

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration of a tropical landscape. In the foreground, there are several palm trees and a body of water. In the middle ground, a river flows through a lush green area. In the background, there are rolling hills and a village with several thatched-roof huts. The sky is a warm, golden-brown color with some clouds. The overall style is reminiscent of a woodcut or a detailed drawing.

Heart of Darkness

JOSEPH CONRAD

HEART OF DARKNES

&

SELECTIONS FROM  
THE CONGO DIARY

JOSEPH CONRAD  
HEART OF  
DARKNESS  
&  
SELECTIONS FROM  
THE CONGO  
DIARY

*Introduction by Caryl Phillips*



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## JOSEPH CONRAD

Joseph Conrad was born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski in Russian-occupied Poland on December 3, 1857. His parents were aristocrats and intensely nationalistic political activists who were exiled to Vologda, northeast of Moscow, for their opposition to tsarist rule. Józef's mother, Ewa, died in 1865 of tuberculosis, and his father, Apollo, succumbed to the same disease four years later. Józef was cared for by his uncle, Tadeusz Bobrowski, until the young man acted on a long-expressed desire to go to sea. In 1874 he left for Marseilles, where he began sailing for the French merchant service.

In 1878, in money difficulties and no longer able to sail on French vessels because he had not secured an exemption from military service in Russia, Conrad attempted suicide. After his recovery, he left Marseilles on a British ship and went to England, where he worked the route between Lowestoft and Newcastle. He arrived in England virtually without qualifications and with very little English, but he was able in a few years to earn his master's certificate in the British merchant marine and became a British national. Conrad traveled to Mauritius and Constantinople, worked on wool clippers from London to Australia, and sailed the waters of the Far East.

These voyages were punctuated by long periods when he could not find suitable positions because of the decline in sail-powered transport in the age of the steamship.

Conrad began writing in English, which became his language of choice after his native Polish and French, although he complained of difficulties with English grammar and syntax. His voyages provided the background for much of his fiction. "Youth" and "Typhoon" draw on Conrad's personal experience with disasters at sea. In 1881, he became second mate on the *Palestine*, a ship that was rammed, caught in tempestuous gales in the English Channel, had its cargo of coal catch fire, and sank off Sumatra. His captaincy of the *Otago* from Bangkok in 1888 informs *The Shadow-Line* (1917) and the stories "Falk" and "The Secret Sharer." "Heart of Darkness" (1899) is drawn from an expedition to the Belgian Congo in 1890. He was already working on a novel when he traveled to the Congo, where he expected to take command of a river steamer. The assignment failed to materialize and Conrad fell dangerously ill. On his return to England, he was forced to find work as a ship's mate. He was able during this period of intermittent employment to devote more time to his writing, and in 1894 he submitted the novel *Almayer's Folly* to the publisher Fisher Unwin. Unwin published it in 1895 under the anglicized version of Conrad's Polish name.

Conrad was encouraged to continue to write by Unwin's reader Edward Garnett, although he went on applying for posts as a ship's captain. He finished *The Outcast of the Islands* in 1895 and in 1896 married Jessie George. They had two sons, Borys and John, born in 1898 and 1906. Constantly in need of more money, Conrad produced short stories and serialized his novels. Although plagued by physical illness and psychological problems, he established one of the most formidable bodies of work in the English language. His longer works include *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1897), *Lord Jim* (1900), *Nostramo* (1904), *The Secret Agent* (1907), *Under Western Eyes* (1911), and *Victory* (1915). From early in his career Conrad had the admiration of fellow writers—Stephen Crane, John Galsworthy, Henry James, and Ford Madox Ford, with whom Conrad collabo-

rated on *The Inheritors* (1901) and *Romance* (1903). It was only after the success of *Chance* (1913), however, that his writing afforded him widespread recognition and relative financial security. He spent his declining years in Kent, often in ill health, and died on August 3, 1924, at his home near Canterbury.

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# INTRODUCTION

## CARYL PHILLIPS

Joseph Conrad was born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski in Russian-occupied Poland in 1857. He endured a miserable childhood that was rendered increasingly bleak by the early death of both his parents. The young boy subsequently passed into and out of the care of first one relative and then another, and was subject to much displacement and disruption. This was an era of revolution in which Europe was continually ravaged by war and insurrection, but by the time he was seventeen Conrad had made up his mind to escape both the personal and political turmoil of his homeland. He traveled to Marseilles, where he signed on as a sailor in the merchant marine on a voyage bound for the West Indies and Central America. Conrad soon discovered that there was something reliably soothing about a watery horizon, and he grew to love the solitude of the sea. For the next two decades he voyaged extensively in the Far East, and in Africa and the Americas, his circumnavigations of the globe providing him with opportunities for both education and adventure.

In 1889, a thirty-one year old Conrad chose to settle in London, having three years earlier become a British citizen. He had suffered some maritime hardships, including shipwreck, but he hoped that

the many "exotic" countries he had passed through, and the insights he had gleaned about human nature, might form a convincing backdrop for his future writing. In 1890 he traveled again, this time to Belgian Congo, where he kept a detailed diary of his thoughts and observations. When reading it one can sense Conrad the seaman giving way to Conrad the writer. He chose to write in English, although this was his third language after Polish and French, and his first novel, *Almayer's Folly* (1895), met with some success. This encouraged Conrad to henceforth dedicate himself to writing and to effectively turn his back on the peripatetic life of a sailing man.

In 1902 Conrad published his remarkable short novel *Heart of Darkness*, an ironic tale of rescue that contains a powerful meditation on the relationship between "civilization" and "barbarity." Writing in the last month of 1898 and the first month of 1899, Conrad introduces us to five men who are adrift on a "cruising yawl" that rests at anchor on the flooded River Thames to the east of London. As the evening gloom descends, and the fog rolls in, one among them, a strange-looking man named Marlow (the only man among them who still "followed the sea"), begins to narrate the story of a journey he undertook some years earlier into the heart of Africa. A Belgian trading company had commissioned Marlow to take charge of a steamboat and sail up "a mighty big river." Although not at liberty to disclose the full details of his trading mission, it soon transpires that Marlow is expected to discover and, if necessary, rescue a company agent named Kurtz, a brilliant ivory trader who has recently grown silent. As the narrator tells the story of Marlow telling his story—both narratives unfolding simultaneously—the reader experiences the disturbing effect of being seduced up the Congo by spellbinding English prose which evokes a world that is both frightening and fascinating. Conrad's language is high, and impregnated with weighty constructions and rich atmospheric phraseology which teeter on the edge of, but never topple over into, melodrama.

The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself

bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once—somewhere—far away—in another existence perhaps. There were moments when one's past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare to yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect.

The ailing Kurtz that Marlow eventually discovers, deep in the heart of the African jungle, is a man who has lost touch with the civilized world. Formerly an artist and sometime journalist, this "African" Kurtz has witnessed, and indulged in, unspecified "barbaric" behavior, and his mind is now mired in delusional megalomania. According to Marlow, "the powers of darkness" have "claimed him for their own." Kurtz bestrides his African "empire," bullying and stealing, yet he is worshiped by the natives as a god, and he is happy to encourage their pagan devotion. Understandably, Kurtz is reluctant to leave his crumbling domain, but Marlow is adamant. He places the dying man aboard his steamboat and begins to take him back to the "real" world, but Kurtz dies en route. At the moment of his death, Kurtz whispers, "The horror! The horror!" a final utterance which addresses the enigmatic heart of the novel. There is the horror of what Kurtz has seen, and there is the horror of Kurtz's realization of his own internal capitulation to savagery; however, for the reader, there is the greater horror of recognizing how quickly the benevolence of European colonization can corrode into European criminality, and how quickly man's capacity for evil can rise from beneath the paper-thin veneer of European "civilization."

One of the great paradoxes of the novel is that while Marlow dislikes Kurtz for having abandoned all decent standards, he also admires this ivory trader for having had the courage to fearlessly explore his "dark" side. Kurtz knew that in order to maintain the imagined harmony of the European world, he would have to mas-

ter and subdue the chaos of the African world. However, when faced with the reality of the situation, he was unable or unwilling to play one world off against the other, and he submitted to instinct and indulged himself. On returning to Europe, a disturbed Marlow goes out of his way to protect the integrity of Kurtz's decision, and the "truths" that this deceased trader discovered. Through his encounter with Kurtz, Marlow has come to understand that we exist between centuries of darkness and the darkness that will engulf us when we eventually meet our maker. This brief interlude of light is called "life," and it is made possible only by obeying the rules of rank and order. To abandon these rules, like Kurtz, is to pass from darkness to darkness by way of darkness. However, such a miserable and chaotic passage may afford an individual the opportunity to discover "truths" about Man's nature that ordinary mortals, such as Marlow, will fail to perceive.

Written in the wake of the 1884 Berlin Conference, which saw the continent of Africa carved into a "magnificent cake" and divided among European nations, *Heart of Darkness* offered its readers an insight into the "dark" world of Africa. The European world produced the narrator, produced Marlow, and certainly produced the half-French, half-English Kurtz ("All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz"), but set against the glittering "humanity" of Europe Conrad presents us with a late-nineteenth-century view of a primitive African world that has produced very little, and is clearly doomed to irredeemable savagery. This world picture would have troubled few of Conrad's original readers, for Conrad was merely providing them with the descriptive "evidence" of the bestial people and the fetid world that they "knew" lay beyond Europe. However, by the end of the twentieth century, Conrad's readers are living in a decolonized—indeed postcolonial—world, and Conrad's brutal depiction of African humanity, in order that he might provide a "savage" mirror into which the European might gaze and measure his own tenuous grip on civilization, is now regarded by some readers as problematic.

Among Conrad's more impassioned critics is the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, who has little time for Conrad's master-

piece, describing its author as “a bloody racist” and the text as “an offensive and deplorable book.” He continues: “. . . [T]here is a preposterous and perverse kind of arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the breakup of one petty European mind.” Achebe would appear to be in the camp of those who would submit all literature to the scrutiny of politics, regarding novels and the like as little more than material to be viewed through the prism of empire, colonialism, or some other temporarily fashionable socio-cultural construct. This is not to say that the novel is *not* in any way a political form; it is, because like all art it wishes to produce change. However, one cannot judge *Heart of Darkness*, or any novel, on solely political grounds, any more than one can measure the true merit of a politician’s speech by employing literary criteria.

Fiction is neither democratic, nor does it respect all points of view, including those that attempt to claim the moral high ground. A reader who fails to recognize that perceptions of race change radically from year to year, and that what appears to be “right on” today can quite easily be perceived of as “unquestionably” reactionary tomorrow, is likely to regard *Heart of Darkness* as “offensive” and Conrad a “racist.” In these circumstances how is a writer of fiction, and more specifically the writer of *Heart of Darkness*, supposed to defend himself? Well, the answer is clear. He does not have to, for *Heart of Darkness* is first and foremost a product of its times. It is nonsensical to demand of Conrad that he imagine an African humanity that is totally out of line with both the times in which he was living and the larger purpose of his novel. Even Achebe wistfully concedes that the novel reflects “the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination.” As it happens, the novel does assert European infamy, for there are countless examples throughout the text which point to Conrad’s recognition of the illegitimacy of this trading mission and the brutalizing effect it has on the Africans. However, the main focus of the novel is the Europeans and the effect upon them of their encountering another, less “civilized,” world. *Heart of Darkness* proposes no program for dismantling European racism or imperialistic exploitation, and the novel should not be confused with an equal opportunity pamphlet. Con-

rad's only program is doubt; in this case, doubt about the supremacy of European humanity, and the ability of this supposed humanity to maintain its imagined status beyond the high streets of Europe.

There are three remarkable journeys in *Heart of Darkness*. First, Marlow's actual journey upriver to Kurtz's Inner Station. Second, the larger journey that Marlow takes us on from civilized Europe, back to the beginning of creation when nature reigned, and then back to civilized Europe. And finally, the journey that Kurtz undergoes as he sinks down through the many levels of the self to a place where he discovers unlawful and repressed desires. In all three journeys, Conrad explores the multiple ambiguities of civilization, and his restless narrative circles back on itself as though trapped in the complexity of the situation. The overarching question is, what happens when one group of people, supposedly more humane and civilized than another group, attempts to impose themselves upon their "inferiors"? In such circumstances will there always be an individual who, removed from the shackles of "civilized" behavior, feels compelled to push at the margins of conventional "morality"? What happens to this one individual who imagines himself to be released from the moral order of society and therefore free to behave as "savagely" or as "decently" as he deems fit? How does this man respond to chaos?

Conrad uses colonization, and the trading intercourse that flourished in its wake, to explore these universal questions about man's capacity for evil. The end of European colonization has not rendered this *Heart of Darkness* any less relevant, for Conrad is interested in the making of a modern world in which colonization is simply one facet. The uprootedness of people, and their often disquieting encounter with the "other," is a constant theme in his work, and particularly so in this novel. Conrad's writing prepares us for a new world in which modern man has had to endure the psychic and physical pain of displacement, and all the concomitant confusion of watching imagined concrete standards become mutable. Modern descriptions of twentieth-century famines, war, and genocide all seem to be eerily prefigured by Conrad, and *Heart of*

*Darkness* abounds with passages that seem terrifyingly contemporary in their descriptive accuracy.

Near the same tree two more bundles of acute angles sat with their legs drawn up. One, with his chin propped on his knees, stared at nothing, in an intolerable and appalling manner: his brother phantom rested its forehead, as if overcome with a great weariness; and all about others were scattered in every pose of contorted collapse, as in some picture of a massacre or a pestilence.

The modern world continues to explode with change and contradiction as past traditions come face-to-face with modern pressure, and modern pressure imposes itself on past traditions. The fissures and fractures of “modernism” are laid bare in this masterwork whose carefully wrought structure creaks under the strain of transition. A supposedly advanced civilization begins to lose its bearings, and “sophisticated” individuals begin to stoop, unable to bear the burden of who they are. To their dismay these individuals discover themselves adrift in situations that challenge their conception of self. They can flee, but the world they will return to will never again seem familiar. Or they can stay and hope to find some kind of resolution to this painful conundrum. Some flee, some stay, but few submit to the confusing confluence of past and present, old and new, with the complete abandonment of a Kurtz, and therefore few discover the “truths” that he does (“The horror! The horror!”). *Heart of Darkness* is peopled with modern men facing new and often terrifying choices. Conrad understood this to be the predicament of our times. Mercifully, most of us will never have to face these questions, but if confronted with our own metaphorical heart of darkness would we have the strength to hold on to the old values while sitting in judgment on the new? Would we have the courage to stare down at “the horror” of whatever it is that lurks in the basement of our modern souls?

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CARYL PHILLIPS was born in St. Kitts, West Indies, and went with his family to England that same year. He was brought up in Leeds and

educated at Oxford. He has written numerous scripts for film, theater, radio, and television. He is the author of one book of nonfiction, *The European Tribe*, and six novels, *The Nature of Blood*, *The Final Passage*, *A State of Independence*, *Higher Ground*, *Cambridge*, and *Crossing the River*. He is the editor of two anthologies, *Extravagant Strangers: A Literature of Belonging* and *The Right Set: A Tennis Anthology*. Awards he has received include the Martin Luther King Memorial Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. He divides his time between London and New York City.



# COMMENTARY

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BY

H. L. MENCKEN

E. M. FORSTER

VIRGINIA WOOLF

ERNEST HEMINGWAY

BERTRAND RUSSELL

LIONEL TRILLING

CHINUA ACHEBE

PHILIP GOUREVITCH

## H. L. MENCKEN

Like Dreiser, Conrad is forever fascinated by the "immense indifference of things," the tragic vanity of the blind groping that we call aspiration, the profound meaninglessness of life—fascinated, and left wondering. One looks in vain for an attempt at a solution of the riddle in the whole canon of his work. Dreiser, more than once, seems ready to take refuge behind an indeterminate sort of mysticism, even a facile supernaturalism, but Conrad, from first to last, faces squarely the massive and intolerable fact. His stories are not chronicles of men who conquer fate, nor of men who are unbent and undaunted by fate, but of men who are conquered and undone. Each protagonist is a new Prometheus, with a sardonic ignominy piled upon his helplessness. Each goes down a Greek route to defeat and disaster, leaving nothing behind him save an unanswered question. I can scarcely recall an exception. Kurtz, Lord Jim, Razumov, Nostromo, Captain Whalley, Yanko Goorall, Verloc, Heyst, Gaspar Ruiz, Almayer: one and all they are destroyed and made a mock of by the blind, incomprehensible forces that beset them.

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Conrad . . . grounds his work firmly upon [a] sense of cosmic implacability, [a] confession of unintelligibility. The exact point of the story of Kurtz, in "Heart of Darkness," is that it is pointless, that Kurtz's death is as meaningless as his life, that the moral of such a sordid tragedy is a wholesale negation of all morals. . . .

[Conrad] brings into the English fiction of the day, not only an artistry that is vastly more fluent and delicate than the general, but also a highly unusual sophistication, a quite extraordinary detach-

ment from all petty rages and puerile certainties. The winds of doctrine, howling all about him, leave him absolutely unmoved. He belongs to no party and has nothing to teach, save only a mystery as old as man. In the midst of the hysterical splutterings and battle-cries of the Kiplings and Chestertons, the booming pedagogics of the Wellses and Shaws, and the smirking at keyholes of the Bennetts and de Morgans, he stands apart and almost alone, observing the sardonic comedy of man with an eye that sees every point and significance of it, but vouchsafing none of that sophomoric indignation, that Hyde Park wisdom, that flabby moralizing which freight and swamp the modern English novel. "At the centre of his web," says Arthur Symons [in *Forum*, May 1915] "sits an elemental sarcasm discussing human affairs with a calm and cynical ferocity. . . . He calls up all the dreams and illusions by which men have been destroyed and saved, and lays them mockingly naked. . . . He shows the bare side of every virtue, the hidden heroism of every vice and crime. He summons before him all the injustices that have come to birth out of ignorance and self-love. . . . And in all this there is no judgment, only an implacable comprehension, as of one outside nature, to whom joy and sorrow, right and wrong, savagery and civilization, are equal and indifferent. . . ."

Obviously, no Englishman! No need to explain (with something akin to apology) that his name is really not Joseph Conrad at all, but Teodor Josef Konrad Karzeniowski, and that he is a Pole of noble lineage, with a vague touch of the Asiatic in him. The Anglo-Saxon mind, in these later days, becomes increasingly incapable of his whole point of view. Put into plain language, his doctrine can only fill it with wonder and fury. That mind is essentially moral in cut; it is believing, certain, indignant; it is as incapable of skepticism, save as a passing coryza of the spirit, as it is of wit, which is skepticism's daughter. Time was when this was not true, as Congreve, Pope, Wycherley and even Thackeray show, but that time was before the Reform Bill of 1832, the great intellectual levelling, the emancipation of the *chandal*. In these our days the Englishman is an incurable foe of distinction, and being so he must needs take in with his mother's milk the delusions which go with that enmity, and partic-

ularly the master delusion that all human problems, in the last analysis, are readily soluble, and that all that is required for their solution is to take counsel freely, to listen to wizards, to count votes, to agree upon legislation. . . .

My business, however, is not with the culture of Anglo-Saxondom, but only with Conrad's place therein. That place is isolated and remote; he is neither of it nor quite in it. In the midst of a futile meliorism which deceives the more, the more it soothes, he stands out like some sinister skeleton at the feast, regarding the festivities with a flickering and impenetrable grin. "To read him," says Arthur Symons, "is to shudder on the edge of a gulf, in a silent darkness." There is no need to be told that he is there almost by accident, that he came in a chance passerby, a bit uncertain of the door. It was not an artistic choice that made him write English instead of French; it was a choice with its roots in considerations far afield. But once made, it concerned him no further. In his first book he was plainly a stranger, and all himself; in his last he is a stranger still—strange in his manner of speech, strange in his view of life, strange, above all, in his glowing and gorgeous artistry, his enthusiasm for beauty *per se*, his absolute detachment from that heresy which would make it no more than a servant to some bald and depressing theory of conduct, some axiom of the uncomprehending. He is, like Dunsany, a pure artist. His work, as he once explained, is not to edify, to console, to improve or to encourage, but simply to get upon paper some shadow of his own eager sense of the wonder and prodigality of life as men live it in the world, and of its unfathomable romance and mystery. "My task," he went on [in *The New Review*, December 1897], "is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see*. That—and no more, and it is everything." . . .

This detachment from all infra-and-ultra-artistic purpose, this repudiation of the rôle of propagandist, this avowal of what Nietzsche was fond of calling innocence, explains the failure of Conrad to fit into the pigeon-holes so laboriously prepared for him by critics who must shelve and label or be damned. He is too big for any of them, and of a shape too strange. He stands clear, not only of all

the schools and factions that obtain in latter-day English fiction, but also of the whole stream of English literature since the Restoration. He is as isolated a figure as George Moore, and for much the same reason. Both are exotics, and both, in a very real sense, are public enemies, for both war upon the philosophies that caress the herd. . . . [Conrad] is not only a finer artist than Kipling; he is a quite different kind of artist. Kipling, within his limits, shows a talent of a very high order. He is a craftsman of the utmost deftness. He gets his effects with almost perfect assurance. Moreover, there is a poet in him; he knows how to reach the emotions. But once his stories are stripped down to the bare carcass their emptiness becomes immediately apparent. The ideas in them are not the ideas of a reflective and perspicacious man, but simply the ideas of a mob-orator, a mouther of inanities, a bugler, a schoolgirl. Reduce any of them to a simple proposition, and that proposition, in so far as it is intelligible at all, will be ridiculous. It is precisely here that Conrad leaps immeasurably ahead. His ideas are not only sound; they are acute and unusual. They plough down into the sub-strata of human motive and act. They unearth conditions and considerations that lie concealed from the superficial glance. They get at the primary reactions. In particular and above all, they combat the conception of man as a pet and privy councillor of the gods, working out his own destiny in a sort of vacuum and constantly illumined by infallible revelations of his duty, and expose him as he is in fact: an organism infinitely more sensitive and responsive than other organisms, but still a mere organism in the end, a brother to the wild things and the protozoa, swayed by the same inscrutable fortunes, condemned to the same inchoate errors and irresolutions, and surrounded by the same terror and darkness. . . .

But is the Conrad I here describe simply a new variety of moralist, differing from the general only in the drift of the doctrine he preaches? Surely not. He is no more a moralist than an atheist is a theologian. His attitude toward all moral systems and axioms is that of a skeptic who rejects them unanimously, even including, and perhaps especially including, those to which, in moments of æsthetic detachment, he seems to give a formal and resigned sort of

assent. It is this constant falling back upon "I do not know," this incessant conversion of the easy logic of romance into the harsh and dismaying logic of fact, that explains his failure to succeed as a popular novelist, despite his skill at evoking emotion, his towering artistic passion, his power to tell a thumping tale. He is talked of, he brings forth a mass of punditic criticism, he becomes in a sense the fashion; but it would be absurd to say that he has made the same profound impression upon the great class of normal novel-readers that Arnold Bennett once made, or H. G. Wells, or William de Morgan in his brief day, or even such cheap-jacks as Anthony Hope Hawkins and William J. Locke. His show fascinates, but his philosophy, in the last analysis, is unbearable. . . .

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As for Conrad the literary craftsman, opposing him for the moment to Conrad the showman of the human comedy, the quality that all who write about him seem chiefly to mark in him is his scorn of conventional form, his tendency to approach his story from two directions at once, his frequent involvement in apparently inextricable snarls of narrative, sub-narrative and sub-sub-narrative. . . .

The Kipling-Wells style of swift, shouldering, button-holing writing has accustomed readers and critics alike to a straight course and a rapid tempo. Moreover, it has accustomed them to a forthright certainty and directness of statement; they expect an author to account for his characters at once, and on grounds instantly comprehensible. This omniscience is a part of the prodigality of moral theory that I have been discussing. An author who knows just what is the matter with the world may be quite reasonably expected to know just what is the matter with his hero. Neither sort of assurance, I need not say, is to be found in Conrad. He is an inquirer, not a law-giver; an experimentalist, not a doctor. One constantly derives from his stories the notion that he is as much puzzled by his characters as the reader is—that he, too, is feeling his way among shadowy evidences. The discoveries that we make, about Lord Jim, about Nostromo or about Kurtz, come as fortuitously and as unexpectedly as the discoveries we make about the real figures of our world. The picture is built up bit by bit; it is never flashed suddenly

and completely as by best-seller calciums; it remains a bit dim at the end. But in that very dimness, so tantalizing and yet so revealing, lies two-thirds of Conrad's art, or his craft, or his trick, or whatever you choose to call it. What he shows us is blurred at the edges, but so is life itself blurred at the edges. We see least clearly precisely what is nearest to us, and is hence most real to us. A man may profess to understand the President of the United States, but he seldom alleges, even to himself, that he understands his own wife.

In the character and in its reactions, in the act and in the motive: always that tremulousness, that groping, that confession of final bewilderment. "He passes away under a cloud, inscrutable at heart. . . ." And the cloud enshrouds the inner man as well as the outer, the secret springs of his being as well as the overt events of his life. "His meanest creatures," says Arthur Symons, "have in them a touch of honour, of honesty, or of heroism; his heroes have always some error, weakness, or mistake, some sin or crime, to redeem." What is Lord Jim, scoundrel and poltroon or gallant knight? What is Captain MacWhirr, hero or simply ass? What is Falk, beast or idealist? One leaves "Heart of Darkness" in that palpitating confusion which is shot through with intense curiosity. Kurtz is at once the most abominable of rogues and the most fantastic of dreamers. It is impossible to differentiate between his vision and his crimes, though all that we look upon as order in the universe stands between them. In Dreiser's novels there is the same anarchy of valuations, and it is chiefly responsible for the rage he excites in the unintelligent. The essential thing about Cowperwood is that he is two diverse beings at once; a puerile chaser of women and a great artist, a guinea pig and half a god. The essential thing about Carrie Meeber is that she remains innocent in the midst of her contaminations, that the virgin lives on in the kept woman. This is not the art of fiction as it is conventionally practised and understood. It is not explanation, labelling, assurance, moralizing. In the cant of newspaper criticism, it does not "satisfy." But the great artist is never one who satisfies in that feeble sense; he leaves the business to mountebanks who do it better. "My purpose," said Ibsen, "is not to answer questions; it is to ask them." The spectator must bring something with him beyond

the mere faculty of attention. If, coming to Conrad, he cannot, he is at the wrong door.

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Conrad's predilection for barbarous scenes and the more bald and shocking sort of drama has an obviously autobiographical basis. His own road ran into strange places in the days of his youth. He moved among men who were menaced by all the terrestrial cruelties, and by the almost unchecked rivalry and rapacity of their fellow men, without any appreciable barriers, whether of law, of convention or of sentimentality, to shield them. The struggle for existence, as he saw it, was well nigh as purely physical among human beings as among the carnivora of the jungle. Some of his stories, and among them his very best, are plainly little more than transcripts of his own experience. He himself is the enchanted boy of "Youth"; he is the ship-master of "Heart of Darkness"; he hovers in the background of all the island books and is visibly present in most of the tales of the sea.

And what he got out of that early experience was more than a mere body of reminiscence; it was a scheme of valuations. He came to his writing years with a sailor's disdain for the trifling hazards and emprises of market places and drawing rooms, and it shows itself whenever he sets pen to paper. A conflict, it would seem, can make no impression upon him save it be colossal. When his men combat, not nature, but other men, they carry over into the business the gigantic method of sailors battling with a tempest. "The Secret Agent" and "Under Western Eyes" fill the dull back streets of London and Geneva with pursuits, homicides and dynamitings. "Nostromo" is a long record of treacheries, butcheries and carnalities. "A Point of Honor" is coloured by the senseless, insatiable ferocity of Gobineau's "Renaissance." "Victory" ends with a massacre of all the chief personages, a veritable catastrophe of blood. Whenever he turns from the starker lusts to the pale passions of man under civilization, Conrad fails. "The Return" is a thoroughly infirm piece of writing—a second rate magazine story. One concludes at once that the author himself does not believe in it. "The Inheritors" is worse; it becomes, after the first few pages, a flaccid artificiality, a bore. It



is impossible to imagine the chief characters of the Conrad gallery in such scenes. Think of Captain MacWhirr reacting to social tradition, Lord Jim immersed in the class war, Lena Hermann seduced by the fashions, Almayer a candidate for office! As well think of Huckleberry Finn at Harvard, or Tom Jones practising law.

These things do not interest Conrad, chiefly, I suppose, because he does not understand them. His concern, one may say, is with the gross anatomy of passion, not with its histology. He seeks to depict emotion, not in its ultimate attenuation, but in its fundamental innocence and fury. Inevitably, his materials are those of what we call melodrama; he is at one, in the bare substance of his tales, with the manufacturers of the baldest shockers. But with a difference!—a difference, to wit, of approach and comprehension, a difference abysmal and revolutionary. He lifts melodrama to the dignity of an important business, and makes it a means to an end that the mere shock-monger never dreams of. In itself, remember, all this up-roar and blood-letting is not incredible, nor even improbable. The world, for all the pressure of order, is still full of savage and stupendous conflicts, of murders and debaucheries, of crimes indescribable and adventures almost unimaginable. One cannot reasonably ask a novelist to deny them or to gloss over them; all one may demand of him is that, if he make artistic use of them, he render them understandable—that he logically account for them, that he give them plausibility by showing their genesis in intelligible motives and colourable events. . . .

The true answer, when it is forthcoming at all, is always much more complex than the melodramatist's answer. It may be so enormously complex, indeed, as to transcend all the normal laws of cause and effect. It may be an answer made up largely, or even wholly, of the fantastic, the astounding, the unearthly reasons of lunacy. That is the chief, if not the only difference between melodrama and reality. The events of the two may be, and often are identical. It is only in their underlying network of causes that they are dissimilar and incommensurate.

Here, in brief, you have the point of essential distinction between the stories of Conrad, a supreme artist in fiction, and the

trashy confections of the literary artisans—*e.g.*, Sienkiewicz, Dumas, Lew Wallace, and their kind. Conrad's materials, at bottom, are almost identical with those of the artisans. He, too, has his chariot races, his castaways, his carnivals of blood in the arena. He, too, takes us through shipwrecks, revolutions, assassinations, gaudy heroisms, abominable treacheries. But always he illuminates the nude and amazing event with shafts of light which reveal not only the last detail of its workings, but also the complex of origins and inducements behind it. Always, he throws about it a probability which, in the end, becomes almost inevitability. . . .

In all his stories you will find [a] . . . concern with the inextricable movement of phenomena and noumena between event and event, this same curiosity as to first causes and ultimate effects. Sometimes, as in "The Point of Honor" and "The End of the Tether," he attempts to work out the obscure genesis, in some chance emotion or experience, of an extraordinary series of transactions. At other times, as in "Typhoon," "Youth," "Falk" and "The Shadow Line," his endeavour is to determine the effect of some gigantic and fortuitous event upon the mind and soul of a given man. At yet other times, as in "Almayer's Folly," "Lord Jim" and "Under Western Eyes," it is his aim to show how cause and effect are intricately commingled, so that it is difficult to separate motive from consequence, and consequence from motive. But always it is the process of mind rather than the actual act that interests him. Always he is trying to penetrate the actor's mask and interpret the actor's frenzy. It is this concern with the profounder aspects of human nature, this bold grappling with the deeper and more recondite problems of his art, that gives him consideration as a first-rate artist. He differs from the common novelists of his time as a Beethoven differs from a Mendelssohn. Some of them are quite his equals in technical skill, and a few of them, notably Bennett and Wells, often show an actual superiority, but when it comes to that graver business which underlies all mere virtuosity, he is unmistakably the superior of the whole corps of them.

This superiority is only the more vividly revealed by the shopworn shoddiness of most of his materials. He takes whatever is

nearest to hand, out of his own rich experience or out of the common store of romance. He seems to disdain the petty advantages which go with the invention of novel plots, extravagant characters and unprecedented snarls of circumstance. All the classical doings of anarchists are to be found in "The Secret Agent"; one has heard them copiously credited, of late, to so-called Reds. "Youth," as a story, is no more than an orthodox sea story, and W. Clark Russell contrived better ones. In "Chance" we have a stern father at his immemorial tricks. In "Victory" there are villains worthy of Jack B. Yeats' melodramas of the Spanish Main. In "Nostromo" we encounter the whole stock company of Richard Harding Davis and O. Henry. And in "Under Western Eyes" the protagonist is one who finds his love among the women of his enemies—a situation at the heart of all the military melodramas ever written.

But what Conrad makes of that ancient and flyblown stuff, that rubbish from the lumber room of the imagination! Consider, for example, "Under Western Eyes," by no means the best of his stories. The plot is that of "Shenandoah" and "Held by the Enemy"—but how brilliantly it is endowed with a new significance, how penetratingly its remotest currents are followed out, how magnificently it is made to fit into that colossal panorama of Holy Russia! It is always this background, this complex of obscure and baffling influences, this drama under the drama, that Conrad spends his skill upon, and not the obvious commerce of the actual stage. It is not the special effect that he seeks, but the general effect. It is not so much man the individual that interests him, as the shadowy accumulation of traditions, instincts and blind chances which shapes the individual's destiny. Here, true enough, we have a full-length portrait of Razumov, glowing with life. But here, far more importantly, we also have an amazingly meticulous and illuminating study of the Russian character, with all its confused mingling of Western realism and Oriental fogginess, its crazy tendency to go shooting off into the spaces of an incomprehensible metaphysic, its general transcendence of all that we Celts and Saxons and Latins hold to be true of human motive and human act. Russia is a world apart: that

is the sum and substance of the tale. In the island stories we have the same elaborate projection of the East, of its fantastic barbarism, of brooding Asia. And in the sea stories we have, perhaps for the first time in English fiction, a vast and adequate picture of the sea, the symbol at once of man's eternal striving and of his eternal impotence. Here, at last, the colossus has found its interpreter. There is in "Typhoon" and "The Nigger of the *Narcissus*," and, above all, in "The Mirror of the Sea," a poetic evocation of the sea's stupendous majesty that is unparalleled outside the ancient sagas. Conrad describes it with a degree of graphic skill that is superb and incomparable. He challenges at once the pictorial vigour of Hugo and the æsthetic sensitiveness of Lafcadio Hearn, and surpasses them both. And beyond this mere dazzling visualization, he gets into his pictures an overwhelming sense of that vast drama of which they are no more than the flat, lifeless representation—of that inexorable and uncompassionate struggle which is life itself. The sea to him is a living thing, an omnipotent and unfathomable thing, almost a god. He sees it as the Eternal Enemy, deceitful in its caresses, sudden in its rages, relentless in its enmities, and forever a mystery.

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Conrad's first novel, "Almayer's Folly," was printed in 1895. He tells us in "A Personal Record" that it took him seven years to write it—seven years of pertinacious effort, of trial and error, of learning how to write. He was, at this time thirty-eight years old. Seventeen years before, landing in England to fit himself for the British merchant service, he had made his first acquaintance with the English language. The interval had been spent almost continuously at sea—in the Eastern islands, along the China coast, on the Congo and in the South Atlantic. That he hesitated between French and English is a story often told, but he himself is authority for the statement that it is more symbolical than true. Flaubert, in those days, was his idol, as we know, but the speech of his daily business won, and English literature reaped the greatest of all its usufructs from English sea power. To this day there are marks of his origins in his style. His periods, more than once, have an inept and foreign smack. In fish-

ing for the right phrase one sometimes feels that he finds a French phrase, or even a Polish phrase, and that it loses something by being done into English. . . .

There is a notion that judgments of living artists are impossible. They are bound to be corrupted, we are told, by prejudice, false perspective, mob emotion, error. The question whether this or that man is great or small is one which only posterity can answer. A silly begging of the question, for doesn't posterity also make mistakes? Shakespeare's ghost has seen two or three posterities, beautifully at odds. Even today, it must notice a difference in flitting from London to Berlin. The shade of Milton has been tricked in the same way. So, also, has Johann Sebastian Bach's. It needed a Mendelssohn to rescue it from Coventry—and now Mendelssohn himself, once so shining a light, is condemned to the shadows in his turn. We are not dead yet; we are here, and it is now. Therefore, let us at least venture, guess, opine.

My own conviction, sweeping all those reaches of living fiction that I know, is that Conrad's figure stands out from the field like the Alps from the Piedmont plain. He not only has no masters in the novel; he has scarcely a colourable peer. Perhaps Thomas Hardy and Anatole France—old men both, their work behind them. But who else? James is dead. Meredith is dead. So is George Moore, though he lingers on. So are all the Russians of the first rank; Andrieff, Gorki and their like are light cavalry. In Sudermann, Germany has a writer of short stories of very high calibre, but where is the German novelist to match Conrad? Clara Viebig? Thomas Mann? Gustav Frenssen? Arthur Schnitzler? Surely not! As for the Italians, they are either absurd tear-squeezers or more absurd harlequins. As for the Spaniards and the Scandinavians, they would pass for geniuses only in Suburbia. In America, setting aside an odd volume here and there, one can discern only Dreiser. . . . There remains England. England has the best second-raters in the world; nowhere else is the general level of novel writing so high; nowhere else is there a corps of journeyman novelists comparable to Wells, Bennett, Benson, Walpole, Beresford, George, Galsworthy, Hichens, De Morgan,

Miss Sinclair, Hewlett and company. They have a prodigious facility; they know how to write; even the least of them is, at all events, a more competent artisan than, say, Dickens, or Bulwer-Lytton, or Sienkiewicz, or Zola. But the literary *grande passion* is simply not in them. They get nowhere with their suave and interminable volumes. Their view of the world and its wonders is narrow and superficial. They are, at bottom, no more than clever mechanics.

As Galsworthy has said, Conrad lifts himself immeasurably above them all. One might well call him, if the term had not been cheapened into cant, a cosmic artist. His mind works upon a colossal scale; he conjures up the general out of the particular. What he sees and describes in his books is not merely this man's aspiration or that woman's destiny, but the overwhelming sweep and devastation of universal forces, the great central drama that is at the heart of all other dramas, the tragic struggles of the soul of man under the gross stupidity and obscene joking of the gods. "In the novels of Conrad," says Galsworthy, "nature is first, man is second." But not a mute, a docile second! He may think, as Walpole argues, that "life is too strong, too clever and too remorseless for the sons of men," but he does not think that they are too weak and poor in spirit to challenge it. It is the challenging that engrosses him, and enchants him, and raises up the magic of his wonder. It is as futile, in the end, as Hamlet's or Faust's—but still a gallant and a gorgeous adventure, a game uproariously worth the playing, an enterprise "inscrutable . . . and excessively romantic." . . .

If you want to get his measure, read "Youth" or "Falk" or "Heart of Darkness," and then try to read the best of Kipling. I think you will come to some understanding, by that simple experiment, of the difference between an adroit artisan's bag of tricks and the lofty sincerity and passion of a first-rate artist.

From "Joseph Conrad," *A Book of Prefaces*, 1917

E. M. FORSTER

[The essays composing Conrad's *Notes on Life and Letters*] suggest that he is misty in the middle as well as at the edges, that the secret casket of his genius contains a vapour rather than a jewel; and that we need not try to write him down philosophically, because there is, in this particular direction, nothing to write. No creed, in fact. Only opinions, and the right to throw them overboard when facts make them look absurd. Opinions held under the semblance of eternity . . . and therefore easily mistaken for a creed.

As the simple sailorman, concerned only with his job, and resenting interference, he is not difficult to understand, and it is this side of him that has given what is most solid, though not what is most splendid, to his books. . . .

He has no respect for adventure, unless it comes incidentally. If pursued for its own sake it leads to "red noses and watery eyes," and "lays a man under no obligation of faithfulness to an idea." Work filled the life of the men whom he admired and imitated and whom, more articulate than they, he would express. . . .

He does not respect all humanity. Indeed, were he less self-conscious, he would probably be a misanthrope. He has to pull himself up with a reminder that misanthropy wouldn't be quite fair—on himself. . . . It becomes a point of honour not to be misanthropic, so that even when he hits out there is a fierce restraint that wounds more deeply than the blows. He will not despise men, yet cannot respect them, and consequently our careers seem to him important and unimportant at the same time, and our fates, like those

## INTRODUCTION BY CARYL PHILLIPS

Commentary by H. L. Mencken, E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway,  
Bertrand Russell, Lionel Trilling, Chinua Achebe, and Philip Gourevitch

Originally published in 1902, *Heart of Darkness* remains one of this century's most enduring works of fiction. Written several years after Joseph Conrad's grueling sojourn in the Belgian Congo, the novel is a complex meditation on colonialism, evil, and the thin line between civilization and barbarity. This edition contains selections from Conrad's *Congo Diary* of 1890—the first notes, in effect, for the novel, which was composed at the end of that decade. Virginia Woolf wrote of Conrad: "His books are full of moments of vision. They light up a whole character in a flash. . . . He could not write badly, one feels, to save his life."

Caryl Phillips is the author of many works of fiction and nonfiction. His novel *A Distant Shore* won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award.

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