

# HEART OF DARKNESS

by Joseph Conrad



## THE AUTHOR

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) was born Teodor Jozef Konrad Korzeniowski in Russian-occupied Poland. His father was a notable writer and opponent of the Russian presence in his fatherland. His political activities caused him and his family to be exiled to Siberia, where Joseph's mother died when he was eight. After return from exile, Joseph was sent to live with his uncle; his father died without ever seeing him again.

At age 17, Conrad ran away to Marseille, and spent the next twenty years as a sailor. Among his experiences was a trip on a steamboat up the Congo River in 1890, which became the basis for his most famous novel, *Heart of Darkness*, which understandably contains many autobiographical elements. His time in Africa ruined his health, so he returned to England, his adopted country, to seek his fortune as a writer, though he did on two other occasions return to sea. His novels, including *Lord Jim*, *Nostromo*, and *The Secret Agent*, were widely accepted, and he lived happily in England with his wife and family until his death in 1924.

## PLOT SUMMARY

*Heart of Darkness* begins with four men on a yacht on the Thames River, one of whom, Marlow, begins to tell a story to the others of his trip up the Congo River as captain of a steamship. He is hired by the Company after one of their captains dies, and heads for Africa in search of adventure. Both on the trip and after his arrival, however, he finds nothing but pettiness, greed, and incompetence among the employees of the Company.

When he arrives at the Central Station, he finds that his ship has sunk in the river, and he must spend months waiting for materials to arrive before affecting repairs on the vessel. It is here that he first hears of Kurtz, a highly successful ivory trader who heads the Inner Station. After repairing the ship, he heads upriver with a few agents (referred to as *pilgrims* because of their staffs) and a crew of cannibals, who have a disturbing tendency to behave better than the agents.

As they approach the Inner Station, they come upon a deserted hut with firewood piled in front of it for their use, along with a note warning them to approach the Station with caution. As they move slowly upriver, they are attacked by natives, and for a while prevented from moving ahead because of a heavy mist that settles over the water. The native attack convinces them that Kurtz must be dead, but they continue toward the Station anyway.

On arrival, they meet a Russian trader dressed in colorful rags who assures them that Kurtz is quite alive, and that he is the one who left the wood for them. He says that Kurtz has “enlarged his mind,” and cannot be judged by the same standards as normal men. Kurtz has apparently passed himself off as a god to the natives, and he leads them on raids of neighboring villages to seek ivory, meanwhile being worshiped by them with “unspeakable rites.” When the pilgrims enter Kurtz’s hut, however, they find him ill, and carry him to the ship in a stretcher.

As they bring Kurtz to the ship, they are surrounded by a large group of natives, but Kurtz speaks to them, and they disperse. A native woman appears on the shore and holds her hands out toward Kurtz, and the Russian reveals that Kurtz had ordered the attack on the ship because he didn’t want to be taken back to civilization. Later that night, Kurtz leaves the ship and begins to crawl toward the native village. Marlow follows him, and convinces him to return to the ship.

On the trip back down the river, Kurtz’s health is failing fast, and when the ship needs to stop for repairs, Kurtz dies and is buried. Before his death, he entrusts a pile of documents to Marlow, and speaks his last words - “The horror! The horror!” Marlow also becomes ill, and narrowly avoids death.

Upon returning to Belgium, Marlow delivers the documents to Kurtz’s Intended, who remains in mourning over a year after his death, cherishing illusions of his greatness. When she asks Marlow about his final words before death, he lies and tells her that Kurtz spoke her name.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Marlow - He is the narrator, and the major character in the story through whose eyes all of its incidents are viewed. Anything that is related from secondhand sources tends to be vague and uncertain. He is a lifelong sailor who loves the sea and the adventure he finds there. He demonstrates a strong work ethic, and, despite the cultural racism that is inevitable for one in his cultural context, holds a higher opinion of and expresses greater sympathy for the Africans than anyone else in the novel.
- Kurtz - The chief of the Inner Station, he is initially pictured as an idealist in contrast to the materialistic, fortune-hunting agents of the Company. He is an eloquent man who is described as a “universal genius.” Once arriving in the wilderness, however, he succumbs to its temptations and reveals the barbarism within his (and by implication, everyone’s) soul.

These are the only really major characters in the story. A few minor characters are worth noting, however:

- The General Manager - A crafty man who endures purely because of his ability to outlive his rivals and to make those under him “uneasy.”
- The Chief Accountant - An efficient worker with the peculiar habit of dressing as he would in a London banking house, Marlow admires him because he has not succumbed to the slovenly conditions around him.

- The Russian Trader - A Russian sailor who deserted his ship and headed into the wilderness with no idea of where he was going or how he would survive, he has become a disciple of Kurtz. His patched clothing reminds Marlow of the costume of a harlequin.
- The Native Woman - A glorious, strong African woman who appears to have some significant connection to Kurtz; most critics suppose her to have been his mistress.
- The Intended - Kurtz's fiancée back in Belgium; her parents opposed their marriage because of Kurtz's lack of wealth and social standing. The love she maintains for him, dressing in mourning over a year after his death, is built on cherished illusions that Marlow refuses to destroy.

### NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“But these chaps were not much account, really. They were no colonists; their administration was really a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force - nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind - as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea - something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to...” (Marlow, p.8)

“I’ve seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but by all the stars! these were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men - men, I tell you. But as I stood on this hillside, I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly.” (Marlow, p.25)

“I would not have gone so far as to fight for Kurtz, but I went for him near enough to a lie. You know I hate, detest, and can’t bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appalls me.” (Marlow, p.45-46)

“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 ability 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.” (Marlow, p.84)

“I want you clearly to understand that there was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there. They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him - some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence. Whether he knew of this deficiency himself I can't say. I think the knowledge came to him at last - only at the very last. But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had not conception till he took counsel with this great solitude - and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core...” (Marlow, p.104)

“I tried to break the spell - the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness - that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions. This alone, I was convinced, had driven him out to the edge of the forest, to the bush, towards the gleam of the fires, the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations. And, don't you see, the terror of the position was not in being knocked on the head - though I had a very lively sense of that danger, too - but in this, that I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low. I had, even like the niggers, to invoke him - himself - his own exalted and incredible degradation. There was nothing either above or below him, and I knew it.” (Marlow, p.119-120)

“Soul! If anybody ever struggled with a soul, I am the man. And I wasn't arguing with a lunatic either. Believe me or not, his intelligence was perfectly clear - concentrated, it is true, upon himself with horrible intensity, yet clear; and therein was my only chance - barring, of course, the killing him there and then, which wasn't so good, on account of unavoidable noise. But his soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself, and, by heavens! I tell you, it had gone mad. I had - for my sins, I suppose - to go through the ordeal of looking into it myself. No eloquence could have been so withering to one's belief in mankind as his final burst of sincerity.” (Marlow, p.120-121)

“Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before, and hope never to see again. Oh, I wasn't touched. I was fascinated. It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror - of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision - he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath: ‘The horror! The horror!’” (Marlow, p.126)

“And perhaps this is the whole difference; perhaps all wisdom, and all truth, and all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible. Perhaps! I like to think my summing-up would not have been a word of careless contempt. Better his cry - much better. It was an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory!” (Marlow, p.128-129)

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Marlow, like Nick in *The Great Gatsby*, speaks of himself as an honest man, saying, “You know I hate, detest, and can’t bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appalls me.” Do the events of the novel justify his assessment of himself? To what extent can we trust him to be a reliable reporter of the events he relates?
2. F. Scott Fitzgerald openly admitted that he was influenced by Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* when he wrote *The Great Gatsby*. In what ways is the influence evident? Be specific.
3. If *The Great Gatsby* is a devastating critique of the American Dream, *Heart of Darkness* serves the same purpose for European imperialism. In what ways does the novel reveal the emptiness of the colonial enterprise?
4. Some have criticized *Heart of Darkness* as a racist novel. Do you think this is an accurate assessment? Support your conclusions with specific details from the story.
5. Many have noticed the stylistic similarities between *Heart of Darkness* and *The Great Gatsby*. In what ways did Fitzgerald learn from and borrow the narrative techniques he learned from reading Conrad’s novel?
6. Discuss the following: “While F. Scott Fitzgerald was a lapsed Catholic, Joseph Conrad was an atheist. The difference in their religious stances is evident in the gods portrayed in *The Great Gatsby* and *Heart of Darkness*, respectively.”
7. Both Jay Gatsby and Mr. Kurtz are valued by the narrators of their stories because they entertain within themselves a great dream. Compare and contrast the dreams that drive these men, ultimately to their destruction.
8. Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* contrasts two rivers, the Congo and the Thames. As the novel develops, however, do we find that the author’s purpose is to contrast the two, or to compare them?
9. Discuss the following: “While in *Heart of Darkness*, the fundamental distinctions between people are those of race, in *The Great Gatsby* they are those of social class.”
10. In both *The Great Gatsby* and *Heart of Darkness*, the reader comes to know the protagonist through the eyes of the narrator - gradually, imperfectly, piece by piece - forcing the reader to become a participant in the story by putting the pieces together. Discuss the value of this technique, and the advantages of using it, as it appears in these two novels.

11. “Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19, NIV). Discuss how Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* illustrates the truth of this verse.
12. “They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator...” (Rom. 1:25, NIV). How do both the Europeans and the Africans in *Heart of Darkness* illustrate the truth of this verse?
13. “Civilization and its labors are unreal, and lie on the surface of life, serving only to distract our attention from the underlying reality of the jungle within.” Discuss this view of life in the light of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.
14. In what ways does Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* illustrate the truth that, in a world without God, there is sin, but no redemption?
15. In Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow says that Brussels, the location of the Company’s offices, “always makes me think of a whited sepulchre.” To what extent does the hypocrisy of the White Man’s Burden change Marlow into a Buddha figure who sees the suffering of the world, but believes it to be inevitable?
16. In Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, does Marlow function as Kurtz’s critic and potential redeemer, or merely as one more idolater in a story full of devil worship?
17. Discuss how the use of language to establish tone and atmosphere contributes to the impact of the passage where Marlow’s steamship is enshrouded in the mist.
18. In Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, with the exception of the skulls mounted on poles around the hut, Marlow never describes in detail, but only hints at, the nature of the depravity to which Kurtz had sunk in the absence of all societal restraints. It is commonplace today, especially in the cinema, for depravity to be pictured in all its explicit hideousness. Which is a more effective way of conveying the ugliness of human nature, and why?
19. In what sense does Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* present to the reader an adult version of William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*?
20. Many writers in the late nineteenth century were profoundly influenced by Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, which suggested that man had descended from more primitive forms of animal life. In what ways may such an influence be seen in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*?
21. The phrase “White Man’s Burden” is derived from the poetry of Rudyard Kipling. Though Kipling is often viewed as propounding jingoism of the worst variety, his short story *The Man Who Would Be King* has much in common with Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Compare and contrast the critiques of colonialism found in the two works.

22. Compare and contrast the native woman and the Intended in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.
23. Discuss with specific examples from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "Conrad uses the symbolism of light and darkness, not to suggest that civilization is good and savagery evil, or the converse, but to suggest that civilization and savagery have, at the core, much in common."
24. To what extent does Kurtz represent Marlow's potential self - that which he would become should he succumb to the allure of the jungle?
25. In some novels or plays, some of the most significant events are mental or psychological - for example, awakenings, discoveries, or changes in consciousness. Choose one such internal event from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and describe how the author manages to give the event the sense of excitement, suspense, and climax usually associated with external action. Do not merely summarize the plot.
26. One of the characteristics of the Gothic novel is the menacing nature of the setting, which serves to create in the reader a sense of doom and foreboding, and in some cases, terror. Though the settings of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* are very different, both share this characteristic. In what ways are the descriptive techniques used by the two authors similar in making the respective settings of the two novels function almost as characters in the stories?
27. Critic Michael Joslin has argued that the true Gothic villain "has the capacity to benefit mankind greatly but because of his desires or because of some blighting check given to his moral development, he exerts his might only to achieve his selfish ambitions." Given this definition, compare Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Heathcliff in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* as Gothic villains. Which one more fully fits Joslin's definition? Why do you think so?