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HEART OF DARKNESS

AND THE SECRET SHARER

JOSEPH CONRAD

With an Introduction by
FRANKLIN WALKER

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JOSEPH CONRAD, christened Jósef Teodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski, was born on December 3, 1857, in a part of Russia that had once belonged to Poland. His parents were members of the landed gentry, but as ardent Polish patriots they suffered considerably for their political views. Orphaned at eleven, Conrad attended school for a few years in Cracow. He soon concluded, however, that there was no future for a Pole in occupied Poland, and at sixteen he left his ancestral home forever.

The sea was Conrad's love and career for the next twenty years. In the French merchant marine, he sailed to the West Indies, smuggled guns to Spanish rebels, ran into debt, and bungled a suicide attempt. Then in the British merchant navy, he rose to first mate and finally to captain, sailing to Australia and Borneo and surviving at least one shipwreck. In 1890 he contracted to become captain of a Congo River steamer, but the six months he spent in Africa led only to disillusionment and ill health; this episode would become the basis for Conrad's masterpiece, *Heart of Darkness*. Reluctantly leaving the merchant service, he settled in England and completed his first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, already begun at sea.

His subsequent works, many of which drew upon his sea experiences, include *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1897), *Lord Jim* (1900), *Heart of Darkness* (1902), *Youth* (1902), *Typhoon* (1903), *Nostromo* (1904), *The Secret Agent* (1907), *The Secret Sharer* (1910), *Under Western Eyes* (1911), and *Chance* (1913). The man who was twenty-one years old before he spoke a word of English is now regarded as one of the superb English stylists of all time. Conrad died almost literally at his desk in 1924, at the age of sixty-six.

INTRODUCTION

IN HIS famous preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* Conrad stated that: "Art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect." But what was the truth for Conrad? Was he basically an observer of life or a moralist commenting on it? H. L. Mencken wrote in 1917, "Conrad makes war on nothing; he is preeminently *not* a moralist. He swings, indeed, as far from revolt and moralizing as is possible, for he does not even criticize God." While Douglas Hewitt asserted in 1952, "The most cursory glance at Conrad's work is enough to convince us that he has a conception of a transcendental evil, embodying itself in individuals—a sense of evil as great as that of any avowedly Catholic or Calvinist writer." These judgments obviously reflect a radical shift in critical fashion, but Conrad's intentions themselves may be complex enough to support such a double reading.

A similar quandary presents itself in any discussion of Conrad's technique. Early readers of his fiction felt that his appeal lay in the surface level of his writing—in his handling of plot, setting, and characters. But today critics delve into its deeper levels of symbol and myth. Conrad clearly supports both views in his comments on his writing. At one time he stated: "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is,

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before all, to make you *see*." But at another time he wrote to a reader who had inquired about the meaning of one of his stories: "Coming to the subject of your inquiry, I wish first to put before you a general proposition: that 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."

Certainly there can be no doubt about the authenticity of the adventures and settings in *The Secret Sharer* and *Heart of Darkness*. Like much of Conrad's fiction, they are autobiographical in that they make use of the author's own experiences and reflect characters he had met and events he had heard about in his far-flung voyages. Conrad was prompted to write *The Secret Sharer* by the visit of a sea captain from Penang who reminded Conrad of his own sailing days in the Malay Archipelago twenty years before, when he had assumed his first and only sea command on the sailing ship *Otago* in Bangkok after the death of its captain. Such an initiation into the awesome responsibility of commanding a ship is at the heart of Conrad's story.

The crime and escape of Leggatt were based on the experiences of a first mate known as Sidney Smith who had killed a rebellious seaman and was given an opportunity to escape by his skipper. Conrad noted in his preface that the story was widely known in the Far East at the time, and he may have heard it when he was in Singapore. For the purposes of his tale, he made Leggatt a much more sympathetic character than the hard-fibered, despotic Smith, who had killed his man with an iron capstanbar. Conrad's sailor is a younger man, son of an English parson (like Lord Jim), and he kills in a desperate act of self-defense while trying to save his ship. Thus, in helping Leggatt, the young skipper in *The Secret Sharer* is

put in the position of favoring Christian humanism over the harsh maritime letter-of-the-law attitude represented by the commander of the *Sephora*.

It is the emphasis that Conrad puts on Leggatt as the protagonist's double which has puzzled many readers and encouraged a number of moralistic or psychological interpretations. The controversy over this element in the story is well illustrated by the difference in opinion between Albert J. Guerard, perhaps the most influential interpreter of Conrad's fiction, and Jocelyn Baines, who has written the best biography of Conrad. Guerard looks upon the story as a symbolist masterpiece, in which Leggatt, "criminally impulsive," represents the lower elements in the narrator's nature and the action iself becomes a psychological "night journey" into the captain's unconscious. Baines, on the other hand, feels that the work has little psychological or moral content. One "symbolist" critic finds the sleeping suits worn by both characters represent "the garb of unconscious life" (in spite of our knowledge that Conrad frequently wore his pajamas on the deck of the becalmed *Otago* because of the heat). Another claims that *The Secret Sharer* reflects not only the archetypal Cain–Abel story but also the Jonah myth, with Leggatt reaching a state of repentance in the sail-locker such as Jonah experienced in the whale's belly. To the present writer, the captain's predicament most resembles the moral dilemma of Captain Vere in Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*.

Conrad was himself much annoyed with a critic who referred to Leggatt as "a murderous ruffian." Moreover, Leggatt, unlike the double in Poe's "William Wilson," is not a typical "doppelgänger," that is, "an apparitional double or counterpart of a living person"; on the contrary, he is a very real person. Perhaps the best clue to the meaning of the story

lies in Conrad's statement that it "deals with what might be called the 'esprit de corps,' the deep fellowship of two young seamen meeting for the first time." The young captain's successful protection of Leggatt gives him confidence in *himself*—both in his ability to make difficult moral decisions, and in the brilliant navigational skill that finally assures Leggatt's escape. In assuming responsibility for Leggatt, he has proven himself worthy of command.

In 1889, when Conrad was thirty-one, he resigned his command of the *Otago* in Australia, for reasons that are not entirely clear, and returned to England. A few months later he went out to Africa to command a river-boat for the Belgian Company for Commerce on the Upper Congo. His motives for this venture were mixed; he was out of a job and had spent his savings, he could not find another sea command, he had connections who could help him with the company authorities in Brussels, and, most of all, he had wanted since boyhood, to journey to the little explored center of the dark continent. He spent six months in the Congo, two of them learning the river as first mate of a small steamer which went up as far as the end of navigation at Stanley Falls. There, at the company's inner station, the boat picked up a sick agent named Klein, who died on the return trip—a trip during which Conrad took command of the boat for a few days because of the captain's illness. After returning to Kinshasa and learning that he was not to have charge of the steamer he had been promised, ill and thoroughly disturbed at the Belgians' crass imperialism, he left for home, visiting Brussels *en route*, where he saw his aunt and possibly called on Klein's "Intended."

Although he never fully recovered from his sickness picked up on the Congo, Conrad was still able to say to a friend, "Before the Congo I was a mere animal." There is no

question but that the experience affected him deeply. He drew on it for two stories: first "The Outpost of Progress," concerning two misfits among the "pilgrims" or agents, and then, eight years after he came back to London, *Heart of Darkness*, which deals with the Congo without ever mentioning it by name. Like *Lord Jim*, which started to be 20,000 words long and ended up 140,000, *Heart of Darkness* began as a short story and ended as a novelette. Before he wrote it, Conrad had published three novels and a collection of tales. He had emerged from his apprentice period.

Conrad once stated that *Heart of Darkness* was "experience pushed a little (and very little) beyond the facts of the case"; perhaps this is the reason for the sense of immediacy that makes most readers feel with F. R. Leavis that the "details and circumstances of the voyage to and up the Congo are present to us as if we were making the journey ourselves." By his mastery of tone as well, Conrad gave his "somber theme" a "sinister resonance" and "continued vibration"; as T. S. Eliot put it, "we are continually reminded of the power and terror of Nature, and the isolation and feebleness of Man."

But what more was Conrad doing in the story? The common assumption when it came out was that, unlike Kipling, he was attacking imperialism. Certainly imperialism was at its worst in the Congo despoliation by Leopold II, whose heritage is still with us, and the tale amply illustrates that "merry dance of death and trade." As Conrad wrote elsewhere, the Congo venture was "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration." Kurtz's collapse also exemplified a related theme popular with Conrad and other writers of the period—the perils of going native, whether it be on

an island in the Indies, a South Seas atoll, or a wild part of Africa.

More recent interpretations of the story stress the role of Marlow, the narrator. Marlow was Conrad, but he was also a character in himself. He had appeared as the protagonist of *Youth* and was to tell most of the story in *Lord Jim* and *Chance*. Probably he is the narrator in *The Secret Sharer*, although he is not identified there. The use of Marlow as narrator allowed the author to comment on his story without using old devices like Thackeray's "dear reader" asides. It also preserved a sense of immediacy and enabled Conrad to manipulate time almost as freely as later practitioners of the stream-of-consciousness technique. Above all, the use of Marlow controlled aesthetic "point of view"—the camera angle, as it were, from which the story is recorded.

Today it is widely accepted that Marlow, not Kurtz, is the principal character, and that *Heart of Darkness* deals with his maturing through an arduous and soul-searching initiation, for it is clear that Conrad was writing about the impact of Africa on himself. This emphasis on Marlow has also led to much discussion of the "frame," that portion of the narrative which takes place on the yacht at the mouth of the Thames. Here Conrad emphasizes the play of light and dark first over London and then out at sea, and he anticipates the situation in Africa with Marlow's comments on the days when Romans were invading primitive Britain. As one critic has pointed out, the yacht swings with the tide between the beginning and end of the story, so that Marlow first faces upstream towards the "mournful gloom" of "the monstrous town" (London) and later, down the Thames waterway leading to "the uttermost ends of the earth . . . into the heart of an immense darkness." Thus the present is linked to the moral universe of the story.

The action of *Heart of Darkness* has also been related to

the theories of Freud and Jung, though it is unlikely that Conrad read either psychologist. Most bizarre is the suggestion that Kurtz is like the *id*, the unharnessed primal forces, with the manager representing the timid repression of the *superego* and Marlow the awareness and control of the *ego*. More persuasive is Albert J. Guerard's thesis that, whether he knew it or not, Conrad was writing of "a night journey" or a discovery below the level of consciousness of the evil innate in all men. This concept is based in part on the generally accepted theory that writers tell more than they realize. Corollary to this view are the several suggestions that *Heart of Darkness* reflects archetypal myths, some found in folklore and religion, others in literary works which build on them. Thus, Marlow's journey becomes a descent into Hell, the main question being whether Conrad echoed Virgil, Dante or the Orpheus legend. Biblical analogies have also been applied: the story reflects the myth of the fall; Kurtz is driven out of Eden; Kurtz is a Christian Satan; the story is a disguised retelling of the Passion Week; it is an "epiphany" or discovery story in Joyce's terms. Readers interested in medieval literature have suggested that *Heart of Darkness* parallels the quest for the Holy Grail and that there is an Arthurian echo in the manager's round table at the Central Station. Drawing on anthropology, Harold R. Collins has argued persuasively that a main element in the story is the "detribalization" of the helmsman and Kurtz; both succumb because they have abandoned their tribal views and customs.

Not only the meaning of Marlow's experience, but also his reaction to it is open to a wide variety of interpretations. As Marlow tells his story, is he still suffering from a nervous breakdown, or has he gained serenity by glimpsing the nature of evil? Or does he show that even he is unchanged, strangely unaffected by his journey into the heart of dark-

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ness? What about his puzzling interview with Kurtz's "Intended"? Does Marlow lie to her in order to defend Kurtz's memory, because he has always over-idealized women, because he wants to balance evil with good, or because he has become a relativist, willing to go against his own pronounced dislike of lying? Is Marlow an "isolato" in existentialist terms, who lives as he dreams—alone? Has he come to realize that he lives in an irrational universe, or has he simply revolted against conformity? That might explain his ironic view of life.

It seems to me, however, that the emphasis on Marlow has resulted in neglect of Kurtz and in a distorted interpretation of his character. He is surely more than Marlow's evil inner self or his depraved double; he, like Leggatt, is very much a man in his own right. It is well to remember Conrad's own description of his story as an "histoire farouche d'un journaliste qui devient chef de station à l'intérieur et se fait adorer par une tribu de sauvages" [a wild story about a journalist who became a chief of station in the interior and made himself adored by a tribe of savages]. From the time Marlow first hears of him from the Accountant to the occasion when he tells Kurtz's fiancée that he died with her name on his lips, Kurtz remains the focal point of *Heart of Darkness*.

There is some justification for assuming, with most critics, that Kurtz had become a completely depraved man. Even Conrad called him "hollow at the core." No doubt Kurtz was self-centered, power-mad, and lacked the "restraint" exhibited principally by the cannibals in the story. But, as Marlow points out, "whatever he was he was not common," as the other traders were common. It is significant that Marlow remains loyal "to the nightmare of his choice." Even after he learns of Kurtz's violent acts,

Marlow is still drawn to him, risks his life for him, lies for him. He recognizes a kindred spirit.

An "emissary of pity, of science, and progress, and devil knows what else," Kurtz was idealistic even though his ideals proved of little help to him in the jungle. In this quality, as in others, he is contrasted with the opportunistic, tepid-blooded agents whom Marlow (and Conrad) so much disliked. He had initiative and was fearless. He had "the gift of expression"; even to the end he retained his voice. But most commendable (and dangerous) of all, he was imaginative and hence inordinately curious. The other agents, who represent much the worst of nightmares, were "too dull even to know you are being assaulted by the heart of darkness."

Conrad was constantly interested in the effect of imagination in men. As he wrote of Lord Jim, "your imaginative people swing farther in any direction, as if given a longer scope of cable in the uneasy anchorage of life." Certainly, Kurtz swung to extremes: to his idealistic paper on the "Suppression of Savage Customs," he added a postscript in an unsteady hand, "Exterminate all of the brutes." It is these extremes of vision, and the path of Kurtz's career from the most enlightened European traditions to the most primitive human instincts, which give Conrad's vivid story of his African adventure its immense range and lasting resonance as a work of art.

Franklin Walker

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