

## Works Cited

Haskin, Wayne E. "Heart of Darkness." *Masterplots, Revised Second Edition* (1996): *Literary Reference Center Plus*. EBSCO. Web. 12 Aug. 2010.

### Heart of Darkness

**Author:** Joseph Conrad

**Given Name:** Józef Teodor Konrad Nałęcz Korzeniowski

**Born:** December 3, 1857; Near Berdyczów, Podolia, Poland (now Berdychiv, Ukraine)

**Died:** August 3, 1924; Oswalds, Bishopsbourne, England

**Type of Work:** Novella

**Type of Plot:** Psychological realism

**Time of Work:** Late nineteenth century

**Locale:** Belgian Congo

### Principal Characters:

**Marlow**, the narrator

**Mr. Kurtz**, the manager of the Inner Station, Belgian Congo

**The District Manager**

**A Russian Traveler**

**Kurtz's Fiancée**

### The Story:

A group of men were sitting on the deck of the cruising yawl, *The Nellie*, anchored one calm evening in the Thames estuary. One of the seamen, Marlow, began reflecting that the Thames area had been, at the time of the invading Romans, one of the dark and barbarous areas of the earth. Dwelling on this theme, he then began to tell a story of the most barbarous area of the earth that he had experienced.

Through his aunt's connections, Marlow had once secured a billet as commander of a river steamer for one of the trading companies with interests in the Belgian Congo. When he went to Belgium to learn more about the job, he found that few of the officials of the company expected him to return alive. In Brussels, he also heard of the distinguished Mr. Kurtz, the powerful and intelligent man who was educating the natives and at the same time sending back record shipments of ivory. The mysterious figure of Mr. Kurtz fascinated Marlow. In spite of the ominous hints that he gathered from various company officials, he became more and more curious about what awaited him in the Congo. During his journey, as he passed along the African coast, he reflected that the wilderness and the unknown seemed to seep right out to the sea. Many of the trading posts and stations the ship passed were dilapidated and looked barbaric. Finally, Marlow arrived at the seat of the government at the mouth of the river. Again, he heard of the great distinction and power of Mr. Kurtz, who had an enormous reputation because of his plans to enlighten the natives and his success in gaining their confidence. Marlow also saw natives working in the hot sun until they collapsed and died. Marlow had to wait impatiently for ten days at the government site because his work would not begin until he reached the district manager's station, two hundred miles up the river. At last, the expedition left for the district station.

Marlow arrived at the district station to find that the river steamer had sunk a few days earlier. He met the district manager, a man whose only ability seemed to be the ability to survive. The district manager, unconcerned with the fate of the natives, was interested only in getting out of the country; he felt that Mr. Kurtz's new methods were ruining the whole district. The district manager also reported that he had not heard from Kurtz for quite some time but had received disquieting rumors about his failing health.

Although he was impeded by a lack of rivets, Marlow spent months supervising repairs to the antiquated river steamer. He also overheard a conversation that revealed that the district manager was Kurtz's implacable enemy, who hoped that the climate would do away with his rival. The steamer was finally ready for use, and Marlow, along with the district manager, sailed to visit Kurtz at the inner station far up the river. The journey was difficult and perilous; the water was shallow; there were frequent fogs. Just as they arrived within a few miles of Kurtz's station, natives attacked the vessel with spears and arrows. Marlow's helmsman, a faithful native, was killed by a long spear when he leaned from his window to fire at the savages. Marlow finally blew the steamboat whistle, and the sound frightened the natives away. The district manager was sure that Kurtz had lost control over the natives. When they docked, they met an enthusiastic Russian traveler who told them that Kurtz was gravely ill.

While the district manager visited Kurtz, the Russian told Marlow that the sick man had become corrupted by the very natives he had hoped to enlighten. He still had power over the natives, but instead of his changing them, they had debased him into an atavistic savage. Kurtz attended native rituals, had killed frequently in order to get ivory, and had hung heads as decorations outside his hut. Later Marlow met Kurtz and found that the man had, indeed, been corrupted by the evil at the center of experience. Marlow learned from the Russian that Kurtz had ordered the natives to attack the steamer, thinking that, if they did so, the white men would run away and leave Kurtz to die among his fellow savages in the wilderness. Talking to Marlow, Kurtz showed his awareness of how uncivilized he had become and how his plans to educate the natives had been reversed.

He gave Marlow a packet of letters for his fiancée in Belgium and the manuscript of an article, written sometime earlier, in which he urged efforts to educate the natives.

The district manager and Marlow took Kurtz, now on a stretcher, to the river steamer to take him back home. The district manager contended that the area was now ruined for collecting ivory. Full of despair and the realization that devouring evil was at the heart of everything, Kurtz died while the steamer was temporarily stopped for repairs.

Marlow returned to civilization. About a year later, he went to Belgium to see Kurtz's fiancée. She still thought of Kurtz as the splendid and powerful man who had gone to Africa with a mission, and she still believed in his goodness and power. When she asked Marlow what Kurtz's last words had been, Marlow lied and told her that Kurtz had asked for her at the end. In reality, Kurtz, who had seen all experience, had in his final words testified to the horror of it all. This horror was not something, Marlow felt, that civilized ladies could, or should, understand.

### **Critical Evaluation:**

In one sense, *Heart of Darkness* is a compelling adventure tale of a journey into the heart of the Belgian Congo. The story presents attacks by the natives, descriptions of the jungle and the river, and characterizations of white men who, sometimes with ideals and sometimes simply for profit, invade the jungles to bring out ivory. The journey into the heart of the Congo, however, is also a symbolic journey into the darkness central to the heart and soul of humanity, a journey deep into primeval passion, superstition, and lust. Those who, like the district manager, undertake this journey simply to rob the natives of ivory, without any awareness of the importance of the central darkness, can survive. Similarly, Marlow, who is only an observer, never centrally involved, can survive to tell the tale; but those who, like Mr. Kurtz, are aware of the darkness, who hope with conscious intelligence and a humane concern for all humanity to bring light into the darkness, are doomed, are themselves swallowed up by the darkness and evil they had hoped to penetrate. Joseph Conrad manages to make his point, a realization of the evil at the center of human experience, without ever breaking the pattern of his narrative or losing the compelling atmospheric and psychological force of the tale. The wealth of natural symbols, the clear development of character, and the sheer fascination of the story make this a novella that has been frequently praised and frequently read ever since its publication in 1902. *Heart of Darkness* is, in style and insight, a masterpiece.

Christened Józef Teodor Konrad Nałęcz Korzeniowski by his Polish parents, Joseph Conrad was able to write of the sea and sailing from firsthand knowledge. He left the cold climate of Poland early in his life to travel to the warmer regions of the Mediterranean, where he became a sailor. He began reading extensively and chose the sea as a central shaping metaphor for the ideas that were forming in his imagination. He traveled a great deal: to the West Indies, Latin America, Africa. Eventually, he settled in England and perfected (through the elaborate process of translating from Polish into French into English) a remarkably subtle yet powerful literary style.

Criticism of Conrad's work in general and *Heart of Darkness* in particular has been extensive and varied. Many critics concern themselves with Conrad's style; others focus on the biographical aspects of his fiction; some see the works as social commentaries; some are students of Conrad's explorations into human psychology; many are interested in the brooding, shadowy symbolism and philosophy that hovers over all the works. It is easy

to see, therefore, that Conrad is a distinctively complex literary genius. E. M. Forster censured him as a vague and elusive writer who never quite clearly discloses the philosophy that lies behind his tales. Such a censure ignores Conrad's notion about the way some fiction can be handled. Partly as Conrad's mouthpiece, the narrator of *Heart of Darkness* states in the first few pages of the novel:

The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of those misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.

The mention of the narrator brings up one of the most complex and intriguing features of *Heart of Darkness*: its carefully executed and elaborately conceived point of view. Readers can detect (if careful in their reading) that the novel is in truth two narratives, inexorably woven together by Conrad's masterful craftsmanship. The outer frame of the story—the immediate setting—involves the unnamed narrator who is apparently the only one on *The Nellie* who is profoundly affected by Marlow's tale, the inner story that is the bulk of the entire novella. Marlow narrates, and the others listen. The narrator's closing words show his feeling at the conclusion of Marlow's recounting of the events in the Congo:

Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha. Nobody moved for a time. "We have lost the first of the ebb," said the Director suddenly. I raised my head. The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.

Since Marlow's narrative is a tale devoted primarily to a journey to the mysterious "dark" continent (Africa), a superficial view of the tale is simply that it is essentially an elaborate story involving confrontation with exotic natives, treacherous dangers of the jungle, brutal savagery, and even cannibalism. Such a view, however, ignores larger meanings with which the work is implicitly concerned: namely, social and cultural implications; psychological workings of the cultivated European left to the uncivilized wilderness; and the richly colored fabric of symbolism that emerges slowly but inevitably from beneath the surface.

*Heart of Darkness* can also be examined for its social and cultural commentaries. It is fairly obvious that a perverted version of the "white man's burden" was the philosophy adopted by the ivory hunters at the Inner Station. Kurtz's "Exterminate the brutes!" shows the way a white man can exploit the helpless savage. The futile shelling from the gunboat into the jungle is also vividly portrayed as a useless, brutal, and absurd act perpetrated against a weaker culture than the one that nurtured Kurtz.

Here the psychological phenomena of Marlow's tale emerge. Kurtz, a man relieved of all social and civilized restraints, goes mad after committing himself to the total pursuit of evil and depravity. His observation "The horror! the horror!" suggests his final realization of the consequences of his life. Marlow also realizes this and is allowed (because he forces restraint upon himself) to draw back his foot from the precipice of madness. The experience leaves Marlow sober, disturbed, meditative, and obsessed with relating his

story in much the same way Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* must also relate his story.

On a symbolic level, the story is rich; a book could easily be written on this facet of the novel. An arbitrary mention of some of the major symbols must suffice here: the Congo River that reminded Marlow of a snake as it uncoiled into the darkness of Africa and furnished him with an uncontrollable "fascination of the abomination"; the symbolic journey into Marlow's own heart of darkness, revealing blindingly the evil of human nature and the human capacity for evil; the irony of the quest when the truth is revealed not in terms of light but in terms of darkness (the truth brings not light but rather total darkness). The entire symbolic character of the work is summarized at the end of Marlow's tale when he is forced to lie to Kurtz's intended spouse in order to preserve her illusion; the truth appears to Marlow as an inescapable darkness, and the novel ends with the narrator's own observation of darkness.

*Heart of Darkness* is one of literature's most somber fictions. It explores the fundamental questions about human nature: the capacity for ultimate evil; the necessity for restraint; the effect of isolation; and the necessity of relinquishing pride for one's own spiritual salvation. E. M. Forster's censure of Conrad may be correct in many ways, but it refuses to admit that through such philosophical ruminations Conrad allowed generations of readers to ponder humanity's heart of darkness.

*Essay by:* Wayne E. Haskin

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