

# Black Brain, White Brain. „In Desert and Wilderness” by Henryk Sienkiewicz in the Light of Postcolonial Studies<sup>1</sup>

Krzysztof Gajewski  
Institute of Literary Research  
Polish Academy of Science

Miercurea Ciuc/Csíkszereda, 21-22 April 2017

---

<sup>1</sup>This presentation is a part of a project "Cultural Transfer as a Trans-disciplinary Element of Intercultural Studies on an Example of Influences of Arabic Culture in Poland", National Program for the Development of the Humanities (2016-2018), Poland, under supervision of dr hab. Agata Nalborczyk, carried out in University of Warsaw, Faculty of Oriental Studies.

# Table of Contents

## Preliminary

"In Desert and Wilderness" and its in History of Literature  
Post-colonial Theory and its Contexts

## Narration

### "World Presented"

Arabs and Bedouins

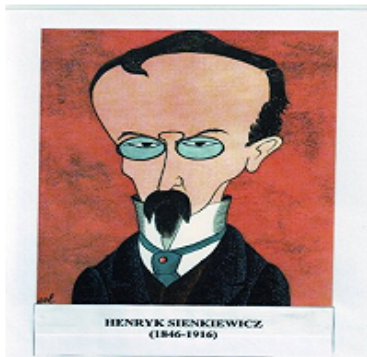
Black people

White people

Preliminary

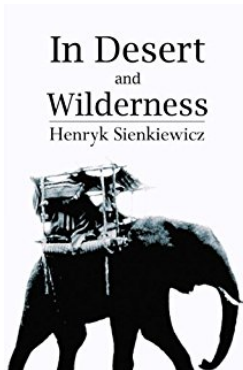
# "In Desert and Wilderness" and its in History of Literature

# Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846-1916)



- Author of "Quo vadis" (1896)
- Nobel Prize in Literature (1905)
- one of the most translated Polish authors

# "In Desert and Wilderness" (1912)



- during almost all the past century a mandatory school reading in Poland
- *“a most successful version of a parable on the victory of good over evil” (Krzysztof Rutkowski)*
- *racist, sexist, colonialist (Wojciech Kalaga)*

## "In Desert and Wilderness" (1912)

- *„an occasional coarseness of expression, which is much less glaring than in the prince of dramatists [i.e. Shakespeare], and is more offensive in translations than in the original”<sup>2</sup>*
- *“openly racist”<sup>3</sup>*
- *“deceitful”<sup>4</sup>.*

---

<sup>2</sup>M.K., “Through the Desert”. America. Vol. 6, Issue 22, p. 523.

<sup>3</sup>Weissbrod, Rachel. 2008. “Coping with racism in Hebrew literary translation”. Babel. Vol. 54 Issue 2, p. 171

<sup>4</sup>el Tayeb, Mahmud 2012. “Sudańczyk patrzy na ‘W pustyni i w puszczy’” [“Sudanese Looks at ‘In Desert and Wilderness’”] In Axer and Bujnicki 2012 , p. 571

# Post-colonial Theory and its Contexts



- „Orientalism” (1978), motto from Karl Marx: “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented”<sup>5</sup>
- “Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Cf. Said, p. XXVI

<sup>6</sup>Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, London 2003, p. 3

- “subalterns” (Antonio Gramsci)
- suicides of Hindu widows case: “White men are saving brown woman from brown men”<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 1988. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271-313, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press. , p. 296

## Asymmetric counterconcepts (*asymmetrischer Gegenbegriffem*)

- created and operated by a group that „makes an exclusive claim to generality, applying a linguistically universal concept to itself alone and rejecting all comparison”<sup>8</sup>
- Hellens vs. Barbarians, Christians vs. Heathens, Mensch vs. Übermensch

---

<sup>8</sup>Reinhart Koselleck. 2004 [1979]. *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe. New York: Columbia University Press., p. 156

# Narration

- *Personale Erzählsituation*, with some elements of *Auktoriale Erzählsituation*<sup>9</sup>
- supremacy over a reader as far as concerns African reality (knowledge of local languages, etc.)
- the point of view is mostly of Stas Tarkowski, 14-yrs old French-Polish boy, born in Africa.

---

<sup>9</sup>Franz K. Stanzel, 1964. *Typische Formen des Romans*. [Typical Forms of the Novel] Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

"World Presented"

# Arabs and Bedouins

# Arabs and Bedouins: Aggressivity

- “Gebhr always had a cruel and a trifle **bestial** expression of face”<sup>10</sup>.
- “the savage hordes intoxicated with **blood**”<sup>11</sup>
- “in Egypt Arabs as well as Bedouins yell on every occasion as if they are about to **annihilate each other**”<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>Sienkiewicz 1917, 40

<sup>11</sup>Sienkiewicz 1917, 125

<sup>12</sup>Sienkiewicz 1917, 96



## Arabs and Bedouins: Moral defects

- “she **lies** as only in the East they know how to lie”<sup>13</sup>
- “much the people in the East are **greedy and venal**”<sup>14</sup>
- “he was, like almost every Arab, **covetous and ambitious**”<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup>Sienkiewicz 1917, 21

<sup>14</sup>Sienkiewicz 1917, 66

<sup>15</sup>Sienkiewicz 1917, 140

Black people

- „Arabs and negroes swim like **fishes**”<sup>16</sup>
- Mea “climbed the rope with skill and agility as if she were the full sister of a **chimpanzee**. For Staś it was considerably more difficult, but he was too well-trained an **athlete**”<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup>Sienkiewicz 1917, 9

<sup>17</sup>Sienkiewicz 1917, 229

## Black people: "Bad" influence of islam

- “negroes, until Mohammedanism fills their souls with **cruelties and hatred against infidels**, are rather **timid and gentle**”<sup>18</sup>

*Anna Cichoń: “Sienkiewicz is visibly afraid of Islamists, whereas, with respect to the black people, he sees in them potential Catholics”*<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup>Sienkiewicz 1917, 369

<sup>19</sup>Cichoń, 2004, 103

- “Dinah (...) was known for her uncommon gluttony”<sup>20</sup>
- Kali: „The elephant cannot get out. **Great master kill the elephant** and Kali will eat him. Oh, eat, eat!”<sup>21</sup>
- Barbarian Kiswahili?

---

<sup>20</sup>Sienkiewicz 1917, 30

<sup>21</sup>Sienkiewicz 1917, 246

## Black people: Other moral deficits

- “Dinah (...) **was not able to take care of herself** on the railways and in the hotels, the duties of guide and paymaster during this trip devolved upon Staś”<sup>22</sup>
- “inbred negro **carelessness**”<sup>23</sup>
- “During the stop the white men were occupied with hunting and arranging their geographical and scientific notes, and the negroes devoted themselves to **idleness**, which is always so sweet to them”<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup>Sienkiewicz 1917, 25

<sup>23</sup>Sienkiewicz 1917, 421

<sup>24</sup>Sienkiewicz 1917, 434

## Black people: lack of gratitude

- “Among the blacks there are honest souls, though as a rule **you cannot depend upon their gratitude**; they are children who forget what happened the day before”<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup>Sienkiewicz 1917, 316

- “Mea has a dark skin and **dark brain**”<sup>26</sup>
- Stas to Kali, Wahimas’s king: “The Wahimas have **black brains**, but your brain ought to be **white**”<sup>27</sup>
- “she [Mea] thought that after the baptism her skin would at once turn **white**, and great was her astonishment when she observed that she remained **as black as before**” (Sienkiewicz 1917, 335)

---

<sup>26</sup>Sienkiewicz 1917, 258

<sup>27</sup>Sienkiewicz 1917, 395



## “Kali’s morality”

*“Tell me,” asked Staś, “what is a wicked deed?”*

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

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

**“If Kali takes away the cow of somebody else,**  
*that is a good deed.”*<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup>Sienkiewicz 1917, 334

*POLUS: Then would you wish rather to suffer wrong than to do it?*

*SOCRATES: I should wish neither, for my owe part; but if it were necessary either to do wrong or to suffer it, I should choose to suffer rather than do it.*<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup>Plato 2001: 335

## Black people: Desire to remain a slave

- Fatma to Mr Rawlison: “I entreat that you permit me to serve you as a **slave**”<sup>30</sup>
- Kali “fell on his face before Staś and Nell in token that he **desired** to remain their **slave** to the end of his life”<sup>31</sup>
- a black prince of one of tribes “embraced with his black hands her [Nell’s] little foot and placed it on his head in sign that through his entire life he **desired** to remain her **slave**”<sup>32</sup>
- Cf. lack of gratitude

---

<sup>30</sup>Sienkiewicz 1917, 19

<sup>31</sup>Sienkiewicz 1917, 197

<sup>32</sup>Sienkiewicz 1917, 397

White people

Stas is a brain of the whole team

- “Staś **commanded** Kali to build a fire”, “By Staś’ **orders**, Kali and Mea (...) began to gather melons”, “he **ordered** Mea to throw into the interior of the baobab tree a few lighted boughs”, “Staś **ordered** Mea to melt the fat”

*“What shall we do now, Staś?” Nell asked one day,  
(...)*

*“There is plenty of work to do,” the boy answered,  
(...) “In the first place Kali and Mea are pagans, and  
Nasibu (...) is a Mohammedan. It is necessary to  
**enlighten them, teach them the faith, and baptize  
them.**”<sup>33</sup>*

---

<sup>33</sup>Sienkiewicz 1917, 386

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

---

<sup>34</sup> Cichoń 2004, 99

- *“most of the huts had been burned or ruined (...), Before the huts lay here and there **human bones and skeletons**, white as chalk, for they had been cleaned by the **ants** (...) in the huts could be smelt the leaven of **ants**, (...) Everything had been cleaned out by the terrible ‘siafu’”<sup>35</sup>*
- “This Africa is a charnel house”, “region of death”

---

<sup>35</sup>Sienkiewicz 1917, 386



## Works Cited

1. Axer, Jerzy and Bujnicki, Tadeusz, eds. 2012. Wokół “W pustyni i w puszczy”. W stulecie pierwodruku powieści. [Around “In Desert and Wilderness. In Centenary of Original Publication of the Novel] Cracow: Universitas.
2. Cichoń, Anna. 2004. “W kręgu zagadnień literatury kolonialnej — ‘W pustyni i w puszczy’ Henryka Sienkiewicza” [“In the Circle of Issues of Colonial Literature - ‘In Desert and Wilderness’ by Henryk Sienkiewicz”], ER(R)GO. Teoria–Literatura–Kultura no 8: 91-108.
3. Sienkiewicz, Henryk. 1917 [1912]. In Desert and Wilderness, trans. Max A. Drezmal. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company.