

Jack London's Heart of Darkness

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Although there are certain obvious similarities in the fiction of Jack London and Joseph Conrad—both wrote tales of the sea as well as stories set in exotic lands, and frequently both peopled their fiction with rough characters engaged in violent action—Conrad's different emphasis, surer craftsmanship and more profound insight into the psychological motivations of his characters have made these similarities seem relatively inconsequential. London is often, even within the same book, an exponent of the cult of raw meat and red blood and a political expounder using fiction as a means of advancing the doctrines of socialism. This blatant dichotomy is in obvious contrast to Conrad's characteristically subtle investigations of states of mind. Conrad himself bridled at being regarded "as literarily a sort of Jack London":

I don't mean to depreciate in the least the talent of the late Jack London, who wrote me in a most friendly way many years ago at the very beginning, I think, of his literary career, and with whom I used to exchange messages through friends afterwards; but the fact remains that temperamentally, mentally, and as a prose writer, I am a different person.¹

Thus London's biographers and critics have given what seems to be the proper emphasis to the London-Conrad relation when they merely note in a sentence or so that London read the English author and that at one point or another their literary interests coincided extrinsically. Actually, however, it is as misleading to minimize their similarities as to exaggerate them; and to say that London exhibits *only* a superficial likeness to Conrad obscures a basic correspondence which is of some significance in an over-all consideration of London's fiction. Consequently, I would like to examine here the nature and extent of London's relation to Conrad—not so much to determine Conrad's "influence" but rather to illuminate an infrequently considered aspect of London's work.

Certainly there can be no question of London's enthusiastic regard for Conrad. Mrs. London's record of the voyage of the *Snark* cites three occasions when Jack read Conrad aloud to the crew.² Frank Pease reported that London, while reading *A Personal Record*, exclaimed excitedly, "Here's Conrad saying a thing about a dog in two words that I've been trying to say all my life and couldn't."³ The eponymous hero of *Martin Eden*, whose efforts to become a successful writer mirror the author's own early struggles (London remarked, "I was Martin Eden"), while composing what he considers his finest work makes the following appraisal: "There's only one man who could touch it . . . and that's Conrad. And it ought to make even him sit up and shake hands with me, and say, 'Well done, Martin, my boy!'" In 1915 upon reading *Victory*, London wrote an effusive letter to Conrad, commenting, "I had just begun to write when I read your first early work. I have . . . madly appreciated you and communicated my appreciation to my friends through all these years."⁴

At the age of twenty-three, then, London admired Conrad greatly; and he was still asserting this admiration the year before his death. London's affinity to Conrad indicated by these continuing expressions of respect is less explicitly illustrated on several levels in his work. At least once he appears to have borrowed from a Conrad story directly and extensively; moreover, the basic theme of two of his important books is one which recurs throughout Conrad's writing. These correspondences appear to me to be worth examining in some detail.

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London's first story was published in January, 1899, and his 1915 letter to Conrad states that he began reading him about that time. Evidence of the impact of this reading on London is apparent in "In a Far Country," London's fifth story, which was published in June, 1899; for this story seems to be a close parallel of Conrad's "An Outpost of Progress," first published in *Tales of Unrest* the preceding year. Walter F.