

THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

JOSEPH CONRAD

YOUTH, HEART  
OF DARKNESS,  
THE END OF  
THE TETHER



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*Youth*  
*Heart of Darkness*  
*The End of the Tether*



*Edited with an introduction by*  
ROBERT KIMBROUGH

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JOSEPH CONRAD was born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski in the Russian part of Poland in 1857. His parents were punished by the Russians for their Polish nationalist activities and both died while Conrad was still a child. In 1874 he left Poland for France and in 1878 began a career with the British merchant navy. He spent nearly twenty years as a sailor and did not begin writing novels until he was approaching forty. He became a British citizen in 1886 and settled permanently in England after his marriage to Jessie George in 1896.

Conrad is a writer of extreme subtlety and sophistication; works such as *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, and *Nostromo* display technical complexities which have established Conrad as one of the first English 'Modernists'. He is also noted for the unprecedented vividness with which he communicates a pessimist's view of man's personal and social destiny in such works as *The Secret Agent*, *Under Western Eyes*, and *Victory*. Despite the immediate critical recognition that they received in his life-time Conrad's major novels did not sell, and he lived in relative poverty until the commercial success of *Chance* (1913) secured for him a wider public and an assured income. In 1923 he visited America, with great acclaim, and he was offered a knighthood (which he declined) shortly before his death in 1924. Since then his reputation has steadily grown and he is now seen as a writer who revolutionized the English novel and was arguably the most important single innovator of the twentieth century.

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## INTRODUCTION

### I

IN THE year of his death (1924), Joseph Conrad said that the three stories in *Youth: A Narrative; and Two Other Stories* (1902)—‘Youth’, ‘Heart of Darkness’, and ‘The End of the Tether’—represent the three ages of man—youth, maturity, and age. The comment is helpful, but only in a general, introductory way, even if supported by the relative length of each story: ‘Youth’ is about 13,000 words, ‘Heart of Darkness’, about 38,000, and ‘The End of the Tether’, about 47,000—Conrad’s longest. (His shortest novel, *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* (1897) is about 54,000 words.) In fact, the very first sentence in Conrad’s 1917 Preface states that ‘the three stories in this volume lay no claim to unity of artistic purpose’. Conrad did not set out to write about three separate periods of life; he wrote about life from three separate points of view, using three separate techniques—even though the first two are told by the same man, Marlow.

Not ‘The End of the Tether’, but *Lord Jim*, in the form of a short story (‘Lord Jim’), was to have been the third piece for a volume contracted in 1898 by the Edinburgh publisher, William Blackwood. ‘Youth’ and ‘Heart of Darkness’ had first appeared in *Blackwood’s Magazine* (*Maga*) in 1897 and 1899, as had *Lord Jim* in 1899–1900 (and as would ‘The End of the Tether’). Upon completion *Lord Jim* had proved too long for inclusion as a short story and was published separately as a novel in 1900. Before the third story had been received, however, the first two stories had been set in print for the single volume. Thus,

Conrad still had to provide about 40,000 words in order to fulfil his contract to complete the book.

Had *Lord Jim* remained short enough to be entitled 'Lord Jim' the resulting volume could have been entitled *Marlow*, because Marlow, that friend of the anonymous narrator of 'Youth', 'Heart of Darkness', and *Lord Jim*, is actually the principal narrator within all three. Thus, all three are *about* Marlow as well as *by* Marlow. But in writing 'The End of the Tether' to complete *Youth: A Narrative; and Two Other Stories*, Conrad chose not to evoke Marlow, possibly because to do so would draw too much attention to the many ways that 'The End of the Tether' is a kind of recasting of Lord Jim's story, which Marlow had already recounted.

Conrad's 1917 Preface to the *Youth* volume of 1902 remains the best introduction to Marlow and to the three stories in that volume—and, of course, in this: hence, readers might well wish to turn to Conrad's 'Author's Note' at this point. There Conrad places the composition of the stories between the two critically acknowledged landmarks of his early career as a writer, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897) and *Nostramo* (1904). He tells us that each of the three stories is based in part on his own experience:

'Youth' is a feat of memory. It is a record of experience; but that experience, in its facts. . . begins and ends in myself. 'Heart of Darkness' is experience, too; but it is experience pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case. . . 'The End of the Tether' is a story of sea-life. . . the pages of that story—a fair half of the book—are also the product of experience.

For the details of Conrad's experiences as the second mate on the barque *Palestine* in 1881–2 ('Youth'), as the captain of a steamer on the Congo in 1890 ('Heart of Darkness') and as the first mate of the *Vidar* in 1888 ('The End of the

Tether'), the reader should consult Roger Tennant's 1981 biography and Norman Sherry's excellent volumes on Conrad's Eastern and Western worlds (see the headnote to the Notes, p. 341). When Conrad was forthright enough to say that 'all art is autobiographical or it is nothing', he did not mean that all art is biography. Indeed, he made it abundantly clear in a letter to his young friend Richard Curle in 1921 that scholarly, critical 'explicitness is fatal to art'. Hence, the Notes in this present volume do not link details of fiction to details of life. Indeed, the proper degree of scholarly, critical reserve that we should adopt is exemplified by Conrad himself in his remarks on Marlow, that 'most discreet, understanding man'.

Conrad rightly laughs at those of us who debate whether Marlow is or is not Conrad. Clearly, Marlow is both, at the same time that he is neither. Marlow is, in the Elizabethan sense, an invention—something come across, something happened upon, something uncovered—something discovered in the very process of writing. Hence, we need not doubt that 'Marlow and I came together in the casual manner of those health-resort acquaintances which sometimes ripen into friendships', that Marlow 'haunts my hours of solitude', and that 'as we part at the end of a tale I am never sure that it may not be for the last time' (this was written in 1917, four years after *Chance*, which turned out to be the fourth and last of the Marlow stories). Because of the imaginative source of Marlow within Conrad, we can appreciate the warmth and humour in Conrad's 'Yet I don't think that either of us would much care to survive the other.'

## II

The special appeal of 'Youth' is that it simultaneously celebrates and laughs at young ideas and acts, that it is

simultaneously sentimental and world-weary. This simultaneity, this mix, could not be achieved without Marlow. Had the story been told in the first-person during or immediately after the events, the egoism of youth—the self-congratulation, the self-centredness, the self-glorification: in short, the romanticism of youth—would have been so central that the story would have sounded a single-noted effect, either of celebration or of derision. Or, had the story been told in a restricted third-person, either past or present tense, the effect, again, would be either/or: either of sentimentality or of embittered disillusionment. But with Marlow, a character within someone else's narrative telling his own story from a recollective point of view, all of the either/or's disappear. Marlow can laugh at himself for having been foolhardy, stupid, and limited in vision; nevertheless, it was Marlow himself who was adventurous, brave, and guided by idealistic patterns superimposed on the world. As a result, Marlow's report has integrity, wholeness, truth.

Between Marlow and us is the anonymous narrator who, like his four friends, 'began life in the merchant service'. To him, then, life at sea 'is life itself'. This statement prepares us for Marlow's 'You fellows know there are those voyages that seem ordered for the illustration of life, that might stand for a symbol of existence'. And at forty-two, Marlow looks back twenty years to recount his initiation into life, his movement from youth to manhood.

To the young Marlow, the *Judea* (with its simplistic motto of an arrested adolescence: 'Do or Die' ['Death Before Dishonour', 'Better Dead Than Red', 'Love It or Leave It']) was 'the endeavour, the test, the trial of life', and his journey ends with 'the thought that I had been tried in that ship and had come out pretty well. . . I did not know how good a man I was till then'. In present perspec-



tive, however, before he gets wine-soaked sentimental at the end, Marlow can clear-sightedly say of his adventure, 'It was like an absurd dream'. The narrator, too, cynically concludes that the life of youth is 'the romance of illusions'. But because of the invention of Marlow, Conrad can rightly claim to have captured in 'Youth' a double-layered 'mood of wistful regret, or reminiscent tenderness', which is life in a larger perspective than that merely of past time or present.

## III

Once invented in 'Youth', Marlow allowed Conrad to turn to his deeply traumatic, cataclysmically catalytic venture into Africa and to convert the experience into art. While a lot of autobiography is deeply hidden in 'Heart of Darkness', there is only surface biography because here, in addition to Marlow, we are given Kurtz. 'Youth' is double-layered; 'Heart of Darkness' is multi-layered. Question: When Kurtz utters 'The horror! The horror!' what do you think that Conrad thought that the narrator thought that Marlow thought that Kurtz thought? The answer to that question lies not in Conrad's biography, but is found at the heart of this dark story—or, it resides as well in the darkness surrounding the heart of the story, for all referents point inward and outward at the same time, which is the way symbols work on us.

In 'Youth', through Marlow, Conrad turned from his previous technique of straightforward single-layered narrative to one that was indirect and double. Still, the tensions, the potential ambiguities, were contained within the dimensions of Marlow's original experience. With the addition of Kurtz's experience, Conrad is able to add a symbolic dimension to his earlier narrative technique. In the surviving manuscript version of the story, Conrad

included an episode that describes Marlow's arrival at the seat of colonial government within the estuary of the River Congo. Marlow says in part:

'I had heard enough in Europe about its advanced state of civilization; the papers, nay the very paper vendors in the sepulchral city were boasting about the steam tramway and the hotel—especially the hotel. I beheld that wonder. *It was like a symbol at the gate.* It stood alone, a grey high cube of iron with two tiers of galleries outside towering above one of those ruinous-looking fore-shores you come upon at home in out-of-the-way places where refuse is thrown out. To make the resemblance complete it wanted only a drooping post bearing a board with the legend: rubbish shot here, and *the symbol* would have had the clearness of the naked truth.' [emphasis added]

The passage never got into print; perhaps the symbolism of this mock sepulchral city linking Europe with Africa was too blatant, too naked. But the repetition of the word 'symbol' indicates that Conrad realized that he was bringing a new kind of writing into 'Heart of Darkness'. Where his earlier narratives were primarily objective, descriptive, and thematically clear, 'Heart of Darkness' is also interior, suggestively analytic, and highly psychological. Indeed, Conrad realized that in comparison to 'Youth', 'Heart of Darkness' is 'written in another mood'; the 'sombre theme had to be given a sinister resonance, a tonality of its own, a continued vibration' and the result is 'like another art altogether'.

While 'Heart of Darkness' is the story of the story of Marlow's venture up the Congo River to Stanley Falls, Marlow's interest (to the regret of the reporting narrator) is centred in Kurtz:

'I don't want to bother you much with what happened to me personally', he began, showing in his remark the weakness of many tellers of tales who seem so often unaware of what their

audience would best like to hear; 'yet to understand the effect of it on me you ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up that river to the place where I first met the poor chap.'

Hence, it is Kurtz's story that Marlow is telling, even before he and we meet Kurtz. But Marlow's story is the mediating story between the inner one of Kurtz's invasion of the so-called Belgian Congo and the outer story that Conrad is telling of Europe's invasion of Africa. Without Kurtz's story, 'Heart of Darkness' would, like 'Youth', be a simultaneous celebration of self and satire of society. But with Kurtz the reverberations and implications multiply, for Kurtz is the central symbol.

All of Europe, we are told, contributed to the making of Kurtz—Europe: safe, civilized, scheduled, masculine, literate, Christian, and dead. Kurtz, a European 'Knight', sets out on a crusade to win the hearts and minds of a lesser people, ignorant of the degree to which Africa is dangerous, wild, timeless, feminine, unfettered by letters, religious, and vibrant. His love turns to rape when he discovers how unfitted he is to master the magnificent vitality of a natural world. The difference between Europe and Africa is the difference between two secondary symbols: the European woman who has helped to puff up Kurtz's pride and the African woman who has helped to deflate him.

The Intended (nameless, intended for someone else, not herself) is totally protected (helpless), rhetorically programmed (words without matter), nun-like in her adoration (sexually repressed), living in black, in a place of darkness, in a pre-Eliot City of the Dead, in the wasteland of modern Europe. She, like Europe, is primarily exterior, for the simple black garment hides nothing.

The Native Woman is Africa, all interior, in spite of her lavish mode of dress. While Kurtz is male, white, bald, oral, unrestrained, the native woman is female, black,

stunningly coiffured, emotive, and restrained. Here, in part, is her introduction:

'She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. . . She was savage and superb, wild-eyed, and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul.'

Africa, yes, but she is also Tellus Mater, Amazon, Dido, and a type of Venus. Kurtz is clearly a kind of Mars. While this does not mean that the arrows shot through the pilot-house door come from their son Cupid, these arrows are, however, a fine example of the phallic futility of their relationship, which has none of the creativity and bonding of love, only love's hate and anger. Kurtz's lustful exploitation of her, then, is rape, just as were his raids in the lake region, just as was the fantastic invasion of Africa by Christian, capitalistic Western civilization and its discontents.

Marlow's story links these inner and outer stories. In a sense, Marlow exploits the exploiters in order to carry out his boyhood dream of going to Africa, where there was 'one river especially, a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land. And as I looked at the map of it in a shop-window, it fascinated me as a snake would a bird—a silly little bird. . . The snake had charmed me.' The snake and the bird, age-old phallic symbols, set up the motif of sexual encounter. Recalling the map on the office wall in the sepulchral city, Marlow says, 'I was going into the yellow. Dead in the centre. And the river was there—

'fascinating—deadly—like a snake.' And as he departed in his French steamer he 'felt as though, instead of going to the centre of a continent, I were about to set off for the centre of the earth'.

Thus the river is a phallus within the vulva of Africa, the head of the penis touching the womb, the heart, the inner darkness. But the river itself is a vulva, mouth open to the sea, inviting the sexually excited scavenger birds of Europe. The snake swallowing its own tail is the sign of fulfilment, of perfection, of androgynous wholeness, because penis and vulva circle continuously. But in 'Heart of Darkness' the phallus of Europe enters the snake's mouth, moves inward to the heart of darkness, reaches climax, and is disgorged. Phallic futility, vaginal pain—no fulfilment, no content.

During Marlow's trip to Africa, the coast line was 'smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering, Come and find out'. This female image is counterpointed by the masculine surf: 'The voice of the surf heard now and then was a positive pleasure, like the speech of a brother. It was something natural, that had its reason, that had a meaning', as did the native men who came out to the ship in canoes: 'they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, and intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast'—a surf that is a 'dangerous surf, as if Nature herself had tried to ward off intruders'.

Within this self-contained, positive, masculine-feminine context, we get a symbol of the intruders in the French man-of-war, 'her ensign drooped limp like a rag', 'shelling the bush' from 'long six-inch guns' sticking out of its low hull:

'In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a little

white smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech—and nothing happened. Nothing could happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight.'

Interestingly, these guns were 'ten-inch' in manuscript, 'eight-inch' in *Blackwood's Magazine*, and are 'six-inch' here in the *Youth* volume; 'inch', of course, refers to muzzle/bore diameter, but the association of diminishing size to male sexual pride, fear, and fantasy is obvious.

Fittingly, when Marlow first hears the high explosives used in clearing for the railroad that will connect the Lower and Central Stations, he is reminded of the French phallic futility: 'a heavy and dull detonation shook the ground, a puff of smoke came out of the cliff and that was all. No change appeared on the face of the rock. They were building a railway. The cliff was not in the way or anything; but this objectless blasting was all the work going on. . . . Another report from the cliff made me think suddenly of that ship of war I had seen firing into a continent.'

After fifteen days and two hundred miles of tramping, Marlow gets from the Lower to the Central Station. The cockiness of the manager and the impotence of his underlings are caught at once: "They wandered here and there with their absurd long staves in their hands, like a lot of faithless pilgrims bewitched inside a rotten fence. . . . And outside, the silent wilderness surrounding this cleared speck on the earth struck me as something great and invincible.' This phallic futility and failed interaction is followed up by the invasion, the infliction, the visitation by the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, and Marlow overhears one night snatches of conversation between the manager and his uncle, the leader of the Expedition:

'I saw him extend his short flipper of an arm for a gesture that took in the forest, the creek, the mud, the river—seemed to

beckon with a dishonouring flourish before the sunlit face of the land a treacherous appeal to the lurking death, to the hidden evil, to the profound darkness of its heart. The high stillness confronted these two figures with its ominous patience, waiting for the passing away of a fantastic invasion.'

At this point, Conrad's manuscript reads: 'The thick voice was swallowed up, the confident gesture was lost in the high stillness. . . with its ominous air [of] patient waiting', and cancelled is a comparison of the voice and gesture to 'bursting shells' and 'blasted rocks'.

The central sexual experience of the book is the trip up the river by the men aboard that symbol of Western civilization, the steamboat, which is here simultaneously a phallus penetrating the river-vulva and semen carrying sterile sperm within the river-phallus moving up to the mouth of the womb of Africa. This adventure to attempt to 'rescue' Kurtz culminates in a sexual explosion of nature's fog and man's smoke, of natural noises and man-made ones, of arrows and bullets. What more appropriate than to find the Russian fool at the Inner Station, for the fool is another age-old phallic symbol: folly resides in the head of the penis; the folly of folly, folly within folly.

The whole experience is given context by a passage spoken by Marlow before he describes this ascent into the heart of darkness. Ostensibly for the benefit of his immediate audience, but actually for ours, he asks: 'Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—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 the very essence of dreams.' The description of the passage up river 'as we penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness' is a dream narrative, a prose poem, that must

be read aloud, slowly in order for the sensuality of the experience to be felt: from p. 92—'Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings'—to p. 96—'They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar.'

The manuscript of the story tells us that comprehension of the wilderness could not come to the travellers because they were merely passing by. True comprehension could come only 'by conquest—or by surrender'. Kurtz came to a full knowledge both ways, by conquest and surrender: 'The wilderness had patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a ball—an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and—lo!—he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation. He was its spoiled and pampered favourite.' In his sexually spent condition, Kurtz looks like Red Cross Knight, also the victim of his own sexual pride. But the native woman is not Duessa, and the Intended is not Una. Rather, the reverse, for when Kurtz conquered and surrendered to the Native Woman he discovered Truth. It is not the Intended, but the African, 'wild and gorgeous', to whom Marlow refers when he says Kurtz 'had conquered one soul in the world that was neither rudimentary nor tainted with self-seeking'. It is she to whom Kurtz tries to return at night, and Marlow is appalled: 'I tried to break the spell—the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness—that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions.' These are Marlow's words, and those



who would have us believe that this is Conrad speaking as well are misrepresenting Kurtz, who, in spite of Marlow's and Conrad's reactions to his sexual experiences, has learned all there is to learn about *Love and Will* before Rollo May, with a debt to Schopenhauer, wrote about the demonic within us. When the steamer is leaving, the woman returns, puts out her hands, and screams something. Marlow asks Kurtz if he understands: 'He kept on looking out past me with fiery, longing eyes, with a mingled expression of *wistfulness* and *hate*. . . "Do I not?" he said slowly, gasping, as if the words had been torn out of him by a supernatural power' (emphasis added).

When Kurtz says 'The horror! The horror!' rhetoric and reality come together; Europe and Africa, the Intended and the African, collide. Kurtz realizes that all he has been nurtured to believe in, to operate from, is a sham; hence, a horror. The primal nature of nature is also, *to him*, a horror, because he has been stripped of his own culture and stands both literally and figuratively naked before another; he has been exposed to desire but cannot comprehend it through some established framework. That which we cannot understand we stand over; that which we cannot embrace, we reject; that which we cannot love, we hate. To Kurtz, Europe and Africa have both become nightmares—"The horror! The horror!"—and it is between these nightmares that Marlow must make his choice.

Meditating on his own brush with death, Marlow wonders if he could have reached the insight and self-discovery that Kurtz obtained through his exposure to the timeless world of love and hate:

'He had summed up—he had judged. "The horror!" He was a remarkable man. After all, this was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candour, it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper, it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth—the strange commingling of *desire* and *hate*. . . It was an