

# Meet Joseph Conrad



*The artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on Wisdom. . . . He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to that sense of mystery surrounding our lives, to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain.*

—Joseph Conrad

As a child, Joseph Conrad dreamed of sailing the high seas. His fascination with the unknown reportedly led him to put his finger on a blank spot in the middle of a map of Africa and declare, “When I grow up, I will go there.” When he grew up, he did go “there.” He lived his childhood dream and became a mariner, visiting such distant places as the Congo, Constantinople, Bangkok, Java, Singapore, and Madras.

**A Difficult Childhood** Conrad, whose birth name was Jozef Teodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski, was born in 1857 in Russian-controlled Poland. When he was three, the family moved to Warsaw but did not live there long. Conrad’s father, a Polish patriot and political activist, took part in a movement to free Poland from Russian control and was arrested and imprisoned soon after the family arrived.

When Conrad was four, the family was deported to Vologda, in northern Russia, far from the center of political activity. Soon after, Conrad’s mother died from tuberculosis. Later,

Conrad and his father were allowed to move back to Poland, where, before Conrad was twelve years old, his father also died of the disease. Thereafter, Conrad lived with relatives. He had never given up his dream of going to sea, though his uncle tried to dissuade him from pursuing it. At the age of sixteen, Conrad left for Marseilles, France, where he had distant relatives, and joined the French merchant marine. Over the next few years, he sailed several times to the West Indies.

**From Sailor to Author** As a young adult, Conrad became a seaman in the British merchant marine. Though he knew only a few words of English when he entered the service, he began picking up the language by listening and talking to his British shipmates. Gifted with a natural facility for languages, he quickly learned English. By his late twenties, he had become a British citizen and had risen to the rank of captain. A few years later, he began writing his first novel, *Almayer’s Folly*, but he worked on it only sporadically because of the demands of his career. When he was in his late thirties, he finally finished the novel and began to devote himself primarily to writing.

*Heart of Darkness*, which was first published in 1898, established Conrad as a master of psychological fiction and a brilliant prose stylist. It was soon followed by several other tales of the sea, including “The Secret Sharer,” published in 1910.

**Conrad’s Art** Conrad’s fiction is characterized by a narrative technique that involves time shifts, stories within stories, and the use of symbol and myth. To a reader who had asked about the meaning of one of his stories, he replied:

*A work of art is very seldom limited to one exclusive meaning and not necessarily tending to a definite conclusion. And this for the reason that the nearer it approaches art, the more it acquires a symbolic character.*

During his lifetime, Conrad’s close friends were authors Stephen Crane, John Galsworthy, Ford Madox Ford, and Henry James. He continued to write until his death, in 1924, at age sixty-six.

# Introducing the Novella

[*Heart of Darkness* is a] dreadful and fascinating tale, full as any of [Edgar Allan] Poe's mystery and haunting terrors, yet with a substantial basis of reality that no man who had not lived as well as dreamed could conjure into existence.

—from a review in *The Nation*, 1906

## BACKGROUND

Like many authors, Joseph Conrad drew on his experiences when he wrote. He often incorporated details about people he had known, places he had visited, and events he had witnessed. This technique gives *Heart of Darkness* a sense of authenticity and immediacy that moved critic F. R. Leavis to write,

*The details and circumstances of the voyage to and up the Congo are present to us as if we were making the journey ourselves.*

Conrad himself referred to the work as “experience pushed a little (and very little) beyond the facts of the case.”

The novella is based on a four-month stint Conrad spent in the Congo. Out of work, broke, and eager for a chance to realize his boyhood dream of exploring central Africa, he had accepted an assignment to command a steamboat up the Congo River for the Belgian Company for Upper-Congo Commerce. This company ranked as one of late-nineteenth-century Europe's most

successful—and greedy—traders in ivory. Steaming a thousand miles upriver from Kinshasa, Conrad reached the company's inner station. There he met an ailing agent named Georges Antoine Klein, who may have been a model for the character Kurtz.

Since its publication, *Heart of Darkness* has become one of the most read and debated works of fiction in the English language. Why? Perhaps it is because Conrad plumbs the depths of human consciousness to explore the dark side of the personality. Perhaps it is because his sophisticated narrative technique helped paved the way for modern fiction. Or perhaps it is because of his elegant prose style. Whatever the reasons, it is likely that *Heart of Darkness* will continue to be read, discussed, and analyzed for many years to come.

## THE TIME AND PLACE

The novella takes place in the Congo River basin in the summer of 1890, during a period when the colonization of Africa was at its peak and Belgium's King Leopold II was ruthlessly exploiting the land and its people. European countries rushed to claim territory in Africa and to establish strongholds that would secure their status as world powers. Before that period, few Europeans had explored the “Dark Continent.”

### Did You Know?

The unnamed ivory trading company referred to throughout *Heart of Darkness* may have been based on companies such as the Anglo-Belgian India Rubber Company. During the twenty years that King Leopold controlled the company, in which he owned half the stock, an estimated five million people in the Congo died at the

hands of company agents, who terrorized and killed Africans who failed to meet their rubber quotas. King Leopold cleared a substantial profit before he lost his monopolistic control of the rubber trade. A reform movement sparked by *Heart of Darkness* and eyewitness reports helped break his power in the region.



## JOHN MASEFIELD

### From the *Speaker*†

Mr. Conrad's stories, excellent though they are, leave always a feeling of disappointment, almost of regret. His is a rare temperament, an exotic, a poetic temperament, and its artistic expression, though tense, nervous, trembling with beauty, is always a little elusive, a little alien, of the quality of fine gum from Persia, or of a precious silk from Ghilan.<sup>1</sup>

In this volume Mr. Conrad gives us three stories, and in each shows a notable advance upon the technique and matter of his former work. His manner, indeed, shows a tendency towards the 'precious,' towards the making of fine phrases and polishing of perfect lines. He has filled his missal-marge<sup>2</sup> with flowerets; he has planted

his forest full of trees; till both prayer and forest are in some danger of being hid. In the story called 'Youth,' and still more in the story called 'Heart of Darkness' (both of them stories written as told by one Marlow to a company of friends), he has set down page after page of stately and brilliant prose, which is fine writing, good literature, and so forth, but most unconvincing narrative. His narrative is not vigorous, direct, effective, like that of Mr. Kipling. It is not clear and fresh like that of Stevenson, nor simple, delicate, and beautiful like that of Mr. Yeats.<sup>3</sup> It reminds one rather of a cobweb abounding in gold threads. It gives one a curious impression of remoteness and aloofness from its subject. Often it smells very palpably of the lamp, losing all spontaneity and becoming somewhat rhetorical. \* \* \*

## KING LEOPOLD II

### [The Sacred Mission of Civilization]†

Our refined society attaches to human life (and with reason) a value unknown to barbarous communities. When our directing will is implanted among them its aim is to triumph over all obstacles, and results which could not be attained by lengthy speeches may follow philanthropic influence. But if, in view of this desirable spread of civilisation, we count upon the means of action which confer upon us dominion and the sanction of right, it is not less true that our ultimate end is a work of peace. Wars do not necessarily mean the ruin of the regions in which they rage; our agents do not ignore this fact, so from the day when their effective superiority is affirmed, they feel profoundly reluctant to use force. The wretched negroes, however, who are still under the sole sway of their traditions, have that horrible belief that victory is only decisive when the enemy, fallen beneath their blows, is annihilated. The soldiers of the State, who are recruited necessarily from among the natives, do not immediately forsake those sanguinary habits that have been transmitted from generation to generation. The example of the white officer and wholesome military discipline gradually inspire in them a horror of human trophies of which they previously had made their boast. It is in their leaders that they must see living evidence of these higher principles, taught that the exercise of authority is not at all to be confounded with cruelty, but is, indeed, destroyed by it. I am pleased to think that our agents, nearly all of whom are volunteers drawn from the ranks of the Belgian army, have always present in their minds a strong sense of the career of honour in which they are engaged, and are animated with a pure feeling of patriotism; not sparing their own blood, they will the more spare the blood of the natives, who will see in them the all-powerful protectors of their lives and their property, benevolent teachers of whom they have so great a need.

and the English who have done most for abolishing the slave-trade and slavery, are treated by the Negroes themselves as enemies. For it is a point of first importance with the Kings to sell their captured enemies, or even their own subjects; and viewed in the light of such facts, we may conclude slavery to have been the occasion of the increase of human feeling among the Negroes. The doctrine which we deduce from this condition of slavery among the Negroes, and which constitutes the only side of the question that was an interest for our inquiries, that which we deduce from the *idea*: viz. that the "Natural condition" itself is one of absolute and thorough injustice—contravention of the Right and Just. Every intermediate grade between this and the realization of a rational State retains—as might be expected—elements and aspects of injustice; therefore we find slavery even in the Greek and Roman States, as we do serfdom down to the latest times. But thus existing in a State, slavery is itself a phase of advance from the merely isolated sensual existence—a phase of education—a mode of becoming participant in a higher morality and the culture connected with it. Slavery is in and for itself *injustice*, for the elevation of humanity is *Freedom*; but for this man must be matured. The gradual abolition of slavery is therefore wiser and more equitable than its sudden removal.

At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it—those in its northern part—belong to the Asiatic or European World. Civilization, as a Phœnician important transitional phase of civilization, is referred in reference to the passage of the human mind from its Eastern to its Western phase, but it does not belong to the African Spirit. What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which has not been presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History.

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CHARLES DARWIN

On the Races of Man†

The question whether mankind consists of one or several species has of late years been much discussed by anthropologists, who are

† From *The Descent of Man* (1871; rpt. Adelaide, Australia: U of Adelaide Library, 1998 [electronic version]), chapter 7. Darwin (1809–82), English naturalist, laid out the theory of evolution through "natural selection" in *The Origin of Species* (1859). Unless indicated, notes are the author's.

divided into the two schools of monogenists and polygenists.<sup>1</sup> Those who do not admit the principle of evolution, must look at species as separate creations, or in some manner as distinct entities; and they must decide what forms of man they will consider as species by the analogy of the method commonly pursued in ranking other organic beings as species. But it is a hopeless endeavour to decide this point, until some definition of the term "species" is generally accepted; and the definition must not include an indeterminate element such as an act of creation. We might as well attempt without any definition to decide whether a certain number of houses should be called a village, town, or city. We have a practical illustration of the difficulty in the never-ending doubts whether many closely-allied mammals, birds, insects, and plants, which represent each other respectively in North America and Europe, should be ranked as species or geographical races; and the like holds true of the productions of many islands situated at some little distance from the nearest continent.

Those naturalists, on the other hand, who admit the principle of evolution, and this is now admitted by the majority of rising men, will feel no doubt that all the races of man are descended from a single primitive stock; whether or not they may think fit to designate the races as distinct species, for the sake of expressing their amount of difference. With our domestic animals the question whether the various races have arisen from one or more species is somewhat different. Although it may be admitted that all the races, as well as all the natural species within the same genus, have sprung from the same primitive stock, yet it is a fit subject for discussion, whether all the domestic races of the dog, for instance, have acquired their present amount of difference since some one species was first domesticated by man; or whether they owe some of their characters to inheritance from distinct species, which had already been differentiated in a state of nature. With man no such question can arise, for he cannot be said to have been domesticated at any particular period.

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Although the existing races of man differ in many respects, as in colour, hair, shape of skull, proportions of the body, &c., yet if their whole structure be taken into consideration they are found to resemble each other closely in a multitude of points. Many of these are of so unimportant or of so singular a nature, that it is extremely improbable that they should have been independently acquired by aboriginally distinct species or races. The same remark holds good

1. Those who believe that human beings descend from a single origin (Darwin's view that humans evolved from apes) or from many different species. [Editor]

with equal or greater force with respect to the numerous points of mental similarity between the most distinct races of man. The American aborigines, Negroes and Europeans are as different from each other in mind as any three races that can be named; yet I was incessantly struck, whilst living with the Feugians on board the *Beagle*, with the many little traits of character, shewing how similar their minds were to ours; and so it was with a full-blooded negro with whom I happened once to be intimate.

He who will read Mr. Tylor's and Sir J. Lubbock's interesting works<sup>2</sup> can hardly fail to be deeply impressed with the close similarity between the men of all races in tastes, dispositions and habits. This is shown by the pleasure which they all take in dancing, rude music, acting, painting, tattooing, and otherwise decorating themselves; in their mutual comprehension of gesture-language, by the same expression in their features, and by the same inarticulate cries, when excited by the same emotions. This similarity, or rather identity, is striking, when contrasted with the different expressions and cries made by distinct species of monkeys. There is good evidence that the art of shooting with bows and arrows has not been handed down from any common progenitor of mankind, yet as Westropp and Nilsson have remarked,<sup>3</sup> the stone arrow-heads, brought from the most distant parts of the world, and manufactured at the most remote periods, are almost identical; and this fact can only be accounted for by the various races having similar inventive or mental powers. The same observation has been made by archaeologists<sup>4</sup> with respect to certain widely-prevalent ornaments, such as zig-zags, &c.; and with respect to various simple beliefs and customs, such as the burying of the dead under megalithic structures. I remember observing in South America,<sup>5</sup> that there, as in so many other parts of the world, men have generally chosen the summits of lofty hills, to throw up piles of stones, either as a record of some remarkable event, or for burying their dead.

Now when naturalists observe a close agreement in numerous small details of habits, tastes, and dispositions between two or more domestic races, or between nearly-allied natural forms, they use this fact as an argument that they are descended from a common progenitor who was thus endowed; and consequently that all

2. Tylor's *Early History of Mankind*, 1865: with respect to gesture-language, see p. 54. Lubbock's *Prehistoric Times*, 2nd ed., 1869.

3. "On Analogous Forms of Implements," in *Memoirs of Anthropological Society* by H. M. Westropp. *The Primitive Inhabitants of Scandinavia*, Eng. translac., edited by Sir J. Lubbock, 1868, p. 104.

4. Westropp "On Cromlechs," &c., *Journal of Ethnological Soc.*, as given in *Scientific Opinion*, June 2, 1869, p. 3.

5. During his voyage as a naturalist on the *Beagle* (1831-36), during which he made the observations and gathered the evidence on which he based his theory of evolution. [Editor]

should be classed under the same species. The same argument may be applied with much force to the races of man.

As it is improbable that the numerous and unimportant points of resemblance between the several races of man in bodily structure and mental faculties (I do not here refer to similar customs) should all have been independently acquired, they must have been inherited from progenitors who had these same characters. We thus gain some insight into the early state of man, before he had spread step by step over the face of the earth. The spreading of man to regions widely separated by the sea, no doubt, preceded any great amount of divergence of character in the several races; for otherwise we should sometimes meet with the same race in distinct continents; and this is never the case. Sir J. Lubbock, after comparing the arts now practised by savages in all parts of the world, specifies those which man could not have known, when he first wandered from his original birthplace; for if once learnt they would never have been forgotten.<sup>6</sup> He thus shews that "the spear, which is but a development of the knife-point, and the club, which is but a long hammer, are the only things left." He admits, however, that the art of making fire probably had been already discovered, for it is common to all the races now existing, and was known to the ancient cave-inhabitants of Europe. Perhaps the art of making rude canoes or rafts was likewise known; but as man existed at a remote epoch, when the land in many places stood at a very different level to what it does now, he would have been able, without the aid of canoes, to have spread widely. Sir J. Lubbock further remarks how improbable it is that our earliest ancestors could have "counted as high as ten, considering that so many races now in existence cannot get beyond four." Nevertheless, at this early period, the intellectual and social faculties of man could hardly have been inferior in any extreme degree to those possessed at present by the lowest savages; otherwise primeval man could not have been so eminently successful in the struggle for life, as proved by his early and wide diffusion.

From the fundamental differences between certain languages, some philologists have inferred that when man first became widely diffused, he was not a speaking animal; but it may be suspected that languages, far less perfect than any now spoken, aided by gestures, might have been used, and yet have left no traces on subsequent and more highly-developed tongues. Without the use of some language, however imperfect, it appears doubtful whether man's intellect could have risen to the standard implied by his dominant position at an early period. Whether primeval man, when he possessed but few arts, and those of the rudest kind, and when his

6. *Prehistoric Times*, 1869, p. 574.

power of language was extremely imperfect, would have deserved to be called man, must depend on the definition which we employ. In a series of forms graduating insensibly from some ape-like creature to man as he now exists, it would be impossible to fix on any definite point where the term "man" ought to be used. But this is a matter of very little importance. So again, it is almost a matter of indifference whether the so-called races of man are thus designated, or are ranked as species or sub-species; but the latter term appears the more appropriate. Finally, we may conclude that when the principle of evolution is generally accepted, as it surely will be before long, the dispute between the monogenists and the polygenists will die a silent and unobserved death.

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If \* \* \* we look to the races of man as distributed over the world, we must infer that their characteristic differences cannot be accounted for by the direct action of different conditions of life, even after exposure to them for an enormous period of time. The Eskimaux live exclusively on animal food; they are clothed in thick fur, and are exposed to intense cold and to prolonged darkness; yet they do not differ in any extreme degree from the inhabitants of southern China, who live entirely on vegetable food, and are exposed almost naked to a hot, glaring climate. The unclothed Fuegians<sup>7</sup> live on the marine productions of their inhospitable shores; the Botocudos of Brazil wander about the hot forests of the interior and live chiefly on vegetable productions; yet these tribes resemble each other so closely that the Fuegians on board the *Beagle* were mistaken by some Brazilians for Botocudos. The Botocudos again, as well as the other inhabitants of tropical America, are wholly different from the Negroes who inhabit the opposite shores of the Atlantic, are exposed to a nearly similar climate, and follow nearly the same habits of life.

Nor can the differences between the races of man be accounted for by the inherited effects of the increased or decreased use of parts, except to a quite insignificant degree. Men who habitually live in canoes, may have their legs somewhat stunted; those who inhabit lofty regions may have their chests enlarged; and those who constantly use certain sense-organs may have the cavities in which they are lodged somewhat increased in size, and their features consequently a little modified. With civilized nations, the reduced size of the jaws from lessened use—the habitual play of different muscles serving to express different emotions—and the increased size of the brain from greater intellectual activity, have together produced a considerable effect on their general appearance when

7. Inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego, islands off the southern tip of South America. [Editor]

compared with savages.<sup>8</sup> Increased bodily stature, without any corresponding increase in the size of the brain, may (judging from the previously adduced case of rabbits), have given to some races an elongated skull of the dolichocephalic type.

Lastly, the little-understood principle of correlated development has sometimes come into action, as in the case of great muscular development and strongly projecting supra-orbital ridges. The colour of the skin and hair are plainly correlated, as is the texture of the hair with its colour in the Mandans of North America.<sup>9</sup> The colour also of the skin, and the odour emitted by it, are likewise in some manner connected. With the breeds of sheep the number of hairs within a given space and the number of excretory pores are related.<sup>1</sup> If we may judge from the analogy of our domesticated animals, many modifications of structure in man probably come under this principle of correlated development.

We have now seen that the external characteristic differences between the races of man cannot be accounted for in a satisfactory manner by the direct action of the conditions of life, nor by the effects of the continued use of parts, nor through the principle of correlation. We are therefore led to enquire whether slight individual differences, to which man is eminently liable, may not have been preserved and augmented during a long series of generations through natural selection. But here we are at once met by the objection that beneficial variations alone can be thus preserved; and as far as we are enabled to judge, although always liable to err on this head, none of the differences between the races of man are of any direct or special service to him. The intellectual and moral or social faculties must of course be excepted from this remark. The great variability of all the external differences between the races of man, likewise indicates that they cannot be of much importance; for if important, they would long ago have been either fixed and preserved, or eliminated. In this respect man resembles those forms, called by naturalists protean or polymorphic, which have remained extremely variable, owing, as it seems, to such variations being of an indifferent nature, and to their having thus escaped the action of natural selection.

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8. See Prof. Schaffhausen, transl., in *Anthropological Review*, Oct., 1868, p. 429.  
9. Mr. Catlin states (*N. American Indians*, 3rd ed., 1842, vol. i., p. 49) that in the whole tribe of the Mandans, about one in ten or twelve of the members, of all ages and both sexes, have bright silvery grey hair, which is hereditary. Now this hair is as coarse and harsh as that of a horse's mane, whilst the hair of other colours is fine and soft.

1. On the odour of the skin, Godron, *De l'Espece*, tom. ii., p. 217. On the pores of the skin, Dr. Wilckens, *Die Aufgaben der Landwirth. Zootechnik*, 1869, s. 7.