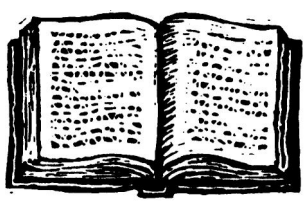
Heart of Darkness

Joseph Conrad

1899

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* now his most famous work, was first published in 1899 in serial form in London's *Blackwood's Magazine,* a popular journal of its day. The work was well received by a somewhat perplexed Victorian audience. It has since been called by many the best short novel written in English. At the time of its writing (1890), the Polish-born Conrad had become a naturalized British citizen, mastered the English language, served for ten years in the British merchant marines, achieved the rank of captain, and traveled to Asia, Australia, India, and Africa. *Heart of Darkness* is based on Conrad's firsthand experience of the Congo region of West Africa. Conrad was actually sent up the Congo River to an inner station to rescue a company agent—not named Kurtz but Georges-Antoine Klein—who died a few days later aboard ship. The story is told in the words of Charlie Marlow, a seaman, and filtered through the thoughts of an unidentified listening narrator. It is on one level about a voyage into the heart of the Belgian Congo, and on another about the journey into the soul of man. In 1902, *Heart of Darkness* was published in a separate volume along with two other stories by Conrad. Many critics consider the book a literary bridge between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and a forerunner both of modern literary techniques and approaches to the theme of the ambiguous nature of truth, evil, and morality. By presenting the reader with a clearly unreliable narrator whose interpretation of events is often open to question, Conrad forces the reader to



take an active part in the story's construction and to see and feel its events for him- or herself.

Author Biography

Joseph Conrad was born Josef Teodor Konrad Walecz Korzeniowski in a Russian-ruled province of Poland (now part of the Ukraine) on December 3, 1857. His father was a poet, a writer, and a political activist. His mother was also politically involved. As a result of his parents' participation in the Polish independence movement, young Conrad and his mother and father were forced into exile in Northern Russia in 1863. In the next five years, by the time Conrad was eleven, both his parents had died and the boy had been sent to live with various relatives. Conrad dropped out of school when he was sixteen and took up life on the sea, first joining the French merchant marines and sailing as apprentice and then steward to Martinique and the West Indies. At the age of twenty-one, Conrad joined a British ship, and served with the British merchant marines for ten years. During this time he achieved the rank of captain, became a naturalized British citizen, and travelled to Asia, Africa, Australia, and India. A trip to the Belgian Congo in 1890, during which Conrad sailed the Congo River, was crucial to the development of the 1899 work *Heart of Darkness.*

Poor health, from which Conrad had suffered all his life, forced his retirement from the British merchant marines in 1894. Conrad had begun writing while still in the service, basing much of his work on his life at sea. His first novel, *Almayer's Folly,* was published in 1895 and began Conrad's difficult and often financially unrewarding career as a writer. Not until 1913, with the publication of the novel *Chance,* did he achieve true critical and financial success. Nevertheless, Conrad managed to earn his living by his pen, writing all his novels in his acquired language, English, and always returning to the sea and the outskirts of civilization for his most enduring themes.

In addition to *Heart of Darkness,* Conrad's most notable early works include *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1897), *Lord Jim* (1900), *Youth* (1902), and *Typhoon* (1902). The novels which are widely regarded as Conrad's greatest works are *Nostromo* (1904), *The Secret Agent* (1907), *Under Western Eyes* (1911), and *Chance.* The novel *Victory,* which appeared in 1915, may be the best known of these later works. Conrad collaborated on two novels with his friend and fellow novelist Ford Madox Ford, *The Inheritors* (1901) and *Romance* (1903).

Joseph Conrad married in 1896, had two sons, and died of a heart attack in England on August 3, 1924. He was buried in Canterbury Cathedral, where many of England's greatest writers lie. Although he often struggled to write in his adopted language, Conrad is now considered one of the greatest prose stylists in English literature.

Plot Summary

Chapter I

Literally speaking, the action of *Heart of Darkness* is simply the act of storytelling aboard a ship on the river Thames around the turn of the twentieth century. An unnamed narrator, along with four other men, is aboard the anchored *Nellie* waiting for the tide to turn. They trade sea stories to pass the time. One of these men is Charlie Marlow, whose story will itself be the primary narrative of *Heart of Darkness.* Before Marlow begins his tale, however, the unnamed narrator muses to himself on a history of exploration and conquest which also originated on the Thames, the waterway connecting London to

the sea. The narrator mentions Sir Francis Drake and his ship the *Golden Hind,* which travelled around the globe at the end of the sixteenth century, as well as Sir John Franklin, whose expedition to North America disappeared in the Arctic Ocean in the middle of the nineteenth century.

As the sun is setting on the *Nellie,* Marlow also begins to speak of London's history and of naval expeditions. He, however, imagines an earlier point in history: he sketches the story of a hypothetical Roman seaman sent north from the Mediterranean to the then barely known British Isles. This is Marlow's prelude to his narration of his own journey up the Congo river, and he then begins an account of how he himself once secured a job as the captain of a river steamer in the Belgian colony in Africa. From here on the bulk of the novella is Marlow's narration of his journey into the Congo.

Through an aunt in Brussels, Belgium's capital, Marlow manages to get an interview with a trading company which operates a system of ivory trading posts in the Belgian Congo (formerly Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). After a very brief discussion with a Company official in Brussels and a very strange physical examination by a Company doctor, Marlow is hired to sail a steamer between trading posts on the Congo River. He is then sent on a French ship down the African coast to the mouth of the Congo.

From the mouth of the Congo Marlow takes a short trip upriver on a steamer. This ship leaves him at the Company's Lower Station. Marlow finds the station to be a vision of hell—it is a "wanton smash-up" with loads of rusting ancient wreckage everywhere, a cliff nearby being demolished with dynamite for no apparent reason, and many starving and dying Africans enslaved and laboring under the armed guard of the Company's white employees. Marlow meets the Company's chief accountant, who mentions a Mr. Kurtz—manager of the Inner Station—for the first time and describes him as a "very remarkable person" who sends an enormous amount of ivory out of the interior. Marlow must wait at the Lower Station for ten days before setting out two hundred miles overland in a caravan to where his steamer is waiting up the river at the Central Station.

After fifteen days the caravan arrives at the Central Station, where Marlow first sees the ship which he is to command. It is sunk in the river. Marlow meets the manager of the Central Station, with whom he discusses the sunken ship. It will, they anticipate, take several months to repair. Over the course of the next several weeks Marlow notices that the rivets he keeps requesting for the repair never arrive from the Lower Station, and when he overhears the manager speaking with several other Company officials he begins to suspect that his requests are being intercepted; that is, that the manager does not want the ship to get repaired for some reason.

Chapter II

Overhearing a conversation between the manager and his uncle, Marlow learns some information which begins to make some sense of the delays in his travel. Kurtz, chief of the Inner Station, has been in the interior alone for more than a year. He has sent no communication other than a steady and tremendous flow of ivory down to the Central Station. The manager fears that Kurtz is too strong competition for him professionally, and is not particularly interested in seeing him return.

Marlow's steamer, however, finally gets fixed and he and his party start heading up river to retrieve Kurtz and whatever ivory is at the Inner Station. On board are Marlow, the manager, several employees of the Company, and a crew of approximately twenty cannibals. The river is treacherous and the vegetation thick and almost impenetrable throughout the journey. At a place nearly fifty miles downstream from the Inner Station they come across an abandoned hut with a sign telling them to approach cautiously. Inside the hut Marlow discovers a tattered copy of a navigation manual in which undecipherable notes are written in the margins.

Nearing the Station in a heavy fog, the ship is attacked from the shore by arrows, and the passengers—"pilgrims," Marlow calls them—fire into the jungle with their rifles. Marlow ends the attack by blowing the steam whistle and scaring off the unseen attackers, but not before his helmsman is killed by a spear. Marlow imagines that he will not get to meet the mysterious Kurtz, that perhaps he has been killed, and suddenly realizes something:

> "I made the strange discovery that I had never imagined him as doing, you know, but as discoursing. I didn't say to myself, 'Now I will never see him,' or, 'Now I will never shake him by the hand,' but, 'now I will never hear him.' The man presented himself as a voice. Not of course that I did not connect him with some sort of action. Hadn't I been told in all the tones of jealousy and admiration that he had collected, bartered, swindled, or stolen more ivory than all the other agents together? That was not the point. The point was in his being a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts the one that stood out preeminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his abil-

ity to talk, his words—the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness."

When they finally reach the Inner Station they are beckoned by a odd Russian man who is a sort of disciple of Kurtz's. He turns out also to have been the owner of the hut and navigation manual Marlow found downstream. He speaks feverishly to Marlow about Kurtz's greatness.

Chapter III

The Russian explains to Marlow that the Africans attacked the ship because they were afraid it was coming to take Kurtz away from them. It appears that they worship Kurtz, and the Inner Station is a terrifying monument to Kurtz's power. The full extent of Kurtz's authority at the Inner Station is now revealed to Marlow. There are heads of "rebels" on stakes surrounding Kurtz's hut and Marlow speaks of Kurtz presiding over "unspeakable" rituals. When Kurtz is carried out to meet the ship—by this time he is very frail with illness—he commands the crowd to allow him to be taken aboard without incident. As they wait out the night on board the steamer the people of the Inner Station build fires and pound drums in vigil.

Late that night Marlow wakes up to find Kurtz gone, so he goes ashore to find him. When he tracks him down, Kurtz is crawling through the brush, trying to return to the Station, to the fires, to "his people," and to his "immense plans." Marlow persuades him to return to the ship. When the ship leaves the next day with the ailing Kurtz on board the crowd gathers at the shore and wails in desperate sadness at his disappearance. Marlow blows the steam whistle and disperses the crowd.

On the return trip to the Central Station Kurtz's health worsens. He half coherently reflects on his "soul's adventure," as Marlow describes it, and his famous final words are: "The horror! The horror!" He dies and is buried somewhere downriver on the muddy shore.

When Marlow returns to Belgium he goes to see Kurtz's fiancée, his "Intended." She speaks with him about Kurtz's greatness, his genius, his ability to speak eloquently, and of his great plans for civilizing Africa. Rather than explain the truth of Kurtz's life in Africa, Marlow decides not to disillusion her. He returns some of Kurtz's things to her—some letters and a pamphlet he had written—and tells her that Kurtz's last word was her name. Marlow's story ends and the scene returns to the anchored *Nellie* where the unnamed narrator and the other sailors are sitting silently as the tide is turning.

Characters

The Aunt

The Aunt uses her influence to help Charlie Marlow secure an appointment as skipper of the steamboat that will take him up the Congo River. Echoing the prevailing sentiments of the Victorian day, the Aunt speaks of missions to Africa as "weaning the ignorant millions from their horrid ways."

The Chief Accountant

The Chief Accountant, sometimes referred to as the Clerk, is a white man who has been in the Congo for three years. He appears in such an unexpectedly elegant outfit when Marlow first encounters him that Marlow thinks he is a vision. Both the Chief Accountant's clothes and his books are in excellent order. He keeps up appearances, despite the sight of people dying all around him and the great demoralization of the land. For this, he earns Marlow's respect. "That's backbone," says Marlow.

The Clerk

See The Chief Accountant

The Company Manager

See The Manager

The Doctor

The Doctor measures Marlow's head before he sets out on his journey. He say he does that for everyone who goes "out there," meaning Africa, but that he never sees them when they return. The Doctor asks Marlow if there's any madness in his family and warns him above all else to keep calm and avoid irritation in the tropics.

The Fireman

The Fireman is an African referred to as "an improved specimen." He has three ornamental scars on each cheek and teeth filed to points. He is very good at firing the boiler, for he believes evil spirits reside within and it is his job to keep the boiler from getting thirsty.

The Foreman

The Foreman is a boilermaker by trade and a good worker. He is a bony, yellow-faced, bald wid-

ower with a waist-length beard and six children. His passion is pigeon flying. By performing a jig and getting Marlow to dance it with him, he shows that the lonely, brutalizing life of the interior of Africa can make people behave in bizarre ways.

Captain Fresleven

Fresleven, a Danish captain, was Marlow's predecessor. He had been killed in Africa when he got into a quarrel over some black hens with a village chief. He battered the chief over the head with a stick and was in turn killed by the chief's son. Fresleven had always been considered a very quiet and gentle man. His final actions show how drastically a two-year stay in Africa can alter a European's personality.

The Helmsman

A native, the Helmsman is responsible for steering Marlow's boat. Marlow has little respect for the man, whom he calls "the most unstable kind of fool," because he swaggers in front of others but becomes passive when left alone. He becomes frightened when the natives shoot arrows at the boat and drops his pole to pick up a rifle and fire back. The Helmsman is hit in the side by a spear. His blood fills Marlow's shoes. His eyes gleam brightly as he stares intently at Marlow and then dies without speaking.

The Intended

The Intended is the woman to whom Kurtz is engaged and whom he had left behind in Belgium. One year after his death, she is still dressed in mourning. She is depicted as naive, romantic, and, in the opinion of Victorian men of the day, in need of protection. She says she knew Kurtz better than anyone in the world and that she had his full confidence. This is an obviously ironic statement, as Marlow's account of Kurtz makes clear. Her chief wish is to go on believing that Kurtz died with her name on his lips, and in this, Marlow obliges her.

The Journalist

The Journalist comes to visit Marlow after Marlow has returned from Africa. He says Kurtz was a politician and an extremist. He says Kurtz could have led a party, any party. Marlow agrees and gives the journalist a portion of Kurtz's papers to publish.

Mr. Kurtz

Kurtz, born of a mother who was half-English and a father who was half-French, was educated in England. He is an ivory trader who has been alone

Media Adaptations

- Directed by Nicolas Roeg, *Heart of Darkness* was adapted for television and broadcast on TNT in 1994. The film features Tim Roth as Marlow and John Malkovich as Kurtz, and is available on cassette from Turner Home Entertainment.
- The structure of *Heart of Darkness* was incorporated into Francis Ford Coppola's award-winning 1979 film *Apocalypse Now,* starring Marlon Brando and Martin Sheen. The insanities presented in the book as stemming from isolation in the African jungle are in the film transposed to the jungles of Vietnam. Available from Paramount Home Video.
- Two sound recordings of *Heart of Darkness* exist. Both are abridged and produced on two cassettes each. One was recorded by HarperCollins in 1969, is narrated by Anthony Quayle, and runs 91 minutes. The other is a 180-minute recording, published by Penguin-High Bridge audio in 1994, with narration by David Threlfall.

in the jungles of Africa for a long time. No one has heard from him in nine months. The Company Manager says Kurtz is the best ivory trader he has ever had, although he suspects him of hoarding vast amounts of ivory. Marlow is sent to rescue him, although he has not asked for help. The word "kurtz" means "short" in German, but when Marlow first sees the man, seated on a stretcher with his arms extended toward the natives and his mouth opened wide as if to swallow everything before him, he appears to be about seven feet tall. Though gravely ill, Kurtz has an amazingly loud and strong voice. He commands attention. Kurtz, previously known to Marlow by reputation and through his writings on "civilizing" the African continent, is revealed upon acquaintance to be a dying, deranged, and power-mad subjugator of the African natives. Human sacrifices have been made to him. Rows of impaled human heads line the path to the door of his cabin. Kurtz is both childish and fiendish. He talks to the very end. His brain is haunted by shadowy images. Love and hate fight for possession of his soul. He speaks of the necessity of protecting his "intended" and says she is "out of it," a sentiment Marlow will later echo. Kurtz's final words, uttered as he lies in the dark waiting for death, are: "The horror! The horror!" With this utterance, Kurtz presumably realizes the depth to which his unbridled greed and brutality have brought him. That realization is transferred to Marlow, who feels bound to Kurtz both through the common heritage of their European background and the infinite corruptibility of their natures as men.

Kurtz's Cousin

Kurtz's Cousin is an organist. He tells Marlow Kurtz was a great musician. Marlow doesn't really believe him but can't say exactly what Kurtz's profession was. Marlow and the Cousin agree Kurtz was a "universal genius."

The Manager

The Manager, a man of average size and build with cold blue eyes, inspires uneasiness in Marlow, but not outright mistrust. He is an enigma. He is smart, but cannot keep order. His men obey him but do not love or respect him. The Manager has been in the heart of Africa for nine years, yet is never ill. Marlow considers the Manager's greatness to lie in that he never gives away the secret of what controls him. Marlow speculates that perhaps there is nothing inside him, and maybe that is why he is never ill. The Manager says Kurtz is the best agent he ever had; yet he also says Kurtz's method is unsound and that he has done more harm than good to the Company. When Marlow discovers his ship is in need of repair, the Manager tells him the repairs will take three months to complete. Marlow considers the man "a chattering idiot," but his three-month estimate turns out to be exactly right.

The Manager's boy

The Manager's "boy," an African servant, delivers the book's famous line, "Mistah Kurtz—he dead."

The Manager's Uncle

The Manager's Uncle, a short, paunchy man whose eyes have a look of "sleepy cunning," is the leader of the group of white men who arrive at the Central Station wearing new clothes and tan shoes. The group calls itself the "Eldorado Exploring Expedition," and uses the station as a base from which to travel into the jungle and plunder from its in-

habitants. Marlow observes that they steal from the land "with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe." The Manager's Uncle and the Manager refer to Kurtz as "that man."

Charlie Marlow

Marlow, a seaman and a wanderer who follows the sea, relates the tale that makes up the bulk of the book. He is an Englishman who speaks passable French. He sits in the pose of a preaching Buddha as he tells a group of men aboard the *Nellie,* a cruising yawl in the River Thames, the story of his journey into the interior of the Congo. Marlow had previously returned from sailing voyages in Asia and after six years in England decided to look for another post. He speaks of his boyhood passion for maps and of his long fascination with Africa, that "place of darkness." Through the influence of his aunt, Marlow is appointed captain of a steamer and charged with going up river to find Kurtz, a missing ivory trader, and bring him back. Marlow says he is acquainted with Kurtz through his writing and admires him. His trip upriver is beset with difficulties. Marlow encounters several acts of madness, including a French man-of-war relentlessly shelling the bush while there appears to be not a single human being or even a shed to fire upon. Later, he comes upon a group of Africans who are blasting away at the land, presumably in order to build a railway, but Marlow sees no reason for it, there being nothing in the way to blast. Everywhere about him, he sees naked black men dying of disease and starvation.

Revulsion grows within him over the white man's dehumanizing colonization of the Congo. It reaches a peak when Marlow finally meets Kurtz and sees the depths of degradation to which the man has sunk. Nevertheless, Marlow feels an affinity toward Kurtz. He sees in him both a reflection of his own corruptible European soul and a premonition of his destiny. Although Kurtz is already dying when Marlow meets him, Marlow experiences him as a powerful force. When Kurtz says, "I had immense plans," Marlow believes the man's mind is still clear but that his soul is mad. Marlow takes the dying Kurtz aboard his steamer for the return trip down river. He feels a bond has been established between himself and Kurtz and that Kurtz has become his "choice of nightmares." When Marlow hears Kurtz's last words, "The horror! The horror!", he takes them to be Kurtz's final judgment on his life on earth. Seeing a kind of victory in that final summing up, Marlow remains loyal to Kurtz. One year after Kurtz's death, Marlow visits Kurtz's fiancée, who has been left behind in Brussels. He finds her trusting and capable of immense faith. Marlow believes he must protect her from all the horrors he witnessed in Africa in order to save her soul. When the girl asks to hear Kurtz's final words, Marlow lies and says he died with her name on his lips. Marlow then ceases his tale and sits silently aboard ship in his meditative pose.

The Narrator

The Narrator remains unidentified throughout the book. He tells the reader the story Charlie Marlow told to him and three other men (the captain or Director of the Companies, the accountant, and the lawyer) as they sat aboard the becalmed *Nellie* on London's River Thames, waiting for the tide to turn. The Narrator is an attentive listener who does not comment on or try to interpret the tale. He is, instead, a vessel through which Marlow's story is transmitted, much as Conrad is a vessel through whom the entire book is transmitted. When Marlow finishes speaking, the Narrator looks out at the tranquil river and reflects that it "seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness."

The Official

The Official demands that Marlow turn over Kurtz's papers to him, saying the Company has the right to all information about its territories. Marlow gives him the report on "Suppression of Savage Customs," minus Kurtz's final comment recommending extermination, and says the rest is private. The Official looks at the document and says it's not what they "had a right to expect."

The Pilgrim in Pink Pajamas

See The Pilgrim

The Pilgrim

The Pilgrim is a fat white man with sandy hair and red whiskers. He wears his pink pajamas tucked into his socks. He cannot steer the boat. He assumes Kurtz is dead and hopes many Africans, whom he and all the other white people refer to as "savages," have been killed to avenge Kurtz's death. Marlow tells the Pilgrim he must learn to fire a rifle from the shoulder. The pilgrims fire from the hip with their eyes closed.

The Pilgrims

The Pilgrims are the European traders who accompany Marlow into the jungle. They fire their rifles from the hip into the air and indiscriminately

into the bush. They eventually come to look with disfavor upon Marlow, who does not share their opinions or interests. When they bury Kurtz, Marlow believes the Pilgrims would like to bury him as well.

The Poleman

See The Helmsman

The Russian

The Russian is a twenty-five-year-old fair-skinned, beardless man with a boyish face and tiny blue eyes. He wears brown clothes with bright blue, red, and yellow patches covering them. He looks like a harlequin—a clown in patched clothes—to Marlow. As he boards Marlow's boat, he assures everyone that the "savages" are "simple people" who "meant no harm" before he corrects himself: "Not exactly." The Russian dropped out of school to go to sea. He has been alone on the river for two years, heading for the interior, and chatters constantly to make up for the silence he has endured. The Towson's Book on seamanship, which Marlow had discovered previously, belongs to the Russian. Marlow finds the Russian an insoluble problem. He admires and envies him. The Russian is surrounded by the "glamour" of youth and appears unscathed to Marlow. He wants nothing from the wilderness but to continue to exist. The Russian describes Kurtz as a great orator. He says one doesn't talk with him, one listens to him. He says Kurtz once talked to him all night about everything, including love. "This man has enlarged my mind," he tells Marlow. The Russian presents Marlow with a great deal of information about Kurtz, chiefly that Kurtz is adored by the African tribe that follows him, that he once nearly killed the Russian for his small supply of ivory, and that it was Kurtz who ordered the attack on the steamer to scare them away.

The Savages

"Savages" is the blanket term the white traders use to refer to all African natives, despite their differing origins. The savages range from the workers dying of starvation and disease at the Outer Station to the cannibals who man Marlow's boat to the tribe who worships Kurtz. For the most part Marlow comes to consider all the natives savages, although he expresses some admiration for the cannibals, who must be very hungry but have refrained from attacking the few white men on the boat because of "a piece of paper written over in accordance with some farcical law or other." When Marlow first arrives in Africa, he is appalled by the whites' brutal treatment of the natives, and never expresses agreement with the pilgrims who eagerly anticipate taking revenge on the savages. He also seems to be shocked by the addendum to Kurtz's report that says, "Exterminate all the brutes!" Nevertheless, Marlow never sees beyond the surface of any of the natives. He compares watching the boat's fireman work to "seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind-legs," and shocks the pilgrims when he dumps the body of the helmsman overboard instead of saving it for burial. For Marlow, the native "savages" serve only as another illustration of the mystery Africa holds for Europeans, and it is because of this dehumanization that several critics consider *Heart of Darkness* a racist work.

The Swedish Captain

The Swedish Captain is the captain of the ship that takes Marlow toward the mouth of the Congo. He tells Marlow that another Swede has just hanged himself by the side of the road. When Marlow asks why, the Swedish Captain replies, "Who knows? The sun too much for him, or the country perhaps."

The Woman

The Woman is the proud, "wild-eyed and magnificent" African woman with whom Kurtz has been living while in the interior. She is the queen of a native tribe. When she sees Marlow's steamer about to pull away and realizes she will never see Kurtz again, she stands by the river's edge with her hands raised high to the sky. She alone among the natives does not flinch at the sound of the ship's whistle. Marlow considers her a tragic figure.

The Young Agent

The Young Agent has been stationed at the Central Station for one year. He affects an aristocratic manner and is considered the Manager's spy by the other agents at the station. His job is to make bricks, but Marlow sees no bricks anywhere about the station. The Young Agent presses Marlow for information about Europe, then believes his answers are lies and grows bored. The Young Agent tells Marlow Kurtz is Chief of the Inner Station. He refers to Kurtz as "a prodigy ... an emissary of pity and of science and progress." The Young Agent establishes a connection between Kurtz and Marlow by saying that the same group of people who sent Kurtz into Africa also recommended Marlow to come and get him out.

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

Throughout *Heart of Darkness,* which tells of a journey into the heart of the Belgian Congo and out again, the themes of alienation, loneliness, silence and solitude predominate. The book begins and ends in silence, with men first waiting for a tale to begin and then left to their own thoughts after it has concluded. The question of what the alienation and loneliness of extended periods of time in a remote and hostile environment can do to men's minds is a central theme of the book. The doctor who measures Marlow's head prior to his departure for Africa warns him of changes to his personality that may be produced by a long stay in-country. Prolonged silence and solitude are seen to have damaging effects on many characters in the book. Among these are the late Captain Fresleven, Marlow's predecessor, who was transformed from a gentle soul into a man of violence, and the Russian, who has been alone on the River for two years and dresses bizarrely and chatters constantly. But loneliness and alienation have taken their greatest toll on Kurtz, who, cut off from all humanizing influence, has forfeited the restraints of reason and conscience and given free rein to his most base and brutal instincts.

Deception

Deception, or hypocrisy, is a central theme of the novel and is explored on many levels. In the disguise of a "noble cause," the Belgians have exploited the Congo. Actions taken in the name of philanthropy are merely covers for greed. Claiming to educate the natives, to bring them religion and a better way of life, European colonizers remained to starve, mutilate, and murder the indigenous population for profit. Marlow has even obtained his captaincy through deception, for his aunt misrepresented him as "an exceptional and gifted creature." She also presented him as "one of the Workers, with a capital [W].... Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle," and Conrad notes the deception in elevating working people to some mystical status they can not realistically obtain. At the end of the book, Marlow engages in his own deception when he tells Kurtz's fiancée the lie that Kurtz died with her name on his lips.

Order and Disorder

Conrad sounds the themes of order and disorder in showing, primarily through the example of the Company's chief clerk, how people can carry on with the most mundane details of their lives while all around them chaos reigns. In the larger context, the Company attends to the details of sending agents into the interior to trade with the natives and collect ivory while remaining oblivious to the devastation such acts have caused. Yet on a closer look, the Company's Manager has no talent for order or organization. His station is in a deplorable state and Marlow can see no reason for the Manager to have his position other than the fact that he is never ill. On the other hand, the chief clerk is so impeccably dressed that when Marlow first meets him he thinks he is a vision. This man, who has been in-country three years and witnessed all its attendant horrors, manages to keep his clothes and books in excellent order. He even speaks with confidence of a Council of Europe which intended Kurtz to go far in "the administration," as if there is some overall rational principle guiding their lives.

Topics for Further Study

- Research the Belgian atrocities, committed in the Belgian Congo between 1889 and 1899, and compare them to the evidence of same presented in *Heart of Darkness.*
- Research Henry Stanley's three-year journey (1874-1877) up the Congo River and compare the stations Stanley founded along the river to those mentioned in *Heart of Darkness.*
- Compare the view of women, as presented in *Heart of Darkness,* to today's view. Argue whether Conrad should or should not be considered a sexist by today's standards.
- Compare the view of Africans, as presented in *Heart of Darkness,* to today's view. Argue whether Conrad should or should not be considered a racist by today's standards.
- Research a contemporary psychological study of the effects on an individual of isolation, solitude, or a wild jungle environment and compare it to Kurtz's situation.

Sanity and Insanity

Closely linked to the themes of order and disorder are those of sanity and insanity. Madness, given prolonged exposure to the isolation of the wilderness, seems an inevitable extension of chaos. The atmospheric influences at the heart of the African continent—the stifling heat, the incessant drums, the whispering bush, the mysterious light—play havoc with the unadapted European mind and reduce it either to the insanity of thinking anything is allowable in such an atmosphere or, as in Kurtz's case, to literal madness. Kurtz, after many years in the jungle, is presented as a man who has gone mad with power and greed. No restraints were placed on him—either from above, from a rule of law, or from within, from his own conscience. In the wilderness, he came to believe he was free to do whatever he liked, and the freedom drove him mad. Small acts of madness line Marlow's path to Kurtz: the Man-of-War that fires into the bush for no apparent reason, the urgently needed rivets that never arrive, the bricks that will never be built, the jig that is suddenly danced, the immense hole dug for no discernible purpose. All these events ultimately lead to a row of impaled severed human heads and Kurtz, a man who, in his insanity, has conferred a godlike status on himself and has ritual human sacrifices performed for him. The previously mentioned themes of solitude and silence have here achieved their most powerful effect: they have driven Kurtz mad. He is presented as a voice, a disembodied head, a mouth that opens as if to devour everything before him. Kurtz speaks of "my ivory ... my intended ... my river ... my station," as if everything in the Congo belonged to him. This is the final arrogant insanity of the white man who comes supposedly to improve a land, but stays to exploit, ravage, and destroy it.

Duty and Responsibility

As is true of all other themes in the book, those of duty and responsibility are glimpsed on many levels. On a national level, we are told of the British devotion to duty and efficiency which led to systematic colonization of large parts of the globe and has its counterpart in Belgian colonization of the Congo, the book's focus. On an individual level, Conrad weaves the themes of duty and responsibility through Marlow's job as captain, a position which make him responsible for his crew and bound to his duties as the boat's commander. There are also the jobs of those with whom Marlow comes into contact on his journey. In *Heart of Darkness,* duty and responsibility revolve most often about how one does one's work. A job well done is respected; simply doing the work one is responsible for is an honorable act. Yet Conrad does not believe in romanticizing the worker. Workers can often be engaged in meaningless tasks, as illustrated in the scene where the Africans blast away at the rock face in order to build a railway, but the rock is not altered by the blasts and the cliff is not at all in the way. The Company's Manager would seem to have a duty to run his business efficiently, but he cannot keep order and although he is obeyed, he is not respected. The Foreman, however, earns Marlow's respect for being a good worker. Marlow admires the way the Foreman ties up his waist-length beard when he has to crawl in the mud beneath the steamboat to do his job. (Having a waist-length beard in a jungle environment can be seen as another act of madness, even from an efficient worker.) Chapter I of the novel ends with Marlow speculating on how Kurtz would do his work. But there is a larger sense in which the themes of work and responsibility figure. Marlow says, "I don't like work—no man does—but I like what is in the work—the chance to find yourself." It is through the work (or what passes for it) that Kurtz does in Africa that his moral bankruptcy is revealed. For himself, Marlow emerges with a self-imposed duty to remain loyal to Kurtz, and it is this responsibility which finally forces him to lie to Kurtz's fiancee.

Doubt and Ambiguity

As reason loses hold, doubt and ambiguity take over. As Marlow travels deeper inland, the reality of everything he encounters becomes suspect. The perceptions, motivations, and reliability of those he meets, as well as his own, are all open to doubt. Conrad repeatedly tells us that the heat and light of the wilderness cast a spell and put those who would dare venture further into a kind of trancelike state. Nothing is to be taken at face value. After the Russian leaves, Marlow wonders if he ever actually saw him.

The central ambiguity of *Heart of Darkness* is Kurtz himself. Who is he? What does he do? What does he actually say? Those who know him speak again and again of his superb powers of rhetoric, but the reader hears little of it. The Russian says he is devoted to Kurtz, and yet we are left to wonder why. Kurtz has written a report that supposedly shows his interest in educating the African natives, but it ends with his advice, "Exterminate all the brutes!" Marlow has heard that Kurtz is a great man, yet he suspects he is "hollow to the core." In

Marlow's estimation, if Kurtz was remarkable it was because he had something to say at the end of his life. But what he found to say was "the horror!" After Kurtz's death, when various people come to Marlow representing themselves as having known Kurtz, it seems none of them really knew him. Was he a painter, a writer, a great musician, a politician, as he is variously described? Marlow settles for the ambiguous term, "universal genius," which would imply Kurtz was whatever one wanted to make of him.

Race and Racism

The subject of racism is not really treated by Conrad as a theme in *Heart of Darkness* as much as it is simply shown to be the prevailing attitude of the day. The African natives are referred to as "niggers," "cannibals," "criminals," and "savages." European colonizers see them as a subordinate species and chain, starve, rob, mutilate, and murder them without fear of punishment. The book presents a damning account of imperialism as it illustrates the white man's belief in his innate right to come into a country inhabited by people of a different race and pillage to his heart's content.

Kurtz is writing a treatise for something called the "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs." This implies the existence of a worldwide movement to subjugate all nonwhite races. Kurtz bestows a kind of childlike quality upon the Africans by saying that white people appear to them as supernatural beings. The natives do, indeed, seem to have worshipped Kurtz as a god and to have offered up human sacrifices to him. This innocence proceeds, in Kurtz's view, from an inferior intelligence and does not prevent him from concluding that the way to deal with the natives is to exterminate them all.

Early in his journey, Marlow sees a group of black men paddling boats. He admires their naturalness, strength, and vitality, and senses that they want nothing from the land but to coexist with it. This notion prompts him to believe that he still belongs to a world of reason. The feeling is short-lived, however, for it is not long before Marlow, too, comes to see the Africans as some subhuman form of life and to use the language of his day in referring to them as "creatures," "niggers," "cannibals," and "savages." He does not protest or try to interfere when he sees six Africans forced to work with chains about their necks. He calls what he sees in their eyes the "deathlike indifference of unhappy savages." Marlow exhibits some humanity in offering a dying young African one of the ship's biscuits, and although he regrets the death of his helmsman, he says he was "a savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara." It is not the man he misses so much as his function as steersman. Marlow refers to the "savage who was fireman" as "an improved specimen." He compares him, standing before his vertical boiler, to "a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs."

Violence and Cruelty

The violence and cruelty depicted in *Heart of Darkness* escalate from acts of inhumanity committed against the natives of the Belgian Congo to "unspeakable" and undescribed horrors. Kurtz (representing European imperialists) has systematically engaged in human plunder. The natives are seen chained by iron collars abut their necks, starved, beaten, subsisting on rotten hippo meat, forced into soul-crushing and meaningless labor, and finally ruthlessly murdered. Beyond this, it is implied that Kurtz has had human sacrifices performed for him, and the reader is presented with the sight of a row of severed human heads impaled on posts leading to Kurtz's cabin. Conrad suggests that violence and cruelty result when law is absent and man allows himself to be ruled by whatever brutal passions lie within him. Consumed by greed, conferring upon himself the status of a god, Kurtz runs amok in a land without law. Under such circumstances, anything is possible, and what Conrad sees emerging from the situation is the profound cruelty and limitless violence that lies at the heart of the human soul.

Moral Corruption

The book's theme of moral corruption is the one to which, like streams to a river, all others lead. Racism, madness, loneliness, deception and disorder, doubt and ambiguity, violence and cruelty—culminate in the moral corruption revealed by Kurtz's acts in the Congo. Kurtz has cast off reason and allowed his most base and brutal instincts to rule unrestrained. He has permitted the evil within him to gain the upper hand. Kurtz's appalling moral corruption is the result not only of external forces such as the isolation and loneliness imposed by the jungle, but also, Conrad suggests, of forces that lie within all men and await the chance to emerge. Kurtz perhaps realizes the depth of his own moral corruption when, as he lays dying, he utters "The horror! The horror!" Marlow

feels this realization transferred to himself and understands that he too, living in a lawless state, is capable of sinking into the depths of moral corruption. The savage nature of man is thus reached at the end of the journey, not upriver, but into his own soul.

Style

Point of View

Heart of Darkness is framed as a story within a story. The point of view belongs primarily to Charlie Marlow, who delivers the bulk of the narrative, but Marlow's point of view is in turn framed by that of an unnamed narrator who provides a first-person description of Marlow telling his story. The point of view can also be seen in a third consciousness in the book, that of Conrad himself, who tells the entire tale to the reader, deciding as author which details to put in and which to leave out. Beyond these three dominant points of view are the individual viewpoints of the book's major characters. Each has a different perspective on Kurtz. These perspectives are often conflicting and are always open to a variety of interpretations. Whose point of view is to be trusted? Which narrator and which character is reliable? Conrad leaves these questions to the reader to answer, accounting for the book's complexity and multilayered meanings.

Setting

The novel takes place in the 1890s and begins on a boat sitting in the River Thames, which leads from London to the sea, waiting for the tide to turn. Marlow's story takes the reader briefly onto the European continent (Belgium) and then deep into Africa by means of a trip up the Congo River to what was then called the Belgian Congo, and back to Europe again. The Congo is described as a place of intense mystery whose stifling heat, whispering sounds, and strange shifts of light and darkness place the foreigner in a kind of trance which produces fundamental changes in the brain, causing acts that range from the merely bizarre to the most extreme and irrational violence.

Structure

The book's structure is cyclical, both in geography and chronology. It begins in the 1890s, goes back several years, and returns to the present. The voyage describes almost a perfect circle, beginning in Europe, traveling into the heart of the African continent, coming out again, and returning almost to the exact spot at which it began. The novel was originally published in serial form, breaking off its segments at moments of high drama to make the reader eager to pick up the next installment. When the full text was published in 1902, it was divided into three parts. Part I takes the story from the present-day life of the unidentified narrator to Marlow's tale, which began many years before and unfolds over a period of several months. This section leads from London into Belgium and from there to the Congo's Central Station. It ends with Marlow expressing a limited curiosity about where Kurtz's supposed moral ideas will lead him. Part II takes the journey through a series of difficulties as it proceeds deeper into the African interior and finally arrives, some two months later, at the Inner Station. It is here that Marlow meets the Russian and is told that Kurtz has "enlarged" his mind. Part III covers the period from Marlow's eventual meeting with Kurtz to his return to Europe.

Symbolism

The title of the book itself, *Heart of Darkness,* alerts the reader to the book's symbols, or items that suggest deeper interpretations beyond their literal meanings. The "heart of darkness" serves both as an image of the interior of a dark and foreign continent as well as the interior workings of the mind of man, which are dark and foreign to all observers. The literal journey into the jungle is a metaphor, or symbol, for the journey into the uncharted human soul. On another level, the voyage into the wilderness can be read as a voyage back to Eden, or to the very beginning of the world. On still another level, the actual trip into and then out of the African continent can be seen as metaphor for sin and redemption. It parallels the descent into the depths of human degradation and death (in Kurtz's case; near-death in Marlow's) and the return to the light, or life. As the book begins, the *Nellie* is waiting for the tide to turn. This can also be taken as a metaphor for the brewing revolution in the Congo at the time, for the tide of history was about to turn. The dying Kurtz himself, who is half-French and half-English and of whom Marlow says, "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz," can be seen as a symbol for a decaying western civilization. Other symbols in the book include the river, whose flow, sometimes fast and sometimes stagnant, mirrors the stream of life; the knitting

Map of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

women waiting outside Marlow's interview room, who recall the Fates of Greek mythology and thus can be seen as potential judges; and the cross-legged pose in which Marlow sits during his narration, suggesting the figure of the enlightened Buddha and thus a kind of supreme wisdom. The presentation of Kurtz as a talker, a voice who enlarges the mind of his listeners, can also be taken as a symbol for Conrad himself. As a writer, Conrad talks to his listening readers and enlarges their view of the world. Marlow's function, too, is a metaphor for the author's: they both tell stories; they both make people see and feel.

Historical Context

European Presence in Africa

In 1890, Joseph Conrad secured employment in the Congo as the captain of a river steamboat; this was also the approximate year in which the main action of *Heart of Darkness* takes place. Illness forced Conrad's return home after only six months in Africa, but that was long enough for intense impressions to have been formed in the novelist's mind. Today, the river at the center of *Heart of Darkness* is called the Zaire and the

Compare & Contrast

- **1890s:** The iron steamship has supplanted the sailing ship. The British, French, and Dutch Merchant Marines are associated with colonization and the development of manufacturing. With the introduction of the steel steamship in the mid-nineteenth century, Great Britain takes first place in ship building and shipping.

  Today: The turbine and diesel engine bring new power and speed to shipping, and a new age of nuclear-powered shipping is launched. Ocean-going vessels are still the dominant means for world transport of commercial goods.

- **1890s:** The African slave trade has begun to die out in the Belgian Congo. The Brussels Act of 1890 is signed by eighteen nations and greatly limits the slave trade. But forced labor continues in the Congo with appalling brutality as the lucrative trade in rubber and ivory takes up where trade in human beings left off.

  Today: Slavery is all but abolished throughout the world, although it is reported to still exist in parts of Africa and Asia.

- **1890s:** Because of the ivory trade, the collection of ivory (present only in the tusks of elephants) thrives in Africa, where elephant tusks are larger than they are in Asia. Antwerp (Belgium) and London are major centers of ivory commerce, with Europe and the U.S. being major importers.

  Today: The diminishing number of elephants, due largely to their wholesale slaughter for tusks, leads to a complete ban on ivory trading. A new method of determining the origin of a tusk through DNA testing enables zoologists to fight poaching and determine where the elephant population is large enough to safely permit a limited trade.

- **1890s:** The Congo Free State is established by King Leopold II of Belgium and is to be headed by the King himself. Leopold II never visits the Congo in person and when reports of atrocities committed there by his agents reach him, he order that all abuses cease at once. His orders are ignored. Belgium annexes the Congo in 1908.

  Today: The Belgian Congo is the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Congo River is the Zaire. The Congolese army mutinied in 1960 and the Congo was declared independent. In 1989, the country defaults on a loan from Belgium, resulting in the cancellation of development programs. Since 1990, a trend of political turmoil and economic collapse continues, even after a relatively bloodless revolution in 1997.

- **1890s:** Christian Missionaries are very active in the Belgian Congo. They are mostly Roman Catholic and pursue what is known as the "white man's burden" to bring western religion, culture, and technology to the nations of Africa.

  Today: More than three-fourths of the inhabitants of the Democratic Republic of the Congo are Christian. Many also follow traditional religious beliefs and a substantial number belong to African Protestant groups. The population of the Congo comprises about two hundred ethnic groups, the majority of whom speak one of the Bantu languages, although the country's official language is French.

country is the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but at the time Conrad wrote of them the country was the Belgian Congo and the river the Congo.

European explorers first discovered the Congo River in 1482 and maintained a presence on it for hundreds of years thereafter, never traveling more than two hundred miles upstream. It was not until 1877, after the English-born American explorer Henry Morton Stanley had completed a three-year journey across central Africa, that the exact length and course of the mighty Congo River were known.

Stanley discovered that the Congo extends some 1,600 miles into Africa from its eastern coast to its western edge, where the river empties into the Atlantic Ocean, and that only one stretch of it is impassable. That section lies between Matadi, two hundred miles in from the mouth of the Congo, and Kinshasa, yet another two hundred miles further inland. In *Heart of Darkness,* Conrad calls Matadi the Company Station and Kinshasa the Central Station. Between those two places, one is forced to proceed by land, which is exactly what Marlow does on his "two hundred-mile tramp" between the two Stations, described in the book.

In 1878, King Leopold II (reigned 1865-1909) of Belgium asked Stanley to found a Belgian colony in the Congo. The King charged Stanley with setting up outposts along the Congo River, particularly at Matadi. Leopold II described his motives to the rest of Europe as springing from a desire to end slavery in the Congo and civilize the natives, but his actual desires were for material gain. In 1885, at the Congress of Berlin, an international committee agreed to the formation of a new country to be known as the Congo Free State. In *Heart of Darkness,* Conrad refers to this committee as the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. Leopold II, who was to be sole ruler of this land, never set foot in the Congo Free State. Instead, he formed a company, called simply the Company in *Heart of Darkness,* that ran the country for him.

The Ivory Trade

A prevalent feeling among Europeans of the 1890s was that the African peoples required introduction to European culture and technology in order to become more evolved. The responsibility for that introduction, known as the "white man's burden," gave rise to a fervor to bring Christianity and commerce to Africa. What the Europeans took out of Africa in return were huge quantities of ivory. During the 1890s, at the time *Heart of Darkness* takes place, ivory was in enormous demand in Europe, where it was used to make jewelry, piano keys, and billiard balls, among other items. From 1888 to 1892, the amount of ivory exported from the Congo Free State rose from just under 13,000 pounds to over a quarter of a million pounds. Conrad tells us that Kurtz was the best agent of his time, collecting as much ivory as all the other agents combined.

In 1892, Leopold II declared all natural resources in the Congo Free State to be his property. This meant the Belgians could stop dealing with African traders and simply take what they wanted themselves. As a consequence, Belgian traders pushed deeper into Africa in search of new sources of ivory, setting up stations all along the Congo River. One of the furthermost stations, located at Stanley Falls, was the likely inspiration for Kurtz's Inner Station.

Belgian Atrocities in the Congo

The Belgian traders committed many well-documented acts of atrocity against the African natives, including the severing of hands and heads. Reports of these atrocities reached the European public, leading to an international movement protesting the Belgian presence in Africa. These acts, reflected in *Heart of Darkness,* continued, despite an order by Leopold II that they cease. In 1908, after the Belgian parliament finally sent its own review board into the Congo to investigate, the king was forced to give up his personal stake in the area and control of the Congo reverted to the Belgian government. The country was granted its independence from Belgium in 1960, and changed its name from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Zaire in 1971. A relatively bloodless revolution in 1997 returned the country's name to the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Critical Overview

When published in 1902 in a volume with two other stories (*Youth* and *The End of the Tether*), *Heart of Darkness* was praised for its portrayal of the demoralizing effect life in the African wilderness supposedly had on European men. One respected critic of the time, Hugh Clifford, said in the *Spectator* that others before Conrad had written of the European's decline in a "barbaric" wilderness, but never "has any writer till now succeeded in bringing ... it all home to sheltered folk as does Mr. Conrad in this wonderful, this magnificent, this terrible study." Another early reviewer, as quoted in Leonard Dean's *Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness': Backgrounds and Criticisms,* called the prose "brilliant" but the story "unconvincing."

In his review published in *Academy and Literature* in 1902, Edward Garnett called the volume's publication "one of the events of the literary year." Garnett said when he first read *Heart of Darkness* in serial form, he thought Conrad had "here and there, lost his way." but upon publication of the novel in book form, he retracted that opinion and

now held it "to be the high-water mark of the author's talent." Garnett went on to call *Heart of Darkness* a book that "enriches English literature" and a "psychological masterpiece." Garnett was particularly taken with Conrad's keen observations of the collapse of the white man's morality when he is released from the restraints of European law and order and set down in the heart of Africa, given free reign to trade for profit with the natives. For sheer excitement, Garnett compared *Heart of Darkness* favorably to *Crime and Punishment,* published by the great Russian novelist Dostoyevsky in 1866. Garnett calls *Heart of Darkness* "simply a piece of art, fascinating and remorseless."

Kingsley Widmer noted in *Concise Dictionary of British Literary Biography* that Conrad's literary reputation declined sharply in the mid-1920s, after the publication of *Victory,* which Widmer flatly called a "bad novel." But the following generation gave rise to a revival of interest in Conrad's work, centering largely on a few works written between 1898 and 1910 and including *Heart of Darkness, The Secret Agent,* and *Lord Jim,* which were given the status of modern classics.

Widmer concluded that although "much of Conrad's fiction is patently poor," his sea stories contain a "documentary fascination in their reports of dying nineteenth-century merchant marine sailing experience." Widmer faults Conrad for gross sentimentality, shoddy melodrama, and chauvinism. But he acknowledges that Conrad's best fiction, among which he counts *Heart of Darkness, Nostromo, The Secret Sharer,* and *The Secret Agent,* which he says may be "Conrad's most powerful novel," achieves a modernism that undercuts those heavyhanded Victorian characteristics and provides the basis on which Conrad's reputation justifiably rests.

In more recent years, *Heart of Darkness* has come under fire for the blatantly racist attitudes it portrays. Some critics have taken issue with the matter-of-fact tone in which Marlow describes Africans as "savages" and "niggers" and portrays African life as mysterious and inhuman. Noted Nigerian author Chinua Achebe, for instance, argued in a *Massachusetts Review* article that "the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot." Other critics, however, have reasoned that Conrad was merely portraying the views and attitudes of his time, and others have even suggested that by presenting racist attitudes the author was ironically holding them up for ridicule and criticism.

Despite such controversy, *Heart of Darkness* has withstood the test of time and has come to be seen as one of Conrad's finest works. The way in which Conrad presents themes of moral ambiguity in this novel, never taking a side but forcing the reader to decide the issues for him- or herself is considered a forerunner of modern literary technique. Frederick Karl, in *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives,* calls *Heart of Darkness* the work in which "the nineteenth century becomes the twentieth." Others have called it the best short novel in the English language. "*The Secret Sharer* and *Heart of Darkness,*" said Albert J. Guerard in his introduction to the novel, "are among the finest of Conrad's short novels, and among the half-dozen greatest short novels in the English language." The book continues to this day to be taught in high schools, colleges, and universities and to be held up as an example of great literature.

Criticism

Kevin Attell

In the following essay, Attell, a doctoral candidate at the University of California—Berkeley, explores how Heart of Darkness *has been viewed as both a commentary on the evils of colonialism and a philosophical exploration of the human psyche. Attell argues that critics who argue that the novel is either historical or philosophical "misses Conrad's insight that the two are in fact inseparable."*

The original publication of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was a three-part serialization in London's *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1899. It was subsequently published in a collection of three stories by Conrad in 1902. The date of *Heart of Darkness* should be noted, for it provides a historical context which illuminates the story's relation to both the contemporary turn-of-the-century world to which Conrad responds in the tale, and also the influential role Conrad plays in the subsequent progress of twentieth-century literary history.

Traditionally there have been two main ways of approaching the interpretation of *Heart of Darkness.* Critics and readers have tended to focus on either the implications of Conrad's intense fascination with European colonialism in Africa and around the world, or they have centered on his exploration of seemingly more abstract philosophical issues regarding, among other things, the human condition, the nature of Good and Evil, and the power of language. The former interpretive choice

What Do I Read Next?

- In *Lord Jim,* published in 1900, another maritime tale, Conrad deals with issues of honor in the face of grave personal danger and colonial imposition of will upon a native people. Marlow again becomes a narrator. Here he tells the story of Jim, a simple sailor who tried and failed to adhere to an honorable code of conduct.
- *Nostromo* (1904), Conrad's largest and most ambitious novel, has multiple heroes and flashes forward and back over a wide time frame. The familiar Conradian preoccupation with colonial interests in remote lands is here transposed to a fictional South American country seething with political unrest.
- Conrad's novel of political terrorism, *The Secret Agent* (1907), illustrates the author's fascination with a hero who, unlike Kurtz, seeks to remain neutral and avoid commitment in a world of conflict. Against his own will, Adolf Verloc, the book's double agent, is forced into actions which result in more than one murder and a suicide.
- Set in the author's native Nigeria, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) shows the tragic effects of European colonialism on one man.
- Winner of the 1991 National Book Award for fiction, *Middle Passage* by Charles Johnson relates the story of a free black man living in New Orleans who stows away on a ship only to discover it is a slave trader bound for Africa.
- In *Travellers in Africa: British Travelogues, 1850–1900,* Volume 1, Tim Youngs collects actual nineteenth-century British accounts of African voyages, and includes discussion of social, cultural, and racial attitudes. The volume includes an analysis of *Heart of Darkness* as a travel account, and compares Marlow's version of the Congo with that of British-American explorer Sir Henry Morton Stanley.

would concentrate on the ways Conrad presents European colonialism (of which he had much firsthand experience, being a sailor himself), while the latter would primarily investigate Conrad's exposition of philosophical questions. Even a cursory reading of the tale makes it clear that there is ample evidence for both of these interpretive concerns. What is perhaps less obvious, but equally important, is the way the historical reality which Conrad takes as his subject matter and the philosophical meditation to which Kurtz's story gives rise are intrinsically connected to one another.

The turn of the twentieth century was a period of intense colonial activity for most of the countries of Europe. Conrad refers to European colonialism countless times in *Heart of Darkness,* but perhaps the most vivid instance is when Marlow, while waiting in the office of the Belgian Company, sees "a large shining map [of colonial Africa], marked with all the colours of the rainbow. There was," he says, "a vast amount of red—good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done there, a deuce of a lot of blue, a little green, smears of orange, and, on the East Coast, a purple patch.... However, I wasn't going into any of these. I was going into the yellow." These colors, of course, correspond to the territorial claims made on African land by the various nations of Europe: red is British, blue French, green Italian, orange Portuguese, purple German, and yellow Belgian. The map bears noting. On the one hand it establishes the massive geographical scale of Europe's colonial presence in Africa, but it also symbolically sets this presence up in relation to another central thematic concern of the novella: the popular conception of colonialism in Europe.

Conrad links the colored maps to the childlike ignorance and apathy of the European public as to what really goes on in the colonies. Just a few moments before describing the map in the office in Brussels Marlow had recalled his childhood, say-

ing: "Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, When I grow up I will go there." Much of *Heart of Darkness* is then a grim and detailed exposition of the real "glories of exploration" which Marlow observes firsthand, but in these opening moments before Marlow has left for Africa Conrad has given his assessment of the perspective on the colonies from the point of view of the common European: on public display in the waiting-room of the Company office in Brussels, and in the imagination of the European public, the representation of European activity in Africa is as abstract and pleasant as a multicolored map.

Another example of the distance between the popular conception of the colonies and their reality can be found in the frequent reference made to the purportedly civilizing aspect of colonial conquest. Marlow's aunt speaks of "weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways" and Kurtz's early pamphlet ominously claims that "by the simple exercise of [the colonists'] will [they] can exert a power for good practically unbounded." Marlow's direct experience of the trading stations in the Congo, and Kurtz's scrawled note "Exterminate all the brutes" at the end of the pamphlet put the lie to these European pretensions to civilizing charity. And to Conrad's British readers of 1900 these revelations may have been shocking. There was, it should be noted, a growing anticolonial campaign being waged by dissidents throughout Europe at the time, and Conrad's novella can be considered a part of that campaign.

But in addition to the aggressive presentation of the grim conditions which existed in Europe's colonies—which Conrad succeeds in making very vivid—*Heart of Darkness* also creates a theme from certain philosophical problems which become central to the dawning literary movement called Modernism. Conrad shows the way the European public is profoundly ignorant (perhaps willfully) of what goes on in their colonies, but he also suggests that that very separation reveals a problematic relation between belief and reality, between representation and truth, which can also be investigated as a philosophical question. Keeping in mind the way this problem has been introduced in the novella (ie. the specific relation between Europe and its colonies), let us briefly sketch out the philosophical and literary attempts to address the problem of representation in Modernism.

Roughly speaking, Modernism had its peak in the years between World War I and World War II. The great canonical Modernists include such writers as James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, and others. In most accounts of the period what links the Modernist writers loosely together is their intensive formal experimentation with literary and linguistic techniques; that is to say, their experimentation with the actual *modes* of literary representation. Stein's experiments with syntax, Joyce's melding of languages and myths, Faulkner's endless sentences, can all be seen as various ways of working through difficult questions raised about the very nature of language and how it works. Language in Modernist literature is no longer seen as a stable vehicle for the communication of meaning, but rather it is put up for radical questioning in itself. Modernist experimentation, one might say, arises out of the doubt that language (at least language as it has been used in the past) is able to communicate or sufficient to represent meaning or truth. And the seeds of this very doubt, to bring us back to Conrad, can be seen in *Heart of Darkness*. Some of the most illustrative examples of how Conrad introduces these Modernistic concerns can be seen at the points of Marlow's narration where the actual question of *meaning* explicitly arises.

Clearly Marlow has no trouble narrating events; he is indeed quite a storyteller. Yet, at various times in the narration the flow of his speech is interrupted and he seems at a loss for words. If we pick one of these moments we can see the way Conrad is creating a theme from the very instability and inadequacy of language itself ("words," "names," the "story") to contain and convey what one might call "truth," "meaning," or "essence" (Marlow calls it all three). At a point well into his tale Marlow says:

> "At the time I did not see [Kurtz]—you understand. He was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is the very essence of dreams...."
>
> He sat silent for a while.
>
> " ... No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's exis-

tence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone...."

Conrad has set up a clear opposition in Marlow's speech here: the opposition is between language on the one hand and truth or meaning on the other. In the quoted passage Marlow is exasperated because when faced with the task of communicating something deeper than just the narrative of events he is at a loss for words—or more precisely, the words themselves fail him. His pronouncement that it is "impossible" for language to do certain things—for language to hold the *essence* of things as they exist—foreshadows the dilemma at the center of Modernist and indeed much of twentieth-century philosophical thought. But what he is trying to tell is not just "the Truth" in the abstract, but rather the truth about Kurtz, the *truth of his experience of the European colonies.* This suggests the way that the philosophical themes of the tale are intertwined with if not identical to the colonial themes. Conrad has the two coexisting in such close proximity that they in fact appear to be two sides of the same coin.

The debate, then, over whether *Heart of Darkness* should be interpreted in terms of *either* colonial and historical *or* philosophical questions misses Conrad's insight that the two are in fact inseparable. As the complex textual fusion of the two in *Heart of Darkness* implies, the seemingly abstract philosophical problems concerning language and truth arise only out of concrete problems (such as colonialism) which exist in the social world, while at the same time the concrete problems of colonial domination at the turn of the twentieth century have extensive philosophical implications.

Source: Kevin Attell, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 1997.

Chinua Achebe

Achebe is a noted Nigerian novelist whose works include Things Fall Apart *and* Anthills of the Savannah; *he has frequently lectured in the United States and served as a professor at the University of Massachusetts—Amherst in 1987–88. In the following excerpt, Achebe argues that the racist attitudes inherent in Conrad's novel make it "totally inconceivable" that it could be considered "great art."*

Heart of Darkness projects the image of Africa as "the other world," the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where a man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality. The book opens on the River Thames, tranquil, resting peacefully "at the decline of day after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks." But the actual story takes place on the River Congo, the very antithesis of the Thames. The River Congo is quite decidedly not a River Emeritus. It has rendered no service and enjoys no old-age pension. We are told that "going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginning of the world."

Is Conrad saying then that these two rivers are very different, one good, the other bad? Yes, but that is not the real point. What actually worries Conrad is the lurking hint of kinship, of common ancestry. For the Thames, too, "has been one of the dark places of the earth." It conquered its darkness, of course, and is now at peace. But if it were to visit its primordial relative, the Congo, it would run the terrible risk of hearing grotesque, suggestive echoes of its own forgotten darkness, and of falling victim to an avenging recrudescence of the mindless frenzy of the first beginnings.

I am not going to waste your time with examples of Conrad's famed evocation of the African atmosphere. In the final consideration it amounts to no more than a steady, ponderous, fake-ritualistic repetition of two sentences, one about silence and the other about frenzy. An example of the former is "It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention" and of the latter, "The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy." Of course, there is a judicious change of adjective from time to time so that instead of "inscrutable," for example, you might have "unspeakable," etc., etc.

The eagle-eyed English critic, F. R. Leavis, drew attention nearly thirty years ago to Conrad's "adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery." That insistence must not be dismissed lightly, as many Conrad critics have tended to do, as a mere stylistic flaw. For it raises serious questions of artistic good faith. When a writer, while pretending to record scenes, incidents and their impact, is in reality engaged in inducing hypnotic stupor in his readers through a bombardment of emotive words and other forms of trickery much more has to be at stake than stylistic felicity. Generally, normal readers are well armed to detect and resist such underhand activity. But Conrad chose his subject well—one which was guaranteed not to put him in conflict with the psychological predisposition of his readers or raise the need for

him to contend with their resistance. He chose the role of purveyor of comforting myths.

The most interesting and revealing passages in *Heart of Darkness* are, however, about people. I must quote a long passage from the middle of the story in which representatives of Europe in a steamer going down the Congo encounter the denizens of Africa:

> We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil. But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not remember because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign—and no memories.
>
> The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this 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 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.

Herein lies the meaning of *Heart of Darkness* and the fascination it holds over the Western mind: "What thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours.... Ugly."

Having shown us Africa in the mass, Conrad then zeros in on a specific example, giving us one of his rare descriptions of an African who is not just limbs or rolling eyes:

> And between whiles I had to look after the savage who was fireman. He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap. He squinted at the steam gauge and at the water gauge with an evident effort of intrepidity—and he had filed his teeth, too, the poor devil, and the wool of his pate shaved into queer patterns, and three ornamental scars on each of his cheeks. He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrall to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge.

As everybody knows, Conrad is a romantic on the side. He might not exactly admire savages clapping their hands and stamping their feet but they have at least the merit of being in their place, unlike this dog in a parody of breeches. For Conrad, things (and persons) being in their place is of the utmost importance.

Towards the end of the story, Conrad lavishes great attention quite unexpectedly on an African woman who has obviously been some kind of mistress to Mr. Kurtz and now presides (if I may be permitted a little imitation of Conrad) like a formidable mystery over the inexorable imminence of his departure:

> She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent.... She stood looking at us without a stir and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose.

This Amazon is drawn in considerable detail, albeit of a predictable nature, for two reasons. First, she is in her place and so can win Conrad's special brand of approval; and second, she fulfills a structural requirement of the story; she is a savage counterpart to the refined, European woman with whom the story will end:

> She came forward, all in black with a pale head, floating towards me in the dusk. She was in mourning.... She took both my hands in hers and murmured, "I had heard you were coming."... She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering.

The difference in the attitude of the novelist to these two women is conveyed in too many direct and subtle ways to need elaboration. But perhaps the most significant difference is the one implied in the author's bestowal of human expression to the one and the withholding of it from the other. It is clearly not part of Conrad's purpose to confer language on the "rudimentary souls" of Africa. They only "exchanged short grunting phrases" even among themselves but mostly they were too busy with their frenzy. There are two occasions in the book, however, when Conrad departs somewhat from his practice and confers speech, even English speech, on the savages. The first occurs when cannibalism gets the better of them:

> "Catch 'im," he snapped, with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp white teeth—"catch 'im. Give 'im to us." "To you, eh?" I asked; "what would you do with them?" "Eat 'im!" he said curtly ...

The other occasion is the famous announcement:

> Mistah Kurtz—he dead.

At first sight, these instances might be mistaken for unexpected acts of generosity from Conrad. In reality, they constitute some of his best assaults. In the case of the cannibals, the incomprehensible grunts that had thus far served them for speech suddenly proved inadequate for Conrad's purpose of letting the European glimpse the unspeakable craving in their hearts. Weighing the necessity for consistency in the portrayal of the dumb brutes against the sensational advantages of securing their conviction by clear, unambiguous evidence issuing out of their own mouth, Conrad chose the latter. As for the announcement of Mr. Kurtz's death by the "insolent black head of the doorway," what better or more appropriate *finis* could be written to the horror story of that wayward child of civilization who willfully had given his soul to the powers of darkness and "taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land" than the proclamation of his physical death by the forces he had joined?

It might be contended, of course, that the attitude to the African in *Heart of Darkness* is not Conrad's but that of his fictional narrator, Marlow, and that far from endorsing it Conrad might indeed be holding it up to irony and criticism. Certainly, Conrad appears to go to considerable pains to set up layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of his story. He has, for example, a narrator behind a narrator. The primary narrator is Marlow but his account is given to us through the filter of a second, shadowy person. But if Conrad's intention is to draw a *cordon sanitaire* between himself and the moral and psychological malaise of his narrator, his care seems to me totally wasted because he neglects to hint however subtly or tentatively at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters. It would not have been beyond Conrad's power to make that provision if he had thought it necessary. Marlow seems to me to enjoy Conrad's complete confidence—a feeling reinforced by the close similarities between their careers.

Marlow comes through to us not only as a witness of truth, but one holding those advanced and humane views appropriate to the English liberal tradition which required all Englishmen of decency to be deeply shocked by atrocities in Bulgaria or the Congo of King Leopold of the Belgians or wherever. Thus Marlow is able to toss out such bleeding-heart sentiments as these:

> They were all dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest.

The kind of liberalism espoused here by Marlow/Conrad touched all the best minds of the age in England, Europe, and America. It took different forms in the minds of different people but almost always managed to sidestep the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people. That extraordinary missionary, Albert Schweitzer, who sacrificed brilliant careers in music and theology in Europe for a life of service to Africans in much the same area as Conrad writes about, epitomizes the ambivalence. In a comment which I have often quoted but must quote one last time Schweitzer says: "The African is indeed my brother but my junior brother." And so he proceeded to build a hospital appropriate to the needs of junior brothers with standards of hygiene reminiscent of medical practice in the days before the germ theory of disease came into being. Naturally, he became a sensation in Europe and America. Pilgrims flocked, and I believe still flock even after he has passed on, to witness the prodigious miracle in Lamberene, on the edge of the primeval forest.

Conrad's liberalism would not take him quite as far as Schweitzer's, though. He would not use the word "brother" however qualified; the farthest he would go was "kinship." When Marlow's African helmsman falls down with a spear in his heart he gives his white master one final disquieting look.

> And the intimate profundity of that look he gave me when he received his hurt remains to this day in my memory—like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment.

It is important to note that Conrad, careful as ever with his words, is not talking so much about *distant kinship* as about someone *laying a claim* on

it. The black man lays a claim on the white man which is well-nigh intolerable. It is the laying of this claim which frightens and at the same time fascinates Conrad, "... the thought of their humanity—like yours ... Ugly."

The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely, that Conrad was a bloody racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticism of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely undetected. Students of *Heart of Darkness* will often tell you that Conrad is concerned not so much with Africa as with the deterioration of one European mind caused by solitude and sickness. They will point out to you that Conrad is, if anything, less charitable to the Europeans in the story than he is to the natives. A Conrad student told me in Scotland last year that Africa is merely a setting for the disintegration of the mind of Mr. Kurtz.

Which is partly the point: Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Of course, there is a preposterous and perverse kind of arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the breakup of one petty European mind. But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot. I would not call that man an artist, for example, who composes an eloquent instigation to one people to fall upon another and destroy them. No matter how striking his imagery or how beautiful his cadences fall such a man is no more a great artist than another may be called a priest who reads the mass backwards or a physician who poisons his patients. All those men in Nazi Germany who lent their talent to the service of virulent racism whether in science, philosophy or the arts have generally and rightly been condemned for their perversions. The time is long overdue for taking a hard look at the work of creative artists who apply their talents, alas often considerable as in the case of Conrad, to set people against people. This, I take it, is what Yevtushenko is after when he tells us that a poet cannot be a slave trader at the same time, and gives the striking example of Arthur Rimbaud who was fortunately honest enough to give up any pretenses to poetry when he opted for slave trading. For poetry surely can only be on the side of man's deliverance and not his enslavement; for the brotherhood and unity of all mankind and against the doctrines of Hitler's master races or Conrad's "rudimentary souls."...

[Conrad] was born in 1857, the very year in which the first Anglican missionaries were arriving among my own people in Nigeria. It was certainly not his fault that he lived his life at a time when the reputation of the black man was at a particularly low level. But even after due allowances have been made for all the influences of contemporary prejudice on his sensibility, there remains still in Conrad's attitude a residue of antipathy to black people which his peculiar psychology alone can explain. His own account of his first encounter with a black man is very revealing:

> A certain enormous buck nigger encountered in Haiti fixed my conception of blind, furious, unreasoning rage, as manifested in the human animal to the end of my days. Of the nigger I used to dream for years afterwards.

Certainly, Conrad had a problem with niggers. His inordinate love of that word itself should be of interest to psychoanalysts. Sometimes his fixation on blackness is equally interesting as when he gives us this brief description:

> A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms.

As though we might expect a black figure striding along on black legs to have *white* arms! But so unrelenting is Conrad's obsession.

As a matter of interest Conrad gives us in *A Personal Record* what amounts to a companion piece to the buck nigger of Haiti. At the age of sixteen Conrad encountered his first Englishman in Europe. He calls him "my unforgettable Englishman" and describes him in the following manner:

> [his] calves exposed to the public gaze ... dazzled the beholder by the splendor of their marble-like condition and their rich tone of young ivory ... The light of a headlong, exalted satisfaction with the world of men ... illumined his face ... and triumphant eyes. In passing he cast a glance of kindly curiosity and a friendly gleam of big, sound, shiny teeth ... his white calves twinkled sturdily.

Irrational love and irrational hate jostling together in the heart of that tormented man. But whereas irrational love may at worst engender foolish acts of indiscretion, irrational hate can endanger the life of the community....

Whatever Conrad's problems were, you might say he is now safely dead. Quite true. Unfortu-

nately, his heart of darkness plagues us still. Which is why an offensive and totally deplorable book can be described by a serious scholar as "among the half dozen greatest short novels in the English language," and why it is today perhaps the most commonly prescribed novel in the twentieth-century literature courses in our own English Department here. Indeed the time is long overdue for a hard look at things.

There are two probable grounds on which what I have said so far may be contested. The first is that it is no concern of fiction to please people about whom it is written. I will go along with that. But I am not talking about pleasing people. I am talking about a book which parades in the most vulgar fashion prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities in the past and continues to do so in many ways and many places today. I am talking about a story in which the very humanity of black people is called in question. It seems to me totally inconceivable that great art or even good art could possibly reside in such unwholesome surroundings.

Secondly, I may be challenged on the grounds of actuality. Conrad, after all, sailed down the Congo in 1890 when my own father was still a babe in arms, and recorded what he saw. How could I stand up in 1975, fifty years after his death and purport to contradict him? My answer is that as a sensible man I will not accept just any traveller's tales solely on the grounds that I have not made the journey myself. I will not trust the evidence even of a man's very eyes when I suspect them to be as jaundiced as Conrad's....

But more important by far is the abundant testimony about Conrad's savages which we could gather if we were so inclined from other sources and which might lead us to think that these people must have had other occupations besides merging into the evil forest or materializing out of it simply to plague Marlow and his dispirited band. For as it happened, soon after Conrad had written his book an event of far greater consequence was taking place in the art world of Europe. This is how Frank Willett, a British art historian, describes it [in *African Art,* 1971]:

> Gaugin had gone to Tahiti, the most extravagant individual act of turning to a non-European culture in the decades immediately before and after 1900, when European artists were avid for new artistic experiences, but it was only about 1904-5 that African art began to make its distinctive impact. One piece is still identifiable; it is a mask that had been given to Maurice Vlaminck in 1905. He records that Derain was "speechless" and "stunned" when he saw it, bought it from Vlaminck and in turn showed it to Picasso and Matisse, who were also greatly affected by it. Ambroise Vollard then borrowed it and had it cast in bronze ... The revolution of twentieth century art was under way!

The mask in question was made by other savages living just north of Conrad's River Congo. They have a name, the Fang people, and are without a doubt among the world's greatest masters of the sculptured form. As you might have guessed, the event to which Frank Willett refers marked the beginning of cubism and the infusion of new life into European art that had run completely out of strength.

The point of all this is to suggest that Conrad's picture of the people of the Congo seems grossly inadequate even at the height of their subjection to the ravages of King Leopold's International Association for the Civilization of Central Africa. Travellers with closed minds can tell us little except about themselves. But even those not blinkered, like Conrad, with xenophobia, can be astonishingly blind....

As I said earlier, Conrad did not originate the image of Africa which we find in his book. It was and is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination and Conrad merely brought the peculiar gifts of his own mind to bear on it. For reasons which can certainly use close psychological inquiry, the West seems to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilization and to have a need for constant reassurance by comparing it with Africa. If Europe, advancing in civilization, could cast a backward glance periodically at Africa trapped in primordial barbarity, it could say with faith and feeling: There go I but for the grace of God. Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray—a carrier onto whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate. Consequently, Africa is something to be avoided just as the picture has to be hidden away to safeguard the man's jeopardous integrity. Keep away from Africa, or else! Mr. Kurtz of *Heart of Darkness* should have heeded that warning and the prowling horror in his heart would have kept its place, chained to its lair. But he foolishly exposed himself to the wild irresistible allure of the jungle and lo! the darkness found him out.

In my original conception of this talk I had thought to conclude it nicely on an appropriately positive note in which I would suggest from my

privileged position in African and Western culture some advantages the West might derive from Africa once it rid its mind of old prejudices and began to look at Africa not through a haze of distortions and cheap mystification but quite simply as a continent of people—not angels, but not rudimentary souls either—just people, often highly gifted people and often strikingly successful in their enterprise with life and society. But as I thought more about the stereotype image, about its grip and pervasiveness, about the willful tenacity with which the West holds it to its heart; when I thought of your television and the cinema and newspapers, about books read in schools and out of school, of churches preaching to empty pews about the need to send help to the heathen in Africa, I realized that no easy optimism was possible. And there is something totally wrong in offering bribes to the West in return for its good opinion of Africa. Ultimately, the abandonment of unwholesome thoughts must be its own and only reward. Although I have used the word *willful* a few times in this talk to characterize the West's view of Africa it may well be that what is happening at this stage is more akin to reflex action than calculated malice. Which does not make the situation more, but less, hopeful.

Source: Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa," in *The Massachusetts Review,* Vol. XVIII, No. 4, Winter, 1977, pp. 782–94.

Walter F. Wright

In the following excerpt, Wright suggests that the scene in which Marlow conceals the nature of Kurtz's death "is really a study of the nature of truth."

The tragedy of Kurtz and the education of Marlow fuse into one story, since for Marlow that tragedy represents his furthest penetration into the heart of darkness. As Marlow enters the forest to intercept Kurtz on the way toward the ceremonial blaze he senses the fascination which the savage ritual possesses. In the light of Conrad's other tales we know that it is because he is guided by well-established habits that he is able to complete his mission and carry Kurtz back to his cot, though not before he himself has apprehended the lure of the primitive. He has duplicated in his own experience enough of Kurtz's sensations to have good reason to wonder what is real and what is a false trick of the imagination. It was this fascination and bewilderment that Conrad aimed to suggest, and the presenting of Kurtz at the most intense moment of his yielding to it was to transcend time and bring a unity of impression.

When Marlow, soon after, hears the dying pronouncement, "the horror, the horror!" he has more than a mere intellectual awareness of what the words mean; and as we have vicariously shared Marlow's quasi-hysterical emotion on the trip toward the camp fire, we feel likewise the completeness with which Kurtz has savored degradation. He is a universal genius because he has had both the dream of sweetness and sacrifice in a cause shared by others and the disillusionment of being, in the very midst of the savage adoration, irretrievably alone, devoid of all standards, all hopes that can give him a sense of kinship with anything in the universe. Now, as he faces the last darkness of all, he cannot even know that Marlow understands and that he feels no right to condemn....

Conscious will was, in the novelist's opinion, not merely fallible, but often dangerous. Reliance upon it could lead one completely away from human sentiments. In *Heart of Darkness* itself Kurtz twice replies to Marlow that he is "perfectly" conscious of what he is doing; his sinister actions are deliberate. This fact does not in the least, however, mean that Conrad wished for a condition devoid of will. He believed that man had the power to pursue the interpretation of experience with deliberate intent and by conscious endeavor to reduce it to proportions. The imagination would bring up the images and incidents, but the reason could help select and arrange them until they became the essence of art. In his trip up the Congo and in his rapid descent Marlow is protected by habits which tend to preserve sanity, but the experience is of the imagination and emotions. Were he to stop short with the mere sensations, he would have no power to distinguish reality from the unreal, to speculate, with touchstones for reference, about life. What we are coming to is the obvious question, If Kurtz's dictum represents the deepest penetration into one aspect of the mind, why did Conrad not stop there; why did he have Marlow tell the girl that Kurtz died pronouncing her name? Is the ending tacked on merely to relieve the horror, or has it a function in the conscious interpretation of life in the proportions of art? ...

The fact is that Conrad, fully capable of building to a traditional climax and stopping, wanted to put Kurtz's life in the perspective which it must have for Marlow *sub specie aeternitatis.* Marlow does not have a final answer to life, but after we have shared with him the steady penetration to the brink of degradation we have almost forgotten what life otherwise is like. It is now that Conrad's method of chronological reversal is invaluable. We are quickly re-

turned to Europe, where the marvel of Kurtz's genius still remains, as if he had left but yesterday.

The scene in which Marlow conceals from the girl the nature of Kurtz's death is really a study of the nature of truth. If he had told the girl the simple facts, he would have acknowledged that the pilgrims in their cynicism had the truth, that goodness and faith were the unrealities. Marlow appreciates this temptation, and we are hardly to suppose that sentimental weakness makes him resist it. He does not preach to us about the wisdom he has achieved; in fact he deprecates it, and now he says merely that to tell her would be "too dark altogether." He is still perplexed as to the ethics of his deception and wishes that fate had permitted him to remain a simple reporter of incidents instead of making him struggle in the realm of human values. Yet in leaving in juxtaposition the fiancée's ideal, a matter within her own heart, and the fact of Kurtz's death, Marlow succeeds in putting before us in his inconclusive way the two extremes that can exist within the human mind, and we realize that not one, but both of these are reality.

When Marlow ends his monologue, his audience [is] aware that the universe around them, which, when we began the story, seemed an ordinary, familiar thing, with suns rising and setting according to rule and tides flowing and ebbing systematically for man's convenience, is, after all, a thing of mystery. It is a vast darkness in that its heart is inscrutable. What, then, has Marlow gained, since he has ended with this conclusion which we might, *a priori,* accept as a platitude? He has certainly helped us eliminate the false assumptions by which day to day we act as if the universe were a very simple contrivance, even while, perhaps, we give lip service to the contrary. Moreover, instead of letting one faculty of the mind dominate and deny the pertinence of the others, he has achieved a reconciliation in which physical sensation, imagination, and that conscious logic which selects and arranges have lost their apparent qualities of contradiction. He has achieved an orderly explanation, conscious and methodical, of the strange purlieus of the imagination. Because those recesses harbor shadows, the exploration must not be labeled conclusive; but the greatness of the darkness, instead of leaving a sense of the futility of efforts to dispel it, has drawn the artist to use his utmost conscious skill. Life itself, if we agree with Conrad, may tend to seem to us as meaningless and chaotic as were many of Marlow's sensations at the moment of his undergoing them, and the will may often appear to play no part at all, or a false part, in guiding us. But the genius of art was for Conrad that it accepted the most intense and seemingly reason-defying creations of the imagination and then discovered within them, rather than superimposed upon them, a symmetry coherent and logical.

Through Marlow's orderly narrative, with its perfect identity of fact and symbol, with its transformation of time and space into emotional and imaginative intensity, the shadows have contracted, and we are better able than before to speculate on the presences which seem to inhabit the very heart of darkness. Time is telescoped and we have as if in the same moment the exalted enthusiast and the man who denied all except horror; and we realize that they are and always have been the same man. We perceive that Africa itself, with its forests, its heat, and its mysteries, is only a symbol of the larger darkness, which is in the heart of man.

Source: Walter F. Wright, "Ingress to the *Heart of Darkness,*" from his *Romance and Tragedy in Joseph Conrad,* University of Nebraska Press, 1949, reprinted in *Conrad's* Heart of Darkness *and the Critics,* edited by Bruce Harkness, Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1960, pp. 153–55.

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