

CONTENTS

Publisher's Note	vii
About This Volume	ix
A Bend in the River by V. S. Naipaul	1
Candide, Or Optimism by Voltaire	11
Chronicle of a Death Foretold by Gabriel García Márquez	23
Dead Man's Path by Chinua Achebe	33
Dubliners by James Joyce	39
The Fellowship of the Ring by J. R. R. Tolkien	53
The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy	61
Half a Life by V. S. Naipaul	69
Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone by J. K. Rowling	83
Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets by J. K. Rowling	91
Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad	101
The Hound of the Baskervilles by Arthur Conan Doyle	107
The House of the Spirits by Isabel Allende	113
Illywhacker by Peter Carey	123
Just So Stories by Rudyard Kipling	129
Loaded by Christos Tsiolka	139
Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka	147
Miss Brill by Katherine Mansfield	155
Moll Flanders by Daniel Defoe	163
My Life as a Fake by Peter Carey	173
Out of Africa by Isak Dinesen	181
The Overcoat by Nikolai Gogol	187
The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde	191
A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man by James Joyce	201
The Prophecy by Anjana Appachana	211
The Return of the King by J. R. R. Tolkien	219
Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe	227
Schindler's List by Thomas Keneally	233
At Swim-Two-Birds by Flann O'Brien	239
A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens	247
Tess of the D'Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy	255
And Then There Were None by Agatha Christie	263
The Time Machine by H. G. Wells	269



Heart of Darkness

by Joseph Conrad

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

—Joseph Conrad

Content Synopsis

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

Marlow travels to the company office where he signs his contract and sees two women knitting with black wool. He also visits the company doctor who makes a hobby of measuring the heads of those traveling to remote regions. He hopes to be able to take measurements when the agents return,

but cannot because none of them ever comes back. Along the way, as Marlow moves deeper into the jungle, his attitude about the uselessness or dangers of colonial involvement in the Congo are exposed. He describes people decimated and mistreated, and a forbidding jungle that seems to repulse them at every turn. From the very start of the story, the contrasts between lightness and darkness are explored and developed.

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

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

Historical Context

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

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

The period was also influenced by the growing understanding of different cultures discovered via anthropological expeditions that began in the previous century and culminated in the Great Crystal Palace exhibition in England (1851) in which the

white, European (British) man was figured as the highest form of evolution. The deconstruction of this assumption is reflected in “Heart of Darkness,” over fifty years later, in light of the reports of barbaric practices engaged in by powers attempting to secure colonial rule.

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

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

Societal Context

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

Women figure in the text as direct representations of the Victorian virgin/whore complex. The Savage Mistress symbolizes unchained sexuality, primitive and seductive in the extreme while the Intended symbolizes purity in both mind and body.

Although the text reinforces these stereotypes on the surface, it invites the reader to look deeper to find a more complex and contradictory theory. In the end when Marlow tells the Intended Kurtz spoke her name as he died, a symbolic linguistic replacement identifies the pure and innocent wife-to-be as “The Horror.”

Religious Context

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

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

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

Historically, Christianity is an important lens through which one can begin to understand the actions

of colonizers and missionaries that flooded Africa in the late 1800s. Belgian King Leopold’s Congo influence, for example, was predicated on his view of heathen savagery present in the area. During a conference in Brussels, he shored up his position, arguing that his goal in the Congo was to “open to civilization the only part of our globe where Christianity has not penetrated and to pierce the darkness which envelops the entire population” (Hennessey 79).

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

Scientific & Technological Context

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

The growth of psychology and psychoanalysis in which the concept of unconscious motivations were shown to be involved in the everyday decisions made by individuals has a place in not only the depictions and possible explanations for Kurtz’s behavior but also for the Doctor’s interest in Marlow as he leaves for Africa. The doctor measures Marlow’s head, employing a form of phrenology, a scientific process that was one of the pseudo-sciences at the time. Marlow thinks he “is becoming scientifically interesting.” The doctor says the head measurements are probably not useful because the changes take place inside the men.

Biographical Context

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

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

maintain the symmetry of males, or mankind the priest who once plucked the heart from the breast of a living victim to feed the sun" (265).

Tracy M. Caldwell

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Discussion Questions

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

Essay Ideas

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



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Arthur Conan Doyle's novel, *Hound of the Baskervilles*, likely the best known of the Sherlock Holmes detective stories, is featured opposite. Photo: Designed by Jim DuPlessis with images from the *New York Tribune*, 1912 and the *Richmond Planet*, 1905.