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Conrad's Avatar: Group Membership and Authorial Intent

James A. Elwood

By the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel... before all, to make you see. That — and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm — all you demand — and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask.

Joseph Conrad, Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1897, p. vii)

Abstract

“The eyes are the window to the soul”—whatever the origin of this phrase, humans have long searched for the true meaning in a person's soul. Absent the eyes, later generations can look at one's written legacy for clues to a writer's intent. This paper revisits that question concerning Joseph Conrad, whose works have been the focus of intense scrutiny since written a century ago. Drawing on the notion of group membership, this paper argues that as a linguistic and cultural outsider, Conrad was able to comment very knowledgeably on the human condition while effectively distancing himself from broad cultural tendencies of his time.

Introduction

Although born some 150 years too early to have done so, what avatar might a computer-savvy Joseph Conrad have chosen?¹ Avatars are the proxy beings that allow computer users to join a community vicariously and serve several purposes such as preserving the owner's anonymity and allowing unfettered freedom of expression. Much as modern net mavens use avatars to establish a presence (usually a person, but not always), was Conrad doing exactly that in his writings? Of particular importance to the present article is Conrad's position in perhaps his seminal work, *Heart of Darkness* (1902).

For those perhaps not familiar with Joseph Conrad, let us take a moment to meet the man.

Born in 1857 to Polish parents, he grew to maturity as Jozef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski. His father was a writer and translator from French and English into Polish, and he encouraged his son to read widely in both Polish and French. Upon reaching the age of 16 Conrad embarked on the first of his travels, showing the wanderlust that would take him to far-flung locales and underpin many of his later writings. He worked 16 years in the merchant marine navies, first for France and later England, retiring finally at age 36 from his seafaring life. These nautical experiences formed the basis of many of his writings, which utilized elements of the nautical world and its discourse while exploring the human condition.

One of the locations that Conrad visited was a so-called station in the Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). Such stations served as outposts for the Belgian monarchy, providing both a foothold for claims of sovereignty by the distant government in Europe and a departure point for the flow of goods to Europe and the Americas. Those goods were extractive in nature, including primarily ivory and rubber. Far more malicious were poor treatment of local peoples and the flow of humans—slaves—that would eventually number in the millions.

Conrad eventually returned to Europe, settling in England and receiving English citizenship. In his lifetime, he authored some 20 books and many shorter works, and his sailor's background figured prominently in many. One might note in passing that Conrad wrote not in his native language, Polish, or his

¹ As the preceding sentence may suggest to the reader, this paper includes a considerable number of perhaps unusual juxtapositions and draws upon a wide range of background information. I ask the reader's patience as we veer from nameless horses through failed fire-builders and beyond, for such analogies may help to illustrate the points under consideration.

second language, French—for him, English was third in line, and in spite of having begun to learn it in his 20s, he became obviously quite proficient as the richness of his written prose attests. Nonetheless, Conrad was a non-native speaker of English and “a stranger in the context of the cultural and literary tradition that, ironically, [he] would become part of” (Caneda Cabrera, 2008, p. 62).

In the current treatise, we will look briefly at Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (HD; 1902).

On a Deck in the Thames

Heart of Darkness furthered the life of Conrad’s most famous character, the man called Marlow, who first appeared in *Youth* (1898) and would later also narrated *Lord Jim* (1902). Like Conrad, Marlow had worked as a sailor, and HD takes the form of Marlow’s narrative about a particularly disturbing trip into the interior of Africa. Employed as the captain of a riverboat that transported ivory downriver for export to Europe, Marlow also was charged with retrieving the rogue trader Kurtz. In the course of his journey, Marlow experiences torture, cruelty, and the much-analyzed “unspeakable rites.”

In the novella Conrad used a literary technique called frame narrative, in which the narrator’s story (i.e., Marlow’s story) is told as a narrative—in short, the story we read is a narrative of Marlow’s narrative. This use of a “fictive proxy” (Greaney, 2002) allowed the author, Conrad, to distance himself from the sentiments of Marlow by establishing a buffer zone, a *cordon sanitaire* (Morrell, 2006).

Modern Views of Conrad and His Works

Moving into the latter half of the twentieth century, many of Conrad’s works had become library pieces, of interest primarily to Conrad aficionados and beleaguered university students. However, HD was and remains an integral part of many high school English classes in the United States, where it wears many hats: as a fine example of the writing of that era, an exploration into the “heart of darkness” (wherever that lay), an indictment of imperialism, and a shining example of lyrical prose. In short, in Watts’ (1996) words, it had become “canonical” (p. 52).

However, Conrad’s works—especially *Heart of Darkness*—began to be critiqued from a variety of viewpoints, including readings based on post-modernist theory, postcolonial studies (Collits, 2005), feminist theory (Smith, 1989), gender studies (Roberts, 1993; Schneider, 2003), masculinity studies (Roberts, 2000), medical narrative (Bock, 2002) and even gothic studies (Mahanta, 2006). By far the best known, however, came from the field of post-colonial literature: in 1975, Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe took issue with *Heart of Darkness*, stating that its author was a “thoroughgoing racist” for its portrayal of Africa and Africans (Achebe, 1977). Achebe’s comments invited extensive commentary and reevaluation of long-held beliefs about *Heart of Darkness*.

Achebe asserted that Conrad’s famous novel dehumanizes Africans, rendering Africa “a metaphysical battlefield of all recognisable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril” (1977, p. 9). Indeed, nearly all of the people in the tale lack names, instead being referred to only with functional titles: the fireman, the accountant, the pilgrims, the Russian, the Dane—the list continues, for only Kurtz and Marlow actually are named. Furthermore, the native people seem to lack speech, speaking instead with a “violent babble of uncouth sounds” which included “exchang[ing] short grunting phrases” (p. 8). However, perhaps more useful would be Hampson’s (1994) suggestion that Marlow’s rendering described the outcome of changing a “heteroglot experience [Russian, German, French, African languages] . . . into a monoglot text” (cited in Greaney, 2002, p. 62).

Achebe also objected to Conrad’s ostensible use of dyads: Africa represents a “counterpart” to Europe in many ways, thus representing Africa as “the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant beastiality” (p. 2). Furthermore, Achebe asserted that Conrad was inevitably tied to and thus representative of the widespread paternalism and racism vis-à-vis Africa, which “almost always managed to sidestep

the ultimate question of the equality between white people and black people” (p. 8).

Achebe himself offered that legitimate reasons may underpin Conrad’s work, and numerous academics have weighed in, with Patrick Brantlinger (1996) and Cedric Watts (1983) having provided two seminal critiques. A longer and extremely lucid treatment is Firchow’s (2000) book, but my purpose is not to address the various points Achebe raised and which have been argued at length by such august scholars. A paradigm from which to mull HD is our goal, and the idea of group membership provides one such framework.

The View from the Poop Deck

In naval parlance, the poop deck is the deck located at the stern of a ship and atop the cabin there. On sailing vessels it was where the helmsman stood and from where observation and navigation were conducted—in short, it was the headquarters of the ship. From our vantage point on the literary (and figurative) poop deck, we shall embark on our journey.

Given that the two works portray people of the late 19th century world in a particular light, how can someone of the 21st century assess them? More importantly, how can one impartially or even correctly assess them? To do so, one must assume a point of reference, a frame, or even a paradigm (see Murphey, Falout, Elwood, & Hood, 2009). *Assume* in the preceding sentence is perhaps too strong in that the reviewer may not realize that he / she is doing so; a better verb there would likely be *acknowledge*, which carries the notion of realizing (and perhaps admitting) that a frame of reference is extant. The distinction is crucial, for each person carries a frame of reference by virtue of his or her upbringing, which includes language: later in life, Wittgenstein would come to believe that “our language determines our view of reality because we see things through [language]” (Pears, 1971, p. 13). In other words, as a result of one’s background, one employs a particular framework—including language—from which to view and make sense of the world.

This is crucial to bear in mind when examining a context different than one’s own.

While commonalities certainly exist across different times and places, temporal separation that Achebe (1977) termed “actuality” may mediate perceptions—imagine Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet. Pining for your beloved (as most people have likely experienced, including Kurtz’ Intended in HD) is a quite timeless condition, yet how can a 21st-century man completely understand Romeo’s situation? Our modern lovelorn gent might well pick up a telephone or send an e-mail, yet Romeo had a much different reality. Moreover, different eras often have different social mores—again, as in the above nod to political correctness, I have opted to avoid a common pejorative used widely to refer to blacks, yet in the early 20th century it was a common term (as were others now considered unacceptable).

An anecdote might clarify this point. My mother made her grand entrance into this world in 1928, and she has spent nearly all her life in Montana in the northwestern United States, an area inhabited almost completely by people of European descent—in other words, by whites. In her upbringing, she and her sisters would occasionally be treated to a variety of nuts from the local grocery store: walnuts, cashews, hazelnuts, Brazil nuts, and others. A Brazil nut is a dark brown nut, about the color of bitter chocolate, generally about 2 cm in length in the shape of a rounded oblong. When my mother was small, the common lexeme for such nuts was “nigger toes,” a rather crude, graphic, yet widespread appellation. That was the term commonly used by her father and those around her, and I sincerely doubt whether it represented a latent or recidivistic racism on her part. Whereas we in the 21st century would take issue with the use of such terms, our sensibilities are removed temporally from that time. Moreover, we run the risk of adjudicating that time through our contemporary, “presentist” lens, in effect trying to “reprocess the past” (LaCapra, 1987, p. 9).

Taxonomy, The Art of Classification

To lay the foundation for a different look at Conrad’s work, let us then turn to how we humans make sense of the world. In the

course of becoming literate adults, children learn classification, the art of grouping and labeling such groups. This process initially entails tangible objects as, for example, various furry, mobile things gradually form the animal group in the child's mind. As the person matures, tangible comes to include intangible, and the person naturally will classify himself/herself into groups. The list of groups into which a person falls or chooses to fall can be endless, involving familial, social, and work relationships among others.

This is of crucial importance in the analysis of Conrad's works, for Achebe would have the critic believe that lack of membership in a group handicaps the observer—how, for example, can a male comment on a female condition? On the other hand, positioning outside the group may allow one to view and analyze the group from a more impartial stance (Elwood, 1999), a notion echoed in the description of Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*: “[T]o him [Marlow], the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out as only a glow brings out a haze” (p. 2).

A second consideration is of importance, too. This enters into the sphere of semantics, and a concept Saussure posited some 100 years ago. In his *Course in General Linguistics* (1916/1998) Saussure noted that an object (the thing that is *signified*) exists, and that people signify that object in some linguistic fashion (i.e., the word or the *signifier*). Together these constitute the *sign*, which exists only in relation to other signs in some kind of system (Hoenisch, 2005). A case in point could be some innocuous thing like an apple. The signified is a type of fruit, generally red, yellow, or green, which is grown in temperate zones. The signifier is the label we attach to that fruit. For something like an apple, the basic signifier is quite close to the actual object.

However, meaning is not always so simple, as Saussure's formulation implies: an apple may carry other nuances as part of a system, perhaps associated with one's childhood or one's country. In the US, for example, apple pie (of the American vintage, not European-style pie) carries a very pronounced sense of nostalgia associated like home, Grandma's

home cooking, and baseball. For someone from another country, apples might carry another nuance or perhaps none at all—to paraphrase the Bard, an apple by any other name is still an apple.

The “Other”

In modern society, however, people converse at length about myriad topics, not just apples. Some of the most contentious dialogs emerge from what can be termed “othering,” a notion utilized by Achebe in his essay and shortly thereafter developed further by Edward Said (1978). The essence of othering is the idea that an entity, say a group of people, is marked by characteristics that mark it as “something else” (i.e., something “other”). In so doing people can innocently observe differences such as food preferences, or people can embark on the slippery slope of value judgments: an “other” is by its very nature *not*, a condition lacking something. In 19th century thought, Africa often was portrayed as the “other,” a vast continent filled with people lacking the refinements of real (read: Western) civilization and therefore in need of help by the enlightened denizens of Europe (Firchow, 2000). Indeed, a widespread sentiment often integrally linked with Christian dogma was that members of Western civilization, as righteous Christians, had an obligation to help those less fortunate, which was often interpreted to mean those lacking (Western) clothing, Western education, and certainly Western religion.

In many 19th century contexts, this meant an odd juxtaposition of several elements: innocent altruism, often overbearing paternalism, power-mongering that marked the era of European empires and still permeates international relations, and the economic reality of Europe in the Industrial Revolution period and its developing appetite for resources. As true as the axiom that “To the victor go the spoils [of war]” is, perhaps equally true is that the victors, be they in warfare or simply power, will author the narrative of the incident in question and, in a broader sense, the history (or histories). In the US, for example, the traditional account of Columbus' heroic adventures in “discovering” the Americas was long taught

as *the* one, correct account of Europeans' early ventures into the New World, in spite of there obviously being a second narrative, that of the Native Americans. In Asia, a similar discussion has continued for many years over accounts of the activities of Japan's Imperial Army and Navy in World War Two, yet such accounts have come under scrutiny and criticism (e.g., Chang, 1998; Higashinakano, 2005; Wakabayashi, 2007).

Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*

In essence, then, we arrive at rather differing versions of history that may be, in the parlance of marital discord, irreconcilable. However, such versions may be emblematic of a trend to offer more balanced treatments of history. A recent example of one scholar's effort to offer a coherent synthesis of history and perhaps offer a preview of things to come is Samuel P. Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations?" In the original 1993 article in *Foreign Affairs*, Huntington painted a broad canvas on which conflicts were and will be intrinsically *not* those between nation-states (in the sense of a political unit exercising sovereignty), but rather between civilizations, of which seven or perhaps eight exist. This was further developed in subsequent books and articles (e.g., Huntington, 1996), and it led to an outpouring of discussion and criticism.

Huntington, a Harvard scholar, brought the academic's learned pen to his commentary, yet criticism levied at Huntington was that he had little or no business writing about civilizations about which he knew little. Among others, Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said (2001) responded, arguing that Huntington's characterizations of the broad Islamic world as a single civilization "purged myriad currents and countercurrents that animate human history" (§3). Indeed, in the centuries-old conflicts that have riven and continue to play important roles throughout the Middle East and well into Asia, the mixed nature of the Islamic world appears quite evident. Furthermore, the position as an outsider may restrict one's understanding of and therefore ability to comment on the numerous contexts in the Islamic world. Regarding Said's Orientalism, George

Landow of Brown University noted Said's "dramatic assertion that no European or American scholar could 'know' the Orient" (2002).

This line of reasoning is quite similar to those that underpin some criticisms of Conrad's works. In writing about Africa, how could Conrad, a European, address any situation in Africa except from a European perspective? The skepticism inherent in this question is premised on the notion that a group member (i.e., an insider) can comment more knowledgeably than an outsider. If this criterion is valid, then the critique of *any* outsider is potentially suspect.

To Build a (Membership) Fire

Given that group membership is of considerable importance, how can one obtain membership in a group, a small community? One aspect is, of course, the personal decision to do so, as seen in President Barack Obama's decision to identify with his black heritage. At one point in his life he used the anglicized form Barry to "fit in," but later he changed to using his given name of Barack. Moreover, he has certainly been embraced by blacks (and dare one say, "the black community"?) in the US. The second aspect—acceptance by the target group—is a process that may run the gamut from simple to fraught with peril, as London's protagonist was fated to learn.

In many contexts, group membership is protected and not freely granted, via what we might call the "gatekeeper function." This fulfills a number of needs, including preventing usurpers or pretenders from gaining membership and reflecting social mores (and perhaps more commonly, social changes). As of this writing (early 2009), the United States had only recently overcome the long-standing fact that a member of a minority group could not—and later, *could* but had not—become president. For much of its history, the US legally barred certain groups from voting (much less holding public office) based on ethnic membership and gender, and only in the last few decades have increasing numbers of women and minority group members assumed positions of leadership. The gatekeeper function, whether legal or social, has slowly loosened its grip on

membership in all echelons of the United States' political establishment.

Through the Looking Glass (or Not)

However, is group membership a prerequisite for knowledgeable commentary? Might not the outsider see things more clearly? In Said's (1993) words, "[Y]our self-consciousness as an outsider can allow you to actively comprehend how the machine works, given that you and it are fundamentally not in perfect synchrony or correspondence" (p. 24).² One manifestation of this idea in the newspaper industry and in government is the ombudsman [*sic*], a person employed specifically for the purpose of handling criticism and him/herself critiquing while not being beholden to and perhaps influenced by the employer.

As numerous commentators (e.g., Brantlinger, 1996; Firchow, 2000) have noted, in *Heart of Darkness* Conrad appears to have tried to distance himself from Marlow, his 'fictive proxy.' This ploy allows him leeway to be (or not to be) part of a community. This practice is very similar to that in online social networking in which a proxy, a so-called avatar, represents a person. An avatar can be anything its creator wishes vis-à-vis, for example, gender, race, age, appearance, and character—in short, the avatar does not necessarily equate with or even resemble its creator. This is also true in puppetry (Elwood, 2009), in which the puppeteer is often not exactly himself when manipulating the puppet, and of course people assume various roles depending on the social context.

A Horse with No Name

Much as does the lead article in this issue of the *OTB Forum* (Rainey, this volume), let us look a moment at an example from another medium. Nearly 40 years ago music aficionados were treated to a hardy, faithful, yet sadly nameless equine soul that transported the singer through a desert

(Bunnell, 1971). Here we find encapsulated the essence of the group membership issue.

Is It a Horse?

A fundamental question in the midst of traversing that musical desert could be the identity of the walker. Labeled a horse, the mode of transportation thus was assumed to be one, possessed of four legs with hooves, a long tail, a prominent proboscis, and a penchant for oats. We really have little reason to doubt that it was a horse, complete with its various identifying characteristics.

Returning to *Heart of Darkness*, we can at least agree that it is a book. However, what kind of book was and is it? That mere question is not as simple as it might at appear at first blush: any communicative act, be it literary or oral, is subject to at least two interpretations (the communicator and the audience). In literature one widely-known example of a different interpretation was the *fatwa*-inducing work of Salman Rushdie in the 1980s. Rushdie penned *The Satanic Verses* (1988), a work which some decried as blasphemous for its depictions of the Prophet Mohammed. The Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini subsequently issued a religious edict (*fatwa*) calling for Rushdie's death, a verdict that led to both police protection of Rushdie by the British government and the subsequent writing of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), ostensibly a story for children but with a rather thinly-veiled commentary on threats to freedom of speech. In this series of events we see the complexities in how a literary work can be interpreted in markedly different ways.

Thus we can ask the following: what was *Heart of Darkness*? A horse, a literary work, or a social treatise? While the horse analogy may have exhausted its usefulness (and also the reader's patience), the other two are certainly possibilities. Much as a child might see that book as something of no interest except for building a mountain of books, an adult would likely see it differently. The perceived nature of the book is of necessity dependent on the observer and subsequently on the observer's identification of the book, which naturally depends to an extent on who is critiquing. Firchow (2000) argues

² Interestingly, in 2001 Said took the opposite tack, calling into question "Huntington's assumption that his perspective, which is to survey the entire world from a perch outside all ordinary attachments and hidden loyalties, is the correct one" (¶3).

eloquently for viewing *Heart of Darkness* as a novel of exceptional aesthetic value, not a social treatise, but a novel from which social and historical meaning can be construed in relation to its aesthetic significance.

Here, allow me a soapbox moment: at times the critics of HD take issue with how various groups are depicted (e.g., Africans and women). While the essence of such criticism is arguably true, the simple fact is that the book to be examined is the one written, not what critics wish had been written. A work can likely never be all things to all people, yet as observers we should allow the work to have its place and function (whatever those might be) in the author-reader dialogue.

Willing Suspension of Disbelief

Our final point also deals with allowing Conrad some space to breathe. Here, to this increasingly convoluted discussion we bring Coleridge's (1817) notion of *willing suspension of disbelief*, which refers to how a receiver (i.e., the audience) will allow incredible and perhaps impossible things to be believed—picture a talking bear in animated films. Whereas not one talking bear has appeared in history, we treat that loquacious, animated ursine being as sentient. In other words, we temporarily disengage or suspend our disbelief, a mechanism that underpins fiction and performing art. Note, however, that in fiction, even as the author draws upon his/her own history, we readers allow the author the freedom to be distant from the opinions expressed in the work.

The same consideration should be granted to Conrad and his works. Even though Achebe asserted, “Marlow seems to me to enjoy Conrad’s complete confidence” (p. 7). Certainly Marlow spoke at Conrad’s behest, and Conrad himself offered this characterization of their relationship:

[Youth] marks the first appearance ... of the man Marlow ... [We] came together in the casual manner of those health-resort acquaintances which sometimes ripen into friendships. This one has ripened ... He haunts my hours of solitude, when, in silence, we lay our heads together in great comfort and harmony. (Conrad, 1917, ¶4)

On the other hand, it was a transitory friendship, for “[A]s we part at the end of a tale I am never sure that it may not be for the last time” (¶4).

The Crux of the Matter

We thus return to our original question: what avatar might Conrad have chosen? First, although Conrad antedated the computer avatar, the idea of a proxy being (the original usage of the word avatar) was masterfully employed in the man Marlow. Second, Marlow narrated Conrad’s stories, which I opt to classify, in Firchow’s words, as works of “aesthetic significance that offered nuanced commentary on the human condition” (p. 154); they were not then and still are not now ironclad reflections of the author’s intent, for we as readers must allow the author to tell his tale. In so doing, he utilized a frame of reference distant from that tale and its depictions of various people.

Finally, let ask this question: who was Conrad? Of his place as a member of a misplaced Polish royal family and a former sailor, we are certain. He was, however, neither African nor a full-fledged member of the English-speaking community, thereby being an outsider to both groups. Such a status does not preclude commentary on either and perhaps offers clearer insight.

Conrad might well have been his own avatar, a condition that—frustratingly, perhaps, for the reader that would like a definitive answer—would allow him to remain nebulous. Whatever the man truly was, his own feelings were not transparent, and certainly not through his eyes. Regarding one of his works, he wrote, “As to its ‘reality’ that is for the readers to determine” (1917, ¶4)—the author simply accords the reader the right to judge, and perhaps that is true of the man and his avatar, too.

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Have a great lesson plan you'd like to share? How about an experience? Hop to it, put pen to paper (or, perhaps more likely now, fingertips to keyboard), and let the world know.

To wit, the next issue of the *OTB Forum* is planned for the fall of 2009. Authors may submit a short abstract for planned submissions by Wednesday, July 15, 2009.