

# Excerpts from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

## **BACKGROUND:**

***Heart of Darkness*** is a novella written by Polish-born writer Joseph Conrad. Before its 1902 publication, it appeared as a three-part series (1899) in *Blackwood's Magazine*. It is widely regarded as a significant work of English literature and part of the Western canon.

This highly symbolic story is actually a story within a story, or frame narrative. It follows Marlow as he recounts, from dusk through to late night, his adventure into the Congo to a group of men aboard a ship anchored in the Thames Estuary.

The story details an incident when Marlow, an Englishman, took a foreign assignment as a ferry-boat captain, employed by a Belgian trading company. Although the river is never specifically named, readers may assume it is the Congo River, in the Congo Free State, a private colony of King Leopold II. Marlow is employed to transport ivory downriver; however, his more pressing assignment is to return Kurtz, another ivory trader, to civilization in a cover up. Kurtz has a reputation throughout the region.

In writing the novella, Conrad drew inspiration from his own experience in the Congo: eight and a half years before writing the book, he had gone to serve as the captain of a Congo steamer. However, upon arriving in the Congo, he found his steamer damaged and under repair. He soon became ill and returned to Europe before ever serving as captain. Some of Conrad's experiences in the Congo, and the story's historic background, including possible models for Kurtz, are recounted in Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost...*

## **PLOT:**

The story opens with four men, apparently old friends, on a boat on the Thames. One man, Marlow, begins telling a story of a job he took as captain of a steamship in Africa. He describes how his "dear aunt" used many of her contacts to secure the job for him. When he arrives at the job, he encounters many men he dislikes, as they strike him as untrustworthy. They speak often of a man named Kurtz, who has quite a reputation in many areas of expertise. He is somewhat of a rogue ivory collector, as well as a skilled painter.

Marlow learns that he is to travel up the river to retrieve Kurtz (if he is alive), who was evidently left alone in unfamiliar territory. However, Marlow's steamer needs extensive repairs, and he cannot leave until he receives rivets, which take a suspiciously long time to arrive. Marlow suspects the manager of deliberately delaying his trip to prevent Kurtz from stealing the manager's job.

Marlow is finally able to leave on his journey with five other white men and a group of cannibals they have hired to run the steamer. He notes that the cannibals use a respectable amount of restraint in not eating the white men, as their only food source is a small amount of rotting hippo meat, and they far outnumber the white men, or "pilgrims" as Marlow refers to them.

Marlow's steamer is attacked by natives while en route to Kurtz' station – they are saved when Marlow blows the ship's steam whistle and frightens the natives into retreat. They arrive at the station and Marlow meets Kurtz' right-hand man, an unnamed Russian whose dress resembles a Harlequin and whose admiration and fear of Kurtz is palpable. The Russian explains that Kurtz is near-death and that Kurtz had ordered the native tribes to attack the steam ship. Harlequin

explains that Kurtz had used his guns and personal charisma to take over tribes of Africans and had used them to make war on other tribes for their ivory, explaining how Kurtz obtains so much.

The Russian, who idolizes Kurtz, worries that Kurtz' reputation will be sullied by the Manager. Marlow promises to maintain Kurtz' reputation as a great man and advises the Russian to flee to friendly natives. The Russian thanks Marlow and leaves after collecting a few oddments.

At this point, near death, Kurtz has an enigmatic last desire to remain a part of the native culture, as exhibited by his ineffective striving toward tribal fire, dance and the darkness.

Marlow and his crew take the ailing Kurtz aboard their ship and depart. During this time, Kurtz is lodged in Marlow's pilothouse and Marlow begins to see that Kurtz is every bit as grandiose as previously described. During this time, Kurtz gives Marlow a collection of papers and a photograph for safekeeping; both had witnessed the Manager going through Kurtz' belongings. The photograph is of a beautiful girl whom Marlow assumes is Kurtz' love interest.

One night, Marlow happens upon Kurtz, obviously near death. As Marlow comes closer with a candle, Kurtz seems to experience a moment of clarity and speaks his last words: "The horror! The horror!" Marlow believes this to be Kurtz' reflection on the events of his life. Marlow does not inform the Manager or any of the other pilgrims of Kurtz' death; the news is instead broken by the Manager's child-servant.

Marlow later returns to his home city and is confronted by many people seeking things and ideas of Kurtz. Marlow eventually sees Kurtz' fiance about a year later, who is still in mourning. She asks Marlow about Kurtz' death and Marlow informs her that, instead of, "The horror! The horror!," his last words were her name.

### **MOTIFS & THEMES:**

T. S. Eliot's use of a quotation from *The Heart of Darkness*—"Mistah Kurtz, he dead"—as an epigraph to the original manuscript of his poem, *The Hollow Men*, contrasted its dark horror with the presumed "light of civilization," and suggested the ambiguity of both the dark motives of civilization and the freedom of barbarism, as well as the "spiritual darkness" of several characters in *Heart of Darkness*. This sense of darkness also lends itself to a related theme of obscurity—again, in various senses, reflecting the ambiguities in the work. Moral issues are not clear-cut; that which ought to be (in various senses) on the side of "light" is in fact mired in darkness, and vice versa.

Africa was known as "The Dark Continent" in the Victorian Era with all the negative attributes of darkness attributed to Africans by the English. One of the possible influences for the Kurtz character was Henry Morton Stanley of "Dr. Livingstone, I presume" fame, as he was a principal explorer of "The Dark Heart of Africa", particularly the Congo. Stanley was infamous in Africa for horrific violence and yet he was honored by a knighthood. However, an agent Conrad himself encountered when traveling in the Congo, named Georges-Antoine Klein (Klein means 'small' in German, as Kurtz alludes to *kurz*, 'short'), could have possibly served as an actual model for the Kurtz that appears in *Heart of Darkness*. Klein died aboard Conrad's steamer and was interred along the Congo, much like Kurtz in the novel.<sup>[1]</sup> Among the people Conrad may have encountered on his journey was a trader called Leon Rom, who was later named chief of the Stanley Falls Station. In 1895 a British traveller reported that Rom had decorated his flower-bed with the skulls of some twenty-one victims of his displeasure, including women and children, resembling the posts of Kurtz' Station.<sup>[2]</sup>

Conrad uses the river as the vehicle for Marlow to journey further into the "heart of darkness". The descriptions of the river, particularly its depiction as a snake, reveal its symbolic qualities. The river "resembl[es] an immense snake uncoiled" and "it fascinated [Marlow] as a snake would a bird." Not only is Marlow captivated by the river, representing as it does the jungle itself, but its association with a snake gives this "fascination of the abomination" its metaphorical characteristics. The statement, "The snake had charmed me" alludes to both the idea of snake charmer and the snake in the story of Genesis. While typically, a snake charmer would charm the snake, in this case, Marlow is charmed by the snake, a reversal which puts the power in the hands of the river, and thus the jungle wilderness. Furthermore, the allusion to the snake of temptation from the story of Adam and Eve demonstrates how the wilderness itself contains the knowledge of good and evil, and upon entering that wilderness Marlow will be able to see, or at least explore, the characteristics of humanity as well as good and evil.

Throughout the novel Conrad dramatizes the tension in Marlow between the restraint of civilization and the savagery of barbarism. The darkness and amorality which Kurtz exemplifies is argued to be the reality of the human condition, upon which illusory moral structures are draped by civilization. Marlow's confrontation with Kurtz presents him with a 'choice of nightmares'—to commit himself to the savagery of the human condition, or to the lie and veneer of civilized restraint. Though Marlow 'cannot abide a lie' and subsequently cannot perceive civilization as anything but a veneer hiding the savage reality of the human condition, he is also horrified by the darkness of Kurtz he sees in his own heart. After emerging from this experience, his Buddha-like pose aboard the "Nellie" symbolizes a suspension between this choice of nightmares.

The reversal of the black and white imagery is also a major theme in the novel. Conrad challenges typical literary associations when he associates "black" with "good" and "white" with "bad" or "evil". The associations of black with good appear throughout the novel, especially in reference to the African natives and their actions. However, the most prominent example of the white/bad association occurs at the beginning of the novella. When Marlow sets out for Europe to receive his work assignment, he remarks that "I arrived in a city that always makes me think of a whited sepulchre." A sepulchre, a type of tomb or container for human remains, obviously has bad or morbid connotations. This may well be a Biblical reference, for in the Bible hypocrites are likened to "white sepulchers." This city, which contains the "Company's offices," can be surmised as a city in Belgium, with which Marlow has notably negative and death-like associations. The synthesis of "whited" and "sepulchre" demonstrates the reversal of black and white connotations that Conrad employs, and uses here to reveal his dislike of the Belgian companies that operated in the Congo. Furthermore, Marlow's symbolic journey can be interpreted with the Sigmund Freud's "psychic apparatus" that involves the id, ego, and super-ego.<sup>[citation needed]</sup> Most importantly, the id, or the part of the psyche that deals with one's subconscious instincts and basic drives, appears as part of the major theme, where Conrad explores what happens when the id is unleashed.

To emphasize the theme of darkness within all of mankind, Marlow's narration takes place on a yawl in the Thames tidal estuary. Early in the novella, Marlow recounts how London, the largest, most populous and wealthiest city in the world at the time, was itself a "dark" place in Roman times. The idea that the Romans, at one time, conquered the "savage" Britons parallels Conrad's current tale of the Belgians conquering the "savage" Africans. The theme of darkness lurking beneath the surface of even "civilized" persons appears prominently, and is further explored through the character of Kurtz and through Marlow's passing sense of understanding with the Africans.

Themes developed in the novella's later scenes include the naïveté of Europeans—particularly women—regarding the various forms of darkness in the Congo; the British traders and Belgian colonialists' abuse of the natives; and man's potential for duplicity. The symbolic levels of the book expand on all of these in terms of a struggle between good and evil (light and darkness), not so much between people as within every major character's soul.

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT:**

The novel is largely autobiographical, based upon Joseph Conrad's six-month journey up the Congo River where he took command of a steamboat in 1890 after the death of its captain. At the time, the river was called the Congo, and the country was the Congo Free State. The area Conrad refers to as the Company Station was an actual location called Matadi, a location two-hundred miles up river from the mouth of the Congo. The Central Station was a location called Kinshasa, and both these locations marked a stretch of river impassable by steamboat, upon which Marlow takes a "two-hundred mile tramp."

The Company was in reality the Anglo-Belgium India-Rubber Company formed by King Leopold II of Belgium charged with running the country of the Congo Free State in 1885. The Congo Free State was voted into existence by the Berlin Conference (1884), which Conrad refers to sarcastically in his novella as "the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs."

Leopold II declared the Congo Free State his personal property in 1892, legally permitting the Belgians to take what rubber they wished from the area without having to trade with the African natives. This caused a rise in atrocities perpetrated by the Belgian traders.

The Congo Free State was taken out of the personal property of the king and made a regular colony of Belgium, called Belgian Congo, in 1908, after the extent of atrocities committed there became generally known in the West, partially through Conrad's novel.

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Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Heart\\_of\\_Darkness&printable=yes](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Heart_of_Darkness&printable=yes)

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"I left in a French steamer, and she called in every blamed port they have out there, for, as far as I could see, the sole purpose of landing soldiers and custom-house officers. I watched the coast. Watching a coast as it slips by the ship is like thinking about an enigma. There it is before you-- smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering, Come and find out. This one was almost featureless, as if still in the making, with an aspect of monotonous grimness. The edge of a colossal jungle, so dark-green as to be almost black, fringed with white surf, ran straight, like a ruled line, far, far away along a blue sea whose glitter was blurred by a creeping mist. The sun was fierce, the land seemed to glisten and drip with steam. Here and there grayish-whitish specks showed up clustered inside the white surf, with a flag flying above them perhaps. Settlements some centuries old, and still no bigger than pinheads on the untouched expanse of their background. We pounded along, stopped, landed soldiers; went on, landed custom-house clerks to levy toll in what looked like a God-forsaken wilderness, with a tin shed and a flagpole lost in it; landed more soldiers--to take care of the custom-house clerks, presumably. Some, I heard, got drowned in the surf; but whether they did or not, nobody seemed particularly to care. They were just flung out there, and on we went. Every day the coast looked the same, as though we had not moved; but we passed various places--trading places--with names like Gran' Bassam, Little Popo; names that seemed to belong to some sordid farce acted in front of a sinister back-cloth. The idleness of a passenger, my isolation amongst all these men with whom I had no point of contact, the oily and languid sea, the uniform somberness of the coast, seemed to keep me away from the truth of things, within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion. The voice of the surf heard now and then was a positive pleasure, like the speech of a brother. It was something natural, that had its reason, that had a meaning. Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening.

They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks--these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at. For a time I would feel I belonged still to a world of straightforward facts; but the feeling would not last long. Something would turn up to scare it away. Once, I remember, we came upon a man-of-war anchored off the coast. There wasn't even a shed there, and she was shelling the bush. It appears the French had one of their wars going on thereabouts. Her ensign dropped limp like a rag; the muzzles of the long six-inch guns stuck out all over the low hull; the greasy, slimy swell swung her up lazily and let her down, swaying her thin masts. In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech--and nothing happened. Nothing could happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight; and it was not dissipated by somebody on board assuring me earnestly there was a camp of natives--he called them enemies!--hidden out of sight somewhere.

"We gave her her letters (I heard the men in that lonely ship were dying of fever at the rate of three a day) and went on. We called at some more places with farcical names, where the merry dance of death and trade goes on in a still and earthy atmosphere as of an overheated catacomb; all along the formless coast bordered by dangerous surf, as if Nature herself had tried to ward off intruders; in and out of rivers, streams of death in life, whose banks were rotting into mud, whose waters, thickened into slime, invaded the contorted mangroves that seemed to writhe at us in the extremity of an impotent despair. Nowhere did we stop long enough to get a particularized impression, but the general sense of vague and oppressive wonder grew upon me. It was like a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares.

"It was upward of thirty days before I saw the mouth of the big river. We anchored off the seat of the government. But my work would not begin till some two hundred miles farther on. So as soon as I could I made a start for a place thirty miles higher up.

"I had my passage on a little sea-going steamer. Her captain was a Swede, and knowing me for a seaman, invited me on the bridge. He was a young man, lean, fair, and morose, with lanky hair and a shuffling gait. As we left the miserable little wharf, he tossed his head contemptuously at the shore. 'Been living there?' he asked. I said, 'Yes.' 'Fine lot these government chaps--are they not?' he went on, speaking English with great precision and considerable bitterness. 'It is funny what some people will do for a few francs a month. I wonder what becomes of that kind when it goes up country?' I said to him I expected to see that soon. 'So-o-o!' he exclaimed. He shuffled athwart, keeping one eye ahead vigilantly. 'Don't be too sure,' he continued. 'The other day I took up a man who hanged himself on the road. He was a Swede, too.' 'Hanged himself! Why, in God's name?' I cried. He kept on looking out watchfully. 'Who knows? The sun too much for him, or the country perhaps.'

"At last we opened a reach. A rocky cliff appeared, mounds of turned-up earth by the shore, houses on a hill, others with iron roofs, amongst a waste of excavations, or hanging to the declivity. A continuous noise of the rapids above hovered over this scene of inhabited devastation. A lot of people, mostly black and naked, moved about like ants. A jetty projected into the river. A blinding sunlight drowned all this at times in a sudden recrudescence of glare. 'There's your Company's station,' said the Swede, pointing to three wooden barrack-like structures on the rocky slope. 'I will send your things up. Four boxes did you say? So. Farewell.' "I came upon a boiler wallowing in the grass, then found a path leading up the hill. It turned aside for the boulders, and also for an undersized railway-truck lying there on its back with its wheels in the air. One was off. The thing looked as dead as the carcass of some animal. I came upon more pieces of decaying machinery, a stack of rusty rails. To the left a clump of trees made a shady spot, where dark things seemed to stir feebly. I blinked, the path was steep. A horn tooted to the

right, and I saw the black people run. A heavy and dull detonation shook the ground, a puff of smoke came out of the cliff, and that was all. No change appeared on the face of the rock. They were building a railway. The cliff was not in the way or anything; but this objectless blasting was all the work going on.

"A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind wagged to and fro like tails. I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking. Another report from the cliff made me think suddenly of that ship of war I had seen firing into a continent. It was the same kind of ominous voice; but these men could by no stretch of imagination be called enemies. They were called criminals, and the outraged law, like the bursting shells had come to them, an insoluble mystery from the sea. All their meager breasts panted together, the violently dilated nostrils quivered, the eyes stared stonily up-hill. They passed me within six inches, without a glance, with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages. Behind this raw matter one of the reclaimed, the product of the new forces at work, strolled despondently, carrying a rifle by its middle. He had a uniform jacket with one button off, and seeing a white man on the path, hoisted his weapon to his shoulder with alacrity. This was simple prudence, white men being so much alike at a distance that he could not tell who I might be. He was speedily reassured, and with a large, white, rascally grin, and a glance at his charge, seemed to take me into partnership in his exalted trust. After all, I was also a part of the great cause of these high and just proceedings.

"Instead of going up, I turned and descended to the left. My idea was to let that chain-gang get out of sight before I climbed the hill. You know I am not particularly tender; I've had to strike and to fend off. I've had to resist and to attack sometimes--that's the only way of resisting--without counting the exact cost, according to the demands of such sort of life as I had blundered into. 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. How insidious he could be, too, I was only to find out several months later and a thousand miles farther. For a moment I stood appalled, as though by a warning. Finally I descended the hill, obliquely, towards the trees I had seen.

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"The moon had spread over everything a thin layer of silver - over the rank grass, over the mud, upon the wall of matted vegetation standing higher than the wall of a temple, over the great river I could see through a somber gap glittering, glittering as it flowed broadly by without a murmur. All this was great, expectant, mute, while the man jabbered about himself. I wondered whether the stillness on the face of the immensity looking at us two were meant as an appeal or as a menace. What were we who had strayed in here? Could we handle that dumb thing, or would it handle us? I felt how big, how confoundedly big, was that thing that couldn't talk and perhaps was deaf as well. What was in there? I could see a little ivory coming out from there and I had heard Mr. Kurtz was in there. I had heard enough about it too - God know! Yet somehow it didn't bring any image with it - no more than if I had been told an angel or a fiend was in there. I believed it in the same way one of you might believe there are inhabitants on the planet Mars. I know a Scotch sail maker who was certain, dead sure, there were people in Mars. If you asked

him for some idea how they looked and behaved he would get shy and mutter something about 'walking on all-fours.' If you as much as smiled he would - though a man of sixty - offer to fight you. I would not have gone so far as to fight for Kurtz, but I went for him near enough to 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. There is a taint of death, a flavor of mortality in lies - which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world - what I want to forget. It makes me miserable and sick like biting something rotten would do. Temperament, I suppose. Well, I went near enough to it by letting the young fool there believe anything he liked to imagine as to my influence in Europe. I become in an instant as much of a pretence as the rest of the bewitched pilgrims. This simply because I had a notion it somehow would be of help to that Kurtz whom at the time I did not see - you understand. He was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream - making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is the very essence of dreams..."

He was silent for a while.

"... No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence - that which makes its truth, its meaning - its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream - alone."

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Joseph Conrad. *Heart of Darkness*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006. 26-7.