Abstract: The aim of this paper is to investigate the effect of the racial slurs *nigger* and *negro* in *Heart of Darkness* on readers’ perception of dehumanisation, discrimination, and racism. It compares data collected through online questionnaires to test whether the absence or different frequencies of the slurs influence how participants perceive the fictional representation of the African people in the text. Three versions of the same questionnaire are used: one with unmodified passages from *Heart of Darkness*, one with the same passages but without the racial slurs, and one with the same passages but with more slurs than in the original. Findings show that the absence or overabundance of slurs compared to the original does not alter reader perception of dehumanisation, discrimination, and racism. By comparing the results, this paper makes two interconnected contributions. First, it contributes to the critical discussion about racism in Conrad’s novel, by providing evidence on whether the representation of the Africans is perceived as dehumanising, discriminatory, and racist by readers. Second, it offers an empirical perspective on the usefulness of the “sanitising” (removing or substituting of all racial slurs) of literary texts with potential racist implications, adopted by some publishing houses and applied to novels like Conrad’s *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* and Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Keywords: dehumanisation; discrimination; *Heart of Darkness*; racism; reader-response analysis; sanitation

1 *Heart of Darkness*, the n-word, and its sanitation

For the last 40 years, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* has been at the centre of an animated debate. Since Chinua Achebe, in a 1975 public lecture (then published in 1988), accused Conrad of being “a thoroughgoing racist” (Achebe 2016: 21), critics have been discussing whether and to what extent *Heart of Darkness* can be seen as a racist text. Achebe (2016: 21) argues that Conrad conforms to the imperialistic...
ideology of his time by dehumanising Africa and Africans, and in so doing, fostering persistent prejudices and discriminatory attitudes. He questions “whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art” and his answer is “no, it cannot” (Achebe 2016: 21). Many other critics have also tried to answer this question after Achebe (see for example Hawkins 2006; Miller 2006; Watts 1983, 1990; Zins 1982), providing a variety of different answers and contributing to a discussion that is simply unavoidable when engaging with Conrad today, as Allington (2006) explains. The debate is not confined to academic circles; it regularly breaks into the public sphere too. The Guardian has published several articles on the topic (“Out of Africa: The case against Conrad”, Phillips 2003; “The unjust prejudice against Conrad”, Jones 2007; “Defacing Heart of Darkness: New plays tear down Conrad’s colonialist tale”, Trueman 2018), as well as The New Yorker (“The trouble with Heart of Darkness”, Denby 1995), and The New York Times (“The contradictions of Joseph Conrad”, Thiong’o 2017). The persistence of this debate, both inside and outside academia, is accentuated by the fact that Heart of Darkness frequently appears in teaching curricula. As Achebe (2016: 23) remarks, Heart of Darkness “is today the most commonly prescribed novel in twentieth-century literature courses in English Departments of American universities.” Blake (1982) wonders whether a novel “which depersonalizes a portion of the human race” (Achebe 2016: 12) should be taught at all, while Titlestad (2013) discusses the pedagogical implications of including The Nigger of the “Narcissus” and Heart of Darkness in the syllabus of a South African University.

A key role in the discussion about the racist implications in Heart of Darkness is played by the fictional representation of the African people. According to Achebe (2016: 16), the passages concerning the Africans are the “most interesting and revealing” of Conrad’s racist attitude. Similarly, Hawkins (2006) and Lawtoo (2012) identify dehumanising tendencies in the way Africans are portrayed in the text, tendencies that Mastropierro (2017) describes linguistically with a corpus stylistic approach. The negative depiction of the Africans and the text’s perception as racist is also related to the use of the racial slur nigger. This is especially true in the American context, where the n-word is considered “the most socially consequent racial insult” (Kennedy 2002: 32). Achebe (2016: 22) argues that Conrad had an “inordinate love of that word”, which contributes to the view that “certainly Conrad had a problem with niggers”. Watts (1990: xxi) similarly recognises that the use of the term has given offence to readers, while Zins (1982: 110) acknowledges that employing the slur was and is “clearly disparaging”.

Despite the recognition of the explicitly derogatory nature of nigger, the use of the slur does not seem to play a major role in the critical discussion of the text’s potential racist implications. If on the one hand the existing literature does
acknowledge the “frankly derogatory language [used] in describing [Africans]” (Hawkins 2006: 366), on the other it develops the discussion about racism far beyond the simple usage of the racist slur, recognising the complexity and multifaceted nature of the issue. Some critics discuss the use of *nigger* as only one of the reflections of the wider socio-cultural context in which *Heart of Darkness* was written. For example, Watts (1990: xxi) defines it as “historically realistic”, Zins (1982: 110) as “normal usage for all non-whites”, whilst Simmons (2015: 23–24) explains that “the racist vocabulary is part of the point; Marlow [the main narrator in *Heart of Darkness*] is acutely of his age, and he does not seek to excuse himself”. Others look instead at the co-text in which *nigger* is employed and find it more relevant than the use of the slur itself. For instance, Trench-Bonett (2000) suggests that *nigger* occurs in passages in which the Africans are abused; in other words, the slur is a label that accompanies and emphasises the dehumanisation, but is not the originator of the dehumanisation itself. A case Trench-Bonnet (2000) discusses is that of the leader of an African village who, in a story Marlow is told at the beginning of the novella, is attacked by an agent called Fresleven. Trench-Bonnet (2000: 85) notices that the word *nigger* is used once the man is being beaten and mistreated, while before that he is called *the chief of the village*. Similarly, Mastropierro (2017) shows that dehumanising tendencies are conveyed by a negative semantic preference and prosody occurring in the co-text of the words used to refer to the African people, independently of whether it is *nigger*(s) or another, less derogative, word. Overall, the use of *nigger* itself does not occupy a central place in the critical debate of racism in *Heart of Darkness*; rather, the literature seems more preoccupied with the manifold and at times contradictory relationship between racist and anti-racist tendencies in Conrad’s novella. As Brantlinger (1988: 257) lucidly observes, “*Heart of Darkness* offers a powerful critique of at least some manifestations of imperialism and racism as it simultaneously presents that critique in ways that can be characterized only as imperialist and racist”. In the final analysis, most critics would agree that the question of racism in *Heart of Darkness* is much broader than the simple use of the racist slur, even though it is a contributing factor.

There are nevertheless some voices that raise concerns about the occurrence of *nigger* in literary texts. An especially well-known case is that of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, “one of the most beleaguered texts in American literature” (Kennedy 2002: 108), ranking 14th in the top 100 2000–2009 banned/challenged books published by the American Library Association.¹ As Kennedy (2002: 108) explains, “[f]or many of *Huckleberry Finn*’s enemies, the most upsetting and best proof of the book’s racism is the fact that *nigger* appears in the text some 215 times”.

It is not surprising that the book has been the target of a sanitising process, even recently, aimed to remove the slur altogether. For example, the NewSouth edition of the *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* (2011) replaces the n-word with *slave*, while the more extravagant *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: Robotic Edition* (Diani and Devine Press, 2011) replaces it with *robot*. Conrad’s *The Nigger of the Narcissus* has been given the same treatment by Wordbridge Publishing, which has published a version of the text titled *The N-Word of the Narcissus*. The publisher claims that they “performed a public service in putting Joseph Conrad’s neglected classic into a form accessible to modern readers. This new version addresses the reason for its neglect: the profusion of the so-called n-word throughout its pages.”

More generally, the interest of the public in the sanitation of literary texts is also evidenced by the existence of phone apps, such as *CleanReader App*, designed to “clean” texts of what may be considered inappropriate, including racial slurs. Underlying these publishing initiatives and sanitising practices there seems to be the idea that racism is a superficial layer that can be scraped off or attenuated by intervening on the vocabulary, and in so doing removing what is seen as a cosmetic issue that affects these otherwise canonical texts. For instance, Alvarado (2019: online), the project creator of *The N-Word of the Narcissus*, suggests that it is precisely the use of the n-word which obfuscates the “complex, modern exploration of race relations” that Conrad’s text offers, making it seem as “a superficially racist story” instead. Similarly, Gribben (2011: online), the editor of the NewSouth edition of the *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, claims that many teachers and educators “[have] lamented the fact that they no longer feel justified in assigning either of Twain’s boy books because of the hurtful n-word”, the use of which “is overwhelming every other consideration about *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*”. It follows that replacing the slur addresses these issues, contributing to re-establish the “once-incontestable belief that the reading of this book at multiple levels of schooling ought to be essential for every American citizen’s education”.

These claims and, more generally, the effect of sanitising practices on readers’ response have not been tested. With this paper, we aim to redress this gap, with a study that investigates the impact of the n-word on readers’ perception of racism in *Heart of Darkness*. Even though *Heart of Darkness* has not been the target of any sanitising procedure yet (as far as we are aware), the debate about racism in the text, its public appeal, and the general interest in the sanitation of widely taught novels makes Conrad’s novella a relevant case study. We investigate the extent to which the presence or absence of the n-word affects readers’ response in terms of

---

2 [http://alvamail.synology.me/wordbridge/books/literary-works/the-n-word-of-the-narcissus](http://alvamail.synology.me/wordbridge/books/literary-works/the-n-word-of-the-narcissus).

3 [https://www.cleanreaderapp.com/](https://www.cleanreaderapp.com/).
perception of racism, dehumanisation, and discrimination, using online questionnaires to collect readers’ responses to extracts of *Heart of Darkness* in three versions: the original version, a version with no n-word, and a version with more occurrences than in the original. By doing so, this paper not only contributes with empirical data to the critical discussion on *Heart of Darkness*’s racist implications but, more generally, also provides some general insights on the effect of sanitising practices and their usefulness.

2 Background and methods

This study makes use of participants’ responses to investigate the effect that specific linguistic features can have on readers. As such, it falls within the remit of reader response analysis and its application in the wider field of stylistics. Building on well-established and long-standing paradigms (c.f. Fish 1980; Iser 1978; van Peer 1986), the most recent applications of this methodological approach in stylistics aim to test “whether assumptions and frameworks of stylistic analysis are supported by evidence from real readers” (Peplow and Carter 2014: 440). Thus, data collected through a range of methods (questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, psycholinguistic experiments, etc.) is used to support, challenge, or develop assumptions on how real readers may react to given linguistic and stylistic features. For example, Castiglione (2017) explores how readers react to the linguistic features of difficult poems, Cui (2017) and Sotirova (2006) investigate readers’ perception of narrative point of view, Mahlberg et al. (2014) use eye-tracking to study the response of participants to body language multi-word clusters in Dickens’s novels, while Zyngier et al. (2007) analyse readers’ reaction to foregrounded stylistic features. In this study, we test whether the presence or absence of the n-word changes readers’ perception of racism, dehumanisation, and discrimination in the representation of African people in *Heart of Darkness*.

This research builds on a previous study (Mastropierro and Conklin 2019) in which we explored the effect of translation alterations on the perception of racism, dehumanisation, and discrimination in *Heart of Darkness* and its Italian translations. We compared responses to the representation of the African people in the English original and in two Italian translations. In one translation, the translator (Luisa Saraval) replaces all the occurrences of *nigger*, *niggers*, and *negro* with the Italian equivalent of *black*, whereas the other translation (translated by Rossella Bernascone) introduces additional occurrences of the Italian equivalent of *nigger*, where the original uses *black*. Even though significant differences could be seen in the perception of racism, dehumanisation, and discrimination between the English and Italian readers, we argued that these differences were the result of both
translation alterations and sociocultural differences between the two languages and contexts (Mastropierro and Conklin 2019: 320). Therefore, we could not answer the question of whether the presence or absence of racial slurs directly influences readers’ perception of racism in *Heart of Darkness*. In the present study we remove the variable of the different language and associated culture, employing English texts with English readers.

Specifically, this study is structured as follows. To collect our data, we employed an online questionnaire in three versions. All versions presented readers with the same 17 extracts from *Heart of Darkness* in which African people appear. The passages are one or two paragraphs long, with the shortest one being 37 words long and the longest being 336 words long. The only difference between the three sets of extracts is the number of occurrences of racial slurs. One questionnaire presents the extracts in their original form, as they appear in *Heart of Darkness*. The second version includes more slurs than the original text itself, while the third version sanitises the extracts and removes all racial slurs. The two modified versions reflect the practices seen in two Italian translations of the novel discussed above (see Mastropierro and Conklin 2019), which align perfectly with the scenarios we aim to test: abundance and absence of racial slurs, compared to the unmodified version. The original version (“Questionnaire O” for original) includes all the uses of racial slurs in *Heart of Darkness*. These appear in 12 out of 17 extracts: five occurrences of *nigger*, five occurrences of *niggers*, and three occurrences of *negro*. The remaining five extracts still include references to Africans, but the more neutral *black* is used instead of a racial slur. In “Questionnaire O+”, all 17 extracts contain racial slurs. This version includes all the original uses and adds slurs in the five extracts in which *Heart of Darkness* employs *black*; a total of 19 occurrences of *nigger*, *niggers*, and *negro*. Finally, “Questionnaire O-” contains no slurs at all; all occurrences of *nigger*, *niggers*, and *negro* have been replaced with *black*. Examples (1), (2), and (3) show the same passage in Questionnaire O, O+, and O-, to give an idea of how the extracts can differ:

(1) He [*the manager of the station*] was neither civil nor uncivil. He was quiet. He allowed his ‘boy’ – an overfed young negro from the coast – to treat the white men, under his very eyes, with provoking insolence. (from Extract 7, Questionnaire O)

(2) He [*the manager of the station*] was neither civil nor uncivil. He was quiet. He allowed his ‘boy’ – an overfed young nigger from the coast – to treat the white men, under his very eyes, with provoking insolence. (from Extract 7, Questionnaire O+)
He [the manager of the station] was neither civil nor uncivil. He was quiet. He allowed his ‘boy’ – an overfed young black man from the coast – to treat the white men, under his very eyes, with provoking insolence. (from Extract 7, Questionnaire O-)

The passages were presented in the order they appear in the text and occasionally short notes were added between extracts to help the reader understand how one passage is linked to the next (e.g. “Marlow reaches another station where he waits for months for his steamer to be repaired”). These notes are typographically presented as extra-textual material, not part of the original text.

As in Mastropierro and Conklin (2019), after reading the extracts, participants were asked to answer three sets of questions, measuring dehumanisation, discrimination, and racism respectively. The first set comprised of six items for which participants were asked to indicate their agreement on a 7-point Likert-type scale (see Appendix 1). The items were adapted from Morena et al.’s (2016) study, which is itself based on Gray et al.’s (2007, 2011) dimensions of mind perception. This model evaluates “humanness and its opposite, dehumanization” (Morena et al. 2016: 1) – defined as “denying other people mental capacities” (Morena et al. 2016: 2) – and “investigate[s] whether people negate distinct abilities (agency and experience) of the mind” (Morena et al. 2016: 2). The first three items measure perception of agency (capacity of self-control, capacity to act morally, capacity to plan), while the last three measure perception of experience (capacity to experience emotion, capacity to experience refined or uniquely human feelings, capacity to experience consciousness). The second set is comprised of six 6-point Likert-type scale questions (see Appendix 1) aimed at measuring perception of discrimination. The items were extracted and adapted from the Privilege and Oppression Inventory (Hays et al. 2007), a model “designed to measure an individual’s level of awareness of social issues (i.e. privilege and oppression as it relates to four primary cultural dimensions)” (Hays et al. 2007: 68). Of the four dimensions (racial, gender, sexual orientation, religious identities) tested in the inventory, we used the questions related to racial issues, selecting and adapting six items from the original 13-item inventory. Finally, to measure readers’ perception of racism, we used a 6-point Likert-type scale question asking participants to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement “The representation of the African natives in these passages is racist”. Participants were also given the option to add any comments on the above statement. We could not find an existing racism measure or inventory that would work in this study, as the vast majority of established scales (see Atkins 2014; Gamst et al. 2011; Kressin et al. 2008) measure racism and racial prejudice in the participants themselves, or their ability to be aware of it, as opposed to their perception of racism in external material (such as
our extracts). The questionnaire ended with questions on the age, gender and native language of the participants, as well as on whether they had read and/or studied *Heart of Darkness* before.

We collected 62 responses: 21 for Questionnaire O, 21 for Questionnaire O+, and 20 for Questionnaire O-. All participants were students studying for an undergraduate degree in the School of English at the University of Nottingham with native knowledge of English, primarily aged between 18 and 20 (with one participant aged 36) and mostly women (50). The vast majority of them had not read *Heart of Darkness* before (55), nor studied it (58).

### 3 Results

The ratings for the questions relating to dehumanisation, discrimination and racism are presented in Table 1. It is important to note that the rating scale for the questions relating to dehumanisation (7-point scale; zero to six) is different to that of discrimination and racism (6-point scale; one to six). Our rating scales preserve those in the original instruments that were developed, evaluated, and implemented to assess dehumanisation and discrimination. In order to compare ratings across all three sets of extracts (O, O+, O-), the Kruskal-Wallis $H$ test was used. When directly comparing two sets of extracts (O vs O+, O vs O-, O+ vs O-), the Mann-Whitney $U$ test was used.

The six questions related to dehumanisation asked participants to evaluate, on a scale from zero (not at all) to six (totally), to what extent they thought the people in the extracts would be capable of doing a number of things based on the way they were described in the passages, *not* according to their own personal beliefs: (i) capable of restraining their wishes, emotions, and impulses; (ii) capable of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dehumanisation</th>
<th>Original</th>
<th>O+</th>
<th>O-</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agency questions</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>1.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience questions</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>3.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>2.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>5.13</td>
<td>5.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1: Mean ratings for the dehumanisation, discrimination and racism questions. For dehumanisation ratings mean values relate to agency, experience and across both (overall), with 0 indicating not capable and 6 indicating totally capable. For the discrimination and racism ratings, 1 indicates strongly disagree and 6 indicates strongly agree.*
anticipating the positive or negative consequences of their behaviour and of being responsible for their acts; (iii) capable of making plans to reach their goals; (iv) capable of experiencing emotions like fear, pain, or joy; (v) capable of experiencing feelings like shame, guilt, or hope; and (vi) capable of being conscious of their environment and of the things that happen. The first three questions relate to the participants’ perception of the Africans’ agency in the extracts while the last three relate to their perception of the Africans’ capacity to experience emotion, uniquely human feelings, and consciousness. Note that lower values are indicative of increased dehumanisation.

Looking at the overall perception of dehumanisation, the Kruskal-Wallis $H$ test reveals no difference between the three sets of extracts ($\chi^2(2) = 0.60, p = 0.74$). When directly comparing the extracts to each other, the Mann-Whitney $U$ test shows no difference between them ($O$ vs $O+$, $Z = -0.36, p = 0.71$; $O$ vs $O-$, $Z = -0.80, p = 0.42$; $O-$ vs $O+$, $Z = -0.37, p = 0.71$). If we consider the perception of agency separately, there is again no difference amongst the three sets of extracts ($\chi^2(2) = 2.93, p = 0.23$), nor when comparing them to each other ($O$ vs $O+$, $Z = -0.54, p = 0.59$; $O$ vs $O-$, $Z = -1.29, p = 0.20$; $O-$ vs $O+$, $Z = -1.58, p = 0.12$). Similarly, when considering the capacity to experience emotion, feelings, and consciousness, there is no difference across the three sets of extracts ($\chi^2(2) = 1.29, p = 0.52$), nor when comparing them to each other ($O$ vs $O+$, $Z = -0.97, p = 0.33$; $O$ vs $O-$, $Z = -0.09, p = 0.93$; $O-$ vs $O+$, $Z = -0.99, p = 0.32$). Notably, when we compare ratings of agency and capacity to experience, we see a significant difference across all text types ($Z = -6.50, p = 0.001$). This indicates that readers’ perceive the Africans’ agency as significantly less than their ability to experience emotion, feelings, and consciousness.

To assess discrimination, six questions asked participants to judge the extracts on a scale from one (strongly disagree) to six (strongly agree) on the following: (i) the whites generally have more resources and opportunities than the African natives; (ii) the whites have the power to exclude the African natives; (iii) there are benefits to being white in the social order/context described by these passages; (iv) white cultural characteristics are more valued than those of the African natives; (v) the narrator favours the whites; and (vi) these passages negatively stereotype the African natives. The sole question on racism asked the participants to “evaluate whether the representation of the African natives in these passages is racist”; again, with one indicating strongly agree and six strongly disagree. For both the discrimination questions and the racism question, lower ratings are indicative of lower perception of discrimination and racism. When comparing across the three sets of extracts, there is no difference in the evaluation of discrimination ($\chi^2(2) = 0.90, p = 0.66$), nor when comparing the texts directly to each other ($O$ vs $O+$, $Z = -0.90, p = 0.37$; $O$ vs $O-$, $Z = -0.72, p = 0.47$; $O-$ vs $O+$, $Z = -0.61, p = 0.95$). We
see the same pattern for perceived racism, with no difference amongst the three sets of extracts ($\chi^2(2) = 0.67, p = 0.72$), nor when they are compared with each other (O vs O+, $Z = -0.71, p = 0.48$; O vs O-, $Z = -0.65, p = 0.52$; O- vs O+, $Z = -0.29, p = 0.77$).

4 Discussion

The first set of questions shows that participants in all three versions perceive a degree of dehumanisation in the way African people are represented in the passages. The mean overall rating across both subsets of questions (perception of agency and perception of experience) is 2.66, in a scale in which 0 roughly represents “no agency/experience at all” and 6 represents “complete agency/experience”. Comparing the individual means for each subset, it emerges that it is the lack of agency that readers perceive more markedly (2.08 agency vs 3.24 experience), that is, a negation of the Africans’ “mental capacities that enable decision-making and organizing behaviours” (Morena et al. 2016: 2). Across all versions, Africans are seen to be dehumanised insofar as they lack the capacity for self-control, the capacity to act morally, and to plan, whereas denial of experience would instead mean the inability to experience emotion, refined or uniquely human feelings, and consciousness. Morena et al. (2016: 5) explains that negation of agency and negation of experience reflect different types of dehumanisation: animalistic dehumanisation, that is considering humans as animals, in the case of low levels of agency; mechanistic dehumanisation, e.g. considering humans as objects or robots, in the case of low experience scores. Answers to the first set of questions suggest that in Heart of Darkness Africans are more likely to be perceived as being represented in an animalistic way, than in a mechanistic one. As far as the perception of discrimination is concerned, the second set of questions shows that discrimination is strongly perceived across all versions of the texts. An overall score of 5.07 (in a scale in which 1 means “strongly disagree” and 6 means “strongly agree”) indicates that participants consistently recognise some form of racial discrimination in the way African people are treated or represented in the passages. Finally, a similar consistent result can be seen in the answer to the question about racism: the overall score across the three questionnaires (4.89, in a scale in which 1 means “strongly disagree” and 6 means “strongly agree”) indicates that participants agree that the representation of the African people in the extracts is racist.

Overall, it can be claimed that participants do perceive the depiction of Africans in Heart of Darkness as dehumanising (especially in terms of animalistic dehumanisation), discriminating, and racist. Notably, this response is consistent across the three versions. The statistical analysis of the results shows that readers’
perception of dehumanisation, discrimination, and racism in the fictional representation of the African people is not influenced by the number of occurrences of racial slurs in the extracts. Whether *nigger(s)* and *negro* occur 13, 19 times, or not at all, it does not have a significant impact on the responses to the passages. This strongly suggests that it is not the slurs themselves that trigger the racist implications that many critics have identified in *Heart of Darkness*; an abundance of the n-word or its absence does not seem to emphasise or de-emphasise the perception of racism in the text. Hence, it is more likely the overall discourse in which the representation of the African people is framed that is dehumanising, discriminating, and racist, rather than simply the labels used to refer to the Africans in the text.

Looking more qualitatively at the participants’ comments confirms that the n-word does not play a major role in the perception of racism. After the question “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: The representation of the African natives in these passages is racist”, participants were asked whether they would like to add “any comments on the statement above or anything related”. Eight, six, and five participants in Questionnaire O, O+, and O- respectively left comments, for a total of 19 comments. Only one comment refers explicitly to the use of *nigger*, but at the same time the participant recognises that the extracts nevertheless portray African people in a subservient and simplistic manner:

(4) "a lot of the racism comes from the use of the word ‘nigger’ which at the time of writing would not have seemed unacceptable in the way that it is now, however the one dimensional and subservient portrayal of the blacks is still racist in my opinion” (Questionnaire O+)

Two comments refer instead more generally to “racial terms” and “racial slurs”. But in these cases too, the use of the slurs does not seem to be the main or only trigger of the racist implications. In the comment in (5), the participant links the use of racist terms to the socio-historical context in which *Heart of Darkness* was written, implicitly suggesting that the derogatory nature of these terms is arguably accentuated for the contemporary reader as a result of differences in the cultural perception of the slur between Conrad’s time and today. Whereas, in the comment shown in (6), the participant seems to imply that negative images and racial slurs play at least an equal part in triggering a racist depiction:

(5) “Some of the racial terms used would have been more acceptable at the time it was written.” (Questionnaire O+)

(6) “use of racial slurs and negative images” (Questionnaire O+)
The majority of the comments refer to a wider range of issues in the extracts other than the use of the n-word. Some participants comment on the stereotypical nature of the Africans’ representation in the text, e.g. “[...] the author aims to highlight these stereotypes for the reader and to shock them [...]” (Questionnaire O+) or “[...] Overall, the passages depict a very stereotypical image of the African Natives as they are presented as inferior” (Questionnaire O-). Some others refer to the dehumanisation of the African people, directly or indirectly: “By not mentioning ‘the black’ people by name, it dehumanised the ‘natives’, as well as the references to their ‘tails’ and ‘grotesque’ features [...]” (Questionnaire O-) or “They are treated as non human [...]” (Questionnaire O). Some comments are very general, for example “The language used to describe the African is very negative and derogatory” (Questionnaire O), while others mention very specific aspects of the extracts, e.g. “The description of their chanting as weird is an example of disregard, more broadly of racism” (Questionnaire O). There are also a few comments that align with some of the critical responses to Heart of Darkness (e.g. Brantlinger 1988; Said 1994) in acknowledging the duality of Marlow’s attitude towards the Africans, characterised by a recognition of the flaws of the colonialist enterprise but at the same time the inability to conceive any alternative to it. A good example of these can be seen in (7):

(7) It is racist in that it consistently others them in a way that justifies their lower position. The narrator is uncomfortable and saddened by the appearance of the starved, chained slaves, but seems perfectly happy accepting the existence of ‘better kept’ slaves (like the ‘boy’ who is well-fed and insolent). That, in itself, is racist. Furthermore, he describes their faces as ‘grotesque masks’ and I can’t remember them now, but I’m sure he uses other language like that to describe them; they are savages and their otherness/differences from the white men make them disgusting, rather than difference being neutral. It feels like it is, at best, a sort of passive racism, which doesn’t necessarily want to see all black people starved and chained and brutalised, but does accept their inferiority as fact and consequently, justification for their subjugation and enslavement. [...] (Questionnaire O-)

These comments are not hard evidence but clearly support the quantitative analysis in suggesting that the use or absence of racial slurs play a minor role in the readers’ perception of dehumanisation, discrimination, and racism. Overall, both quantitative and qualitative findings align with the discussion in the critical literature outlined in Section 1, which sees the use of racial slurs as a potential contributing factor, rather than the core of Heart of Darkness racist implications.
5 Conclusions

This paper provided some empirical evidence that the use of racial slurs does not affect the perception of dehumanisation, discrimination, and racism in the fictional representation of African people in Heart of Darkness. Passages in which the occurrences of nigger(s) and negro were removed or increased were perceived as dehumanising, discriminatory, and racist as the original version. This suggests that these terms play a secondary role in triggering a racist reading, subordinated to other textual factors that readers seem to respond to independently of whether they are accompanied by the occurrence of slurs or not. Further research is needed to understand what these other textual factors may be; more data for a follow-up study is being collected to this end.

The findings of the current study contribute in two main ways to the discussion of racism and its reception in Heart of Darkness and in other pieces of literature in general. First, the consistency of the results across all three versions of the questionnaire provides some confirmation that readers of Heart of Darkness do find the depiction of African people in the text dehumanising, discriminatory, and racist. Even with no previous knowledge of the novel (the vast majority of the participants had never read nor studied Heart of Darkness), and so presumably with little awareness of the racist accusations against the text and its author, readers perceive the description of the Africans as racially prejudiced. Of course, this is very different from claiming that Heart of Darkness is a racist text, which is beyond the scope of this paper. Whether Conrad’s novella is racist or not remains a central question in Conradian studies and one that is not likely to be answered resolutely any time soon. This is because, as the literature discussed in Section 1 demonstrates, the question cannot be answered with a simple “yes” or “no”. The issue is complex, as it intertwines a number of factors such as socio-historical considerations, the cultural and theoretical perspective from which the text is approached, and even personal views of the author himself, in addition to the fact that Heart of Darkness is a multifaceted novel that lends itself to a heterogeneity of interpretations. However, what our results show is that, above and beyond the wider interpretational implications, there is an inherently racist discourse entrenched in the representation of the African people, and readers of the text perceive it independently of their knowledge of the text and its critical discussion.

Second, the findings of this paper call into question practices that aim to “cleanse” a text of its potential racist implications by removing racial slurs or replacing them with other terms. As our results show, the occurrence of racial slurs does not significantly affect the perception of dehumanisation, discrimination, and racism in the extracts, not even when comparing a version with no slurs at all.
with one that has even more occurrences than the original. This challenges the view that the racism perceived by readers in novels such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, and *Heart of Darkness* is triggered by the occurrence of the n-word only, as well as the idea that removing it would make a text that has an intricate relation with racism less racist. The results of our analysis suggest that considering racism in a text as a superficial and lexical issue, one that can be eradicated or even toned down by simply acting on the occurrence of the n-word, is simplistic, and publishing practices that aim to do so are questionable.

### Appendix 1 Questionnaire 0, 0+, and 0-

1. Purely based on the way the African natives are described in these passages – NOT according to your personal beliefs – to what extent do you think the natives would be:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

   - Capable of restraining their wishes, emotions, and impulses?
   - Capable of anticipating the positive or negative consequences of their behaviour and of being responsible for their acts?
   - Capable of making plans to reach their goals?
   - Capable of experiencing emotions like fear, pain, or joy?
   - Capable of experiencing feelings like shame, guilt, or hope?
   - Capable of being conscious of their environment and of the things that happen?

2. Purely based on the way the African natives are described in these passages – NOT according to your personal views or the modern context – do you think that the following are true?
3. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- The whites generally have more resources and opportunities than the African natives.
- The whites have the power to exclude the African natives.
- There are benefits to being white in the social order/context described by these passages.
- White cultural characteristics are more valued than those of the African natives.
- The narrator favours the whites.
- These passages negatively stereotype the African natives.

4. Any comments on the statement above or anything related you would like to add? (optional)

5. Age (number, e.g. 32)

6. Gender

7. Native language

8. Have you read *Heart of Darkness* before?

9. Have you studied *Heart of Darkness* before?

---

**References**


