Black Brain, White Brain. „In Desert and Wilderness” by Henryk Sienkiewicz in the Light of Postcolonial Studies

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Preliminary
"In Desert and Wilderness" and its in History of Literature
Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846-1916)

- Author of "Quo vadis" (1896)
- Nobel Prize in Literature (1905)
- one of the most translated Polish authors
”In Desert and Wilderness” (1912)

- during almost all the past century a mandatory school reading in Poland
- “a most successful version of a parable on the victory of good over evil” (Krzysztof Rutkowski)
- racist, sexist, colonialist (Wojciech Kalaga)
„an occasional coarseness of expression, which is much less glaring than in the prince of dramatists [i.e. Shakespear], and is more offensive in translations than in the original”

“openly racist”

“deceitful”.

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4 el Tayeb, Mahmud 2012. “Sudańczyk patrzy na ‘W pustyni i w puszcz” [“Sudanese Looks at ‘In Desert and Wilderness’”] In Axer and Bujnicki 2012 , p. 571
Post-colonial Theory and its Contexts
• “Orientalism” (1978), motto from Karl Marx: ”They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented” \(^5\)

• ”Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.” \(^6\)

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\(^5\) Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, Cf. Said, p. XXVI

\(^6\) Edward W. Said, Orientalism, London 2003, p. 3
• “subalterns” (Antonio Gramsci)
• suicides of Hindu widows case: “White men are saving brown woman from brown men”

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Asymmetric counterconcepts (*asymmetrischer Gegenbegriffem*)

- created and operated by a group that „makes an exclusive claim to generality, applying a linguistically universal concept to itself alone and rejecting all comparison”

- Hellens vs. Barbarians, Christians vs. Heathens, Mensch vs. Übermennsch

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Narration
• *Personale Erzählsituation*, with some elements of *Auktoriale Erzählsituation*\(^9\)

• supremacy over a reader as far as concerns African reality (knowledge of local languages, etc.)

• the point of view is mostly of Stas Tarkowski, 14-yrs old French-Polish boy, born in Africa.

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"World Presented"
Arabs and Bedouins
• “Gebhr always had a cruel and a trifle bestial expression of face”\textsuperscript{10}.
• “the savage hordes intoxicated with blood”\textsuperscript{11}
• “in Egypt Arabs as well as Bedouins yell on every occasion as if they are about to annihilate each other”\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10}Sienkiewicz 1917, 40
\textsuperscript{11}Sienkiewicz 1917, 125
\textsuperscript{12}Sienkiewicz 1917, 96
Arabs and Bedouins: Moral defects

- “she lies as only in the East they know how to lie”\textsuperscript{13}
- “much the people in the East are greedy and venal”\textsuperscript{14}
- “he was, like almost every Arab, covetous and ambitious”\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{13}Sienkiewicz 1917, 21
\textsuperscript{14}Sienkiewicz 1917, 66
\textsuperscript{15}Sienkiewicz 1917, 140
Black people
• „Arabs and negroes swim like fishes”\textsuperscript{16}
• Mea “climbed the rope with skill and agility as if she were the full sister of a chimpanzee. For Staś it was considerably more difficult, but he was too well-trained an athlete”\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{16}Sienkiewicz 1917, 9
\textsuperscript{17}Sienkiewicz 1917, 229
Black people: ”Bad” influence of islam

• “negroes, until Mohammedanism fills their souls with cruelties and hatred against infidels, are rather timid and gentle”

Anna Cichoń: “Sienkiewicz is visibly afraid of Islamists, whereas, with respect to the black people, he sees in them potential Catholics”

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18 Sienkiewicz 1917, 369
19 Cichoń, 2004, 103
• “Dinah (...) was known for her uncommon gluttony”\textsuperscript{20}
• Kali: „The elephant cannot get out. Great master kill the elephant and Kali will eat him. Oh, eat, eat!”\textsuperscript{21}
• Barbarian Kiswahili?

\textsuperscript{20}Sienkiewicz 1917, 30
\textsuperscript{21}Sienkiewicz 1917, 246
• “Dinah (...) was not able to take care of herself on the railways and in the hotels, the duties of guide and paymaster during this trip devolved upon Stas”\textsuperscript{22}
• “inbred negro carelessness”\textsuperscript{23}
• “During the stop the white men were occupied with hunting and arranging their geographical and scientific notes, and the negroes devoted themselves to idleness, which is always so sweet to them”\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{22}Sienkiewicz 1917, 25
\textsuperscript{23}Sienkiewicz 1917, 421
\textsuperscript{24}Sienkiewicz 1917, 434
“Among the blacks there are honest souls, though as a rule you cannot depend upon their gratitude; they are children who forget what happened the day before.”

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25 Sienkiewicz 1917, 316
“Mea has a dark skin and **dark brain**”\(^{26}\)

Stas to Kali, Wahimas’s king: “The Wahimas have **black brains**, but your brain ought to be **white**”\(^{27}\)

“she [Mea] thought that after the baptism her skin would at once turn **white**, and great was her astonishment when she observed that she remained as **black as before**” (Sienkiewicz 1917, 335)

\(^{26}\)Sienkiewicz 1917, 258

\(^{27}\)Sienkiewicz 1917, 395
“Tell me,” asked Staś, “what is a wicked deed?”

“If any one takes away Kali’s cow,” (...) “that then is a wicked deed.”

“Excellent!” exclaimed Staś, “and what is a good one?” (...)  

“If Kali takes away the cow of somebody else, that is a good deed.”

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28 Sienkiewicz 1917, 334
POLUS: Then would you wish rather to suffer wrong than to do it?

SOCRATES: I should wish neither, for my own part; but if it were necessary either to do wrong or to suffer it, I should choose to suffer rather than do it.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{29}Plato 2001: 335
Fatma to Mr Rawlison: “I entreat that you permit me to serve you as a slave”\textsuperscript{30}

Kali “fell on his face before Staś and Nell in token that he desired to remain their slave to the end of his life”\textsuperscript{31}

a black prince of one of tribes “embraced with his black hands her [Nell’s] little foot and placed it on his head in sign that through his entire life he desired to remain her slave”\textsuperscript{32}

Cf. lack of gratitude

\textsuperscript{30} Sienkiewicz 1917, 19
\textsuperscript{31} Sienkiewicz 1917, 197
\textsuperscript{32} Sienkiewicz 1917, 397
White people
Stas is a brain of the whole team

- “Staś commanded Kali to build a fire”, “By Staś’ orders, Kali and Mea (...) began to gather melons”, “he ordered Mea to throw into the interior of the baobab tree a few lighted boughs”, “Staś ordered Mea to melt the fat”
“What shall we do now, Staś?” Nell asked one day, (...)

“There is plenty of work to do,” the boy answered, (...)

“In the first place Kali and Mea are pagans, and Nasibu (...) is a Mohammedan. It is necessary to enlighten them, teach them the faith, and baptize them.”

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33 Sienkiewicz 1917, 386
Anna Cichoń: “Local knowledge” and experiences of natives are perceived as useless. One cannot rely on it, since they seem uncertain, illegible, incommunicable — it should be replaced and “translated” by recognizable categories. This is (…) an aim of cartographer’s work, who removes native names and replaces them with his own”34

34 Cichoń 2004, 99
“most of the huts had been burned or ruined (...), Before the huts lay here and there human bones and skeletons, white as chalk, for they had been cleaned by the ants (...) in the huts could be smelt the leaven of ants, (...) Everything had been cleaned out by the terrible ‘siafu’”\textsuperscript{35}

“This Africa is a charnel house”, “region of death”

\textsuperscript{35}Sienkiewicz 1917, 386
