

Heart of Darkness

Joseph Conrad

Plot Summary

- Marlow tells the story to 4 other people on the ship Nellie, and one of them is the narrator
- Marlow takes a job as a riverboat captain with the Company—Belgian concern organized to trade in Congo
- Marlow arrives at Central Station run by general manager
- His steamship has sunk and several months are spent waiting for parts to repair it
- Interest in Kurtz grows
- Manager and brickmaker fear Kurtz as threat to their position although Kurtz rumored to be ill
- Marlow get the parts he needs and sets out with the manager, a few agents (called pilgrims), and some cannibals
- Come across hut with stacked firewood and a note saying it is for them and to approach cautiously

- After taking on firewood, steamer is surrounded by dense fog
- When the fog clears, ship is attacked by unseen band of native
- African helmsman is killed before Marlow frightens them away with the ship's whistle
- They arrive at Kurtz's Inner Station and the Russian trader meets them saying that everything is fine, and he was the one to leave the wood
- According to Russian, Kurtz not subject to same moral judgments as normal people
- Kurtz has established himself as a god and goes on brutal raids to get ivory
- Severed heads surround the station on posts
- As Kurtz is taken on board, the natives surround them, but Kurtz talks them and they leave

- As Kurtz is brought on board, his native mistress appears
- Russian tells Marlow that Kurtz ordered the attack on the steamer so that they would be forced to leave Kurtz at the station
- Russian leaves fearing the displeasure of the manager
- Kurtz tries to leave in the night, but Marlow gets him to come back to the ship
- Kurtz talks to Marlow as they travel down the Congo
- Kurtz entrusts Marlow with a packet of papers
- After the steamer breaks down, Kurtz dies and his last words are “The horror! The horror!”
- Marlow falls ill, but after reviving he returns to Europe to talk to Kurtz fiancée who is still in mourning a year later
- After hearing her praise Kurtz, Marlow tells her that his last words were actually her name

Characters

- Marlow – protagonist; philosophical, independent-minded, and generally skeptical of those around him; master story teller; shares Europeans' prejudices, but seen enough of world and encountered enough debased white men to make him skeptical of imperialism.
- Kurtz – chief of Inner Station and object of Marlow's quest; many talents; charismatic and can lead men; understands power of words; remains enigma even to Marlow, but exerts powerful influence on people in his life; downfall is willingness to ignore hypocritical rules that govern European colonial conduct; fraternized with natives and didn't keep up appearances; wildly successful while incurring wrath of fellow white men
- General Manager – chief agent of Company in African territory; runs Central Station; success due to hardy constitution; average appearance and abilities; can cause uneasiness in those around him so that he can exert his control over them

- Brickmaker – Marlow meets at Central Station; favorite of manager; corporate spy; never produces any bricks because he is waiting for something he needs to do so; petty and conniving and assumes other people are too
- Chief Accountant – efficient worker who dresses up in spotless clothing; keeps himself tidy despite squalor of Outer Station where he works; one of the few to have accomplished anything by training a native woman to care for his clothing
- Pilgrims – bumbling, greedy agents of Central Station; carry long wooden staves; want to be appointed to station to trade ivory and earn commission; obsessed with keeping up appearance of civilization and proper conduct; motivated by self-interest; hate natives and due to greed and ridiculousness appear less than human
- Cannibals – crew of the steamer; reasonable and well-tempered; restrained and accept adversity; leader intelligent and capable of ironic reflection of situation

- Russian trader – Russian sailor gone to African interior as Dutch company representative; boyish appearance & temperament; exists wholly on glamour of youth and audacity of adventurousness; brightly patched cloths; devoted to Kurtz
- Helmsman – trained by Marlow's predecessor; capable but not considered much by Marlow; killed when steamer attacked
- Kurtz's African mistress – beautiful; influences Kurtz and natives; Russian says to fear her
- Kurtz's Intended – naïve; long-suffering; Marlow visits after Kurtz's death; unshakeable certainty about Kurt's love and intelligence; reinforces Marlow's belief women live in dream world insulated from reality
- Aunt – Marlow's relative who gets him the position
- Men aboard Nellie – Director of companies (capt. & host), Lawyer, Accountant, Narrator, and Marlow
- Fresleven – Marlow's predecessor & killed in fight over hens

Analysis of Major Characters

Marlow - Although Marlow appears in several of Conrad's other works, it is important not to view him as merely a surrogate for the author. Marlow is a complicated man who anticipates the figures of high modernism while also reflecting his Victorian predecessors. Marlow is in many ways a traditional hero: tough, honest, an independent thinker, a capable man. Yet he is also “broken” or “damaged,” like T. S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock or William Faulkner's Quentin Compson. The world has defeated him in some fundamental way, and he is weary, skeptical, and cynical. Marlow also mediates between the figure of the intellectual and that of the “working tough.” While he is clearly intelligent, eloquent, and a natural philosopher, he is not saddled with the angst of centuries' worth of Western thought. At the same time, while he is highly skilled at what he does—he repairs and then ably pilots his own ship—he is no mere manual laborer. Work, for him, is a distraction, a concrete alternative to the posturing and excuse-making of those around him.

Marlow can also be read as an intermediary between the two extremes of Kurtz and the Company. He is moderate enough to allow the reader to identify with him, yet open-minded enough to identify at least partially with either extreme. Thus, he acts as a guide for the reader. Marlow's intermediary position can be seen in his eventual illness and recovery. Unlike those who truly confront or at least acknowledge Africa and the darkness within themselves, Marlow does not die, but unlike the Company men, who focus only on money and advancement, Marlow suffers horribly. He is thus “contaminated” by his experiences and memories, and, like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, destined, as purgation or penance, to repeat his story to all who will listen.

Kurtz - Kurtz, like Marlow, can be situated within a larger tradition. Kurtz resembles the archetypal “evil genius”: the highly gifted but ultimately degenerate individual whose fall is the stuff of legend. Kurtz is related to figures like Faustus, Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, *Moby-Dick*'s Ahab, and *Wuthering Heights*'s Heathcliff. Like these characters, he is significant both for his style and eloquence and for his grandiose, almost megalomaniacal scheming. In a world of mundanely malicious men and “flabby devils,” attracting enough attention to be worthy of damnation is indeed something. Kurtz can be criticized in the same terms that *Heart of Darkness* is sometimes criticized: style entirely overrules substance, providing a justification for amorality and evil.

In fact, it can be argued that style does not just override substance but actually masks the fact that Kurtz is utterly lacking in substance. Marlow refers to Kurtz as “hollow” more than once. This could be taken negatively, to mean that Kurtz is not worthy of contemplation. However, it also points to Kurtz's ability to function as a “choice of nightmares” for Marlow: in his essential emptiness, he becomes a cipher, a site upon which other things can be projected. This emptiness should not be read as benign, however, just as Kurtz's eloquence should not be allowed to overshadow the malice of his actions. Instead, Kurtz provides Marlow with a set of paradoxes that Marlow can use to evaluate himself and the Company's men.

Indeed, Kurtz is not so much a fully realized individual as a series of images constructed by others for their own use. As Marlow's visits with Kurtz's cousin, the Belgian journalist, and Kurtz's fiancée demonstrate, there seems to be no true Kurtz. To his cousin, he was a great musician; to the journalist, a brilliant politician and leader of men; to his fiancée, a great humanitarian and genius. All of these contrast with Marlow's version of the man, and he is left doubting the validity of his memories. Yet Kurtz, through his charisma and larger-than-life plans, remains with Marlow and with the reader.

Themes, Motifs, and Symbols

Themes

- Hypocrisy of imperialism - *Heart of Darkness* explores the issues surrounding imperialism in complicated ways. As Marlow travels from the Outer Station to the Central Station and finally up the river to the Inner Station, he encounters scenes of torture, cruelty, and near-slavery. At the very least, the incidental scenery of the book offers a harsh picture of colonial enterprise. The impetus behind Marlow's adventures, too, has to do with the hypocrisy inherent in the rhetoric used to justify imperialism. The men who work for the Company describe what they do as “trade,” and their treatment of native Africans is part of a benevolent project of “civilization.” Kurtz, on the other hand, is open about the fact that he does not trade but rather takes ivory by force, and he describes his own treatment of the natives with the words “suppression” and “extermination”: he does not hide the fact that he rules through violence and intimidation. His perverse honesty leads to his downfall, as his success threatens to expose the evil practices behind European activity in Africa.

However, for Marlow as much as for Kurtz or for the Company, Africans in this book are mostly objects: Marlow refers to his helmsman as a piece of machinery, and Kurtz's African mistress is at best a piece of statuary. It can be argued that *Heart of Darkness* participates in an oppression of nonwhites that is much more sinister and much harder to remedy than the open abuses of Kurtz or the Company's men. Africans become for Marlow a mere backdrop, a human screen against which he can play out his philosophical and existential struggles. Their existence and their exoticism enable his self-contemplation. This kind of dehumanization is harder to identify than colonial violence or open racism. While *Heart of Darkness* offers a powerful condemnation of the hypocritical operations of imperialism, it also presents a set of issues surrounding race that is ultimately more troubling.

- Madness as a result of imperialism - Madness is closely linked to imperialism in this book. Africa is responsible for mental disintegration as well as for physical illness. Madness has two primary functions. First, it serves as an ironic device to engage the reader's sympathies. Kurtz, Marlow is told from the beginning, is mad. However, as Marlow, and the reader, begin to form a more complete picture of Kurtz, it becomes apparent that his madness is only relative, that in the context of the Company insanity is difficult to define. Thus, both Marlow and the reader begin to sympathize with Kurtz and view the Company with suspicion. Madness also functions to establish the necessity of social fictions. Although social mores and explanatory justifications are shown throughout *Heart of Darkness* to be utterly false and even leading to evil, they are nevertheless necessary for both group harmony and individual security. Madness, in *Heart of Darkness*, is the result of being removed from one's social context and allowed to be the sole arbiter of one's own actions. Madness is thus linked not only to absolute power and a kind of moral genius but to man's fundamental fallibility: Kurtz has no authority to whom he answers but himself, and this is more than any one man can bear.

- Absurdity of evil - This novella is, above all, an exploration of hypocrisy, ambiguity, and moral confusion. It explodes the idea of the proverbial choice between the lesser of two evils. As the idealistic Marlow is forced to align himself with either the hypocritical and malicious colonial bureaucracy or the openly malevolent, rule-defying Kurtz, it becomes increasingly clear that to try to judge either alternative is an act of folly: how can moral standards or social values be relevant in judging evil? Is there such thing as insanity in a world that has already gone insane? The number of ridiculous situations Marlow witnesses act as reflections of the larger issue: at one station, for instance, he sees a man trying to carry water in a bucket with a large hole in it. At the Outer Station, he watches native laborers blast away at a hillside with no particular goal in mind. The absurd involves both insignificant silliness and life-or-death issues, often simultaneously. That the serious and the mundane are treated similarly suggests a profound moral confusion and a tremendous hypocrisy: it is terrifying that Kurtz's homicidal megalomania and a leaky bucket provoke essentially the same reaction from Marlow.

Motifs

- Observation & eavesdropping - Marlow gains a great deal of information by watching the world around him and by overhearing others' conversations, as when he listens from the deck of the wrecked steamer to the manager of the Central Station and his uncle discussing Kurtz and the Russian trader. This phenomenon speaks to the impossibility of direct communication between individuals: information must come as the result of chance observation and astute interpretation. Words themselves fail to capture meaning adequately, and thus they must be taken in the context of their utterance. Another good example of this is Marlow's conversation with the brickmaker, during which Marlow is able to figure out a good deal more than simply what the man has to say.

- Interiors & exteriors - Comparisons between interiors and exteriors pervade *Heart of Darkness*. As the narrator states at the beginning of the text, Marlow is more interested in surfaces, in the surrounding aura of a thing rather than in any hidden nugget of meaning deep within the thing itself. This inverts the usual hierarchy of meaning: normally one seeks the deep message or hidden truth. The priority placed on observation demonstrates that penetrating to the interior of an idea or a person is impossible in this world. Thus, Marlow is confronted with a series of exteriors and surfaces—the river's banks, the forest walls around the station, Kurtz's broad forehead—that he must interpret. These exteriors are all the material he is given, and they provide him with perhaps a more profound source of knowledge than any falsely constructed interior “kernel.”

- **Darkness** - Darkness is important enough conceptually to be part of the book's title. However, it is difficult to discern exactly what it might mean, given that absolutely everything in the book is cloaked in darkness. Africa, England, and Brussels are all described as gloomy and somehow dark, even if the sun is shining brightly. Darkness thus seems to operate metaphorically and existentially rather than specifically. Darkness is the inability to see: this may sound simple, but as a description of the human condition it has profound implications. Failing to see another human being means failing to understand that individual and failing to establish any sort of sympathetic communion with him or her.

Symbols

- **Fog** - Fog is a sort of corollary to darkness. Fog not only obscures but distorts: it gives one just enough information to begin making decisions but no way to judge the accuracy of that information, which often ends up being wrong. Marlow's steamer is caught in the fog, meaning that he has no idea where he's going and no idea whether peril or open water lies ahead.

- The “Whited Sepulchre” - The “whited sepulchre” is probably Brussels, where the Company's headquarters are located. A sepulchre implies death and confinement, and indeed Europe is the origin of the colonial enterprises that bring death to white men and to their colonial subjects; it is also governed by a set of reified social principles that both enable cruelty, dehumanization, and evil and prohibit change. The phrase “whited sepulchre” comes from the biblical Book of Matthew. In the passage, Matthew describes “whited sepulchres” as something beautiful on the outside but containing horrors within (the bodies of the dead); thus, the image is appropriate for Brussels, given the hypocritical Belgian rhetoric about imperialism's civilizing mission. (Belgian colonies, particularly the Congo, were notorious for the violence perpetuated against the natives.)
- Women - Both Kurtz's Intended and his African mistress function as blank slates upon which the values and the wealth of their respective societies can be displayed. Marlow frequently claims that women are the keepers of naive illusions; although this sounds condemnatory, such a role is in fact crucial, as these naive illusions are at the root of the social fictions that justify economic enterprise and colonial expansion. In return, the women are the beneficiaries of much of the resulting wealth, and they become objects upon which men can display their own success and status.

- The river - The Congo River is the key to Africa for Europeans. It allows them access to the center of the continent without having to physically cross it; in other words, it allows the white man to remain always separate or outside. Africa is thus reduced to a series of two-dimensional scenes that flash by Marlow's steamer as he travels upriver. The river also seems to want to expel Europeans from Africa altogether: its current makes travel upriver slow and difficult, but the flow of water makes travel downriver, back toward “civilization,” rapid and seemingly inevitable. Marlow's struggles with the river as he travels upstream toward Kurtz reflect his struggles to understand the situation in which he has found himself. The ease with which he journeys back downstream, on the other hand, mirrors his acquiescence to Kurtz and his “choice of nightmares.”