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The Evolution of Blackness

From Shakespeare to Stan Lee

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Introduction

The history of the representations of black people by European, and later American, artists and writers provides fascinating insights into how the perception of the ‘other’, the stranger, has changed over the centuries; through literary works, paintings and comic books it is possible to fathom the outsiders’ status in the society’s hierarchy and to consider what were the most diffused stereotypes about them. Among the fundamental elements in this chain of constantly evolving thoughts it is possible to enumerate a series of novels and of plays which contributed, along with paintings and sculptures, to depicting how European societies reacted to and treated both African slaves and freed men. Race and racism are complex issues that are still central in twenty-first century life, when globalization and mass movement have led to the creation of blending of cultures and languages, with communities experiencing zones in-between two different traditions and therefore uncertainty about their own identities and frustration for those barriers which separate them from either tradition.

Creative compositions produced by the most influential artists of their century constitute a testimony of a past time in which people of African descent were treated in a totally different manner, almost inhumanly, as if they were something to be afraid of, a sort of threat posed by their being primitive to European civilisation and progress. Not only were their minds and culture oppressed, but they were also physically treated as mere object, as Europeans’ personal possessions, therefore they were not granted the essential right every human being is entitled to. The establishment of slave trade routes led to a consequent increase in the number of blacks in Europe, a spatial movement which brought them closer to a different society and introduced them to a domestic scene while before they were just distant communities and the only contact they established was through their ambassadors, as in the case of the Ottoman Empire.

By the sixteenth century Africans had become a constant presence at court in many European countries, where they were employed as nothing more than pages or stable workers, a display of the power aristocrats possessed. In the vast majority of portraits of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, Africans were depicted as having a supporting role, never actually being the real protagonists of the scene, with a few exceptions especially in religious contexts, in which artists bestowed upon a black person

a role of relevance as it happened in some representations of the adoration of the Magi. The growing interest in travel literature caused, supported by visual imagery, blacks to be heavily stereotyped for their physical features, which became a productive source for discourses arguing that those characteristics were the proofs that evolution had not followed the same path for the entire human race, an assertion which they based on an interpretation of eminent scientists and naturalists such as Charles Darwin. The seventeenth century was characterised by a Manichean struggle between black and white in which the colour of the skin carried certain assumptions and contrasting ideas, with white or fair skin believed to be the external indication of inner virtue and goodness, while black skin represented nothing more than evil and sinfulness; therefore, whiteness was desirable and was to be chased at any cost.

Ben Johnson's masques, composed to honour Queen Anne of Denmark's requests in the early years of the century, are the embodiment of this feeling of racial superiority whites felt. During their performances the court was shown how it was possible for blacks to achieve a physical but also mental metamorphosis which allowed them to abandon darkness in order to be accepted in the realm of British culture. This concept of metamorphosis will survive and will be used over two centuries later in commercial advertisements such as Pears' soap, in which a white young boy washes an overly stereotyped black toddler whose darkness is 'cleansed' as a result of the power of soap, implying that, if they are offered help, even African people can hope to abandon their primordality in order to join whiteness, progress and civilisation. Together with William Shakespeare's famous plays *Othello* and *The Tempest*, Johnson's masque reflects the importance of appearance first in the Elizabethan and then in the Jacobean court, defining it as essential feature of identity.

The abolitionist movement allowed Africans to demonstrate that all the assumptions regarding their alleged mental inferiority were futile arguments; they proved that their art and literary works could be as good as the white artists' compositions. Furthermore, they finally had the chance to introduce an African point of view to the masses, as they wrote using the languages of European colonisers, which allowed them to reach as wide an audience as possible. However, the effort of anti-slavery organisations often led to the reinforcement of stereotypes of Africans as children, helpless and thus not representing any real threat to the British Empire, while blacks were actually inciting

all slaves to riot against their master and to fight for their freedom. The revolt which took place in Saint-Domingue was among the earliest and inspired painters as Daniel Chodowiecki, who gave visual expression to the violence and the hatred blacks had suffered at the hands of the white man and were now returning through methods which were not condemnable.

Enlightenment and missionary organisations played a crucial role in the shaping of African identity, evangelisation being thought fundamental to cast away darkness, previously mainly linked with physical features though now it implied a new meaning of mental progress from primeval nature to civilisation. The Europeans' aim became showing Africans the path to advancement, perfectly embodied by the former's culture. This imposition caused African identity to be strongly influenced by colonisation, which affected the mind as well as the body of native tribes. Contemporary African writers such as Chinua Achebe illustrated the impact of missionaries and of Christianity on blacks, describing in fiction the arrival of white men and the consequent chaos that befell the organisation and beliefs of native tribes. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Polish writer Joseph Conrad published his masterpiece, *Heart of Darkness*, whose narrator and protagonist Marlow unfolds the cruelties perpetrated by European companies in order to seize ivory, introducing relevant though ambivalent themes and symbols which Achebe interpreted as racist, despite the novel provides recurring observations against colonialism and its atrocities.

Among the ferocious abuses they suffered, the most heinous was possibly dehumanisation; natives were deprived of the essence of their being human, characteristic which is even more important than culture and language in defining that a person is equal to his fellow beings. In Conrad's novel, Africans do not speak nor seem to demonstrate in any way that in the writer's mind they could perform any action a normal person would, becoming associated more with the animal world due also to the terminology he used, which comprehends descriptions of natives constrained by chains, wearing collars and rags which resembled tails. The barbarities perpetrated by the colonialists appear as cruel and uncivilised as the image they had diffused of Africa, perhaps even more due to the alleged degree of progress and superiority they attributed to themselves, resulting in a contradiction between the idea of the unrighteousness of the Empire's colonising mission and the emphasis on stereotypes.

Africa was commonly imagined as a place of darkness, with connotations associated both to the dark colour of its populations' skin but also to the fact that it was largely unexplored, which attributed a feeling that the continent was something mysterious, exotic, stimulating the desire for adventure in Europeans who longed for a fresh experience and for the glory of being the first to bring modernity in a primitive reality. Many explorers, among which the most notorious are certainly the Scottish doctor David Livingstone and the journalist Henry Morton Stanley, took upon themselves the responsibility to travel through the African hinterland, a feat which has inspired future novelists and movie directors. Africans, especially women, were regarded as objects of sexual desire by colonisers, who had left their wives back home to contribute to their country's cause in the continent; local women represented, in contrast with white women's purity and innocence, lust and desire. They were able to provide a sexual fulfilment and unleashed the basic instincts hidden under the armour of civilisation.

Africa has often been treated as a whole unit, without differentiating among its huge number of culturally and linguistically various ethnic groups; furthermore, no historical background was attributed to any of the tribes living on the continent, as if their history started when Europeans colonised it. The British domination imposed a totally different identity upon blacks, forcing them to abandon their own languages, customs and tradition in order to embrace new ones; this imposition lasted for centuries, with colonies being able to free themselves of the British rule only recently, reaffirming and reinventing their identity through literature and art. The rewriting of British masterpieces became an essential instrument in the effort to provide an alternate version of the same novel or theatrical play, often by introducing black characters playing crucial roles. Versions of Shakespeare's plays as *Othello* and *The Tempest* have been rewritten to present a postcolonial interpretation, or adapted into movies either in order to reach a modern audience who is ever less inclined to attend a play than to go to the cinema.

New literary media as comic books became popular in the twentieth century, rapidly gaining an important status especially among youngsters, initially at least, with publishing companies introducing a way of doing literature which was a halfway between illustration and novel. Comics books featured super-powered beings and rapidly became an essential medium to convey themes that were central in the first half of the century, as the struggle against racism led by the Falcon. Furthermore, comic books involved a strong

sense of nationalism but also of a pursuit of justice and of equality among ethnic groups; in the sixties the first black superhero characters, the Black Panther and the Falcon made their appearance to the American audience thanks to Marvel Comics, beginning a trend which would be continued over the following decades with the introduction of an increasing number of blacks that also reflected the ethnic variety that has characterised the history of the United States of America. Comic books provided insights into African but also into African American identity, presenting real life situations involving blacks in America and depicting how they were accepted or refused by the white part of the population. Publications as *All-Negro Comics*, entirely written and drawn by African American artists who were given the chance to express the full extent of their creativity and skills, apart from the opportunity to provide a perspective on blacks which was different from that of white artists, who could not feel and therefore represent the situation in the same manner as those who were forced to live and survive it in everyday life.

The aim of this thesis is to analyse how the attitude of European populations, with a focus on the British culture, towards people of African descent has changed over the centuries, providing an insight into popular culture from the Elizabethan Age to the twenty-first century. A critical reading of some of the fundamental literary works, including not only novels but also plays, present how blacks were perceived and stereotyped in different periods of time, analysing how the role of black characters gained or lost importance in the plots of those literary works and if that reflected their status quo in their society. Artworks such as paintings, drawings, and statues are taken into consideration to better understand how they were represented at a visual level, since they portray scenes inspired by ordinary life which were restricted to life at court in the sixteenth century and then began to be associated with the idea of freed slaves and with the abolitionist movement. The shaping or re-shaping, of African identity was based on the abandonment of assumptions on hair, skin colour, head conformation Europe created and supported, basing every aspect on how different it was; it was an identity modelled on contrasts rather than on actual characteristics, which laid the foundation for the creation of an ethnic hierarchy and therefore for racist ideas and attitudes. Even though the word 'racism' was used for the first time in the twentieth century, the roots of its ideology were established long before, attributing innate qualities and characteristics to

ethnic groups based on superficial judgements or on what could be used at Europeans' own advantage.

While in the past Africa and its inhabitants were defined according to a European conception, after the independence of former British colonies there has been a movement of black writers who relinquished the language of the colonisers in favour of their native ones. They sought to maintain, by doing so, their culture alive, even though it meant that literary works were no more available to masses, as the vast majority of the world population would not understand a single word; in countries where oral tradition had always been the preponderant part of culture, literature and therefore written sources gained power. Their attempt is to affirm their own identities no more as a contrast with another culture and thus being just a difference but defining their characterising traits through a negotiation with themselves in order to find out which are the attributes the individual recognises as part of his/her own identity.

1. Early Modern Blacks

1.1 Saints and Masques

Visual representations of black Africans did not start in the early modern period; in fact, they were conceived even centuries before their contact. In the Bible, which was the source of inspiration of many artists during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, for instance, the book of Genesis seems to provide an account of the origin of dark-skinned people. The so-called Curse of Ham has undergone several interpretations, among which some were used to explain why some Africans had black skin and, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, to justify slavery and the predominance of the white man. In Genesis 9:20-27 it is told the episode of Noah who, after being saved from the Great Flood, planted a vineyard and having tasted some of its wine, got drunk. He fell asleep naked and his son Ham saw him lying and decided to call his two brothers Shem and Japheth to show them; they, feeling ashamed for their father's nakedness, covered him. Noah woke up and, angry at his son for his actions, cursed Canaan, Ham's son, condemning him to be a slave to others for the rest of his life. The Curse of Ham is also a misnomer for the Curse of Canaan, though the reasons why Noah cursed Canaan and not Ham are still argument for debate, as the former had nothing to do with his father's actions.

Some critics theorised that the curse might either be a sort of prophecy to explain the fate of the descendants of Canaan while others argued that it was meant to provide a motive for the submissive status of those descendants to Israelites. The *Targum Onkelos*, the official Aramaic translation of the Torah, explains how Noah's anger was due to the fact that his son was laughing at his disgrace publicly, which would be a more rational motivation for the curse. Even though there is no explicit mention of the effect the curse allegedly had on Ham's skin colour, the link between Ham and black skin was established as some suggested that his name might be derived from a Hebrew word meaning "black" or "burnt", though it possibly derived from an Egyptian word for "servant". However, some critics argued that they found no real evidence that Ham was used in the Bible with connotations of black skin and that was due to the misrepresentation of some graphic symbols (Goldberg 2003). Another myth associated Ham's skin turning dark to his having

had intercourse during his permanence on the ark, not heeding a restriction that had been imposed.

In the Middle Ages, Europeans employed the Curse of Ham as a justification of their having black African people as servants, pages or grooms. In the eighteenth century, the fact that they were regarded as Ham's descendants, hence they were guilty of his same sin, was adopted to reinforce the basis of slavery.

One of the earliest visual representations of a black-skinned Ham was Moisé dal Castellazzo's; he carved biblical scenes for one of his projects (Kaplan 2010: 118-119). In the early years of the sixteenth century, Michelangelo took this scene from the Bible as inspiration to paint part of the Sistine Chapel's ceiling and, in the same period, Giovanni Bellini painted his *The Drunkenness of Noah*, widely recognised as one of his masterpieces. However, in none of those artworks any evidence of Ham's black skin is to be found, as the three siblings possess the same physical characteristics, therefore the curse might have acted only on Ham's lineage.

The representation of Saint Maurice has also been quite controversial. He was a soldier in the Roman army, specifically the leader of the Theban Legion, in the third century; they were all Christian converts and became famous for their martyrdom. As a matter of fact, they refused to take arms against a group of Christian peasants who were rioting against the Empire because they felt it was morally wrong to kill fellow Christians; as a punishment for their disobedience, the Emperor Maximian ordered the immediate death of all the soldier of the Legion (Enciclopedia Britannica 2006).

The name Maurice, in Latin Mauritius, is associated with the land of Mauritania, a Northern African region which was one of the provinces of the Roman Empire; the word "Maurus" acquired the meaning of "black", though through uncertain stages. Maurus was, initially, an indication of the colour of Northern Africans' hair but during the Middle Ages it was also used to refer to the colour of their skin (Bassi 2010: 23). Saint Maurice was portrayed as white-skinned until the thirteenth century, but later he has often been represented as dark-skinned, at least in certain German regions; the reasons why his colour suddenly changed are still mysterious, though the hypotheses are that, beside the etymology of his name, it was because he was born in Thebes, Egypt. An example of those later representations is a statue in the Magdeburg Cathedral, in Germany, which

dates between 1240 and 1250, characterises the martyr as dressed as a Roman soldier having coal black skin, protruding lips and flat nose.

In 1507, the German artist Hans Baldung Grien painted an image of Saint Maurice which was part of a triptych commissioned by the church; the saint's skin is of a dark brown hue, his hair and beard are the ones stereotypically associated with black Africans. In fact, the same traits are shared by the black King portrayed in the central panel, which contains the scene of the adoration of the Magi (Devisse 1979: 187), although this might be due to the fact that the artist's model for both his characters was the same man. The Altarpiece of the Holy Knights, also known as "Ritteraltar", by Hans von Kulmbach provides a slightly different interpretation of the figure of Saint Maurice. His kinky hair and the darkness of his skin are clear hint of his ethnicity, which in this artwork is reinforced by his wearing an earring. However, his attitude is different from many other representations of him, as he seems to be more thoughtful, introspective and this renders his figure solemn (Devisse 1979: 196).

Despite they scarcely appeared in British art, the presence of black Africans in England was not unfrequently recorded in the sixteenth century. The vast majority of them had been taken away from their native land to be sold to wealthy Europeans, who would employ them as servants or, as it generally happened in court, as pages, horse grooms but also as musicians. It was a quite widespread practice among European aristocrats to have artists produce paintings displaying ordinary scenes of life at court in which appeared black pages performing small and unimportant tasks such as holding a horse's bridle but sometimes they were even portrayed just as quiet observers, as if they were a sort of witnesses of the grandeur of their masters. As a matter of fact, the presence of black grooms was associated with an idea of courtliness and of aristocracy, and in many European courts black slaves were regarded as fashionable. Black Africans became ever more associated, then, with aristocratic families (Bindman 2010: 253), becoming the emblem of their wealth.

The Flemish Baroque painter Anthony van Dyck produced some interesting works over the early decades of the seventeenth century, as they were foreshadowing a series of themes which would become of great relevance in the century that followed. One of those works is his *Portrait of George Gage with Two Attendants*, in which the attendant in the background's skin pigment is darker than that of the British diplomat or that of his fellow

attendant, characteristic that is accentuated by his being placed in the physical shadows the columns on the left cast on him, but also he is in the virtual shadows of the white men who are ignoring him, suggesting that blacks are unable to engage a conversation and that they are content with remaining silent witnesses or observers, recurrent theme of the eighteenth and nineteenth century literature. This exclusion seems to reflect the lower social status of black Africans in seventeenth-century England, where they could be present but still not seen, both physically and metaphorically. In contrast with this invisibility, the body of George Gage seems to be emanating an aura of light, probably due to the light colour of the hue used by the artist to paint his skin, which looks even whiter than it should be, attracting the attention of the audience on himself while the black attendant on the back is left ignored, at least initially, because of the limited visibility of his position and of the colour of his skin.



Figure I. *Henrietta of Lorraine* (1634) by Anthony van Dyck

Van Dyck's painting *Henrietta of Lorraine* (figure I) depicts a young page boy, black-skinned, at the side of the central female character who gives the name to the portrait. Clad in vivid red, the boy's garments mark a sharp contrast with the black tones of Henrietta's dress, with a further contrast given by the two different hues of their skin. Gestures and poses reveal several connotations: the dame's hand is laying on her page's shoulder in a gesture of kind affection and indulgence, almost in a paternalistic attitude. It might as well imply the concept of England being a gentle mother for her colonies to which she would teach how to evolve into a civilised society; the colony being portrayed as a child implies that it needs and it seeks for a figure to look up to, a figure to take inspiration from to emerge from its state of primitiveness.

The boy's adoring glance confirms that in this portrait he is an allegory for the entire African continent being in a position of submission to the motherland, awaiting with impatience that England, in its benevolence, contributes to the flourishing of its colonies. In order to show his gratitude, the black page offers his mistress a salver of flowers, though the dame's eyes are not pointing at him, suggesting a certain indifference or apathy towards her servant, considering him not worthy of her attention and maintaining a detached attitude.

One of the earliest possible representations of a black person in modern England dates back to the fifteenth century, it is a stained-glass panel depicting a scene from Jesus' nativity in which the three Magi or kings honouring the new-born with gifts. One of the Magi's skin looks darker than that of his companion and he possesses physical attributes which strongly recall the stereotypical features attributed to black populations, namely the colour of their skin, the shape of his lips and nose and his curly hair.

From an aesthetic point of view, an essential factor which affected European's attitude towards blacks was the iconography connected to the Ottoman Empire, which was undergoing a period of splendour and of consequent expansion, acquiring the control over commercial routes between Europe and Asia. Europeans obtained their knowledge of Ottoman appearance and of Ottoman costumes from their contact with the Empire's ambassadors, who were described as wearing a turban on their head, a blue kaftan with a leather belt, red inner garments, white stockings and black shoes and this became the prototype image of blacks in the minds of Europeans. In Venice, they were first alluded to in the fifteenth century, specifically in the thirties, when they were addressed with

several different epithets, as for instance Ethiopians, Moors and Turks; the issue with these names is that they did not clearly define which were the distinctive characteristics of each group. As a matter of fact, the boundaries of those words were quite blurry, as they did not delineate merely the colour of the skin, but carried also religious connotations, as in the case of the term “Turk” which was also used to mean “infidel”.

They had the chance to gain a special protection from the Venetian government by being baptized and changing their faith. After a short period during which they were to learn Venetian habits, they were often hired as gondoliers or shipbuilders; in fact, in one of the acclaimed painter Vittore Carpaccio’s oil on panel compositions, namely *Hunting on the Lagoon*, it is noticeable that in the two gondolas in the foreground two black sailors are joining the Venetians in a hunting session, though they do not seem to be performing any important task but they just stand at the rear of the boats, witnessing the act still remaining in a position of separation, of physical subordination.

Another emblematic painting by Carpaccio is *Miracle of the Relic of the Cross at the Ponte di Rialto*, otherwise known as *The Healing of the Madman*, a canvas representing the miraculous effects of one of the fragments of the Holy Cross which had been used to crucify Jesus. Carpaccio painted it around 1496 for the Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista, and in this project were involved other nine famous painters, each of whom produced an artwork. As in *Hunting on the Lagoon*, a dark-skinned man is one of the gondoliers, but here he appears not as a subordinate of the Venetians as in the other canvas but rather as their peer, as he is entrusted with the guide of his own gondola. He is dressed in red and white robes, echoing the other Carpaccio’s artwork but also van Dyck’s *Henrietta of Lorraine*, establishing a common pattern of red colour used for the hue of the page and the gondoliers’ dresses. In the bottom left corner, a group of people are witnessing the scene; some of them wear red robes which reminds the fashion of the Ottoman Empire, suggesting therefore that they are not Venetians but they could rather be ambassadors or diplomats who came to attend the performance of the miracle.

Britons associated external appearance with defined characteristic, which could be changed just by modifying physical shape. On 6th January 1605, Ben Jonson’s *Masque of Blackness* was performed at Whitehall, before King James and his court, with the Queen performing together with other eleven ladies the role of one of the daughters of the black-skinned Niger. The Masque was in fact composed on a request made by

Queen Anne of Denmark herself, who wished to appear as a negress (Coleridge 1875: xiv); in order to satisfy her desire, Johnson and Inigo Jones, an architect who created the costumes and the sets to be used in the performance, decided to employ a new method which would distinguish their performance from other ones in the past in which 'blackamoors' appeared. As a matter of fact, the darkness of African skin had been staged by dressing the actors in black or dark clothes: masks, gloves, stockings had been employed to give an impression of darkness. Queen Anne and her ladies did not wear any dark clothes to simulate darkness but they adopted a cosmetic approach instead, painting their faces and bodies with soot and ash, a technique which was common during festivities. It is not clear from the text of the masque whether the choice of this make-up was due to a specific suggestion by the Queen or if it was Johnson's idea, nevertheless it conveyed an unprecedented realism on stage.

A description of the characters and of their dresses and appearance introduces the text of the masque, providing also the set, namely Niger, the famous river in Ethiopia, which was regarded as, in Johnson's words, the "blackest nation of the world" (Johnson 1966: 87) and therefore the most suitable location where to stage blackness. The land embodies the natural primordiality typical of Africa, evoking vast but void fields, except for random woods, and the sea, whose waves are "imitating the orderly disorder which is common in nature" (Johnson 1966: 87); an exotic and supernatural image would be conjured by some tritons, whose body was half human and half fish and hair was as blue as the colour of the sea and who would hint at the fact that Africa was the land of magic, where encountering divine entities or creatures would not be as rare as it would be in the land of Albion, subsequently re-named England.

The character of the god Oceanus is then presented in the text as appearing in a human shape, his superhuman attributes being displayed by the colour of his skin, blue, and of his clothes, sea-green. The description of the other major character, Niger, might suggest that while a blue-skinned god could resemble a human being, an African is relegated to a sub-human state. His "form and colour of an Ethiop" (Johnson 1966: 88) hint at the fact that Ethiopian body is different from the white man's body and therefore in the social scale he must be placed in a lower step. He is depicted as having stereotypical curly hair and being adorned with pearls on his neck and his wrists and a wreath on his head.

The initial song is emblematic of the central concerns of Johnson's masque:

Sound, sound aloud
The welcome of the orient flood,
Into the west;
Fair Niger, son to great Oceanus,
Now honor'd, thus,
With all his beauteous race:
Who, though but black in face,
Yet are they bright,
And full of life and light.
To prove that beauty best,
Which, not the color, but the feature
Assures unto the creature. (Johnson 1966: 89, 112-129)

Niger is praised as Oceanus' son by a triton and two sea-maids, partly because rivers are born from the ocean, thus could be imagined as its offspring; however, being a simple child, Niger needs to be educated and instructed by an adult, mirroring the white Christian mission of evangelisation and of civilisation of black populations. However, even though they are Oceanus' legacy, Niger and his twelve daughters are pointed at as *his* race, which differs in the colour of its skin but still possesses inward qualities that correspond to the Elizabethan idea of fairness and brightness and were symptom of an inner whiteness which needed to be performed also outwardly. The Ethiopians' features are those of modern European persons, as they were performed by Queen Anne and other British ladies, contrasting with their supposed appearance of an Ethiopian, which was not possible to stage unless by employing an African actor. The audience's knowledge of the use of a make-up did not prevent them from a full immersion in the performance, accepting that their fantasy needed to compensate what reality lacked; however, this could not hide the European features which still remained visible on the ladies' faces beneath their make-up. The song gives credit for Niger race's beauty to their features, but it is not very clear to what it refers: the word 'feature' might stand either of inner quality and of physical characteristic and in this case the nature of the situation would suggest that the

former interpretation would be the most appropriate. Nevertheless, it might refer also to the European features above discussed, in an effort to please the Queen by praising her beauty even when it is disguised as a grotesque black mask.

A long conversation between Oceanus and Niger follows the end of the song, in which the latter praises his daughters' beauty, alluding to the ancient belief that Ethiopian were the first population to have inhabited Earth, perhaps also claiming that theirs is a sort of 'original' beauty which could be regarded as no less striking than white beauty. Niger attributes the shift in the canons of beauty from Ethiopian characteristic to Northern European ones to the works of "poor brain-sick men, styl'd poets here with you" (Johnson 1966: 91); their influence was so powerful that with their verses they could affect the minds of Niger's daughters, not to mention the aesthetic standards of entire generations. As they praised handsome women from other countries, African features were soon dismissed from being characteristics of beauty and quickly became just traits indicating an 'otherness' so far from European culture; thus, they were turned into elements which had to be feared and shunned rather than as a simple different kind of beauty. However, Niger adds that it was because of the fall of Phaethon, the son of the god Helios, who lost control of his father's chariot almost burning the entire globe, that Ethiopian skin became black. As a matter of fact, ancient mythology, re-interpreted also by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, describes how the cause of African burnt skin is that the sun came too close to the Earth, drying many of its lands in the process. This might imply, though, that poets started abhorring them after that episode and the beauty that was actually celebrated had always been the fair one; not only was Ethiopians' change aesthetical but it also was internal, their identities having been deeply touched by their sudden metamorphosis. They were now "black with black despair" (Johnson 1966: 91), their inner fairness disappeared, leaving them being nothing more than miserable and abandoned beings.

The general tone of Niger's discourse appears to be aimed at claiming that, in spite of the poets' works and of other kinds of beauty, his daughters do and will continue to possess an innate grace which will distinguish them and which makes them desirable. On the other hand, as the moon, played by a woman dressed in white and silver robes, materialises on the stage, his words sound as if they were pointing at its fair side: "auspicious light", "thy general brightness", "shine" (Johnson 1966: 93). The moon's attributes seem to be more suitable to describe the land of Albion rather than of Ethiopia,

which would more easily be associated with the sun instead, recalling the myth that claimed their appearance was simply a divine error. The fact that Niger asks the moon to “beautify” (Johnson 1966: 93) his daughters suggests that she has the power to whiten the hue of their skin, relieving them of their despair; the shining light of Ethiopia might counteract the action of the sunbeams which scorched them, washing away both the darkness which covers them but also the one that haunts and torments them, that makes them weep, granting with this transformation the achievement of a higher status of humanity.

Ethiopia’s answering speech provides quite interesting themes; she claims that “thy daughters’ labours have their period here” (Johnson 1966: 94), meaning that darkness has become such a heavy burden for them to carry that she will allow her brightness to cure their disease, to undo the errors that brought grief upon them and she begs Niger to resume his “native cheer” (Johnson 1966: 94) for his daughters will be admitted to and be part of those reigns that, according to poets, were so full of fairness. The moon draws then a distinction between Ethiopian sun and Albion’s: in fact, she claims that in Britannia the sun shines day and night and it is not clear whether the sun and the moon are present together at night or the sun is the only ruler of light, dismissing Ethiopia as just a complementary element without any real influence. In this case, she might be said to represent the “other”, the African self, who lives in the same world as the white man but without being recognised as peer, therefore not able to make the difference.

The sun’s rays possess the ability to “blanch an Ethiop and revive a cor’s” (Johnson 1966: 94) and this seems to deny the moon’s power to whiten Niger’s daughters, as he requested. Ethiopia insists that his light can “salve the rude defects of every creature” (1966: 94) and it is an attack to all that is good in Ethiopians and to blacks in general, as their characteristics are relegated to mere imperfections and flaws, weaknesses that cannot possibly be present in the European ideal of a human being. Niger’s daughters are invited in front of British men to receive their gifts of salvation and the crowd would probably add a mortal part of acceptance to the sun-god blessing, which would be a guarantee of preservation of beauty. Turning white was then believed to be desired by black people, since it conveyed a refinement and the achievement of the civilisation they were longing for.

In the final speech of the masque, Ethiopia announces that Niger must go back to the lake alone, as if it was a punishment for his blackness, while his daughters will remain as honoured guests of Oceanus; their newly achieved whiteness distanced them from their father and they shall live abandoning their old traditions and beliefs in order to embrace the ones that their white condition has imposed upon them.

The masque inspires questions about the nature of identity and about its mutability: in Niger's mind, appearance is immutable, fixed, as his words describing his prole prove:

Since the fixt colour of their curled hair,
Which is the highest grace of dames most fair,
No cares, no age can change, or there display
The fearful tincture of abhorred gray,
Since Death herself, herself being pale and blue,
Can never alter their most faithful hue; (Johnson 1966: 91, 171-176)

The emphasis is placed on external features: hair and skin colour. Niger stresses that one additional meaning of beauty is that it never fades away, not even in death, remaining as eternal echo of the past, while in contemporary culture beauty is ephemeral by definition and that is why it is so highly valued. The imposition of new identities is a theme that will be central in the colonial discourse and Queen Anne and her ladies' cosmetic masquerade is the emblem of the usurpation of African identity by England, blackness becoming superficial while whiteness is regarded as a permanent reality (Over 2004: 48). On the one hand, it might be positive because it acknowledges a common basis for all human beings, a shared essence which might be the link to put aside the diversities that have been impeding a peaceful coexistence; on the other hand, denying that different identities exist means dehumanising the "other", shaping him after the European model and erasing the other's own history, legacy and culture. Niger's appeal against the assimilation to Albion is uttered but neither Oceanus nor Ethiopia provide any answer to his heartfelt plea but they rather build a wall of indifference, as if his argument was not even worth being taken into consideration.

The journey of the twelve daughters from Ethiopia to Albion, or England, is a journey of whitening, in which each new country is inhabited by a population whose skin

is lighter than the one before, ascending the scale of hues up to its white top, Britannia. What is particularly interesting is the fact that, in this case, the metamorphosis of Niger's daughters is voluntary, or at least it partially is, as such a transformation must happen because otherwise they would have been considered only as outcasts, unaccepted by society as they were different. The women voluntarily started the process but their choice might not have been spontaneous idea, sprung because they felt that by changing they could reach an identity that matched their feelings. It was almost a need, a necessity imposed by the external context. In a world in which the only possible choice would be to conform, real separate identities would be impossible to be created as one of the basis for the creation of identity is diversity, even if the latter has been often employed as a way to annihilate and suppress the other. As a matter of fact, the Ethiopians' features are rendered identical to those of the Britons.

Queen Anne insisted with Ben Johnson that he should conclude his work, and on 10th January 1608, three years after *The Masque of Blackness*, the playwright had his second masque, namely *The Masque of Beauty*, performed at court. This new work was less complex than the previous one, still it introduced some elements: the masque presents a slight ambivalence, wavering between contrasting tones. The Queen was performing again but this time neither she nor the other ladies had their skin made dark by pigments, as the transformation that was promised has actually happened over the two years of their absence.

The masque opens with a conversation between the wind Boreas and Januarius, who proclaims himself "Prince of Months" (Johnson 1966: 125); the former presents what happened to the twelve daughters of Niger, that is to say they were guided by the shining light of the moons into the water of the ocean, whose waves cleansed their blackness, and they finally received the gift of true beauty (Johnson 1966: 125). The pigment of their skin seems not to be different from the one employed by Inigo Jones to make the ladies appear as black-skinned, since it can be easily washed away by water as if it were a stain on clothes. Their decision inspired other four blacks, Boreas claims, to go to England to seek a similar change in their aesthetics but by doing so they enraged the Night, who was concerned with the exaggerated importance whiteness was given:

Which Night envy'd, as done in her despite,

And, mad to see an Aethiope washed white,
Thought to prevent in these; lest Men should deem
Her colour, if thus chang'd, of small esteem. (Johnson 1966: 126, 81-84)

The Night's desire is to avoid the dismissal of blackness as a characteristic which causes embarrassment or a feeling of inferiority and the longing for external change which seems to be affecting an increasing number of Ethiopians, who suddenly regard their blackness as a burden which has to be left behind.

During the first part of the masque, a black curtain representing the Night was hiding part of the stage; after the character of the East-wind Vulturinus appears on stage revealing that the Night's plan against the nymphs was unsuccessful, the curtain is drawn, in a symbolical abandonment of obscurity to salute the Throne of Beauty, a prism of light which brightens the actresses' backs, casting darkness out of human bodies, cleansing both their bodies and their souls, so that the whole scene must have appeared idyllic to the audience. Eight actors embodying the elements of beauty parade on the stage, each of them portraying a different aspect of it, their clothes and accessories of bright or vivid colours: the first to appear, Splendor, wears a dress of an intense hue and her breast is naked, detail that in the following centuries will be associated with the primordially of Africa and its inhabitants, opposing the refined and splendid garments of European colonisers. Splendor's companions wear bright blue garments, a fair sun on the head, which might be anticipating the Enlightenment's light of Reason, that comes from the mind and is responsible for progressed and civilized societies, gold and silver, flowers, pearls and other ostentatious ornaments.

Then, the musicians play their instruments, celebrating the importance of (white) beauty in the world; Love, who radiates light, struggled against Chaos and won, bringing a new era of brightness on the world. Blackness is used in contrast with beauty, in the same way as night is used in contrast with light, suggesting that dark skin was not considered good-looking and that they were opposite sides of the same quality, therefore they cannot coexist simultaneously. Shadows will not be allowed to survive in the new world, as "it was for Beauty, that the world was made" (Johnson 1966: 132) and the assumption is that, as beauty can only be an attribute of the white man, there is no room for Africans unless they accept to be whitened and to submit themselves to the rules of the British world.

The Masque of Blackness and *The Masque of Beauty* stage a metamorphosis from Ethiopian, which in sixteenth-century England was used to refer to the whole African continent, to European. In the first one, though, the voice of Niger tries to counteract this push that urges his daughters to conform, but to no avail as all he obtains is to be sent back alone and in despair for having lost his daughters forever but even more because they renounced their identities too easily, as if they did not care much about maintaining them or fighting for them. Costumes, setting, choice of words, everything is constructed so as to present the supremacy of King James' desire to unite the kingdoms of Britain and to add new lands to his control, and his cause would have sounded legitimate to the British audience due to the dichotomy black versus white, charged with many meanings that go beyond the pure and simple contrast of colours.

The former was associated with devilry, witchcraft and sin while the latter was linked with purity, innocence and virtue so probably the spectators would not heed the words of the sinful Niger but they would be focused on the idea of superiority of the white man. The masques revolve around the theme of identity, a complex issue to be dealt with as the contemporary notion of it does not coincide with the early modern concept of it. Niger is the only character who chose not to renounce his African identity and hence he is labelled as "alien" and discriminated; his discourse is inspired by ideas that anticipate the condemnation of the effects of colonial exploitation of the British Empire in its African colonies. Themes of appropriation and cultural and psychological projection will be central in the following centuries, especially in the twentieth, when the colonies achieved the freedom they longed for, not without heavy psychological consequences.

It emerges from the texts that, in the seventeenth century, inner qualities were strongly linked to appearance, hence whenever the latter changed, the former were inevitably affected. The very presence of the moon, or Ethiopia, at court is emblematic of the malleability of black identity when inside Albion's territory, with Africans revolting against their state of blackness and yearning for whiteness. Quite controversial in his relationship between virtues and appearance is Othello, or the Moor of Venice, who is frequently stereotyped through the play for his typical African features as lips and dark skin and he is then associated with bestiality and evil, as Iago's speeches conjure many images of animal sexual intercourse which would be a metaphor for the Moor and his wife, the Venetian Desdemona.

1.2 *Othello, the Moor of Venice*

Shakespeare probably wrote the play in 1603, taking inspiration from a collection of Italian tales by Giraldi Cinthio for the main plot, namely *Gli Hecatommithi* (Sanders 1984: 2), adding then some minor characters and slight modifications to make it the masterpiece the world knows. It was the seventh tale of the third section the one which provided the majority of details for the plot of the play. Shakespeare's *Othello* is the story of a former enslaved Moor who has become one of Venice's most respected army generals and married a young Venetian woman, the daughter of a wealthy Senator. The Moor soon becomes the target of the attacks of his ensign, the treacherous and puppet-master Iago, who seems to be a sort of playwright, as with his rhetoric he is able to influence every character he encounters, bending them to his own will and thus becoming a divinity who moves the threads of unaware mortals. However, the real motive for Iago's longing for a cruel revenge is not so clear: it might be due to his unfulfilled desire to be appointed Othello's lieutenant in Cassio's place, to the alleged sexual intercourse between the Moor and Iago's wife Emilia, sometimes it might appear that the ensign's reason is just that Othello's skin is darker than his own.

The first act opens with the debauched and affluent Roderigo conversing with Iago and accusing him of not having told him that Desdemona, whom he secretly loved, had married Othello. Iago convinces his interlocutor that the situation can be turned at their own advantage and sends him to Desdemona's father Brabantio to make him aware that his daughter is wed to a Moor; the furious Brabantio rushes to Othello, accusing him of seducing his daughter using sorcery and witchcraft, otherwise she would never have consented to such a hideous bond. Meanwhile, they are both summoned to a council to counteract the Turks' attack on Cyprus and, before leaving for the island, another accusation is thrown at Othello but the Duke absolves him. Though the Turkish fleet is sunk by a storm, during the celebrations Iago gets Cassio drunk, who wounds another soldier forcing Othello to strip him of his rank. At this point, the ensign persuades Cassio to ask Desdemona to intercede in his favour with her husband while he also persuades Othello that his wife and his lieutenant are having an affair, suspicion reinforced when Iago places Desdemona's handkerchief in Cassio's room, planting in the Moor's mind the idea that the allegedly adulterous couple must be killed to avenge his honour. In his

last confrontation with his wife, Othello does not hear her frantic pleas and declarations of innocence, as he was already resolved to kill her as a punishment for her infidelity. After the deed is done, Emilia, bewildered by Desdemona's death, reveals the foul plans her husband had conceived, causing the latter to stab her to death; shocked by this sudden revelation, Othello commits suicide after wounding his ensign.

The beginning of the play provides hints of Othello's appearance even before he enters on stage: Roderigo refers to him as "thick-lips" (*Othello*, 1.1.62) and to his "gross clasps of a lascivious Moor" (*Othello*, 1.1.123), Iago tells Brabantio that an "old black ram is tugging your white ewe" (*Othello*, 1.1.85-86). Throughout the play, recurrent elements point at Othello's ethnicity, which has not been clarified yet; it is essential to notice that, in seventeenth-century England, the word Moor possessed a various range of different associations, in fact it was often linked with people of African descent who possessed sets of physical features which were not even similar.

As travel literature achieved popularity in England, accounts of those distant lands became more frequent and in particular Leo Africanus' *A Geographical History of Africa*, an ethnographic as well as geographical account of the author's travels, translated in English by John Pory in 1600, provides an insight into the populations living in the Mediterranean coast of Africa, whom he called "Moors" and "Arabians" (Mabillard 2000); they lived in Barbary, which in Elizabethan England comprised the North African lands extending from Egypt to the Atlantic Ocean. In his account of Arabians, Leo Africanus attempts to describe either what he considered positive and negative traits of their life: on the one hand, they are depicted as less progressed than Europeans, as they lived in tents and they were very superstitious, to the point that on certain days they would not wash parts of their bodies. Moreover, they were quite rude and coarse that it would have been complicated for any stranger to establish relationships with them, particularly because they followed no law; their ignorance led them to the belief that everything in the world was due to some divine intervention and that makes of them no better than primitives, as Britons would be versed in natural philosophy and hence would not believe anything they were told without questioning it. They were held as pagans, not devoted to any of the major recognised religions and Leo noticed the absence of any church or site devoted to praying. From his account of those populations' lifestyles it might be argued

that they were barbarians whose brains were not as developed as Europeans', therefore there was not much to expect from them (Mabillard 2000).

On the other hand, he describes some of them as interested in arts and sciences, while others, the ones who had settled on the mountains, as strong-willed and worthy of respect (Mabillard 2000). Furthermore, the Bard might have taken inspiration from Leo Africanus' personal life to shape the character of Othello, as the Muslim was a noble, educated and skilled African who was able to gain respect and admiration for his accomplishments in the white, civilised, Venetian society; in fact, Leo was born from a wealthy family and then was captured and forced to become a slave, the same fate that befell the Moor of Venice, who, speaking about the period of his life when he had been sold as slave, mentions his subsequent "redemption" (*Othello* 1.3.137) which might refer to the freedom both of them finally received.

Another source Shakespeare was probably aware of was Pliny the Elder's *The Historie of the Natural World*, which was translated by Philemon Holland in 1601. Pliny's explanation of the divergences between men of different nations, with a section dedicated to the Scythians, some of whom were cannibals and are mentioned by Othello in his account of his life before arriving in Venice: "And of the cannibals that each other eat, / The anthropophagi, and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders." (*Othello* 1.3.142-144). The figure of the anthropophagi enthralled both Pliny and Desdemona, whose love Othello won by telling her tales of his African exotic adventures; in *The Historie of the Natural World*, the savage habits of cannibals as drinking from human skulls and taking parts of their enemies to exhibit as trophies (scalps, hair) suggest that they are closer to animals than to human beings, their behaviour being almost bestial, primordial and seemingly driven only by basic instincts rather than by awareness or contemplated choices.

The presence of the Prince of Morocco in the other Venetian play written by Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, insinuates that the playwright was aware of the existence of different stereotypical features which were associated with people of different "nations", as Pliny defined them. In fact, the Prince is described as a tawny Moor, with no other aesthetic references but the colour of his skin; in this case, no lips, bosom, hair or physical attributes provide an ethnicity for the royal suitor. As in the case of Othello, the Prince's dark skin is referred to previously to his entrance on the stage,

when Portia finds out about his presence among her suitors and react harshly: “If he have the condition of a saint, and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me” (*The Merchant of Venice* 1.2.124-126). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the definition of Moor is inhabitant of ancient Mauritania, but the term was quite flexible in the early modern period and therefore it was associated also with religious groups as the Muslims, to pagan infidels, or to populations whose skin was of a darker hue than that of Europeans.

Venice was considered as a multicultural city, in which the presence of people of varied ethnicities was not surprising, despite foreigners and non-Christians were lowly respected as presented in the case of the Jew Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. The insulting epithets which he had to endure relegated him to being just an outcast in the Venetian society, a menacing embodiment of the lack of virtues and values of non-Christians.

As a matter of fact, the presence of Othello in Venice was not contested at the beginning of the play, at least by the senators the Duke, as the Venetian army required his skills in the upcoming war against the fleet of Turks. In *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice*, which dates back to 1599, military positions of relevance were appointed to foreign soldiers, in order to prevent any Venetian from gaining excessive authority and influence as a result of their military achievements (Bassi 2000: 21). However, in 1693 Thomas Rymer, in his *A Short View of Tragedy*, argued:

The character of that state is to employ strangers in their wars; but shall a poet thence fancy that they will set a Negro to be their general, or trust a Moor to defend them against the Turk? With us a blackamoor might rise to be a trumpeter, but Shakespeare would not have less than a lieutenant-general. With us a Moor might marry some little drab or small coal-wench. (Rymer 2004: 202-203)

He questioned Shakespeare’s choice of representing a world that was highly implausible, for ethnic difference were still so influential in his mind that he could not conceive a blackamoor gaining a high status in the social hierarchy and having a white and Christian wife. Sixteenth-century England was accustomed to the presence of foreigners, nevertheless contempt and hostility towards them was diffused, as the alien other was regarded as dreadful, not worthy of being respected as a peer. Rymer’s remark

is that, no matter how Othello appears integrated in the Venetian society, he could not possibly have achieved such a respected status as that of general, suggesting that it would have been impossible to rely on him to defend the city against the menace of the infidels. While in the original tale by Cinthio the protagonist was a Moor only by name and it was not referring to his skin colour, Shakespeare's Moor was clearly defined as not white, even if his actual ethnicity was not surely identifiable among the African ones. Rymer claimed that Cinthio had better understood the nature of his character, therefore he preferred not to give him Moorish traits (2004).

Brabantio himself started opposing to the Moor only when he was told about the secret marriage between his daughter and Othello, which he regards as a "treason of the blood" (*Othello* 1.1.166); miscegenation was considered an aberration, a sinful union which would bring nothing more than disgrace and degradation. Daileader argued that one of the sub-texts in the play is the theme of rape, which she connected with inter-racial sexual relationships, as Brabantio was certain that Desdemona would never have agreed to the marriage willingly. Therefore, she must have been forced; miscegenation, then, is just a category of rape (2005: 22) which took not into consideration the possibility that blacks could be loved or appreciated. Iago describes miscegenation in bestial terms, telling the senator that "an old black ram is tuppung your white ewe" (*Othello* 1.1.85-86) and that his daughter is "covered with a Barbary horse", so that his nephews will "neigh" to him (*Othello* 1.1.108-109), depriving them of their humanity and placing them in the semantic field of the animal, the non-human. Such a union is not natural nor accepted by God, hence their progeny will inherit the characteristic of the father; the outcome of the blending of black and white is always black, a predominance which threatens society, showing its weaknesses and arousing deep sexual desires.

The accusation Brabantio made against Othello is that he employed witchcraft or sorcery to win her, an enchantment which removed the fear she felt; the Venetian addresses him calling him "such a thing as thou" (*Othello* 1.3.71), showing that in the moment he dared wooing his daughter, the Moor passed from being an honoured general to an object of evil. Desdemona had refused many other suitors who would have made the perfect husband for her, as they possessed inward and outward whiteness but her will must have been chained by the stranger in a sort of reverse colonialism: Brabantio's claim is that Othello came to Venice and subdued Desdemona's mind to do with her whatever

he desired and that he “abused her delicate youth” (*Othello* 1.1.74), because otherwise there would be no reason why such a handsome and young lady should decide to be married to an older, black man whose world was completely different from hers. An act that the senator wanted to punish with prison to avoid the control of the city being taken by slaves or infidels, revealing a concern with the underestimated impact of foreigners on the Venetian society and suggesting that there was an infiltration due to society’s excessive openness. In the original tale, though, the Ensign declares that Desdemona dislikes the Moor’s blackness, echoing the moral of not marrying a man whose culture and nature render them so detached the one from the other; Shakespeare avoids simple morality as a unique purpose for his play and his Desdemona ceases to defend her husband only when she exhales her last breath.

Othello’s defence against the accusation is preceded by his assertion that “Rude am I in my speech, / And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace;” (*Othello* 1.3.81-82); he is a soldier, a warrior, hence his abilities are greater with his sword than with his tongue. As a matter of fact, his speeches, especially the long ones, demonstrate that he possesses a powerful rhetoric and a knowledge of language devices and that he speaks with the same intensity of military strategy as of love; his fascinating words were, in fact, the reason why Desdemona fell in love with him. Othello’s use of language reveals that he is not a barbaric, unlettered stranger but rather he possesses a fair soul and he was able to disclose it to the one who listened to the stories he told. The idealised image of himself the Moor achieves to create breaches the cultural barriers imposed by the Venetian society and by her family: “She loved me for the dangers I had past, / And I loved her that she did pity them” (*Othello* 1.3.166-167); his ability to recreate all the adventures of his past life, in which he risked his life several times, was captured and sold into slavery and finally found his redemption created a synergy with her desire to listen and to discover a reality which was so distant but that could be so close due to his presence. That is to say, either Othello and Desdemona fell in love with a projection of each other, a fantasy they recognised as such, for he admitted in his speech that her pity was what moved his heart and she claims that she “saw Othello’s visage in his mind” (*Othello* 1.3.250), she perceived a fairness in him that he partly seems to recognise at the beginning of the play when he claims that he is worthy of Desdemona but that he basically denies when he dismisses his speech as rude.

The Duke himself shows appreciation after the Moor's passionate account and such was probably the response of the early modern audience, particularly eager to listen to exotic tales, as new trade routes inspired the authors of travel literature, in which the protagonists were inaccessible and obscure places and their bizarre inhabitants; plays displaying the cruelty of the Turks became frequently performed in the early years of the seventeenth century.

Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* failed where Desdemona succeeded: she did not realise that beauty is determined not just by external features but also by inner virtues and qualities. She had already rejected the Prince of Morocco's suit even before she knew him, for she is only interested in his complexion and even if his virtues were those of a saint she would just see him for the negative stereotypes connected with his skin hue. Portia's desire to see the Moroccan fail the casket test might have led her to affect the final result with some clever trick to avoid having to marry a devil: "Let all of his complexion choose me so" (*The Merchant of Venice* 2.7.79). Echoing Othello, the Prince tells Portia exotic and adventurous tales of his life but they did not succeed in making her see his visage, and she says that "You must take your chance" (*The Merchant of Venice* 2.1.38).

Desdemona might be considered then an anti-Portia, in the sense that she voluntarily chose to ignore the boundaries imposed by their cultural differences and to see beyond Othello's colour, which in the early modern imagination was a sign of evil, a symbol of inferiority which God had chosen as a mark, as he did with Cain, to expose blacks' lack of virtues. One of the play's central themes is the complication of achieving integration between cultures, personal experiences and different identities. The miscegenation that was regarded with hatred and revulsion in the early modern audience became the opposite during the Renaissance: Othello was no more a barbarous stranger but rather the emblem of the noble savage, accepted by Europeans as not dangerous nor aggressive, filled with goodness because free of the corruptive power of civilisation. However, the Moor would have evoked ambivalent feelings: his status of stranger, "an extravagant and wheeling stranger / Of here and everywhere" (*Othello* 1.1.133-134), is fascinating for his wife as it is for the audience, who sympathises with him but at the same time that same status is felt as a threat to European identity.

Iago's continuous pointing at Othello's diversity would have been directed to the readers of the play rather than to its theatrical audience, as readers probably imagined Othello as "white", not having visual support and therefore it was easier for them to accept his diversity. Iago clearly is a villain whose purpose is not well defined and his being so subtle and deceitful pushed the reader towards the Moor's side; in a performance Othello appeared for what he was really intended to be, in other words the other whose diversity was visible even if represented by white actors whose bodies were painted.

Interracial marriage evoked ideas of sex, lust and bestiality; it introduced the sexualised body of the black male, who, with his lascivious behaviour, damaged the innocence of the white woman, inducing in sinning. In the early years of the seventeenth century, a pseudonymous pamphlet accused Queen Elizabeth of having had sexual relationships with blackmoors, in the original Latin described as "populous aethiopium", in other words Ethiopians; having intercourse with blackmoors would appear as having been held as a highly perverse sin against decency (Daileader 2005: 14). Such a union was not deemed possible in early modern period except in works of fantasy, in which it could be a warning against the possibly dreadful consequences of getting involved in an unnatural bond.

Shakespeare, as the majority of his contemporaries, appears to have conceived interracial relationships as possible only between a black male and a white female, with a total absence of a reverse couple. Seldom was black femininity represented and in those cases it was intended to be simply misogynistic humour, as when Lorenzo accuses the Clown of having had sex with a black woman: "I shall answer that better to the commonwealth / than you can the getting up of the negro's belly: the / Moor is with child by you, Lancelet" (*The Merchant of Venice* 3.5.34-36). In the previous section, Lorenzo adopts the terms "Moor" and "negro" as if they were synonyms, arising questions about what is the actual meaning of the "tawny Moor" which described the Moroccan Prince. The "tawny" might have been added because Moor was intended as a characteristic of being a non-Cristian, probably a Muslim, so that it would be needed a chromatic indication of his complexion. The misspelling of the Clown's name is due to make a pun referring to the act of physical penetration of the black woman.

In another play, *The Old Wives Tale* by George Peele, a blind white man is married to a black woman; here one possible conclusion is that, if not for his blindness which

prevented him from seeing her complexion, the man would not have consented to marry her. On the other hand, though, it can be argued that blindness is more an advantage than a handicap, as it allowed him to love without any kind of prejudice; Desdemona chooses to be “blind”, to close her eyes in order to be able to “feel” the real Othello rather than just stopping at appearances, reinforcing the idea that she embodies the ideal wife and woman.

Othello and Desdemona’s marriage is the foremost to be discussed when it comes to the topic of interracial relationships; at the beginning of the play, it was depicted as a faithful and loving one when Desdemona, proclaiming her duties as a wife towards the Moor, shields him against Brabantio and the Duke. She exposes her personal view of Othello to the world: “My heart’s subdued / Even to the very quality of my lord. / I saw Othello’s visage in his mind. / And to his honors and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate” (*Othello* 1.3.248-252): her love is so intense that she promised not only her body but also her soul to him and she will not leave alone him even when he is going to fight a battle. Their fates are tied in life as they will be in death. Their whole relationship revolves around their considering themselves worthy of their partner; Othello sees himself as fair and is sure his wife understands it, so he challenges the Duke and Brabantio to question his fairness after having heard of it by the Venetian lady. In the early modern period, the word “black” was meant not only as an indication of external traits but also as a contrary of “fair”, or beautiful, which had also moral connotations, especially when women were concerned (Daileader 2005: 14), therefore, when Othello challenged the Venetians to find him foul in his wife’s words, he probably intended it as a test to find whether he was lustful and obscene or not.

Brabantio states that it was an unnatural device such as witchcraft that corrupted his daughter; by condemning Othello, he denies the affection he felt for the Moor when the latter was just a soldier going to his house to tell stories. Iago’s revelation seems to have stripped Othello naked of his new Venetian and Christian identity in the senator’s eyes, reverting him back to being just a black infidel who is trying to steal Desdemona’s purity and goodness; he is compared to a thief who broke into Brabantio’s house to steal the most precious jewel he found. A similar situation appeared in *The Merchant of Venice*, but with reverse roles: in fact, Jessica, the young daughter of the Jewish moneylender Shylock, marries Lorenzo, a Venetian, against the will of her father. Lorenzo did not win

her love with exotic tales, though she said that she knows his tongue, an image either charged with obvious sexual connotations and reminding of the power of speech when used for particular purposes by an eloquent person; in both of the Venetian marriages, the two wives appear to have been seduced by their respective wooer's ability to evoke an appealing idea of themselves through words.

Another element to be found in both the plays is the fact that Lorenzo and Desdemona are able to transcend the earthly body of their beloved ones, an extraordinary capacity to perceive the real essence of the other human beings which is seldom witnessed in other characters of the early modern period's theatrical plays. In the seventeenth century, sexual fantasies, lasciviousness and luxury were considered as a form of adultery, even if they were restricted to husband and wife; throughout the play, the many hints at sexuality and desire, together with the continuous pressures made by Iago, present the female characters of the play, namely Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca, as promiscuous and sexually available.

It is important to be noticed that they are all connected with adultery or prostitution and it is hard to clarify whether they are guilty of the act they were accused of or it is just another scheme in the villainous ensign's plan; Bianca is presented as a courtesan in Cyprus who is involved in a peculiar relationship with Cassio. The lieutenant is, in fact, one of her clients but he behaves as if they were actual lovers: he calls her "sweet love" (*Othello* 3.4.167) and she responds as a woman in love would, that is to say lamenting the long days that will keep them separated. Once she is given Desdemona's handkerchief by Cassio, her jealous outburst is meant to prove that her feelings for him are true and that, despite her job causes her to have sexual intercourses with a high number of men, she is and will be devoted only to him; it might have been intended to stimulate a reaction in the lieutenant in order to understand what the man's feelings were for her. However, given the free nature of her character, Bianca possibly pretends to be in love with Cassio as she had done with many other of her customers.

Despite her name means "fair" or "white" in Italian, her being traditionally depicted as courtesan implies that she is not the virtuous, chaste and faithful woman that was idealised as the emblem of the perfect wife in the seventeenth century; in other words, she would be called foul. She defends herself against Emilia and Iago's accusation of murder and of being a merciless prostitute: "I am no strumpet, but of life as honest / As

you that thus abuse me” (*Othello* 5.2.120-121); her honesty might be true in her mind, but for the audience she would remain unfaithful and lustful and they would see her as the negative example of woman who must be scorned because she abandoned herself to carnal pleasures in exchange for money. Though, there is no explicit mention of what her occupation is except that Cassio, when asked if he really wants to marry Bianca, answers: “I marry? What! A customer? Prithee bear some / charity to my wit; do not think it so unwholesome” (*Othello* 4.1.119-120). The idea of binding himself to her would mean that his mind is “unwholesome”, diseased and the word “customer”, in its sexual connotations, reinforces the concept that what she actually does is selling her body.

Emilia, Iago’s wife, is exploited by her husband so that he could finally achieve his goals; in the sequence that follows Desdemona dropping the handkerchief, Emilia reflects upon that token of love: “My wayward husband hath a hundred times / Wooed me to steal it. But she so loves the token / (For he conjured her she should ever keep it) / That she reserves it evermore about her” (*Othello* 3.3.294-297). In contrast to Othello and Lorenzo’s use of language and of wooing, Iago employs his charm of lover to bend her will, to convince her to betray her mistress’ trust to favour her husband instead. “What he will do with it / heaven knows, not I: / I nothing but to please his fantasy” (*Othello* 3.3.299-301): Emilia’s sense of duty towards her husband clearly forces her to surrender to the villain’s demand without even questioning its righteousness or the motives that stand behind it. Emilia is mostly a sort of tool in Iago’s hands, as the only way he addresses her is not to express love or fondness but rather to take advantage of her privileged position at Desdemona’s side (and consequently at Othello’s).

Her verses are characterised by a lack of comprehension for her husband’s but also for her own actions despite she did try, as Desdemona did in her final moments, to have Iago reveal his exact reasons for his mischief but her effort was barely sketched and she almost immediately abandoned her quest and submitted to her husband’s answers with a weak attitude. He appears not to be particularly sexually ambiguous, but her being adulterous is advanced as possible reason to justify the hatred and resentment Iago feels towards the Moor; though, there is no element that might allude to intercours between them, no ambiguous words not gestures that might lead to think of a present or past relationship that goes further than formality. Their only conversation which exceeds those boundaries is to be found in the final act of the play, when she discovers the Moor’s

monstrous deed that condemned Desdemona, and her former respect becomes violent anger and she addresses Othello with unkind epithets. However, she is the key that leads Othello to finally understand he has been played for a fool and that is the moment she rejects her duties as a wife in order to be raised as protector of justice and truth. Iago's charms fail, his skilful tongue is unable to chain her will as he had done before and her adultery passes from being physical to being verbal, as she basically betrayed Iago and created a bond of truth with Othello, revealing the plot that involved his finding the handkerchief in Cassio's lodgings. The fate of the unfaithful wife is always the same: horrible death.

Desdemona, differently from her attendant Emilia, displays a greater confidence in the influence she exercises on her husband, so that their relationship is healthier and more natural. At the beginning of the play, they are strongly connected to the point that neither of them would willingly abandon their places at each other's side; Desdemona would follow him to Cyprus facing the perils of war and of a possibly unsafe journey on the Mediterranean Sea to honour her duty: her spirit is that of a brave woman and Othello salutes her as "my fair warrior" (*Othello* 2.1.179) as they meet in the island. Her authority, though, is even recognised as greater than Othello's by Cassio, who, after her ship lands at Cyprus, says that "our great captain's captain" (*Othello* 2.1.74) has arrived; though Othello commands the army, Desdemona controls him. Cassio states that, due to her celestial beauty, even natural elements do not harm her and are tamed, while they unleashed all their fury on the foul and infidel Turks, causing their ships to sink and therefore eliminating their threat.

At this point of the tragedy, Othello and Desdemona's love has not been corrupted by Iago's false insinuations, and they rejoice when they learn that no harm has come to either of them. Othello's speech is charged with erotic power: his puns about sex leave few doubts on the Moor's secret desires, which contradict what he had promised to the Duke in a previous scene, in the specific when Desdemona asked the Duke to allow her to leave for Cyprus:

Vouch with me, heaven, I therefore beg it not
To please the palate of my appetite,
Nor to comply with heat (the young affects
In [me] defunct) and proper satisfaction;

But to be free and bounteous to her mind;
And heaven defend your good souls that you think
I will your serious and great business scant
When she is with me. (*Othello* 1.3.259-266)

The image of a black man portrayed in this passage is not that of the libidinous and lustful alien who tries to contaminate the European society by giving birth to a mixed-race new generation of prole, but rather he appears as an old man whose “appetite” has long since been extinguished, or “defunct”. He is no more in his years of youth, when sexual desires could have forced him to forget his mission to focus only on personal carnal satisfaction so he maintains that he will act according to his newly acquired Venetian identity’s standards. Civilisation imposed that basic impulses and instincts must be restrained because they are more suitable to animals than to human beings; Othello understands that, due to his foreign origins, the senators believe that nature will prevail in him, clouding his judgement in the moment it will be most needed. The Moor’s plea, in this sense, is that they accept him and trust his ability of self-restraint; he wants to be considered as a fundamental part of their society instead of another subdued being whose only aim is to be exploited for others’ purposes.

His intention to prove that his redemption, or conversion, was actually successful seems to be deeply felt by Othello, and he states that, should desire overwhelm his duties of general, they should “Let housewives make a skillet of my helm, / And all indign and base adversities / make head against my estimation” (*Othello* 1.3.270). His name, his reputation is at stake, hence he has all the world to lose should he fail in fulfilling his promises; Cassio affirms that reputation is all that matters and once it is lost “what remains is bestial” (*Othello* 2.3.254). Maintaining a good name is regarded as essential, and it seems to be intended by the lieutenant as the soul that prevents the mind from abandoning the light of reason favouring an outburst of animal behaviours. A good name is connected with a higher probability of entering into Venetians’ good graces, therefore it is held in great consideration; Iago’s response to Cassio’s complaint unveils the contradictions of a society which attributes too much importance to ephemeral and often not deserved attributes. His denial of the grounds on which the whole system of determination of individual’s merit is built partially affirms that Othello has integrated so completely that he does the same choices and the same errors as his employers.

On the other hand, dismissing reputation as something which has no real value would help the Moor's case in the sense that satisfying his conjugal appetites would be no reason for being less worthy. As long as the individual believes himself to be decent, he should not let his opinion be influenced by external judgements. It is an interesting statement, though it is scarcely applicable to the early modern society (and in any other, it could be argued), because Othello would otherwise be cast out of the inner circles of society for being the other that they feared. However, it turns out to be just another of the ensign's cunning ploys, as he contradicts his own words later in the play when discussing with Othello about the sudden disappearance of Cassio from his wife lodgings as he saw his former commander approaching.

Desdemona's influence is once more employed in order to help Cassio; she promised she would intercede with her husband, confident that her ability would be sufficient to make him change his mind on the subject. The third scene of Act 3 is central in the play as it provides the essential elements to feed the Moor's jealousy: in fact, not only does he catch a glimpse of the stealthy Cassio leaving Desdemona's room but also Emilia collects the dropped handkerchief and gives it to Iago. Moreover, the insistence of his wife regarding the reconciliation of the two soldiers will later nourish Othello's doubts about her infidelity, so that her ability becomes a double-edge sword and instead of helping the lieutenant she unwillingly contributes to the realisation of the scheme that will eventually bring to her death. Othello answers "I will deny thee nothing" twice (Othello 3.3.76, 83), as Desdemona seeks assurance that she will accomplish her purpose; she would not deny him anything and she expects him to do the same for her, so she agrees to leave at his request.

Marriage is strictly related to ethnicity in the play: Othello is not regarded as an appropriate husband because of his blackness. Iago, Roderigo and Brabantio point at his racial difference from the first scenes, giving voice to prejudices and stereotypes about black people and making the audience aware of his ethnicity. However, Othello gradually changes and, while it can be said that, initially, his behaviour might have made the Venetians forget about his dark skin, in the final scenes his metamorphosis is so evident that the image they perceive of him is no more that of the integrated black who achieved whiteness but rather that of the "other" who murders indiscriminately. Blackness is not only physical but also mental. The Moor is attacked and he has no means to defend

himself otherwise than his rhetoric, which is a powerful weapon when it comes to wooing Desdemona or to affirming his Christian identity by punishing Cassio and comparing his behaviour to that of Turks. Othello's words often point at his abstract qualities or his actions rather than at his physical characteristics (Bassi 2000): "My parts, my title, and my perfect soul / Shall manifest me rightly" (*Othello* 1.2.30-31). He thinks of himself as worthy of his place in the Venetian society and consequently of his place at Desdemona's side.

In the Venetian society imagined by Shakespeare, stereotypes about the two lovers in interracial marriage are quite clearly stated by Iago:

[...] If sanctimony and a frail vow betwixt
an erring barbarian and super-subtle Venetian be
not too hard for my wits and all the tribe of hell, thou
shalt enjoy her. (*Othello* 1.3.351-354)

In this section, Iago seems to dismiss Othello and Desdemona's marriage as "frail", implying that, actually, their bond is weak and therefore easily breakable if the right conditions are provided. Their vow was pronounced, according to Christian religion, before God and Iago claims that it was just a pretence of righteousness, done with no other intent than that of respecting Venetian Christian customs. It is suggested that, given the Moor's nature of alien, or "barbarian", he is not able to recognise the skilful work of the subtle woman who consented to marry him just because of her lascivious desires, which could be fulfilled by the heavily sexualised black male. Even though Iago's efforts are directed at presenting that bond as diabolic and unnatural, he himself confesses his connection with the "tribe of hell" aimed at separating the spouses so that Roderigo can finally get the chance to declare himself to Desdemona.

Although Shakespeare's play is not to be defined as a racist literary work, as racism did not exist in the contemporary sense of the term, it surely provides interesting insights into the early modern perception of the "other", whose different physical traits were inevitably classified and linked with a series of negative attributes whose only purpose was to prove the superiority of the white man and culture over the others. Othello is a moor, a black individual who is forced to survive in the Venetian society, a part of which has strong prejudices and in which avoiding conforming meant automatic

exclusion from any of its activities. It is still quite uncertain what the exact connotations of being black were in the seventeenth century; some critics argued that dark skin was seen as a symptom of depravity and degeneration but it is possible that it was connected to those meanings years later. Skin would appear to be a sort of litmus test for inner virtues but while in Johnson's masques it was something that could easily be washed away, cleansed by the influence of Albion, in *Othello* it is quite more complex to rid of it. Basically, the difference is in the fact that in the latter blackness is not eliminated but remains in the background instead, ready to present itself anew when provided with the right context, which is Iago's scheme to undermine the Moor's reputation.

The colour of the skin will remain an important topic in the following centuries and will be employed, beside other characteristics as the dimension of the skull, to justify slavery and the urge to colonise Africa so as to allow them to reach the next step in the chain of evolution. Ania Loomba argued that those characteristics which are external and therefore the first to be highlighted when pointing at differences are also the most fragile; skin colour, for instance, can be modified by interracial sex (2002: 3). Given their momentary nature, there is no reason why they should cause so much concern. Desdemona was able to go beyond those simplistic differentiation:

[...] My heart's subdued
Even to the very quality of my lord.
I saw Othello's visage in his mind,
And to his honours and valiant parts
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate (*Othello* 1.3.248-252)

She is the only one who is really seeing Othello for who he believed himself to be, without the influences of the Venetian society reflected in Iago's speeches, and that is the pathway to reach true love. Self-approval is the key to cure the agitation of the mind; Iago claims that he has never met anyone who loved himself and that includes Othello. The hint is that, notwithstanding the Moor's claims of his own value, his condition of other will never allow him to truly relate to his own identity, unless he accepts that, no matter how hard he tries, he will always be an outcast. In the second part of the play, Othello's jealousy deeply affects his own understanding of his own value and virtues, as he begins to consider the possible motives of Desdemona's infidelity; his

blackness is the first reason that comes to the Moor's mind which could justify his wife's alleged promiscuous behaviour.

Othello's speeches become more focused on revenge and on hatred, due to the constant inputs of Iago, who feeds his general's anger with doubts and pointing his attention toward elements that, if correctly decontextualized, and Iago is particularly skilful in doing that, present misleading evidence. The Moor's certainties and identity rely on his love for Desdemona and on his being sure that his feeling is the same in her; as long as he is positive that she accepts him for who he is, the Moor's speeches seldom present fear or resentment. Iago weakens Othello's certainties and, therefore, he attacks the latter's identity, which begins to slightly fracture until it becomes clear that he cannot gather those shattered pieces anymore. On the contrary, Iago seems to be certain of everything he says and he distributes his certainties first to his fellow conspirer Roderigo and then to Othello himself. His forcing ideas into others' minds provoke a chain of events and of consequences that will affect all the characters. The ensign's skills in rhetoric are comparable to Othello's, though the former appears to lack a sense of morality and of emotional understanding and his being unmoved by empathy is what allows him to keep himself detached from reality and to analyse the situation from an external point of view. What he tries to do is to impose his own view of the world to the other characters, his own labels for either people or situations, and he succeeds in that, so most of the play revolves around Iago's reality rather than the actual reality. On the other hand, he justifies his action through his feelings of anger and envy towards Othello, so it can be said that, even though his actions are regardless of emotions, the motivations that stand behind them are certainly connected with his initial negative feelings.

In the second part of the play, Othello completely changes his behaviour: whereas in the first acts he was conscious that, despite others as Brabantio treated him as a menace, he could always confide in his wife's support, later he becomes aggressive and seems to prove that he is a being made of instincts. His rejection of the facts that are presented to him causes him to question what are the actual basis of his relationship with Desdemona, which he though was based on mutual honesty, loyalty and fidelity but that appear now as nothing more than a dim memory of a happiness that has faded into nothingness. Initial denial swiftly transforms into a desire to avenge the wrongs he suffered and that he begins to associate with his being black; he refuses to give credit to Iago's suggestions at first:

Nor from mine own weak merits will I draw
The smallest fear or doubt of her revolt,
For she had eyes and chose me. No, Iago,
I'll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove;
And on the proof there is no more but this:
Away at once with love or jealousy! (Othello 3.3.189-194)

Those qualities and virtues he so strongly asserted to possess at the beginning of the play now become “weak merits” which threatens the stability of their marriage, as the suspect that she might suddenly revolt against him has insinuated into his mind, though but feebly. He acknowledges a weakness where before he only saw his strength, especially because his merits had been a fundamental aid in the wooing of Desdemona and he is afraid that the magic that keeps them together might vanish and leave its place to indifference and detachment. However, here Othello is still able to avoid falling into Iago’s trap, as he states that he would doubt of Desdemona only in case he himself should be the witness of her betrayal, considering that she has not yet provided him reasons to be jealous or to investigate further on her alleged promiscuous behaviour. Othello’s highlighting the fact that she has eyes suggests that, deep inwardly, he is conscious that, as Brabantio said in his accusation, many Venetian women would have been concerned with his ethnicity, so different from theirs though so similar once mere appearance is dismissed as superficial and therefore not to be taken into account when judging a person.

The previous passage is the point from which Othello’s speeches display a feeling of apprehension and of inability to be satisfied by not knowing what happens around him, which inevitably reflects on his inner understanding of himself. His vulnerability provides access points for Iago through which he can enter the mind of the Moor and plant suspicion towards the latter’s closest friends and wife, who should support him and give him the strength to overcome the doubts society and Iago have about him. Instead, Othello falls into a spiral of self-pity and of self-dramatization which will ultimately lead him to craziness and to a fixation on punishing those who have offended him and his good name. The extraordinary pressure he experiences, effect of Iago’s continuous insinuations, reaches its breaking point at the moment of the murder of Desdemona, the ultimate act of

vengeance whose burden is too heavy to be carried by Othello's soul, forcing him to commit suicide as an attempt to make amends for his abominable act.

While pointing at Othello's blackness was just his ensign's priority, now the Moor himself advances it as an explanation of his wife's estrangement: in the first place he says "Haply for I am black, / And not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have" (*Othello* 3.3.265-266), then he lets rage emerge and shouts: "Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell!" (*Othello* 3.3.446). He also links the loss of his own reputation to his inner blackness: "My name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black / As mine own face" (*Othello* 3.3.387-389). Desdemona's promiscuity has affected his name, sullyng it with dishonour and he compares his most abstract quality with his most physical and superficial trait, that is to say his skin colour. This connection is quite interesting, as Othello himself claims that his whole being has reached a unity, though it is represented as negative as black, for the Moor as well as for the early modern society, was the colour which evoked a devilish image of foulness. Being black was the sign of a connection with the devil, as stated in Iago's words to Roderigo:

[...] Her eye must be fed. And what delight
shall she have to look on the devil? When the blood
is made dull with the act of sport, there should be—
again to enflame it, and to give satiety a fresh appetite—
loveliness in favour, sympathy in years, manners
and beauties, all which the Moor is defective in. (*Othello* 2.1.222-227)

Not only was blackness a sign of evil but it was also a distinctive trait of ugliness, which Iago claims Desdemona will be tired of after the initial period of appreciation. Iago here highlights the prevalence of the influence of the eye as most important organ when it comes to choosing a partner.

In his mind, Othello's dark skin is becoming an obstacle standing between him and Desdemona, preventing them from living happily; the burden of knowledge seems to be too much for him to bear and he would rather have remained unaware of her betrayal than having to face it. Iago's poisonous words are having the desired effect on the Moor, who abandons his previous self-control allowing his feelings to take over. Even in the earlier acts, when he seems to be in control of his passions, the episode of the inebriated

Cassio losing his mind and wounding a fellow Venetian is enough to set him on edge: “Now, by heaven, / My blood begins my safer guides to rule, / And passion, having my best judgement collied, / Assays to lead the way” (*Othello* 2.3.194-197). Passions cloud Othello’s (and Cassio’s before) mental faculties, reminding those animal terminology he was described with in the first scenes.

The ensign’s “little act on the blood” (*Othello* 3.3.328) severs the bond that tied the two lovers but at the same time it establishes, or rather it reinforces, a bond between Othello and Iago, in a sort of perversion of marriage. The structures that maintain the bond are the same, at least in Othello’s imagination: the relationship is based on mutual trust, with Iago disclosing his most intimate thoughts about the suspected affair between Cassio and Desdemona and the Moor revealing his doubts. Paradoxically, their bond’s basis is not love as in ordinary marriage but hatred instead; though, while Iago cloaks his hatred under a false pretence of love (the Moor says: “I greet thy love” in 3.4.469), Othello openly displays his hatred for Desdemona’s infidelity to the point that it becomes the only reason for the two men to join forces.

Blackness in the early modern period was conceived not only as an external feature of appearance but also as an inward “quality”. In this sense, the play presents controversial characters: in fact, Iago, despite he is ordinarily assumed to be white and European, proves that his virtues are more akin to what was described as “black”, while Othello is described as worthy, valiant and Christian, all characteristics which would have denoted inner whiteness. The Duke himself, surprisingly, is moved by the Moor’s story, which convinces him that “If virtue no delighted beauty lack, / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black” (*Othello* 1.3.287-288); the blackness which is part of his identity can be washed white by the power of virtue.

When Iago praises fairness and the wisdom connected to it, Desdemona invites him to pronounce some verses to honour blackness instead, breaking with the tradition that only “fair” beauty was to be celebrated (Minetti 1996: 36):

DESDEMONA: Well praised! How if she be black and witty?

IAGO: If she be black, and thereto have a wit,

She’ll find a white that shall her blackness fit.

DESDEMONA: Worse and worse!

EMILIA: How if fair and foolish?

IAGO: She never yet was foolish that was fair,
For even her folly helped her to an heir. (*Othello* 2.1.131-137)

The misogynistic attitude of Iago is reflected in his words, he refers to the “folly” of fair women meaning not only to their stupidity or dullness but also to their being lustful; being smart or not is a matter of no importance, as men will invariably focus on their sensuality, their power of seduction which guarantees that they will always find a partner. The “blackness” Iago speaks of might be interpreted as an inversion of roles of Othello and Desdemona (Minetti 1996: 37): Desdemona is “black” because she chose to marry a Moor, letting her whiteness be corrupted by the power of her lover’s dark magic. Whereas Othello’s virtues figuratively whitened his skin, Desdemona’s sin blackened her soul in her father’s eyes. He emphasised their incompatibility, claiming that Othello was unsuitable to be her husband, as it goes “against all rules of nature” (*Othello* 1.3.101) that she had refused all those young, white, Venetian suitors and marry a Moor, an alien to her society and her traditions.

A strong significance is given to the verb “to turn”: as a matter of fact, it is given different interpretations, among which religious conversion and chromatic change, either inwardly and outwardly, from black to white and vice versa. In the early modern period, the expression “to turn Turk” was employed not only to express the meaning of turning to Islam but metaphorically to refer to the loss of self-control: losing the grip on reason might cause a regression of the mind to a barbaric or primitive state, which was correlated to the European image of Turks. The infidel embodied the threat of animal instincts, therefore he was to be regarded as a warning of the consequences of abandoning the privileged state of civilised European to join the ranks of irrational beings devoted only to the fulfilling of momentary urges. Othello was able to renounce that state of inward “Moorishness”, embracing a new religion and, consequently, re-shaping his own identity. His redemption, though, is counteracted by his gradual reverting back to being a “Turk” during the play; Othello’s changing denotes a fluidity of identity, which is not fixed and immutable but a continuous re-inventing of the self instead. However, whereas his first conversion was an act of free and self-conscious will, his final regression is forced upon him by Iago’s persistent inputs.

Othello's rage against Cassio is emblematic of the concerns the early modern audience would have regarding going native:

Are we turned Turks? And to ourselves do that
Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?
For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl! (*Othello* 2.3.160-162)

The Moor speaks on account of his Christianity, which he reaffirms distancing himself from any doubt that might question his faith; his use of the pronoun "we" implies that he feels part of the Venetian society and, in spite of what Brabantio claims, he is to be regarded as their peer. As Saint Maurice, Othello is a convert who condemns the act of hurting a fellow Christian; he implies that, since God has prevented the Turks from achieving their goal of attacking the island of Cyprus, in quarrelling Cassio and Roderigo are interfering with the Almighty's will. In Cassio's case, it was his addiction to drinking that sealed his fate, as he fell prey of Roderigo's cunning ability to drive him astray. Othello defines their fight as a "barbarous brawl", giving voice to the anxiety about the repercussions of indulging immoral desires. Turning Turk would lead to damnation, as the soul would be subjected to sexual temptations and vices (Vitkus 1997: 145).

The demonic influence of surrendering to passion, or "blood", is once more presented in the last scenes, when Othello's conversion is becoming more evident and condemnable. He is no more able to discern lies from truth, in the chaos of his mind only one purpose is clear: his honour must be avenged. Her bed, symbol of her disgrace, will be the place where she must confess her crime and atone for it: "The bed, lust-stained, shall with lust's blood be spotted" (*Othello* 5.1.36). The Othello who did not miss the chance to proclaim his valour, honour and virtue is substituted by an enraged Othello, whose bestial attitude had been anticipated by Brabantio at the beginning of the play, when he had presented the Moor as a creature that must be feared instead of being appreciated, a declaration which sounded completely inappropriate then but that now seems to fit what Othello has become. Desdemona's betrayal is perceived as a turn by the Moor, and he appears to be moved not by jealousy but by an idea of punishing her for having abandoned Christian virtues to join the ranks of the infidels, driven by impulses; he did not accept such behaviour from Cassio when he found the latter drunk and unrestrainable and he cannot possibly accept it from his wife.

Desdemona's "turn" had already been anticipated by her father Brabantio in the first scenes of the play: "Look at her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / she has deceived her father, and may thee" (*Othello* 1.3.290-291), a warning which is heeded by Othello later:

Ay, you did wish that I would make her turn.
Sir, she can turn, and turn, and yet go on
And turn again. (*Othello* 4.1.247-249)

Her turning can be intended either as having a sexual connotation and as an indication of her continuous changing of loyalty and fidelity, the argument the Moor advances so as to explain his sudden fits of rage and his detached attitude towards his wife after he had always shown nothing else than affection and love for her. Desdemona finds herself in the same situation as did Jessica, daughter of Shylock, in *The Merchant of Venice*. As a matter of fact, they decide to marry a man their fathers despise and think is not suitable for them, in Shylock's case because Lorenzo is a Christian while in Brabantio's case his protest is motivated by Othello's ethnicity.

The purification of Desdemona from her demons becomes Othello's holy mission: once he "puts out" the light that kindles her life, he will not be able to restore it but he can give new light to her soul, as if it was a candle. He urges her to confess her crimes and pray before the deadly deed is done, for she must reconcile herself to heaven and God if she wishes her sins to be forgiven. However, the only crime she confesses is that of loving him and Othello's answer is peculiar: "Ay, and for that thou diest" (*Othello* 5.2.41). Despite hers was a declaration of innocence, Othello might have interpreted it as a reverberation of her previous words "for the love I bear to Cassio" (*Othello* 4.1.227) and thought her was lying even with her last breaths. Once again, that "bloody passion" (*Othello* 5.2.44) that shakes the Moor presents the audience with the evidence that the one who is losing control of himself is not Desdemona but Othello himself.

His earlier epileptic crisis would have reminded the early modern audience of the rumours spread by some Christians according to which Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, falsely claimed that, actually, his crises were divine possessions (Vitkus 1997: 155). Othello's epilepsy, as Muhammad's, seems a perversion of the Christian divine inspiration, an additional sign that the Moor's grasp on his body and his mind is

loosening. His pretending to be a priest in order to obtain a confession is also an appropriation of the sacred role God has given to his ministers on Earth. Othello feels he has the power and the right to judge whether his wife deserves to live or to die, convinced that his Christianity attributed to him the right (or duty) to condemn what he regards as sinful. He welcomes the impositions of his new religion, whereas Shylock had strongly despised all that was connected to it; the latter stressed the differences between him and the Venetian society, he exalts the distance that keeps them apart.

In the minutes that precede the murder, Othello appears strangely tranquil, as if his previous anger was gone now that his mind is resolved about what must be done; knowing that she is going to die quieted him. His calmness might be due to the fact that he perceives Desdemona's death as inevitable, already pre-ordained by those "sweet powers" that had also caused the Turkish fleet to be sunk, therefore his need of self-justification could be satisfied by attributing all responsibility to some higher power (Adamson 1980: 266). His comfort derives from not feeling the weight of a burden that would cause many to falter. Desdemona, who was initially his "safe space", the only person who understood and accepted him, has now become a threat to his identity:

This is the night

That either makes me or foredoes me quite. (*Othello* 5.1.127-128)

For Iago as well as for Othello, the decision to kill or not Desdemona will carry heavy consequences. In fact, if she dies, Iago's plan is complete and he is "made" while Othello is totally broken and loses all, from his reputation and his name to his freedom, as he would be incarcerated. On the other hand, if he decided not to kill her, it would be Iago to be "foredone", since his schemes would be revealed and Othello would be "made" whole again by the certainty that his wife had always been faithful. However, the conversation between Othello and Desdemona suggests that he is just pretending to feel comfortable in his idea of killing her, as the moment of her death is delayed in the first place by his attempt to have her confessing and then by Desdemona's pleas to let her live, even only for a few minutes. Her refusal to admit she is the unfaithful and lascivious woman she is accused to be does not undermine her husband's resolution, but perhaps she succeeded in arising some last feeble doubts in him.

Othello's declaration that he has "no wife" (*Othello* 5.2.99) after his hideous act is perhaps an attempt to suppress mentally, as he has just done physically, the image of Desdemona and the feelings that her memory might still evoke. Furthermore, his act of closing the bed curtains to hide the dying body from Emilia's sight could be a sign of his need to hide her from his own sight too, an image too difficult to deal with no matter how strong his will was. He could not even bear the sounds of that noisy room: "What noise is this? Not dead? not yet quite dead?" (*Othello* 5.2.87). All he needs in his most desperate hour is silence (Adamson 1980: 279), which is denied by the cries of the dying Desdemona and of the desperate Emilia, who is entering the stage to inform of the death of Roderigo at the hand of Cassio. Othello needs some time alone to find solace and relief, to forgive himself for having smothered his wife but also a part of his own identity, namely the one which accepted the identity he had chosen for himself, the "visage" in his mind.

In killing Desdemona, the Moor is severing the link which had connected him to the Venetian society, and by doing so he is once again cast out of it because he is guilty of the same bestial behaviour he had so passionately condemned in Cassio. The reactions of the other characters seem to confirm that they no longer see him as the valiant and brave general that should have led them against the Turks but as one of those threats to their lives and freedom: he suddenly "blackens" in their minds. Emilia addresses him as "the blacker devil" (*Othello* 5.2.134) twice and then as "gull", "dolt" and "ignorant" (*Othello* 5.2.167-168), then Montano defines the murder a "monstrous act" (*Othello* 5.2.194); his deed has doomed Othello's soul to hell, and his only weapon against the accusations of the other characters is his sword. At the beginning of the play, the audience had to trust his word (and that of the Senators and Cassio) that he was a soldier, as he never actually had to draw his blade nor show his fighting skills; his rhetoric was his most reliable ability, even if he did not recognise it as such or perhaps did not want to admit it. However, in the final scene he limits the use of his tongue in order to confide in his hand and in his sword. His former articulate speeches are substituted by claims that Desdemona is a whore and that she is a liar while he threatens Emilia, who was speaking against him: "Do thy worst. / This deed of thine is no more worthy heaven / Than thou wast worthy her" (*Othello* 5.2.162-164). When Iago's villainous plot is finally revealed, even Othello

himself acknowledges that something has changed inside of him, and he is no more the same man he used to be: “That’s he that was Othello; here I am” (Othello 5.2.289).

1.3 Performances of Blackness

The performances of Othello have undergone many different interpretations, some of which were highly appreciated by the audience while others raised questions and feelings of revulsion and fear. In the early modern period, as it happened with the masques, in public theatres the actors used to perform black skin by dressing in black or dark clothes, a technique which would render the idea of blackness but that required a certain degree of suspension of disbelief in order to fully immerse in the plot and themes of the play. Dyes, coal and ointments were the most employed techniques to perform the idea of racial difference. In the following centuries, though, actors as Edmund Kean and Ira Aldridge emerged and brought on the stage new interpretations of the character of Othello.

The first quarto, published in 1622, reported on its title page that the play had been “diuerse times acted at the Globe, and at the Black-Friers, by his Maiesties seruants” (Thompson 2016: 67), the King’s Men, formerly known as the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, which listed Shakespeare among its members. The first actor to interpret the role of Othello was probably Richard Burbage, whose interpretation was highly praised in his eulogy, which celebrated his role as the “grieved Moor” (Thompson 2016: 67), even though his physical characteristics did not even slightly remember those the reader would mentally portray of Othello, that is to say having thick lips, dark skin and dark hair. However, what is particularly interesting to notice is the reception of the early modern audience: in fact, they were not concerned with one of the main themes, namely miscegenation (Neill 2006: 1), which is fundamental in the play as it partly explains the negative attitude of Brabantio, and possibly Iago, towards the Moor.

One of the innovations on the performance of Othello was introduced by the famous nineteenth-century actor Edmund Kean, who decided to play him as a light-skinned North African rather than as coal-black skinned, a so-called “blackamoor”, as other actors previously did. His choice was motivated by the fact that the skin of the Northern Africans was the proof of their being descendants of the “Caucasian race”, as his biographer reported (Neill 2006: 47). Coleridge had already stated that, according to his personal idea, Othello was not a black-skinned African but rather a “tawny” or light-

skinned Moor; he argues that black Africans at Shakespeare's time were just imagined as slaves, hence they could not have been born of royal family. Coleridge suggests that Othello is not to be regarded "as a negro but a high and chivalrous Moorish chief" (Coleridge 2004: 232). However, for his own admission, Othello was kidnapped and sold into slavery, as he tells the Senators.

Possibly, the real reason for his modification was that dark paint obscured his features, depriving his performance of all those facial gestures that were important for him to convey the feelings of Othello to the audience, so that the character would be more deeply connected to them. As a matter of fact, Kean's interpretation was described as particularly intense and very emotional. Kean himself must have felt a strong link with the events that take place in the play, since in 1825 he was divorcing from his wife as he had been sued for adultery by Alderman Cox, which caused him to lose his reputation. His last recorder performance was at Covent Garden in 1833, when he played Othello and suddenly, while he was reciting one of the speeches from the third act, he fell into his son Charles' arms due to a mortal illness.

Tommaso Salvini's interpretation was the one that most challenged the acclaimed Kean, because he gave the character a strong erotic sensuality in the first acts and then substituted it with a devastating grief and with despair, agony and violence in the last scenes (Sanders 1997: 44). He first performed the role of the Moor in 1856 in Venice, but in the following years he travelled to the United Kingdom and the United States. What characterised his method of interpretation was that he strongly played on physicality, and this caused him some troubles as many actresses were not willing to participate in the scene of Othello's assault on Desdemona; the tempting scene with Iago was also quite aggressive, with Salvini seizing the ensign by the throat and pushing him to the ground (Thompson 2016: 73). This version of Othello focused on the savagery and bestiality that none of the other actors had made emerge, at least not in such a powerful and breath-taking way; his idea brought Othello closer to the contemporary imaginary of Africans, who were depicted as primeval. Salvini himself admitted having studied the behaviour of the Moors during his trip to Gibraltar (Thompson 2016: 74), therefore what he portrayed on stage was supposed to be a realistic representation of them. His interpretation, though, would not be appropriate according to Coleridge's definition of the Moor's characteristics: as a matter of fact, he wrote: "There is no ferocity in Othello; his mind is

majestic and compromised” (Coleridge 2004: 232), and in this sense Kean’s interpretation was perhaps more conform to the poet’s idea.



Figure II. *Ira Aldridge as Othello* (ca. 1848), by unknown artist

The first black actor to impersonate Othello was Ira Aldridge; with him, race became the most debated issue of the play, and he had to face many negative critiques, especially in England, where critics were not convinced by the possibility that the Moor might be played by a black African actor. His performances reinvigorated the first idea of Othello being a black African, whose skin was dark and not “tawny” as he had been recently portrayed; he was so intense in his playing that some actresses felt real terror. It has been reported that one actress, during the murder scene, was so scared that she abandoned the stage and had to be made a great effort in order to convince her to go back and finish the scene (Neill 2006: 51).

Previous interpretations and critiques had demonstrated how blackness was the result of the imagination of the white man, therefore it could easily be manipulated to be

used at Europeans' advantage (Bassi 2000: 94). In 1863, a woman commented a performance of *Othello* with Aldridge as the leading actor and her response suggested that, contrary to the British, who preferred an orientalist version of the Moor, she believed that *Othello* could only be a black African:

A full-blooded Negro, incarnating the profoundest creations of Shakespearean art, giving *flesh and blood* for the aesthetic judgement of Educated European society . . . how much nearer can one get to the truth, to the very source of aesthetic satisfaction? . . . As the spirit is not the body, so the truth of art is not this profoundly raw flesh . . . But by the very fact that flesh is so powerful—that is genuinely black, so naturally *un-white* does it howl—that savage flesh did its fleshy work. It murdered and crushed the spirit . . . and in place of the highest enjoyment, this blatant flesh introduced into art, this *natural* black *Othello*, pardon me, causes only . . . revulsion. (Neill 2016: 52)

Despite the fact that his skin is, according to her, supposed to be black, a black African actor should perfectly embody those characteristics which would present the audience an *Othello* as close as possible to the one that Shakespeare allegedly imagined. However, Aldridge's features were also an obstacle to the complete portrayal of his character, as his “flesh murdered the spirit”, therefore what remains would be only subject for an aesthetic evaluation.

The themes to be analysed in *Othello* are several and each of them provides interesting insights into different subjects and ideas; the importance of some of those themes changed according to the specific historical period in which they were debated. For instance, race and racism became fundamental only later, as a demonstration that the focus on a certain subject was affected by the context, with politics, discourses about slavery, race and interracial relationships continuously evolving as a response from new inputs.

2. Loss of Freedom

2.1 Imagery of Slavery

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, slavery was widely diffused in European societies, in which black African were treated as mere personal properties by their masters, and had no rights in a society which had been imposed upon them. Being a black African meant to be an outcast, an alien who was considered as less human than light-skinned people on the basis that dark skin, in addition to physical features, was a sign of inferiority provided by nature and therefore it was employed as a justification of the horrible treatments reserved to slaves.

However, movements which fought against slavery began to rise in the eighteenth century, introducing abolitionist ideas of freedom and of independence from white masters, who were confining black Africans into boundaries dictated by hierarchical conventions. Those movements were initially created and supported by blacks, but then white Europeans and Americans joined their fight, moved by the new concepts of the Enlightenment and of science, which were assuming a role of importance in the society.

Laurence Sterne, celebrated Irish novelist and clergyman, wrote a letter to Ignatius Sancho, an antislavery campaigner, in which he expressed doubts about those ideals which were the basis of European's feeling of superiority:

It is by the finest tints, and most insensible gradations, that nature descends from the fairest face about St. James's, to the sootiest complexion in Africa: at which tint of these, is it, that the ties of blood are to cease? And how many shades must we descend lower still in the scale, 'ere Mercy is to vanish with them?—but 'tis no uncommon thing, my good Sancho, for one half of the world to use the other half of it like brutes, & then endeavour to make them so. (Brycchan Carey n.d.)

Sterne claims that, no matter the hue of the skin, all the populations of the world descend from the same roots, despite those common “ties of blood” are taken in small consideration by the vast majority of white populations, who act regardless of the fact that there is a shared trait of humanity. If all the populations of the world were descendants of Adam and Eve, the so-called monogenesis, there should be no diversification based on

aesthetic values, because that would only take into account superficial characteristics. Even though they never, or rarely, mention a racial hierarchy, monogenetic theories attributed the birth of different races, or varieties, to climatic and environmental factors, defining this evolutionary process as “degeneration” (Kitson 2004: 13), in harmony with the Bible. The anatomist and surgeon William Lawrence, despite believing in monogenesis, asserted that the European was superior to the Ethiopian (Kitson 2004: 17), but he never openly supported slavery either; his was a racial classification which implied no justification for inhuman practices as those employed in the slave trade.

On the other hand, the polygenist hypothesis claimed that not all human beings had the same origin of creation; the explanation for differences must be that their point of origin was separated, though not mentioned in the Scriptures. Isaac La Peyrère maintained that the story of Adam was only to be applied to Jews (Kitson 2004: 13).

Sterne condemns the abuses of power of the half of the world who “uses” their brothers as if they were animals, primeval beings without rational thoughts. However, he seems to recognise the existence of a scale of human beings, reminding of the Great Chain of Being (Bindman 2011: 1), which was a religious hierarchical structure first conceived by Plato. He placed God at the top of the Chain, followed by His angels, then human beings, animals, plants and minerals at the bottom. Sterne’s concept of scale reflects the inevitability of establishing a hierarchy, which implies the assumption that human beings are not equal, hence they are categorised according to their aesthetic features.

On the other hand, anti-slavery and equality movements were not universally shared; as a matter of fact, anti-abolitionist factions argued in favour of slavery and of the slave trade. Some Christians, among whom the famous preacher George Whitefield, provided excerpts of the Bible in order to demonstrate that slavery was not condemned by God but that it was rather acceptable. Edward Long, in his *History of Jamaica* (1774), asserted that Negroes were “an intermediate group between humanity and the higher apes” (Kitson 2004: 13), interpreting the word “humanity” as indicating Europeans only. Long had already defended the righteousness of slavery, affirming in his pamphlet *Candid Reflections* (1772) that blacks’ biology rendered them more suitable for working in the plantations: “The nature of the West India climate, and the impossibility of clearing and cultivating the soil there, by any other than Negroe labourers” (Kitson 2004: 14).

Science was fundamental with the new researches which, along the considerations

of intellectuals as Sterne, Locke and Blake, affected the thoughts of the upper classes. The idea was that slavery could not be justified by a divergence in physical characteristics and was thus to be stopped; the African continent and its inhabitants passed from being a distant subject for travel literature to being at the centre of new studies. Understanding more deeply all the various cultural differences between European and Africans but also between African populations became the focus, along with investigating further the studies of those first explorers whose reports provided inspiration for many authors, as they did with Shakespeare. The works of the great thinkers of this century suggested the concept that science could provide answers regarding mankind, about human's physical and mental nature; for the first time the abolition of slave trade became a prospect (Bindman 2011: 1).

Many of the eighteenth-century paintings, as did many in the previous century, have black court attendants as one of the subjects, projecting them in a life that is not that of plantations but which still affirms the superiority of Europeans over the rest of the world. They were meant to affirm the grandeur of their owners, whose beauty was celebrated in contrast with the blackness of their skin, deemed ungraceful, not pleasant to be looked at. In 1780s, Johann Caspar Lavater claimed that:

custom alone determines our preference of the colour of the *Europeans* to the *Aethiopians*; and they, for the same reason, prefer their own colour to ours. I suppose no body will doubt, if one of their painters were to paint the goddess of beauty, but that he would represent her black, with thick lips, flat nose, and woolly hair; and, it seems to me, he would act very unnaturally if he did not; for by what criterion will any one dispute the property of his idea? We, indeed, say, that the form and colour of the *European* is preferable to that of the *Aethiopian*; but I know of no reason we have for it, but that we are more accustomed to it. (Bindman 2011: 7)

Everything is relative, and so is beauty, as what is regarded as such is the result of a series of inputs given by the context; that is to say, the European white man attributed to blackness negative connotations in response to its diversity. Different religion, ethnicity, language have always been among the reasons of exclusion, detachment and in some cases they were even the cause of more violent actions.

However, in the second half of the century, the imaginary of the city substituted the court and it provided the ground for new and more realistic depictions of the conditions of African slaves; some black freed men wrote about their lives in slavery, as in the case of Olaudah Equiano, otherwise known as Gustavus Vassa, whose autobiography contributes to understand the treatment reserved to slaves but more generally speaking to all black Africans in that period, with striking descriptions of the tortures and abuses they had to submit to.

The alleged undisputed predominance of the white man produced a hierarchy in which black Africans were labelled as primitive, barbaric, whose animal-like lifestyle placed them lower in the hierarchy of humanity; they were believed to be not enough civilised to be regarded as peers of enlightened Europeans. Blacks' social status was the same as peasants and children, who were believed to be unable to make moral decisions due to their poor education (Bindman 2011: 4). In contrast with those ever more debased societies, the figure of the "noble savage" emerged as a critique; it first appeared in the English language in John Dryden's play *The Conquest of Granada* (1672) and in the eighteenth century it intended to present the "savage" as pure, not contaminated by the vices of civilisation, giving then a different perspective on the African populations, whose slower technological progress had caused them to be just children in the eyes of the white man.

An example of the noble savage is to be found in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave: A True History* (1688). The protagonist is portrayed as morally superior than any other character, his virtues being highly acclaimed, his nobility an example for the reader but also for his people, who respect him. He is physically described as having European features, which make it difficult to distinguish him from any Englishman; the "other" is, in this case, a sort of mirror of the European imagination, in which they projected the qualities that were, according to some contemporaries, disappearing in the continent. Oroonoko, then, might perhaps be intended as a better version of Europeans, as he possesses great virtues and his external characteristics are the same as them. His being of royal birth places him above his subjects but it does not prevent him from being captured and sold into slavery, suggesting that the "other" is in any case placed at the lower level of the hierarchical scale.

Some artists worked on representations of the Four Continents, and the character embodying Africa was often dark-skinned and possessed attributes which would relate to the continent he was allegorically representing (Bindman 2011: 13-14). Nakedness was considered one of the distinctive traits of African populations, perhaps as a sign that marked the difference between the colonised Europeans who were elegantly dressed even in the forests, as recounted in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, while Africans seemed to be not concerned with decency, their primitive state preventing them from reaching the next step on the scale of human hierarchy. They were accompanied by exotic animals as elephants or crocodiles, reminding of the unfamiliarity of those lands, in which it was possible to encounter the strangest beasts and customs. It is a sort of echo of those stories Othello told at first Desdemona and Brabantio and then the Senators, stories of an adventurous life which feed curiosity; stories about the anthropophagi and extraordinary quests that could only take place in the unexplored territories of Africa.

The imagery of slavery was still quite definite in the minds of Europeans: wearing a silver collar was an irrefutable sign of the status of slave, and they were usually portrayed as if they were accepting their condition; their willing subjugation seemed to imply they perceived it a natural relationship between master and subject (Bindman 2011: 15). In Equiano's autobiography, the sense of supremacy white people felt is clearly understandable, as the author describes several episodes that happened during his travels in which he stressed the powerlessness of black Africans, either slaves or freed men. The dichotomy white-black had not disappeared, but, apparently, its connotations of goodness and grace in opposition to devilry and propensity to sin were not as strong as they were in the seventeenth century. However, the discourse about inner qualities and virtues was still employed by some writers to fight the prejudices and contempt that were part of the pro-slavery campaign.



Figure III. *Marriage à la Mode: IV, The Toilette* (1743-1745) by William Hogarth

Between 1743 and 1745, the English painter William Hogarth produced a series of six paintings called *Marriage à la Mode*, with the purpose of criticising the behaviour of eighteenth century upper classes. The painting symbolises the excesses of European aristocracy, whose wealth was gained through colonialism and the exploitation of black Africans. In the picture, members of the wealthier class are gathered in an elegantly decorated room, with an evident display of opulence. They are occupied with different pastimes: some of them are conversing while holding in their hands some cups, the gentleman on the left has an open book before him; the centre of the scene is taken by two women dressed in white and gold, focused on listening to the discourse of the men who are at their sides. Behind the women, a dark-skinned groom is serving coffee, suggesting that black Africans are still employed just as servants, and they are not fitted for joining the white Europeans in their conversations, as if these were too complex for them to understand.

The only other dark-skinned character in the scene is a boy who sits on the right side of the canvas; the objects which are placed beside him are a basket of artistic bric-a-brac and an auction catalogue, symbolising the link between art and slavery (Dabydeen 2011). As a matter of fact, those aristocrats who dealt and were interested in art were also

often involved in the slave trade. This painting suggests that, in the eighteenth-century art, black Africans were mainly depicted as either slaves, grooms or children.

A literary example of the relationship between blacks and whites is to be found in the English poet and painter William Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, published in 1789; it was a collection of poems and artworks produced by Blake himself, which provided a perspective of the values and challenges that every human being experiences in his growth from being a child to becoming an adult. One specific poem is of great interest, namely *The Little Black Boy*, which reflects the doubts of its protagonist, a dark-skinned child, about the significance of blackness and whiteness and their consequences on the relationship between him and an English white boy. The boy's questions receive some unsatisfactory answers by his mother, whose pessimistic attitude towards physical life in favour of hope for a future life in heaven affects the boy's view of his own physicality (Leader 1981: 108).

In the first verses, the black boy lamented not only the difference between him and the other child but also between his external appearance and internal soul:

My mother bore me in the southern wild,
And I am black, but oh, my soul is white;
White as an angel is the English child,
But I am black as if bereaved of light. (Blake 1971: 58, 1-4)

He perceives the English child as if he were an angel, one of the creatures who live closest to God and therefore the ones who should be more appreciated by Him. On the other hand, his blackness seems to be synonymous of an absence of external light, whereas his soul is white; this contrast might create doubts in the black boy about his own identity, about who he is and what this disparity of colours means for him.

His mother tells him that the cause of his blackness is the love God feels for him; as a matter of fact, she employs the sun as a metaphor for God, who lives in the East and rises to bring His light on the inhabitants of the world. His black body is what allows him to endure "the beams of love" (Blake 1971: 58, 14) and the heat that the sun-God produces; the sun-burnt skin therefore is the exterior sign of the black boy's closeness to the Almighty. Hence, black skin should be regarded as a sign of superiority, at least in the eyes of God. Though, this interpretation raises the question of why, if blackness is a

sign of God's affection, the poem appears to be permeated by a feeling that somehow dark skin is not to be desired (Leader 1981: 110); both the mother and her son, in fact, are waiting for the time they will join the angels in the afterlife, when colour will not matter anymore.

That same motive of joy and pride is actually causing suffering to the black boy, who, in his innocence which is the common thread shared by all the poems in this collection, cannot find any reason for the existence of different hues of the skin; unfortunately, his mother appears not to be able to provide any clear explanation for this, and all that she can offer her unquiet son is hope (Leader 1981: 110). As she cannot offer him a different perception of the world he lives in, she tries to convey her own belief in a life after the death of the physical body, which appears to be nothing more than a sort of "container" of the soul. The purpose of the body is to protect the soul from direct exposure to the beams of God's light and love, which would otherwise be harmful; she describes the body as "but a cloud, and like a shady grove" (Blake 1971: 58: 16). The mother's concern for her son's self-understanding and acceptance makes sure she provides a positive idea of equality, though her reported words might suggest that such equality will not to be found but in a future and conceptual heaven.

Body and skin colour are then presented as volatile, they are given importance just in earthly life, therefore they should be given small importance. Blake's poem reflects the Christian concept of reaching salvation through suffering, so that enduring the trials God set for the boy would grant him that he would reach the kingdom of angels once his worldly challenges are over. The mother told the little black boy that "the cloud will vanish" (Blake 1971:58, 18) emphasising that life is only a temporary condition; in the eyes of God, all souls look the same and there will be no distinction between black and white: all will receive the love of God. The boy imagines that the English boy and he will finally be freed of their physical constraints to ascend to the garden where the Almighty awaits; however, the implicit assumption is that until that moment they will not be equals. However, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, composed between 1790 and 1793, Blake stated that the soul was but a portion of the body itself (Leader 1981: 109), hence it seems quite controversial that in *The Little Black Boy* the author decided to present the two of them as totally separate elements of the human being.

The seventh and last stanza once again suggests that the black boy is better able to endure the heat of the sun than the white boy: “I’ll shade him from the heat till he can bear / To lean in joy upon our Father’s knee” (Blake 1971: 58, 25-26). Because of the teachings of his mother, the black boy seems to have changed his attitude towards his blackness, regarding it as a positive attribute, perhaps not being aware yet of how much suffering it will probably cause him, due to the prejudices and stereotypes still widely shared in the eighteenth-century European society. The last verse is particularly striking: “And be like him and he will then love me” (Blake 1971:58, 28); he assumes that, in order to be appreciated by the white boy, he will have to look like him, otherwise he will always be treated as inferior, no matter how strong is effort to shield the other child from a heat the latter cannot endure. Perhaps this effort was also meant to please the English child, so that he might come to be appreciated through gratitude.

2.2 Black Autobiography: A New Voice

Autobiographies became the means through which black Africans, who had to live in a society which recognised them as alien, could finally let their own voice be heard. By writing their own stories, they could present to the white European and American audience the horrors and abuses they had to endure as slaves, and this was a great asset for the abolitionist cause.

The vast majority of the black Africans who were forced to live in the British colonies in America were uneducated, though; some of them had the opportunity to attend one of the few free schools for slaves, while others were taught how to read and write by their masters (Costanzo 1987: 2). Those few who were able to produce pieces of writing chose to write their own autobiography in which their thoughts and feelings could flow freely, and which were appealing to the readers due to the not ordinary nature of the events which occurred to the authors. Autobiographical writing became popular in the Middle Ages, when Saint Augustine wrote his *Confessions*, and until the eighteenth century it was of religious nature (Costanzo 1987: 6).

However, a new variant of autobiography emerged, namely the secular; whereas the religious writings stressed the quest to save the soul from perdition and the pursuit of redemption, the secular was focused on the effort to find individual identity and self-assertion of the author’s values and characteristics. In Olaudah Equiano’s autobiography,

especially in the second volume, it is possible to find a strong religious tone, as he often refers to the intervention of Providence in the events which marked his life, but he also develops a self-confidence in his ability and right to morally judge the white men he encounters, for he seems to perceive a degradation of the values of modern European societies.

The first account of a slave's life was written by Briton Hammon in 1760 (Costanzo 1987: 5), but Equiano's has probably been one of the most influential. Olaudah Equiano, also known as Gustavus Vassa, was very influential in his attempt to help his fellow Africans, as he himself had been a slave and had been able to purchase his own freedom by working hard and enduring the abuses of his white masters, but also of other white men. His autobiography, entitled *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, Written by Himself*, helped to report the savage behaviour white men had towards black Africans; it was published in 1789 and it was immediately important for Abolitionists, who were making pressures to the British government so that they would end the African slave trade.

His memoir opens with the letter he wrote to the Lords and Commons of the Parliament, inviting them to be sympathetic of the misfortunes which happened to him and that were continuing to afflict the lives of many other Africans. His plea is that they take those misfortunes into consideration when discussing about whether to abolish slavery or not (Equiano 2015: 1). The text is divided in two volumes, the first including chapters from one to six and the second from seven to twelve. In the first chapter, he gives an account of the customs and traditions of his native country, Guinea: he describes quite in detail its location and its form of government, that "includes a variety of kingdoms" (Equiano 2015: 4), among which the kingdom of Benen, where he was born. In their society, elders had important roles, as they were judges in disputes and had the power to punish anyone who committed a crime. Equiano highlights the importance of music and dancers, for every public occasion becomes a celebration in which people dance accompanied with delightful tunes; this is a theme that will be encountered also in the following chapters, when the author is surprised by the absence of music in European and American everyday life.

Equiano writes that even in Benen slavery existed; however, they were only prisoners of war or people who were guilty of a crime. Kidnapping was also a common

practice to obtain new slaves, and this is what occurred to Equiano himself as he was eleven: in fact, he and his sister had been left alone in their house when three assailants came in and took them away. After their separation, he was boarded on a slave ship and he is taken to the Barbados, in the West Indies.

After a few days, Equiano is brought to Virginia, where he is bought by Captain Pascal, with whom he leaves for England; once they arrive, he is introduced to Mr. Guernsey, a relative of Captain Pascal's but they must leave almost immediately to board a ship war. When they finally come back, Equiano is left with the Guerin sisters, who indulge his desire for being taught how to read and write in the English language and who introduce in his mind the idea of salvation through baptism and conversion to Christianity. Then, when he expects his master to grant him his freedom, he is sold again twice, and he ends up with the Quaker Robert King, whose kindness towards his own slaves emphasised the atrocities other fellow Africans had to undergone at the hands of their wicked masters. The first volume closes on Equiano working hard to earn the money to gain his freedom.

The second part of the autobiography begins with a pivotal point in his life, that is to say he achieves the freedom he longed for; nevertheless, it is, initially at least, just an illusion as he agrees to go on working on Mr. King's ship. Following an account of his adventures and challenges, he finally describes his decision to leave his old master in order to go back to England, where he started working as a hairdresser. However, feeling nostalgic for the sea, he joins a crew of sailors headed for Turkey and he eventually gets to Genoa, Italy, and he provides a description of the different customs of the lands he visited, including his expedition to the North Pole seeking a passage to India. In the last chapter, he recounts his being sent to Africa as a missionary and his petition to the Queen on behalf of all the African slaves.

The violence of slavery is one the first themes Equiano's autobiography presents to the reader. Not only is this violence perpetrated by white Europeans, but also by African slave traders; as a matter of fact, in the circumstance in which the author and his sister are kidnapped, he describes how they were taken by fellow Africans: "We sold slaves to them, but they were only prisoners of war, or such among us as had been convicted of kidnapping, or adultery, and some other crimes, which we esteemed heinous" (Equiano 2015: 8). British traders were stationed on the Atlantic coasts, ready

to move slaves from Africa to their American colonies, and they relied on African slave traders to have fresh supplies of slaves whenever they were needed. It was not easy for Europeans to maintain posts in the African lands, due to the fact that they often fell ill, therefore they could not remain for a long time without risking their lives venturing on the hinterland to kidnap young men to sell to plantation owners. Instead of wasting human resources and money exploring new lands seeking for slaves, British dealt with Africans traders, from whom they bought prisoners to be sent to the colonies (Walvin 1998: 4).

The cruelties inflicted by Africans slave traders are reported by Equiano, who had to suffer that treatment when he was eleven years old; he recalls having been left at home alone with his sister, when they were suddenly assaulted and carried away:

One day, when all our people were gone out to their works as usual, and only I and my sister were left to mind the house, two men and a woman got over our walls, and in a moment seized us both, and, without giving us time to cry out, or make resistance, they stopped our mouths, and ran off with us into the nearest woods. (Equiano 2015: 16)

It was not unusual for kids to be threatened in the absence of their parents, in fact, Equiano remembers an episode which occurred to him in his youth: he was playing with other children when he spotted a kidnapper approaching. They used to have some of them watching the area from the top of a tree, so that they could prevent anyone from getting too close to the children unseen (Equiano 2015:16).

Their abductors tied their hands and forced them to walk until night came, and their daily sorrows were partially forgotten in sleep, as they felt physical weariness but also mental agony, because they had been separated from their family and knew that they were probably not going to come back. Not only did the kidnappers tie their hands, but when Equiano saw some people on the road and attempted to draw their attention he was put into a sack and carried until they stopped again to have some rest. As Equiano wrote, “the only comfort we had was in being in one another’s arms all that night, and bathing each other with our tears. But alas! We were soon deprived of even the small comfort of weeping together” (Equiano 2015: 16-17); he is separated also from the last relative he is left, his sister, and whereas they could find solace in each other, as they were sharing the same dreadful experience, now he is alone in lands he has never seen, compelled to obey

the orders of a master. He will later meet his sister again, even though for a short time and that brief moment of happiness is overcome by the anxiety for her fate.

Equiano, as many other Africans, was denied his freedom, his liberty, he is physically even before than mentally constrained; at first, despite being miles from his native land, he finds that the language his new master and his people speak is the same which is spoken in his native kingdom.

His life there is described as quite endurable, as he was treated well by the family and he spent some time with the free-born children, and his experience did not foretell the violence and the abuses who would witness and suffer in the years to come. Even as a freeman, he cannot forget “the violence of the African trader, the pestilential stench of a Guinea ship, the seasoning in the European colonies, or the lash and lust of a brutal and unrelenting overseer” (Equiano 2015: 20).

The author notices that most of the lands he passed through had the same or similar language, customs and manners, though, as he approaches the coast, a sudden change occurs: “I came at length to a country, the inhabitants of which differed from us in all those particulars” (Equiano 2015: 21). The influence of the European society was stronger near their posts, where people were not circumcised as were Guinea’s habit and did not make any sacrifice; Equiano’s first contact with Europeans is when he sees a slave ship anchored and waiting for a new cargo to be taken to America. His thoughts about the white men he encountered is quite singular:

I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions too differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke, (which was very different from any I had ever heard) united to confirm me in this belief. (Equiano 2015: 22)

Equiano has been introduced in a world in which everything is different from the reality he knew and was accustomed to, and for a moment his anxiety for his own condition is superseded by his horror and fear for those “bad spirits” who look so threatening. The scene which presents in the moment he steps on the ship is horrific: “a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow” (Equiano 2015: 22), and it is a hint of the feelings he himself will have to experience.

Africans were chained together and brought under the decks before the ship sailed; the concentration of such a huge number of human beings caused the slave decks to be infected, the air heavy with the smell of filth, as slaves had to relieve themselves in some buckets the crew provided them with (Walvin 1998: 18).

I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste any thing. (Equiano 2015: 23)

Africans were inhumanly packed as if they were animals who did not deserve even the basic rights which should be granted to every human being. Starvation was another common issue; in fact, while at first it was them who decided not to eat, as the journey continued they were scarcely fed, which was the cause of violent disputes between slaves, who wanted to have at least what they needed to survive the journey. The cruel conditions slaves were subjected were the reason why many of them did not survive to see the colonies; diseases and sickness spread quickly in closed and unhealthy environment, and infections were lethal for Africans, who were weakened by hunger and fear of what was to be expected next.

In some extreme cases, slaves decided that they did not want to suffer that situation anymore, therefore they attempted suicide by throwing themselves out of the ship when they happened to have the chance to do it. For this reason, ships were equipped with encircling nets, to avoid that slaves could end their lives by leaping into the ocean, and the crew was always making sure that they stayed away from the side of the ship. However, sometimes some of them had the strength to get through the nets but those of them who were rescued were severely punished (Walvin 1998: 22).

Equiano himself strongly desired death after he smelled the stench coming from under the deck, but he feared too much the water of the ocean, never having seen it before in his life. His desire for a merciful death which would put an end to his sufferings is counteracted by his fear they the white men would eat him and his fellow Africans: he asks some black men “if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, loose hair” (Equiano 2015: 22). The fear of being nothing more than food for those white men is a recurrent theme in Equiano’s first meetings with white traders and

merchants, in a sort of reversal of the Anthropophagi mentioned by Othello. The crew of white men is depicted as acting “in so savage a manner” (Equiano 2015: 23); from the point of view of an African, the manners of Europeans are cruel, barbarous, ruthless and their monstrous appearance of “bad spirits” seems to be confirmed by their actions of wicked malice.

The roles are inverted: white men, who claimed that primordial behaviour was among the reasons why they felt almost compelled to teach humanity to blacks, are acting as if they lacked that light of reason which was motive of pride, for they professed their degree of civilisation was the highest achieved by any of the existing population on Earth. On the other hand, throughout the autobiography Africans seem to be able to elevate themselves on a higher human and moral level. In one of the journey Equiano joined because pushed by his former master Mr. King, the author compares the reaction of the white and the black members of the crew when their ship sank: whereas the white sailors lost their hope and started drinking, waiting for death to come, the four blacks’ efforts granted that all the crew was saved. Even though Equiano initially thought that “my sin was the cause of this, and that God would charge me with these people’s blood” (Equiano 2015: 91), the author kept his spirit high, working hard to ensure everyone’s safety rather than abandoning them to their fate. As a matter of fact, none of the other sailors did but lay down on the deck drunk, unaware that they were just a burden for those who had to carry them to the shore, they behaved “as if not possessed of the least spark of reason” (Equiano 2015: 93), echoing Cassio in *Othello*, whose mind was inebriated and consequently not lucid.

Once he is brought on board of the ship, what Equiano witnesses is “a scene of horror almost inconceivable” (Equiano 2015: 25), which must have been even worse seen from the eyes of a young boy of an eleven-year old boy, who was suddenly thrown into a world where discrimination and violence appeared to be the shared values:

Surely this is a new refinement in cruelty, which, while it has no advantage to atone for it, thus aggravates distress, and adds fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery. (Equiano 2015: 27)

In the eighteenth century, British were dominating the Atlantic slave routes, and they ferried from twenty thousand to forty thousand African slaves per year to the

American colonies, supported by the power of their Navy (Walvin 1998: 17). Black Africans were mostly required to work in the sugar plantations, as sugar was becoming central in the lives of British citizens, who used it as ingredient in many recipes and to sweeten coffee. In order to be fit to work in the plantations, slaves needed to be physically able to endure the hard work which were required of them, so traders had to find strategies to hide the damages diseases had caused to Africans during the crossing. Slaves were “cleaned, rubbed down with oil to give the skin a healthier gloss, even bunged-up if afflicted by gastric troubles” (Walvin 1998: 24) so as to be made more presentable when they were inspected by the buyers. Equiano recalls the episode of his arrive in Barbados, when they were “pent up together like so many sheep in a fold, without regard of sex or of age” (Equiano 2015: 26); this passage seems to echo *Othello*’s animal lexicon referred to interracial relationships. Equiano tells the story of a dark-skinned man who was tortured for daring have intercourses with a white prostitute, an episode which quite enraged him for the disparity of treatment Africans received; raping innocent black women was held acceptable, whereas a black man could not satiate his appetites when the opportunity was presented to him.

In Virginia, while working for a plantation owner, Equiano catches a glimpse of a black woman slave, who was afflicted by physical constraints; indeed, her masters employed a series of iron tools, whose purpose was none other than to punish and torture slaves. What principally struck Equiano when he first saw those iron machines on the black woman was that “she had one particularly on her head, which locked her mouth so fast that she could scarcely speak; and could not eat nor drink” (Equiano 2015: 28), the so-called iron muzzle. Cruelties were widely practiced, as slaves were mostly regarded as properties or personal objects rather than as human beings, therefore white masters felt they did not need to treat them better than animals.

When the author arrives in Montserrat, he quotes a passage from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667), in which he emphasises the sorrow and hopelessness of that land, where the majority of slaves were forced to submit to heartless masters. They were often “branded with the initial letter of their master’s name; and a load of heavy iron hooks hung about their necks” (Equiano 2015: 61). Chains, iron muzzles and other torture tools were employed to punish slaves for futile motives, hence this ferocious attitude towards Africans seems to be just the way in which white masters could gratify their own ego,

with a pointless display of power which would damage both physically and mentally their poor slaves. Slaves had to resist those abuses, trying to maintain their subjectivity and uniting in the margin which became the “place of resistance” (Rutherford 1990: 22).

Equiano reports that, in some cases, Africans were bought by men who did not possess themselves a plantation but who offered their slaves’ services receiving money in return; however, some masters did not let workers have their share and beat them instead if they dared ask for their pay (Equiano 2015: 57). A black man, who bought a boat with the money he had saved, was deprived of his property by the governor, and once he complained with his master he received no help, but he was reprimanded because it was forbidden for “negroes to have a boat” (Equiano 2015: 58).

Africans were so lowly respected that, whenever Equiano was sent to purchase some rum or sugar, he had to be accompanied by a white man as nobody would entrust the goods to him. Even though the author tried in any way he could to help his fellow slaves, he had to surrender to the masters’ authority: when he was in charge of new cargoes of slaves to be sold, he had to witness black woman being raped: “it was almost a constant practice with our clerks, and other whites, to commit violent depredations on the chastity of the female slaves” (Equiano 2015: 59). Equiano provides rumours of the cruelty of another master in Montserrat:

I believe he had not a slave but what had been cut, and had pieces fairly taken out of the flesh: and, after they had been punished thus, he used to make them get into a long wooden box or case he had for that purpose, in which he shut them up during pleasure. (Equiano 2015: 61)

Africans were forced to submit to the caprices of white colonisers, and could not rebel even if they had suffered injustice; as a matter of fact, Equiano and another black man were robbed of their bags full of fruits to sell by two white men, depriving them of all they possessed and their complaints were answered with menaces. The commanding officer of the fort, who should grant justice, refused to take their side and hastened to take his whip to threaten them. Africans were denied even the most basic human rights, and this was exactly Equiano’s intention, as he proposed himself to tell the European and American audience of the awful abuses he, as many other Africans, had suffered and were still suffering at the hands of white men. In 1772, when Equiano arrived in England, the

country was shaken by the Somerset case, which had heavy repercussions on the relationships between masters and servants; Lord Justice Mansfield declared that masters had no legal right to transport a slave to the colonies without his explicit consent. Slaves considered it as a loosening of the bonds that tied them to their masters (Walvin 1998: 100-101). Nevertheless, the treatment reserved to him and to the other Africans enraged him and he resolved that he could not endure that situation anymore, as his skin colour would always mark a thick line between him and the British.

Equiano had immediately noticed that Europeans' complexion was quite different from his own, but he reports a specific episode in which he became almost ashamed of this difference. In England, he met a little girl called Mary, and writes that, after being washed, her face "looked very rosy" (Equiano 2015: 33), therefore he tried to wash his own face hoping that it would clean it and make it look more similar to that of his young friend. He felt humiliated because, apparently, he perceived he was inferior in this new reality, as if he was looking at himself with different eyes, European eyes. If identity might be defined as "about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others [...] the stable core to your individuality" (Weeks 1990: 88), Equiano finds he has elements in common with Europeans and Africans, but he happens sometimes to be rejected by both, and he appears to feel no real sense of belonging anywhere.

Apparently, Equiano was not at ease with his position between his African and his European self, as his encounter with a black boy demonstrates (Carretta 2003: xix). He defines it as a "trifling incident" (Equiano 2015: 45): a young black slave, seeing him walking, ran towards him and hugged him even if they had never met before, as a testimony of the importance of encountering a fellow countryman in a foreign land. Equiano still wavers between the idea he has of himself as an Englishman, affected by the influence of the British culture, and the image other people have of him as an African (Carretta 2003: xix); for many of his days, Equiano longed to return to England, where he imagined he would live as a freeman, far from the ferocity of the West Indies.

Equiano is shocked at the treatment that is reserved to the offspring of interracial sexual intercourses. He was told about a French man who employed his mulatto children as workers in his plantation and, having already witnessed such cruelties, the author's reaction is of rage and contempt: "Pray, reader, are these sons and daughters of the French

planter less his children by being begotten on a black woman?" (Equiano: 2015: 63). He aimed at inspiring serious reflections in Europeans' minds, presenting with great strength the idea that skin colour does not mark a human being's position in a hypothetical scale, and it seems to suggest that it should be regarded just as an external characteristic of another population. Though, language, religion, skin colour and other factors have often been used as a marker of difference and of superiority or inferiority, as the so-called "other", or alien, was perceived as a threat, therefore it came easier to take distances rather than to try and establish a connection. This duality was created by the projection of Europeans' anxieties on the "other", so that the latter became the antithesis of the former (Rutherford 1990: 22).

On the other hand, Equiano presents evidence that not all white men behaved the same with him: as a matter of fact, he established a friendship with some of them, particularly among the first he mentioned he recalls Richard Baker with affection. Baker was born in America, and they met on board of a ship. Remembering his death, Equiano describes him with kind words:

[...] an event which I have never ceased to regret, as I lost at once a kind interpreter, an agreeable companion, and a faithful friend; who, at the age of fifteen, discovered a mind superior to prejudice; and who was not ashamed to notice, to associate with, and to be the friend and instructor of one who was ignorant, a stranger, of a different complexion, and a slave! (Equiano 2015: 30)

The attentions Baker showed towards the author were the ground upon which they established a connection, perhaps also due to the fact that they were almost the same age. The friendship between Equiano and another shipmate, Daniel Queen, seems to have been as intense as the one with Baker, since Queen too instructed him and they were fond of each other: "he was like a father to me" (Equiano 2015: 50) he says, echoing the theme of blacks being children to be instructed to dissipate their ignorance. The Guerin sisters were also important figures in his life, as they indulged his desire to learn how to read and write and besides, they introduced him to the Christian religion, which will play a fundamental role in his self-acceptance and his shaping his own identity. Equiano tried to improve himself constantly, aiming at elevating himself, and his achievements made him regard himself as if he were born an Englishman.

The influence of the new culture in which Equiano was forced to live in gradually affected his mind: whereas he was initially afraid of all those alien customs, language, and objects, he eventually became accustomed to them and even began thinking differently. After he spent some time on ships, he longed “for a battle” (Equiano 2015: 33), showing the influence the environment had on him; having often been treated better than other slaves, the risk was that he might have felt superior to them, a sort of favourite of his masters, and ignored the sufferings of his fellow Africans in order to enjoy the benefits of his privileged position. However, he was never totally corrupted by the values and beliefs of people who were Christian by name but who did not respect its predicaments, as he makes clear when he writes “O, ye nominal Christians” (Equiano 2015: 27); in the first chapter, judging his life, Equiano clearly stated he eventually did not consider himself as European, despite he acquired their manners and language and, at first, he strongly desired to be one of them. His transformation brought important changes in his attitude, in fact he saw Europeans as better than Africans; once the author could understand sailors speaking English, he defined them as “men superior to us” (Equiano 2015: 39). As did Othello before him, Equiano initially desired to be part of the British community, as he admired them for their achievements, which he considered the result of some type of magic in his ignorance: for instance, he was astonished when he saw that ships stopped at the white man’s command, thinking anchors were spells. The moment he walks into his master’s house, he believes that the watch “would tell the gentleman any thing I might do amiss” (Equiano 2015: 28), and he thinks that the picture hung in the room is how whites “had to keep their great men when they died, and used to offer them libation as we used to do our friendly spirits” (Equiano 2015: 28).

Language was one of the barriers that initially separated Equiano from the Europeans, contributing to render him an alien, an outsider to the Anglophone community. It was a sign of his otherness, which was intended as the site of difference, where Europeans projected their concern and apprehension (Rutherford 1990: 10). So as to feel integrated, he learns how to write and read in English. Literacy was a critical element in the European concepts of enlightenment, as it was a motive of pride and a characteristic of civilisation itself (Walvin 1998: 35). Being illiterate was considered as characterising lesser human beings, and it was advanced often as an excuse for colonisation and slavery, whose aim, according to Europeans, was to allow Africans to

climb the steps of the human scale. In the colonies, literacy grew among slaves, and some of them were required an education to be able to perform the tasks their masters assigned to them, despite many masters strongly opposed because they claimed that this would have inspired ideas of independence and freedom in the minds of their slaves (Walvin 1998: 35). Equiano recalls some passengers of a ship saying that it was dangerous to “let a negro know navigation” (Equiano 2015: 73); in fact, they could have stolen a boat and escaped, while otherwise they would have been forced to remain on board of the ship. Having been educated allowed the author to be employed for different jobs, for instance Mr. King thought he was suitable for working as a clerk; he was often believed to be a valuable resource, therefore he often received better working positions than the majority of the other slaves.

One book particularly affected his vision of the world and of himself, namely the Bible. He found a reliable ally in the Christian religion, which gave him the strength to face even the most difficult moments of his adventurous life. Religion became essential in the formation of his identity, as it allowed him to deal with issues as how to “achieve a reconciliation between our collective needs as human beings and our specific needs as individuals and members of diverse communities, how to balance the universal and the particular” (Weeks 1990: 89). Equiano’s first contact with the Christian religion happened when he was nearly twelve, in Falmouth, England, where he saw snow falling and, never having witnessed anything of that kind before in his life, questioned the ship’s mate about it. He was then told that the snow had been created by “a great man in the heavens, called God” (Equiano 2015: 31), and, being curious about this supernatural being, he went to church to attend the daily service. His surprise was great in seeing that, differently from what happened back in his own country, white people were free and were not kidnapped to be sold in slavery, but even more because they did not make any sacrifice to please their god.

Despite all the horrors perpetrated at the hands of Europeans he had already witnessed, Equiano is often amazed at all the new habits and objects he discovers as he spends more time on the ship or in England; as a matter of fact, he describes his first church service thus: “I thought they were much happier than we Africans. I was astonished at the wisdom of the white people in all things I saw” (Equiano 2015: 32). However, the magic and wonders he connected with his idea of Europeans vanish and are

substituted by the realisation that, notwithstanding the white men's claim of superiority, he is actually more admirable than many of them, because he achieved a higher morality and a better attitude at sympathy and compassion. One of Equiano's masters took a great interest in assuring that his slave was the most righteous as possible:

[...] he even paid attention to my morals; and would never suffer me to deceive him, or tell lies, of which he used to tell me the consequences; and that if I did so God would not love me; so that, from all his tenderness, I had never once supposed, in all my dreams of freedom, that he would think of detaining me any longer than I wished. (Equiano 2015: 50)

The pivotal moment in the first volume of the autobiography is the day he was baptised. Supported in his decision by the Guerin sisters, who were able to convince his doubtful master, he was baptised in Westminster in 1759; the reason which stands behind Equiano's sudden decision is that the Guerins' servants told him that he would not be accepted in the heavenly kingdom otherwise: "This made me very uneasy; for I had now some faint idea of a future state" (Equiano 2015: 39). A few weeks later, Equiano is thrown into the Thames by some English boys, in a perversion of the ceremony of baptism, as the water which had marked his acceptance in the Christian religion was now a mortal threat, from which he escaped death due to the rescuing of some boatmen. The moment of his baptism coincides with his choosing of his own name, as he was baptised "by my present name" (Equiano 2015: 40), Olaudah, which in his native language indicated a person who was favoured by the gods and skilled in the usage of language; it is a strong assertion of his African identity, as previously his masters chose his name in his place. As a matter of fact, he had been named Michael by a crew of sailors, then Jacob when he was working on the plantation fields in Virginia, and then he became Gustavus Vassa when bought by Captain Pascal. His attempt to rebel and maintain Jacob as a name was quickly suppressed by Pascal:

I at that time began to understand him a little, and refused to be called so, and told him as well as I could that I would be called Jacob; but he said I should not, and still called me Gustavus; and when I refused to answer to my new name,

which at first I did, it gained me many a cuff; so at length I submitted [...].
(Equiano 2015: 29)

Not only did Europeans impose themselves physically on Africans but they also did mentally, affecting their process of self-identification, being name a fundamental element of identity. Names are important in the process of individualisation, as they are labels which designate an individual, differentiating him from the others; as identity is not fixed but rather a process, a fluid and continuous renegotiation with the self, names define how the individual sees himself (Psychology and Society 2016). Equiano's refusal of his anglicised name implied that he eventually recognised himself as an African, at the end of a long process of self-understanding in which he went through several phases. He seemed to be stuck in-between two cultures, not able to fully identify with one of them. The loss of the name might cause the lack of a personal characteristic which is intrinsic to identity. As naming is classifying, names affect also the perception other people have of a person, as it might carry cultural meaning, related to family or to traditions (Psychology and Society 2016).

From the day of his baptism, Equiano became ever more interested in religion and in understanding the will of God in any of the accidents of events which happened to him or to the people he lived with: "Every extraordinary escape, or signal deliverance, either of myself or of others, I looked upon to be effected by the interposition of Providence" (Equiano 2015: 45). He reports some episodes happened to members of the ship crew which were so extraordinary that, without the intervention of God, the sailors would have surely perished. For instance, a man called Mr. Mondle had just come out of his room when another boat's cutwater completely destroyed it, and the sailor would have died, had he been on his bed. Another example of divine mercy is when a man fell from the upper-deck, miraculously surviving the jump.

In Georgia, Equiano was even asked to perform the duties of a priest at a funeral by a black woman, whose child had died; she could find no white man willing to do it, nevertheless she wished her son's soul could be admitted to the presence of God. Despite his doubts about not being a parson, he eventually accepted: "I then accordingly assumed my new vocation" (Equiano 2015: 99), foreshadowing his future missions as a missionary. In St. Kitt's, Equiano buys a Bible, since the one he owned was lost when

he was dragged down of the Aetna, where he was previously employed as a sailor. Reading the Bible gave him great comfort, it inspired his daily life, and he prayed every day for his freedom, confiding that God would eventually listen to his pleas; in fact, his morality prevented him from gaining his freedom by escaping or by any means that were not “honest and honourable” (Equiano 2015: 70). Freed slaves were in constant danger of falling again into the hands of slave traders, who often tricked them in order to sell them to some merchant; it also happened to Equiano, who was approached by two white men claiming that they were looking for a slave who looked identical to him. However, he reacts: “I had seen those kind of tricks played upon other free blacks, and they must not think to serve me so” (Equiano 2015: 99), and, noticing that he spoke a perfect English, they left.

An event that deeply marked Equiano’s faith was his journey to the North Pole; as he returned, he meditated on the perils he had had to face and on the fact that he had survived unharmed, concluding that he owed his life to Providence. Thus, he decided he needed to double his efforts to be an irreprehensible Christian, and he started attending services in different churches, seeking for an ideology that would agree with his interpretation of religion. Nonetheless, he found that neither Quakers nor Roman Catholics nor Jews could satisfy his need of redemption and of future salvation of his soul:

I found none among the circle of my acquaintance that kept wholly the ten commandments. So righteous was I in my own eyes, that I was convinced I excelled many of them in that point, by keeping eight out of ten; and finding those who in general termed themselves Christians not so honest or so good in their morals as the Turks, I really thought the Turks were in a safer way of salvation than my neighbours [...]. (Equiano 2015: 113)

It draws a sharp contrast with *Othello*, as in Shakespeare’s tragedy Turks were regarded as infidels and as not worthy of heaven, while in Equiano they are elevated, presented as holier than Christians, closer to salvation and to God. In fact, he claims that Christians are good at preaching but that they never actually follow their own predicaments, hence the devotion they asserted they possessed was just a façade for their debasement. Lost in his search for a guidance and oppressed by the violence of Europeans, Equiano’s faith began to vacillate: “I began to blaspheme, and wished often

to be any thing but a human being” (Equiano 2015: 115). His unholy behaviour seriously jeopardised the salvation of his soul, as he was conforming to that attitude he so intensely despised, and he himself admits that “I was still in nature’s darkness” (Equiano 2015: 115).

Equiano eventually reached spiritual peace by joining the Methodist movement, a branch of the Protestant religion which followed the preaching of John Wesley (Walvin 1998: 104). The author was quite surprised to see that at their parties they did not eat or drink but they sang hymns instead. Then, they started sharing their experiences involving the intervention of Providence, and “when they spoke of a future state, they seemed to be altogether certain of their calling and election of God” (Equiano 2015: 116). Their meetings are heavenly scenes of happiness in Equiano’s eyes, and he craves for being admitted to that circle of elected people. Conversing with Methodists gave the author a great pleasure, but also confused his perception of salvation; as a matter of fact, Wesley and his fellow preachers claimed that God is the only one who can forgive our sins, therefore a new birth is required, along with a close reading of the Bible. However, Equiano is perplexed at hearing that he was not given to know the state of his soul: “it brought me to a stand, not knowing which to believe, whether salvation by works or by faith only in Christ” (Equiano 2015: 118).

Equiano’s autobiography, along with other literary and artistic works produced in the eighteenth century, contributed to present the world with evidence of the actual treatment of African slaves in the colonies and on the ships. His was one of the first works in which an African expressed his own point of view, providing a new voice in a world where Europeans aimed at dominating and subduing other cultures, imposing their own traditions and languages as a justification of the desire to share their civilisation and progress, their enlightened culture with population whose primeval nature would not allow them to advance.

3. Heart of Blackness

3.1 The Raft of the Medusa

Equiano's autobiography achieved its purpose, that is to say to sensitise the European audience about the horror and injustice of slavery; in 1807, a few years after his death, the Slave Trade Act proscribed the slave trade, though it did not condemn slavery itself. In 1833, the Parliament of the United Kingdom issued the Slavery Abolition Act, which made slavery illegal in all the territories ruled by the British Empire, so that all slaves were freed and their masters were given a compensation.

Nevertheless, attitude towards Africans was still affected by racial theories claiming white superiority over any other race in their beauty, intellect and morality (Honour 1989: 11). In America, especially before the Abolitionist movement, the abuses blacks had to endure in their lives as slaves were rarely portrayed while in Europe artists produced a number of works which aimed at spreading disgust for those evil practices; though, towards the end of the nineteenth century, American artists started depicting blacks as free men, who were no more bound by those chains that had forced them to submit to the will of the white coloniser.

Joshua Reynolds wrote in an essay that preferences are affected by custom, meaning that beauty is not objective but rather the contrary, as culture and environment inevitably influence personal visions of the world and consequently of other human beings whose characteristics are different (Honour 1989: 10). His conclusion was that blacks and whites are equally beautiful, though in different ways, and it personal choices or preferences should not be disputed as one has the authority to dispute another person's preferences in matter of aesthetics. The primary focus of scientists became the human being, the main subjects of study became skin colour, hair, and aesthetic characteristics, which stressed the differences between whites and blacks, giving predominance to aesthetic values as criteria to determine where each ethnic group stood in the hierarchical scale of humanity. Scientists took as assumption that Europeans were to be considered the norm and the others just variants of that normality (Honour 1989: 12), their divergence due to a series of external factors. Africans' physical strength was counterbalanced by their alleged lack of reason, a mental inferiority which stated their subjugation and was

the reason why they accepted their conditions. Racial theories were not universally accepted as convincing: the German anthropologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, who coined the term “Caucasian”, claimed that his categorisation carried no connotations of mental difference or diversity and that it was the greed to profit from slave trade which caused such stereotypes to spread (Honour 1989: 12).

Charles Darwin’s theories affirmed that humans descended from the animal world and, though he always stood for equality and unity of humankind, his arguments have often been adapted to reach opposite purposes. He did not approve of slavery or of the brutality of Europeans towards Africans, and he aimed at proving a common descent for all human beings which would render them equals (Kohn 2009). Among the possible reinterpretations and even appropriations of his theories, one line of reading was that, as evolution had not followed the same path for all the population of the Earth, blacks were yet to achieve a complete transformation. In other words, such interpretation implied that they were paced between animals and whites in the line of evolution, hence they must have retained wild habits no more present in the fully metamorphosed white Europeans. “Social Darwinism was increasingly invoked in attempts to justify the conquest of Africa, and discrimination against blacks in Europe and America” (Honour 1989: 12); Darwinist theories were distorted and used to foment hatred, to create barriers of prejudices which deeply affected whites’ attitude towards blacks, and which prevented cooperation and peaceful cohabitation.

Prejudices and stereotypes were clearly visible in art, with artists inevitably drawing from their imaginary to produce paintings and artworks; the artists’ perception often corresponded to that of their audience, reflecting, at least partially, a conscious or unconscious image suggested by the context of society. “Visual images are always part of a culture’s structure” (Honour 1989: 14), and as such they represent the connection between artist and community, reporting blacks’ status in the structure of society; some artists expressed concern for the unfair treatment they received, and sided with them in their pursuit of equality and freedom, affirming their individual identity whereas in slavery they would just be an anonymous mass of identical beings, with no will of their own. In the sixties, after the Civil War, the Southern States approved the Black Codes, whose effects were to limit African Americans’ freedom, with low wages in exchange for their work. The Black Codes regulated blacks’ activities in order to suppress any attempt

to gain power or influence in the white-dominated Southern society, so that, even in their freedom, they were metaphorically chained.

In the United States, words as “black” or “Negro” started being used to refer to whoever was compelled to travel “Jim Crow” on a South Carolina train (Honour 1989: 16); the Jim Crow laws, issued in the Southern States, as were the Black Codes, aimed at imposing racial segregation. Blacks and whites were physically separated, the former being not allowed to frequent the same public spaces, schools or to use the same public services as the latter; the aim was to alienate them from the community, so that they would be unable to vote or intervene in any matter regarding public decisions.

Artistic visual representations of black Africans contributed to present images either pro and against Abolitionism, reflecting the attitude of both the factions. One of the most emblematic paintings produced in the nineteenth century is Théodore Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa*, which inspired controversial interpretations. It was exhibited for the first time in Paris in the Salon of 1819 (Honour 1989: 119).



Figure IV. *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819), by Théodore Géricault

As the Atlantic slave trade was one of the most debated subjects in France at the beginning of the century due to Napoleon's abolition of the trade, Géricault probably considered it while working at the painting (Honour 1989: 120). The artist took inspiration from the shipwreck of the frigate *La Méduse*, which carried soldiers and settlers to Senegal, in 1816; the subjects are lower class passengers and crew left behind by the captain. Géricault was able to portray the desperation and hopelessness of ordinary men who endured sufferings on a raft, not knowing whether they would ever reach the shore alive to see their families again. *The Raft* depicted Géricault's vision of the human condition, in which pain is the only constant element, shared by all humanity, in a world in which pleasures are imaginary and ephemeral (Honour 1989: 124). He painted some sketches, among which a study in oil is peculiar as it portrays a plain black man crouching with his hands clasped, and it evokes the symbol of the abolitionist movement.

The picture, masterwork of French Romanticism, shows exhausted men trying to call to the attention of ship which is passing, though their efforts seem to be vain fruitless. Three blacks are present in the painting: a position of predominance is given to the one who is physically elevated above all the other passengers of the raft, with his arm lifted and holding a piece of his own clothes to be more visible to the crew of the ship, deluded by a sense of false hope that his signal will be seen. The second one is lying down, as if he were dying, almost an emblem of the hopelessness and abandonment to which they are condemned by the cruelty of white captain and officers; the third one stands by the mast, his face turned towards the sky, perhaps waiting for or invoking divine help to survive the horrible threat posed by the sea. The symbolism recalls to the movements who supported equality and freedom for Africans, with a black man at the top of a pyramid of sorrow, attempting to be heeded by the white crew of a distant ship, an image of the condition mankind must endure (Honour 1989: 125).

The fact that both blacks and whites are present in the painting hints at the universality of the message it conveys, a message of misery and torment, to which, at least according to the author, all mankind his destined. Géricault suggested contrasting ideas of slavery and freedom, hope and despair, rendering his work a unique mix of feelings; it seems to convey the message that all populations are subjected to the same emotions and experiences, no matter their ethnicity.

Gericault died young, nonetheless his work was of great inspiration to many artists to come but also his contemporaries, for the dignity which he achieved to give to those otherwise average men was a great accomplishment for him, as they had the same strength and tragic nature as the godly heroes of past myths and stories.

3.2 Alone in the Wilderness

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, published in 1899, provided interesting but controversial ideas about colonialism; as a matter of fact, throughout the novel he seems to criticise the colonial mission of the European empires, but at the same time the general ideas he presents of Africa and its inhabitants appear to be agreeing with the stereotypes and prejudices which were connected with that mysterious land. Chinua Achebe, in *Image of Africa*, claims that Conrad's vision of Africa is the same as the narrator, Marlow, whose view is affected by clichés and therefore might be defined racist (Caminero-Santangelo 2005: 3) and even calls him a "bloody racist". However, as for *Othello*, giving such a definition is quite difficult, as the contemporary notion of racism is not the same as it was back in the nineteenth century.

Its accusation of being a racist novel, along with its apparent support of imperialism, was the main concern of postcolonial scholars over the last decades (Firchow 2000: 3). The very term "racist" used by Achebe leaves a few doubts on its meaning, as it does not have the same implications it might have had in the nineteenth century, when the term did not exist yet (Firchow 2000: 4). The difference in cultural context between now and the past plays a crucial role in the definition of racism; despite the phenomenon as such already existed, it was not classified in the same terms. In the Victorian period, people did not feel the need to use the word "racism" as their vision of the world strongly relied on races and on hierarchies which they felt as rightful. The first term which suggested negative connotations about race was "racialism", which appeared in 1907 to define the feeling of superiority of a particular race that creates prejudices and stereotypes (Firchow 2000: 4).

In the past, race was seldom employed as a barrier between one population and the other: ancient Greeks, for instance, made a distinction between civilised and non-civilised people, categories which did not take into account any external feature but rather

the degree of knowledge they possessed; early Christians celebrated Africans' conversion, a sign that spiritual equality was more important than appearance (Fredrickson 2002: 17). Basically, that was due to the fact that, prior to the fifteenth century, Europeans had had little or no contact with sub-Saharan Africans (Fredrickson 2002: 26), hence the colour of the skin was not discussed as an issue or as a reason to establish a hierarchy of humanity. The subsequent association of blackness with evil and immorality caused dark-skinned people to be treated as inferior, as the analysis in the first chapter of this thesis showed. In the colonial period, race was conveniently given connotations of enlightenment or underdevelopment, so that Europe could have a reason to colonise Africa and profit from the exploitation of its resources, both human and material.

In 1735, Carl Linnaeus' classification of human varieties (namely Europeans, American Indians, Asians and Africans) presented a racist hierarchy in which Europeans were described as civilised, bright, educated, while Africans were wild, negligent; Blumenbach, in 1776, wrote his *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind*, in which he asserted that all humanity is one species and has common ancestry (Fredrickson 2002: 56); his classification of races was based on physical traits rather than on behaviour and cleverness and comprehended five races, which were Caucasians, Mongolians, Ethiopians, Americans and Malays. In the United States, Abolitionism forced those who were in favour of the slave system to adopt racial theories which might legitimise it, therefore they asserted that mankind had been created separate and unequal (Fredrickson 2002: 79).

Conrad took inspiration from his journey to Congo in 1890, when he served on a steamboat for a Belgian company; he was shocked by the violence perpetrated by European colonisers, who employed brute force against natives so that they could seize ivory. In his novel, Conrad suggests his doubts about how colonisers managed to maintain their stations and their ivory trade, criticising the weak administrative structure and exposing the brutality of what in Europe was called civilisation.

The ambiguity of Conrad's novel is apparent from its very first words, its title: *Heart of Darkness*. It is still quite unclear what the author meant exactly by those words; their connotations are opposites, as 'heart' is the source of life, therefore it evokes positive images. Furthermore, 'heart' is associated with goodness, courage, love, all of which are

to be praised and sought, as they are characteristics to be appreciated in human beings. The word 'darkness', on the other hand, carries negative connotations as it is linked with chaos and disorder in several mythologies, which attributed to it the role of antithesis of light and life, and of all that is good (Adams 1998: 117). 'Darkness' also inspires ideas of the unknown, either in the sense of the mystery such an unexplored land as Africa instilled and in the sense of lack of civilisation, an intellectual darkness that was distinctive of the early medieval period in Europe. It was the same ignorance which was ascribed to Africans, whose cultural traditions were totally different from Europeans', beings mostly based on orality and rhythm rather than on written documents.

Another negative connotation is fear, since darkness hosts monstrous things, hiding them from sight; in fact, Marlow reports of human shapes and eyes moving or glimpsed at in the darkness of the African forests, frightful presences whose only purpose is to attack any human being should venture in their territory.

Due to their dark complexion, black Africans were also called 'darky' (Adams 1998: 118) and they seemed to be the expression of the Renaissance anxieties about exterior blackness being the sign of sinfulness and of the devil, while whiteness was the emblem of spiritual and bodily perfection. The evangelical mission was aimed at bringing a metaphorical light into a dark continent, with the consequent order civilisation provided instead of wilderness, in which men behaved like beasts, instinctive, primordial, therefore dangerous (Adams 1998: 118). The heart of darkness might also be that of Kurtz, the symbol of the European spirit corrupted by the darkness of the obscure Africa; though, Kurtz might also stand for the true nature of Europe, its savagery hidden under the mask of civilisation.

The novel opens in Gravesend, England, where the boat *Nellie* is anchored; the passengers are a group of five men, not professional sailors but rather men enjoying a cruise on the Thames. The narrator, whose name is not mentioned, reports the speech of Marlow, one of the passengers, who tells the others about his adventure in Congo searching for a man called Kurtz.

From the very first pages, the ambiguity of Conrad's words' might inspire different interpretations of the colonising missions of the European empires:

captains, admirals, the dark “interlopers” of the Eastern trade, and the commissioned “generals” of East India fleets. Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth! . . . The dreams of men, the seeds of commonwealths, the germs of empires (Conrad 1997: 5-6)

He defines those who chose to undertake the mission as “hunters for gold” and “pursuers of fame”, implying that, no matter what the official reasons might be, they were just interested in personal achievements, so that the spreading of European culture and knowledge was but a pretext. The adventurers were bringer of both “sword” and “torch”, that is to say of military power and of enlightened knowledge; Europeans had conquered Africa by using brute force, being their weapons deadlier and more dangerous than those used by natives. The light of “spark from the sacred fire” casts out the shadows of ignorance, allowing Africans to partake in the wisdom of more civilised populations. Congo was usually associated with ideas of an “animalistic” place, where exotic animals lived beside natives, who were defined as “savages” or “primitives” (Firchow 2000: 33).

On the other hand, the tone of the last lines of the passage seems to be praising the feat of those brave adventurers who ventured into unknown territories, and whose greatness shone as if it was the light of the sun, enlightening the minds of natives who could but learn the principles of that civilisation which, according to Europeans, they lacked. The “dreams of men” could be fulfilled in Africa, where white men were treated as if they were gods and the rules the European societies applied in their countries were no longer valid there, or at least they were weakened.

Nevertheless, as Marlow himself admits, England “has been one of the dark places of the earth” too (Conrad 1997: 6); the real strength of white men, therefore, was to rise from the darkness of ignorance to reach a higher state of humanity, in which those instincts which governed life are suppressed and reason governs every single action, restraining primordial desires. This would be the only possible way to achieve order and a system of rules which would allow a community to live peacefully, without the constant threat of undesired outbursts of instinctual nature which might compromise the stability of society and its members. Marlow then refers to the time when Romans first came to

England, when it was nothing more than an uncivilised place, where wilderness reigned and cold, fog, diseases and death would be the only companion of the civilised Roman soldiers who dared to risk their lives in order to explore such dangerous lands. Though, the mission of spreading the light of the Empire as far as possible was too important to abandon it due to the fear of the unknown. In stopping to be savages, humans can possibly achieve to become superior beings, a concept which was the cornerstone of evolutionary theories (Firchow 2000: 33).

Marlow claims that Romans were “men enough to face the darkness” (Conrad 1997: 8), evoking the image of a common citizen who would land in that savage England, surrounded by wilderness and subjected to continuous inputs which could wake his inner and most hidden impulses. The scenes imagined by Marlow are not so far back in time, as he himself states that “darkness was here yesterday” (Conrad 1997: 7), implying that darkness had been hovering on England just a few centuries before, perhaps suggesting that British had no right to impose themselves upon other populations with the justification of civilisation, as they themselves were lost in darkness until recently. The difference between the first Roman settlers and modern colonisers is, according to Marlow, “efficiency” (Conrad 1997: 8); as a matter of fact, he claims that violence was the only method through which the former achieved to take control of the lands of England and of its inhabitants.

They were conquerors, and for that you only want brute force—nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind—as if very proper for those who tackle a darkness. (Conrad 1997: 9)

Marlow traces a line between conquerors and colonisers, asserting that the former took advantage of the natives’ weakness and less advanced technology. Their mission was not of civilisation but rather of taking possession of every land or population they encountered in their exploring the world. Marlow seems to despise this employment of brute force for the pure intent of appropriating of another’s possessions, since it serves only the purpose of personal achievement and interest, without serving any higher scope.

The term “conquerors”, then, is used negatively, in opposition to the more favourable word “colonists” (Firchow 2000: 14).

Men in the past were blinded by violence, they could not resist it and perhaps this made them more similar to those natives they subjugated rather than to the prototype of illuminated colonisers. Such brutality might have appeared as appropriated to “tackle a darkness” which would have been impossible to face otherwise; Romans’ blindness forced them to undertake a path of immorality, as it was based on the simple fact that their opponents had not the means to resist them, as Marlow admits, therefore their conquests were due in large part to the fortuity of finding others’ weakness rather than to their real strength. Marlow further articulates his critique of violent methods:

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. (Conrad 1997: 9)

This section seems to strongly disapprove the methods employed in the past but also the ones employed in the modern era by the British Empire, whose conquest implied the appropriation of the lands but also of the lives of population whose appearance was characterised by distinctive features which differed from Europeans’. Those characteristics placed them, in the European imaginary, lower in the hierarchical scale of mankind. Marlow clearly denounces the methods colonisers employed to conquer foreign lands (Firchow 2000: 10), and he seems to deliver a message of peace, according to which violence is never an answer but a reason of conflict.

Despite Achebe’s accusation, the submission of other populations is not depicted as desirable but rather as a monstrous act of dehumanisation and of destruction of the other’s identity. On the other hand, Marlow’s phrase “What redeems it is the idea only” might partly be interpreted as supporting the colonial enterprise, in the sense that, though subjugation is not “a pretty thing”, the concept of reaching another culture to share technology or progress in order to reach a mutual benefit is what might redeem the atrocity committed in the process. Then, the idea is that suffering should be endured so that a greater good can be done. As being an animal would mean a metaphoric way of indicating lack of full human conscience (Firchow 2000: 36), the mission of civilisation

carried on by Europeans through the centuries might be interpreted as a way of implementing that part of consciousness African needed to evolve into humanity.

The exact meaning of that “idea” is complex and enigmatic, as it might also indicate that conquest would be acceptable in order to spread the light of reason, in which case a hierarchy would be established and the relation would be in one way only, from the coloniser who gives the light to the colonised who receives it. Another possible interpretation is that the idea is that modern colonisers are better than those first Romans he mentioned earlier; it is a common thought among colonisers that they are better than the ones who came before them, as if this would redeem them for doing a reparative act.

Not only did Europeans focus on cultural differences, but they also stressed physicality as a sign of the primordial state of Africans. Before being allowed to leave for Congo, Marlow has to undergo some tests, so he was visited by a doctor who was trying to find a pattern which could link the permanence on the African soil with mental regression. Moreover, he was trying to determine whether those who decided to venture to Africa possessed similar physical features to which their choice might be attributed:

‘I always ask leave, in the interests of science, to measure the crania of those going out there,’ he said. ‘And when they come back, too?’ I asked. ‘Oh I never see them,’ he remarked; ‘and, moreover, the changes take place inside, you know.’ (Conrad 1997: 16)

Science was an important resource in a century in which people took inspiration from the principles of the Enlightenment to try and explain the mechanism of the world and of nature. By abandoning old superstitions and fears, they thought it would be possible to elevate the mind, which would be thus kindled by the light of knowledge. The doctor who visited Marlow, despite his interest in physicality, admits that the metamorphosis is internal, that Africa affects the mental faculties of those who stay long enough within the range of its influence. The measuring of adventurers’ heads aimed at classifying them according to the size of their brains, and understand if theirs were smaller or different from those who remained in Europe. The shape and size of the head allegedly contributed to determine the subject’s cleverness, providing a useful tool to distinguish highbrows from lowbrows; as racism, this method relied on difference to create a

hierarchy which serves only a selected elite of people whose characteristics fit into that description.

Marlow is also questioned about potential prior cases of madness in his family, with the doctor thoroughly checking every possible hint of elements which might signal that his brain was out of the ordinary. His overzealous enquiries might lead to think that the doctor needs a valid reason to understand why people should leave civilisation to undertake life-endangering missions.

When Marlow tells his audience about the fate of Fresleven, the dead captain whose place he was hired to take, he ironically refers to the Company's late captain's mission as "noble cause" (Conrad 1997: 12); as all the other white men who went to Africa, Fresleven endangered his life in pursuit of the fulfilment of a quest which would elevate him and his spirit for its goodness. At least, this was the notion of which Europeans were convinced, for it was the official aim of trade companies, it was one of the methods they employed so as to recruit new members for their crews.

Africa was still mostly an unexplored territory for Europeans at the beginning of the nineteenth century; Marlow recalls that, when he was a child, he used to study maps of the world and he was fascinated by all those spaces which were left blank, indicating the places of the Earth which had not been explored by whites yet: "At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth" (Conrad 1997: 10). As a matter of fact, each country on the map was assigned a different colour, in order to show clearly how the known world was divided. However, by the time of his journey, many of those blank spaces had been filled, as explorers went ever further seeking either for new valuable resources as ivory and for fame and glory, for the immortality and excitement that those wild lands offered. While African lands were but blank spaces on a map, their appeal was stronger, due to the fact that they were exotic, mysterious, even dangerous and this produced great fascination in the minds of European explorers. Achebe claimed that Africa became, at least in fiction, the representation of the unknown and of the mysterious inner parts of the self and that way of representing it often led to misconceptions and misrepresentations of Africa and of its inhabitants (Firchow 2000: 20).

When they ceased to be unknown, those blank spaces were substituted by names of rivers, lakes and stations, and the previously harmless land became "a place of darkness" (Conrad 1997: 11). Darkness, in continuation of the tradition of the seventeenth

century, had moral connotations of evil, and of Africa became a pagan place which neither the light of God nor science had reached yet. However, Marlow seems to imply the possibility that darkness was not an innate characteristic of Africa but rather a negative consequence of the presence of the corruption which was introduced by Europeans.

Africa seems to be the opposite of England. That is to say, at the beginning of the novel, Marlow explained how England was a place of darkness before the coming of Romans, who brought civilisation where wilderness was ruling. Marlow's words might then be interpreted as paradoxical: he had scathingly criticised Romans for their use of violence, denouncing at the same time the crime committed by whites, namely of having corrupted Africa; still, he admitted that they had a positive impact on the wild lands of England. Conrad even suggested his audience to imagine what would happen if a group of blacks went to England and forced British to work for them (Conrad 1997: 30). The darkness so strongly denounced by trade companies was then perhaps just a reflection of what was in the hearts of Europeans, whose darkness could find no place in societies which celebrated self-control over freedom of passions and feelings, so that they feel constrained.

Marlow's first contact with natives is visual, from distance, therefore he provides his impressions based on what he could glimpse of them from the deck of the steamer; he describes the surreal feelings of being surrounded by the wild jungles of Africa, in company of men he did not know, with whom he shared but the passion for sailing and for adventure, echoing the scene at the beginning of the novel, when the narrator describes the persons who are on board of the *Nellie*, and who share the "bond of the sea" (Conrad 1997: 3). He feels as if he was out of reality, everything is new, different and the only moment of contact with the world he knows are when he catches a glimpse of some boats on shore, owned by a group of blacks.

You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks—these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as neutral and as true as the surf along the coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. (Conrad 1997: 20)

Africans in *Heart of Darkness* are strongly associated with physicality; in this passage, for instance, Marlow highlights the strength and vigour of their bodies, and he seems to admire that “wild vitality” which they possess. Whites are always still or performing no particular motion, while blacks are intense in their movements, emanating energy from their muscles and bones, in an ecstasy of shapes which is appealing to the sight of Marlow. However, the admiration Marlow feels for their bodies is in contrast with the portray he provides of African faces, which he describes as “grotesque masks”. Their facial features, so different from Europeans’, make them look like monsters, fearful beings that inspire apprehension if not fear. However, Marlow’s discourse might regard just an aesthetic judgement, without any reference to their intelligence or morality (Firchow 2000: 10).

Masks imply the lack of individuality; as a matter of fact, wearing a mask would render every individual identical to the others, eliminating subjectivity. On the other hand, whites are described referring to their qualities or their flaws; this particularly happens in the case of Kurtz, of whom the reader continuously hears about but without actually “seeing” him until the last chapters of the novel. Differently from whites, then, blacks are treated as if they were all alike, a crowd of faces which possess no distinctive traits. In fact, the similar shape of the body appears to be the only one thing that blacks have to make them human; personal attributes are not mentioned, hence this might imply that Europeans, even Conrad, did not see them as their peers. Even though Conrad thought in stereotypical terms, as the majority of his contemporaries, he was “subtler and more balanced” (Firchow 2000: 7) in his fiction than many other writers of the nineteenth century.

Another recurring element in *Heart of Darkness* is that blacks never speak. They shout, sing, or emanate strange noises but they never actually pronounce anything understandable if not when they speak to Kurtz, who has gone native and can understand what they say. As a matter of fact, civilised speeches strongly contrast the strange noises produced by Africans, with either drums or yelling, incomprehensible and therefore primitive (Kaplan 2003: 70).

In their self-asserted certainty of superiority, those Europeans members of the crew of the French steamer defined natives as “enemies” (Conrad 1997: 21) and did not hesitate to attack them recklessly; those enemies represented the “other” (Firchow 2000:

46) in opposition to the European self, which was menacing and possibly dangerous. They fired randomly in the jungle, sure that a camp where those enemies lived was hidden in its shadows and they were possibly convinced of the fact that, sooner or later, a threat would come out of the darkness and jeopardise the fulfilment of the noble cause by killing any parties of adventurers who should happen to cross their path.

Marlow's first actual encounters with natives happen when he arrives at the first of the Company's stations; the scene before him shows the effect of colonisation both on the landscape and on Africans' life. He sees earth turned up, sites of excavation and houses, signs that the kingdom of nature was perverted by the works of whites, who employed their machineries to re-shape the environment, as they were doing with Africans' minds, re-shaping their identities. The only element left of the former dominion of nature is the sound of the rapids, which background noise contrasts with the "inhabited devastation" (Conrad 1997: 22) that perhaps marked the beginning of Marlow questioning the actual implication of the European's occupation.

The effect of colonialism on Africans is shown in the character of the black fireman:

He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind-legs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap. (Conrad 1997: 58)

Africans, then, seem to be able to produce benefits for the society only when they are instructed by colonisers, becoming mimic men who seek to imitate whites' behaviour, language and customs but never being able to achieve a full metamorphosis. The colonised desires this metamorphosis to be authentic (Bhabha 2017: 129), though he remains stuck in-between the identity he wishes to leave behind and the one he wants to reach, and, as a consequence, he is not fully accepted in neither of them. The previous passage highlights the irony in seeing the "improved specimen" as a parody of Europeans, using once again lexicon regarding the animal sphere: the African is like a dog trying to walk erect, in a pale imitation of a human being. Marlow's journey is of self-discovery, as he has to deal with the "other", the unexplored part of the self which is projected onto the colonised, who both "allure and terrify" (Kaplan 2003: 68).

The Englishman sees groups of natives walking, “black and naked, moved like ants” (Conrad 1997: 22); natives seem to be anything but human, maybe compelled by their primitive nature to behave like animals. It might be interpreted as a reverberation of Iago’s words in reference to Othello’s alleged bestiality, as they both use words belonging to that same semantic field to allude to the inhumanity of the Moor and of Africans. Marlow’s first reference is to the colour of natives’ skin, black, which adds a connotation of evil and impurity, legacy of the Manichean distinction white-black as exterior signs of goodness or immorality. Then, Africans’ nakedness is stressed, and it draws a sharp contrast with the elegant dresses of white, whose emblem is the Company’s Chief Accountant, who deeply cares for his appearance to the point that he almost maniacally keeps it, as if he were in London.

The Africans’ lack of interest for refined dresses might be a sign of their uncivilised habits, as nakedness would be commonly thought more appropriated to animals or people who live in the wilderness, with no contact with the rest of the world. The third element taken into consideration is their behaviour: they move like ants, an image which supports the concept of their lack of individuality, in which no one emerges or is distinct from the others due to personal attributes.

Marlow then witnesses an episode which makes him deeply reflect on whether Europeans’ action could be somehow justified or they should be condemned:

Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind wagged to and fro like tails. I could see every rib, the joins of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking. (Conrad 1997: 23)

This passage of the novel clearly states that the submission of native Africans had had terrible consequences on their lives; again, the lexicon used by Conrad pertains the bestial condition of those living beings. The rags which are tied around their heads end in pieces of cloth that resemble tails, not only in their shape but also in their movement, as they “wagged to and fro”, evoking in the reader’s mind the idea of a group of animals

doing what they are told and nothing more. The dehumanisation of African seems to go on regardless of their rights as human beings and therefore as peers. Nevertheless, Conrad never claims that Europeans are superior because of genetic or biological characteristics (Firchow 2000: 10)

However, the chains that constrain them are, as Equiano so strongly suggested in his autobiography, bonds that force the physical re-shaping of the self. They are the material sign of submission, they indicate inferiority, and their major implication is that they deprive a person of his own freedom, with repercussions on his/her own identity. Chains set boundaries to the individual's liberty to act, physically impeding him to perform most normal actions; but perhaps their power is even stronger as far as mind is concerned. Fearing the "other", the coloniser tries to limit his power through methods as subordination or transformation, maintaining the inequality which is the cornerstone of imperialism (Kaplan 2003: 68).

In fact, the mental state of submission caused by chains is more powerful than its physical form, as it establishes limits to a person's will and might also imply the loss of hope or of the desire to live. Marlow longs for an answer to his question of what it means to be human, and he finds it in the person of Kurtz (Firchow 2000: 19); the latter is prisoner of the wilderness that surrounds him, and finds that his European qualities are tested by the temptations Africa offers. Kurtz is an ordinary man, as his origins are humble and even his name, which means "short" in German, suggests it. Though, he managed to elevate himself, becoming the embodiment of Europe; as a matter of fact, "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (Conrad 1997: 79), his mother being half-English and his father half-French and perhaps because of this Marlow saw in him the emblem of the unleashing of the most basic instincts which was a constant threat to anyone who ventured to Africa.

While blacks are chained, whites are freed of the constraints that regulated their lives in their native countries, and Kurtz is the character which most represents this going native and the submission to the power of the animal traits of the self: "He had no restraint, no restraint—just like Kurtz— a tree swayed by the wind" (Conrad 1997: 81). His ability is to continuously reinvent himself in the colonial space, which offers endless possibilities to a man who has the will to change himself; Kurtz's charisma is one of the reasons why people would follow him unquestioningly. He relies on words to elevate himself in the

eyes of other people, and he achieves to be worshipped as a sort of semi-god by natives, almost becoming a superhuman, an overman.

As it is argued in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, man must be “surpassed” (Nietzsche 2010: 13) though, as for Darwin’s theories, subsequent interpretations adjusted Nietzsche’s words so that they could be easily employed to justify racial hatred, as Nazis did in the twentieth century, who gave them biopolitical implications to sustain their frightful actions. In the colonial space, men can experiment, re-shaping reality according to their desires, as if it was a mirror in which to project whatever secret aspiration Europeans had. Conrad perhaps intended Kurtz to be a symbolic character, who shares characteristics with several different varieties of Europeans, an incarnation of European imperialism in Africa (Firchow 2000: 68).

Kurtz had been entrusted by the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs with writing a report, which Marlow happened to read; the latter was particularly shocked to read that “He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, ‘must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings” (Conrad 1997: 79); however, the rest of the report particularly fascinated him, as it suggested “the notion of an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence” (Conrad 1997: 79-80). Henry Louis Gates affirmed that it was Europeans’ “privileged writing” the element which sanctioned their superiority over Africans, who had not yet developed a system of writing when the first contact happened (Firchow 2000: 8).

Nevertheless, Kurtz’s subsequent madness seem to gradually change his thoughts; in a footnote he left on his report, he wrote: “Exterminate all the brutes!” (Conrad 1997: 80), showing that he did not recognise Africans’ humanity, they were primitive, unintelligent and therefore they must be eliminated, an idea which finds its roots in Darwin’s theory that natural selection assists the progress of civilisation (Firchow 2000: 152). Kurtz, though, never made any attempt to realise his genocidal thoughts; instead, he convinced a group of natives that he was to be worshipped as a god, and he turned to the immoral aspects of life. His “nerves, went wrong, and caused him to preside at certain midnight dances and unspeakable rites” (Conrad 1997: 79), his lust and carnality were unleashed, freed from the self-control imposed by European values and beliefs. Unlike the cannibals Marlow had met, Kurtz seemed not able to restrain himself, perhaps because

he did not possess that strength of will and of soul which was the cannibals' innate quality (Collins 1998: 138).

Marlow heard of Kurtz from different characters he encountered in his journey, never actually seeing him until he arrived at the Inner Station; therefore, Kurtz was but a name, an image other people depicted of him. Though, the reports he heard were quite confusing, as initially the Chief Accountant portrayed him as a "very remarkable person" (Conrad 1997: 28), one of the best agents employed by the Company, a man to be respected and admired. On the other hand, as Marlow went further deep towards the Inner Station, the description of the man he was looking for quite differed. Kurtz's greediness and instinctual nature became exposed. The Russian Trader, despite his firm devotion to Kurtz, tells him about the latter's avidity: "He wanted to shoot me too one day" (Conrad 1997: 89) for keeping some ivory for himself.

The Trader admits that Kurtz is not to be treated as an ordinary man, for the influence of wilderness upon him was too great: "This man suffered too much. He hated all this, and somehow he couldn't get away" (Conrad 1997: 90). Marlow then learns that it was Kurtz who arranged the attack to the steamer, because he did not wish to leave the Inner Station; no matter his mental and physical deterioration, the calling of Africa seemed to be too strong for him to resist it. An example of this temptation is when he crawled back to the Sorcerer's fire, suggesting that he had consciously chosen to become an animal, unlike the dying native Marlow saw kneeling down to drink water from the river, forced to abandon his erect position, sign of his humanity (Firchow 2000: 39). The "heavy, mute spell of wilderness—that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and brutal passions" (Conrad 1997: 105) had turned him into a creature who lived of impulses, without the light of reason.

A sign of Kurtz's abandonment to wilderness is his horrific idea of having human heads plunged on stakes, frightful ornaments which had no purpose to serve but that of gratifying Kurtz's desire. A behaviour which was not tolerated by the Company, for whom the agent's actions were inappropriate and dangerous and did not bring any benefits. The presence of those heads showed that "Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him—some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent

eloquence” (Conrad 1997: 92). Kurtz’s animalism is portrayed in its savage and irrational aspects, even linked with diabolism, though it is not to be considered entirely negatively, as, by walking erect, he affirms his humanity (Firchow 2000: 37) before deciding to abandon it. His lust is embodied by the “savage and superb” woman (Conrad 1997: 97), emblem of the paradoxical appeal and fear inspired by the “other”, with Kurtz being sexually attracted while the Russian Trader was terrified by her presence and states: “If she had offered to come aboard I really think I would have tried to shoot her” (Conrad 1997: 98).

Kurtz’s last words are particularly interesting: “The horror! The horror!” (Conrad 1997: 111); his desperate cry might be Kurtz’s final rebellion against the terrible actions perpetrated for the sake of civilisation. The cruel methods of subjugation of natives witnessed by him and then by Marlow could be the reason why Kurtz decided not to be part of that mechanism anymore, leaving the barbarous behaviour of Europeans to join a community of Africans. On the other hand, he might refer to the darkness he found in Africa, in the shape of a fascinating wilderness which deeply affected him, to the point that, in the eyes of the colonisers, he appears to be no different from those “brutes” he wanted to exterminate (Conrad 1997: 80). When reporting Kurtz’s death to his Intended, Marlow chose to omit those ambiguous words, and he told her that, with his last breath, he had pronounced her name; his lie has a moral function, it is Marlow’s last step on his path of personal growth (Schwartz 1998: 128). His desire is to prevent her from losing her admiration for Kurtz, for had she known that he had abandoned himself to the power of darkness, her whole idea of him would have been irretrievably destroyed.

Heart of Darkness provides interesting insights into the methods of imperialism and its exploitation of Africa; due to cultural and environmental inputs, Conrad’s work might be defined nowadays as a racist work, as Achebe did. Nevertheless, it raises questions about the legitimacy of the abuses to which native Africans were forced to submit, as Marlow never clearly affirms that Europeans were superior due to physical or mental innate characteristics, he rather seems to lament the inhuman conditions of the blacks who worked for the Company. Whereas in the past religious sinfulness was the main association of blackness, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century the concern shifted from religion to science, with the aim of proving that biology could provide an answer for the primitive state of Africans.

4. Blackness in the United States

4.1 The New Negro

In the years that followed the end of the American Civil War, many efforts were done in order to maintain peace among the states, which were re-united, but also between the different ethnic groups which lived side by side. President Ulysses S. Grant, elected in 1868, supported the Congress' Enforcement Acts of 1870-71, with the aim of protecting and granting African Americans their civil rights, as their right to vote, which they had recently acquired, and to be regarded as equals before the law. President Grant was also trying to protect black communities from the KKK, or Ku Klux Klan, whose violent actions against blacks first and then other ethnic groups considered non-American caused them to be held as a serious threat.

The Enforcement Acts aimed at preventing the Klan from intimidating black people so that they would renounce their right to vote, to let their voice be heard, the chance to finally be seen as peers rather than as mere objects. They also contrasted the Black Codes emanated by white Congressmen, which limited the former slaves' new freedom and forced them to work in a system based on low wages, therefore the Codes were modelled essentially after the previous slave codes.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the vast majority of the African American population in the United States lived in the Southern States, whose economy was prevalently based on rural activities. In 1916, many moved to the North, in what is called the Great Migration, which involved millions of African Americans who left the countryside to live in urban areas. Among the reasons of this movement, segregation and racist ideology were probably the most compelling; in fact, in the Southern States, violence and oppression towards blacks had not stopped, despite the efforts the government made in order to ensure that a peaceful coexistence could be possible, or, at least, this was the new laws and acts' purpose. Better working opportunities and the hope to find a benevolent context in which to live pushed freedmen to try a new experience elsewhere.

The African Americans' attempts to integrate in a totally new environment inspired the artist Jacob Lawrence, who created a series of paintings called *Migrations*

Series, each of which had a caption written by the author providing the theme of that specific canvas; Lawrence was the child of two migrants who moved from the South to Harlem, one of New York's neighbourhoods (NPR 2015). His paintings dealt with many themes regarding the challenges they had to face in their diaspora, as they not always found the utopian place they were hoping for. Even though in the North the attitude towards them was quite milder, African Americans were subjected to indifference and contempt, not being allowed the chance to fully integrate (NPR 2015). The first part of the *Series* is about the cruelty of southerners and the complications of their traveling, portraying scenes of poverty and need; in one of the canvases, a black person in a red sweatshirt is sitting next to a tree, from which a noose is hanging, representative of the several lynchings in which African Americans were mercilessly murdered. Another shows a black doctor visiting a dark-skinned patient, and its caption explains that black professionals were required to move and follow their clientele, probably because white people would never have required their services. The works regarding traveling portray railway stations packed with people waiting for their train, in some cases arrested by the police to complicate their leaving and prevent them from leaving.

However, once reached their destination, they discovered that many of them were not to obtain better conditions than in the South; as a matter of fact, Lawrence provides both the sides of housing conditions for migrants, showing that, while their new apartments looked opulent if compared with their former houses in the rural area (Museum of Modern Arts 2015), these were not properly built to host such a huge amount of people, for they lacked courtyards and the small airshafts prevented much of external light from coming in. As Lawrence himself experienced life in those apartments in Harlem, his representations fully reflect the feelings and inconveniences that African Americans experienced; he explained that, given the general sadness of the place, and to make it more enjoyable, families decorated their apartments with coloured objects, as pillows and quilts, and he claims that he suddenly realised that he was "surrounded by art" (Museum of Modern Arts 2015).

Migrants found obstacles in their search for an affordable and comfortable apartment, as they were directed to determined areas of the cities by a combination of political and economic forces, which assigned neighbourhoods as Harlem in New York or the Hill District in Pittsburgh for blacks to live in (Museum of Modern Arts 2015). Not

only was it hard for migrants to find a decent housing but also their landlords made them pay higher rents than whites, a service which was based on racial distinction and which profited to the wealthy whites who took advantage of the despair of the travellers.

Another painting perfectly embodies the (slight) difference in racial discrimination from North to South: in the latter, the Jim Crow laws lawfully authorised racial segregation, while in the former it was a common practice though not backed by the law. Lawrence's painting's setting is a restaurant, where white and black people are eating; what is striking is the fact that they are separated by a yellow rope, which marks two different areas of the room, each destined to one specific group. As it happened in the South, then, social interactions between different ethnic groups were forbidden.

Animosity towards African Americans was also due to the fact that employers used them as strike breakers, causing the rage of the other white workers; especially in the World War I period, black workers were hired to fill the places left by Americans who had answered the call of duty, and who came home to find that the situation had completely changed during their absence.



Figure V. *Panel 52: One of the Largest Race Riots Occurred in East St. Louis (1940-41)*, by Jacob Lawrence

The rising tension resulted in violent riots in many cities all over the United States, ignited by the most disparate reasons, with blacks being accused of alleged crimes against whites; the latter's rage suggests that they wanted to find an excuse to restate the racial hierarchy in America (Museum of Modern Arts 2015).

This painting depicts one of the most brutal riots that ever occurred in the history of the United States, the one that occurred in St. Louis, Illinois, in 1917, which was caused by white employers trying to use black workers to break a strike (Museum of Modern Arts 2015). Violent protests in the city resulted in murders and injuries, hence many of the black inhabitants of the city decided that the best choice for them was to flee and to leave all the violence behind. The last panels show that, in the North, African Americans were allowed to vote and that they had access to better learning facilities, in contrast with the first paintings showing children probably working in cotton fields, carrying baskets on their heads.

The philosopher and critic Alain Locke foresaw the "rise of the New Negro", whose characteristics were to be educated, politically aware and self-respectful of his own identity (Museum of Modern Arts 2015). "New Negro" became a term of fundamental importance during the Harlem Renaissance, which marked the rebirth and flourishing of African American arts; Harlem was the New York neighbourhood in which the majority of black people lived, it was the destination of many of those migrants who left the South to move northward, hoping to find a reality in which blacks had not to withstand the racist attitude which they had already endured.

The years which followed the end of World War I saw the rising of Harlem as the centre of African American culture, music and literature, which focused on political and racial themes, and whose concern was the struggle for equality (Glasrud and Wintz 2012: 1). Due to the Great Migration, a huge number of African Americans moved from the South to New York, joining the growing community of blacks who lived there; the ideas embedded in the Harlem Renaissance were clearly stated by Langston Hughes, who wrote in his essay *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain* in 1926:

We younger Negro artist who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. (Glasrud and Wintz 2012: 5)

Hughes' words asserted the desire for self-acceptance as "dark-skinned" in spite of the prejudices and stereotypes whites had often associated with that feature. Even though in *Othello* the Moor's physicality becomes an issue only when he marries a white woman, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in fact, dark skin was deemed as a characteristic denoting inferiority and slavery, as Equiano so powerfully reported in his autobiography. In *Heart of Darkness*, dark skin is linked with primordality, since natives were depicted as mentally underdeveloped, subjugated to the white man's will. The process started with the Abolitionist movement and continued in the Harlem Renaissance, dark-skinned people were given the chance to express themselves freely and more powerfully, and Hughes' essay suggests that they were aiming at re-shaping their own identity, so that they would no more be constrained in that imposed by Europeans and Americans, whose contradictions threatened their self-approval.

The African American desire to challenge old prejudices resulted in the so-called New Negro Movement, which became fundamental in the Harlem Renaissance; those who joined the Movement were prevalently claiming that they deserved the same rights as white Americans and, through art, they attempted to undermine the stereotypical imaginary of non-African Americans. What rendered the New Negro different from the past was a newly found dignity and self-respect, which were expressed through literature, music and other artistic forms.

The role of art in Negro identity was discussed by Alain Locke, whose anthology *The New Negro* contributed to the birth of the Movement; he believed that the artists' superior aesthetic powers could help the pursuit of equality and reassessment of the Negro identity (Bindman 2014: viii-ix). Spatial movement allowed migrants to improve their conditions, as Harlem and the other black communities provided the right environment for a metamorphosis, which could be physical but also mental. With better salaries, migrants could afford new clothes, and sometimes they also adopted northern accents, therefore it might be said that they had the opportunity to become whole new individuals, if only they desired it (Powell 2014: 56-57).

By the sixties, the struggle for Civil Rights and fairness had become a crucial issue in the United States, and artists became ever more politically engaged; this was due to the fact that they believed that black experience could be transmitted through their works and

that visual support could reach the hearts and minds of white Americans who were still in favour of oppression and subjugation of the dark-skinned part of the population. African Americans organised protests and manifestations in order to counteract discrimination and to demand that they were given the same rights and recognition that white citizens received.

4.2 Superheroes and Their Reinterpretations

In 1947, the African American journalist Orrin C. Evans noticed the absence of black superheroes in comic books, and was particularly struck by the fact that, being accustomed to white super powered beings, blacks unconsciously identified with them, not questioning the absence of dark-skinned heroes (Christopher 2014). Therefore, he founded the All-Negro Comics, Inc., with the purpose of presenting to the American audience a black superhero; all the stories which were published in its first (and last) issue were written only by black artists and told the adventures of black characters, with Ace Harlem as main protagonist. However, the series was never continued, as Evans was not able to find anyone who would sell him newsprint; this was due perhaps to the pressure of influential publishers who did not wish the All-Negro Comics to be published again (Christopher 2014).

Between the sixties and the seventies, American pop culture developed discourses about race, and started addressing the racial tensions which were causing disorders in America (Nama 2011: 11). Superheroes were no more perfect and morally irreprehensible, but they became flawed and more human, to facilitate the reader's identification; comic books started to engage social problems of real life, instead of just focusing on the battle with a strangely dressed supervillain, and, as a result, their stories gained an unprecedented depth.

Marvel Comics published the first stories of a black superhero in mainstream comics, namely the Black Panther. Created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, he made his first appearance in *Fantastic Four* #52-53 in July 1966, and was initially just a guest star in the main series dedicated to other superheroes, as Captain America and Tales of Suspense. The Black Panther, whose real name is T'Challa, is the king of Wakanda, a fictional African kingdom, concealed from the rest of the world so that it would not be threatened

by greedy adventurers seeking to steal the valuable supply of vibranium (*Fantastic Four* #53), a fictional alien metal which was brought to Earth by a meteorite.

The representations of America's racial climate were the natural consequence of "social trends, cultural themes, and political opinions born from the civil rights and the Black Power movements" (Nama 2011: 36). The Black Power movements' purpose was to promote self-determination for black people, a re-evaluation of themselves which could be free of white assumptions. The Black Power movements followed the line traced by the Civil Rights Movement, whose efforts were aimed at counteracting the Jim Crow segregation laws and at guaranteeing equality for blacks. The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, founded in 1966 and whose symbol was a black panther, was among the organisations which dared to defy white supremacy in the States; the government's oppression actually convinced more African Americans to join the party, to fight against the abuses of the white man. This demand for Black Power was the starting point of a cultural change: now Negroes were identified as blacks, and they supported the creation of black institutions (Nama 2011: 42).

The kingdom of Wakanda might be considered as a metaphor for the fight against European colonialism; as a matter of fact, Wakandan live under the constant fear of being discovered and submitted by whites, represented in the comics by the supervillain Ulysses Klaw. Klaw is a physicist, specialised in the field of applied sonics, and he needs the vibranium so as to power the machines he engineered, therefore he begins his mission of exploitation of the African reserves of the metal.

Whereas, prior to the twentieth century, Africa was portrayed as backward, simple, and primordial, Stan Lee's representation shows quite different characteristics, introducing a new vision of its inhabitants. King T'Challa embodied the ideals of the anticolonialist movement of the fifties, supported by third-world revolutionaries who fought for independence, though they were eventually unable to achieve it (Nama 2011: 43); the Black Panther, in this sense, symbolises those anticolonialist values, and carries on the values of the movement.

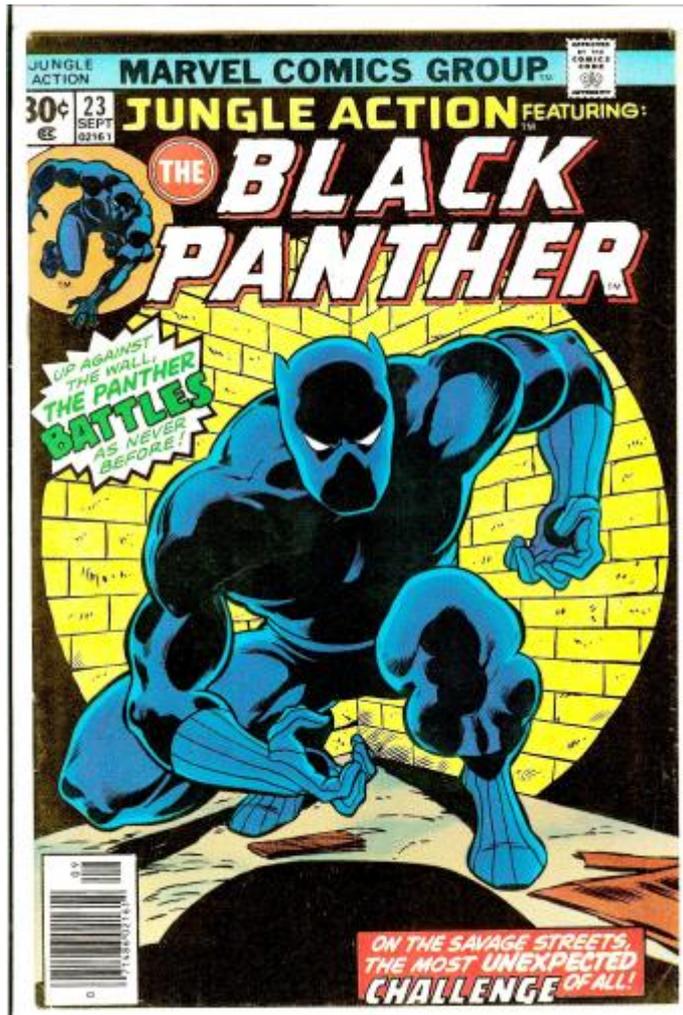


Figure VI. Cover to *Jungle Action Vol. 2 #23* (1976) by John Byrne, Dan Adkins, Danny Crespi

In his first appearance on Marvel's comic books, the Black Panther invites the Fantastic Four to join him in Wakanda; the members of the group are astonished to notice that the vehicle that has been sent to carry them to Africa is a piece of advanced technology. In particular, Reed Richards, who is one of the most brilliant scientists of the Earth, admires the qualities of the mind who engineered such an amazing ship. Though, it is peculiar that Mr. Fantastic's words appear quite sceptical regarding the possibility that an African might have designed and built a machine whose electronic components are so complicated that no similar technology on the planet could compete with them (*Fantastic Four* #52: 2). His wonder is echoed by the Thing, who excludes the possibility that a "refugee from a Tarzan movie" could "lay his hands on this kinda gizmo" (*Fantastic Four* #52: 2).

Despite they have seen proof of Wakandan skills, the group is doubtful about the actual ability of king T'Challa and his men to match, or even to surpass, the level of progress the United States had achieved. The Thing's statement suggests that the Black Panther must have stolen the ship, implying that their image of Africa and its inhabitants is that of a savage and underdeveloped land similar to the jungle portrayed in some Tarzan film. As they meet the African ambassador on the top of the Baxter building, another device strikes Richard's attention, namely the communication apparatus the former employed to inform his king of the fact that the Fantastic Four accepted his invitation (*Fantastic Four* #52: 3). Never has Richard seen a similar wonder of technology, and the level of expectation regarding the mysterious African kingdom rises.

The panels presenting Wakanda show that there is more than meets the eye in Africa; as a matter of fact, beneath the jungle which covers the surface, an elaborate metallic forest welcomes the Fantastic Four, leaving no more doubts about the veracity of natives' progress. Branches made of precious wires, buttons shaped as flowers and humming rocks performing the tasks of computer dynamos are just a small portion of what the group witnesses in that "man-made jungle" (*Fantastic Four* #52: 9). Eventually, the Americans must admit that what surrounds them must have been designed by a superior intellect, subverting the past belief according to which Africans were mentally inferior and incapable of elevating themselves to the level of the white man.

King T'Challa explains that Wakandans are sent abroad to attend the most prestigious universities, so as to improve their intellect and expand their knowledge of the world before returning to their homeland, where they can use them to help their country. Despite the danger of contaminating their native culture is always present, Wakandans did not abandon their forefathers' lifestyle; they still perform old rituals and dances to celebrate special events; as Wingfoot remarks, "they are not the ordinary natives they seem to be" (*Fantastic Four* #53: 1). The clothes and ornaments they wear would probably have been defines as primitive by Marlow, as Wakandans are half naked, with men wearing a short piece of cloth around their waists and women wearing long colourful attires, very different from those worn by Americans in the panels set in the United States. In some cases, Africans wear bands around their loins, often with long feathers attached. Former king T'Chaka is portrayed as wearing white fur on his head, which makes him resemble a lion, perhaps as a metaphor for his animal strength and behaviour. Dresses

seem to differ according to which role each individual fulfils in their society; the king dons a long red toga, while guards are covered in animal furs. A few Wakandans have their faces hidden behind a mask, or have long garments and a sceptre which suggests that they might be performing the role of shamans.

Not only does the jungle point at the Africans' alleged primordially but also their traditions and culture; in fact, while watching their dances, the Thing is puzzled by the contrast between all the sophisticated devices he has seen and their sudden acting as if they came from a remote past in which civilisation was not achieved yet. To illustrate, he says that "they're acting like they're all charged up on account'a just inventing the wheel" and that "nobody'll be able to understand'em" except for Richards (*Fantastic Four* #53: 2). The lack of comprehension of their actions seems to be a reverberation of *Heart of Darkness*' distance between European colonisers and natives, a distance which prevents any attempt of mutual understanding, a cultural barrier which is apparently impossible to cross, due to prejudices about what waits on the other side.

The physical features of Africans are quite stereotypical, as they are portrayed as having flat noses, kinky hair and protruded lips, attributes which had been characteristics of Africans, and were among the ones al-Mas'udi listed. Their bodies echo Marlow's remarks upon the wild energy that the natives he saw emanated; they are almost frenetic, especially in their dances and in their hunting sessions, when their physical features are exalted by the strain and the movements they perform. Furthermore, the body of T'Challa is emphasised by his Black Panther costume, which gives prominence to his muscles and masculinity, in a display of raw primal nature (Brownie and Graydon 2016: 1) accentuated by the animal references of his mask.

The only one whose features are not always visible is the Black Panther, since his costume covers him completely. It would not be possible to tell whether there is a white or black man behind the mask, for it provides no hints of any ethnicity. As T'Challa himself claims, though, his mask is not "a symbol of concealment, but rather a symbol of my panther power" (*Fantastic Four* #52: 20); his costume is an essential part of his identity as African, it references both to his dark skin, being it totally black, and to the power of the jungle embodied by the panther, one of its iconic animals. The panther is also employed as symbol of darkness, since it moves in the shadows and it renews the past association of African with darkness and wilderness, along with the link animal

instincts. The Panther possesses, in fact, the skills of that beast, its strength, its speed, its ability to see in the dark along with the capacity to track human beings from their scents.

On the other hand, the figure of a black superhero was revolutionary because it provided a new interpretation of the African identity; whereas in Conrad natives were basically unable to pronounce intelligible sentences, at least for anyone but Kurtz, in the twentieth century they were presented not only as peers of Europeans, but in some cases also superior to them, as the Black Panther and the African American Falcon prove. Those new characters had feelings, flaws, and made moral choices which labelled them either as heroes or villains of a determined situation; they gave the chance to black children to actually identify with them, which was basically hardly possible with white superheroes (Nama 2011: 10).

In *Fantastic Four #53* king T'Challa tells the story of the arrival of the white man in the land of Wakanda; it is interesting to notice that his story has common points with the representation of colonialism in *Heart of Darkness*. As a matter of fact, one shared element is the greediness of white men, who impose themselves on native populations for the only purpose of exploiting their resources; however, while in Conrad they were seeking ivory, in Marvel comics they are after vibranium's sources. Klaw is from Belgium, though he has German origins, and the Company whose stations had been installed in Congo was Belgian as well. T'Challa describes Klaw as being inhumanly stern: the "unsmiling", "merciless" adventurer who do not hesitate to order king T'Chaka's execution when the latter opposes his plans (*Fantastic Four #53*: 7).

The Black Panther's memories about that encounter are still quite vivid in his mind; the violence he had seen in the jungle was nothing compared to the brutality of Europeans' machine guns (*Fantastic Four #53*: 8), whose deadly lead rain fell on Wakandan warriors, as many angels of death claiming their lives. Klaw and his men's relentless fury makes them appear as the actual wild monsters, whose hearts have been swallowed by a darkness which is not that of the African jungle but rather seems to derive from the influence of European corrupted values. The violence of Europeans does not stop even when the African king is dead; they burn a village to ashes, trying to annihilate Africans and whatever is connected to them or to their culture, to the point that whiteness becomes synonym for "evil incarnate" (*Fantastic Four #53*: 9) in the imaginary of T'Challa and his subjects. Stan Lee and Jack Kirby tried to reverse the old assumptions

about whiteness and blackness, revealing the horrors of colonialism and exploitation by representing them in comic books, a literary genre which became ever more popular from the sixties and which could reach a wide audience, as youngsters would probably find it entertaining due to the fascination that superheroes and their powers exerted on them.

Superheroes' costumes were and still are appealing because of their theatricality, they are enthralling and have become fundamental elements in the construction of superheroes' identity (Brownie and Graydon 2016: 1). They create a duality, as, when a superhero is born, his civilian identity separates from his new alter-ego, which becomes the emblem of "otherness". In fact, as he wears his costume, the world recognises him as different, in some cases he is celebrated as a hero as are for instance Iron Man and Captain America, though he might represent a menace to humanity as the X-Men or Spider-Man during the first years of its publication.

The symbolic birth of superheroes is usually marked by their designing and creating their own costumes (Brownie and Graydon 2016: 2); however, the death of the civilian alter-ego does not necessarily mean the death of the "other". As a matter of fact, in Marvel Comics costumes are often given to or found by new characters; as a result, in the continuity of Marvel's multiverse, different alter-egos hide behind the same mask. Captain Marvel, for instance, is a name associated with several characters, among whom even Mar-Vell, an alien belonging to the Kree race; Iron Man's armour, one of the most famous Marvel's superheroes, has not always been worn by Tony Stark. The civilian identity of Black Panther himself has changed; as T'Challa explains, the duties of being the ruler of Wakanda come with the honour of becoming chieftain of the Panther Clan. It is a rite of passage from one king to another, in which the would-be ruler is tested together with other Wakandan warriors in order to prove his abilities and strength. His identity is, thus, known to the entire community, differently from the vast majority of the other superheroes, who choose to keep their alter-ego a secret to protect their family. The kingdom of Wakanda is depicted as being less corrupted and violent than many of the American cities, as New York, which are the backgrounds for other superheroes' adventures.

Sam Wilson, also known as the Falcon, is the first Marvel African American superhero, appeared for the first time in Captain America #117, in 1969. Wilson meets Captain America in Exile Island, where he lives with his falcon Redwing; he is half-

naked, as he only wears a pair of tattered red trousers. Seeing him, Captain America believes he must be a native of the island, but as soon as he hears Wilson speak, he understands he is American: "... specially since you sound more Harlem than Haitian" (*Captain America* #117: 16). Both T'Challa and Wilson live in contexts which are far from the crowded, frenetic cities of the United States, apparently because of a bond with nature, where they feel comfortable; Marvel's first two black superheroes seem to be destined to live their adventures only in the wilderness, suggesting that, perhaps, before the end of the sixties the American audience was not ready to imagine them walking on the streets of New York as easily as it was to conceive Spider-Man or Thor.

Exile Island is, along with Wakanda, a space where natives are threatened by the arrival of external forces trying to take over the land and to exploit either its natural and human resources. Though, the natives of the island have no superhero to protect them from the abuses of the group of white renegades who self-declared their rulers; Wilson, then, adopts the name Falcon, becoming the champion of the helpless, and leads them in a riot against the oppressors. However, it might be suggested that Falcon was a product of white intervention, namely of Captain America's efforts in order to instruct him in the art of fighting and even encourages him to wear a costume, which, similarly to the Panther's, stresses Wilson's animal abilities. Falcon's words are quite peculiar in this sense: "You... the one who's been helping me... training me... who made me the Falcon..." (*Captain America* #119: 11); the Captain appears as the "good" coloniser, who educates his protégé so that he can improve himself, showing him that his courage and skills are as good as any white man's. On the other hand, this education might be considered as an imposition, a forcing Wilson to mimic the Captain's gestures, combat style, even his wearing a mask to hide his facial features. In this interpretation, the Falcon would be but an imitation of a superhero, and his endeavour to resemble his teacher would be destined to fail.

At the end the decade, Stan Lee decided to move his black superheroes to a space in which the readers' identification with them would require a lesser effort. Therefore, Africa remained present only in flashbacks or in memories for a few years, since the Black Panther joined the Avengers and Falcon returned to the "swingin' slums of Harlem" (*Captain America* #118: 5) and became Captain America's companion. He even had T'Challa build him a pair of technologically sophisticated wings, so that he could embody

all the characteristics of a falcon. His newly gained ability, though, had also social and political implications, since it symbolised the “unprecedented access and upward social mobility many Africans were experiencing in education and professional positions” (Nama 2011: 2).

Their relationship implies that the Captain regards Wilson as his peer, as he even allows the latter to see his face without the mask; their partnership will continue for a few years, and the title of the series is changed in *Captain America and the Falcon*, giving the same relevance to both the heroes. The Falcon is prevalently concerned with the welfare of his fellow African Americans who live in Harlem, and, as a result, his adventures involve themes of racism and violence. Their different ideals and purposes eventually distance the two partners, and Falcon comes to the decision of changing his old costume, which represented the influence of the Captain on him, to assert his independence and his new identity. His first solo action leads him to fight some white pushers who are tormenting a black youngster, a feat which makes him gain the respect of the members of Harlem’s African American community, who are delighted in seeing a hero who can actually represent them fully.

Because of his involvement in Captain America’s crime fighting, the Falcon was accused of being an “uncle Tom” (*Captain America* #144: 20), that is to say of turning his back on his people, swearing loyalty to the white man. He receives similar accusations in his solo limited series, when he is called Oreowonder, an expression whose meaning is black outside but white inside. Not only was such epithets addressed to the Falcon, but also to Black Panther; in fact, the African king’s subjects question his rightfulness when a panther attacks him, thinking the episode to be a divine signal.

In 1971, *Captain America and the Falcon* dealt with issues of race and riots in Harlem; as Wilson is a social worker, he is involved in his neighbour’s political life, therefore, when popular discontent resulted in violent actions against white cops, he immediately intervenes in order to restore peace and to calm those enraged activists, despite he is often insulted because of his alleged support of white power. The construction of an alter-ego causes the character to be more relatable, more human (Brownie and Graydon 2016: 73), and his being capable of taking moral decisions provided a source of inspiration for youngsters.

In issue #143, both parties' hatred is fomented by masked men, whose public rallies convince their audiences that only through violence can they maintain and affirm their own identities, counteracting the influence of whites whose claim of superiority had forced them to segregation. Falcon is invited to join one the mysterious The People's Militia's meetings, whose emblem is a red fist, similar to the one symbolising the Black Power movements, representing the brutality of their actions; there, Wilson is revealed that their plan is to burn Harlem down, to destroy the place where the white man had forced black people to live, to keep them in control and far from the areas inhabited by white American citizens. The Militia's leader exploits the African American community's rage and resentment for the centuries in which their people were abused and sold into slavery to fuel riots; their desire for freedom and equality made them blind to the heinous actions they had to do in order to accomplish their purposes. The furious cries of members of the community embody their commitment to the cause: "This is the start of the black revolution!", "Black is beautiful!", "Power to the People!" (*Captain America* #143: 12), echoing Langston Hughes' claims; in spite of the assumption that black skin made them ugly and sinful and prevented them from frequenting the same public spaces as whites, they self-affirmed their dignity and worthiness, eager for being recognised as peers.

A few years later, New York is once again shaken by racial hatred: the so-called Grand Master mesmerises his fellow citizens so that they would join his mission of purification of the United States, which implies the extermination of those considered poisonous for the society. He and the other members of his party are dressed in white, which suggests both the idea of white-skin purity and the imaginary of the Ku Klux Klan, whose white garments probably provided inspiration for the Master's organisation; furthermore, some of them also wear a Nazi armband. When confronted with a faction of African Americans, the Master's followers claim that "their kind must be purged" (*Captain America* #233: 3), they must be disposed of so that America can become stronger.

Captain America and the Falcon are the proof that cooperation and mutual respect between whites and blacks can exist, and that the existence of the concept of races is actually just a social construct, since aesthetic differences cannot justify the declassification and injustice that people of African descent have been enduring for

centuries. Beneath the costume which is human skin, there is no difference in the potential that an individual can achieve, no matter his or her ethnicity; European colonialism and ideology caused a disruption in what were considered as non-white identities, as they imposed their own culture, language and religion, creating by so doing the overlapping of two selves, and the consequent alienation of the individual from both of them.

Black superheroes in comic books, then, provided the ground for black artists to free African identity from the constraints imposed by white culture; however, this was not the only medium of self-assertion. Black writers and artists reinterpreted previous works under a postcolonial perspective, trying to give prominence to black characters in novels and paintings, subverting the hierarchy of roles which had condemned blacks never to be protagonists. Re-writing, then, became the key to introduce a new perspective, which could take into consideration the issues and contradictions of the identity of people of African descent, who were still dealing with the remnants of their diasporic experience.

David Dabydeen, Guyanese writer and academic, wrote *A Harlot's Progress* at the end of the nineties, taking inspiration from Hogarth's series of painting of 1732; Dabydeen gave life to the paintings, choosing the black boy Mungo as the novel's protagonist. The fictional events told in the novel take place thirty years later, when the old Mungo tells his story to the Abolitionist Mr. Pringle in exchange for his charity, gathering the fragments of memories of his past and putting them together. In his flashbacks, Mungo remembers how he was captured by Captain Thomas Thistlewood, who tortured and sexually abused him on his ship. As the ship lands in England, Mungo is sent to Betty to be washed and prepared to be sold at an auction, where he is bought by Lord Montague. However, he is forced to flee after Lady Montague's illness, so as not to be sold again, and he starts working for the Jew physician Mr. Gideon, treating prostitutes as Moll Hackabout (the protagonist of Hogarth's series).

Whereas in the paintings the black boy was present only once, in Dabydeen the boy is the protagonist, his story appealing and inspired to the autobiography of former slaves in the eighteenth century, whose purpose was to make their readers question the righteousness of the slave trade and of the abuses African had to endure. However, Mungo's story will inevitably be "Anglicised" (Ward 2007: 36) by Mr. Pringle, who "cannot believe me capable of speech as polished as my teeth once were. No, nigger does munch and crunch the English" (Dabydeen 2000: 5). Mr. Pringle restrains Mungo, pushes

him into fitting a stereotypical image in which he does not recognise himself, the old habit of slave narrative which suppresses the voice of Mungo in spite of his efforts to define his identity by the power of his own words (Ward 2007: 36). He can write his story by himself, though he is not allowed to do so by the impositions of Mr. Pringle who does not concede to him that freedom which Abolitionists were fighting for.

Mr. Pringle, as the humble instrument of the Divine, will purge the story of its imperfections, to reveal Mungo in his unfallen state. He will wash the Aethiopian white, scrubbing off the colours of sin and greed that stained Mungo's skin as a result of slavery. (Dabydeen 2000: 6)

Ironically, Mungo links the image of his interlocutor with that of an agent of God, capable of washing his body and soul white, mirroring Johnson's masques' theme, restoring his previous pure state; his dark-skin is the external sign of sin, therefore it must be cleansed.

The author of the book needed to be a former slave so as to be appealing to the audience, thus increasing the profits; nevertheless, Mr. Pringle was entrusted with the embellishment of the actual story, providing new details which would give Mungo the "gift of mind and eloquence" (Dabydeen 2000: 3). Being a witness of the suffering of African slaves, Mungo has the moral duty to convey his story, as a sort of legacy to be left for future generations.

Though it would serve the Abolitionist cause, it is an appropriation of African identity, modified in European terms so that the character would possess qualities which did not generally belong to Africans in the common imaginary. The Abolitionist Movement encouraged former slaves to tell their stories, and, as a result, some of their autobiographies were published and presented to the Parliament as proofs of the inhuman practices of slavery.

The first meeting between Mungo's African village and European explorers is marked by the former's surprise at being attacked with strange and technological weapons, whose mode of operation is completely different from what they had seen before. They believe guns to have been created by some sort of magic enchantment, devised by the "white hunters" (Dabydeen 2000: 22) who are exterminating all the natives. Their superstitious nature leads them to interpret the colonisers as a punishment

sent by the gods due to Mungo's trespassing a taboo area; exiled were offered as sacrifices to the demons who inhabited the wild lands so as to be assured that they will not unleash their forces on the village. Many were the deities worshipped or feared by the village, deities or demons in form of nests, honeycomb and excrements; basically, "anything that threatened, beguiled or stank" (Dabydeen 2000: 37).

Africans are preys for the hunters, they are treated as animals to be killed for sport or to be captured and caged, chained and sold; the story told by Mungo is intensely pointing at the cruelty of the cold-blooded murderers, whose blades cut mercilessly through the flesh of the villagers. The whitening effect of smoke on the huts suggests that whiteness is the offspring of violence, and as such it is not desirable since it corrupts the soul and blackens it whereas Europeans' mission was aimed at the opposite. Mungo is the only one who is spared, he is the "last witness" (Dabydeen 2000: 22) of the carnage, and, as Marlow, he has beheld the reality of Europeans' actions in Africa. However, Mungo remembers that his people had already been decimated by a battalion of Greek marauders (Dabydeen 2000: 30), who, according to him, obliterated "whole species of tribes and animals" (Dabydeen 2000: 31). If they did not kill, Greeks forced natives into slavery to either make them work in the newly built forts or fulfil their sexual appetites.

Mungo admits having learned of the Greek battalion from the white man's books, as his ancestors' reports of the event were quite mysterious and confused. The society they established in the midst of wilderness was highly praised, as they had brought civilisation where primordiality reigned before; "a new tribe of blacks of all hues" (Dabydeen 2000: 32) replaced the old monochromatic community, and its members were skilled hunters as Africans are, though their minds are enlightened by the knowledge Greeks taught them. However, after a short period of expansion, this new tribe and its mixed qualities faced elimination, and the wilderness proved stronger than civilisation: "Bush reclaimed its territory" (Dabydeen 2000: 32).

The protagonist and narrator first came in contact with Christianity while he was on a slaveship and it gave him a new knowledge; whereas "in Africa there was no knowledge, therefore no death" (Dabydeen 2000: 47), in Christian religion, suffering is considered the legacy of the original sin, and with the knowledge of it Mungo realised that humanity is destined to perish and to endure the agony of hell. He was moulded into a perfect Christian, to the extent that he regards non-baptised people as being not human,

because they were not allowed to partake in God's grace, therefore not allowed to enter the heavenly kingdom: "And yet they were not fully human, for none were baptized in the body of Christ, none received the sacraments from Captain Thistlewood, my father's mouth" (Dabydeen 2000: 49). The Captain also taught him that life itself was a slavery, the only way out of which was death; he was perhaps suggesting that there was no point in attempting to break the chains that bound them, because they would be constrained in their mortal form anyway, unable to actually gain freedom until God claims their souls. The Captain's seductive words have the power to re-shape Mungo's conception of the world, in fact he believes that, through baptism, Thistlewood has managed to guarantee his soul's salvation, making him visible for the first time in the eyes of God.

However, in all his religious purity and boasted compassion, Captain Thistlewood took care of the infirm slaves not as if they were human beings but rather animals: "He tended to them not as soulful beings but as sick animals. And when his efforts failed, and they were brought on deck to be disposed of overboard, his face was mulched with sorrow" (Dabydeen 2000: 50). What actually mattered was that they were under his protection, and he cared for them as a farmer would care for his animals, without hesitating in replacing them should they lose their usefulness.

Mungo's special relationship with the Captain resulted in his being addressed as a betrayer of his own people by the other slaves; as a matter of fact, they no longer heed his words and ignore him even when he offers them food, leaving him alone, brooding over his treason. Mirroring Falcon, Mungo is alienated by his fellow Africans due to his alleged complicity in the white man's campaign of submission, and they both find themselves in-between two cultures which reject them instead of seeing in them the ideal bridge, the link which could lead to a mutual understanding and acceptance. The other slaves denounce the twisted discourses of Thistlewood, who, they claim, "will not kill you with blows but with new words", as "he will plant in your mind pictures of his land, and root up yours" (Dabydeen 2000: 65).

Nevertheless, Mungo was able to reverse the roles in his relationship with the Captain eventually, exploiting the strong feeling the latter felt for him. As a matter of fact, Thistlewood's instincts overcame his will and he was no more able to restrain himself:

He beat me manfully but only to resist his growing love for me, his collapsing heart, which, as each day passed, weakened him to the condition of woman. I came to possess him, even as I yielded to him, and the coinage of his speech became rare, when once it dwelt only on matters of trade. (Dabydeen 2000: 112)

The Captain's forbidden love results in the loss of his manly attributes, which were what allowed him to be in control of the relationship, and by turning metaphorically into a woman he creates the premises to be raped, possessed by Mungo. The protagonist will also reject his manly characteristics, when the ghost of Rima asks if he is a man, and he replies: "I am a slave" (Dabydeen 2000: 136), renouncing the claim of manhood he had advanced with Thistlewood. He also overturns the hierarchy of roles with Betty, who is charged with preparing him for selling; he outwits her, becoming so self-confident that "he no longer wears the mask of a piteous black creature" (Dabydeen 2000: 116). It is emblematic of this reversal the moment when he loosens the towel from his waist and gives it to her, "as if she were the newly bathed slave" (Dabydeen 2000: 118).

When the ship reaches its destination, the slaves are moved to a cellar, waiting to be taken and prepared for the auction; a fat woman has been given the task of washing them, and her mind suddenly visualises a previous episode in which she fell amidst the Africans, who started approaching to her as if they were dark-skinned Magi, eager to worship whiteness. Her shouting and hysteria, though, erase the almost sanctified image of her which the slaves had in mind, and they left her in her wretchedness.

The theme of cannibalism returns in Dabydeen, as Mungo suspects that they might be eaten by that fat woman, displaying the same fear Equiano admitted in his autobiography, and she plays with his mind telling him that, in England, they "prepare our meals well" (Dabydeen 2000: 106).

The woman's remarks about him are quite interesting: in fact, she notices Captain Thistlewood's mark on Mungo's forehead, a symbol of the former's dominion over the latter's body and mind: "But you are Thomas Thistlewood's creature, from the mark on your forehead, so you have no feeling. He is famed throughout the profession for breaking nigger boys like you" (Dabydeen 2000: 107). Lord Montague checks the presence of the mark as a confirmation of his slave having been "tamed and trained" (Dabydeen 2000: 173). On the other hand, he proves his independent in his thinking by making a

comparison between Euclid's theories and skin colour: "parallel lines will never meet. The godly and the savage are one, but will never meet" and "colour divides us though we meet" (Dabydeen 2000: 107-108). He is suggesting that whiteness and blackness are parallel lines, which can coexist in the same reality though not in the same exact point, excluding the possibility that the two can mix. The woman is shocked at seeing an African being so cultured, and a sudden terror dominates her, and she starts calling him devil, wondering if his purpose is to kill her. Mungo uses the knowledge he has been taught together with his own natural cleverness, but his appropriation of the English language and of its culture to present autonomous reasoning is regarded as threatening and condemnable.

After having been bought by Lord Montague, he finds out that he has been purchased to replace a monkey; as a matter of fact, he even has to wear its silver collar, which was also a symbol of slavery. He is given a new name, Perseus or Percy, and, noticing the "scratching of an amorous animal he is destined to emulate" (Dabydeen 2000: 204), he realises that his role in the house will be that of the Lady's pet. Lady Montague's gestures indicate that she is acting as if she were still relating to her late monkey, as she "put a chain on my silver collar and take me for afternoon walks in the grounds of the house" or "she gurgle at me and make silly faces" (Dabydeen 2000: 240).

His identity is completely annihilated and replaced by a new one imposed by his new white masters, who seem to consider their African slave as less than human, at the same level as an animal. Even the style of narration changes in the moment he is named Perseus, since, when he is to impersonate that new character, narrator and protagonist are no more the same but they seem to be two separate entities.

In the twentieth century, then, artists of African origins conveyed in their works the desire for self-asserting their identity, abandoning the previous impositions and resisting the new attempts of the white man to oppress them and restrain them both physically and mentally. Comic books were suitable to carry their message also to younger generations, providing a visual support which would compensate for the lesser range of words employed in comparison with a novel. Superheroes became a source of inspiration for black children, allowing them to re-invent their identity; comics provided a new interpretation of blackness, which now could be associated with greatness, dignity, and morality since the new black superheroes were complex characters, whose depth

made them different from the Africans in *Heart of Darkness*, who were but objects, pawns in the hands of European colonisers. Writing the story behind Hogarth's series of paintings provided insights into a story which, in the eighteenth century, scarcely took into account the presence of the black boy, marginalised and ignored; in Dabydeen, he plays the role of the protagonist, so that the audience can have access to the other side of the story too.

In 2016, Ta-Nehisi Coates took on the Marvel's *Black Panther* series, and started working on a spin-off, called *Black Panther & The Crew*, a revival of a series by Christopher Priest. The spin-off involves new characters, all dark-skinned, and is set in Harlem, New York; Coates' purpose was to create stories in which characters that had prevalently been involved in street actions could be protectors of the whole world. The revival of the Black Panther series brought new insights into T'Challa's efforts to keep his people united and on the relationship between him and his subjects, who plan a revolution.

Ryan Coogler directed a movie, called *Black Panther*, based on Stan Lee's character, which will be released in 2018; the bringing of the king of Wakanda's adventures to the silver screen might allow him to reach an even wider audience and to perform the Panther's life more realistically than it is possible to do in comic books, as they require a stronger effort in filling the gaps between the panels.

Conclusion

Blackness has been represented from several different perspectives, and many different artists and writers have offered their personal interpretations of the idea of race in their works. The earliest artistic works depicted black Africans as secondary characters, less important than the whites at the centre of the scene, despite they were occasionally given relevance by portraying religious figures as dark-skinned. Such was the case with some of the representations of the Magi and of the figure of Saint Maurice, in which they main characters possessed physical characteristics stereotypically attributed to blacks, that is to say flat nose, dark hue of their skin and protruded lips.

In Shakespeare's *Othello*, it is striking to notice the Moor's internal struggle for self-determination, while his identity is constantly threatened by the heinous words of Iago. Throughout the play, the Moor's initial confidence in the solid basis of his own identity is challenged by the prejudices and stereotypes of the Venetian society, ignited by the twisted plan of the Ensign though they were already rooted in Venetians' minds. Not only does the image of Othello change in the eyes of the community, but also the Moor himself doubts the validity of his previous beliefs; the cornerstone which granted his mental stability was Desdemona, therefore when her loyalty is questioned, his world falls apart. He is an outcast, and, despite his efforts to learn their language and traditions, he is never really accepted as a member of their society; he is just a useful soldier who can help them win the war against the Turks, but as he marries a white woman he becomes a threat to the integrity and purity of Venice. Despite the greatness of his work, though, some critics argued that the so-called "blackamoors" would not have the chance to become generals of the army, for it would guarantee too much power; they believed it untrustworthy to place a dark-skinned man in such a position, as it would not respect the racial hierarchy.

In the eighteenth century, Equiano and other freed men gave voice to the atrocities slaves had to endure on ships and working in the fields or in white masters' houses; Africans were taken from their motherlands, subdued, and sold, forced to learn languages and customs which were foreign to them but which were needed to survive in the cruel machine of colonialism. In comparison with *Othello*, where the Moor is the only dark-skinned individual, Equiano presents the general situation of many slaves like himself,

who were introduced to a society in which they had no rights and their claim for equality was not heeded. The birth of the Abolitionist movement provided African slaves with the chance to be heard, as organisations of white people became interested in their stories and in helping them. In his autobiography, Equiano tells of his becoming European, of his identity being re-shaped to elevate him above the other slaves due to the influence of Europeans. His story suggests that blacks could abandon their former wild state and achieve to become civilised only by the intervention of Europeans, who educate them and show them the path to enlightenment.

On the other hand, *Heart of Darkness* shows the effect of black influence on white colonisers: Mr. Kurtz is overwhelmed by the wilderness which surrounds him, and cannot resist his animal instincts. Africans are mainly depicted either as objects to be employed for colonisers' purposes or as brutal savages, and they seem to be just able to behave primordially unless taught by colonisers. However, some natives, as for instance the cannibals, embody another reading of natives, that is to say they possess the strength to restrain themselves, to partially resist the wilderness, whereas whites were destined to succumb to its appeal. Furthermore, the change in the imaginary occurred between the seventeenth and the eighteenth century is quite peculiar: in fact, while Othello is flawed and takes moral decisions, besides being skilled in the use of language, in Equiano's world blacks are prevalently slaves, uneducated and submitted, and only few of them eventually gain freedom; however, Equiano has a sense of morality which leads his actions. In Conrad, Africans speak an incomprehensible idiom, and seem but primitives who live relying on their senses rather than on their minds.

It might be said, then, that the characterisation of Africans has changed but, instead of elevating their status, it has rendered them ever more primitive and savage. A significant turn in their representation occurs in the twentieth century, with the introduction of black superheroes.

The Civil Rights Movement provided the background for a re-evaluation of blackness, and with it the number of blacks present in comic books and art increased; African Americans valued self-assertion, therefore they significantly contributed by writing or painting artworks which praised blackness, trying to re-appropriate of their own identity, that had been deeply affected by the influence of the white man. American pop culture addressed social and cultural phenomena and was concerned with the

problems which vexed black communities in the States. By introducing dark-skinned superheroes, comic books challenged the white assumptions of superiority, showing that, exactly as white superheroes, blacks had virtues and flaws, their own morality and therefore they were peers.

The re-writing or re-imagining of past literary or artistic works allowed people of African descent to present new versions of the same concept, from different points of view, taking into considerations black characters instead of relegating them to being just a background or support for the white man's achievements. Dabydeen, in writing the story of Hogarth's painting, gives the African slave Mungo the central role he had been denied in the canvas. The novel addresses again the discourses about slavery, though it presents a black protagonist who is in many ways superior to the whites he encountered; however, once again his only chance to tell his story is through a white Abolitionist man whose main concern is profit.

The concept of race has often been employed as a justification for the Europeans' greed, and their creation of a racial hierarchy has no scientific grounds, but it is rather a social construction which became dominant in Europe, where physical differences were thought to imply mental and moral superiority or inferiority. The outcome of this classification has been the separation and evaluation of human beings based on the principle of aesthetics; subsequently, the concept of the Chain of Being was adapted to support the new social identity. Despite the fact that in the last century the voice of people of African descent has grown stronger, prejudices and stereotypes are still affecting the minds of many whites, erecting barriers between cultures; due to globalisation and the increasing mass movement, though, the contact between different languages, colours, traditions has become more frequent, and, hopefully, younger generations will leave prejudices behind and regard all humankind as equal.

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