

Joseph Conrad and the University Curriculum

It may seem utilitarian with a vengeance to consider a writer of Conrad's dimension according to his "usefulness" in the university curriculum, but in addition to all the literary and interpretative aspects which have been offered I should like to make a few comments based on my experience as a university teacher. My startingpoint when I introduced Conrad on the reading list for first-year students could be described like this: Firstly, surprisingly few students are acquainted with Conrad's work before they go to university. Sadly enough quite a few have not even heard his name mentioned in the classroom. Secondly, they often find him fairly difficult to begin with mainly because of his much-discussed vagueness and his vocabulary. Thirdly, for lack of experience of complex literary texts they tend to read his works (and indeed more or less all texts) on a purely narrative surface level.

Consequently, my aim was to make my students discover his qualities, above all how extraordinarily readable and 'modern', indeed topical part of his writing is. In addition I intended to use his texts to illustrate and discuss literary theory and history and to practice a range of interpretative methods.

To achieve this I have usually chosen *Heart of Darkness* and its prestudy "An Outpost of Progress" and put them side by side to illustrate Conrad's methods of characterization, his moral and social themes, the significance of setting etc. At this stage the students are asked to write essays dealing with themes and imagery, historical background, or similarities and differences between the two texts.

Heart of Darkness is the best-suited book I know to show the importance of close reading, and to demonstrate how little details, such as names, objects and foregrounded phraseology can trigger off allusions and indicate various and increasingly abstract reading levels and infracontexts. Together we examine and discuss the following interrelated interpretative levels:

First there is the obvious, purely narrative adventure story of Marlow's journey, including mystique, exotic setting, cannibals, unexpected attacks, love and death. We notice, though, that according to the text neither Marlow nor his narrative are to be considered "typical", that there is a recurrence of words like "glow", "haze", a "spectral illumination of moonshine" and that the ominous-sounding "brooding gloom" occurs no less than four times. Even before the journey Marlow is said to be sceptical, nervous and uncertain. Taken together such signals indicate that a reading merely on the narrative level will prove unsatisfactory.

We proceed to the second level illustrating the parallel with Conrad's own Congo trip where some biographical material is introduced in class such as his mention in "A Personal Record" of his fascination as a young boy with the great river "resembling an immense snake uncoiled" and "the white heart of Africa". The "Author's Note" describes the novel as "experience pushed a little beyond the actual facts" which seems to justify biographical comments as long as it is made perfectly clear that the reader has not got the right to equate Conrad, the writer, and Marlow, the protagonist cum narrator. We also notice the irony of the situation when Conrad himself was sitting on board his little steamer saying to himself: "This is the very spot of my boyish boast" while ruthless and cruel exploitation was going on, a hunt for wealth, power and property that was so horrible that it meant an immediate stop to all his idealistic dreams. Letters from the Congo indicate that the experience very nearly robbed him of all taste for life in general and humankind in particular. "Everything here is repellent to me ... Men and things, but above all men". (Coll. Letters I:59).

This leads on to level three dealing with contemporary political issues. Some relevant historical facts are mentioned: Stanley's *In Dark Africa* was published the same year as Conrad went to the Congo, Belgium laid claim on an area 80 times as large as the mother country, the slave trade caused the death of about 1,000 people a day and Congo's population was decreased

by half. In the essay called "Geography and Some Explorers" Conrad describes the situation as "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration". "Extermination", the very word used by Kurtz in his notorious report was an idea that was frequently discussed among scientists, philosophers and writers at the time. To Conrad's contemporaries, European expansion was seen as a biological necessity. The notion that it was inhumane to prolong the natives' struggle for survival by external and artificial means was brought to the fore in the writings of Eduard von Hartman, whose *Philosophy of the Unconscious* (1884) was familiar to Conrad, and similar thoughts, sometimes referred to as social darwinism, were expressed by the leading philosopher of the time, Herbert Spencer, for instance in his *Social Statics* from 1850. (See Lindqvist, *Utrota varenda jävel*, 1992)

The issue of exploration and exploitation forms a link to the fourth level where the historical perspective is widened considerably. Young Conrad's boyish dreams had been associated with the great explorers. In "Geography and Some Explorers" in *Last Essays* he describes them as brave dedicated men, who had set their minds to find truth, no matter the cost, "conquering a bit of truth here and a bit of truth there and they were sometimes swallowed up by the mystery their hearts were so persistently set on unveiling". In this respect Kurtz makes an obvious parallel.

At the beginning of the story the Thames is linked geographically with all waterways in the world, also with the rives of Hades. Marlow's very first words come as a comment to a conversation the reader has not been allowed to share: "And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth". The names of Sir Francis Drake and Sir John Franklin and the names of their ships foreshadow what is going to happen: Drake's "the Golden Hind" returned to England loaded with riches from a cruel and successful exploitation comparable to that 300 years later in Africa. Franklin's "the Erebus" was named after the god of darkness, child of Chaos and his second ship, "the Terror", which as also mentioned by Conrad, never returned from the expedition where the whole crew, including Franklin died. Kurtz' last words, "the horror, the horror", is a natural association.

Otherwise, we can notice, very few names are mentioned. The listeners on board "the Nellie" are anonymous, Brussels is called "the white sepulchral city", Kinchasa is referred to as "the Central Station", Stanley Falls as "the Inner Station". The implications are discussed and the students arrive at the conclusion that Conrad aims at universality rather than biography, documentary or general historical parallels. This is also brought to the fore through the information in *Heart of Darkness* that "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz".

Against this background we can discern a fifth level where moral issues are discussed. Conrad obviously claims that every human being in an extreme situation (a recurrent conradian theme), losing foothold in life, might react in a similar manner. William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* which also deals with the disappearance of the varnish of culture and the emergence of primitive and brutal instincts hidden underneath, makes a good comparison. According to both, human greed, cruelty and selfishness will always exist. In this respect Conrad is pessimistic: temptations, evil, hate and disgust cannot be fought by means of what we call culture and civilization. Early on in the book Marlow discusses what constitutes the possibility of salvation, for the individual and for society. He keeps returning to the word "restraint". "What saves us is efficiency", he says, emphasizing the work ethic, duty and control. At the same time this attitude means surrender to the forces of darkness, as Marlow chooses to concentrate on the bearable and the superficial in order not to see and hear, not to become involved in something that would affect his personality in an extremely unpleasant and thorough manner.

This brings us to a sixth level focusing the psychological point of view, where the painful journey towards the Inner Station, what Marlow refers to as "the furthest point of my navigation", becomes illustrative of the jungian individuation process and a journey towards self-knowledge and insight. We can apply Jungian terminology and see Kurtz as Marlow's "shadow", the dark part of his personality, his second self, the side that Marlow has to acknowledge in order to become a whole individual. In spite of chronology it is interesting to note that Conrad's story "The Secret Sharer" was originally called "The Second Self". The causes and the consequences of Marlow's mental breakdown can be discussed in the jungian context. The novel illustrates Marlow's gradual loss of illusions and foothold in life. He has to mobilize all his capacity of self-control and concentrate on "surface reality" in order to escape the dreadful truth summarized in Kurtz' dying words. Here the story makes a clear distinction between those who have Marlow's capacity for restraint and those who lack it. We are never told what Kurtz'

"unspeakable rites" consist of and it can be discussed whether he had the natives worship him as a god, whether there was cannibalism, sexual orgies, human sacrifice. Are the human head paled outside a sign of Kurtz' efforts to exterminate the native population?

We are given to understand that Marlow himself was surprised by the strength of the dark forces, and he tells his listeners on "the Nellie" that they will never understand what it is all about. One of them sighs and says that Marlow is absurd and Marlow loses his patience arguing that they do not even know what absurd means, they who are firmly anchored in an existence where there is a butcher around one corner and a policeman around the other. He alone has experienced what it means when one's conscious and ones' unconscious self are separated. The result, in Jungian terms, is a neurosis.

The experience to a degree was Conrad's own and led to mental ill health and attempted suicide. While he was working on *Heart of Darkness* he wrote to his friend Cunningham Graham: "Know thyself. Understand that you are nothing, less than a shadow, more insignificant than a drop of water in the ocean, more fleeting than the illusion of a dream". Other letters too indicate lasting pessimism and nervous disorder.

Finally we arrive at the seventh, the philosophical, mythical or religious reading level with parallels in Buddhism and ancient myth. and the notion of illumination. The students are asked to pay attention to archetypal patterns and the numerous allusions to classical epic journeys into the realm of death, to Hades and the underworld. The words "inferno" and "infernal" are mentioned in some contexts and Marlow feels as if he were on his way not to the interior of a continent but to the interior of the earth. We can read the story as an allegory of a journey through the various circles of hell to meet Lucifer at the Inner Station. The aspect of timelessness is continually emphasized: "Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world.." At the beginning, in the middle and towards the end Marlow is compared to a Buddha figure, and the description illustrates and parallels his own mental experience. First, sitting with crossed legs, sunken cheeks, yellow skin, straight back, ascetic, with the palms of his hands turned upwards, in a lotus position, apparently *prepared* to reach contact with his subconscious, in the middle he is "worn, hollow, with downward fold and drooped eyelids, with an aspect of concentrated attention, and at the end he no longer seems to be a member of the group, but an outsider who has gone through Purgatory alone, sitting *apart*, indistinct and silent in the pose of the meditating Buddha". (italics mine)

Scholars have pointed out certain parallels between Virgil's *Aeneid*, particularly the Sixth Song dealing with Aeneas' descent into the realms of death. Like Marlow he is described as dutiful, loyal, obedient and somewhat melancholic. They both have an experience behind them that left them unhappy and isolated. In both cases their helmsmen are killed and the protagonists have to attend to the dead bodies before the moment of truth occurs. Virgil and Conrad both use the snake image and the symbol of ivory, the latter representing something deceitful and false.

Others have found allusions to the Faustus legend and argue that Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* inspired not only the name of the narrator but part of the story as well. Faustus and Kurtz can be considered kindred souls, heroes challenging the unknown, seeking their own benefit and satisfaction, thereby bringing disaster to themselves and others, selling their souls to the devil. We also know that Conrad was fascinated by the Faustus figure, and with that in mind we recall the mention of the *papier maché* Mephistopheles and the fact that the name of Lucifer has the double implication of light bringer and devil. In Conrad's novel the imagery related to light and darkness, to black and white, among other things suggests that the bringers of light become the princes of darkness. Kurtz once was "a bearer of a spark from the sacred fire", and we are told that crawling in the grass he seems to have horns on his head. Just as in the case of Lucifer it is the sin of hubris, megalomania, that destroys him. he has entered a pact with evil forces, but not because he is stupid: "He had taken a high seat among the devils of the land", Marlow states, "I take it no fool ever made a bargain for his soul with the devil.

There are numerous parallels to the mythical heroes of the Grail legend. They too were looking for something symbolizing truth and the deepest insight a human being can achieve, *illuminatio*. Conrad's light-darkness imagery fits the pattern. The Grail legend speaks of a wounded King on the banks of a river who has to be saved by the knight in search of truth. When Marlow has reached "the farthest point of navigation", Kurtz becomes his grotesque Grail, compared to an enchanted princess in a castle dangerous to approach. Marlow experiences some sort of negative illumination, paradoxically implying a sort of light - "it threw a kind of light on

everything about me", he says. The truth of this light, this weird illumination, is so terrible that he cannot convey it to Kurtz' intended because "It would have been too dark & too dark altogether".

Looking back on the story we take its last word, "darkness" as a starting-point for a discussion, and the students usually find that after reading the whole book the word seems to carry new connotations. The title *Heart of Darkness* for instance can suggest a number of things: the innermost part of dark, the very darkest sphere, a living heart beating in darkness etc. We also feel that, paradoxically, Africa as the heart of darkness represents truth and light, and that the darkness of darkest Africa is neither the people nor the landscape nor the traditional rites, but the European enlightenment, the light of so-called civilization. Looking back one also considers the paradox that the darkest things of all are the white sepulchral city, the white ivory, the white fireplace and Marlow's white lie. Perhaps one feels prepared to re-assess and question the reliability of Marlow, the protagonist cum narrator who claims that he values truth and detests a lie, but finally lies deliberately to save the lie whereon his own existence is based.

Linking up with level one the students can also think of Joseph Conrad's pessimism and his belief in universal darkness, seeing man as "an evil animal". The same year as he wrote *Heart of Darkness* he stated that "crime is a necessary condition of organized living" and that "society is basically criminal"

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After this kind of analysis it is easy to demonstrate the relative shallowness of "An Outpost of Progress", which many students prefer to the novel to begin with, in comparison with the depth and complexity of *Heart of Darkness*. The comparison can be used as a starting point for a discussion of the problematic issue of what constitutes good literature. Given the time on the schedule "The Secret Sharer" is useful to further illustrate Jungian features. Other short stories can of course be offered to indicate recurrent moral themes in Conrad's writing.

The complex and unusual narrative technique of *Heart of Darkness* using Marlow as a principal character cum narrator is very special. Literary structure and issues such as the reliability of the narrator and the distance between on the one hand writer and narrator and on the other between narrator and reader are brought to the fore.

During the second year of study when the students write longer essays about literature the discussions we have had about various literary theories applicable on *Heart of Darkness* have proved useful also because they form the background or serve as a model in new contexts, and because Conrad's novel, more than any other books I know of, lends itself to a large variety of theoretical discussions based on biographical, archetypal, marxist, feminist, reader-response criticism, new historicism, structuralism, etc.

The most important result, though, is that the same students who never heard of Joseph Conrad before, who found him difficult and vague or were unable to trace more than one reading level in a book very often, almost invariably, want to read more by Conrad and sometimes even claim that he has become an important writer who gives them a reading experience they never had before.