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2.1. An Act of Self Discovering: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the Congo Experience

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) was born near Berdichef, in the Polish Ukraine, as Josef Teodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski on 3 December. He was an only child. His father was a man of letters and a poet as well as one of the best translators of Shakespeare into Polish. His mother was a fascinating and learned woman with rather fragile health. Both parents held strong sympathies with the Polish insurrectionists and there were often revolutionary meetings at the family household. Suspected of political activism and plotting against the Russian government, the Konrads were deported to Vologda, about 300 miles north-east of Moscow. The hardship of the journey and the extreme conditions in Vologda proved too much for Conrad's mother, who died three years later in 1865 after the family was allowed to move south to Kiev.



The political involvement and secretive life led by his family made Joseph Conrad a lonely and reserved boy. He had no friends of his own age and became increasingly self-absorbed. Most importantly, from a very early age he was engrossed in books and by literature as a way of escaping the rather claustrophobic society that surrounded him.

Joseph Conrad was a voracious reader. Through the books he read (including those by authors such as Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, William M. Thackeray and James Fennimore Cooper) he could imagine countries and distant lands where it was possible to speak freely and to act according to one's views. Yet it was not in a country but at sea that he, when a grown-up, experienced the liberty he had yearned for during his childhood.

After his mother's death Conrad lived with his father who was allowed to leave Vologda and finally settle in Krakow where he died four years later. Conrad then went to live with his maternal uncle, Tadeusz Bobrowsky, who would remain a loving and supporting family member for Conrad. Conrad found the education given to him by his uncle not interesting enough and, after a trip through the north of Italy and Switzerland, he decided not to

return to Poland. During this trip he saw the sea for the first time and, against all odds, decided that he wanted to be a sailor.

Conrad went to sea when he was seventeen and continued to sail for almost twenty years. During two years at Marseille he signed on with different ships and had for the first time, contact with the British empire when he sailed to Martinique first and then India. In 1878, when he was twenty, joined the crew of an English ship, the *Mavis*, where he heard his first words of English. He arrived in England on 18 June, and started his career as a sailor in the British Merchant Service. He was promoted several times in the next few years. In 1885, when on board the *Tikhurst*, he received official notice of his British citizenship. Two years later, as first officer on the *Highland Forest*, he was injured when a mast collapsed. As a result of the injuries suffered he was hospitalised in Singapore. He recounted this experience in *Lord Jim*. The title of this novel was inspired by a man Conrad met four years later while he was aboard the *Vidar*. Jim Lingard, nicknamed 'Lord Jim' by his fellow sailors, was the man who would become the model for the novel's main character.



The sea was an important source of inspiration for Joseph Conrad's writings. Many of his novels and short stories have the sea or a boat as a background to the action. Indeed, the sea is often an image for and symbol of his characters' inner turbulences.

In 1886 at about the time Conrad became a British citizen he wrote his first short story, 'The Black Mate', which he entered in a literary competition but with no success. This first failure did not deter Conrad from writing; during the next three years he began his first novel *Almayer's Folly*. In 1894 he gave up his career as a sailor and sent his novel to T. Fisher Unwin for publication.

In 1890 Conrad was transferred to the Belgian *Société anonyme pour le commerce du Haut-Congo* to take command of one of the company's Congo river steamers. This experience would eventually become one of the basis for *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad's health was severely weakened in Africa and he returned to England to recover his strength. Afterwards, he signed on with the *Adowa* sailing the London-Rouen-London route.

In 1894, as already seen, he left the sea. He married Jessie George, a woman seventeen years younger than he. The Conrads had two sons and apart from the financial difficulties that always followed them, their marriage was a fairly happy one, even though Jessie had to cope with Conrad's difficult temperament. Conrad took his literary career as seriously as he had taken being a sailor and, even though it was far less profitable, he continued to write intensely and carefully.

Heart of Darkness was first serialised between 1898 and 1899 in 'Blackwood's Magazine.' *Lord Jim* ran serially in the same Magazine between 1899 and 1900. In 1902 the volume *Youth and Other Stories* was published. It included *Heart of Darkness* and *The End of Tether*, and it was well received. During these years he met many literary icons who became friends. They included H.G. Wells, Henry James and the American journalist Stephen Crane. Among his friends was the writer, Ford Madox Ford, with whom he collaborated from 1898 until 1905. Part of this collaboration, *The Nature of Crime*, was published posthumously in 1924. After the first publication of his work he devoted himself totally to literature, producing a wide range of both fictional and non-fictional works. To mention but a few, in 1906 his autobiography *The Mirror of the Sea* was published, followed by *The Secret Agent* during the following year. Other works included *Nostromo*, *Typhoon*, *Under Western Eyes* and *Victory*. In 1913 his great critical and popular success *Chance*, was published. The number of works Conrad wrote was due to his financial needs more than to anything else.



Conrad was actually a rather slow writer pressurised by the need of money to maintain his family. Although by 1900 he was quite famous, literature failed to provide him with an adequate income. He was lucky enough to meet George Bernard Shaw and John Galsworthy, who both helped him by lending him money and by recommending him to publishers and critics.

Conrad had settled in England in 1883 because he was an Anglophile who thought that Britain respected individual liberty. English was to become his third language, and, in an apparent paradox, the language he chose for

his writing. The later years of his life were shadowed by ill health and rheumatism. He was offered, but declined, honorary degrees from five universities. Not long before his death in 1924, he also declined a knighthood offered by King George V. Conrad died of a heart attack and was buried in Canterbury.

Heart of Darkness is perhaps Conrad's finest exploration of evil and otherness. Several stories in the novel are linked to the main theme of imperialism and imperial attitudes. It is now well known that many of Conrad's writings were, to an extent, autobiographical. *Heart of Darkness* is no exception. Conrad used his journal and the notes he took when he was working in the Congo as the starting point of his novel. To that he added the impressions of explores such as H. M. Stanley's, as has been said above.



Conrad's intention in writing the novel was to make his readers aware of the situation he found in the Congo. What was this reality? How is it portrayed in the narrative?

By 1890, when Conrad went to the Congo, it was an independent country, *État Indépendent du Congo*. Yet, the reality was very different. A small number of Europeans owned most of the land. Leopold II, King of the Belgians, was one of the biggest landowners. Leopold's only interest in the Congo was in exploiting its riches and making, as he did, a fortune out of it. The situation Conrad saw when he arrived in Africa shocked him greatly and made him question the right of Europeans to exploit their colonies. The colonisation of the Congo was, as Conrad later pointed out, «the vilest scramble of loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience» and this view is transmitted throughout *Heart of Darkness*. Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind that Conrad is neither a politician or a reformer with a political agenda to promote nor is he a historian recording facts in an objective manner. Conrad is, above all, an artist trying to understand his personal experience by rendering it into a polyphonic narrative: for this reason, there are no answers in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.