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JOSEPH CONRAD

HEART
OF
DARKNESS
and
THE END OF THE TETHER



Illustration by Dr. Clarence A. Andrews

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

*Heart
of
Darkness*

and

The End of the Tether



JOSEPH CONRAD

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JOSEPH CONRAD

Introduction

The land-grubbing or city-dwelling man has turned through the centuries to the teller of tales for entertainment or pastime, for release for the moment from the daily drudgery or monotony of life. And through the centuries the storyteller has responded to the implied desire for vicarious experience with his tales of voyages in "swift dark hulls" on "wine-dark seas" to exotic lands beyond the sunset. Long ago, the Greeks thrilled to the story of Odysseus whose adventures began "far on the ringing plains of windy Troy," and who was forced to battle gods, giants, nature, and men through twenty long years until his home was his own again. In the middle ages, Englishmen warmed at the fireside to the tale of Beowulf, and no doubt imagined themselves one with their hero as he triumphed over the monsters Grendle and his mother.

In the nineteenth century the factual resources for the storyteller expanded tremendously. The development of the clipper ship and the steamship made sea travel swifter, more economical, and less rigorous. Resulting exploration and colonization, together with the needs of the new technologies for raw materials, led to the settlement of hitherto inaccessible areas. The scientist reported his discoveries in books such as Darwin's *Voyages of H. M.'s*

Ships Adventure and Beagle and A. R. Wallace's *The Malay Archipelago*. The storyteller and poet responded also, with imaginative works based on their travels: Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*; Melville's *Typee*, *Omoo*, *White Jacket*, and *Moby Dick*; Captain Marryat's *Mr. Midshipman Easy*; Kipling's *Jungle Books* and other stories of India; W. H. Hudson's *The Purple Land* and *Green Mansions*, to name a few. Never had the reader had such a wealth of material to satisfy his need for "escape"; the booksellers in the railway stations and the librarians of Mudie's often could not keep up with the demands of eager customers.

At the end of the century a new name arose in the ranks of those who created stories by the application of their imaginations to actual experiences. It was that of Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), one of the "great English novelists," according to F. R. Leavis. Conrad was English by adoption, having been born Jozef Teodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski at Berdichev (Berdyczew) in Poland, a country then in a state of considerable turmoil under the rule of Russian tsars. His father was a landowner whose literary interests had led him to translate Vigny and Hugo, and whose Shelleyan tendencies had led him to membership in the secret Polish National Committee. His nationalist activities resulted in his arrest as an "agitator" and his subsequent exile to Russia, his wife and son accompanying him on this enforced journey. There, when Conrad was eight, his mother died of the rigors of exile, and Conrad went to live with an uncle who later became his guardian. His father died when Conrad was twelve. From the time of his mother's death, Conrad lived in the Polish Ukraine, Kiev, Galicia, Cracow, and Wartenberg, Bohemia. In Cracow he attended school and studied under a tutor who was a student in the University. Here he also read Marryat and Cooper in translation; his imagination becoming inflamed by these stories, he determined to become a sailor. On vacation with his tutor in Italy, he saw the sea for the first time at Venice.

In 1874, probably despite his uncle's disapproval, Conrad went to Marseilles and secured employment with a firm of French bankers and shippers, a situation made easy by his fluency in French. In 1875 he made his first voyage as an apprentice seaman. Soon his newfound trade had taken him to the west coast of Europe and the West Indies. Mixing his work with political in-

terests undoubtedly inherited from his father, he became involved in smuggling arms to Spain. An unhappy ending to a love affair and a duel with an American led to his voyage on a British ship which took him first to Constantinople and then to England.

For the next dozen years he served on a number of English ships and learned English as a consequence. "My first English reading," he wrote later, "was the *Standard* newspaper; and my first acquaintance by the ear with it was in the speech of fishermen, shipwrights and sailors of the East Coast . . . I've never opened an English grammar in my life." But he did read English writers as diversified as Shakespeare, Dickens, and Mill.

In 1886 he became a British subject and in 1888 was given his first command of a British Merchant Service ship. In the course of these years he shipped much of the time in Far Eastern waters and there acquired that sense of strange enchantment which is reflected in Marlow's words in "Youth":

. . . the first sigh of the East on my face . . . that I can never forget. It was impalpable and enslaving, like a charm, like a whispered promise of mysterious delight . . . for me all the East is contained in that vision of my youth . . .

His enchantment with the sea and the east and his knowledge of both permeate most of his books: *Almayer's Folly* (1895); *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896); *Lord Jim* (1900); *Victory* (1915); and *The Rescue* (1920), to name a few.

The End of the Tether, originally published in 1902 in *Youth: A Narrative and Two Other Stories*, is among these works. "The pages of the story . . . are . . . the product of experience," Conrad wrote later. (I) lived that life (on the sea) fully, amongst its men, its thoughts and sensations."

The title of the story describes the situation of Captain Henry Whalley, the central character, who has come to the end of his financial, spiritual, physical, and social resources. Captain Whalley is an old Malay hand ("Daredevil Harry") who has spent forty of his sixty-seven years on "the great highway to the East," along which his current command, the *Sofala*, now makes its monthly cruise in search of the flotsams and jetsams of cargo left to it by the more modern companies. Like Captain Whalley, the *Sofala* has also seen its "halcyon days . . . of (the) steam

coasting trade . . . (She is a) ship with . . . worn-out boilers (and he is a) man with . . . dimmed eyes." Both the ship and the man go down together at the story's end, each the victim of the co-owner's greed and trickery.

But, like all of Conrad's fictions, *The End of the Tether* is more than an adventure story of half a dozen men and an old "fireboat." What would have been at best a well-plotted melodrama for another 19th century author becomes for Conrad a "novel of analysis" with human overtones which have their origins in classic Greek tragedy. Captain Whalley has resolved "to serve no one but his own auspicious Fortune." But his Fortune is not auspicious; the crash of a banking firm shakes the "East like an earthquake," and Captain Whalley is among those shaken hardest. His wife dies; his daughter makes an unsuccessful marriage; he is forced to sell his ship to support her. "You cannot dam up life like a sluggish stream. It will break out and flow over a man's troubles." Then his eyesight begins to fail and Captain Whalley is forced into an act of falsehood although he maintains his self-reserve and sense of integrity. Circumstances continue to operate to destroy him: the ambitions of the mate, Sterne, a sycophant with overtones of Uriah Heep; the machinations of the engineer-partner Massy, who hates the man who has saved him; the drunkenness of the second engineer, and his chance remark which leads Massy to run the risk of "a safe trick" to get rid of the old ship and collect the insurance money. These circumstances are, however, but "outside suggestions"; Captain Whalley's decision to go down with his ship derives ultimately from his moral and spiritual commitment to his daughter and his realization that public discovery of his blindness will result in financial loss to her.

The tragic overtones of the story are brought out in the detailed analysis of each of the major characters and the almost too perfect tone of Conrad's prose. By some this tone is attributed to the circumstance that Conrad apparently did his thinking in Polish, then mentally translated his ideas into French and thus finally arrived at the English version. However, Conrad himself once said: "When I wrote the first words of (my first book) I had been already for years and years *thinking* in English." Whatever the case, the result is prose like this:

Far away, beyond the houses, on the slope of an indigo promontory closing the view of the quays, the slim column of a factory-chimney smoked quietly straight up into the clear air . . . The shores, the islets, the high ground, the low points, were dark: the horizon had grown quite somber; and across the eastern sweep of the shore the white obelisk, marking the landing place of the telegraph-cable, stood like a pale ghost on the beach before the dark spread of uneven roofs, intermingled with palms, of the native town . . . Venus, like a choice jewel set low on the hem of the sky, cast a faint gold trail behind him upon the roadstead, as level as a floor made of one dark and polished stone . . .

Conrad's style is based on the word order in the classic English declarative sentence—noun equivalent, verb equivalent, object equivalent—with few inversions, if any. Each part of the sentence is developed with adjectival and adverbial phrases set in good logical order and the whole is heavily freighted with modifying words.

Conrad uses the narrative technique of the omniscient narrator in this story. This viewpoint, although capable of unlimited movement in time and space, does lead to one objection on our part: the omniscient narrator deliberately withholds from us his obvious knowledge of Captain Whalley's blindness and uses this knowledge to build suspense in the story. This plot technique is Conrad's concession to the 19th century's romantic penchant for stories of suspense and complication.

In *Heart of Darkness* he uses a centrally placed narrator whose name has become a part of our language, the fictitious storyteller, Charles Marlow. This use of a narrator who is not only an observer, reporter, and commentator on the action, but a participant as well, originally owes its concept to the epistolary novels of the 18th century—*Pamela*, *Clarissa*, *The Adventures of Humphry Clinker*, and the like. But Conrad probably derived his inspiration for the technique from the American-English author, Henry James, who on more than one occasion pleaded for a "fine central intelligence" at the center of a story. And, in the creation of Marlow, Conrad opened up a whole set of possibilities for his story. The relatively simple adventure story, based on

personal experience, becomes, because we see it through Marlow's eyes, a simultaneous journey into half a dozen levels of experience.

To understand how much of a work of art the story is, it might be useful first to glance briefly at the actual experience which was the basis for the story. In 1890, Conrad, in Brussels, met the secretary of the *Société Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo*. At the same time he may have been present for the triumphant welcome of the explorer Stanley and become aware of Stanley's attitude toward the African Negro. His aunt, the novelist Marguerite Gachet Poradowska (for whom Conrad had a great deal of affection), spoke to friends in the Belgian colonial offices about her nephew's desire to travel in Africa; a friend, Adolph Krieger, also interceded. As a result, Conrad was promised command of a small steamer then plying the Congo river. So, and despite his *uncle's* wishes, he made his way on a French ship to Boma, where he transferred to a smaller ship which took him up the Congo. At Matadi he waited fifteen days, the time seeming to him like an eternity, then marched two hundred miles through the jungle to Kimchassa above the rapids. There he found his boat laid up for repairs; he at once embarked as mate on another, the *Roi des Belges*. At Stanley Falls a company agent, George Antoine Klein, was taken on board because he was ill. Klein died before the boat could get back to Kimchassa, where Conrad's only fresh-water voyage ended.

The reader can work out for himself the connections between this account and the details of the story. He will note, for example, that the colloquial tone of Marlow's voice acts to prevent *Heart of Darkness* from reading like a travelogue:

I left in a French steamer, and she called in every blamed port they have out there . . . Every day the coast looked the same, as though we had not moved; but we passed various places—trading places—with names like Gran' Bassam, Little Popo. . . .

He will also note the social criticism:

We gave her her letters (I heard the men in that lonely

ship were dying of fever at the rate of three a day) and went on. We called at some more places with farcical names, where the merry dance of death and trade goes on . . . Once a white man in an unbuttoned uniform, camping on the path with an armed escort of lank Zanzibaris, very hospitable and festive—not to say drunk. Was looking after the upkeep of the road, he declared. Can't say I saw any road or any upkeep, unless the body of a middle-aged negro, with a bullet-hole in the forehead, upon which I absolutely stumbled three miles farther on, may be considered as a permanent improvement . . .

Heart of Darkness is much more, however, than either travelogue or social criticism. Like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (which is also a story of a voyage along a major river), it is an initiation rite, even though Marlow says, "There's no initiation . . . into such mysteries." For Marlow as a boy, Africa has a "blank space . . . the biggest, the most blank, so to speak . . . a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over." By the time he is a man, however, "it had become a place of darkness."

To get to the "heart of darkness," Marlow must undergo a series of ordeals which have their parallels in any initiation rite. There are the two voyages, the French fever ship, the grove of death, the "two-hundred-mile tramp" through the jungle, the sunken ship to be rebuilt, the long voyage through the jungle, the wait in the fog, the attack by the savages who guard "the station" which is the equivalent of the temple. There is even the ordeal of blood: Marlow's feet are soaked by the blood of his helmsman. Finally he receives the secret words:

"The horror! The horror!"

And, nearly dying, he "peep(s) over the edge" and understands better the meaning of his stare, that could not see the flame of the candle, but was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness.

Heart of Darkness is a record of a journey into a world gone mad, a veritable lunatic asylum:

For a time I would feel I belonged still to a world of straight-forward facts; but the feeling would not last long. Something would turn up to scare it away . . . The stout man with moustaches came tearing down to the river, a tin pail in his hand, assured me that everybody was 'behaving splendidly, splendidly,' dipped about a quart of water and tore back again. I noticed there was a hole in the bottom of his pail . . .

Like the visit of Odysseus to Hades, or the visit of Dante to the Inferno, *Heart of Darkness* is a story of a visit to Hell. The entrance to the infernal region is through the city which reminds Marlow "of a whited sepulcher." Instead of Cerberus, there are the two women

guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall . . . *Ave!* Old knitter of black wool. *Morituri te salutant.* Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again—not half, by a long way.

Like Dante's Inferno, Marlow's Hell is at "the center of the earth." Along the way "the merry dance of death and trade goes on in a still and earthy atmosphere as of an overheated catacomb." Marlow's Hell is a living hell where men are forced to wear iron collars and are "connected together with a chain whose bights sw(i)ng between them." He is told that Kurtz, like Dante's Satan, is at "the very bottom of there." The way to the "chief of the Inner Station" is guarded by a "papier-mâché Mephistopheles" who probably has "nothing inside (of him) but a little loose dirt." Kurtz himself has "taken a high seat among the devils of the land," and surrounded himself with a ring of skulls set on posts as a symbol of his authority. But in the end, he is a "pitiful Jupiter . . . hollow at the core." And Marlow must "wrestle with death" before he can make his way back to the world of London.

Finally (but only for the purposes of this introduction), *Heart of Darkness* must be read as an attempt to understand the self. "Before the Congo, I was only a simple animal," Conrad once said of his journey. Marlow says that *his* voyage was "the

culminating point of experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me—and into my thoughts.”

Just what the self is and how it may be understood is, of course, still a matter of conjecture and argument. Psychoanalysts, as we commonly understand it, attempt to get at the self through recourse to the subject's projections, verbalizations, and dreams—exactly the techniques used by Marlow:

It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—(Marlowe says to his listeners)—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams . . . No, it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence . . . We live, as we dream—alone . . .

Kurtz, the object of the dream (notice that only he and Marlow are given names in the story) must be seen, in this light, as Marlow's alter ego. Accepting this identification, then, we are forced to ask why Marlow says that Kurtz is “no idol.” Why does Marlow refer to Kurtz's “barrenness of heart,” to the fact that Kurtz is “hollow at the core”? Why does Marlow refuse to render “Kurtz that justice which was his due”?

And why, like the Ancient Mariner perhaps, does Marlow seem constrained to tell his story?

It is in our realization of Kurtz's nearly fatal fascination for Marlow that we perceive that ultimately the title “Heart of Darkness” must refer also to Marlow.

This, then, is the power of *Heart of Darkness*—to evoke and to provoke. It is the power which Thomas Mann once referred to as “inexhaustible allusiveness.” It is the power which Conrad himself referred to as the power to give a story meanings which are

not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought (them) out only as a glow brings out a haze,

in the likeness of one of those misty halos that sometimes are made visible by spectral illumination of moonshine.

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HEART
of **DARKNESS**

Chapter 1

The *Nellie*, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river, the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide.

The sea-reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway. In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint, and in the luminous space the tanned sails of the barges drifting up with the tide seemed to stand still in red clusters of canvas sharply peaked, with gleams of varnished sprits. A haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea in vanishing flatness. The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth.

The Director of Companies was our captain and our host. We four affectionately watched his back as he stood in the bows looking to seaward. On the whole river there was nothing that looked half so nautical. He resembled a pilot, which to a seaman is trustworthiness personified. It was difficult to realize his work was not out there in the luminous estuary, but behind him, within the brooding gloom.

Between us there was, as I have already said somewhere, the bond of the sea. Besides holding our hearts together through long periods of separation, it had the effect of making us tolerant of each other's yarns—and even convictions. The Lawyer—the best of old fellows—had, because of his many virtues, the only cushion on deck, and was lying on the only rug. The Accountant had brought out already a box of dominoes, and was toying architecturally with the bones. Marlow sat cross-legged right aft, leaning against the mizzen-mast. He had sunken cheeks, a yellow complexion, a straight back, an ascetic aspect, and, with his arms dropped, the palms of hands outwards, resembled an idol. The director, satisfied the anchor had good hold, made his way aft and sat down amongst us. We exchanged a few words lazily. Afterwards there was silence on board the yacht. For some reason or other we did not begin that game of dominoes. We felt meditative, and fit for nothing but placid staring. The day was ending in a serenity of still and exquisite

brilliance. The water shone pacifically; the sky, without a speck, was a benign immensity of unstained light; the very mist on the Essex marshes was like a gauzy and radiant fabric, hung from the wooded rises inland, and draping the low shores in diaphanous folds. Only the gloom to the west, brooding over the upper reaches, became more sombre every minute, as if angered by the approach of the sun.

And at last, in its curved and imperceptible fall, the sun sank low, and from glowing white changed to a dull red without rays and without heat, as if about to go out suddenly, stricken to death by the touch of that gloom brooding over a crowd of men.

Forthwith a change came over the waters, and the serenity became less brilliant but more profound. The old river in its broad reach rested unruffled at the decline of day, after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks, spread out in the tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth. We looked at the venerable stream not in the vivid flush of a short day that comes and departs for ever, but in the august light of abiding memories. And indeed nothing is easier for a man who has, as the phrase goes, "followed the sea" with reverence and affection, than to evoke the great spirit of the past upon the lower reaches of the Thames. The tidal current runs to and fro in its unceasing service, crowded with memories of men and ships it had borne to the rest of home or to the battles of the sea. It had known and served all the men of whom the nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin, knights all, titled and untitled—the great knights-errant of the sea. It had borne all the ships whose names are like jewels flashing in the night of time, from the *Golden Hind* returning with her round flanks full of treasure, to be visited by the Queen's Highness and thus pass out of the gigantic tale, to the *Erebus* and *Terror*, bound on other conquests—and that never returned. It had known the ships and the men. They had sailed from Deptford, from Greenwich, from Erith—the adventurers and the settlers; kings' ships and the ships of men on 'Change; 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