**Joseph Conrad**

"*...Il senso di una integrazione nel mondo conquistata nella vita pratica, il senso dell'uomo che si realizza nelle cose che fa...*"(Perchè leggere i classici)

**Life**

His real name is Jozef Teodor Konrad and he was born in Polish Ukraine in 1857. He participated in the movement for Polish independence and he was exiled. His parents died early when he was a boy leaving him the hatred for tyranny. In 1878 he joined the English Merchant Navy and he became a master. In 1886 he became a British subject. He sailed for about twenty years and he left off because of illness. He died in 1924.

**Works**

He was fascinated by the English language, the wealth of its vocabulary and the colour of the words. He started to write in the calm of the sea in complete isolation and where he could scrutinize the real nature of a man.

His best works:

-Youth

- Nostromo

- Lord Jim

- Heart of darkness

- The secret agent

Conrad's language is difficult because of his rhetorical style, the long sentences and the obscurity of some passages. It's important to underline that English is not the mother-tongue of the writer.

**Features and themes**

-Oblique narrator : the novels are told by narrators who live in the novels. None of these narrators express Conrad's point of view. Through the device of the narrator (Marlow) we can have more point of view and the writer is no longer the single omniscient commentator.

-Double character : unlike Stevenson in "Dr. Kelly and Mr Hyde" who splits one personality into two, Conrad puts two character alongside each other, "Double" is the unconscious part of the man: what he might be and what he might became in particular circumstances.

-A search for the real truth of man existence : a man far from European civilization, confronted with an alien environment reveals his real character.

-Love for exotic places : the sea and nature is seen as a character in itself and has the function of isolating.

-Symbolism : the sea, the jungle are even the symbol of the thought and emotions. Clouds and darkness represent the unconscious world.

**Politics**

Conrad in his private life was predominantly conservative. He maintained a deep abhorrence for socialism ("infernal doctrines born in the continental backslums") and democracy ("I have no taste for democracy"), and held a patronising attitude toward the common folk. Some critics argue he despised notions of equality and the liberal values of pacifism and humanitarianism. However, this is subject to debate, given that a great deal of his work focuses on exposing inhumane behaviour and its consequences.

**Style**

Conrad, an emotional man subject to fits of depression, self-doubt, and pessimism, disciplined his [romantic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanticism) temperament with an unsparing [moral](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morality) judgment.

As an artist, he famously aspired, in his preface to [*The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Nigger_of_the_%27Narcissus%27) (1897), "by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel... before all, to make you *see*. That – and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm – all you demand – and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask."

Writing in what to the [visual arts](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visual_arts) was the age of [Impressionism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impressionism), Conrad showed himself in many of his works a [prose poet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prose_poetry) of the highest order. For instance, in the evocative *Patna* and courtroom scenes of [*Lord Jim*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_Jim); in the "melancholy-mad elephant" and gunboat scenes of [*Heart of Darkness*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heart_of_Darkness); in the [doubled protagonists](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doppelg%C3%A4nger) of [*The Secret Sharer*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Secret_Sharer); and in the verbal and conceptual [resonances](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resonance) of *[Nostromo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nostromo" \o "Nostromo)* and [*The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Nigger_of_the_%27Narcissus%27).

Conrad used his own memories as literary material so often that readers are tempted to treat his life and work as a single whole. His "view of the world", or elements of it, are often described by citing at once both his private and public statements, passages from his letters, and citations from his books. Najder warns that this approach produces an incoherent and misleading picture. "An... uncritical linking of the two spheres, literature and private life, distorts each. Conrad used his own experiences as raw material, but the finished product should not be confused with the experiences themselves."

The singularity of the universe depicted in Conrad's novels, especially compared to those of near-contemporaries like [John Galsworthy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Galsworthy), is such as to open him to criticism similar to that later applied to [Graham Greene](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graham_Greene). But where "Greenland" has been characterized as a recurring and recognizable atmosphere independent of setting, Conrad is at pains to create a [sense of place](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sense_of_place), be it aboard ship or in a remote village. Often he chose to have his characters play out their destinies in isolated or confined circumstances.

In the view of [Evelyn Waugh](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evelyn_Waugh) and [Kingsley Amis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingsley_Amis), it was not until the first volumes of [Anthony Powell](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthony_Powell)'s sequence, [*A Dance to the Music of Time*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Dance_to_the_Music_of_Time), were published in the 1950s, that an English novelist achieved the same command of atmosphere and precision of language with consistency, a view supported by present-day critics like [A. N. Wilson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A._N._Wilson). This is the more remarkable, given that English was Conrad's third language. Powell acknowledged his debt to Conrad.

Conrad's third language remained inescapably under the influence of his first two – Polish and French. This makes his English seem unusual. It was perhaps from Polish and French prose styles that he adopted a fondness for triple [parallelism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parallelism_(rhetoric)), especially in his early works ("all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men"), as well as for [rhetorical](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhetoric) [abstraction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abstraction) ("It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention").

[Zdzisław Najder](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zdzis%C5%82aw_Najder) observes:

[He was a man of three cultures: Polish, French, and English. Brought up in a Polish family and cultural environment... he learned French as a child, and at the age of less than seventeen went to France, to serve... four years in the French merchant marine. At school he must have learned German, but French remained the language he spoke with greatest fluency (and no foreign accent) until the end of his life. He was well versed in French history and literature, and French novelists were his artistic models. But he wrote all his books in English—the tongue he started to learn at the age of twenty. He was thus an English writer who grew up in other linguistic and cultural environments. His work can be seen as located in the borderland of *auto-translation* [emphasis added by Wikipedia].

[T. E. Lawrence](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T._E._Lawrence), one of many writers whom Conrad befriended, offered some perceptive observations about Conrad's writing:

He's absolutely the most haunting thing in prose that ever was: I wish I knew how every paragraph he writes (...they are all paragraphs: he seldom writes a single sentence...) goes on sounding in waves, like the note of a tenor bell, after it stops. It's not built in the rhythm of ordinary prose, but on something existing only in his head, and as he can never say what it is he wants to say, all his things end in a kind of hunger, a suggestion of something he can't say or do or think. So his books always look bigger than they are. He's as much a giant of the [subjective](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subjectivity) as [Kipling](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudyard_Kipling) is of the [objective](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Objective_approach). Do they hate one another?

In Conrad's time, literary critics, while usually commenting favourably on his works, often remarked that his exotic style, complex narration, profound [themes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theme_(literature)) and pessimistic ideas put many readers off. Yet as Conrad's ideas were borne out by 20th-century events, in due course he came to be admired for beliefs that seemed to accord with subsequent times more closely than with his own.

Conrad's was, indeed, a starkly lucid view of the human condition – a vision similar to that which had been offered in two [micro-stories](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Microfiction) by his ten-years-older Polish compatriot, [Bolesław Prus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boles%C5%82aw_Prus" \o "Bolesław Prus) (whose work Conrad admired): "[Mold of the Earth](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mold_of_the_Earth)" (1884) and "[Shades](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shades_(story))" (1885). Conrad wrote:

Faith is a myth and beliefs shift like mists on the shore; thoughts vanish; words, once pronounced, die; and the memory of yesterday is as shadowy as the hope of to-morrow....

In this world – as I have known it – we are made to suffer without the shadow of a reason, of a cause or of guilt....

There is no morality, no knowledge and no hope; there is only the consciousness of ourselves which drives us about a world that... is always but a vain and floating appearance....

A moment, a twinkling of an eye and nothing remains – but a clot of mud, of cold mud, of dead mud cast into black space, rolling around an extinguished [sun](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sun). Nothing. Neither thought, nor sound, nor soul. Nothing.

Conrad is the novelist of man in extreme situations. "Those who read me," he wrote in the preface to [*A Personal Record*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Personal_Record), "know my conviction that the world, the temporal world, rests on a few very simple ideas; so simple that they must be as old as the hills. It rests, notably, among others, on the idea of Fidelity."

For Conrad fidelity is the barrier man erects against nothingness, against corruption, against the evil that is all about him, insidious, waiting to engulf him, and that in some sense is within him unacknowledged. But what happens when fidelity is submerged, the barrier broken down, and the evil without is acknowledged by the evil within? At his greatest, that is Conrad's theme.

**Lord Jim (The Jump)**

The narrator is Marlow. Jim is the first mate on a ship: the Patne which is taking about eight pilgrims to the port of Mecca. One night the ship collides with something awash. Jim discovers that the collision has made a big hole below the water line and the ship is destined to sink in a few minutes.

Without saying anything to the pilgrims for fear of creating a panic the captain and other officers leave the sinking ship. Jim in one blind act joins the other on the boat.

In the passage "The jump", Jim lives again in his mind the moment he jumped: the ship means much more for Jim than a simply vessel, it embodies the set of maritime laws, the code of honour.

The jump has a symbolic meaning: the loss of his honour without any possibility of "going back" and finally he redeems himself through death.

**Heart of darkness**

Heart of Darkness is a [novella](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Novella) written by [Joseph Conrad](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Conrad). Before its 1902 publication, it appeared as a three-part series (1899) in [*Blackwood's Magazine*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackwood%27s_Magazine). It was classified by the Modern Library website editors as one of the "100 best novels" and part of the [Western canon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_canon).

The story centres on [Charles Marlow](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Marlow), who narrates most of the book. He is an Englishman who takes a foreign assignment from a Belgian trading company as a river-boat captain in Africa. *Heart of Darkness* exposes the dark side of European colonization while exploring the three levels of darkness that the protagonist, Marlow, encounters: the darkness of the Congo wilderness, the darkness of the Europeans' cruel treatment of the African natives, and the unfathomable darkness within every human being for committing heinous acts of evil. Although Conrad does not give the name of the river, at the time of writing the [Congo Free State](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congo_Free_State), the location of the large and important [Congo River](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congo_River), was a private colony of Belgium's [King Leopold II](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King_Leopold_II). In the story, Marlow is employed to transport [ivory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivory) downriver. However, his more pressing assignment is to return [Kurtz](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurtz_(Heart_of_Darkness)), another ivory trader, to civilization, in a cover-up. Kurtz has a reputation throughout the region.

This [symbolic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symbol) [story](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Novella) is a story within a story or [frame narrative](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frame_narrative). It follows Marlow as he recounts his Congolese adventure to a group of men aboard a ship anchored in the [Thames Estuary](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thames_Estuary) from dusk through to late night. The passage of time and the darkening sky during Marlow's narrative parallels the atmosphere of the events he narrates.

* **The plot**

Marlow, the narrator, tells his moving story to some friends on a boat anchored on the River Thames. Marlow had been hired by a Belgian trading company to sail up the River Congo and fetch a man named Kurtz, an official of the Company who had been their best agent but who seemed to have gone insane. Marlow's trip on a steamboat up the River Congo brings him into close contact with both the brutal exploitation of the natives by the ivory merchants and the legend of Kurtz. When he finally reaches Kurtz he finds a dying man who has become an idol for the natives, performing strange savage rites. Marlow is fascinated by Kurtz: by the depths to which his soul has fallen and also by his courage. He is disgusted, on the other hand, by the other colonists' hypocrisy: the men who had worshipped Kurtz now only want to get rid of him. Kurtz's unforgivable sin, in their eyes, is to have exposed colonisation for what it really is: a brutal, material business. On the return trip down the river Kurtz dies. Back in Brussels, Marlow goes to see his fiancée. She believes in the rhetoric of the civilising mission of the white man, and regards Kurtz as a God-sent angel. Marlow lies to her, saying that Kurtz's last words were her name, while in fact they were, "The horror! The horror!", summing up the life Kurtz had lived and seen.

The title Heart of Darkness is suggestive in itself. Africa was often referred to "the dark continent". However, Conrad's story is also about the "darkness", the impenetrable mystery that lies at the centre of the human personality. The geographical voyage of discovery into the unknown continent corresponds to a voyage of discovery into the self. When freed from the civilised conventions of European society, the white man reverts to his true self: savage and indistinctive rather than rational, as Freud had also suggested. In fact, he is more savage and cruel than the black man he claims he is trying to "civilise". This identification of colonisation and savagery is personified by the figure of Mr Kurtz, who has revert to savage rites and rituals not only to control the black population under his command, but also to satisfy his most basic physical appetites.

* **Duality of human nature**

To emphasize the theme of darkness within mankind, Marlow's narration takes place on a [yawl](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yawl) in the [Thames](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thames) [tidal estuary](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tidal_estuary). Early in the novella, Marlow recounts how London, the largest, most populous and wealthiest city in the world, was a dark place in [Roman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Rome) times. The idea that the Romans conquered the savage [Britons](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Britons_(historic)) parallels Conrad's tale of the Belgians conquering the savage Africans. The theme of darkness lurking beneath the surface of even "civilized" persons appears prominently and is explored in the character of Kurtz and through Marlow's passing sense of understanding with the Africans. Kurtz embodies all forms of an urge to be more or less than human. His writings show in Marlow's view an "exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence" and they appeal to "every altruistic sentiment." His predisposition for benevolence is clear in the statement "We whites...must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings....By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded". The Central Station manager quotes Kurtz, the exemplar: "Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing". Kurtz's inexperienced, scientific self in the fiery report is alive with the possibility of the cultivation and conversion of the savages. He would have subscribed to Moreau's proposition that "a pig may be educated". [Themes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theme_(literature)) developed in the novella's later scenes include the naïveté of Europeans (particularly women) regarding the various forms of darkness in the Congo; the British traders and Belgian [colonialists](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colonialist)' abuse of the [natives](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indigenous_people) and man's potential for duplicity. The symbolism in the book expands on these as a struggle between [good](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goodness_and_value_theory) and [evil](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evil) (light and darkness), not so much between [people](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Person) as in every [major character](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Major_character)'s [soul](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soul_(spirit)).

* **Critics**

In a [post-colonial](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postcolonialism) reading, the [Nigerian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nigeria) writer [Chinua Achebe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinua_Achebe), author of [*Things Fall Apart*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Things_Fall_Apart), famously criticized *Heart of Darkness* in his 1975 lecture [*An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/An_Image_of_Africa:_Racism_in_Conrad%27s_%22Heart_of_Darkness%22), saying the novella [de-humanized](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dehumanization) Africans, denied them language and culture and reduced them to a metaphorical extension of the dark and dangerous jungle into which the Europeans venture. Achebe's lecture prompted a lively debate, reactions at the time ranged from dismay and outrage—Achebe recounted a Professor Emeritus from the University of Massachusetts saying to Achebe after the lecture, "How dare you upset everything we have taught, everything we teach? *Heart of Darkness* is the most widely taught text in the university in this country. So how dare you say it's different?"—to support for Achebe's view—"I now realize that I had never really read *Heart of Darkness* although I have taught it for years," one professor told Achebe. Other critiques include Hugh Curtler's *Achebe on Conrad: Racism and Greatness in Heart of Darkness* (1997). In [*King Leopold's Ghost*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King_Leopold%27s_Ghost) (1998), [Adam Hochschild](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Hochschild) argues that literary scholars have made too much of the psychological aspects of *Heart of Darkness* while scanting the horror of Conrad's accurate recounting of the methods and effects of colonialism. He quotes Conrad as saying, "*Heart of Darkness* is experience ... pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case."