

Intersemiotic Literacy: Reading *Heart of Darkness* from Serialized Fiction to Contemporary Book Publication

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Abstract:

“*The Heart of Darkness*” was first published in 1899 as a serialized fiction in *Blackwood’s Magazine*. The publication of *Heart of Darkness* in book form and under this present title appeared three years later in the volume *Youth, a Narrative, and Two Other Stories*. To understand how reading as a supposedly passive and personal experience evolves, the phenomenal success of this masterpiece written by the Polish-British writer Joseph Conrad (1867-1924) and its collaborations with different modes of publication would be investigated. This article outlines the publication story of this novella since the time of Conrad till the very present day. To enable an in-depth understanding on how the plot of the narrative interacts with various book cover designs, discussions would be made on whether the visual domain can also portray the juxtaposition of horrors in the exotic milieu with the dark side of humanity. In *Re-Covered Rose* (2011), the award-winning scholar and literary translator Marco Sonzogni (1971-) examines how book cover design is a form of intersemiotic translation. Being inspired by this stance, it is the aim of this article to dissect whether the contemporary book designs of *Heart of Darkness* enrich the interpretation of this novella and respond to its contemporary criticisms. The cover designs of *Heart of Darkness* from Penguin Classics will serve as a case study in understanding how a publisher addresses the rise of new critiques. In addition, 30 book cover designs of *Heart of Darkness* published since the new millennium will be studied to exemplify the relationships between a literary classic, its book covers and intersemiotic literacy.

Keywords: *Heart of Darkness*; book cover designs; publication history; intersemiotic literacy; contemporary critique

Introduction

As the Polish sailor Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski (1867-1924) retired from his maritime career and transitioned to life ashore, he settled in Britain and became the Anglophone writer Joseph Conrad. His nautical experience enabled voyages to far-reaching places and inspired him in the portrayal of exotic landscapes and diverse demographic communities. One of his most notable works, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), is both an embodiment and reflection of his life on boat against

the backdrop of imperialist expedition. The reprinting and reproduction of this novella verify its profound and enduring significance as a canonical work.

This article travels through the publication history of this legendary masterpiece from the time of Conrad till the very present day. This action serves to understand how the phenomenal success of this literary canon collaborates with its different modes of publication. Specifically, the verbal narration made by the protagonist of the novel, Charlie Marlow, about his Congo adventure would be used to demonstrate how textual content juxtaposes with the visual domain of book cover design. In *Re-Covered Rose* (2011), scholar and translator Marco Sonzogni (1971-) explains his research on how book cover design is a form of intersemiotic translation. In his elaboration on the new paradigm of translation across genres and media, he mentions that “When a reader picks up a book, another translation has already occurred: the text has been visualized into a cover” (Sonzogni 2011, 153). This explanation affirms Roman Jakobson’s definition on intersemiotic translation as “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems” (Jakobson 1959, 233), which naturally means good covers should convey the content of the materials.

With the aid of Sonzogni’s suggestion, this article evaluates whether the book covers of *Heart of Darkness* in contemporary publication enrich the interpretation of this novella and respond to its contemporary criticisms. In Sonzogni’s words, we are going to “judge a cover by its book” (Sonzogni 2011, 4). To achieve this, the cover designs of *Heart of Darkness* from Penguin Books will serve as a case study in understanding how a renowned publisher fosters literary excellence by addressing to new critiques of an acclaimed novella. In addition, a total of 30 book cover designs of *Heart of Darkness* published since the new millennium from various publishers will be studied to investigate the intersemiotic relationships between the content of a literary text with book covers of different designs.

The Initial Publication of *Heart of Darkness*

Similar to the experience of many authors during his time, Conrad released his works as serialized fictions in magazines. This common practice commercialized and popularized fictions as authors had the flexibility of changing their work according to readers’ perception towards the previous serials. Catherine Delafield points out that “While the story unfolded there was always the possibility of alternative endings and readings as well as influence over the serials from review or reader feedback” (Delafield 2015, 11). This pattern of publication also provided hints regarding an author’s fame during Conrad’s time. For instance, *Scribner’s Monthly* magazine, an illustrated American literary periodical published from 1870 to 1881, had made the following remark in November 1878:

Formerly, the best writers of fiction never appeared in the magazine ... Now it is the second or third rate novelist who cannot get publication in a magazine, and is obliged to publish in a volume, and it is in the magazine that the best novelists always appear first. (qtd. in Lund 1993, 52)

In the journey of accumulating fame and audience, Conrad published “The Heart of Darkness” as

a three-part serial in 1899 in *Blackwood's Magazine* (February, March, April 1899). It was one of the writings to celebrate the 1000th edition of the magazine. Although serialized fiction gives writers greater flexibility, it was never Conrad's intention to please his readers. This can be seen by comparing the subject matter of *Heart of Darkness* and the target reader of its first publication. British academic Robert Hampson comments that "the narrative strategies of both Conrad and Marlow work to subvert many of the assumptions accepted by their audience" (*HOD* xxxiii). In describing the true horrors of imperialism behind the mission of brightening the dark corners of the world, Conrad's work must have shocked the subscribers of *Blackwood's Magazine* who are "an audience still secure in the conviction that they were members of an invincible imperial power and a superior race" (*HOD* xxxii). Brian W. Shaffer, expert of twentieth century British literature, describes *Blackwood's Magazine* as "a journal with a largely conservative, middle-class, and professional make readership" (Shaffer 2006, 315). The discrepancy between Conrad's ironic portrayal of Anglo-European civilization and his readers' perception towards the benevolent contribution of imperialism may help us to comprehend why Mara Kalnins, former reader in modern British literature at the University of Cambridge, notes that "Conrad's major novels did not sell, and he lived in relative poverty until the commercial success of *Chance* (1914)" (*Chance* i).

The publication of *Heart of Darkness* in book form and under the present title appeared three years later in 1902. This was a revised version published by the same Scottish publishing firm, Blackwood and Sons. Victorian specialist Philip V. Allingham observes that "there are few substantive differences between the serial and final texts" (Allingham 2013). The volume was entitled *Youth, a Narrative, and Two Other Stories*. It is apparent that *Youth* served as the selling point of the book as it was regarded by Conrad himself as a "very well received" piece of work in its *Maga* publication (*HOD* 10).¹ On the contrary, *Heart of Darkness* was referred to by Conrad as "a rotten thing" (Stape 2007, 113). Charlie Marlow as a recurring fictional character in Conrad's works makes his debut appearance in *Youth*. After *Heart of Darkness*, he subsequently appeared as the narrator of *Lord Jim* (1900) and *Chance* (1914). Undeniably, *Heart of Darkness* turns out to be the most remarkable piece of work in its first book volume. The following analysis focuses on the publication of *Heart of Darkness* as a separate book.

As shown from the identical book covers of *Youth* and *Lord Jim* published by Blackwood and Sons (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2), the elegant and serious Victorian cloth bindings fully demonstrate how literature is traditionally regarded as a polite activity among intellectuals. The absence of pictorial content from the book in this book cover design disables its reader from acquiring any hints regarding the plot of the narrative. Sonzogni notices the linkage between the transformation of cover design and marketing strategy:

By the 1920s it had become a common practice for publishers to provide illustrated dust jackets. Their function had changed from protective instrument to a tool for promotion. Covers now play an important part in the marketing process (Sonzogni 2011, 17).

To explore how the publishing industry evolves in meeting market conditions and customer needs, a case study is conducted to showcase the book covers of *Heart of Darkness* published by Penguin Books.

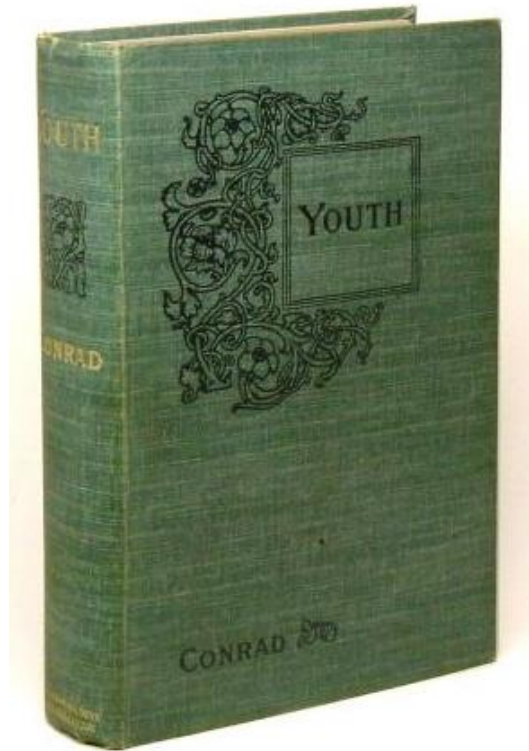


Fig. 1. *Youth* published by Blackwood and Sons in 1902.

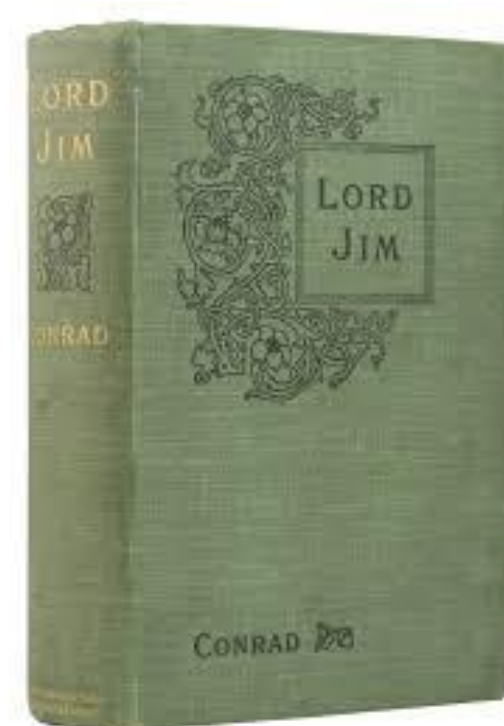


Fig. 2. *Lord Jim* published by Blackwood and Sons in 1900.

The Book Covers of Penguin Books

Founded in 1935, Penguin Books has been a household name for generations. Its reputation is not merely built upon the publishing of good quality books, but also its efforts in making books affordable and accessible for readers worldwide. As a leading English-language publishing company, Penguin Books gains supports from teachers and students of literary studies through popularising reading culture. The inclusion of annotated notes and references in literature titles enhances the comprehension of challenging historical background and cultural contexts and thereby promotes reader engagement. This case study of appraising the book covers of *Heart of Darkness* published by Penguin Books serves to testify Sonzogni's opinion that book cover "offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back" (Sonzogni 2011, 15).

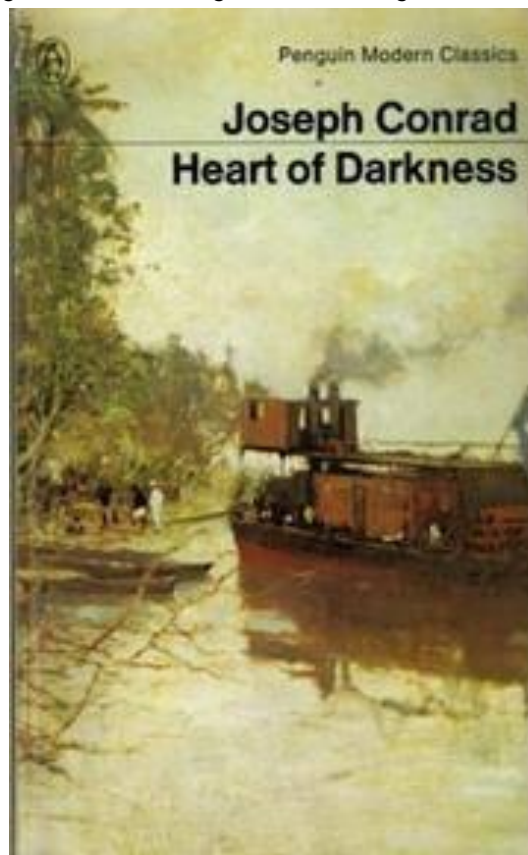


Fig. 3. Penguin Modern Classics in 1976.

Penguin Books published *Heart of Darkness* through three different publication lines. The same book cover was adopted in each of these publications. They include Penguin Modern Classics in 1976 which was also the earliest Penguin edition of *Heart of Darkness* (Fig. 3). The second Penguin's *Heart of Darkness* was published in the Penguin English Library (PEL) series in 1983. Created in 1963, this series published 150 titles of literary classics. Its pioneering role in cultivating literary appreciation can be seen in its efforts of providing both historical and critical introduction, and adding notes to the texts. In 1986, the PEL series merged with Penguin Classics. *Heart of Darkness* was reissued in the Penguin Classics line in 1984 and 1989 respectively. The PEL series was resumed in 2012. An evaluation of its new version of *Heart of Darkness* will be included in the later part of

the discussion. The first volume of Penguin Classics was published in 1946. Traditionally, it focused on translated classics. For example, its first book was the translated version of Homer's *Odyssey* by E.V. Rieu. The illustration of a Congo steamer was chosen as the book cover of Penguin's *Heart of Darkness*. It reminds the reader of the Belgian riverboat *Roi des Belges* that took Conrad to Congo in 1890. In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow tells his audience that "Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world" (HOD 59). This Penguin's steamer takes the reader to what Conrad refers to as "an impenetrable forest" (HOD 59).

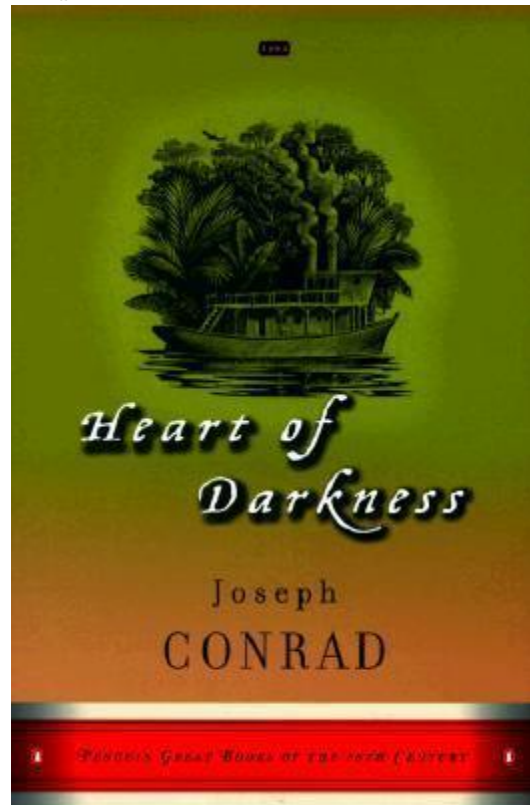


Fig.4. Penguin Great Books of the 20th Century in 1999.

Four Penguin covers of *Heart of Darkness* produced in the 1990s share the similarity in visualizing Marlow's depiction of dense vegetation in Congo. As Marlow "penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness" (HOD 62), he describes the environment through "Trees, trees, millions of trees, massive, immense, running up high ... It made you feel very small, very lost" (HOD 61). All the titles under the UK version of Penguin Popular Classics share the same lime green cover with no images, which accidentally matches with the color of spring vegetation. This line of Penguin Popular Classics is the lower priced edition of the company. The titles were sold at the price of two pounds sterling in 2010. At the end of the millennium, Penguin released the Penguin Great Books of the 20th Century series. The book cover of *Heart of Darkness* issued in this series in 1999 integrates the color of vegetation with the aforementioned design that features an old colonial steamboat (Fig. 4). For the new reader, this book design insinuates the novella's depiction of Africa as the site of imperialist exploration. As for those who revisit the novella, this book design as a reminiscence of the earlier version plays the role of recalling and consolidating the previous reading experience.

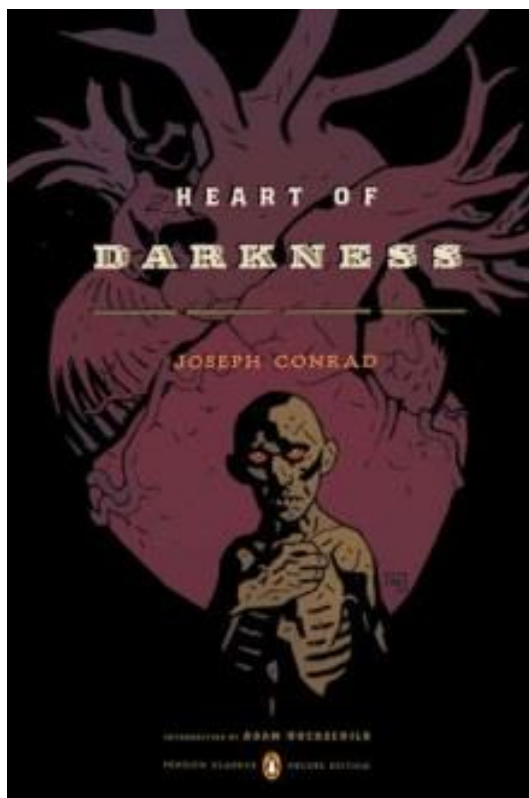


Fig. 5. Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition version in 2012.

Before Marlow sets off for Congo, he has to undergo a medical examination. This medical examination is more than a physical body check. The old doctor asks Marlow, “Ever any madness in your family?” (*HOD* 27). As Marlow gets closer to the Central Station, he recalls how this old doctor has commented that “It would be interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals, on the spot” (*HOD* 40). That the journey to Congo is a psychological journey can be seen from four other Penguin covers of *Heart of Darkness*. They were the Modern Classics version in 2007, Penguin Classics version in 2007, Penguin Popular Classics version in 2011 and Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition version in 2012 (Fig. 5). Three out of these four covers from the 21st century make clear that the darkest place on earth lies within the human mind. As shown from these covers, the gloomy feelings lead us to two important contemporary criticisms of the novel. The first one is Chinua Achebe’s critique on Conrad’s “white racism against Africa” (Achebe 2001, 1789). In Achebe’s view, Conrad’s limited knowledge towards Africa and its people, together with the continual success of *Heart of Darkness*, permanently degrades the vast African continent as an object without humanity. This post-colonial remark made by Achebe in 1977 remains influential. John G. Peters is for the point of view that “Achebe forever forced Conrad scholars to consider Conrad’s stance on issues of race and imperialism” (Peters 2006, 127). The second contemporary criticism is the patriarchal representation of women as shown from Marlow’s perception towards the Intended. Marlow’s description of her as a faithful woman “without suspicion, without a thought for herself” but with “a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering” (*HOD* 117, 119) makes her a victim of Victorian ideals of womanhood at the expense of her own individual character.

The book covers of two Penguin editions of *Heart of Darkness* published in 2012 address the two contemporary criticisms aforesaid. The choice of colorful covers drives away the sense of impending doom. Specifically, the book cover of the now resumed Penguin British Library version features several African masks that highlight Africa as the subject matter of the novel and the value of native culture. Furthermore, the book cover of the Penguin Essentials version demonstrates the richness of Africa via illustrations such as its people, wildlife and nature. Africa is far more than a place of bountiful vegetation, as we have discussed regarding the book covers of the 90s. Other than plants, the inclusion of some other rich African resources such as ivory (as presented by the elephant and the ivory necklace) and manpower (as presented by the natives) visualizes King Leopold's desire in Congo. The display of indigenous weapons on the cover shows how Africa is not a feeble territory awaiting western representation or foreign exploitation.

Most importantly, these two cover designs encourage female readership. This could be seen from the diverse choice of bright and feminine colors, such as turquoise and violet. On the cover of the Penguin Essentials version, the male figure is adorned with various accessories and ornaments, forming a stark contrast with conventional associations of men and masculinity. Marlow mentions at the beginning of his narration that travelers to Africa "were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force – nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others" (*HOD* 20). Therefore, the feminization of a male figure on the book cover could be interpreted as Anglo-European cowardly conquest in Africa.

An Analysis of 30 *Heart of Darkness* Book Covers

Having seen how book covers visualise Marlow's verbal narration and provide pictorial response to some of the contemporary criticisms of the book, this part of the analysis exemplifies how the imaginative space of reading a book could be limited by book cover designs. To demonstrate this, a small-scale research on 30 book covers of *Heart of Darkness* published since the new millennium has been carried out. In selecting representative covers from a wide range of covers that are available, two basic requirements are followed. The first one is that the title of the book must only contain *Heart of Darkness*. For instance, all Oxford World's Classics editions are excluded as they are under the title of *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*. The second requirement is that the books are not published by self-publishing companies. Hence, books published by CreateSpace are excluded. This is a self-publishing company owned by Amazon. As shown from Amazon.com, at least twenty different versions of *Heart of Darkness* under very different book covers can be found. This significant number, together with the non-traditional aspect of the company, means that a separate research may be necessary in exploring the publishing trend of this mode of publication.

The referent of *Heart of Darkness* plays a defining role in categorizing the 30 selected book covers. In analysing *Heart of Darkness* as a fictional discourse with Conrad's autobiographical experience in Congo, Christopher L. Miller discovers the trick of this book's referent:

The referent of *Heart of Darkness* is so commonly understood to be Africa, and specifically the Congo Free State at the time of King Leopold II's reign of terror and profit at the end of the nineteenth century, that it may come as a surprise to learn that "Africa" is never specifically named as its referent. (Miller 1985, 172)

The name Africa only appears in the novella as a representation of Marlow's childhood fantasy. Marlow's boyhood indulgence in exploration through passive map reading foreshadows his future employment as skipper of a river steamboat. He begins to narrate his debut voyage by describing the continent as a blank place in the past:

True, by this time it was not a blank place any more. It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a black space of delightful mystery – a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness. (*HOD* 22)

Out of 30 covers studied, 21 of them are associated with Africa. That constitutes 70% of the total number (Fig. 6). These African covers center around the themes of landscape, ivory, culture, natives and also the map of Africa that fascinates young Marlow (Fig. 7). There are two covers that belong to the category of "Mixed". For example, the Arcturus Publishing cover has adopted a Congo Rainforest image as the background. The foreground shows a tribal necklace and a broken ivory. This cover design thus echoes with Marlow's realization that Anglo-European imperialism exploits indigenous resources.

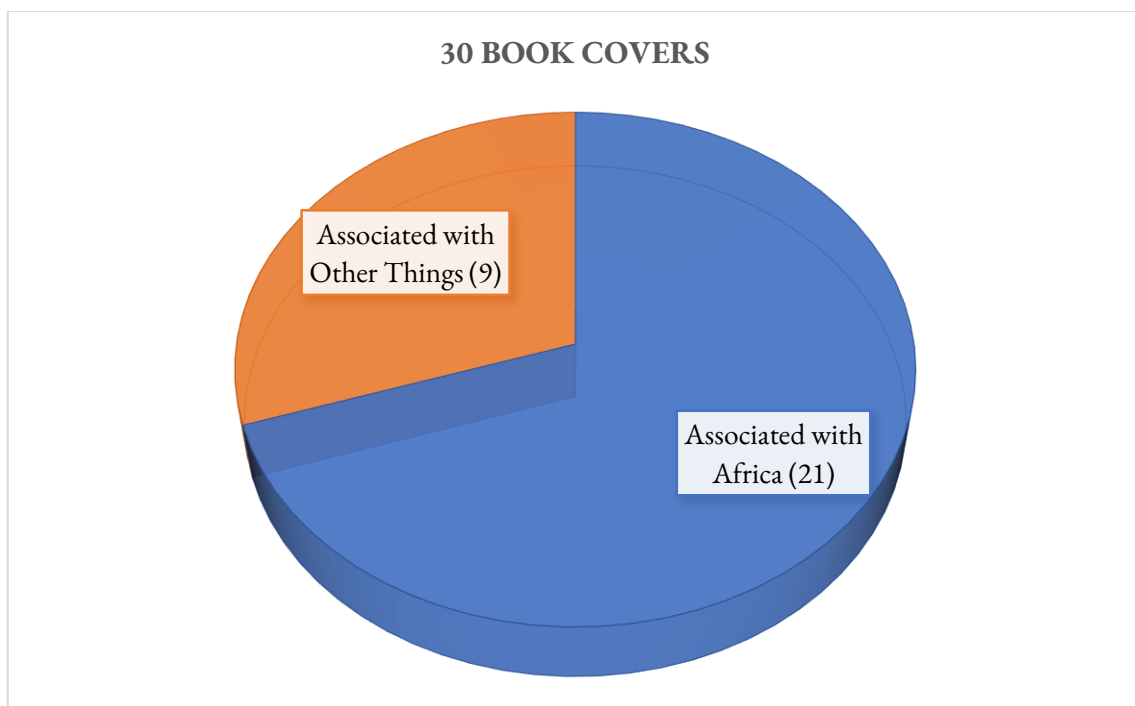


Fig. 6. Book covers that are associated with Africa.

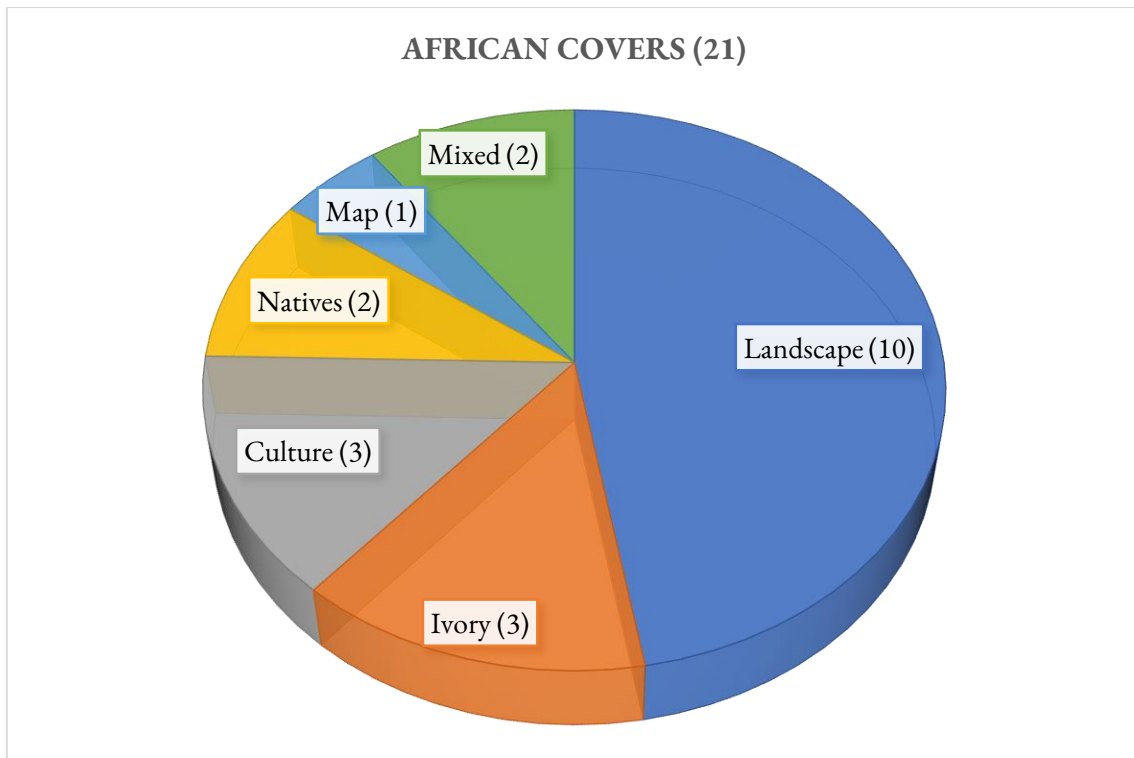


Fig. 7. Categorization of the African covers.

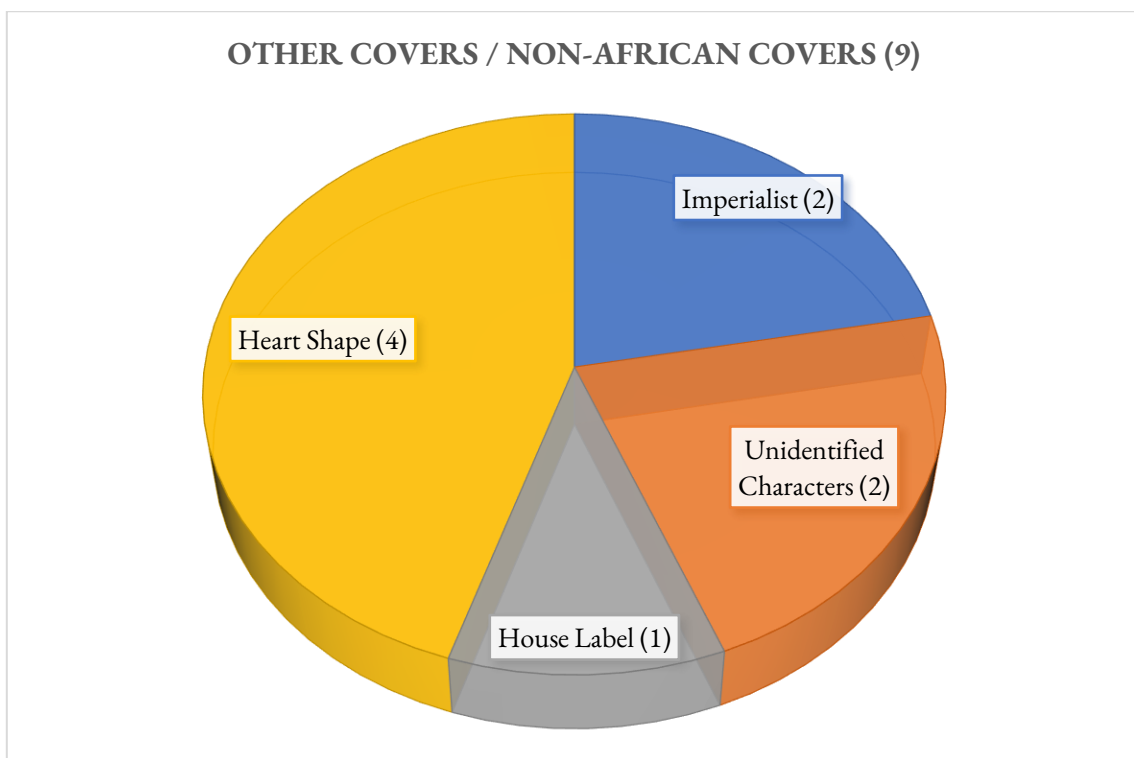


Fig. 8. Categorization of the non-African covers.

The remaining 9 non-African covers can further be classified into 4 categories (Fig. 8). The first one is “Imperialist”. There are two covers under this category: a steamer and a letter. We have previously

mentioned the Belgian steamer cover used by Penguin Classics in 1976. As shown from Ancient Wisdom's edition in 2012, the iconic legacy of the Belgian steamer remains. Another imperialist cover design features a letter. The phrase "Her Excellency" could be an association of Queen Victoria's policy of colonial expansion. Book covers under the second category are monopolized by Penguin's editions. I refer this category as "Unidentified Characters". It gives us little space on associating these men with Marlow, Kurtz or a native African. As for the third category of "House Design", it contains the Penguin Popular Classics edition in 2011. This classic cover design is more significant to the publisher than to the book itself.

The fourth category is a rather representative one and that is the "Heart Shape". It counts for 45% of the non-African covers. This category of cover design is more than a simple echo of the book title. It is related to the final scene of the novella which connects all the major notions raised from the Congo journey such as the frustration towards western civilization, indigenous exploitation, fading humanity and moral degradation. While the exotic climate and the fear of unknown danger in Congo make the place being associated with the heart of darkness, Marlow eventually realizes how her rich ivory content corrupts Kurtz's conscience:

I've seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but, by all the stars!
These were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men – men, I tell you. (*HOD* 34)

Soon after Marlow has fulfilled his patriarchal commitment to the Intended, he concludes his Congo experience in the following way:

The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky – seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness. (*HOD* 124)

Ending the novella with Marlow's painful conclusion confirms Ian Watt's suggestion that Conrad "gives us a sense of a much wider commitment to the main ethical, social and literary techniques, both of the world at large and of the general reader" (Watt 2000, 6).

Conclusion

Although the significant number of covers available for this research is a cheerful remark on the continual success of *Heart of Darkness*, the pictorial content of contemporary covers has also limited the imagination of new readers of the novella. Sonzogni concludes this point by saying that "On one hand, the text can generate unlimited visual interpretations; on the other, the limited space of the cover restricts the choice" (Sonzogni 2011, 22).

The major limitation of this mini research is that whether the books are based on Conrad's manuscript, typescript or proofs has not been taken into consideration. This is related to the fact that Conrad revised his works from time to time for different editions. That explains for Mara

Kalnins' remark that "the absence of authoritative text" made the publication of Conrad's works in our time a challenging task (*Chance* vii).

Endnotes:

1. See Author's Note of *Youth, a Narrative, and Two Other Stories* published in 1917.

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