Conrad and the colonial representation of africa

Learning Objectives

The first unit will discuss the way in which Africa and its people were depicted in colonial literature, here exemplified by the fictional work of Joseph Conrad, who took a resolutely anti-colonial stance, but whose work still displays signs of deeply internalized racism and stereotyping, as pointed to by Chinua Achebe in his now legendary polemic ‘An Image of Africa’.

Keywords

* Conrad, colonialism, stereotyping

Time Required for this Unit

* Theory: 45 minutes
* Tasks: 90 minutes

The Theory

**Józef Teodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski (Joseph Conrad)** was born to Joseph Theodore Appollonius Korzeniowski and [Evelina](http://www.notablebiographies.com/knowledge/Evelina.html) Korzeniowski on December 3, 1857, in Berdyczew, Poland. His father was a writer and a translator of the works of William Shakespeare (1564–1616). He was also a member of a movement seeking Polish independence from Russia. In 1862 the family was forced to move to Russia because of his father's political activities. Conrad's mother died three years later in 1865. It was not until 1867 that Conrad and his father were allowed to return to Poland.

In 1868 Conrad attended high school in the Austrian province of Galicia for one year. The following year he and his father moved to Cracow, Poland, where his father died in 1869. From the time spent with his father, Conrad became a lover of literature, especially tales of the sea. After his father's death, his uncle, Thaddus Bobrowski, took Conrad in and raised him.

As a teenager the future novelist began dreaming of going to sea. In 1873, while on vacation in Western Europe, Conrad saw the sea for the first time. In the autumn of 1874 Conrad went to Marseilles, France, where he entered the French marine service. For the next twenty years Conrad led a successful career as a ship's officer. In 1877 he probably took part in the illegal shipment of arms from France to Spain in support of the [pretender](http://www.notablebiographies.com/knowledge/Pretender.html) to the Spanish throne, Don Carlos (1788–1855). At about this time Conrad seems to have fallen in love with a girl who was also a supporter of Carlos. The affair ended in a [duel](http://www.notablebiographies.com/knowledge/Duel.html) with an American named J. M. K. Blunt. This was the first time Conrad thought of taking his own life.

In June 1878 Conrad went to England for the first time. He worked as a [seaman](http://www.notablebiographies.com/knowledge/Seaman.html) on English ships, and in 1880 he began his career as an officer in the British merchant service, rising from third mate to master. His voyages took him to distant and exotic places such as Australia, India, Singapore, Java, and Borneo, which would provide the background for much of his fiction. In 1886 he became a British citizen. He received his first command in 1888. In 1890 he travelled to the Belgian Congo, Zaire, and Africa, which inspired his great short novel *The Heart of Darkness.*

In the early 1890s Conrad had begun to think about writing fiction based on his experiences in the East. In 1893 he discussed his work in progress, the novel *Almayer's Folly,* with a passenger, the novelist [John Galsworthy](http://www.notablebiographies.com/knowledge/John_Galsworthy.html) (1867–1933). A year later he retired from the merchant marines and completed *Almayer's Folly,* which was published in 1895.

It received favourable reviews and Conrad began a new career as a writer.

In 1896 he married Jessie George, an Englishwoman. Two years later, just after the birth of Borys, the first of their two sons, they settled in [Kent](http://www.notablebiographies.com/knowledge/Kent.html) in the south of England, where Conrad lived for the rest of his life. John Galsworthy was the first of a number of English and American writers who befriended Conrad. Others were Henry James (1843–1916), Arnold Bennett (1867–1931), Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936), Stephen Crane (1871–1900), and Ford Madox (Hueffer) Ford (1873–1939), with whom Conrad [collaborated](http://www.notablebiographies.com/knowledge/Collaboration.html) on two novels.

From 1896 through 1904 Conrad wrote novels about places he visited as a merchant marine and he explored themes such as the uncertainties of human sympathy. His early novels included *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1897), *The Heart of Darkness* (1899), and *Lord Jim* (1900).

The next three novels reflected Conrad's political side. The theme of *Nostromo* (1904) was the relationship between man's deepest needs (his psychology) and his public actions and decisions. The description of London, England, in *The Secret Agent* (1907) was similar to [Charles Dickens](http://www.notablebiographies.com/knowledge/Charles_Dickens.html)'s works. It portrayed a city of mean streets and shabby lives. In *Under Western Eyes* (1911) Conrad examined the Russian temperament.

Conrad's next novel, *Chance* (1914), was a study of solitude and sympathy. Because of its financial success and the efforts of his American publisher, he was able to live without worrying about money for the rest of his life. *Victory* (1915), his last important novel, further examined the theme of solitude and sympathy.

Although Conrad's last novels, *The Shadow Line* (1917) and *The Rover* (1923), were written as a farewell, he received many honours. In 1923 he visited the United States to great fanfare. The year after, he declined an offer of knighthood in England.

On August 3, 1924, Conrad died of a heart attack and was buried at Canterbury, England. His [gravestone](http://www.notablebiographies.com/knowledge/Headstone.html) bears these lines from Edmund Spenser (1552–1599): "Sleep after toyle, port after stormie seas,/ Ease after warre, death after life, does greatly please."

Literary critic [Harold Bloom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harold_Bloom) wrote that *Heart of Darkness* had been analysed more than any other work of literature that is studied in universities and colleges, which he attributed to Conrad's "unique propensity for ambiguity." However, it was not a big success during Conrad's life.When it was published as a single volume in 1902 with two more novellas, "Youth" and "The End of the Tether", it received the least commentary from critics.[[12]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heart_of_Darkness#cite_note-Moore-12) [F. R. Leavis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/F._R._Leavis) referred to *Heart of Darkness* as a "minor work" and criticised its "adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery". Conrad himself did not consider it to be particularly notable. By the 1960s, though, it was a standard assignment in many college and high school English courses.

In [*King Leopold's Ghost*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King_Leopold%27s_Ghost) (1998), [Adam Hochschild](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Hochschild) wrote that literary scholars have made too much of the psychological aspects of *Heart of Darkness*, while paying scant attention to Conrad's accurate recounting of the horror arising from the methods and effects of colonialism in the Congo Free State. "*Heart of Darkness* is experience ... pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case." Other critiques include Hugh Curtler's *Achebe on Conrad: Racism and Greatness in Heart of Darkness* (1997). Moving beyond ideology critique, French philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe called *Heart of Darkness* "one of the greatest texts of Western literature" and used Conrad's tale for a reflection on "The Horror of the West."

*Heart of Darkness* is criticised in [postcolonial](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postcolonialism) studies, particularly by Nigerian novelist [Chinua Achebe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinua_Achebe). In his 1975 public lecture "[An Image of Africa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/An_Image_of_Africa): Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness", Achebe described Conrad's novella as "an offensive and deplorable book" that [de-humanised](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dehumanization) Africans. Achebe argued that Conrad, "blinkered...with xenophobia", incorrectly depicted Africa as the antithesis of Europe and civilisation, ignoring the artistic accomplishments of the [Fang people](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beti-Pahuin_peoples) who lived in the Congo River basin at the time of the book’s publication. Since the book promoted and continues to promote a prejudiced image of Africa that "depersonalises a portion of the human race," he concluded that it should not be considered a great work of art.

Zimbabwean Professor Dr. Rino Zhuwarara broadly agreed with Achebe, though considered it important to be "sensitised to how peoples of other nations perceive Africa." In 2003, Botswanan professor Dr. Peter Mwikisa concluded the book was "the great lost opportunity to depict dialogue between Africa and Europe." In 1983, British Professor Cedric Watts published an essay expressing indignation at his perceived implication of Achebe's criticism: that only black people may accurately analyse and assess the novella. Dr. Stan Galloway writes, in a comparison of *Heart of Darkness* with *Jungle Tales of Tarzan*, "The inhabitants [of both works], whether antagonists or compatriots, were clearly imaginary and meant to represent a particular fictive cipher and not a particular African people."

Fellow novelist [Caryl Phillips](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caryl_Phillips) stated after a 2003 interview that "Achebe is right; to the African reader the price of Conrad's eloquent denunciation of colonisation is the recycling of racist notions of the 'dark' continent and her people. Those of us who are not from Africa may be prepared to pay this price, but this price is far too high for Achebe." More recent critics have stressed that the "continuities" between Conrad and Achebe are profound and that a form of "postcolonial mimesis" ties the two authors.