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AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL DISCOURSE IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS*

Summary

The objective of the article is to present and analyse autobiographical elements in Joseph Conrad's literary masterpiece *Heart of Darkness* perceived as one of the examples of fiction implementing an autobiographical discourse in English literature. The author of the article analyses places, events and people in the Congo that influenced Conrad to write his novella.

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie i analiza elementów autobiograficznych w arcydziele literackim Josepha Conrada pt. „Jądro ciemności”, postrzeganym jako jeden z przykładów fikcji literackiej wykorzystującej dyskurs autobiograficzny w literaturze angielskiej. Autor artykułu analizuje miejsca, wydarzenia i ludzi w Kongo, którzy wpłynęli na napisanie noweli przez Conrada.

Introduction

An autobiographical discourse in literature refers to the ways in which authors incorporate elements of their own life experiences, personal identity, and inner thoughts into their fictional or non-fictional works. This discourse often blends the boundaries between reality and fiction, providing readers with insights into the author's personal world while exploring broader universal themes. An autobiographical discourse in literature represents a profound interplay between memory, identity, and narrative, encompassing a broad spectrum of self-referential writing, where authors recount their personal histories, experiences, and introspections. Autobiographical literature can therefore be seen as a confluence of fact and fiction, providing insights into the human condition while reflecting the subjective reality of the author. Warner asserts that

So great is our will to believe in certain stories that explicitly autobiographical works are often judged as authentic until proven faulty, and even fictional works exhibiting a modicum of documentary flavor are often scoured for testimonial relevance. The tendency of readers to confuse the author with the main character or narrator, which has long been a frustration of literature teachers, is an effect of our will to believe in the stories of others. This desire to equate or, at the very least, relate the narrating voice and the author is particularly prevalent among books with authors who are considered to represent a particular social group and whose sense of self is self-consciously linked to a collective identity (2103, p. 3).

An autobiographical discourse very often takes theoretical recourse of narrative identity theory that posits that individuals are able to shape their identities by integrating their life experiences into an internalized, evolving story. This theory,

articulated by psychologists such as Dan P. McAdams, emphasizes that personal narratives are essential in constructing coherent self-concepts that should govern one's life. McAdams and McLean claim that narrative identity "is a person's internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose" and they add that "[p]eople construct and share stories about themselves [...] detailing particular episodes and periods in their lives and what those experiences mean to them. Out of the episodic particulars of autobiographical memory, a person may construct and internalize an evolving and integrative story for life" (2013, p. 233). Hence, in literature, an autobiographical discourse often serves as a medium for authors to articulate and reshape their identities providing them with a sense of concord, purpose, integrity, and meaning.

An autobiographical discourse has a very long history with its roots in the classical antiquity. It is a fascinating subject because it offers insights into how individuals of that era viewed themselves and their lives. Unlike modern autobiography, which often focuses on the individual's inner life and personal development, autobiographical texts from this period tend to emphasize public deeds, moral exemplarity, and the relationship between the individual and the broader society. Augustine's *Confessions* is one of the most detailed and introspective autobiographical works from antiquity. It chronicles his sinful youth, his conversion to Christianity, and his reflections on God's grace and providence. Augustine's narrative is deeply religious, centered on his spiritual transformation and relationship with God and it is a testimony of faith and a reflection on divine grace. Here, Augustine is candid about his sins, struggles, and emotions. This level of personal disclosure is relatively rare in ancient autobiographical texts. *Confessions* are intended not just as self-examination, but also as a work of theology and an example to others. Augustine seeks to inspire his readers to reflect on their own lives and seek God's guidance.

Medieval literature also saw the emergence of self-reflective texts, often within religious or philosophical contexts. An autobiographical discourse in medieval literature often intertwines personal narrative with religious, social, and political themes. While modern notions of autobiography were not fully developed, many medieval texts reveal authors' personal experiences, thoughts, and reflections. *Vita Nuova* by Dante Alighieri could function as one of many examples of such narratives. In this prose and verse work, Dante recounts his love for Beatrice and his artistic development, blending personal narrative with literary creation. Dante uses his experiences to explore themes of love, poetry, and spiritual growth, presenting his personal story as part of a larger literary and spiritual quest. In the narrative, Beatrice serves as both a real person and a symbolic figure in Dante's life, illustrating the medieval tendency to intertwine personal experience with idealized concepts. Significantly, the work blurs the lines between autobiography and fiction, demonstrating how medieval authors often used personal experiences as a basis for broader artistic and spiritual explorations.

Subsequently, the Renaissance witnessed a burgeoning interest in individualism, leading to a proliferation of autobiographical writing. An autobiographical discourse in Renaissance literature often reflects the period's humanistic emphasis on the individual's experience and the quest for self-knowledge.

Writers from this era utilized autobiography to explore personal identity, intellectual growth, and the complexities of human existence. Literary figures such as Michel de Montaigne, with his *Essays*, exemplify the introspective and self-exploratory spirit of the time. His essays are often considered as one of the earliest forms of modern autobiography. Here, Montaigne reflects on his thoughts, experiences, and observations, revealing much about his personality and intellectual development. For instance, in “Of Cannibals”, he discusses the relativity of cultural norms and criticizes European ethnocentrism. Montaigne’s work is characterized by its introspective nature and candid self-revelation. His essays are a blend of personal anecdotes and philosophical musings, demonstrating the Renaissance emphasis on individualism and skepticism. His style is conversational and self-reflective, providing insights into his character and worldview and his essays serve as a vehicle for Montaigne to explore his inner life and the human condition, reflecting the Renaissance humanist tradition of valuing personal experience and critical thinking. And, coming closer to our modern times, the 19th century saw the expansion of autobiographical discourse into diverse subgenres, including novels, diaries, and memoirs. Finally, the 20th century, marked by psychoanalytic theory and existential philosophy, deepened the introspective and fragmented nature of autobiographical texts. Authors such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce pushed the boundaries of narrative form, incorporating stream-of-consciousness technique¹ to depict the inner workings of the mind.

As for stylistic elements of an autobiographical discourse it is important to assert that the first-person narration is a hallmark of this sort of writing, providing a direct channel for personal reflection for the author. This perspective allows readers to engage intimately with the author’s experiences and thoughts. Moreover, autobiographies often employ non-linear temporal structures, reflecting the fragmented and selective nature of memory. Flashbacks, flash-forwards, and fragmented recollections are common techniques used to convey the complexities of a personal history. Besides, it is significant to add that metafiction, or self-referential writing, is frequently used in autobiographical literature to highlight the constructed nature of the narrative. Authors may comment on the act of writing itself, questioning the reliability and subjectivity of their accounts.

As far as the themes are concerned, an autobiographical discourse is governed by a few concepts. One of those appears to be the exploration of identity undertaken by authors grappling with questions of selfhood, often examining how personal and societal factors shape their sense of self. Moreover, autobiographical texts frequently

¹ Stream-of-consciousness is a literary technique used to depict the continuous flow of a character’s thoughts, feelings, and memories. It attempts to capture the natural, often chaotic way in which human thoughts occur, jumping from one idea to another without following a structured or logical order. This method seeks to represent the inner workings of the mind more authentically than traditional narrative styles, which typically organize thoughts in a clear, linear fashion. In stream-of-consciousness writing, the narrative might include fragmented sentences, abrupt transitions, and free associations, reflecting the spontaneous and often disjointed nature of thought. It can shift quickly between different time periods, perspectives, and emotions, mirroring the way our minds often move between different ideas and memories without warning. This technique is closely associated with modernist writers like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner, who used it to explore the psychological depths of their characters. For example, in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the stream-of-consciousness technique is used extensively to portray the inner thoughts of the protagonist, Leopold Bloom, as he goes about his day. Similarly, Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* uses this technique to delve into the minds of its characters, revealing their inner lives and emotions in a fluid, almost dreamlike manner.

delve into the nature of memory, acknowledging its selective and reconstructive aspects. Secondly, the tension between remembering and forgetting is a recurrent motif, reflecting the challenges of accurately representing the past. Apart from those, the depiction of trauma and the subsequent journey towards healing is a significant theme in many autobiographies. Thanks to their narratives, authors attempt to process and make sense of their traumatic experiences, often finding catharsis in the act of writing. Significantly, an autobiographical discourse is deeply embedded in cultural and social contexts. Authors often reflect on their socio-political environments, addressing issues such as race, gender, class, and colonialism. This intersectionality provides a richer understanding of their personal experiences.

Significantly, an autobiographical discourse in literature serves as a vital medium for self-expression, identity formation, and cultural critique. Through various narrative techniques and thematic explorations, autobiographical texts offer profound insights into the human experience. As a genre, it continues to evolve, reflecting the dynamic interplay between personal narrative and broader social contexts. The study of autobiographical discourse not only enriches our understanding of individual lives but also illuminates the complex fabric of human existence.

An autobiographical discourse in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

Joseph Conrad, born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, is a seminal figure in English literature, known for his complex narratives and profound psychological insights. A Polish expatriate who became a naturalized British citizen, Conrad's rich life experiences deeply influenced his literary output. According to Sanders,

Joseph Conrad (1857 – 1924) was a different kind of outsider in search of integrity. Conrad, born in Poland the son of a prominent nationalist victim of Russian repression, was naturalized as a British citizen in 1886. If he did not in any truly reasonable sense betray his homeland, and if he rarely refers directly to the Poland he had left, a sense of betrayal nevertheless haunts his work. Conrad's career as an exile had begun and developed as a merchant seaman and it was a writer of sea-stories set in the East Indies and the Pacific that he first attracted public attention (1994, pp. 472 – 73).

Conrad, born in 1857 in Berdychiv, then part of the Russian Empire, into a Polish noble family, had life marked by political turmoil and his parents were involved in the Polish independence movement, resulting in their exile to Siberia. As stated by me in my doctoral thesis, “from his earliest years he is the witness to atrocities committed by Russians upon him and his parents, leading Polish patriots, who are pleaded guilty of clandestine fighting against invaders” (Giza, 2019, p. 60). Orphaned by the age of eleven, Conrad's formative years were turbulent, embedding a sense of displacement and existential questioning that would later permeate his narratives, as asserted by Orr who avers that young Teodor “early on experienced first-hand the conditions of revolution, political oppression, colonialism, exile, and illness that would find their expression in his fiction” (1999, p. 203). After these traumatic early experiences, Conrad moved to France and then to England, where he embarked on a career in the British merchant navy. His experiences as a sailor deeply influenced his literary works, providing vivid and authentic descriptions of life at sea and in distant lands. Conrad's

voyage to the Congo in 1890, in particular, stands out as a pivotal experience that profoundly affected him and directly inspired the novella *Heart of Darkness*.

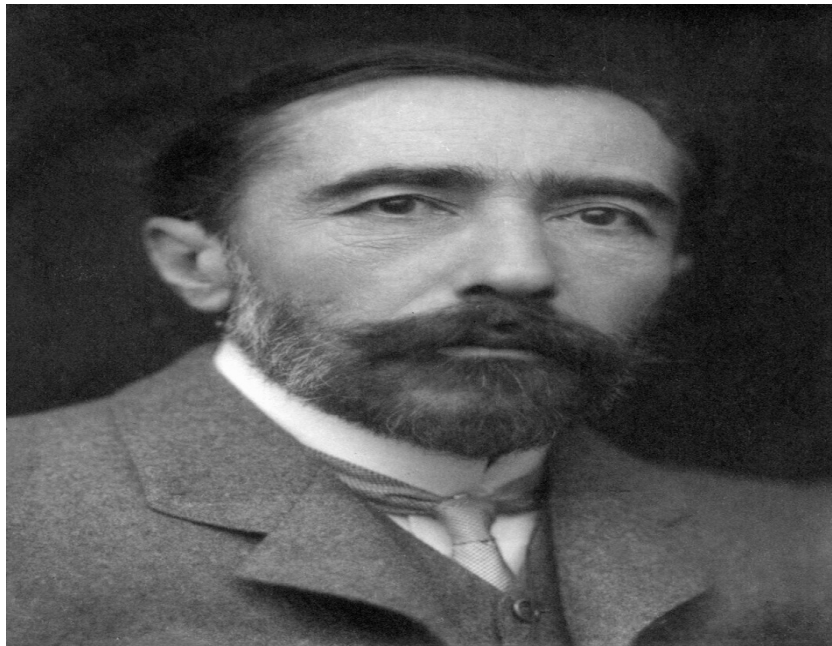


Photo 1.1. (Joseph Conrad in 1904. Internet source 1).

Conrad's father, Apollo Korzeniowski, was a writer and an ardent Polish patriot, whose political activities led to his family's exile to Russia. The hardships and dislocation of his early life, coupled with the deaths of both his parents, left Conrad with a sense of rootlessness and existential disquiet. These themes would later surface in his literary explorations of alienation and identity. Conrad's seafaring life took him to many of the world's remote and exotic places, providing a wealth of material for his fiction. At sixteen, Conrad left Poland for Marseille, beginning a twenty-year maritime career. His experiences at sea, encountering diverse cultures and the raw forces of nature, profoundly influenced his worldview and literary themes. By the age of thirty-two, Conrad had settled in England, where he began his writing career, producing works that reflect his multifaceted identity as a Pole, a seaman, and an English novelist.

Undoubtedly, Conrad's most analyzed literary work, the novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899), is deeply rooted in his own experiences as a riverboat captain in the Congo. In 1890, he took command of a steamer on the Congo River, a journey that profoundly impacted him and directly inspired writing the novella. His observations of colonial exploitation and the psychological burdens of isolation in an alien environment permeate this masterpiece. The novella's protagonist, Marlow, mirrors Conrad's journey into the African interior, confronting the brutal realities of colonial exploitation. The psychological depth and moral ambiguity of the text reflect Conrad's internal struggles and his critique of imperialism. Conrad's personal letters and "The Congo Diary" reveal striking parallels between his real-life observations and Marlow's narrative. His acute depiction of the Congo's landscape, the oppressive heat, and the pervasive sense of foreboding draw directly from his own encounters. Moreover, the

character of Kurtz, with his descent into madness and moral corruption, can be seen as a projection of Conrad's fears about the darkness within humanity, a recurring theme in his literary output.

Conrad's narrative techniques, characterized by non-linear timelines, multiple perspectives, and unreliable narrators, serve to deepen the autobiographical discourse in his works, dealing mostly with sea and alienation of the sailors. In line with Sikorska, "it is the sea that provides the setting for his best novels. Yet, he does not write the literature of the sea-adventure but rather explores the psychological deliberations and 'guilt-complex' originating from his abandonment of Poland that were to become the core of his writing" (2007, p. 462). These techniques allow him to explore complex psychological states and moral ambiguities, reflecting his own introspections and experiences. For instance, the fragmented narrative in *Heart of Darkness* mirrors the disorientation Conrad felt during his Congo expedition, while the shifting perspectives in *Lord Jim* and *Nostramo* underscore the multifaceted nature of truth and identity. These narrative strategies create a layered reading experience, inviting readers to engage with the text on a deeper, more personal level. Moreover, as claimed by Burgess, Conrad's "handling of English is distinctive, a little foreign in its lack of restraint and its high colour, but admirably suited to the descriptions of storms, labouring ships with skippers shouting through high winds, the hot calm of a pilgrimage in the Red Sea" (1987, p. 212).

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is often examined for its rich and complex narrative techniques, but it also provides fertile ground for exploring autobiographical elements. As asserted by Sikorska, "the effects of the white man's presence in the colonies can be observed in Conrad's novella [...], the most grim and terrifying of his works" (2007, p. 464). Conrad's own life experiences deeply inform the novella, and the interplay between fiction and autobiography can be seen in the text's thematic depth, characters, and setting. Published in 1899, the novella is widely regarded as a profound exploration of colonialism, human nature, and the dark recesses of the human psyche. What is often less explored is how the novella reflects Conrad's own life experiences, particularly his journey into the Congo and his broader existential struggles. By examining autobiographical elements within *Heart of Darkness*, the readers can gain deeper insights into Conrad's personal history and the ways in which it shaped his literary work. Often regarded as a semi-autobiographical novella, it reflects his own experiences and insights, particularly regarding the Congo and colonial exploitation, as evidenced in the rich, detailed portrayal of the setting and themes in his literary masterpiece.

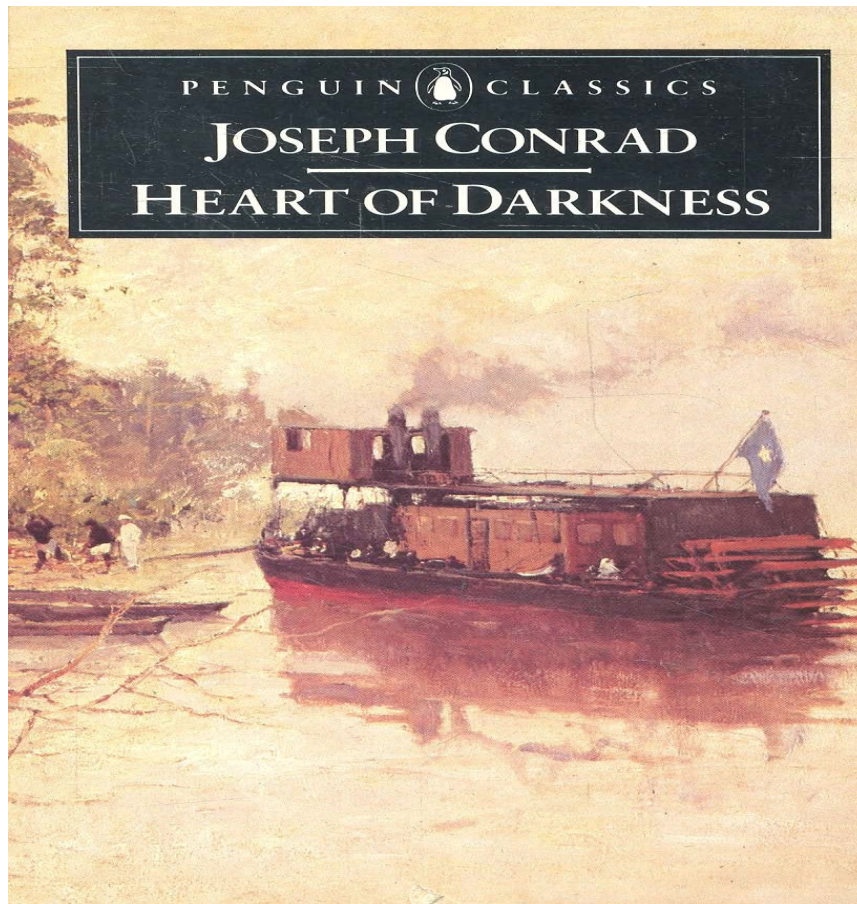


Figure 1.1. (The cover of *Heart of Darkness*. Internet source 2).

The river expedition in the Congo Free State

Conrad's novella narrates the story of Marlow, a seaman who journeys up the Congo River to find Kurtz, an ivory trader who has succumbed to the jungle's darkness, menacing temptations, and greed, as asserted in one of the commentaries done by Marlow:

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 (Conrad, 1928, p. 115).

The narrative parallels Conrad's own voyage to the Congo, undertaken when he served as the captain of the river steamboat *Roi des Belges*, the journey described in Conrad's "The Congo Diary" which focuses upon the presentation of both the expedition on land from Matadi to Kinshasa and the journey on river from the Malebo Pool up to Bangala in 1890. Like Marlow, Conrad witnessed the brutal realities of colonial exploitation and the psychological impact of the African wilderness. The brutality and inhumanity he witnessed are echoed in the novella's depiction of the exploitation and dehumanization of African people by European colonizers. Perceiving Conrad's masterpiece in this perspective, Bloom asserts that the "autobiographical basis of the narrative is well known, and its introspective bias obvious; that is Conrad's longest journey into self" (2009, p. 41).

Picture 1.2. (*Roi des Belges* [King of the Belgians] – the Belgian riverboat Conrad commanded on the upper Congo river in 1890. Internet source 3).

Conrad’s descriptions of the Congo and atrocities inflicted upon its inhabitants in *Heart of Darkness* are stark and vivid, reflecting his firsthand observations. For instance, Marlow’s account of his journey reveals a deep sense of disillusionment and horror at the atrocities he witnessed:

I’ve seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but, by all the stars! these were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men—men, I tell you (Conrad, 1928, p. 65).

This passage echoes Conrad’s own disillusionment and revulsion that was vividly expressed in his essay entitled “Geography and Some Explorers” in which he describes the white men’s ‘glorious enterprise’ in the Congo as “the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration” (qtd. by Goonetilleke, 2003, p. 30). The dehumanizing effect of colonialism that Marlow observes—embodied in the character of Kurtz who embodies white people’s proneness to exercise brutality and power upon inhabitants of the Congo and who descends into madness—mirrors Conrad’s view of the exploitative nature of European colonialism.

Conrad’s journey to the Congo was both a physical and psychological ordeal, as expressed, for instance, in the following entry in his “The Congo Diary”, dated 13th June, 1890: “Think just now that my life amongst the people (white) around here cannot be very comfortable” (2023, p. 91), one dated 4th July, 1890: “At night when the moon rose heard shouts and drumming in distant villages. Passed a bad night” (p. 94), one dated 7th July, 1890: “Hot, thirsty and tired” (p. 95), and another one dated 29th July, 1890: “Bad news from up the river. All steamers disabled. One wrecked” (p. 98). Similarly, in *Heart of Darkness* Marlow describes his mission as a slow and

dangerous descent into the unknown and mysterious wilderness and its accompanying darkness, danger and silence, as expressed in the following quotes:

It was upward of thirty days before I saw the mouth of the big river. We anchored off the seat of the government. But my work would not begin till some two hundred miles further on. So as soon as I could make a start for a place thirty miles higher up (Conrad, 1928, p. 62),

I had to wait in the station for ten days – an eternity (p. 68),

It was just months from the day we left the creek when we came to the bank below Kurtz's station (p. 92),

For me it crawled towards Kurtz – exclusively; but when the steam-pipes started leaking we crawled very slow. The reaches opened before us and closed behind, as if the forest had stepped leisurely across the water to bar the way for our return. We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness (p. 95).

And, importantly, this imagery resonates with Conrad's own letters and reflections on his expedition in the Congo, where he felt the oppressive atmosphere and the moral ambiguity of colonial enterprise.

Marlow's portrayals of places in the Congo, replete with the white men's activity, described as full of inefficiency, as indicated in the following Marlow's observation:

I came upon a boiler wallowing in the grass, then found a path leading up the hill. It turned aside for the boulders, and also for an undersized railway-truck lying there on its back with its wheels in the air. One was off. The thing looked as dead as the carcass of some animal. I came upon more pieces of decaying machinery, a stack of rusty rails. To the left a clump of trees made a shady spot, where dark things seemed to stir feebly. I blinked, the path was steep. A horn tooted to the right, and I saw the black people run. 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 (Conrad, 1928, pp. 63 – 4),

I avoided a vast artificial hole somebody had been digging on the slope, the purpose of which I found it impossible to divine. It wasn't a quarry or a sandpit, anyhow. It was just a hole. It might have been connected with the philanthropic desire of giving the criminals something to do. I don't know. Then I nearly fell into a very narrow ravine, almost no more than a scar in the hillside. I discovered that a lot of imported drainage-pipes for the settlement had been tumbled in there. There wasn't one that was not broken (pp. 65 – 6).

demoralization and despair, resonate with Conrad's observations and, significantly, they reflect Conrad's condemnation of the moral corruption he perceived in white men's colonial enterprises in the Congo. Bloom acknowledges that

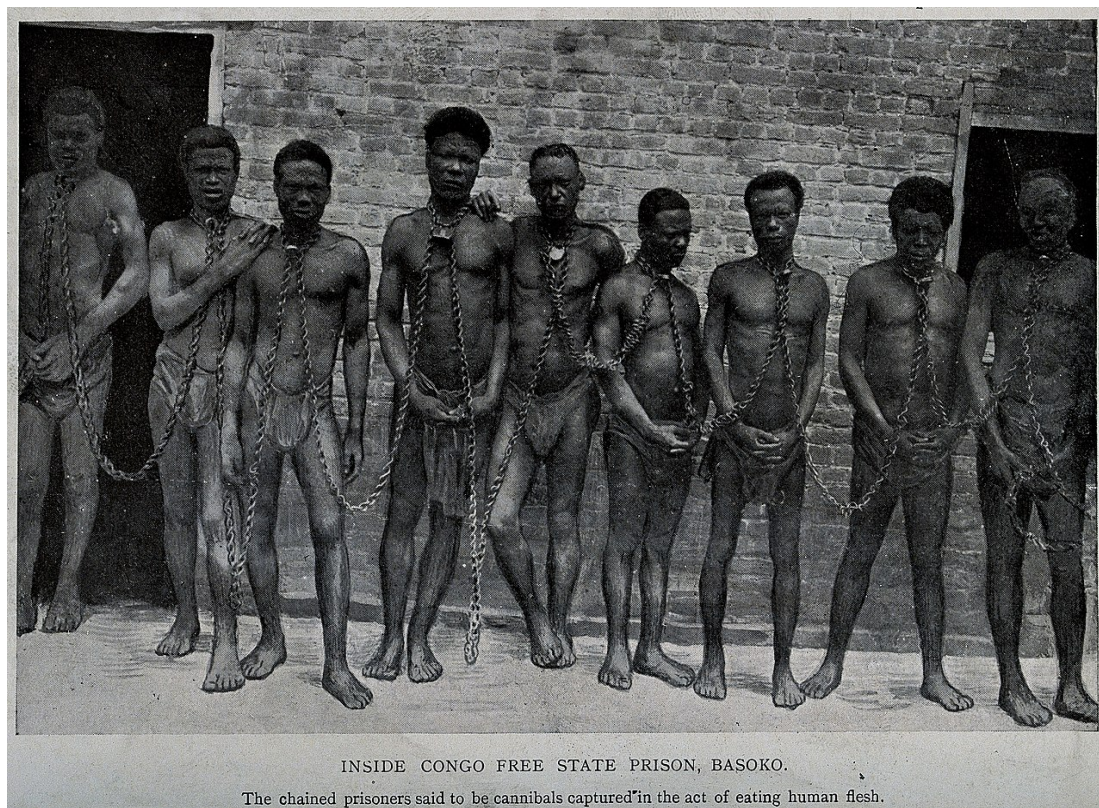
The demoralization of the first company station is rendered by a boiler 'wallowing in the grass,' by a railway truck with its wheels in the air. Presently Marlow will discover a scar in the hillside into which drainage pipes for the settlement had been tumbled: then will walk into the grove where the Negroes are free to die in a 'greenish gloom' (2009, p. 43).

However, the Congo, as depicted in *Heart of Darkness*, is more than just a backdrop; it is a living entity, characterized by its oppressive atmosphere and enigmatic nature. In the novella, Marlow describes the Congo as having "a mighty big river [...] resembling an immense snake uncoiled" (Conrad, 1928, p. 52). This imagery aligns with Conrad's

own description of the Congo River from his “The Congo Diary”: “Banks wooded very densely and valley of the river rather deep but very narrow, [...] Congo very narrow and rapid” (203, pp. 98, 99). Both descriptions convey the river’s treacherous and uncharted nature, symbolizing the unknown and the dangers lurking within the heart of Africa.

Conrad’s firsthand experiences with the brutalities of colonialism are vividly mirrored in *Heart of Darkness*. The novella exposes the greed, cruelty, and moral corruption of European colonizers. This theme is central to the narrative, as Marlow witnesses the exploitation of African natives and the devastating impact of European imperialism. One poignant example is the portrayal of the “grove of death”, where Marlow finds dying African laborers, reduced to skeletal figures by the harsh conditions imposed by their European overseers. Marlow observes:

I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno. [...] Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. [...] this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die. They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom (Conrad, 1928, p. 66).



Picture 1.3. (A line of Congolese prisoners in Basoko joined by large neck chains. Internet source 4).

This harrowing scene echoes Conrad’s own observations of the exploitation and mistreatment of the Congolese people during his journey, the remarks similar to that one voiced by Marlow at the beginning of his narrative:

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much (Conrad, 1928, pp. 50 – 1).

This sentiment is deeply embedded in the fabric of *Heart of Darkness*, where the hypocrisy and moral bankruptcy of colonial enterprises are laid bare.

Charles Marlow as Conrad's *alter ego*

In literary studies, the concept of an *alter ego* often refers to a character that represents the author's personality, experiences, or inner thoughts. Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* presents Charles Marlow, a character whose experiences and reflections closely mirror those of Conrad himself, particularly during his own journey to the Congo. As asserted by Michael Greaney, Joseph Conrad's "narratorial personae, most famously of Charlie Marlow [...] serves as Conrad's Anglo-Saxon *alter ego* in a number of works – although as we shall have reason to note, Marlow is, in some respects, hardly a conventional Englishman" (2015, pp. 102 – 3). Similarly, Owen Knowles and Gene M. Moore in their edited *Oxford Reader's Companion to Conrad*, while indicating a biographical link between Conrad and his fictional creation, maintain that Marlow "has often been seen as Conrad's autobiographical alter ego, since, his narratives are based on Conrad's own experiences in the ill-fated *Palestine* ('Youth') or in the Congo ('Heart of Darkness')" (2000, p. 219). Marlow, therefore, is privileged to express many of the author's personal reflections and philosophical musings such as, for instance, that one about life:

Droll thing life is—that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself—that comes too late—a crop of inextinguishable regrets (Conrad, 1928, p. 150).

This introspection aligns with Conrad's existential outlook, shaped by his own experiences of loss during his childhood (within seven years, both of Conrad's parents had died of tuberculosis and he was sent to live with his mother's brother, his Uncle Tadeusz, in Cracow), isolation and displacement while living in England. And while analysing Conrad's protagonists' isolation that very often is similar to Conrad's loneliness, Wiesław Krajka asserts that "isolation nearly always brings about distressing consequences, misery, and calamity-death, suicide, madness, or at least unsettling one's system of values and emotional balance-which result both from individual activities and the cruel fate" (1992, p. 3).

Significantly, Marlow's contemplative nature and sense of isolation resonate with Conrad's own feelings of being an outsider, both culturally and linguistically, in England. Marlow's sense of being an outsider is palpable throughout the novella, as indicated in his remark:

... No, it is impossible it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence-that which makes its truth, its meaning-its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream-alone (Conrad, 1928, p. 82).

and this sense of solitude reflects Conrad's feelings of alienation, not only as an expatriate but also as a witness to the inhumanity of colonialism while in the Congo. Jerry Allen states that:

His [Conrad's] reactions to his river trip were given in a letter to Mme. Poradowska written two days after his return to Kinchassa. 'My days here are dreary. Make no mistake about that! I am truly sorry to have come here. Indeed I regret it bitterly. [...] Everything is repellent to me here. Men and things, but especially men. And I am repellent to them, too. From the manager in Africa – who has taken the trouble of telling a good many people that I displease him intensely – down to the lowest mechanic, all have a gift of getting on my nerves; and consequently I am perhaps not as pleasant to them as I might be. The manager is a common ivory-dealer with sordid instincts who considers himself a merchant though he is only a kind of African shopkeeper. His name is Delcommune. He hates the English and I am of course regarded as an English here (1967, p. 55).

and Bloom adds that

After reaching the location where he was to take command of his own ship, it was revealed that the boat was damaged, and Conrad had to travel under other leadership once again. Certainly more disconcerting than the surrounding presence and subsequent threat of physical illness and the disappointment of being unable to assume his post as captain was Conrad's exposure to those most disturbing elements of humanity witnessed in the Congo. He was greeted by an overwhelming exhibition of greed, violence, and, arguably, evil, which revealed itself in the entrenched imperialist activity in the region. Conrad reportedly returned to England ill and disillusioned (2009, p. 15).

Joseph Conrad's journey to the Congo was pivotal in shaping his views on imperialism and colonial exploitation. As a Pole, whose father was a political activist fighting to rebuild a nation ruthlessly conquered by other European powers, Conrad was sensitive to the exploitation and disruption that occurs when one culture will use any means, including aggressive military action, to impose its will upon another. The motive is often the theft of natural resources, such as oil, precious metals, or forests. In *Heart of Darkness*, it is ivory, valuable in Europe at the time for the manufacture of piano keys, elaborate chess pieces, jewelry, billiard balls, toiletry items, and ornaments of various kinds. Conrad's experiences in the Congo were harrowing; he witnessed the brutal realities of European colonialism, including the exploitation and dehumanization of African people. The psychological and physical toll of this experience left a lasting impact on Conrad, which is vividly reflected in *Heart of Darkness*.

Significantly, Marlow embarks on a journey that closely parallels Conrad's own expedition. Like Conrad, Marlow is a seaman who takes a job with a European company to navigate a steamboat up the Congo River. Throughout the novella, Marlow's observations and reflections on the colonial enterprise echo the disillusionment and horror that Conrad himself felt during his time in Africa.

Moreover, both Conrad and Marlow are drawn to the Congo by a sense of adventure and the allure of the unknown. Conrad's decision was partly motivated by a desire to experience something extraordinary, a sentiment that Marlow also expresses early in the novella. Marlow's fascination with maps and unexplored territories mirrors Conrad's own curiosity about distant lands, highlighting a shared sense of wanderlust, as indicated in one of Marlow's assertions:

Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, When I grow up I will go there. The North Pole was one of these places, I remember. [...] But there was one yet-the biggest, the most blank, so to speak-that I had a hankering after (Conrad, 1928, p. 52).

Marlow's venture deeper into the Congo which, if "we are to accept [...] autobiographical Marlow's confessions in *Heart of Darkness*," as asserted by Zdzisław Najder, "was a very lonely one" (2004, p. 129) and during this expedition he becomes increasingly aware of the atrocities committed by the European colonizers. He witnesses the exploitation and suffering of the African people, much like Conrad did during his own journey. For instance, Marlow describes the "grove of death" where he encounters dying and enslaved Africans, a scene that likely reflects Conrad's own observations of the inhumane treatment of the Congolese. This depiction aligns with historical accounts of the Congo Free State under King Leopold II, where forced labor, violence, and death were rampant, as vividly presented by Marlow:

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 (Conrad, 1928, p. 67).

and Conrad in his "The Congo Diary":

Saw another dead body lying by the path in an attitude of meditative repose (entry dated 4th July, 1890; 2023, p. 93).

On the road to day passed a skeleton tied up to a post. Also white man's grave – No name (entry dated 29th July, 1890; 2023, p. 98).

Hence, the psychological and physical toll of the Congo on Marlow is another significant parallel to Conrad's experience. Marlow's journey becomes increasingly surreal and nightmarish as he confronts the darkness within the human soul and the corrupting influence of power. Conrad, too, suffered physically from illness during his time in the Congo and was deeply affected by the moral and ethical corruption he witnessed. The novella's famous line "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad, 1928, p. 149) uttered by Kurtz, resonates with Conrad's own sense of despair and disillusionment with imperialism.



Picture 1.4. (King Leopold II of Belgium as Garter Knight. Internet source 5).

Importantly, throughout *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow offers critical reflections on the nature of imperialism, questioning the moral justification of European colonial ventures. Conrad, in his personal letters and other writings, expressed similar sentiments, condemning the exploitation and dehumanization inherent in the colonial system, as indicated in the aforementioned essay “Geography and Some Explorers” in which he describes the white men’s bestiality in the Congo as “the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration” (qtd. by Goonetilleke, 2003, p. 30). It is therefore important to assert that Marlow’s narrative serves as a vehicle for Conrad to critique the hypocrisy and brutality of European imperialism, using Marlow’s voice to articulate his own disenchantment.

Marlow, as a character, serves as an alter ego for Joseph Conrad, allowing the author to explore and critique his own experiences and the broader implications of European colonialism. The parallels between Conrad’s journey to the Congo and Marlow’s expedition in *Heart of Darkness* are striking, from their motivations to their experiences of colonial brutality and psychological deterioration. Through Marlow, Conrad not only reflects on his personal experiences but also offers a profound commentary on the darkness at the heart of imperialism. *Heart of Darkness* thus stands as both a personal narrative and a universal critique, with Marlow as the literary embodiment of Conrad’s inner self.

The enigmatic Kurtz: a composite of a variety of influences

Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is one of the most enduring works of English literature, offering a bleak yet powerful exploration of colonialism, human nature, evil, brutality, and the limits of civilization. Central to this narrative is the

mysterious figure of Kurtz, a European ivory trader who utterly succumbs to the darkness of the African Congo, becoming a god-like figure among the indigenous people he exploits. Kurtz, a station chief who yields to the tempting influence of power and greed, is often perceived as an embodiment of iniquity that is intrinsically associated with the white people's colonial enterprise in Africa. And, as asserted in my doctoral thesis, "on account of the fact that the whole Europe contributed to the shaping of Kurtz – the personification of the archetype of evil – it is indirectly accentuated that the whole process of imperialism is soaked in enormities" (Giza, 2019, p. 62). However, what is less widely known is that the persona of Kurtz could have been inspired by real people Conrad encountered and events he learned about during his time in the Congo.

Among possible inspiration for Conrad's Kurtz, Léon Auguste Théophile Rom (1859 – 1924), a Belgian officer in the Congo Free State, stands out as a significant, though terrifying, model. Rom was born in 1859 in Mons, Belgium. He joined the Belgian military and eventually found himself in service of King Leopold II in the Congo Free State, a vast territory in Central Africa that was the personal property of the Belgian monarch. Rom quickly rose through the ranks, and his name became synonymous with the ruthless and barbaric methods employed to enforce the Belgian control over the region. He served as a station chief in several parts of the Congo, most notably in the area around Stanley Falls (now Boyoma Falls), where he established a reputation for his viciousness.



Picture 1.5. (Léon Auguste Théophile Rom. Internet source 6).

Rom's time in the Congo was marked by accounts of extreme violence and oppression. He was reportedly involved in numerous massacres of the local population and was known for displaying the severed heads of African rebels on spikes around his station, as was done by Conrad's Kurtz in the novella. While referring to Rom's sinister procedure, Maarten Couttenier asserts that Rom "who participated in the war against the Arabo-Swahili, used more than 20 human skulls to decorate the flowerbeds of his colonial outpost" (2024, p. 145). This macabre practice was not only intended as a deterrent to others but also served as a chilling symbol of the absolute power he wielded in the region. Such acts were in line with the broader atrocities committed under the regime of King Leopold II. As asserted by Adam Hochschild,

In the 1880s, as the European powers were carving up Africa, King Leopold II of Belgium seized for himself the vast and mostly unexplored territory surrounding the Congo River. Carrying out a genocidal plundering of the Congo, he looted its rubber, brutalized its people, and ultimately slashed its population by ten million—all the while shrewdly cultivating his reputation as a great humanitarian (1999, p. 4).

The cruelty of King Leopold's soldier, Rom, is well-documented, with several contemporary reports highlighting his disregard for human life and his sadistic tendencies. These traits of his personality and behavior bear a striking resemblance to the fictional character of Kurtz, who similarly surrounds himself with the heads of rebels he has executed and is driven mad by his absolute authority over the African tribes under his control. Marlow presents in such a manner Kurtz's baleful ornamentation:

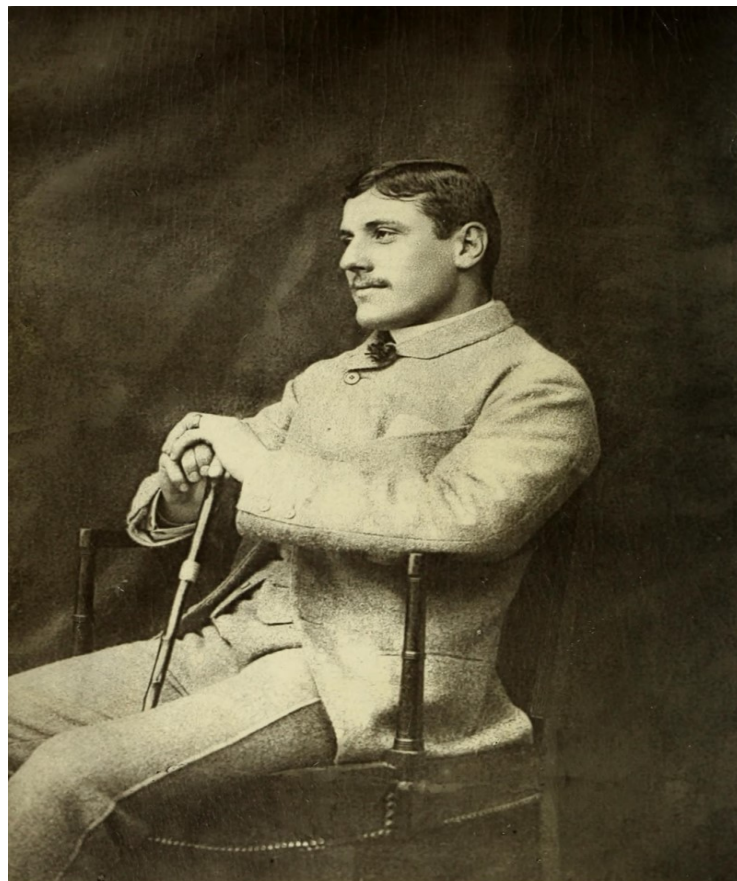
You remember I told you I had been stuck at the distance by certain attempts at ornamentation, rather remarkable in the ruinous aspect of the place. Now I had suddenly a nearer view, and its first result was to make me throw my head back as if before a blow. Then I went carefully from post to post with my glass, and I saw my mistake. These round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic; they were expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing—food for thought and also for vultures if there had been any looking down from the sky; but at all events for such ants as were industrious enough to ascend the pole. They would have been even more impressive, those heads on the stakes, if their faces had not been turned to the house. Only one, the first I had made out, was facing my way. [...] I returned deliberately to the first I had seen—and there it was, black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids,—a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and, with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of the teeth, was smiling, too, smiling continuously at some endless and jocose dream of that eternal slumber (Conrad, 1928, pp. 130 – 31).

While Conrad did not explicitly name Rom as the inspiration for Kurtz, the similarities between the two are too strong to dismiss. Like Rom, Kurtz is depicted as a person who has gone to Africa, ostensibly to bring civilization, "an emissary of light" (Conrad, 1928, p. 59) and whose mission is symbolically represented in the small sketch in oils Marlow finds in Kurtz's station showing "a woman, draped and blind-folded, carrying a lighted torch" (Conrad, 1928, p. 79), but instead becomes consumed by his own barbarity. The imagery of severed heads, the portrayal of the station as a place of death and despair, and the character's descent into madness all suggest that Conrad had figures like Rom in mind when creating Kurtz.

Kurtz's famous last words, "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad, 1928, p. 149) resonate as a condemnation of the darkness inherent in colonialism and human nature itself. This darkness, which Conrad witnessed firsthand in the Congo, was embodied in

men like Léon Rom. While Kurtz is a fictional character, he serves as a symbol of the very real atrocities committed in the name of empire. Léon Rom, as one of the key figures who inspired Kurtz, remains a haunting example of how power can corrupt absolutely. His legacy is a reminder of the brutal realities of European colonialism, which, while often justified in the name of civilization, brought death and destruction to millions.

Kurtz's creation could have also been influenced by the British army officer Edmund Musgrave Barttelot (1859 – 1888). Barttelot's life and tragic end during the ill-fated Emin Pasha Relief Expedition provided a dark inspiration for Conrad's portrayal of Kurtz. Edmund Musgrave Barttelot was born into an aristocratic family in Sussex, England, in 1859. He followed the traditional path expected of men of his class, joining the British Army and serving in various colonial campaigns. In 1887, Barttelot was appointed second-in-command of the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition, led by the famous explorer Henry Morton Stanley. The expedition's mission was to relieve Emin Pasha, a German colonial governor trapped by Mahdist forces in Sudan. However, the journey through the Congo would prove to be a harrowing and tragic ordeal.



Picture 1.6. (Edmund Musgrave Barttelot. Internet source 7).

Barttelot was left in charge of the expedition's rear column in the Congo while Stanley pressed forward. This decision would have devastating consequences. Barttelot's time in the Congo was marked by increasing frustration, isolation, and

paranoia. As the months dragged on, he became obsessed with discipline, exacting brutal forms of punishment on the African porters and soldiers under his command. While offering examples of Barttelot's viciousness, Mark D. Larabee states that "Barttelot had a native lashed to death, jabbed at others with his cane tipped in steel, and bit another before he was shot and killed by a Manyema tribesman" (2018, p. 235). Reports from the time describe Barttelot as becoming increasingly unhinged, resorting to violence and intimidation in an attempt to maintain control over his men. He was even accused of shooting one of his African servants in a fit of rage.

Barttelot's tragic end came in July 1888, when he was shot dead by an African porter. The circumstances of his death are murky, but it is believed that Barttelot's increasingly erratic behavior and harsh treatment of the local population contributed to the incident. His death marked the culmination of a downward spiral into madness, exacerbated by the isolation and brutal conditions of the Congo.

Joseph Conrad never explicitly stated that Edmund Musgrave Barttelot was the model for Kurtz, but the parallels between the two men are striking. Kurtz, like Barttelot, is a European who descends into madness in the heart of Africa. He starts as an idealistic figure, ostensibly bringing civilization and enlightenment to the "savages". However, the isolation and power he wields over the local population ultimately corrupt him. Kurtz becomes a tyrant, using violence and fear to maintain control, much like Barttelot did. Both men are consumed by the darkness of the jungle, losing their humanity in the process.

Conrad's portrayal of Kurtz also reflects the broader themes of *Heart of Darkness*, particularly the corrupting influence of power and the thin veneer of civilization. Barttelot's story serves as a real-life example of these themes, illustrating how even the most well-intentioned individuals can be driven to madness and brutality when placed in extreme circumstances.

Another inspiration for Kurtz could be Georges-Antoine Klein whose life intersected with Conrad's during his journey in the Congo Free State. Bloom asserts that "scholars and critics noted similarities between Kurtz and Georges-Antoine Klein, a sick agent picked up by Conrad's boat who did not survive the return voyage" (2009, p. 15), as was the case with Conrad's Kurtz: "Mistah Kurtz—he dead" (Conrad, 1928, p. 150). Although Klein was not a notorious figure or a man of infamy like Kurtz, his tragic fate in the Congo offers a potent parallel to Conrad's Kurtz's dark tale. Klein was a trading agent for a Belgian company operating in the Congo, a role that placed him squarely within the exploitative machinery of European imperialism in Africa. Klein's life in the Congo was marked by isolation, harsh conditions, and the overwhelming challenges of living in a foreign and unforgiving environment. His health deteriorated rapidly due to the tropical diseases and brutal working conditions, leading to his untimely death in 1890. It is said that Conrad, who was working as a captain of a river steamer in the Congo at the time, was tasked with transporting Klein's body back to the coast.

While Klein was not a megalomaniacal figure like Kurtz, the circumstances surrounding his life and death deeply affected Conrad. The physical and psychological toll that the Congo exacted on Klein was a vivid illustration of the dangers and moral complexities of imperialism. Conrad witnessed firsthand how the Congo could strip away the veneer of civilization, leaving behind a raw and often brutal humanity. Kurtz,

as depicted in *Heart of Darkness*, embodies the extreme consequences of such a stripping away. He is not just a man who has been physically ravaged by the Congo, but one who has lost his moral compass entirely, succumbing to the seductive power of absolute control over others. In many ways, Kurtz represents the darker potentialities of Klein's experience—the outcome if one were to fully surrender to the corrupting influences of isolation, power, and the dehumanizing environment of the Congo.

Conrad's portrayal of Kurtz as a figure who succumbs to the darkness within himself can be seen as a dramatic extrapolation of what he observed in men like Klein. The themes of decay, madness, and moral ambiguity that permeate *Heart of Darkness* are, in part, rooted in Conrad's real-life observations of men struggling to survive in an environment that was as alien as it was hostile. The connection between Georges-Antoine Klein and Kurtz underscores the thin line between fact and fiction in Conrad's work. While *Heart of Darkness* is a work of fiction, its power lies in its grounding in real experiences and observations. Klein's story serves as a reminder that the horrors of colonialism were not just abstract concepts but were lived realities that left lasting scars on those who endured them.

In creating Kurtz, Conrad not only drew on the tragic fate of a few people but also expanded it into a broader critique of European imperialism. Kurtz's descent into madness, collapse, and his demise on board are not just personal tragedies but are emblematic of the moral and ethical decay that Conrad saw as inherent in the colonial enterprise. Klein, in his suffering, becomes a symbol of the many lives consumed by the darkness at the heart of imperialism.

The character of Kurtz, the enigmatic and charismatic ivory trader, embodies the ultimate consequence of unchecked ambition and moral decay. While Kurtz is not a direct autobiographical figure, he represents a composite of individuals Conrad encountered and the broader implications of imperialist ideology. Kurtz's infamous declaration, "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad, 1928, p. 149) is a stark encapsulation of the novella's central themes. This exclamation can be seen as a reflection of Conrad's own disillusionment with the human capacity for evil, a theme he explored extensively in his writing.

Finally, the character of Kurtz can be interpreted as a representation of Conrad's fears about the corrupting influence of power and isolation. Kurtz's descent into madness and moral depravity in the heart of the Congo illustrates the potential for darkness within every human being. Conrad's portrayal of Kurtz is not just a critique of colonialism but also an exploration of the human condition and the potential for evil within all individuals. Kurtz's infamous proclamation at the end of his article: "Exterminate all the brutes!" (Conrad, 1928, p. 118) reflects the extreme dehumanization and violence that characterized the colonial enterprise. This mirrors Conrad's own horror at the atrocities committed in the Congo.

Conclusions

Joseph Conrad's literary oeuvre is a testament to the profound interplay between his life experiences and his fiction. Through characters like Marlow, Jim, and Nostromo, Conrad articulates his own struggles with identity, morality, and existential uncertainty. His innovative narrative techniques not only enhance the psychological

depth of his stories but also reflect his complex cultural and linguistic heritage. Conrad's works continue to resonate with readers, offering rich insights into the human condition through the lens of his unique autobiographical discourse. Conrad's masterpiece *Heart of Darkness* is imbued with autobiographical elements that enrich its narrative complexity and thematic profundity. Conrad's personal experiences, particularly his journey to the Congo, his observations of colonial exploitation, and his introspective nature, are woven into the fabric of the novella.

Through the character of Marlow, the vivid setting, and the psychological depth of the narrative, Conrad transforms his own life experiences into a timeless exploration of the human condition. This text is a profound exploration of the Congo and colonial exploitation, deeply rooted in the author's own experiences. Through the novella's vivid depiction of the Congo's treacherous landscape and the moral corruption of colonialism, Conrad provides a powerful critique of European imperialism. The autobiographical elements in the novella not only enrich the narrative but also underscore the enduring relevance of Conrad's insights into the human condition and the destructive impact of unchecked greed and power.

Picture 1.7. (Congolese slaves tapping rubber. Internet source 8).

Heart of Darkness is not just a tale of colonial exploitation but a profound psychological exploration of its protagonist, Marlow. Through Marlow, Conrad weaves an autobiographical discourse that reveals his own inner struggles, disillusionment, and existential reflections. The psychological depth of Marlow's inner journey highlights the autobiographical elements, drawing from Conrad's own life experiences in the Congo and his broader philosophical contemplations. Thus, Marlow's journey into the heart of darkness is as much about the internal voyage

through the recesses of the human soul as it is about the external exploration of the African continent.

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