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**HEART OF DARKNESS
AND THE SECRET SHARER**

JOSEPH CONRAD

**Includes detailed explanatory notes,
an overview of key themes, and more**

HEART OF DARKNESS
AND
THE SECRET SHARER



Joseph Conrad

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by Susie Paul*

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INTRODUCTION
Heart of Darkness:
AN ANTICOLONIALIST MASTERPIECE



Heart of Darkness (1902) has been lauded as the greatest short novel ever written, and rightly so. In fewer than one hundred pages, Joseph Conrad manages to deliver a compelling tale of adventure, a shocking exploration of the workings of the human mind, and a blistering indictment of European exploitation of African people and resources—all in language so carefully, evocatively crafted that readers can almost feel that they are in the middle of the African jungle.

The backdrop of *Heart of Darkness* is one of the most outrageous humanitarian and environmental crimes in modern history: the late nineteenth-century plunder of the Congo by Leopold II of Belgium. Prompted by greed and jealousy of the colonial might of other European nations, Leopold sought power and wealth by taking personal possession of the Congo, enslaving the people and ravaging land for its natural resources, including ivory and rubber. Several million natives of the Congo died during the period between

1885 and 1908, prompting an international outcry, even from other imperialistic nations.

But *Heart of Darkness* is not a blatant political protest novel or polemic. It is a subtle, painstakingly constructed literary work presented as a story told by a sailor named Marlow, who recounts for his friends what happened to him while he worked in the Congo as riverboat captain for a Belgian ivory trading company. Marlow tells his listeners of his quest to find and rescue a mysterious figure named Kurtz, chief of the company's Inner Station, about whom troubling rumors were circulating. Marlow's journey toward Kurtz is a journey into the depths of the human psyche. What he finds at the end of his journey—and what he learns about himself and his “civilization”—shake him to his very core.

Truly great books inspire heated debate, and *Heart of Darkness* is no exception. In recent decades, critics have raised the question of whether Conrad's “use” of African characters and settings—even in the cause of decrying European colonialism—was racist. Certainly, strong arguments have been made on both sides of the issue. Readers must decide the issue for themselves, taking pains to be as careful and subtle in reading *Heart of Darkness* as Conrad was in writing it.

The Life and Work of Joseph Conrad

Joseph Conrad was born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski in Berdichev, a city in what was then Poland, on December 3, 1857, the eighty-fifth year of oppression by the Russians. His father, Apollo, came from a noble family that had lost its land during the

rebellion against Russian occupation in 1830. His mother, Ewa, was also descended from a wealthy family, yet Joseph's childhood was not financially secure or peaceful. His father, a poet and translator of French and English literature, continued in his family's devotion to the cause of Poland's independence from Russia. Before another uprising of the Poles was discovered and stopped in 1863, Joseph's father was arrested as a revolutionist and sent to prison. Both Apollo and Ewa were convicted and then deported to Vologda in northern Russia. Joseph went with them.

Joseph's mother died of tuberculosis in 1865, the brutal winters undoubtedly a contributing factor to her illness. Apollo was devastated, and though he and his son were allowed to move to Kraków, Poland, he died only four years later, also of tuberculosis. He was treated upon his death as a national hero, but Joseph's maternal uncle, who assumed responsibility for the orphaned boy, viewed the parents' politics as a dangerous influence on their son and sought to steer him in a more moderate direction.

In 1875, Conrad went to sea as an apprentice on the *Mont Blanc*. From that point forward, he would sail for another sixteen years, working steadily toward qualifying for a command, traveling to the Caribbean and the West Indies, Australia, India, Java, and Singapore. Finally, in 1890, Conrad sailed the Congo River. He would write about this trip, during which he and his captain became very ill, in *Heart of Darkness*, which appeared first in serial form in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1899. After one more voyage to complete his career in the British merchant navy, Conrad settled into his career as a writer and family man, having married Jessie George in 1896. Their

first son, Borys, was born in 1898, the year Conrad wrote, purportedly in one month, *Heart of Darkness*. His second son, John, was born in 1906.

Conrad's career as a writer was fraught with financial and creative struggles, but his work was praised by the greatest writers of his day—H. G. Wells, Henry James, Stephen Crane, John Galsworthy. Though some of his best-known works are about the sea—*The Nigger of the Narcissus*' (1897), *Lord Jim* (1900), *Typhoon* (1903)—he also wrote about politics, as in *Nostramo* (1904) and *The Secret Agent* (1907). He wrote his well-known adventure story *The Secret Sharer* (included in this volume) in 1912. The story marks a return for Conrad to tales of his old seafaring days, and it picks up on a few of the themes he explored in *Heart of Darkness*: the complex, dual nature of identity and the secret darkness harbored in the souls of men. Despite critical acclaim, Conrad did not achieve popular success until the publication of *Chance* (1914), which sold well in both England and America.

Conrad died in Kent, England, in 1924. England had been his home for some thirty years and English the language—his third, after his native Polish and French—in which he told his stories and created his masterpieces.

Historical and Literary Context of *Heart of Darkness*

European Imperialism and the Congo

The term “imperialism” can be defined as the efforts of Western nations to seize markets, raw materials, and

investment opportunities in countries outside the West. The nineteenth century saw a huge expansion of European colonial interests in Asia and Africa. Great Britain, for example, consolidated its interests beyond its shores in the middle of the century with large-scale immigration to Australia, Parliament's unification of Canada, and the establishment of a civil service government in India. At their very earliest stages of imperial growth, European nations claimed a moral purpose justified the expansion: They were supposedly on a quest to "civilize" the "heathens" of less developed areas of the world, bringing them religion and the benefits of modern science. Even Queen Victoria supported such efforts in the name of bringing aid to poor natives and advancing the cause of civilization. Not at all coincidentally, the cause embraced for such "noble" motives produced immense wealth for Europe. A sense of the hypocrisy of this situation, at least with regard to the acts of Leopold II of Belgium, so informs *Heart of Darkness* that many have called it one of the most scathing indictments of European imperialism ever written.

Although at the beginning of the 1880s most of Africa was still independent, by 1900 virtually all of it was under some kind of European rule. Into the middle of the frenzy to grab and control an entire continent, piece by piece, came Leopold II of Belgium, setting his sights on the Congo in particular, possibly because it was a relatively uncontested region, and one, because of its isolation perhaps, not so ravaged by the slave trade. The Congo had come to Leopold's, indeed the world's, attention when the *New York Herald* sent H. M. Stanley into the region to find the Scottish missionary and doctor

David Livingstone, who had disappeared into the interior five years before. After searching for nearly eight months, Stanley found him in 1871. He, Livingstone, and the Congo became household names.

Under the guise of humanitarian intentions, Leopold set out to own the Congo—personally. The region was, and still is, rich in natural resources. Leopold sent H. M. Stanley, by now a famous African explorer, into the region beginning in 1879 to broker treaties with its various kings and chiefs. The Belgian king was actually able to establish personal ownership over the region, willing it to the Belgian people only after his death, which occurred in 1908, at which point the region became known as the Belgian Congo. How the native people fared under Leopold's domination Conrad makes painfully clear in *Heart of Darkness*: They suffered horrific tortures, mutilations, and abuses, all while Leopold and his supporters were claiming to have brought prosperity and civilization to the interior of Africa.

Not until 1960 would the Congo be released from Belgian rule, but its history since that liberation has continued to be tumultuous and violent. U.S.-backed president Joseph Mobutu ruled for three decades marked by corruption and cruelty. He was succeeded by Laurent Kabila, who had supported neighboring Rwanda's massacre of its Tutsi citizens, bringing the designers of this genocide into his own fighting forces and continuing raids into Rwanda in an effort to bring down the Tutsi-led government there. A civil war marked by unspeakable savagery raged inside the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for five years at a cost of three million lives. As president, Joseph Kabila

(adopted son of Laurent, who was assassinated in 2001) negotiated a truce in April of 2003 and a transitional government took office in July of the same year. It is hoped this peace will hold until 2005, when general elections are scheduled.

Joseph Conrad—Victorian or Modern?

The middle to late nineteenth century was a time of radical change and great optimism in Europe. The worst physical growing pains of the Industrial Revolution were over, and Europe was beginning to grow wealthy through its colonial holdings. But as the tumultuous nineteenth century came to a close, trouble was brewing in Europe. Ancient European monarchies were crumbling. Religious skepticism was on the rise. Western technological prowess was enabling the construction of new weapons that would bring previously unknown horror and destructive capability to warfare.

To many writers and artists working at the beginning of the twentieth century, the world seemed to have abandoned its old moral certainties—and no new certainties had yet arisen to take their place. They felt an overwhelming sense of loss, but at the same time a sense that they were on the brink of something new. It was an exciting, but uneasy, time for creative thinkers, and it led to an explosion of artistic and literary experimentation.

This period of experimentation—starting at the turn of the century, peaking from 1915 to 1925, and continuing through the 1930s—is referred to as “modernism.” Modernist literature is marked by a focus on extreme subjectivity as opposed to absolute truth.

Instead of one all-knowing narrator, a book might feature several, each telling a highly personal story (William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* is a good example). Fragmented thoughts and sensations, a so-called stream of consciousness, is another hallmark of modernist literature (as in James Joyce's *Ulysses* or Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*). A blurring of distinctions between types of literature, between prose and poetry or oral history and written history, also characterizes the period (as in T. S. Eliot's masterpiece of modernist poetry, *The Waste Land*). Even the way letters and words were constructed on the printed page was open to experimentation (as in the oddly punctuated and rarely capitalized poetry of e. e. cummings). The defining event for the modernist period was World War I (1914–1918), a cataclysmic event that killed nearly an entire generation of young men in some countries. In all, over nine million soldiers died. It was a death toll never before imagined. The bloody conflict was labeled “The War to End All Wars,” a title that, unfortunately, proved to be inaccurate.

Joseph Conrad does not fit tidily into the modernist period, nor does he fit the Victorian period. *Heart of Darkness*, written in 1898 and published in book form in 1902, may be described most accurately as a harbinger of modernism. It is morally ambiguous, it exhibits a modernist uneasiness with the world, it emphasizes human isolation and alienation, it shows a familiarity with the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud, and its narrative structure (an “oral” story set within a narration) is unusual. High modernists like Eliot were clearly admirers of Conrad's work. Eliot uses a famous line from *Heart of Darkness* as the epigraph to his poem

"The Hollow Men," and uses similarly bleak descriptions of London in *The Waste Land*.

Readers and critics often like to label books in order to know and appreciate them. *Heart of Darkness* cannot be convincingly labeled. Yet it compels us, even stripped of such context, which is one of the reasons we call it a great book.

CHRONOLOGY OF JOSEPH CONRAD'S LIFE AND WORK



- 1857: Joseph Conrad born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski in Berdichev in Russian-occupied Poland to Apollo and Ewa Korzeniowski.
- 1862: Apollo and Ewa are deported to Vologda, Russia, both having been convicted as revolutionists. Józef accompanies them.
- 1865: Conrad's mother dies of tuberculosis.
- 1869: Conrad's father dies of tuberculosis.
- 1874: Conrad leaves Poland to avoid being conscripted into the Russian army. He lands in Marseille, where he trains with the French merchant marines.
- 1875: Sails an apprentice on the *Mont Blanc*, bound for Martinique.
- 1876: Sails as steward on the schooner *Saint-Antoine* to the West Indies.
- 1877: Conrad tries gunrunning for profit from Marseille to Spain, aiding supporters of the Spanish pretender to the throne, Don Carlos.

- 1878: Begins sixteen-year career with the British merchant navy.
- 1886: Becomes a British citizen.
- 1888: Conrad gets his only command, of the *Otago*, a small ship.
- 1890: Takes a position on a river steamer traveling the Congo River. He will later write about this experience in *Heart of Darkness*.
- 1895: *Almayer's Folly* published.
- 1896: *Outcast of the Islands* published. Conrad marries Jessie George.
- 1897: Publishes *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus.'*
- 1898: Publishes *Tales of Unrest*, a collection of stories. Son Borys is born.
- 1899: *Heart of Darkness* begins to run serially in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*.
- 1900: Publishes *Lord Jim* in volume form.
- 1904: Publishes *Nostromo*.
- 1906: Son John is born.
- 1913: Publishes *Chance*.
- 1924: Conrad declines a knighthood. He dies of a heart attack August 7, and is buried at Canterbury.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF *Heart of Darkness*



- 1833: Slavery abolished throughout the British Empire.
- 1837: Victoria becomes Queen of England.
- 1850: Large-scale immigration from England to Australia begins.
- 1855: David Livingstone, Scottish medical missionary and explorer, discovers Victoria Falls, Africa.
- 1857: Parliament takes over governing of India from the East India Company.
Indian Mutiny continuing into 1858.
- 1866: Livingstone disappears into Africa for five years.
- 1867: Parliament unifies Canada as Dominion of Canada.
South African diamond fields discovered.
- 1871: American reporter for the *New York Herald*, H. M. Stanley, finds Livingstone after almost eight months of searching. His journey and reporting bring worldwide attention to this relatively unknown region.

- 1876: Queen Victoria named Empress of India.
Leopold II of Belgium calls conference in Brussels to discuss "civilizing" Africa. His particular interest is the Congo region.
- 1877: Another meeting regarding Africa held at Brussels. L'Association internationale du Congo is formed, with Leopold as its president.
- 1879: Leopold sends Stanley into Africa to secure the Congo for Leopold personally through treaties with native kings.
- 1883: Rebellion against British interests in the Sudan.
- 1884: German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck calls conference in Berlin to lay down rules for the dividing up and use of Africa.
- 1887: Congo grants a charter to the Compagnie du Congo pour le commerce et l'industrie for the building of a railroad into the country.
- 1899: Boer War begins, in which the British defeat the Boers, the descendants of the original Dutch settlers, in South Africa. Ends 1902.
- 1908: Leopold dies and the Congo Free State, or the Independent State of Congo, is willed to the Belgian people, thus becoming the Belgian Congo.
- 1960: Belgian Congo becomes independent of Belgian rule.

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