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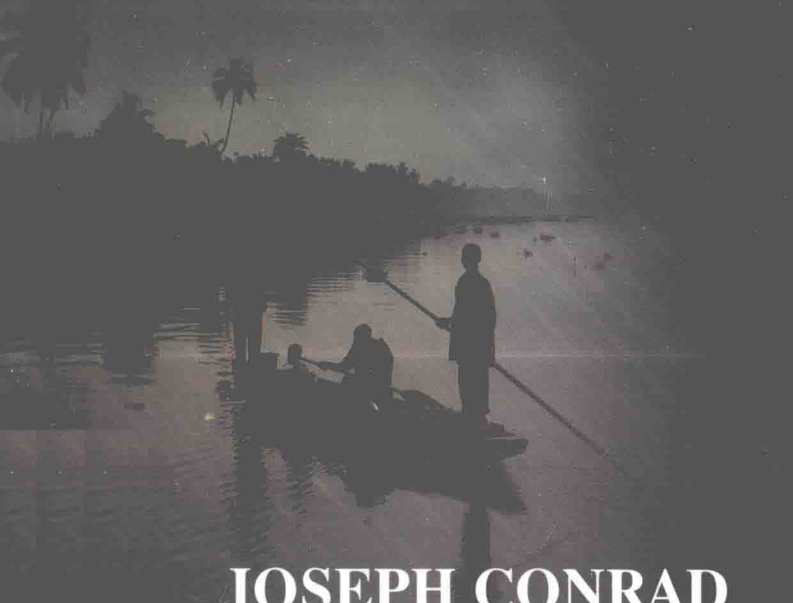

JOSEPH CONRAD

Heart of Darkness

HEART OF DARKNESS

Joseph Conrad

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CLASSICS

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Joseph Conrad asserts the moral right to be
identified as the author of this work

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History of Collins

In 1819, millworker William Collins from Glasgow, Scotland, set up a company for printing and publishing pamphlets, sermons, hymn books and prayer books. That company was Collins and was to mark the birth of HarperCollins Publishers as we know it today. The long tradition of Collins dictionary publishing can be traced back to the first dictionary William published in 1824, *Greek and English Lexicon*. Indeed, from 1840 onwards, he began to produce illustrated dictionaries and even obtained a licence to print and publish the Bible.

Soon after, William published the first Collins novel, *Ready Reckoner*, however it was the time of the Long Depression, where harvests were poor, prices were high, potato crops had failed and violence was erupting in Europe. As a result, many factories across the country were forced to close down and William chose to retire in 1846, partly due to the hardships he was facing.

Aged 30, William's son, William II took over the business. A keen humanitarian with a warm heart and a generous spirit, William II was truly 'Victorian' in his outlook. He introduced new, up-to-date steam presses and published affordable editions of Shakespeare's works and *Pilgrim's Progress*, making them available to the masses for the first time. A new demand for educational books meant that success came with the publication of travel books, scientific books, encyclopaedias and dictionaries. This demand to be educated led to the later publication of atlases and Collins also held the monopoly on scripture writing at the time.

In the 1860s Collins began to expand and diversify and the idea of 'books for the millions' was developed. Affordable editions of classical literature were published and in 1903 Collins introduced 10 titles in their Collins Handy Illustrated Pocket

Novels. These proved so popular that a few years later this had increased to an output of 50 volumes, selling nearly half a million in their year of publication. In the same year, The Everyman's Library was also instituted, with the idea of publishing an affordable library of the most important classical works, biographies, religious and philosophical treatments, plays, poems, travel and adventure. This series eclipsed all competition at the time and the introduction of paperback books in the 1950s helped to open that market and marked a high point in the industry.

HarperCollins is and has always been a champion of the classics and the current Collins Classics series follows in this tradition – publishing classical literature that is affordable and available to all. Beautifully packaged, highly collectible and intended to be reread and enjoyed at every opportunity.

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Life & Times

About the Author

Joseph Conrad had a highly imaginative and creative mind, given to bouts of emotional distress and apathy, but also incredibly driven by his desire for self-expression. Throughout his life his mood would swing back and forth from elevation to depression and it has been said that in his darkest moments he contemplated suicide and even attempted it on one occasion, by shooting himself in the chest, although he made a full recovery. On the other hand, his lucid periods resulted in English prose of the first order and an ability to befriend and entertain those around him. With our modern knowledge of the interior psyche, it seems reasonable to conclude that Joseph Conrad may have displayed classic symptoms of bipolar disorder, or what used to be described as manic depression.

Conrad had a less than desirable childhood, which may account for his psychological profile. He was born into Polish nobility in a region that is now part of Ukraine. Despite this promising start his father was arrested for political activism and exiled to the Russian town of Vologda, northeast of Moscow. One thing led to another and Conrad – at that time named Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski – found himself orphaned at the tender age of 11. He spent the next five years in the charge of his uncle, but left home at 16. His first port of call, quite literally, was Marseille, France, where he enlisted into the French merchant navy and his seagoing adventures began. Conrad spent a 20 year period at sea and his experiences provided the foundation for his literary career. His travels took him to South America, Africa and Asia and he eventually married and settled in England, by now fluent in English and choosing to write in that language, making his prosaic achievements all the more remarkable. At this time he also Anglicised his name to Joseph Conrad.

Although Conrad set his stories in exotic places and spun a good yarn, his primary agenda was to use his fiction as a vehicle for investigating human nature – specifically the human condition. Having lost both of his parents, experienced unrequited love and witnessed hardship and cruelty on his journeys, he was perplexed by his own species. He saw that the world is unfair and that people can possess complex ideas and behaviours that can, by turns, make the world a wonderful place or a living hell. He wanted to express his feelings about such contradictions in his books. Perhaps unsurprisingly, his sombre and sobering words were not well received by the novel buying public and commercial success was not forthcoming. He was however, praised by literary critics who saw the genius in his intentions and recognised that a lighter touch would be inappropriate. As a result he developed a kind of cult following with those "in the know" – especially fellow writers, who admired his uncompromising and deeply moralistic style.

Heart of Darkness

Conrad's most celebrated work, *Heart of Darkness* (1902) was inspired by time spent as a river boat captain in the Congo in 1889. The region was in a state of warfare over slavery at the time, leading to massacres and atrocities that Conrad bore witness to. This experience coloured his view of humanity and crystallized his own views, allowing him to become more complete as a personality. It also erased the romantic vision of Africa that he had developed as a child and which led him there in the first place. He came away with the nucleus of a story, painting Africa as a primal, dangerous and unprepossessing continent, hence the chosen title.

In essence, the central character, Charles Marlow, is Conrad himself. The narrator is recounting the adventures of Marlow in the Congo, to a crew of boatmen on the Thames. As Marlow's story unfolds

and things become more baleful so dusk envelops the narrator's audience, only adding to the general sense of claustrophobia, oppression and atrociousness of the scenario.

The axis of *Heart of Darkness* is Marlow's struggle to deal with a shadowy figure named Kurtz, who holds influence over local tribesman. Kurtz's motive is trade in ivory, which the authorities want for themselves. As a result, Marlow's boat is sabotaged and his crew is attacked, making Marlow's job difficult and dangerous. Ultimately, Marlow finds himself taking Kurtz into his protection due to his declining health. Aboard the boat Marlow is struck by the charisma of Kurtz, but also sees a dying mortal, in marked contrast to the god-like status he has among the Congo natives.

Conrad used *Heart of Darkness* as a vehicle for his exploration of human mores – morals and ethics. He was intelligent enough to understand that qualities considered virtuous are relative and subjective. Kurtz manipulates the belief systems of the natives for his own gain, but becomes morally bankrupted by the atrocities committed in his name, where villages are ransacked and their inhabitants slaughtered to access the valuable ivory. By the time he dies, Kurtz is horrified and ashamed by what he has affected. Conrad's point is that civilization, knowledge and education are easily used by Kurtz to control the behaviour of those who exist in a primitive culture, but the outcome shocks Kurtz because they place less value on life and have different ideas about right and wrong.

In effect, Kurtz is hoisted by his own petard. Marlow, in contrast, is the moral leveller. He initially wishes to perform his duty as river boat captain and arrives with an optimistic outlook on his new life. The events that ensue serve to adjust his outlook, but he remains on an even keel, despite the unpleasant things he is exposed to. He comes away with a wiser and more considered comprehension of the human animal. He has been irrevocably jaded

and scarred by his experience in the Congo, but he is also tougher and more tolerant; accepting even.

Conrad and Humanity

In the modern world we now understand scientifically that all organisms are nothing more than evolved life support systems for DNA, be they human, beast or plant, and that morals and ethics are therefore constructs of the human imagination. When Conrad was alive such strictly secular ideas were not yet formulated, so even atheists tended to believe that there must be some purpose to life. They also acknowledged that society needed people to adhere to behavioural rules based on notions of right and wrong to prevent anarchy and chaos.

Conrad was interested in what happens when different societies overlap, so that contrasting mores are juxtaposed and blended together. His underlying message was that the one cannot judge the other, because they are borne on cosmologies (world views in anthropological terminology) that are each constructs, but an amalgamation can result in outcomes that are reprehensible to both parties. In a way, Conrad's writing was a portent of the complications that have arisen in modern societies where people from different cultures attempt to homogenize but often realize that cultural isolation or segregation are the best ways to find social harmony and accord. We may all belong to the same species biologically, but socially and culturally we can be so disparate as to seem like different species. In essence modern nations immerse peoples of 'primitive' culture within populations of 'developed' culture, so that incompatibilities and antitheses cause people to foment. No one is right, no one is wrong, but the results can be unfortunate and unpleasant whatever one's precepts.

In this way Conrad was a kind of literary social anthropologist. Study of the human as a moral being was his interest, because he himself had encountered a plethora of specimens of humanity over the years and witnessed all manner of extreme behaviours, including

his own. He wanted to understand what it means to be human and the novel became the chosen conduit for expounding his ideas in a non-academic and creative way. It would be a few years before other novelists dared to delve so deeply into what might be described as the human soul in such an exposing and revelatory way. As is so often the case with pioneers, Conrad remained largely unsung until other writers began citing him as an influence.

HEART OF DARKNESS

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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 spirits. 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 years and 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 mizzenmast. 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 somber 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 forever, 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 unknown earth! . . . The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires.

The sun set; the dusk fell on the stream, and lights began to appear along the shore. The Chapman lighthouse, a three-legged thing erect on a mud-flat, shone strongly. Lights of ships moved in the fairway—a great stir of lights going up and going down. And farther west on the upper reaches the place of the monstrous town was still marked ominously on the sky, a brooding gloom in sunshine, a lurid glare under the stars.

"And this also," said Marlow suddenly, "has been one of the dark places of the earth."

He was the only man of us who still "followed the sea." The

worse that could be said of him was that he did not represent his class. He was a seaman, but he was a wanderer, too, while most seamen lead, if one may so express it, a sedentary life. Their minds are of the stay-at-home order, and their home is always with them—the ship; and so is their country—the sea. One ship is very much like another, and the sea is always the same. In the immutability of their surroundings the foreign shores, the foreign faces, the changing immensity of life, glide past, veiled not by a sense of mystery but by a slightly disdainful ignorance; for there is nothing mysterious to a seaman unless it be the sea itself, which is the mistress of his existence and as inscrutable as destiny. For the rest, after his hours of work, a casual stroll or a casual spree on shore suffices to unfold for him the secret of a whole continent, and generally he finds the secret not worth knowing. The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.

His remark did not seem at all surprising. It was just like Marlow. It was accepted in silence. No one took the trouble to grunt even; and presently he said, very slow:

"I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago—the other day. . . . Light came out of this river since—you say knights? Yes; but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker—may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday. Imagine the feelings of a commander of a fine—what d'ye call 'em?—trireme in the Mediterranean, ordered suddenly to the north; run overland across the Gauls in a hurry; put in charge of one of these craft the legionaries—a wonderful lot of handy men they must

have been, too—used to build, apparently by the hundred, in a month or two, if we may believe what we read. Imagine him here—the very end of the world, a sea the color of lead, a sky the color of smoke, a kind of ship about as rigid as a concertina—and going up this river with stores, or orders, or what you like. Sandbanks, marshes, forests, savages—precious little to eat fit for a civilized man, nothing but Thames water to drink. No Falernian wine here, no going ashore. Here and there a military camp lost in a wilderness, like a needle in a bundle of hay—cold, fog, tempests, disease, exile, and death—death skulking in the air, in the water, in the bush. They must have been dying like flies here. Oh, yes—he did it. Did it very well, too, no doubt, and without thinking much about it either, except afterwards to brag of what he had gone through in his time, perhaps. They were men enough to face the darkness. And perhaps he was cheered by keeping his eye on a chance of promotion to the fleet at Ravenna by and by, if he had good friends in Rome and survived the awful climate. Or think of a decent young citizen in a toga—perhaps too much dice, you know—coming out here in the train of some prefect, or tax-gatherer, or trader even, to mend his fortunes. Land in a swamp, march through the woods, and in some inland post feel the savagery, the utter savagery, had closed round him—all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men. There's no initiation either into such mysteries. He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable. And it has a fascination, too, that goes to work upon him. The fascination of the abomination—you know, imagine the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate."

He paused.

"Mind," he began again, lifting one arm from the elbow, the palm of the hand outwards, so that, with his legs folded before him, he had the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus flower—"Mind, none of us would feel exactly like this. What saves us is efficiency—the devotion to efficiency. But these chaps were not

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