

# Discovering the Truth Beyond Time: Encountering the Other in *Heart of Darkness*

LI Juan

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

This article analyzes why Conrad's fiction tells more truthful history than historians by reviewing the loss of faith in historicism that can tell certain truths and correct culture with the development of the history of ideas and explores how the truth beyond time is revealed through the encountering between the self of Europeans and "the Other" of non-Europeans on the prehistoric African land. As "the Other" of British mainstream culture in his time and a historian of human experience, Joseph Conrad reverses the Eurocentric view of "the Other" culture, reminds Europeans of "the Other" within themselves, undermines the West's superiority in its culture, and brings the prehistoric truth that has been forgotten by "civilized" Europeans back to them.

*Keywords:* *Heart of Darkness*, historicism, history, truth, "the Other"

## Introduction

*Heart of Darkness* is a story written by Joseph Conrad in 1899. Originally published as a three-part serial story in *Blackwood's Magazine*, the story revolves around Marlow's journey through the Congo River to find Kurtz and it explores the surprising differences and similarities between European and African societies.

Many critics have analyzed the story from different perspectives. Chinua Achebe pays attention to racism by analyzing the image of Africa in the story. He thinks that *Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as "the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization" and a place "where man's intelligence is finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (Achebe, 2016, p. 15). Samet Güven interprets the story from the point of post-colonial perspective and claims that Conrad does not "intend to appreciate colonialism" and he has deconstructed "binary oppositions of colonialism" by subverting the general idea of the Europeans towards Africa in the 19th century (2013, p. 79). Hunt Hawkins has examined Conrad's extremely complex, and "yet inadequately understood" critique of imperialism. He assumes that throughout the fiction Conrad "condemned imperialism of all types, both efficient and wasteful, benevolent and malevolent, British and non-British" (Hawkins, 1979, p. 286).

These critics notice the colonial and racial factors in *Heart of Darkness*. But in this article, the author wants to analyze the fiction in the background of the development of historicism in the West. She argues that Conrad's fiction tells a more truthful history than those of traditional historians due to the loss of faith in the coherence and ability to tell the real truth of history, and Conrad shows us that the truth beyond time is revealed in the encountering between self and "the Other" and between Europeans and non-Europeans on the prehistoric African continent. That is to say, truth is obtained from forgetting history.

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LI Juan, Master candidate, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

### More Truthful History in Fiction

The century before the publication of *Heart of Darkness* in 1899 was a great time of history. In the Middle Ages, events in history were seen as examples of moral laws or truths. But the Renaissance is a radically different era from that which preceded it, producing many thinkers who considered the events of the present to be different from those of the past. Events are unique in the age at which they occur. “History doesn’t merely take place in time, it took place through time” (Bann, 2011, p. 12). With the passage of time, each generation has a new understanding of the past. Therefore, the past needs to be constantly reinterpreted from new perspectives.

The perception of history’s temporality was widely accepted in the 18th century. Leopold von Ranke wrote that the task of historians was to “show only what actually happened” (Bann, 2011, p. 10). Therefore, Ranke emphasized that history must rely on primary resources to tell the actual past, not the documents recorded by others in another period of time.

But in the 20th century, Ranke’s goal to “show only what actually happened” might seem unpractical and naive. The attempt to reconstruct the past on the basis of original materials seems to ignore the difficulties when representing the past. Today, we are constantly reminded that no history can describe the past as it really is, because history will always be influenced by people’s present perspective. History is written in the language, so the rhetoric the historian employs shapes and determines his description of the past. People like Conrad remind us of what Ranke calls “primary sources” which are merely “second-hand impressions” of a period. From the point of history, the “reality of forms and observation of social phenomenon” in Conrad’s fiction is a more truthful history than those of historians.

Many thinkers in the 20th century have lost faith in values that endow history with coherence and stability. The attempt to obtain the objective history of the past is gradually taken place by subjective interpretations through modern philosophy. I quoted J. Hills Miller’s words to summarize this kind of change:

Historicism does not mean merely an awareness of the contradictory of cultures and attitudes. The modern historical sense means rather the loss of faith in the possibility of ever discovering the right and true culture, the right and true philosophy or religion. (Miller, 1963, p. 10)

By exposing Kurtz, who embodies the noble ideals of Europe, to the horrors at the heart of darkness, Conrad makes us confront the disillusionment that so many 20th-century thinkers have experienced. Marlow embodies this dual perspective. On the one hand, upon returning to Europe, Marlowe tries to forget Kurtz, and “to surrender personally all that remained of him with me to that oblivion which is the last word of our common face” (Conrad, 1990, p. 91). But at the same time, Marlow cannot erase his memory of Kurtz. The memory undermines the narratives of enlightened progress that the European culture defined by authorities tries to tell its “right” history. When Marlow visits Kurtz, Marlow is unable to completely repress this counter-memory: Kurtz’s intended, whose forehead “remained illuminated by the unextinguishable light of belief and love” as the room grows darker (1990, p. 92). Marlowe refuses to destroy her illusion and tells her that the last word Kurtz uttered was her name. In Conrad’s narrative, the light of official memory and the darkness of counter-memory are inextricably linked. But the superiority of official memory relies on the lies that repress the real memory.

In fiction, the truth that Marlow tells about civilized Europe is expressed by the lie, which embodies Conrad's claim that fiction is much closer to the truth than history. The way that Conrad approaches the truth is to remind us of the lies that are named after truth rather than trying to deliver the truth. The ivory keys of the piano Marlow sees when he waits for Kurtz's intended thus are a symbol of Europe's efforts to cover up its exploitation by using its noble culture.

Conrad does not make great efforts to describe the truth but uses a special narrative structure to uncover it. In the story, we can find it is told by the narrator, Kurtz, and Marlow. If their perspectives do not tell the truth, then it means that there is a truth in the narrative form which is the impossibility to state the truth directly.

### **Returning to the Truth by Encountering "the Other"**

To enter the world of *Heart of Darkness*, to some extent, is to enter the world of modern fiction in which authors innovate their techniques as responses to the loss of faith in historicism. Conrad's story about a European's journey to the heart of darkness in Africa reflects the crisis in the late 19th-century European thoughts and its encounter with some thinkers, who are using the term that Jacques Lacan revises from Hegel, "the Other". We may notice that the famous British modernist novelists are actually in positions away from the mainstream of British culture. "The Other" thus becomes an important issue that these novelists focus on. Conrad himself is an exiled Pole, using the language he acquired when he had grown up to write his fiction. In his *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad depicts the encounter between the European and non-European, which is a great part of modern thoughts: Europe discovers "the Other" within itself.

Considering Conrad's novel as the expression of the encounter between the self and "the Other" and between the European and non-European, we need to come close to Europe's encounter with Africa and Africans. When Marlow sees the Africans, he notices that "they howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thoughts of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar" (1990, p. 52). Conrad reverses the racial prejudices. In fact, the real horror is not that Africans are a deviant form of humanity, but the monster is also deep within the Europeans who regard themselves as superior. The African continent is a monster to be bound and conquered. But on the other hand, it was the conquerors of Europe who are conquered, for the cruel and violent imperialism unleashes their latent savagery and makes them more horrible than the people they claim to be civilized. Marlow thinks that the way to make Westerners understand Africans is through the loss of control of themselves. Freeding from the shackles of civilization, Europeans can grow a sense of kinship with those Africans who look so different on the surface. Thus, the non-West can only be understood when the West is conquered by the very people it thinks it is conquering. The courage left to men in Marlow's world is to acknowledge the possibility of conquest by "the Other", "the Other" that always exists within Europe.

One of the reasons why Europeans do not immediately recognize their "the Other" within them is the physical differences between races. However, for Marlow, physical differences are just superficial deception. The real other is not physical, but temporal. When Europeans travel to Africa, they take a physical journey. As Marlowe tells readers, "Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings" (1990, p. 49). The reason why Europeans cannot understand the land and people inhabiting the land is that they travel back to prehistoric times.

But Marlow eventually comes to understand these people. Although they look different from civilized people, they make up the prehistory of the West. If the civilization makes Westerners forget the truth of their prehistory, the effect of Conrad's fiction is to remind them of what they have forgotten. But the way Conrad provokes readers's memories is different from that of 19th-century historians. For those historians, time constitutes reality. The truth of an event depends on the time when it happens. But for Conrad, truth must be found after stripping the cloak of time. The passage of history actually puts a barrier between us and our prehistoric memories.

The modernist novelists believe that the truth is rooted in the place of prehistory. For many modernists, the past and present exist on the same planes of time. Conrad continually juxtaposes the past of England and the present of Africa when comparing the Thames to the Congo.

Conrad, therefore, possesses not only a progressive, Eurocentric vision of world history, but also a different sense of time. In their view, by studying other seemingly primitive cultures that exist synchronously with their own, they can study something temporally different, something that represents their own prehistoric past. Due to this non-synchronic sense of time, Conrad turns a story about a journey to Africa in the present into a journey to Europe in the past, and a story about the primitive psyche of every human being.

Conrad's inversion of the West's view of "the Other" undercuts the West's superiority. Africa does not have less truth just because it exists earlier in the term of history. On the contrary, it embodies a deeper, unspoken truth with its prehistoric origins. Therefore, Conrad subverts the prevailing values in Europe, providing a counter-memory to the Westerners who believe in rationality and progress.

### Conclusions

After analyzing the development and changes in the subject of history science over centuries, we can find that *Heart of Darkness* is the reflection of the loss of faith in the coherence of history. In other words, the "reality of forms and observation of social phenomenon" in Conrad's fiction is a more truthful history than those of historians. Embodying the structural relationship between what is said and what is left unsaid, Conrad's story proves to be more truthful than history, not in the statements but in its narrative forms.

With the loss of faith in historicism, the journey of a European in Africa in the novel shows the crisis in European thoughts when it encounters the modern novelists many of whom have the positions of "the Other" in British mainstream culture. "The Other" is found in European itself and is emphasized due to changes in the Eurocentric view of world history with the overseas expansion of imperialism. Conrad's novel is the expression of the encounter between self and "the Other" and between Europeans and non-Europeans. The Africans and the land bring civilized Europeans back to the truth in prehistory. Conrad reminds people of truth by stripping the cloak of time. Truth is not found by remembering history, but by forgetting it.

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