

## Works Cited

Caldwell, Tracy M. "Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness.."  
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### **Section:** Literary Contexts in Novels **Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"**

"It was in 1868, when nine years old or thereabouts, while looking at a map of Africa of the time and putting my finger in the blank space...I said to myself ..."When I grow up I shall go there."

Joseph Conrad

### **Plot Synopsis**

This tale is told via an unnamed frame narrator who relates to the reader a story told by seaman Marlow about one of his expeditions. Opening on the boat *Nellie*, five men are present for the tale telling: the Captain, the Lawyer, the Accountant, Marlow himself and the unnamed narrator. Marlow's story commences as he relates another sea journey he took to Africa. In the employ of The Company (a Belgian trading concern), Marlow's job was to locate the missing rogue agent Kurtz and bring him back to civilization.

Marlow travels to the company office where he signs his contract and sees two women knitting with black wool. He also visits the company doctor who makes a hobby of measuring the heads of those traveling to remote regions. He hopes to be able to take measurements when the agents return, but cannot because none of them ever come back.

Along the way as Marlow moves deeper into the jungle, his attitude about the uselessness or dangers of colonial involvement in the Congo are exposed via his descriptions of a people decimated, mistreated, and a forbidding jungle that seems to repulse them at every turn. From the very start of the story, the contrasts between light and darkness are explored and developed.

At every step of his journey, Marlow is met by incompetence and disrepair; sickness and apathy. Marlow finds the infamous Kurtz, about whom each character along the journey has formed an opinion, for better or worse, and takes him against his will from the encampment where he is set up as a Deity and worshipped by the natives as either god or monster. Kurtz dies on the return trip, saying only "the horror, the horror" as his last words, a statement at once so compelling and so ambiguous that it has piqued the curiosity of readers and writers alike for the past hundred plus years.

After returning home, Marlow feels obligated to visit the intended wife of Kurtz to give her information regarding his death, but finds himself unable to tell her the truth of the state in which he found the man, or to reveal the last words of her fiancé and instead tells her that Kurtz spoke her name as he died.

## Historical Contexts

Written as an engagement with the horrible consequences of colonial activity in Africa, Conrad comments upon the effect the invasion of a foreign, sovereign power had on individuals and institutions. *Heart of Darkness* is usually interpreted as being "about" the specific abuses of power in the colonization of Africa, although Africa is never specifically mentioned in the story at all. According to Douglas Hewitt, Conrad's "narrative strategy in *Heart of Darkness* is designed to undermine the assumptions of his readers about colonialism and the advance of civilization" (374). Conrad's childhood dream of visiting the "Dark Continent" was shattered after he witnessed the horrifying state of the Belgian Congo in 1890. His observations include having "the distasteful knowledge of the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human consciousness and geographical exploration. What an end to the idealized realities of a boy's daydreams!" (*Heart of Darkness* 186)

The text first appeared in *Blackwood's* magazine in 1899, and is classified as an example of a text bridging the gap between Victorian and Modern literature. Some of the issues explored in this and other post-Victorian texts include a sense of the loss of confidence in an ordered and predictable universe as a result of various historical events. T. S. Eliot quotes a line from *Heart of Darkness* in an epigraph to his poem "the Hollow Men" -- "Mistah Kurtz---he dead". The "hollow" nature of men in the time period of modern consciousness is highlighted in this poem as much as in *Heart of Darkness*: "We are the hollow men/ We are the stuffed men/ Headpiece filled with straw." Figures of this type appear in the *Hairdresser's Dummy* and even in descriptions of Kurtz.

The period was also influenced by the growing understanding of different cultures discovered via anthropological expeditions which began in the previous century and culminated in the Great Crystal Palace exhibition in England (1851) in which the white, European (British) man was figured as the highest form of evolution. The deconstruction of this assumption is reflected in *Heart of Darkness*, over fifty years later, in light of the reports of barbaric practices engaged in by powers attempting to secure colonial rule.

The Belgian Congo, the ostensible location of the story, was, in the late 1800s the 'property' of King Leopold. Even though many allegations surfaced regarding Leopold's own activities in the Congo as questionable and barbaric, he was not universally vilified. The famous explorer H.M. Stanley said of him "King Leopold found the Congo...cursed by cannibalism, savagery, and despair; and he has been trying, with a patience...to relieve it of its horror... [to] save it from perdition" (qtd. in Hennessy 79).

There are several theories regarding the influences on Conrad's depiction of Kurtz. Ian Watt suggests it was James S. Jameson, a member of the Emin Pasha Expedition, who it was rumored "indulged in cannibal orgies" and whose history was similar to the one provided for Kurtz (Watt 144 n.).

## Societal Contexts

The ethics and operations of society are explored in the text in each of the settings, from the civilized starting point of the journey to the more natural and forbidding setting of Kurtz's camp. Social custom, ritual and philosophy are explored by the juxtaposition of civilized mores and savage rituals. From the kinship of sailors to the dangers of a charismatic personality on others, social interactions are explored via Marlow as narrator and Kurtz who seems to leave most people whom he encounters spellbound.

Women figure in the text as direct representations of the Victorian virgin/whore complex. The Savage Mistress symbolizes unchained sexuality, primitive and seductive in the extreme while the Intended symbolizes purity in both mind and body. Although the text reinforces these stereotypes on the surface, it invites the reader to look deeper to find a more complex and contradictory theory. In the end when Marlow tells the Intended Kurtz spoke her name as he died, a symbolic linguistic replacement identifies the pure and innocent wife-to-be as "The Horror."

## Religious Contexts

As a literary movement, Modernism often engaged in a critical study of the Bible as a literary text rather than a religious document. The effects of philosophical commentaries like Nietzsche's "God is dead" statement, along with the concept that, in opposition to previously held theories, faith and values were constructions and not instinctual beliefs, created an atmosphere of doubt and dislocation of meaning previously predicated on Biblical "truth." There are several points in Heart of Darkness where meaning is impossible to locate, as is noted by Marlow. Conrad's reluctance to decipher these ambiguities highlights the feeling that many things that are either pointless or cannot be understood in any concrete way.

In a letter to Cunninghame Graham in 1898 Conrad reveals his own feelings on the state of belief and religion:

Life knows us and we do not know life...Half  
the words we use have no meaning whatever and of  
the other half each man understands each word after  
the fashion of his own folly and conceit. Faith is  
a myth and beliefs shift like mists on the shore;  
thoughts vanish; words, once pronounced, die; and  
the memory of yesterday is as shadowy as the hope  
of tomorrow...As our [Polish] peasants say:  
'Pray brother; forgive me for the love of God.'  
And we don't know what forgiveness is, nor what  
is love, nor where God is. (qtd. in Karl 127).

Historically, Christianity is an important lens through which one can begin to understand the actions of colonizers and missionaries that flooded Africa in the late 1800s. Belgian King Leopold's Congo influence, for example, was predicated on his view of heathen savagery present in the area. During a conference in Brussels he shored up his position, arguing that his goal in the Congo was to "open to civilization the only part of our globe where Christianity has not penetrated and to pierce the darkness which envelops the entire population" (qtd. in Hennessey 79).

According to Hennessey, the Congo was attacked by Christians with a never before witnessed religious zeal: "No foreign missionary field was ever so quickly occupied by Christian workers as the Congo" which he sees as a positive improvement and believes the natives welcome the missionaries who "go and come among the fiercest cannibalistic tribes without fear of being molested" (97).

## Scientific & Technological Contexts

During the modern period, literature reflected, in its themes and content, a growing insecurity about and challenge to 19th century science and its ability to adequately explain the universe and human condition. By the late Victorian period, the opportunities provided by the Industrial Revolution were revealed to have a darker side: movement of people from the relative safety of rural living to the crowded and polluted metropolis of London.

The growth of psychology and psychoanalysis in which the concept of unconscious motivations were shown to be involved in the everyday decisions made by individuals has a place in not only the depictions and possible explanations for Kurtz's behavior but also for the Doctor's interest in Marlow as he leaves for Africa.

The doctor measures Marlow's head, employing a form of phrenological scientific process that was one of the pseudo-sciences at the time. Marlow thinks he "is becoming scientifically interesting." The doctor says the head measurements are probably not useful because the changes take place inside the men.

## Biographical Contexts

Joseph Conrad was born in 1857 in the Russian occupied Ukraine. When his father was exiled in 1861 to Siberia as a potential threat to the government, Conrad and his mother went with him. Conrad's mother died when he was eight of tuberculosis, and his father died when he was twelve. At the age of seventeen, Conrad began a long period of 'adventures at sea, and in 1884 became a naturalized British subject. English was Conrad's third language. When Conrad traveled to Africa it was still one of the 'blank' spaces on the map, something that excited his curiosity (as much as it did many people of his day). Marlow's journey in Heart of Darkness parallels Conrad's own journey into Africa, during which he headed a Belgian steamship on a journey up the Congo River in 1890. Conrad died in 1924.

Though viewed as an anti-imperial text, Conrad himself was not against colonial expansion per se. African novelist Chinua Achebe initiated the contemporary debate over Conrad's possible racist inclinations by boldly asserting "Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist," continuing, "Certainly Conrad had a problem with niggers. His inordinate love of that word itself should be of interest to psychoanalysts" (258). Wilson Harris leads the opposition to Achebe's scathing commentary, focusing on Achebe's failure to understand Conrad's use of parody, through which Conrad explores "the properties of established order that mask corruption in all societies, black and white... a perception of catastrophe behind... mankind the hunter whose folklore is death; mankind the ritualist who sacrifices female children to maintain the symmetry of males, or mankind the priest who once plucked the heart from the breast of a living victim to feed the sun" (265).

## Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the importance of the following quote: "...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 the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness... (38).
2. Notice Conrad's attention to describing their progress to Kurtz's camp-(page 40)-they "crawled," they "crept" to Kurtz. Kurtz is also described as crawling in the story. What do you think Conrad is trying to say about both Marlow and Kurtz?
3. Why do the natives fire on Marlow's boat? Is it an attack? What does it signify?
4. Kurtz is described as "little more than a voice" and "something altogether without substance." What does this mean and what does it have to do with the themes of the novel?
5. What do you assume are the "unspeakable rites" Kurtz participates in during the Midnight Dances?
6. What do the heads in front of Kurtz's camp symbolize?
7. What is the function of the 'savage mistress' in the text?
8. What is the (at least) double meaning of the title?
9. What is the "horror" of which Kurtz speaks on his death bed?
10. Why does Marlow end up lying to Kurtz's "intended" bride? What is the symbolic significance of that lie?
11. What do you think the symbolic import is of the women knitting black wool and the white thread around the black laborer's neck?

## Essay Ideas

1. At the start of the story, Marlow is described as finding meaning not on the inside (like in the shell of a cracked nut) but rather on the outside. Write an essay which argues your opinion of where meaning is located in the text-if it isn't inside the heart of Africa with Kurtz, where is it?
2. Explore the main characters and what they each represent, including in your analysis the characters of Marlow, Kurtz, the narrator, the Intended, and the Savage Mistress.
3. Analyze the differences between Marlow and Kurtz in terms of the idea that Kurtz represents what people become if left to follow their basic instincts while Marlow represents the civilized soul who is able to resist "going native."
4. Write an essay that analyzes the use of opposites in the text: light/dark, civilized/savage, inner/outer.
5. Write an essay that offers and supports several interpretations of either the meaning of the title or the meaning of "the Horror."

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