

Heart of Darkness Book Review

1 Plot Summary

The Narrator describes a night spent on a ship in the mouth of the Thames River in England. Marlow, one of the men on board, tells of his time spent as a riverboat pilot in the Belgian Congo.

With the help of his well-connected aunt, Marlow gets a job as pilot on a steamship on the Congo River in Africa for a European business outfit called the Company. While at the Company's Outer Station, Marlow meets the Company's Chief Accountant. He mentions a remarkable man named Kurtz, who runs the Company's Inner Station deep in the jungle. Marlow hikes from the Outer Station to the Central Station, where he discovers that the steamship he's supposed to pilot recently sank in an accident. Marlow finally gets the ship fixed and sets off upriver with the General Manager. Just before they reach Inner Station the steamship is attacked by natives. Marlow's helmsman, a native trained to steer the ship, is killed by a spear.

At Inner Station, a Russian trader meets them on the shore. He tells them that Kurtz is alive but ill. As the General Manager goes to get Kurtz, Marlow talks to the Russian trader and realizes that Kurtz has made himself into a brutal and vicious god to the natives. When the General Manager and his men bring Kurtz out from the station house on a stretcher, the natives, including a woman who seems to be Kurtz's mistress, appear ready to riot. But Kurtz calms them and they melt back into the forest.

The Russian sees that the General Manager has it in for him, and slips off into the jungle, but not before telling Marlow that Kurtz ordered the attack on the steamship. The steamer sets off the next day. But Kurtz is too ill to survive the journey, and gives his papers to Marlow for safekeeping. His dying words are: "The horror! The horror!" Marlow believes Kurtz is judging himself and the world.

Marlow also falls ill, but survives. He returns to the sepulchral city in Europe and gives Kurtz's papers to the relevant people. The last person he visits is Kurtz's Intended (his fiancé). She believes Kurtz is a great man, both talented and moral, and asks Marlow to tell her Kurtz's last words. Marlow can't find it in himself to destroy her beautiful delusions: he says Kurtz's last words were her name.

On the ship in the Thames, Marlow falls silent, and as the Narrator stares out from the ship it seems to him that the Thames leads "into the heart of an immense darkness."

2 Review

It was a breathtaking read. There are few books which make such a powerful impression as *Heart of darkness* does. Written more than a century ago, the book and its undying theme hold just as much significance even today. Intense and compelling, it looks into the darkest recesses of human nature. Conrad takes the reader through a horrific tale in a very gripping voice. I couldn't say enough about Conrad's mastery of prose. Not a single word is out of place. Among several things, I liked Marlow expressing his difficulty in sharing his experiences with his listeners and his comments on insignificance of some of the dialogue exchanged aloud between him and Kurtz. The bond between the two was much deeper. Whatever words he uses to describe them, no one can really understand in full measure what he had been through. This was the first time I read this book which doesn't seem enough to fathom its profound meaning and all the symbolism. It deserves multiple reads.