UNIT 1 HIS STORY AND HISTORY

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this unit is to provide you with some of the indispensable biographical details as well as the historical context of the novella. We shall, that is, look into the circumstances of the author, and the historical situation in which he lived and wrote. To what extent, if at all, did the public sphere intrude into his private sphere and his imagination? How was his Congo experience imaginatively reconstructed? These are some of the questions that we shall discuss here.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Though, by definition, a work of fiction is, if you permit me the tautology, fictional, there are works—to give examples from the blocks you have been doing—such as Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which draw upon autobiography, and yet others—such as Forster's *A Passage to India*—which are born out of historical situations. Hence the importance of biography and the socio-political context of an author can hardly be exaggerated, especially in the case of Conrad and his *Heart of Darkness*. This is corroborated by the title of a book: *Joseph Conrad: The Fiction of Autobiography* by a critic as perceptive as Edward Said.

Now let us read the following passages carefully:

> 1.What biographical event (if any) occasioned the work? What research (if any) went into its creation? What psychological or social factors determined its meaning? Yet, however impressive its eventual results, the question with which it began—the nature of the relationship between art and life—would remain unresolved. We would have learnt a good deal about Conrad's biography; we would have acquired a number of facts about his work. But as to the relationship between the two, we would remain as ignorant as when we started. (Berthoud, *Joseph Conrad: The Major Phase*, p.1).

> 2. 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. Well, I haven't been there yet, and shall not try now. The glamour's off. Other places were scattered about the Equator, and in every sort of latitude all over the two hemispheres. I have been on some of them, and ... well, we wont talk about that. But there was one yet—the biggest, the most blank, so to speak—that I had a hankering after. (Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*).

3. Regions unknown! My imagination could depict to itself their worthy, adventurous and devoted men, nibbling at the edges attacking from north and south and east and west, conquering a bit of truth here and a bit of truth there, and sometimes swallowed up by the mystery their hearts were so persistently set on unveiling ....

Once only did that enthusiasm (for geography) expose me to the derision of my schoolboy chums. One day, putting my finger on a spot of the then white heart of Africa, I declared that some day I would go there...about eighteen years afterwards, a wretched little sternwheel steamboat I commanded lay moored to the bank of an African river. I was glad to be alone on deck, smoking the pipe of peace after an anxious day.... Away in the middle of the stream, on a little island nestling all black in the foam of the broken water, a solitary little light glimmered feebly, and I said to myself in awe, 'This is the very spot of my boyhood boast'.

(Conrad, "Geography and Some Explorers", 1924)

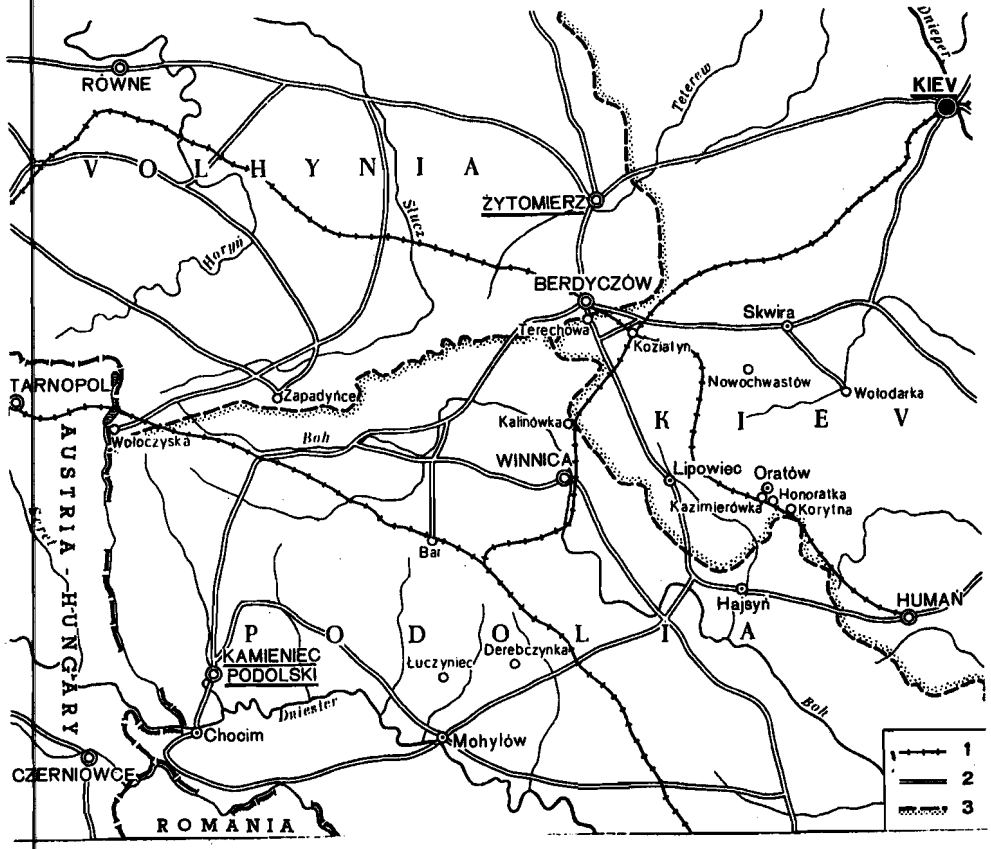
Do you not think that the second and third passages echo each other? And that the fact in one is not vastly different from the fiction in the other? Together do they not undermine the importance of the first? Though I do not want to suggest that the author's biography is the sole guide to his fictional world, I shall be loath to avoid biography and history in my approach to the novella. Yet critics have noted Conrad's "evasive lucidity". Edward Said, in the book I mentioned a little while earlier, addresses this issue. He speaks of the novelist "hiding himself within rhetoric" in his fiction. Whether you agree with him or not, Said's view is well worth keeping in mind. If we know some of his views, and the context in which they were held or expressed, and their fictional rendering, we might arrive at a better understanding of the significance of his fiction and its relation with the historical context.

1.2 JOSEPH CONRAD

Map 1: Europe in Conrad's Time

1.2.1 Home And Homo Duplex

Before we begin, please take a look at the map of Europe of the nineteenth century and Conrad's Poland. You will notice that these look strange. Note the differences between them and their counterparts in the present times in your own atlas. If you do not already know much about nineteenth century Polish history try to gather some information. However, to help you meet your immediate needs, I provide below a few relevant details on which you can build a more adequate picture of mid- ninteenth century Poland, and European imperialism.



Map 2: Conrad's Poland

I am giving you the trouble by digressing from the main task of reading the text with you immediately, because so much depends on your understanding of what once Conrad told a fellow Polish exile: "Both at sea and on land my point of view is English, from which the conclusion should not be drawn that I have become an Englishman. That is not the case. *Homo duplex* has in my case more than one meaning. You will understand me. I shall not dwell upon that subject" (Conrad, quoted in Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*). This admission has several implications for our understanding of the Conrad text; and despite Conrad's confidence that the reader will understand him, generations of critics have made contradictory claims about the intentions of the author here. Even so, one of the implications of Conrad's statement for our reading of the text at hand would be to see why Marlow, the Englishman, is his favourite raconteur. And, both this latter conjecture about his point of view, literally taken, and his dual status need to be pursued

at some length. His status as the homo duplex or double man has many dimensions: he was a Polish nobleman and British citizen; he was successful both as a mariner and an author; an insistent moralist and unabashed sceptic; pessimistic as well as human.

1.2.2 From Konrad to Conrad

Born Jozef Teodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski on 3 December 1857 in Poland, Joseph Conrad assumed his English name and citizenship as if to escape history. For the country of his birth was not what you now see in your map of Europe. It had been, by the end of the eighteenth century, annexed by Russia in the east, Prussia in the west, and Austria in the south. The part in which Conrad was born and grew up was under the control of Tsarist Russia. These biographical details are necessary if you are to understand his view of himself as a homo duplex, and also why he was to become such a trenchant critic of imperialism. His father Apollo Korzeniowski was a patriotic member of the land-owning class known in Polish as *szlachta* (Polish for nobleman); and was involved in the historical struggle to free his homeland from the Russian imperialists. In 1861, when Conrad was barely four years old, his father was found plotting and was incarcerated in Warsaw and later the Korzeniowskis were exiled to the remote province of Vologda. Conrad's mother died in 1865. Father and son moved to Lwow. When Conrad, the only child of his parents, learnt to read and write he kept his father company by reading up a lot of literature, for his father was himself a poet, translator, and dramatist. Apollo died in 1869, and from then on Conrad was looked after by his maternal uncle. Continued ill-health and privation would mean that, he was privately tutored with only occasional schooling. Thus his life so far was one of sickness, loneliness, and intense emotional despair, long journeys across Russia and Poland, a haphazard and spotty education, and little opportunity to make his own friends.

Yet, recalling his earliest days, Conrad would say that he used to think of himself as "Pole, Catholic, Gentleman" (Baines, 14). One of his childhood fantasies was what you have already read above (see the third quotation in 1.1). This dream of Conrad's wouldn't have materialised but for his uncle, Thaddeus Bobrowski, who, until his death in 1894, served Conrad as father, friend, and financial supporter. Theirs was a love-hate relationship: Conrad was the young and romantic dreamer of a maritime life of reckless adventure while his uncle, preferred a sedate life of a conformist, worldly-wise and moralistic.

Orphaned at the age of 11, Conrad continued his education in Cracow and later in Lwow, with occasional trips out of Poland for his health: all of this arranged by his uncle. Bored with the regimentation and order of his schools and his uncle's household, by October 1874, he was convinced that he should go to France to join the French merchant marine. Since much of Conrad's fiction was haunted by figures who shared his own sense of guilt and betrayal, it would be worthwhile asking why he should have left Poland at all. Later in life, he would try to rationalise his interest in the sea by ascribing it to his reading of novels of adventure and books of travel and exploration. But he had more practical reasons to flee Poland. His school life was boring. Poland, his part of it, was not a free country, but worse, dangerous for the only child of Apollo, a martyr for Polish independence. If not with his life, he would have had to pay dearly for his father's "misdeeds" by doing military service in the Russian army up to twenty-five years. Also his uncle may have felt relieved by the departure of his errant ward for purely selfish reasons, and for the young man's safety, wanted him to take up either British or French citizenship. Conrad first went to France (Marseilles), where his uncle had connections in the merchant marine. Many who knew him were surprised at his decision, accusing him even of betrayal. In the French city, Conrad was excited to mingle with a rich, variegated and cosmopolitan crowd, where, as he himself was to say, "the puppy opened his eyes", and "life" began. (Conrad, *Letters*). The five years in Marseilles were memorable, proving to be influential in his formative stage since they also brought disappointments to the young man. It is perhaps because of these years in France that a third dimension must be added to the homo duplex image fostered by Conrad himself. After several attempts to start a proper marine career in France, Conrad formed a syndicate with three other men, acquired a small vessel, *Tremolino*, and engaged in gun-running between France and Spain (1877-78). Through the treachery of one of the crew, the vessel was ambushed and

lost. Conrad attempted suicide out of utter frustration and helplessness. His uncle rushed to nurse the injured Conrad, pay his debts and moralise on the matter of suicide. (Compare this with the suicide of one of the two main characters in "An Outpost of Progress".) Having lost his reputation in France he tried to secure a job on board a British freighter. On the 18th of June 1878, he arrived in England for the first time with an English vocabulary of about a hundred words. He took time to secure a seamanship; but by 1880 he could master enough skills in his job and the new language to be able to pass his examination as second mate, and obtained an officer's position in a clipper to sail to Australia.

He now acquires a trilingual and tricultural identity. **Such hybridity makes him a marginal man; wherever he may have been he did not belong to that place wholly.** At this point we must remember the contrary pulls that such a shift in guardianship entailed: his father's idealist, nationalistic fervour and enlightened conservatism was markedly the opposite of the uncle's practical, conservative approach to life. These opposed pulls further contributed to Conrad's dual affinities.

What do you think are or could have been the implications of such biographical features for Conrad? Stop here and ponder for a few minutes before you read on. Now compare your ideas with mine: If you ask me, I shall agree entirely with the critic who thinks that the "inheritance was both a sensitivity to oppressive autocracy and a profound scepticism about the idealism of social, and particularly nationalistic, movements" (Andrea White). Yet another critic insists that every aspect of Conrad's youth and later development was affected by Russian rule and by the Russian occupation of Poland (Jean H. Szczypien). Conrad, thus, was to experience two great empires: the Russian and the British; was a victim of the first, and served the second. Also, he gave up a successful marine career, and took up the risky business of book-writing. Did these biographical-historical factors have anything to do with the kind of books he wrote? So, as I have said before, one cannot understand Conrad's view of imperialism without a working knowledge of his personal-national identity. We shall look at this from diverse angles as we go on.

1.3 KING LEOPOLD AND THE CONGO

The nineteenth century was notable for European imperialism. Belgium was late in joining this "scramble for loot". In fact the Belgians did not approve of King Leopold's brand of private imperialism. For they had achieved their own independence after a long struggle, and had no desire to subjugate anyone. The father, Leopold the 1st, one of the clever Coburg family who either married into or founded so many of the nineteenth century European royal families, manipulated fortune and negotiated himself to the position of the first King of the Belgians. He was concerned primarily with the establishing and securing of his dynasty.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, equatorial Africa was unknown to the Europeans; the maps had not yet been drawn. This is what Conrad meant when he called the area "a blank space of delightful mystery". But soon missionaries, explorers, and scientists were to unravel the mystery, soon to be followed by rapacious businessmen and commercial houses who began exploiting the resources, material and human. Both private and governmental agents were involved in these exploits if only because an industrial Europe had begun seeking markets and raw material. David Livingstone, the Scot medical missionary and "Her Majesty's consul for Inner and Unexplored Africa," disappeared into east central Africa in 1866 at the request of the Royal Geographical Society to settle the question of the river basins of southern Africa. Stanley, in a spectacular expedition sponsored by the New York *World Telegram* as a publicity stunt, went "looking for" Livingston (who did not regard himself as lost) and "found" him at Ujiji on the shore of Lake Tanganyika in November 1871. Leopold's interest in Congo came after the expedition of Stanley. And soon his men met the explorer to join the King's "civilising mission in Africa". In 1885, Stanley wrote about his mission:

> On the 14th of August 1879, I arrived before the mouth of this river to ascend it, with the novel mission of sowing along its banks civilised

settlements, to peacefully conquer and subdue it, to remould it in harmony with modern ideas into National States, within whose limits the European merchant shall go hand in hand with the dark African trader, and justice and law and order shall prevail, and murder and lawlessness and the cruel barter of slaves shall forever cease.

See in the map the route that Conrad took, and what fictional names he gave to such actual names as Stanley Pool and Stanley Falls on the north bank of the river. From 1885 to 1908, the Congo "Free State" was cruelly exploited until the exploitation crossed all "civilised" limits, which aroused international anger against Leopold's tactics. Of course, the King received support from international finance agencies. The profits were enormous, coming from, mostly, ivory. One such organisation, was to employ Conrad.

Africa, then, came to figure not only in the geographical map of the Europeans, but also in their mental landscapes. The two were not necessarily similar. Africa was now available to them, in Edward Said's words, in terms of an "imaginative geography" (*Orientalism*). This Orientalist attitude of the European was to equip him as inevitably as the "map, mosquito boots, or solar topi" (White). Africa was constructed for them imaginatively or mythically by writers, travel as well as fictional. It was in a sense both discovery and invention. To what purpose? The answer to this is complex and not easily answered. Conrad of course gives his own answer, if such rich ambiguities as the novella under study can be called answers.

1.4 THE WHITE MAN IN THE HEART OF DARKNESS

After moving to England in 1878, Conrad continued to try and fulfil his life's ambition; and after a few years, sea life quickly lost its romance. In 1886, he became a naturalised British citizen, and continued to serve various ships of the British Merchant Navy, which he had joined, in the meantime. Sometime in 1889, after he had resigned from the command of *Otago*, and was in forced idleness in England, he must have become familiar with Stanley's first reports of his exploits in the London *Times*. Well-read in adventure stories, he had begun writing and continued to struggle with his first novel, *Almayer's Folly*. While looking for a ship, he secured an introduction to Albert Thuys, an aide-de-camp of King Leopold II. Around this time an organisation called *Societe Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo* was founded by the king ostensibly to develop the upper Congo Basin and a railway between the mouth of the Congo river and Stanley Pool (See Map III). Thuys interviewed Conrad twice; probably he was also helped by his "aunt" Marguerite Poraowska, a well-connected confidant of his. After delays, there was a breakthrough, and he sailed for the Congo, reaching Matadi six weeks later facing the heart of darkness (See Map III and IV) .

For, from now on Conrad kept two diaries, one of which provides a daily account of his journey of about 250 miles from Matadi to Nselemba near Stanley Pool, beginning with "Arrived at Matadi on the 13th of June, 1890." Not a few of the entries there resemble the incidents in *Heart of Darkness.*

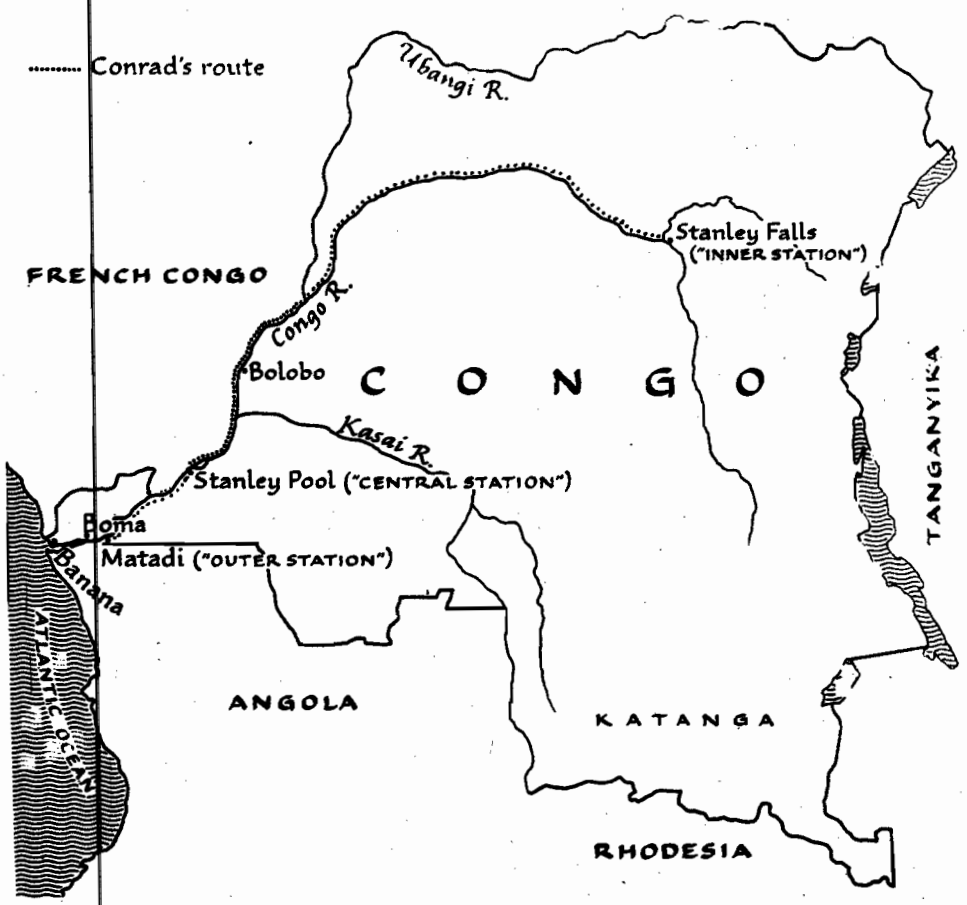
The upper part of the gigantic, python-like river, where the currents were navigable, was cut off from the rapids of Matadi. Thus all the provisions and other necessities of life were carried by porters. The image of the serpent-like river and the task of carrying the requirements of empire-building are to be found in *Heart of Darkness*. The steamboats too were taken apart and carried off to be reassembled when navigation was possible. The railway was to be completed only in 1897. Conrad found the entire exercise dismal, monotonous, and uncomfortable, if not horrifying on occasions. He noted depressing details in his diary: "On the road today passed a skeleton tied to a post. Also white man's grave—no name—heaps of stone in form of a cross." Nineteen days after they began the journey they reached the port area of Stanley Pool (the Central Station of *Heart of Darkness).* Soon he was on board a steamer as mate on its way to Stanley Falls to relieve an ailing company agent by the name of Klein (you may be surprised to know that

Conrad had originally thought of giving this name to the character, Kurtz). The following recollection accurately captures Conrad's disillusionment with the entire enterprise, and also his disgust at the publicity surrounding Stanley:

> a great melancholy descended on me. Yes, this was the very spot. But there was no shadowy friend to stand by my side in the night of the enormous wilderness...only the unholy recollection of a prosaic newspaper 'stunt' and *the distasteful knowledge of the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration.* (my italics; "Geography and Some Explorers", 1924).

Klein died on their return journey, when Conrad was in charge of the steamer after Captain Koch fell ill at Stanley Falls. Though, as I have said before, Klein was Kurtz's original name, the parallels between the real and fictional characters are only superficial. It is much safer to assume that much of Conrad's own experience, brooding, and the gossips and yarns he heard about many other adventurers went into the chracter of Kurtz. Anyway, relationships with his associates, who he said in a letter had "the gift of getting on my nerves", deteriorated fast; and when his pleadings with the officials in Brussels did not help, he returned to England prematurely in November 1891 with gout, rheumatism, neuralgia, and malaria. All this while he had been struggling with his first novel. But such was the intensity of his Congo experience that he could recapture the horror of it all in *Heart of Darkness* eight years later with full force.

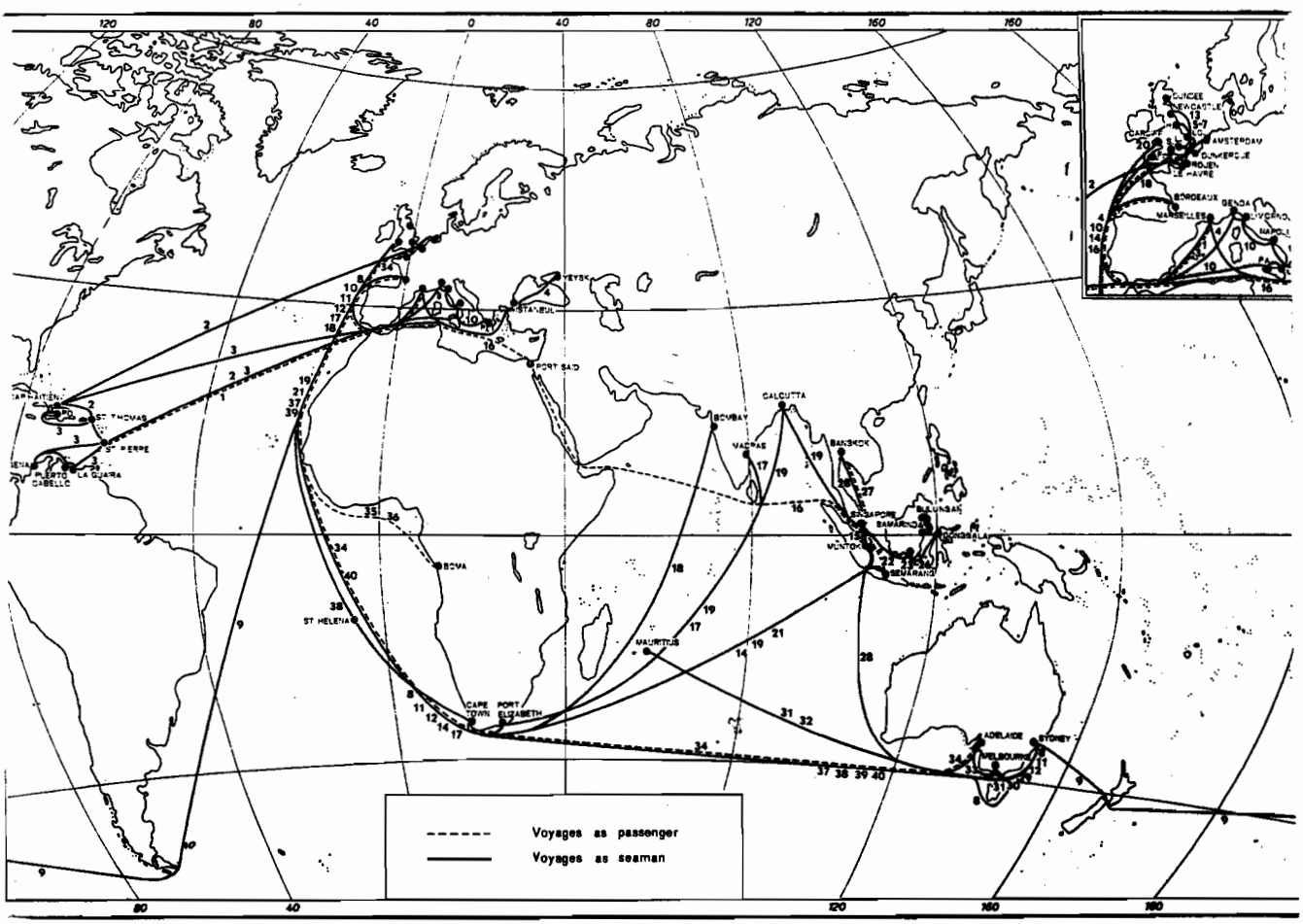
Map III



What were Conrad's assumptions about Africa? We have read about his childhood dreams; we have also seen the way the "dark" continent was imaged and imagined in the white world. Though we have talked about Conrad's criticism of the colonial enterprise in his fiction, it would be a mistake to think that he had held a similar view all along. In fact, his pre-Congo views were vastly different. They were conservative in the best tradition of mainstream British imperial ideology. After all, by the time Conrad began working in the British Merchant Service in 1878, European imperial rule over the non-European world extended to nearly two-thirds of the Earth's land surface, and Britain's empire had a major share in the booty: colonies in Oceania, New Zealand and Australia, and the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States, to India, Canada, Africa, the Caribbean, China, and a more informal empire of trade in South America, and the British Empire. Thus the empire Conrad served was extensive . By the end of the century, it would expand much more.

We can now perhaps understand why Conrad, a recently naturalised British subject, should have spoken of himself at this time as a "Polish nobleman, cased in British tar" with some degree of implied pride (*Letters*, I, p. 52). For by now the "hospitable shores of Great Britain" were what he could call "home" (*Letters* I, p. 12). His sympathies were clearly conservative. A few years before, he had written to a friend, expressing his unhappiness over the victory of the Liberals in the recently concluded elections for the British parliament. With this victory, he said, "all that is respectable, venerable and holy" had disappeared, and the "great British Empire" had "gone over the edge" (*Letters* I, p. 16). Patric Brantlinger has talked about "the Victorian myth of the dark continent", and it is with this and other myths in his ideological baggage that Conrad had approached the Congo. So it was only expected that the young Conrad complained that things were not exactly *pukka* when he was on his way up the Congo.

Map IV: Conrad's Sea Voyages



1.5 THE TITLE OF THE TEXT

On his return from the Belgian Congo, thus, and with his first novel nearly complete, he woke up to the possibility of a new life on dry land. He was rich in experience for a kind of adventure fiction unknown to the English speaking world. "No one has *known,*" Henry James told him, "for intellectual use—the things you know." But it was only in 1896 that he began to use his Congo experience. About the first story "An Outpost of Progress" he wrote to his publisher:

> It is a story of the Congo. There is no love in it and no woman—only incidentally. The exact locality is not mentioned. All the bitterness of those days, all my puzzled wonder as to the meaning of all I saw—all my indignation at masquerading philanthropy have been with me again while I wrote. The story is simple—there is hardly any description. The most common incidents are related—the life in a lonely station on the Kassai. I have divested myself of everything but pity—and some scorn—while putting the insignificant events that bring on the catastrophe.

The story in question, beginning with the title is an ironical treatment of the so-called civilising mission that was going on in Africa. Does Conrad's clarification about there being no love or woman in the story have any significance beyond itself? I think it does. It shows what the expectations of the contemporary reader were like. A story had to have a love angle to it with one or more women in it. What was also popular was the travel adventure of the kind popularised by Stevenson and one or two others. Both these expectations of the reader Conrad subverted. Yet what the editor had expected him to give was an adventure. "An Outpost of Progress" was a partial attempt on his part to exorcise the traumatic experience. He succeeds to some extent. But the story does not have the intensity or sophistication of *Heart of Darkness*. His indictment of "the vilest scramble for loot" was to come in a more satisfying way in the latter. Conrad reported to William Blackwood about the progress he had made on a story he had been working on for ten days sometime in December 1898:

> The title I am thinking of is *The Heart of Darkness* [sic] but the narrative is not gloomy. The criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilising work in Africa is a justifiable idea. The subject is of our time distinctly—though not topically treated. It is a story as much as my "Outpost of Progress" was but, so to speak "takes in" more—is a little wider—is less concentrated upon individuals.

This also makes evident how Conrad's treatment of a topical subject is not quite stereotypical: instead of valorising the colonial enterprise he is castigating the whole enterprise. A minor point perhaps worth noting is that he uses here the definite article, which is dropped in the title he uses eventually. The reason could be that the *Heart of Darkness* that is portrayed, as we shall see, is not a reference to the centre of Africa, the dark continent; though the irony in the allusion is apparent. *Heart of Darkness* is also the darkness within, particularly within the protagonist's mind; as well as within the white race, as the Romans may have found out two thousand years ago according to what Marlow says. Like its companion pieces ("Youth", "The End of the Tether") *Heart of Darkness* is an

> examination of the encounter between truth and image, abstraction and concreteness, darkness and illumination. The kinship between Marlow and Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* is sustained on a metaphysical level as kinship between darkness and light, between the impulse toward light sustained by Marlow until he sees Kurtz and the impulse toward light sustained by Kurtz in the deepest darkness. (Said, *Joseph Conrad* , p. 147)

1.6 Let Us Sum Up

Ideology-formation in a sensitive writer is a slow and evolving process, depending on both conscious efforts on his part for practical reasons, and on unconscious, uncontrolable, socio-political forces. In the case of Conrad, the significant experiences/forces of both these kinds were linked to, as we have just seen, his nationality, exile, migration—a process of deliberate selection and rejection. What we saw in this unit is that Conrad's life as a sailor, and his experience of the two empires, one of which he served in his capacity as a mate, had a decisive influence on the ideological underpinnings which his writing carry. We also saw how his experience in the Congo led to a state of mind which produces the African tales. He soon becomes, as his uncle would put it, "a cog...in the machinery of the empire". We now recall the admonition of his uncle when Conrad was going through his Congo experience: "You are probably looking around at people and things as well as at the 'civilising' (confound it) affair...before you feel able to express your own opinion. Don't wait however until it all crystallises into clear sentences, but tell me something of your health and your first impression." We need not worry about what Conrad wrote to his uncle; but his crystallised impression in *Heart of Darkness* is what will immediately preoccupy us. It is surprising that he would deeply resent contemporary attempts to read too much biography into his work, and the emphasis on his life as a mariner.

1.7 QUESTIONS

1. What factors in Conrad's life do you think may have contributed to his homo duplex status?

2. Do you think Conrad's life is interesting *per se*, or insofar as it contributes to/enriches our understanding of the text?

3. Do you now feel impelled to read Conrad's letters and his Congo diary? Why?

1.8 SUGGESTED READING

Jacques Berthoud. *Joseph Conrad: The Major Phase.* Cambridge University Press, 1978.
Dean, L. F. *Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'; Backgrounds and Criticisms.* Englewood Cliffs, 1960.
B. Harkness. *Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' and the Critics.* San Francisco, 1960.
Zdzislaw Najder. *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle.* New Brunswick:Rutgers University Press, 1983.