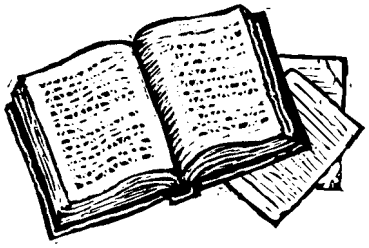
Heart of Darkness

JOSEPH CONRAD

1902

Joseph Conrad's short novel *Heart of Darkness* is widely considered one of the richest examples of the use of symbolism in modern literature. Though the story is a mere fraction of a normal novel's length, Conrad's dense, layered prose can make for a slow and potentially frustrating—though ultimately rewarding—reading experience. The main story is centered on a riverboat pilot named Marlow who signs on to work for a Belgian company making inroads into the African Congo. Once he reaches Africa, Marlow's piloting job transforms into a quest to locate a mysterious company employee named Kurtz who has all but vanished into the African jungle. Marlow's journey is a nightmarish trip through a land he does not understand, where his European cohorts operate without the influence of laws or "civilized" society.

Heart of Darkness is a frame tale, a structure that was quite popular in the last half of the nineteenth century. A frame tale features a story within a story: the narrator of the frame tale meets a character who proceeds to tell a story, usually based on personal experience, to the narrator. The narrator of the frame tale is essentially an observer who interacts with the storyteller only before and after the "story within a story" is told, thus creating a "frame" around the bulk of the narrative. This structure was used by many of the greats of the period, including Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The frame tale technique is



especially useful when the narrator and the storyteller hold contrasting views on the main subject of the tale. In *Heart of Darkness*, the unnamed narrator expresses nothing but pride at his nation's success at spreading civilization across the world. This is in stark contrast to Marlow's views at the end of the tale.

An experienced seaman, Conrad loosely based *Heart of Darkness* on his own experiences working as a steamboat pilot in the Belgian Congo in the 1890s. The book is now generally recognized as a bitter indictment of the European imperialism that took place, mostly in Africa, at the close of the nineteenth century. However, some modern critics see the book in a less favorable light. Nigerian author Chinua Achebe has referred to *Heart of Darkness* as "an offensive and deplorable book" and to Conrad himself as "a thoroughgoing racist." Some critics acknowledge that the book reflects racist views; however, they argue that these views do not belong to Conrad himself but to his fictional creation Marlow. In any case, even Achebe agrees that "Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation" of Africa, and he did it before such a sentiment was popular throughout Europe.

The novella was originally printed in three parts in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1899 and was first published as a standalone work in 1902. The author's abundant use of the symbolic—particularly the frequent use of "light" and "dark" to convey ever-shifting meanings—has prompted over a century of lively critical analysis and has kept the book high on reading lists in high schools and colleges across the United States. Conrad wrote several other notable novels, novellas, and short stories, including *Lord Jim* (1900), another nautical tale in which Marlow serves as narrator. *Heart of Darkness* secured Conrad's place as one of the masters of modern literature.

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."

PLOT SUMMARY

Part I

Heart of Darkness opens aboard the ship *Nellie* on the Thames River in London at dusk. Five longtime friends have gathered on the boat, though only one is mentioned by name: Marlow. The other men are referred to by their current occupation, such as the Lawyer and the Accountant. All were once seamen, but Marlow is the only one who remains a sailor. Like all sailors, Marlow shows a "propensity to spin yarns." At dusk, as the sun falls into a patch of brooding clouds in the west, the unnamed narrator ponders the centuries of great ships and great men the river has seen during the glorious expansion of the British Empire.

Suddenly, Marlow begins to speak of the region's earlier, darker history. He imagines how desolate and wild the region must have seemed to the first Romans who claimed the land as part of their empire two thousand years before. Although the area now holds the most important city in England—and arguably all Europe—Marlow is quick to point out that they "live in the flicker," implying that darkness can return at any time. Marlow then tells of his own experience with darkness—similar to the first Romans, but in Africa. Since his story makes up the bulk of the rest of the book, Marlow acts as a narrator to the reader and to his friends aboard the *Nellie*.

Having recently returned from several years in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, Marlow tries to keep himself busy in London. He becomes restless, though, and calls upon his relatives in

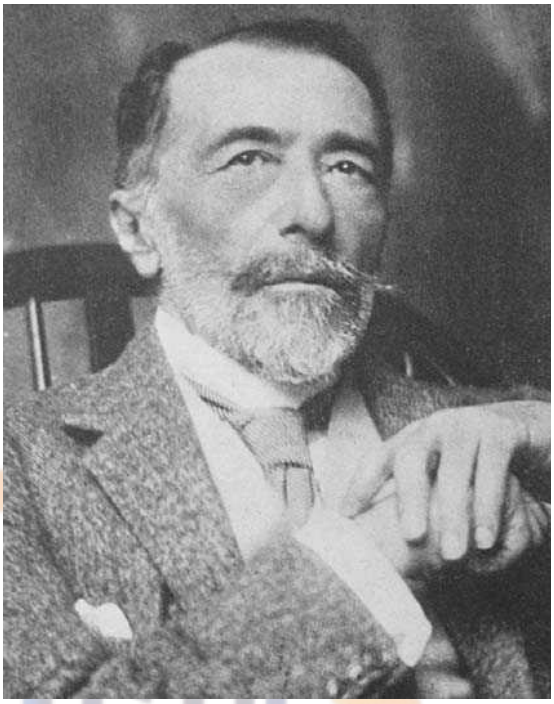
BIOGRAPHY

JOSEPH CONRAD

Though renowned as an English author, Joseph Conrad was actually born Jozef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski in the Ukraine in 1857. By the time Conrad was twelve, both of his parents had died of tuberculosis. He spent the rest of his youth under the care of his uncle Tadeusz in Switzerland. Conrad then went to France to become a merchant seaman. He eventually continued on to England, where he found greater success and ultimately became a British citizen in 1886.

In 1890, Conrad took a job piloting a boat in the Congo for a Belgian company, much like the character Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*. After a few short months of declining health, Conrad decided to return to England, where he spent several weeks hospitalized, recovering from his African excursion. During this time, Conrad concentrated his efforts on writing. His first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, was published in 1895 and received generally favorable reviews. Several books later, Conrad was vaulted into the most esteemed echelons of living writers with the publication of *Lord Jim* (1900).

Conrad continued writing for twenty years after the publication of *Heart of Darkness*, achieving financial success only in the last decade of his life. He died of a heart attack on August 3, 1924 and was buried in Canterbury Cemetery.



Joseph Conrad The Library of Congress

continental Europe to help him secure a position piloting a boat along the Congo River in Africa. His family's influence, and the fact that a Belgian company has just lost a boat captain in the Congo due to an argument with a native chief, lands Marlow an immediate appointment. Marlow travels to Belgium to sign the employment contract, noting that the city from which the Company operates looks to him like "a whited sepulchre," or burial vault. The contract is signed, and a French doctor examines Marlow to affirm his health for the trip. He bids farewell to his aunt and heads to Africa aboard a French steamer.

Long before reaching his port, Marlow encounters the African coastline, made seemingly impenetrable by "a colossal jungle, so dark green as to be almost black," and extending as far as he can see. The steamer passes numerous ragged outposts, as well as a warship firing its cannons into the dense jungle for what appears to be no reason. A member of the crew informs Marlow that there is "a camp of natives—he called them enemies!—hidden out of sight somewhere."

Marlow finally reaches the mouth of the Congo River after a month of travel. He boards another vessel and continues up the river, since he is to be stationed more than two hundred miles from the coast. The captain of the boat, a Swede, tells Marlow of a recent passenger who had hanged himself for no known reason. Marlow is deposited thirty miles upriver at one of the Company's stations to await further passage. The station is a "scene of inhabited devastation," riddled with broken-down machines

and apparently pointless excavations. Marlow sees a group of black men chained together—judged by the colonists to be criminals—carrying baskets of dirt. Marlow ducks into a stand of trees for shade and finds himself among a group of black men on the verge of death, each too ill or weak to continue working. He offers one a biscuit from his pocket and then leaves the men to their suffering.

Continuing on, Marlow encounters the Company's chief accountant, an astonishingly well-dressed man who is to be the first to mention a name Marlow will come to know well: Kurtz. The accountant comments that Marlow is bound to meet the fellow Company agent when he travels upriver. According to the accountant, Kurtz is not only "a very remarkable person," but also brings in more ivory for the Company than all other traders put together.

Ten days later, Marlow leaves camp with a large caravan to begin the two-hundred-mile, two-week trek to the Central Station. When he arrives, Marlow is told the boat he was meant to pilot has sunk. It is now his job to reclaim the boat and fix it. The general manager of the station, an anxious man who seems concerned about Kurtz's well-being at an outpost farther inland, asks Marlow how long it will take to repair the ship and head on. Marlow estimates that it will take a few months and quickly sets to work.

Marlow notices that, other than himself, none of the employees at the camp appears to do anything productive. They spend their time talking about ivory and devising plots and schemes against each other that are never enacted. Marlow becomes acquainted with another Company agent, a brick-maker who has not made any bricks because of the absence of some key component never specified. The brick-maker is very interested in Marlow and his connections back in Europe, but Marlow is interested only in repairing his ship and learning about Kurtz. The brick-maker tells Marlow that Kurtz is "a prodigy" and accuses Marlow of being from the same "gang" as Kurtz—a gang that is destined to assume control of the Central Station in due time.

After beginning his work on the boat, Marlow realizes he will need rivets ordered to finish his repairs. There are no rivets to be found in Central Station, yet he had seen piles and cases of them back at the station he had only recently left. Marlow muses, "Three carriers could have brought all that was wanted to set that steamboat afloat." Marlow asks the brick-maker, who maintains a close relationship with the general manager, to make sure he gets rivets. In the meantime, the general manager's uncle emerges from the jungle. He is the leader of the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, a secretive group whose only goal seems to be to "tear treasure out of the bowels of the land"—in Marlow's view, a calling no higher than "burglars breaking into a safe."

Part II

One night, as Marlow falls in and out of sleep on the deck of his sidelined steamer, he hears two men below him in conversation. It is the general manager and his uncle, discussing Kurtz in less than glowing terms. The manager dislikes Kurtz for his brazen lack of respect, and fears Kurtz is plotting to take over his position. The uncle tells the manager that Kurtz—or another unnamed "pestilential fellow" thought to be in the district with Kurtz—should be hanged to serve as an example. The manager speaks contemptuously of Kurtz's notion that the stations should not only be for trade, but also for "humanising, improving, instructing." Marlow leaps to his feet and startles the two men, who then try to slip away coolly. A few days later, the uncle departs camp with the Eldorado Exploring Expedition. Much later, Marlow hears news that all of the expedition's donkeys have died. He reports dryly, "I know nothing as to the fate of the less valuable animals," meaning the uncle and his fellow explorers.

Marlow finishes repairing his boat; accompanied by the manager, a few pilgrims from the Central Station, and a crew of natives, he sails up the Congo toward Kurtz's camp. Marlow compares journeying upriver to "travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world," a place of stillness but not peace. Marlow describes it as "the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention." The journey takes two months, though Marlow keeps busy with the many challenges of navigating an unfamiliar river. His crew of natives, referred to as cannibals though they are never seen to eat people, prove to be hard workers. Marlow is especially fond of the fireman, who looks after the boiler that provides the boat's steam power. Marlow calls him "an improved specimen," but also compares the man to "a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs."

Fifty miles from Kurtz and his Inner Station, the boat reaches a hut with a stack of cut wood intended for them and a note warning the travelers to approach the station with caution. In the hut, Marlow finds a well-worn book devoted to various trivial matters of seamanship. He finds notes in the margins left by the previous owner, apparently written in some kind of code. He takes the book with him to serve as a diversion from the gloom of the enveloping jungle.

A few days later, with the boat within ten miles of the Inner Station, they become trapped in blinding fog and must stop. While waiting for the fog to lift, they hear a human cry from somewhere nearby. The pilgrims on board fear an attack by the local natives, but Marlow thinks the impenetrable fog will protect them. The fog eventually lifts and they continue, approaching within a mile and a half of Kurtz's Inner Station. There, the river is split by a shallow sandbank that forces Marlow to steer the boat close to shore.

At that moment, a flurry of arrows rain down upon the boat from the shore. The pilgrims blindly fire back with their guns. The native helmsman of the boat, also trying to return fire, is hit with a spear. Marlow blows the boat's steam whistle, and the attackers flee. The helmsman dies, leaving a pool of blood in the pilothouse that soaks Marlow's shoes. Marlow removes his shoes and tosses them into the river. The surprise attack leaves Marlow convinced that in a region of such violence, Kurtz must be dead. This thought fills Marlow with loneliness, even though he has never met the man. Marlow puts on dry slippers, pulls the dead helmsman's body out of the pilothouse, and throws him overboard to prevent the cannibals from eating him.

At last, they reach the Inner Station. On the shore, a young Russian man dressed in colorfully patched clothing, "like a harlequin," greets them. He already knows of the attack on the boat but tells them that everything is fine now. The manager and the pilgrims go to meet Kurtz. Marlow stays behind with the Russian and learns that he was the one who left the stack of wood at the hut downriver. Marlow shows him the book he took from the hut, and the Russian thanks him for returning it. Marlow realizes that the notes in the margin are not written in code, but in Russian. Marlow also learns from the Russian why his boat was attacked: the natives do not want the white men to take Kurtz away from them.

Part III

The Russian tells Marlow how he came to meet Kurtz and how Kurtz immediately captured his devotion. He also mentions that Kurtz enlisted the local tribe to help him acquire ivory—not through trade, but through violence. Kurtz, for all his lofty ideas, seems obsessed with obtaining ivory. Once, he even threatened to kill the Russian over a small piece of ivory the man received as a gift from a local chief. Even after this, the Russian remains as close to Kurtz as anyone can; he even cared for the man when he became ill. This time, however, Kurtz's illness is grave enough to demand more serious treatment.

Through his binoculars, Marlow surveys the hilltop house where Kurtz rests. He is shocked to find the surrounding fence posts topped by the decapitated heads of natives. The Russian defends Kurtz, claiming that these are the heads of rebels. Marlow notes, "Those rebellious heads looked very subdued to me on their sticks." Kurtz is brought from the house on a makeshift stretcher. Tribesmen swarm out from the jungle, surrounding the stretcher and its carriers. Kurtz sits up and shouts something that Marlow cannot hear, and the natives clear out. The men carrying Kurtz place him in a small cabin on the boat. Suddenly, an exquisitely decorated native woman appears on the shore next to the steamer; she stares intently at the men on board, then walks away. The Russian says that if she had tried to board the ship he would have tried to shoot her and that she was acquainted with Kurtz.

Inside Kurtz's cabin, Marlow hears Kurtz arguing with the manager. Kurtz insists that the manager has not come to save him but to save the ivory. He also insists that he is not so ill that he should be removed from his station. The manager steps out of the cabin and complains to Marlow that Kurtz has ruined the region for the Company, doing far more harm than good.

The Russian tells Marlow that he trusts him to look after Kurtz and will take his leave. He also informs Marlow that it was Kurtz who ordered the natives to attack the steamboat as they approached. Kurtz had hoped to scare the manager and his men and send them back to Central Station thinking he must already be

dead. Marlow gives the Russian gun cartridges, tobacco, and a pair of shoes, and the colorfully dressed man disappears into the night.

After midnight, Marlow is awakened by drumming and a burst of ritualistic cries. He checks Kurtz's cabin and discovers him missing. Marlow goes ashore and heads toward the drumming in search of Kurtz. Just thirty yards from the closest native fire, he catches up to Kurtz, crawling toward it like a man under the spell of great magic. Kurtz warns him to go away. Marlow first threatens Kurtz and then flatters him in an attempt to get him back to the boat. Kurtz speaks of his grand plans and the manager's attempts to ruin him, but much to Marlow's relief, Kurtz returns to the boat.

The steamer departs at noon the next day, and a thousand natives line the shore to watch the "splashing, thumping, fierce river-demon beating the water with its terrible tail and breathing black smoke into the air" as it carries Kurtz away. Kurtz is moved into the pilothouse, which is better ventilated than his previous cabin. The native woman appears along the shore, and the entire tribe lets loose a chorus of cries. The pilgrims aboard the ship ready their guns, so Marlow blasts the steam whistle to disperse the natives before the pilgrims can start trouble.

Traveling with the river's current, their pace away from Kurtz's camp is twice as fast as it was on their trip there, but Kurtz's condition quickly worsens. The ship breaks down and must stop for repairs. Kurtz, sensing his end might be near, gives Marlow his personal papers and a photograph of his intended bride back in Europe. One night, when Marlow checks in on him, Kurtz tells him he is waiting to die. Marlow dismisses the remark, but Kurtz, seemingly lost in some vision, softly cries, "The horror! The horror!" Marlow leaves him alone and joins the other pilgrims in the mess-room for dinner. Soon after, the manager's assistant enters and informs them that Kurtz is dead. The pilgrims rush to see, but Marlow stays in the mess-room. The pilgrims bury Kurtz the next day in a muddy hole.

Marlow keeps Kurtz's documents with him all the way back to Europe, despite the manager's attempts to confiscate them as property of the Company. He meets with several people, including Kurtz's cousin—to whom he gives some of Kurtz's family letters—and a journalist who considers himself one of Kurtz's colleagues. The journalist remarks that Kurtz would have made a great leader for an extremist political party. When Marlow asks which party, the journalist responds, "Any party." Marlow gives the man one of Kurtz's reports intended for publication, and the journalist departs, satisfied.

The last of Kurtz's belongings are meant for his fiancée, and Marlow visits her to deliver them. Although by this time it has been a full year since Kurtz's death, she still wears black and appears to be in mourning. The two discuss Kurtz's best qualities, and his intended bride calls his death a loss to all the world. The woman begs Marlow to tell her Kurtz's last words. Knowing she seeks comfort more than truth, Marlow lies and says, "The last word he pronounced was—your name." The woman breaks down, claiming that she knew this all along.

Marlow ends his tale. The narrator looks out over the Thames, which, under a dark and foreboding sky, appears to flow "into the heart of an immense darkness."

THEMES

Imperialism and Oppression

Heart of Darkness directly addresses the issue of imperialism, or the practice of taking control of other lands and people to extend the territory under a nation's rule. In the novel, Marlow's employer—known only as the Company—seems to operate with the approval of the Belgian rulers. The agents of the Company enslave and murder the native people of the Congo and seize control of any area they see fit. Imperialism is sometimes justified with the argument that civilized nations are morally obligated to look after "savage" nations and show them how to improve themselves. This idea is often referred to as the White Man's Burden, after a Rudyard Kipling poem of the same title. The poem, published in the United States in 1899, was meant to rally Americans to support their government's takeover of the Philippines. In the name of progress, these less-industrialized countries are often robbed of their natural resources, and their citizens are oppressed or enslaved.

On his way to the mouth of the Congo, Marlow encounters a gunship firing into the jungle in an attempt to subdue a native tribe,

referred to for some unknown reason as "enemies." Once he reaches the Congo, Marlow sees a group of native men conscripted as prisoners to do the menial work the Company agents require. Some natives are treated as "employees," and paid with bits of wire and other useless decorative items. Often, though, the natives are simply seen as an impediment to progress and are killed.

In *Heart of Darkness*, it is clear that the main reason for the Company's presence in the Congo is to obtain ivory. The agents at the Central Station spend their days plotting ways to get it, and envy Kurtz not just for his cleverness, but also for his ability to retrieve more ivory than anyone else in the region. For all his notions of lifting up the native people through education, Kurtz seems more obsessed with finding ivory than with any of his other grand plans.

Although Marlow often implies that the natives are in many ways inferior to the white men of the Company, he also seems to disapprove of the despicable treatment of the native people. When he sails away from the Inner Station with Kurtz, for example, he blasts his steam whistle in an attempt to keep the white pilgrims aboard from shooting the natives on the shore.

Dehumanization

Throughout the novel, Marlow describes the native people of the Congo in ways that make them seem less than human. At the first Company station, he sees black people moving about "like ants." The men of a chain gang have rags around their waists "and the short ends behind waggled to and fro like tails;" these same men also have joints "like knots in a rope." The dying men he encounters at the station are nothing more than "black shapes" and "bundles of acute angles." He often describes groups of natives by collectively referring to a specific body part: the whites of their eyeballs, the flaring of their nostrils, the whirling of their limbs. The natives who attack the steamboat as the pilgrims near the Inner Station are seen only as "naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eyes." The effect is to cause the reader to never picture the natives as fully human.

Some critics argue that Marlow's descriptions are meant to reflect his ultimate inability to understand the native people as his peers. Although he clearly acknowledges that they are indeed human, he quickly notes that "that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman." It takes a true man, he argues, to even admit to feeling a "remote kinship" with the natives. Viewing them as peers is simply not conceivable. This was a fairly common feeling in nineteenth-century Europe. In the words of philanthropist Albert Schweitzer, as quoted by author Chinua Achebe in "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*": "The African is indeed my brother but my junior brother."

Prejudice

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow makes many assumptions about the native people of the Congo. Although he admits their basic humanness, he often ascribes to them superstitions that he does not know exist. He describes his fireman as believing an evil spirit lurks inside the boiler of the ship; later, he begins to wonder if that description, meant to illustrate a native's lack of scientific understanding, might not be accurate after all. Marlow also takes for granted the fact that native workers are good only so far as they have been instructed—but even this is unnatural, and he muses that the fireman "ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank" with the other natives. His prejudices extend beyond Africa, however: when he finds a book on seamanship with unreadable notes in the margins, he assumes them to be the ciphers of a madman—never even considering the possibility that they might just be written in another alphabet, like the one used by Russians.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Imperialism in Africa

Heart of Darkness was published at the height of Britain's second great push to expand its worldwide colonies, popularly known as the "New Imperialism." One of the main targets of European colonial growth during this period was Africa. Until the mid-nineteenth century, all but the northernmost and southernmost parts of the continent had remained free of foreign interest due to its harsh and mysterious environment. However, the explorations of David Livingstone affirmed Africa's potential wealth of resources and the real possibility of obtaining that wealth.

The nations of Europe moved to stake their own claims, with England and France ignoring much of central Africa in favor of mineral-rich southern areas and important trade ports in the north. This left King Léopold II of Belgium to claim nearly one million square miles of the Congo as part of his domain. A conference was held in Berlin in 1884–1885 so that European countries could lay down ground rules for dividing up the great continent of Africa with a minimum of conflict among them.

These African territories were plagued by decades of abuse and exploitation on the part of their occupying nations. As European public opinion turned against the notion of imperialism, many of these territories were eventually allowed to form their own independent governments. Today, most African countries—even those who have broken free from colonial rule—are still defined by those boundaries set forth by the empires of Europe. The loss of resources and other damages inflicted upon Africa by colonial rule have been responsible, at least in part, for the continent's relatively slow economic development.

The Congo Free State

When the nations of Europe met in Berlin in 1884–1885 to discuss the colonization of Africa, King Léopold II of Belgium was granted private control of the region he had already "bought" through trade with tribal chiefs. As privately held land, the area—which was seventy-five times larger than Belgium itself—was not under the direct control of the Belgian government. This was allowed because Léopold was believed to be a humanitarian, and he promised to hand control of the territory over to its own people as soon as they demonstrated the ability to govern themselves. The area was named the Congo Free State.

Léopold offered leases that allowed different companies to control certain markets in an area. One lease, for example, would allow a company exclusive rights to all ivory within a specified region. The lack of an official government and the institution of a commission system of payment for district officials that was tied directly to profits meant that company agents could use whatever means necessary to extract riches from a region, including slavery, torture, and murder. It was not uncommon for agents who had not met profit goals to provide baskets of severed hands of Congolese natives in an attempt to make up for the shortfall.

This situation continued into the first years of the twentieth century, with the true nature of the atrocities finally coming to light in Europe at about the same time *Heart of Darkness* was published in book form. With public opinion against him, Léopold turned over control of the Congo Free State to the Belgian government. Belgium maintained control of the region for over fifty years, until it gained independent rule in 1960. The ensuing decades saw numerous internal conflicts, culminating in the current Transitional Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which is attempting to establish a truly democratic, constitution-based government for the region.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Heart of Darkness was first published in book form in 1902 as one-third of a story collection titled *Youth*. The critical response to the book was uniformly favorable, with many considering the book one of Joseph Conrad's finest works. Most critics recognized *Heart of Darkness* as the standout piece of the book. Edward Garnett, in a review for *Academy and Literature* titled "Mr. Conrad's New Book," refers to the story as "the high-water mark of the author's talent," and a "psychological masterpiece." Hugh Clifford, in "The Art of Mr. Joseph Conrad" for *The Spectator*, also notes that the story seems "to represent Mr. Conrad at his very best." An unsigned reviewer for *Athenaeum* also singles out *Heart of Darkness* as "a big and thoughtful conception." Clifford also offers general praise for the author, stating that his talent "is surely not far removed from genius," while an unsigned reviewer for the *Manchester Guardian* refers to Conrad as "one of the greatest of sea-writers."

Some of these reviews by the author's contemporaries, viewed with modern eyes, provide insight into the culture in which Conrad lived and wrote. For example, despite the story's seemingly clear condemnation of the horrors that accompany imperialism, the aforementioned reviewer for the *Manchester Guardian* warns the reader, "It must not be supposed that Mr. Conrad makes attack upon colonisation, expansion, even upon Imperialism." In addition, despite modern views of Conrad's treatment of

native Congolese people in the story, Garnett's review in *Academy and Literature* notes "no prejudice one way or the other" on the part of the author. However, seventy-five years later, Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian author of *Things Fall Apart*, writes in "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* that Conrad's "obvious racism" has not been addressed by past reviews and needs to be confronted: "the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot."

While *Heart of Darkness* was frequently singled out as the jewel of the *Youth* collection, many reviewers also felt that its grimness and harsh subject matter might put off some readers. While Garnett lavishes his highest praise on *Heart of Darkness*, he acknowledges that the other two stories in the collection "will be more popular." The reviewer for the *Manchester Guardian* makes this comment about the story: "Even to those who are most impressed an excitement so sustained and prolonged, in which we are braced to encounter so much that menaces and appals [*sic*], must be something of a strain."

An unsigned reviewer for *The Monthly Review* shares similar feelings, but applies them to the whole collection by calling *Youth* a "most depressing book." The anonymous reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* (London) concludes a brief review of the stories by asserting, "'The End of the Tether,' the last of the three, is the longest and best." Though his first assertion may be factual (the story "The End of the Tether" is indeed the longest), history has shown his final claim to be an opinion squarely in the minority.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

Two electronic versions of the book, compatible with Adobe Acrobat Reader and Microsoft Reader, were released by Amazon Press in 2000. Both are available from www.amazon.com.

An unabridged audio version of the book was released on CD by Tantor Media in 2002. It is narrated by Scott Brick.

An unabridged audio version of the book, narrated by Richard Thomas, was released by Dove Audio in 1993. This version is currently available as a digital download through www.audible.com.

Director Francis Ford Coppola updated the story and locale of *Heart of Darkness* for his 1979 movie masterpiece, *Apocalypse Now*. Coppola's film is set in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War, but follows the basic plot of the book closely. It stars Marlon Brando as Colonel Kurtz and Martin Sheen as Captain Willard. It is available on DVD and VHS from Paramount Home Entertainment.

A direct film adaptation of the novel was made for television in 1994 by director Nicholas Roeg. The movie stars John Malkovich and Tim Roth and was released on VHS from Turner Home Entertainment.

CRITICISM

Chinua Achebe

In the following essay excerpt, Nigerian author Chinua Achebe asserts that Conrad's Heart of Darkness*, due to the objectionable attitude it conveys about black people, is an offensive book not worthy of its "classic" status among literary scholars or readers.*

Heart of Darkness projects the image of Africa as "the other world," the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality. The book opens on the River Thames, tranquil, resting peacefully "at the decline of day after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks." But the actual story will take place on the River Congo, the very antithesis of the Thames. The River Congo is quite decidedly not a River Emeritus. It has rendered no service and enjoys no old-age pension. We are told that "going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginning of the world."

Is Conrad saying then that these two rivers are very different, one good, the other bad? Yes,

but that is not the real point. It is not the differentness that worries Conrad but the lurking hint of kinship, of common ancestry. For the Thames too "has been one of the dark places of the earth." It conquered its darkness, of course, and is now in daylight and at peace. But if it were to visit its primordial relative, the Congo, it would run the terrible risk of hearing grotesque echoes of its own forgotten darkness, and falling victim to an avenging recrudescence of the mindless frenzy of the first beginnings.

The most interesting and revealing passages in *Heart of Darkness* are, however, about people.

It is clearly not part of Conrad's purpose to confer language on the "rudimentary souls" of Africa. In place of speech they made "a violent babble of uncouth sounds." They "exchanged short grunting phrases" even among themselves. But most of the time they were too busy with their frenzy. There are two occasions in the book, however, when Conrad departs somewhat from his practice and confers speech, even English speech, on the savages. The first occurs when cannibalism gets the better of them:

> "Catch 'im," he snapped, with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp white teeth—"catch 'im. Give 'im to us." "To you, eh?" I asked; "what would you do with them?" "Eat 'im!" he said curtly.

The other occasion was the famous announcement: "Mistah Kurtz—he dead."

At first sight these instances might be mistaken for unexpected acts of generosity from Conrad. In reality they constitute some of his best assaults. In the case of the cannibals the incomprehensible grunts that had thus far served them for speech suddenly proved inadequate for Conrad's purpose of letting the European glimpse the unspeakable craving in their hearts. Weighing the necessity for consistency in the portrayal of the dumb brutes against the sensational advantages of securing their conviction by clear, unambiguous evidence issuing out of their own mouths, Conrad chose the latter. As for the announcement of Mr. Kurtz's death by the "insolent black head in the doorway," what better or more appropriate *finis* could be written to the horror story of that wayward child of civilization who wilfully had given his soul to the powers of darkness and "taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land" than the proclamation of his physical death by the forces he had joined?

It might be contended, of course, that the attitude to the African in *Heart of Darkness* is not Conrad's but that of his fictional narrator, Marlow, and that far from endorsing it Conrad might indeed be holding it up to irony and criticism. Certainly, Conrad appears to go to considerable pains to set up layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of his story. He has, for example, a narrator behind a narrator. The primary narrator is Marlow, but his account is given to us through the filter of a second, shadowy person. But if Conrad's intention is to draw a cordon sanitaire between himself and the moral and psychological *malaise* of his narrator, his care seems to me totally wasted because he neglects to hint, clearly and adequately, at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters. It would not have been beyond Conrad's power to make that provision if he had thought it necessary. Conrad seems to me to approve of Marlow, with only minor reservations—a fact reinforced by the similarities between their two careers.

Marlow comes through to us not only as a witness of truth, but one holding those advanced and humane views appropriate to the English liberal tradition which required all Englishmen of decency to be deeply shocked by atrocities in Bulgaria or the Congo of King Leopold of the Belgians or wherever.

Thus, Marlow is able to toss out such bleeding-heart sentiments as these:

> They were all dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest.

The kind of liberalism espoused here by Marlow/Conrad touched all the best minds of the age in England, Europe and America. It took different forms in the minds of different people but almost always managed to sidestep the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people.

When Marlow's African helmsman falls down with a spear in his heart he gives his white master one final disquieting look:

> And the intimate profundity of that look he gave me when he received his hurt remains to this day in my memory—like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment.

It is important to note that Conrad, careful as ever with his words, is concerned not so much about "distant kinship" as about someone *laying a claim* on it. The black man lays a claim on the white man which is well-nigh intolerable. It is the laying of this claim which frightens and at the same time fascinates Conrad, "the thought of their humanity—like yours ... Ugly."

The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked. Students of *Heart of Darkness* will often tell you that Conrad is concerned not so much with Africa as with the deterioration of one European mind caused by solitude and sickness. They will point out to you that Conrad is, if anything, less charitable to the Europeans in the story than he is to the natives, that the point of the story is to ridicule Europe's civilizing mission in Africa. A Conrad student informed me in Scotland that Africa is merely a setting for the disintegration of the mind of Mr. Kurtz.

Which is partly the point. Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind? But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot. I do not doubt Conrad's great talents. Even *Heart of Darkness* has its memorably good passages and moments:

> The reaches opened before us and closed behind, as if the forest had stepped leisurely across the water to bar the way for our return.

Its exploration of the minds of the European characters is often penetrating and full of insight. But all that has been more than fully discussed in the last fifty years. His obvious racism has, however, not been addressed. And it is high time it was!

Whatever Conrad's problems were, you might say he is now safely dead. Quite true. Unfortunately, his heart of darkness plagues us still. Which is why an offensive and deplorable book can be described by a serious scholar as "among the half-dozen greatest short novels in the English language." And why it is today perhaps the most commonly prescribed novel in twentieth-century literature courses in English departments of American universities.

There are two probable grounds on which what I have said so far may be contested. The first is that it is no concern of fiction to please people about whom it is written. I will go along with that. But I am not talking about pleasing people. I am talking about a book which parades in the most vulgar fashion prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities in the past and continues to do so in many ways and many places today. I am talking about a story in which the very humanity of black people is called in question.

Secondly, I may be challenged on the grounds of actuality. Conrad, after all, did sail down the Congo in 1890 when my own father was still a babe in arms. How could I stand up more than fifty years after his death and purport to contradict him? My answer is that as a sensible man I will not accept just any traveller's tales solely on the grounds that I have not made the journey myself. I will not trust the evidence even of a man's very eyes when I suspect them to be as jaundiced as Conrad's. And we also happen to know that Conrad was, in the words of his biographer, Bernard C. Meyer, "notoriously inaccurate in the rendering of his own history."

As I said earlier Conrad did not originate the image of Africa which we find in his book. It was and is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination and Conrad merely brought the peculiar gifts of his own mind to bear on it. For reasons which can certainly use close psychological inquiry, the West seems to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilization and to have a need for constant reassurance by comparison with Africa. If Europe, advancing in civilization, could cast a backward glance periodically at Africa trapped

in primordial barbarity it could say with faith and feeling: There go I but for the grace of God. Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray—a carrier on to whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate. Consequently, Africa is something to be avoided just as the picture has to be hidden away to safeguard the man's jeopardous integrity. Keep away from Africa, or else! Mr. Kurtz of *Heart of Darkness* should have heeded that warning and the prowling horror in his heart would have kept its place, chained to its lair. But he foolishly exposed himself to the wild irresistible allure of the jungle and lo! the darkness found him out.

In my original conception of this essay I had thought to conclude it nicely on an appropriately positive note in which I would suggest from my privileged position in African and Western cultures some advantages the West might derive from Africa once it rid its mind of old prejudices and began to look at Africa not through a haze of distortions and cheap mystifications but quite simply as a continent of people—not angels, but not rudimentary souls either—just people, often highly gifted people and often strikingly successful in their enterprise with life and society. But as I thought more about the stereotype image, about its grip and pervasiveness, about the wilful tenacity with which the West holds it to its heart; when I thought of the West's television and cinema and newspapers, about books read in its schools and out of school, of churches preaching to empty pews about the need to send help to the heathen in Africa, I realized that no easy optimism was possible. And there was in any case something totally wrong in offering bribes to the West in return for its good opinion of Africa. Ultimately the abandonment of unwholesome thoughts must be its own and only reward. Although I have used the word "wilful" a few times here to characterize the West's view of Africa, it may well be that what is happening at this stage is more akin to reflex action than calculated malice. Which does not make the situation more but less hopeful.

Although the work of redressing which needs to be done may appear too daunting, I believe it is not one day too soon to begin. Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth. But the victims of racist slander who for centuries have had to live with the inhumanity it makes them heir to have always known better than any casual visitor, even when he comes loaded with the gifts of a Conrad.

Source: Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,*" in *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*, 1989.

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