

JOSEPH CONRAD'S HEART OF DARKNESS

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Annotation: Heart of Darkness, a novel by Joseph Conrad, was originally a three-part series in Blackwood's Magazine in 1899. It is a story within a story, following a character named Charlie Marlow, who recounts his adventure to a group of men onboard an anchored ship. The story told is of his early life as a ferry boat captain. Although his job was to transport ivory downriver, Charlie develops an interest in investing an ivory procurement agent, Kurtz, who is employed by the government. Preceded by his reputation as a brilliant emissary of progress, Kurtz has now established himself as a god among the natives in "one of the darkest places on earth." Marlow suspects something else of Kurtz: he has gone mad. A reflection on corruptive European colonialism and a journey into the nightmare psyche of one of the corrupted, Heart of Darkness is considered one of the most influential works ever written.

Key words: Savages, imperialism, rear column, racism, colony.

Heart of Darkness is an 1899 novella by Polish-British novelist Joseph Conrad in which the sailor Charles Marlow tells his listeners the story of his assignment as steamer captain for a Belgian company in the African interior. The novel is widely regarded as a critique of European colonial rule in Africa, whilst also examining the themes of power dynamics and morality. Although Conrad does not name the river on which most of the narrative takes place, at the time of writing, the Congo Free State-the location of the large and economically important Congo River-was a private colony of Belgium's King Leopold II. Marlow is given a text by Kurtz, an ivory trader working on a trading station far up the river, who has "gone native" and is the object of Marlow's expedition.

Central to Conrad's work is the idea that there is little difference between "civilised people" and "savages". Heart of Darkness implicitly comments on imperialism and racism. The novella's setting provides the frame for Marlow's story of his fascination for the prolific ivory trader Kurtz. Conrad draws parallels between London ("the greatest town on earth") and Africa as places of darkness.

Originally issued as a three-part serial story in Blackwood's Magazine to celebrate the 1000th edition of the magazine, Heart of Darkness has been widely republished and translated in many languages. It provided the inspiration for Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 film Apocalypse Now. In 1998, the Modern Library ranked Heart of Darkness 67th on their list of the 100 best novels in English of the 20th century.

In 1890, at the age of 32, Conrad was appointed by a Belgian trading company to serve on one of its steamers. While sailing up the Congo River from one station to another, the captain became ill and Conrad assumed command. He guided the ship up the tributary Lualaba River to the trading company's innermost station, Kindu, in Eastern Congo Free State; Marlow has similar experiences to the author.

When Conrad began to write the novella, eight years after returning from Africa, he drew inspiration from his travel journals. He described *Heart of Darkness* as "a wild story" of a journalist who becomes manager of a station in the (African) interior and makes himself worshipped by a tribe of natives. The tale was first published as a three-part serial, in February, March, and April 1899, in *Blackwood's Magazine* (February 1899 was the magazine's 1000th issue: special edition). *Heart of Darkness* was later included in the book *Youth: a Narrative, and Two Other Stories*, published on 13 November 1902 by William Blackwood.

The volume consisted of *Youth: a Narrative*, *Heart of Darkness* and *The End of the Tether* in that order. In 1917, for future editions of the book, Conrad wrote an "Author's Note" where he, after denying any "unity of artistic purpose" underlying the collection, discusses each of the three stories and makes light commentary on Marlow, the narrator of the tales within the first two stories. He said Marlow first appeared in *Youth*. On 31 May 1902, in a letter to William Blackwood, Conrad remarked, I call your own kind self to witness ... the last pages of *Heart of Darkness* where the interview of the man and the girl locks in-as it were-the whole 30000 words of narrative description into one suggestive view of a whole phase of life and makes of that story something quite on another plane than an anecdote of a man who went mad in the Centre of Africa.

There have been many proposed sources for the character of the antagonist, Kurtz. Georges-Antoine Klein, an agent who became ill and died aboard Conrad's steamer, is proposed by literary critics as a basis for Kurtz. The principal figures involved in the disastrous "rear column" of the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition have also been identified as likely sources, including column leader Edmund Musgrave Barttelot, his Scottish colleague, James Sligo Jameson, slave trader Tippu Tip and the expedition leader, Welsh explorer Henry Morton Stanley. Conrad's biographer Norman Sherry judged that Arthur Hodister (1847–1892), a Belgian solitary but successful trader, who spoke three Congolese languages and was venerated by Congolese to the point of deification, served as the main model, while later scholars have refuted this hypothesis. Adam Hochschild, in *King Leopold's Ghost*, believes that the Belgian soldier Léon Rom influenced the character. Peter Firchow mentions the possibility that Kurtz is a composite, modelled on various figures present in the Congo Free State at the time as well as on Conrad's imagining of what they might have had in common.

A corrective impulse to impose one's rule characterises Kurtz's writings which were discovered by Marlow during his journey, where he rants on behalf of the so-called "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs" about his supposedly altruistic and sentimental reasons to civilise the "savages"; one document ends with a dark proclamation to "Exterminate all the brutes!". The "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs" is interpreted as a sarcastic reference to one of the participants at the Berlin Conference, the International Association of the Congo (also called "International Congo Society"). The predecessor to this organisation was the "International Association for the Exploration and Civilization of Central Africa".

Charles Marlow tells his friends the story of how he became captain of a river steamboat for an ivory trading company. As a child, Marlow was fascinated by "the blank spaces" on maps, particularly Africa. The image of a river on the map particularly fascinated Marlow.

In a flashback, Marlow makes his way to Africa, taking passage on a steamer. He travels 30 mi (50 km) up the river where his company's station is. Work on a railway is taking place. Marlow explores a narrow ravine, and is horrified to find himself in a place full of critically ill Africans who worked on the railroad and are now dying. Marlow must wait for ten days in the company's devastated Outer Station. Marlow meets the company's chief accountant, who tells him of a Mr. Kurtz, who is in charge of a very important trading post, and is described as a respected first-class agent. The accountant predicts that Kurtz will go far. Marlow departs with 60 men to travel to the Central Station, where the steamboat that he will command is based. At the station, he learns that his steamboat has been wrecked in an accident. The general manager informs Marlow that he could not wait for Marlow to arrive, and tells him of a rumour that Kurtz is ill. Marlow fishes his boat out of the river and spends months repairing it. Delayed by the lack of tools and replacement parts, Marlow is frustrated by the time it takes to perform the repairs. He learns that Kurtz is resented, not admired, by the manager. Once underway, the journey to Kurtz's station takes two months.

The journey pauses for the night about 8 miles (13 km) below the Inner Station. In the morning the boat is enveloped by a thick fog. The steamboat is later attacked by a barrage of arrows, and the helmsman is killed. Marlow sounds the steam whistle repeatedly, frightening the attackers away.

After landing at Kurtz's station, a man boards the steamboat: a Russian wanderer who strayed into Kurtz's camp. Marlow learns that the natives worship Kurtz and that he has been very ill. The Russian tells of how Kurtz opened his mind and admires Kurtz even for his power and his willingness to use it. Marlow suspects that Kurtz has gone mad.

Marlow observes the station and sees a row of posts topped with the severed heads of natives. Around the corner of the house, Kurtz appears with supporters who carry him as a ghost-like figure on a stretcher. The area fills with natives ready for battle, but Kurtz shouts something and they retreat. His entourage carries Kurtz to the steamer and lays him in a cabin. The manager tells Marlow that Kurtz has harmed the company's business in the region because his methods are "unsound". The Russian reveals that Kurtz believes the company wants to kill him, and Marlow confirms that hangings were discussed.

After midnight, Kurtz returns to shore. Marlow finds Kurtz crawling back to the station house. Marlow threatens to harm Kurtz if he raises an alarm, but Kurtz only laments that he did not accomplish more. The next day they prepare to journey back down the river.

Kurtz's health worsens during the trip. The steamboat breaks down, and while stopped for repairs, Kurtz gives Marlow a packet of papers, including his commissioned report and a photograph, telling him to keep them from the manager. When Marlow next speaks with him, Kurtz is near death; Marlow hears him weakly whisper, "The horror! The horror!" A short while later, the manager's boy announces to the crew that Kurtz has died (the famous line "Mistah Kurtz-he dead" would become the epigraph of T. S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men"). The next day Marlow pays little attention to Kurtz's pilgrims as they bury "something" in a muddy hole.

Returning to Europe, Marlow is embittered and contemptuous of the "civilised" world. Several callers come to retrieve the papers Kurtz entrusted to him, but Marlow withholds them or offers papers he knows they have no interest in. He gives Kurtz's report to a journalist, for publication if he sees fit. Marlow is left with some personal letters and a photograph of Kurtz's fiancée. When Marlow visits her, she is deep in mourning although it has been more than a year since Kurtz's death. She presses Marlow for information, asking him to repeat Kurtz's final words. Marlow tells her that Kurtz's final word was her name.

Used literature

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