

SOME BIOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL NOTES ON JOSEPH CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS*

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ABSTRACT

Joseph Conrad's novel, Heart of Darkness, based on Ratna's classifications is the work of an author who writes his or her work[s] based on his or her direct experience (2004, p. 56). The analysis here has shown that there are many parallelisms between Marlow's narration and Conrad's real experience when Conrad was in the Congo in 1890. Whilst historical perspectives also indicate that some "fictionalized events" in the novel has the real references and historical contexts with the reign of King Leopold II in the Congo Free State in 1885 to 1908.

Key words: *parallelisms, narration, King Leopold II*

INTRODUCTION

A novel may have contained the true information about its own author and its own setting of time when it was written. They could be set up deliberately or they just happened coincidentally when its author put his or her ideas into words. As one of the novels that is most talked about from past to present time, *Heart of Darkness*,¹ has biographical and historical dimensions to some extent. In spite of its fictional contents, *Heart of Darkness* novel has implicitly recorded what had been through by its author, Joseph Conrad, and what historical events he had witnessed in the Congo at that time.

He went to the Congo in 1890 (now its name is the Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly it was Zaire) for serving as a captain on a steamboat sailing up the Congo River. The main reason of Conrad went there was to realize his boyhood dream, going to the "white spot" of African continent. Coincidentally, he arrived there at the fifth² year of King Leopold II of Belgium ruling. His one year experience there

had profoundly altered his views about humanity and the white men's philosophy concerning "backward people" or the Congolese. He backed to Europe (Brussels) in 1891 as a very different person if compared to a year before. In this article, I would like to seek the elements of biographical and historical references that had been recorded by Conrad in his *Heart of Darkness* consciously or unconsciously.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In doing the research and presenting the result of my findings I will use qualitative research methodology. According to Hasan (1990, p. 16), qualitative research has descriptive characters in nature, in which the description of phenomena being investigated will not be in figures or mathematical correlation between some variables. The description of findings must be done in words instead. I will do the following steps in my analysis:

- a. reading *Heart of Darkness* novel more than once to get the full picture of story;
- b. identifying parts of *Heart of Darkness* text that may contain the problems that have been stated in the introduction;
- c. referring to theories in the theoretical framework for critical thinking and analysis;
- d. interpreting and analyzing the identified *Heart of Darkness* text using the cited theories and relevant expert's opinions.

The main instrument in qualitative research is the [writer] himself (Hasan, 1990, p. 15). This happens because the writer himself that has to work in gathering the data and interpreting them. Therefore, the writer must be careful and objective in the process in order to guarantee the objectivity of his analysis and discussion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In my analysis I will employ the biographical and historical approaches in order to analyze the *Heart of Darkness*. Biographically, I will examine the sources that relate to Conrad's personal life such as his diary, extracts of correspondence with his relatives and friends, biographical accounts written by himself and other people. Whilst for historical accounts I will look at historical records and reports that have been written about the Congo and from the Congo during the colonialism of Belgian there from 1885 to 1908.

I find a very useful book that contains the two elements for the analysis, compiled and edited by Kimbrough in 1971 (the second edition). It provides me with sufficient information about Conrad's biographical dimensions and historical accounts of the Congo in the in past. Though the book is very inspiring and helpful in shaping my analysis, to be more exhaustive and fairer I also draw my critical judgments from other relevant books and sources.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE STORY

Conrad admits in "Author's Notes" (1917) that his novel [*Heart of Darkness*] "is experience pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts..." (Conrad's words cited in Kimbrough, 1971, p. 160). Real facts have been blended with fiction and his imagination. Conrad's purpose to do this is to give his story literary impression and also to make his story more interesting to read than if he just presents the actual events as they are.

Therefore, in analyzing and interpreting his novel in terms of biography and history we should carefully examine sources that closely related to Conrad's life and

the history of the Congo. This is very important in order not to fall on the trap that has been made by Conrad—accepting fiction as the facts. I split my analysis into two, that is, biographical and historical sections in order to make my job relatively easier.

Biographical Dimensions of *Heart of Darkness*

The novel opens with a nameless narrator or the first narrator who introduces the other four people on board of the *Nellie*, a vessel that sets to its anchor in Themes River. There are five people on board at that moment, that is, the Director of Companies (our captain and our host), a lawyer, an accountant, Marlow, and the first narrator himself (pp. 17-18). On that occasion, they are sitting on the deck to wait for the ebb running back into the Themes River and in the meantime they listen to “Marlow’s inconclusive experiences” (p. 21).

The teller of the story shifts from the first nameless narrator to Marlow when Marlow begins telling his experience in the Congo to his four audiences on board. The function of Marlow in this novel is very unique; he serves as a narrator as well as a character in the story. According to Watts (1989, p. 80), by using technique of Marlow telling the story “Conrad gained a new freedom to advocate many views without thereby exposing himself to criticism for their advocacy.” In other words, Conrad is avoiding becoming a moral preacher in the story, though Marlow is Conrad himself. As the result, this method of story telling puts Conrad in a very fortunate position.

Marlow tells his audience on board that his desire to become a sailor and wanderer is partly driven by his childhood dream to go to uncharted places on the world’s maps.

... 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. (p. 22)

The confession of Marlow about his passion for maps and his strong wish to visit the blank spaces on the maps is also experienced by Conrad when he was a child. Take a closer look at the following extracts from his comments in *A Personal Record*. Conrad describes his boyhood dreams as follows:

It was in 1868, when nine years old or thereabouts, that while looking at a map of Africa of the time and putting my finger on the blank space then representing the unsolved mystery of that continent, I said to my self with absolute assurance and amazing audacity which are no longer in my character now: "When I grow up I shall go *there*." (Conrad, 1912, p. 13, quoted in Kimbrough, 1971, p. 104)

The extracts of texts both from *Heart of Darkness* and from Conrad's personal comments above tell us that the story of Marlow is inspired by Conrad's real life experience. Conrad had been dreaming since he was a child that he would go some day to the white spot in African continent.

Marlow gets a job as a captain in a steamboat sailing up the Congo River through his influential aunt.

I, Charlie Marlow, set the women to work—to get a job. Heavens! Well, you see, the notion drove me. I had an aunt, a dear enthusiastic soul. She wrote: 'It will be delightful. I am ready to do anything, anything for you. It is a glorious idea. I know the wife of a very high personage in the Administration, and also a man who has lots of influence with,' etc. etc. She was determined to make no end of fuss to get me appointed skipper of a river steamboat, if such was my fancy. (p. 23)

The influential aunt in *Heart of Darkness* is Mme. Poradowska, the wife to Alexander Poradowski, first cousin of Conrad maternal grandmother (Curle's footnote no. 1, cited in Kimbrough, 1971, p. 105).

In the excerpt above Marlow did not give a name of the person that had great influence in the Trading Company. In Conrad's real experience the man was Albert Thys. He is the managing director of the *Société Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo*, a trading company operated in the Congo. Conrad tried to get a job as a commanding captain from Thys in 1889 (Murfin, 1989, p. 10). However, at the moment Thys still did not promise Conrad any secured job yet. And Conrad himself felt a bit skeptical about the prospect of getting the contract in the Congo.

In the story Marlow got his job after a captain of a steamboat was killed by the natives because of two hens in a scuffle. In the story the captain's name was "Fresleven" (p. 23). By contrast, Conrad got his command on a steamer plying the Congo River when the Company let him know through a letter that a steamer's captain named "Freisleben" had died in the Congo and his position was vacant at the moment, on April 26, 1890 (Murfin, 1989, p. 10). There was no explanation about the cause of the death of captain Freisleben in Conrad's real experience. But the point was Conrad got his appointment in the Congo. Actually, Conrad did not get his job as a pure luck but through the influences of his aunt (Murfin, 1989, p. 10).

Marlow set his journey to the Congo in "a French steamer" (p. 27). Marlow said to his audience on board that he was still keeping in touch with his aunt in every port when the ship made a stop. On the contrary, Conrad made his journey from "a French port" and from there he sailed to Boma, the main seaport for entering the Congo (Murfin, 1989, p. 10). He also wrote a few letters to his aunt informing his condition and his experience on the way to the Congo. This makes the present day

readers know about his real experience on the Congo trip (see his extracts of letters to his aunt in Kimbrough, 1971, pp. 118-121).

The biggest difference between Marlow's experience and Conrad's is that Marlow did not keep a diary on his journey but Conrad did. However, when Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness* he never consulted to his Congo diary (Curle's introduction to Conrad's biography, cited in Kimbrough, 1971, p. 110). The diary survived because Conrad's wife found it and gave it to Conrad's friend and biographer, Richard Curle. Despite Conrad never refers back to his diary when he wrote the story, there are some resemblances between Conrad's diary and *Heart of Darkness*.

After arriving in the Congo Marlow met with several characters in the *Heart of Darkness*, but these people are only called by their functions, such as the company's chief accountant, the manager, the brick maker, the harlequin, the helmsman, the natives (Maes-Jelinek, 1998, p. 35). Some characters are modeled from the real people but others are Conrad's imaginative characters. The person referred by Marlow as "the manager" (p. 36) was "Camille Delcommune" (Curle's footnote no. 3, cited in Kimbrough, 1971, p. 119) in Conrad's true experience. In the story Marlow was really upset to him because he did not ask him to sit down after walking twenty-miles from Outer Station to meet him at the Central Station (p. 36). Marlow really disliked him right from the beginning, this was reflected in his calling to him: "no learning and no intelligence" (p. 36).

Conrad also had the same feeling toward this person. He wrote his experience to his aunt from Kinshasa dated 26 September 1890. I extract some contents of his letter as follows:

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, ... 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 Englishman here. I can [not] hope for neither promotion nor increase of salary while he remains here. Moreover, he has said that he is but little bound here by promises made in Europe, so long as they are not in the contract. Those made me by M. Wauters are not. Likewise I can look forward to nothing, as I have no vessel to command. In the meanwhile my status here is vague, and I have been having troubles because of this. So there you are. (cited in Kimbrough, 1971, p. 119)

Conrad let his aunt know about his status because he was very concerned that he would never get what had been promised by Thys in Brussels before left to the Congo.

Marlow was greatly disappointed to learn that his steamer had been lying on the bottom of the river. This was resulted from the manager's careless attempt in commanding the steamer—he tore up its bottom side on the sharp rock (p. 35). Marlow knew this from someone in the Company. On the other hand, Conrad knew this terrible news from "Louette" (Murfin, 1989, p. 12). His steamer, *The Florida*, also experienced the same thing. But, there was no explanation what made the steamer sink in the river. Instead, Conrad had to command another steamer, *Roi des Belges*, as a replacement captain. The real captain, captain Koch had been paralyzed with illness and unable to do his job. He received this news from the manager or Camille Delcommune (Camille Delcommune's letter to Conrad on 6 September 1890, cited in Kimbrough, 1971, p. 118).

Marlow had to wait almost three months to get his steamer fixed. The long period of time needed to repair the steamboat because they lacked of "rivets" and the Company's men had to get them from the Outer Station. Whilst waiting for the

reparation on progress Marlow learned many things about the Company and Mr. Kurtz, the “remarkable” agent in the Inner Station. He welcomed some visitors, that is, a group of people intended to explore the region and collect its richness. They are referred as “Eldorado Exploring Expedition” in Marlow’s narration. His leader was the manager’s uncle. In Conrad’s true experience, the manager’s uncle had the name of “Alexandre Delcommune” (Curle’s footnote no. 2, cited in Kimbrough, 1971, p.119). He is the brother of Camille Delcommune. In Conrad’s diary this man was described to lead an expedition to Katanga. However, there was no sufficient information about what he was doing in his expedition there.

After the steamer finished being repaired, Marlow accompanied by the manager and his men hurried to the Inner Station in order to pick up Mr. Kurtz who had been gravely ill. Among the people accompanying Marlow there was a person whom he referred as “a white companion” (p. 34), who often fainted because of the heat and fever. This person often slowed down his journey to the Inner Station. Marlow often felt irritated to him. In Conrad’s true experience the person’s name was “Prosper Harou”, an agent of King Leopold II (Murfin, 1989, p. 11).

With great difficulty Marlow and his men managed to bring Kurtz to the vessel and sailed back to the Central Station. But Kurtz died on board before they reached the Central Station. The fictional Kurtz resembles Georges Antoine Klein, a Frenchman, and an agent of King Leopold II, who also died on board when Conrad and the manager picked him up from his station on 21 September 1890 (Curle’s footnote no. 1, cited in Kimbrough, 1971, p. 118-119). A critic, Albert J. Guerard, believes that the fictional Kurtz is similar to Georges Antoine Klein in some respects, though he does not know how many the resemblances are (Guerard cited in Kimbrough, 1971, p. 123).

In the ending of *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow returns to Brussels after he was greatly affected by fever that nearly killed him. He fulfilled his promise to Kurtz, giving back Kurtz's last possessions and talking to his intended (fiancée). The same thing also happens to Conrad when got back from the Congo in 1891. He returned to Europe (Brussels) without ever serving as a captain on a steamboat sailing up the Congo River as promised by Albert Thys, the director of the Congo's exploration and trading company for King Leopold II. In fact, he only served as supernumerary captain on steamboat called *Roi des Belges* when its captain was ill. His good health was greatly impaired by illnesses that he picked up in the Congo. In a letter to his aunt, Mme. Poradowska, Conrad wrote that "[he] regret [his Congo journey] bitterly" (cited in Kimbrough, 1971, p. 119).

Historical Dimensions of *Heart of Darkness*

Conrad through Marlow's narration depicts some exploitation and their effects experienced by the natives as soon as he set his foot on the Congo Free State. It is described by Marlow in the story as follows:

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. ... 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. (pp. 29-30)

The scene witnessed by Marlow above is that the forced labors employed by King Leopold II' men in railway constructions in that place.

Allen (1965, p. 270) writes that "[t]he railroad was being built, eight years later, would connect Matadi and Stanley Pool but in 1890 the distance was covered on foot." Interestingly, Marlow sees the event in the year of 1890—eight years earlier than Allen's reference. Even though there is unmatched date between Marlow's words and Allen's description, there is one thing for sure, i.e., the slavery and the

forced labor method are used in reconstructing King Leopold II's territory in the Congo.

Marlow also sees a bunch of black people chained to their necks with iron collars are engaged in the forced labor. They walk passing through Marlow without a glance leading to some place in the region.

A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the click kept time with their footsteps. Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind waggled to and fro like tails. I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking. (p. 30)

The description of those black people clearly shows to us the suffering and cruelty that they have to endure. They must be treated very badly by King Leopold II's men that have made their physical appearances deteriorating—very thin and weak.

Marlow witnesses that the "chain-gang" (p. 30) walking under the supervision of a white person—probably he is an agent of the administration like Marlow too.

Behind this raw matter one of the reclaimed, the product of the new forces at work, strolled despondently, carrying a rifle by its middle. He had a uniform jacket with one button off, and seeing a white man on that path, hoisted his weapon to his shoulder with alacrity. (p. 30)

The agent shown by Marlow has uneasy feeling when another white person is watching him at work. He goes hurriedly from that place with his prisoners.

Marlow is struck dumbfounded with the feelings of guilty and hopeless when he thinks that he himself came to that place to earn his living and becomes part of the

system. He has personal conflict inside his mind and he has to come to terms with it. He stops there a while before he climbs up the hill in which his Company's station is located. When he continues his journey, he meets with a group of black people under a tree who was far worse than the first group.

Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effectuated with the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. ... And 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 diseases and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. (p. 31)

These people are the forced labors who have been forced to work very hard and abandoned there to wait for their death. "The natives Marlow encounters are not killed so cleanly, but are starved to death by a merciless and mindless administration (Spittles, 1992, p. 84)."

Marlow also finds a very young person—a boy within this group of natives. He feels sympathy to him and offers the boy his biscuits. He says "... I saw a face near my hand. ... The man seemed young—almost a boy—but you know with them it's hard to tell. I found nothing else to do but to offer him one of my good Swede's ship's biscuits I had in my pocket (p. 31)."

Thing that makes Marlow feels sick in his stomach and wants to leave the place immediately is that when he witnesses a person from the second group under the same tree crawl slowly on his hands and legs to the river side in order to drink. He is too weak to walk there to drink.

Near the same tree two bundles of acute angles sat with their legs drawn up. ... While I stood horror-struck, one of these creatures rose to his hands and knees, and went off on all-fours towards the river to drink. He lapped out his hand, then

sat up in the sunlight, crossing his shins in front of him, and after a time let his woolly head fall on his breastbone. (p. 32)

All the visual descriptions given by Marlow here are not exaggerated; they are the products of King Leopold II's cruel and corrupt administration in the Congo at that time. Some reports either from missionaries and traveling white persons in the Congo at that time described the same terrible descriptions. Many of the natives were abused and killed without any authority can prevent the actions from happening.

Murfin points out that many reports are sent to Europe from missionaries serving in the Congo which describe the atrocities of King Leopold II administration after he was in charge there for a few years (1989, p. 6). But those reports fail to take a serious effect on European communities at that time. One of its reasons is that Congo is located far away from Europe. Besides that the whites also believe that the lost of native lives is the natural consequence of the State soldiers act in defending themselves from the rebellious natives.

Richard Harding Davis once was a renowned, world-traveling journalist, who published a book about King Leopold rule and his atrocities in the Congo in 1907 also described the same description. I quote some of his accounts here with regard to the king's atrocities.

Merchants, missionaries, and officials even in Leopold's service told me that if one could spare a year and a half, or a year, to the work in the hinterland he would be an eye-witness of as cruel treatment of the natives as any that has gone before, and if I can trust myself to weight testimony and believe my eyes and ears I have reason to know that what they say is true. ... Three years of atrocities here were open and above-board. For instance. In the opinion of the State the soldiers, in killing game for food, wasted the State cartridges, and in consequence the soldiers, to show their officers that they did not expend the cartridges extravagantly on antelope

and wild boar, for each empty cartridge brought in a human hand, the hand of a man, woman, or child. These hands, drying in the sun, could be seen at the posts along the river. They are no longer in evidence. The man to blame for atrocities, for each separate atrocity, is Leopold. (Davis, 1907, pp. 44-47, quoted in Kimbrough, 1971, pp. 92-93)

In the story of *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow also reveals some evidence of the Belgian agents' atrocities toward the native, though the events have been slightly fictionalized by Marlow in his story. He said half jokingly, "a middle-aged negro, with a bullet-hole in the forehead, upon which I absolutely stumbled three miles farther on, may be considered as a permanent improvement (p. 34)." The poor black may be murdered by one of the agents and his body was abandoned in the path that was passed by Marlow and his men.

The frightening evidence in the story was the description of human's heads that were dried on sunlight and put on poles around Kurtz's house in the Inner Station. Marlow describes what he saw as follows:

... 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 sunken 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. (p. 73)

In the story the agent named Mr. Kurtz was described as had been mad. He and his native followers were thought to perform a kind of ritual that involved in the killing of some natives. The dried head in the story was one of his ritual victims.

The effect of the cruelty of King Leopold II's administration was very terrible for the Congolese. The result of his cruel administration can be read in *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*:

The regime, under Leopold's unrestrained personal control, became notorious for the treatment of the inhabitants. Forced labor was used to gather wild rubber, palm oil, and ivory. Belgians introduced mutilation as a common punishment even for minor offences. The population of the entire state is said to have declined from 20,000,000 or 30,000,000 to 80,000. (Goetz, 1990, p. 534)

The killings may be under his direct or indirect instructions that were carried out by his men in the Congo for almost twenty-three years of his reign there.

In the same vein, Charter writes that "his agents killed an estimated 5 million people in the Congo" (1987, p. 263). The publication of *Heart of Darkness* in 1902 (in one volume together with two other stories—*Youth* and *the End of Tether*) had successfully opened people's eyes in Europe. On the level of literary work Charter gives the following comments: "When [*Heart of Darkness*] published in 1902, it gave literary expression to an entire age's perception of the Congo as a place of horror and human degradation from ruthless colonialism (1987, p. 263)."

The widespread of reports on mistreatment of the natives from various sources plus the publication of *Heart of Darkness* novel were two factors, which led Leopold to lose his power in the Congo in 1908. As the result of these, he was forced to transfer his authority to the Belgian government. The event is stated in *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* as follows: "In 1908 the Congo Free State was abolished and replaced by the Belgian Congo, a colony controlled by the Belgian parliament" (Goetz, 1990, p. 534). The abolishment of the Congo Free State ended King Leopold II's twenty-three years of reign in the region.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the structure of *Heart Darkness* has shown to us that this novel contains some biographical and historical accounts to certain extent.

Biographically, Conrad in this story has identified himself as Marlow in some respects in which he channeled his frustration, disapproval and anger through Marlow's narration in the story. Whilst historical documents of the effect *Heart of Darkness* even reveal that this novel has gone beyond literary work, that is, the publication of this novel has served as a contributing factor to the fall of King Leopold II in the Congo Free State in 1908.

Notes:

1. I use the text of *Heart of Darkness* in Murfin's 1989 book (pp. 17-94) for my analysis. He notified in his book that this text is the last edition of Heinemann in 1921 that was approved by Conrad. The information can be found on Murfin's footnote no. 1 on page vi of his preface.
2. King Leopold II of Belgium became the supreme ruler of the Congo through the Berlin Conference in 1884. This conference was held to resolve disputes over the Congo territory among some colonialist countries such as Belgium, Portugal, the Netherlands, and France. He officially held the administration of the Congo Free State from 1885 to 1908

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