See the Inspiration: Inside the Mind of Joseph Conrad

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Joseph Conrad was a Polish author who wrote his works of fiction in English after settling in England and being granted British nationality. One of the biggest hurdles he faced when trying to become a published writer was making sure his English was coherent and possible for readers to understand. Every work of fiction Conrad produced was inspired by something he heard about, read about, or experienced first-hand.

Building upon that initial inspiration for a story idea, Conrad had a way of showing a story instead of simply telling it. Conrad once said, “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel — it is, 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.”

Conrad wanted to captivate readers’ attention and make them feel and see things through his writing. He executed this style so brilliantly because he wrote about things that he had some kind of previous introduction to or experience with. *Heart of Darkness* and *The Secret Agent* are two of Conrad’s works of fiction that are prime examples of his writing style and craft.

In 1899, Joseph Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness* was published. As all of his works of fiction are based on things he has knowledge of, *The Heart of Darkness* was no different. Conrad explained that the inspiration for the story came from his own personal experiences during his travels in Africa. In 1890, when Conrad was 31 years of age, he was appointed by a Belgian trading company to serve as the captain of a steamer on the Congo River.  

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1 This quote is from the preface of Joseph Conrad’s *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* (1897).
2 This information can be found on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heart_of_Darkness.
The premise of *The Heart of Darkness* is very similar to Conrad’s experience. In the story, Charles Marlow, a sailor who took a job as a riverboat captain in the Congo, sets off on a journey to meet up with a man named Kurtz. During his travels up the Congo, Marlow witnesses brutality in the Company’s stations. He sees things that he finds to be both disturbing and devastating, especially the black men being overworked and treated with cruelty. When Marlow arrives at the Central Station, he discovers that the steamship he was supposed to captain had been sunk and he had to wait several months for it to be repaired. During Marlow’s time at Central Station, hearing things and fears other people hold about Kurtz and rumors that he was very ill, he became increasingly intrigued. When the parts to repair the ship finally arrived, Marlow set out to find Kurtz and repair the ship. Before they met, Marlow and his crew were attacked by the natives. When they finally met up with Kurtz, they discovered that he was, in fact, extremely ill. In the end, Kurtz died and Marlow was left to reflect on his voyage and all he had seen and experienced.

The details in *The Heart of Darkness* are what moves the story along. Conrad stays true to his mission of trying to make readers see and feel things as they read his work. This works so well because Conrad has actually experienced the things he wrote about (or at least a portion of them) in this story, so he has access to details that would not otherwise be easy to include and certainly not be accessible to execute as effectively. Conrad displays his brilliant use of detail in the following passage from the story:

> It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—the suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it
was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend. And why not?³

The way Conrad repeats the sense of inhumanity and meshes that with descriptive words like, “horrid,” “howled,” “spun,” “uproar,” “passionate,” “wild,” and “ugly” adds an element of seeing the story unfold instead of simply reading words. The use of detail in this passage definitely leads readers to being able to clearly envision what Conrad is describing.

In 1907, Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* was published. This story was inspired by the Greenwich bombing of 1894 which carried out similarly to the major event in the story, except the motives and background of the Greenwich bombing remain unknown. The inspiration for this story, though not something Conrad experienced personally, was something that he had heard about and learned about. This offers such a unique premise for the story, especially since the motives, target, and details of the actual bombing were a mystery. For Conrad, this was an opportunity to fictionally fill in the blanks and create a story that would captivate his audience.

In *The Secret Agent*, Mr. Verloc, a businessman and business owner by day and secret agent by night, meets with Mr. Vladimir, the First Secretary in the embassy of a foreign country. Vladimir tells Verloc that he is not yet an adequate agent and in order to redeem himself, he must conduct the bombing of the Greenwich Observatory. Vladimir insists that an attack on science is necessary and that this bombing needs to take place. Verloc resolves to have his mentally disabled brother-in-law, Stevie, wear the bomb in

³ Joseph Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness*, (1897) page 97
his coat and approach the Greenwich Observatory. The bomb prematurely exploded, Stevie was killed, Verloc’s wife found out and as a result, she stabbed and killed Verloc.

The intense details in the story enact a form of captivation that is undeniable. The description of events is especially compelling and this could not have been executed as effectively if the Greenwich explosion wasn’t the inspiration for the story. After the explosion and reading the story, a new viewpoint and perspective takes shape and that is something that Conrad definitely used to his advantage. An example of Conrad’s use of detail to make readers see, feel, and invest in the story is:

After a while he became disagreeably affected by the sight of the roadway thronged with vehicles and of the pavement crowded with men and women. He was in a long, straight street, peopled by a mere fraction of an immense multitude; but all round him, on and on, even to the limits of the horizon hidden by the enormous piles of bricks, he felt the mass of mankind mighty in its numbers. They swarmed numerous like locusts, industrious like ants, thoughtless like a natural force, pushing on blind and orderly and absorbed, impervious to sentiment, to logic, to terror, too, perhaps. That was the form of doubt he feared most. Impervious to fear! Often while walking abroad, when he happened also to come out of himself, he had such moments of dreadful and sane mistrust of mankind. What if nothing could move them? Such moments come to all men whose ambition aims at a direct grasp upon humanity -- to artists, politicians, thinkers, reformers, or saints. A despicable emotional state this, against which solitude fortifies a superior character.\(^4\)

The details in this passage work so well because Conrad pinpoints key words to give readers a clear mental picture of what he is trying to convey. He uses words that group together: “roadway,” “vehicles,” “pavement,” “street” and “locusts,” “ants,” and “natural.” Even when talking about abstract concepts, Conrad is able to pull details together to insert the reader directly into the story so that they are able to feel, see, and experience the story for themselves.

\(^4\)This is from Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* (1907) on page 77.
Joseph Conrad’s writing style and craft is something to be admired, respected, and, for writers, learned from. For his works of fiction, the thing that moves them along the most effectively is the inspiration behind them and the details utilized in order to create not just a story, but an experience. In Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness* and *The Secret Agent*, he draws from two different types of inspiration (yet still things he has some kind of experience with) and executes details to produce to brilliant works of fiction in true Joseph Conrad style.
Bibliography
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