

# Joseph Conrad was confused essay sample



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

People would think Heart of Darkness was about Imperialism. It is true that the novel was mainly about imperialism. However, it was not fully about imperialism. Other meaningful topics inside the story are just overshadowed by it, and homosexual desire is one of them. In Heart of Darkness, in spite of its ambiguity, homosexual desire was implied in certain parts of the story. For instance, Kurtz's "unspeakable rites" (Conrad 50), involving "various lusts" (Conrad 57), were, Andrew Michael Roberts argues, not about imperialism or cannibalism, for it was not unspeakable to Conrad.

He had talked about them when the African cannibals were mentioned or as the book was used to accuse European society of being Imperialism. Then, what Kurtz did had to be even more unspeakable, at least to Conrad: homosexuality (Roberts 459-460). Nothing was specified by Conrad or by Marlow. Nevertheless, homosexuality is a clear and proper conclusion out of the context, and it is unspeakable. The ambiguous yet undeniable homosexual desire in Heart of Darkness is a demonstration of Joseph Conrad's confused sexuality, and also a way for him to express his own mixed feelings regarding to it.

One of the evidences of homosexual desire in the novel was showcased when Marlow told his audience on the Nellie, the ship, about how he thought of Kurtz: "This is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it. Since I had peeped over the edge myself, I understand better the meaning of his stare... he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot..." (Conrad 70). Marlow thought Kurtz was remarkable, for Kurtz could say

things he could not, and for Kurtz “ had stepped over the edge”, an edge that Marlow could only peep over but not dare to jump off.

That means it is an edge that both Kurtz and Marlow knew, an edge that both of them had encountered in their lives. One would wonder what kind of edge Marlow was referring to. Kurtz had done so many things that were edgy. However, there were not many which Marlow could peep over, thus admire, for it is “ remarkable”. Marlow condemned imperialism and cannibalism, so he would not think of those as remarkable. There was one manifest possibility that could be made: homosexuality, and he obviously desired it.

Another, also the most obvious, evidence of homosexual desire in *Heart of Darkness* appeared when Marlow met the Russian harlequin. who was a huge fan of Kurtz. When the harlequin was expressing his admiration and respect to Kurtz and how remarkable he thought Kurtz was, he said: “ we talked of everything... I forgot there was such a thing as sleep. The night did not seem to last an hour. Everything! Everything... of love too” (Conrad 55). The harlequin spent sleepless nights while talking of love with Kurtz. This was very intimate, at the very least, emotionally, if not physically.

Even though he soon added: “ it isn’t what you think” (55), the homosexual desire had already been obvious and could not be denied in this expression. Furthermore, the more interesting thing is that Marlow was “ amused” (Conrad 55) by this conversation. That was not how a normal heterosexual man in Conrad’s time would react. With that overt expression of same sex relationship, a normal heterosexual man in such a close-minded time would

be disgusted, instead of “amused”. The single word “amused” means that deep inside, Marlow thought it was not a big deal, or subconsciously, he even embraced it.

The homosexual desire lived in his mind. Moreover, same sex orientation is not something new that is recently discovered in Conrad’s works, and *Heart of Darkness* is most definitely not the only work written by Conrad in which same sex desire exists, nor the most obvious one. *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* by Joseph Conrad is another novel that is full of homosexual desire. It was about a group of men voyaging on a ship called the *Narcissus*. There were no women on board, a perfect condition for the initiation of homosexual desire.

Bodies of half-naked men were all around the ship. Gaze from other men on board, and from readers, was all over the place. In this homo-social condition without any women for men to identify their own masculinities, they needed something to be fulfilled. Then, “the homo-eroticized male body” (Packer-Kinlaw 253) came in and attracted others. As a matter of fact, there were “men in couples” on the ship, “walking couples” or “silent couples” (qtd. in Packer-Kinlaw 251). With all that said, “couples” here obviously meant couples with romantic relationship (Packer-Kinlaw 251-255).

Even though no one could confirm that there was any sexual relationship happening between men, the same sex desire could no longer be ignored or denied in this very book. Packer-Kinlaw describes the purpose of *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* in this way: “this text destabilizes gender roles and suggests that traditional notions of masculinity and femininity are actually

illusions that can be transcended and reshaped” (249). This seems to be suggesting that Conrad was trying to blur the line between two sexes, but through a deeper understanding, Conrad was actually questioning the society, and trying to break the rules.

It leads readers to think about what exactly Conrad was trying to question. It was obvious that what Conrad was trying to question was from the society, and regarding to sexes, especially men. In the novel, Conrad created “ a world where the laws of gender are loosened and men don’t have to be ‘ men’ in any oversimplified, conventionally heterosexist or patriarchal sense” (Packer-Kinlaw 251). In other words, it was a world where men did not have to live up to anybody’s expectation, where they were free to be who they were.

No prejudice or hatred could survive in the world he created. The rational reason for Conrad to create such a fantasy world is because he wanted it, consciously or not, which, again, proves that there was homosexual desire in his mind and in his works. As mentioned above, homosexual desire exists in *Heart of Darkness* and other works by Conrad. Nevertheless, such desire appeared to be very subtle, ambiguous, and unspeakable. It is as if Conrad was not sure about it, or how to describe it in the right way because of its “ unspeakability’.

Nina Pelikan Straus argues that “ it seems dubious to argue that Conrad knew well what he wrote in *Heart of Darkness*” (128). Originally, Straus is referring to issues regarding to sexism and racism, but it can also apply to this issue regarding to homosexual desire. After all, it is the same book

Conrad was writing. Conrad did not know how to express or explain what he felt about men. In other words, he was confused about his sexuality. Part of him felt attracted to men, while the other part of him condemned himself for acting this way.

Finally, this ambivalence and confusion caused the ambiguity of homosexual desire in *Heart of Darkness*. Suggesting Conrad was confused is very controversial because there were so many other possibilities, such as bisexuality. Reviewing Richard J. Ruppel's *Homosexuality in the Life and Work of Joseph Conrad: Love Between the Lines*, Dryden summarizes that the theme of the book is to "expose evidence of submerged homoerotic themes in Conrad's fiction" (492). Harrington, when reviewing the same book, notes that the argument of the book is "intimacy for Conrad was always with other men" (qtd. in Harrington 171).

Both of them recognize homosexual desire as an element that cannot be ignored in Conrad's works, agreeing with Ruppel. However, what Ruppel really believes is that Conrad was "imaginatively, if not physically, bisexual" (qtd. in Harrington 171). Ruppel does not just assert that Conrad was homosexual, but rather to take a step back and suggest that he was bisexual. The conclusion is very bold and reasonable. Yet, it is not accurate enough. The accurate way to phrase the situation should be that Conrad was confused about his sexuality, which is a phase that seems like bisexuality.

Homosexual desire here simply indicates the same phase which Conrad was going through. Difference between them is that sexually confused people are not sure about anything, while bisexual people know clearly that they can

love both men and women. Bisexual people can get pleasure and satisfaction, physically or mentally, from either gender, male or female. That is not the case with Conrad. Conrad could not get anything from women more than vain marriages or probably meaningless sex. Harrington refers Conrad's marriage as a "famously difficult marriage" (171).

Also, as a matter of fact, his disrespect and contempt to women, his misogyny, are clear in most of his works, including *Heart of Darkness*. Straus describes women's function in the novel in this way: "in *Heart of Darkness* women are used to deny, distort, and censor men's passionate love for one another" (134). In short, Conrad was not happy with women. They were either ignored or despised under Conrad's description. If he was bisexual, he would be able to love and get happiness from women, but he could not. Because of that, confusion is a better and more accurate word to describe Conrad's situation than bisexuality.

Nonetheless, confusion was not the only reason why the homosexual desire in the novel was depicted ambiguous. Confusion was the internal reason, while the society was the external reason. With that said, they were not separate; part of the reason why Conrad was confused was because of the society. Back then, people who had even the slightest homosexual desire would be treated horribly. A good example was Conrad's friend, Roger Casement. Before going any further, one should understand that examining Casement's life is meaningful because of the similarities and affiliation between Casement and Conrad.

Anthony Bradley concludes that “ their lives and work were curiously intertwined and mutual” (198). Regarding to their lives, both of them were born in European countries which were colonized at some level. Both went to Congo, where they first met, and witnessed those sufferings. Afterwards, they became friends who constantly have correspondences. Friends influence each other, especially two friends as close as them. Plus, being in the same generation and the same society, Casement’s thoughts and what he went through have to be similar to Conrad’s thoughts and experiences.

Their lives were obviously intertwined. Moreover, the connection appears to be even stronger when it comes to their literary works. They both published important works after the excruciating visit in Congo, opposing imperialism. Although one could not ignore the fact that the two works were in two manifestly different discourses, Heart of Darkness by Conrad and The Congo Report by Casement were inseparable. In Casement’s case, he wrote the scientific report after reading Heart of Darkness.