

Heart of Darkness

Joseph Conrad, 1899 — A Study Guide





Brief Biography: Joseph Conrad

- Born Josef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, Poland
- Orphaned by age 12; parents exiled to Siberia by Russian Tsar
- Age 17: sailed to Marseilles, began life at sea
- 1886: British citizen; anglicized name to Joseph Conrad
- Sailed Belgian Congo on a steamship — basis for *Heart of Darkness*
- First novel *Almayer's Folly*, 1894
- Masterworks: *Heart of Darkness* (1899), *Lord Jim* (1900), *Nostromo* (1904)
- Died 1924.



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Scramble for Africa

During the last two decades of the 19th century, European nations battled each other for wealth in the 'scramble for Africa,' colonizing the continent under the guise of 'civilizing' its peoples. In reality, colonizers were driven solely by greed, with no regard for human life. Among the most brutal colonies was the Belgian Congo, property of King Leopold II. In 1890, Joseph Conrad worked as a steamship pilot there — experiences that directly shaped *Heart of Darkness*.

Heart of Darkness

A journey into the Congo.
Confronting the unknown within.

Plot Summary: A Timeline

1 — The Thames, London

Narrator & Marlow aboard a ship.
Marlow begins his story.

3 — Outer Station, Africa

Grove of Death, the Chief
Accountant. First whispers of Kurtz.

5 — River Journey & Inner Station

Fog, native attack, helmsman killed.
Russian Trader reveals Kurtz's
monstrous transformation. Spiked
heads.

2 — The Company HQ

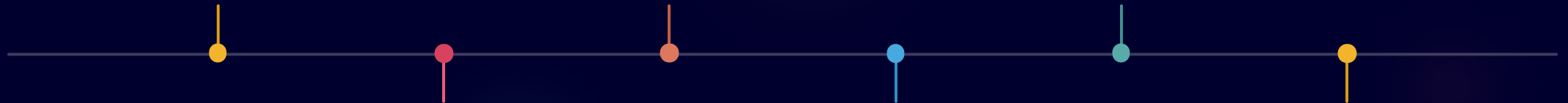
Marlow hired; visits the "whited
sepulcher" headquarters in Europe.

4 — Central Station

Ship sunk; 3-month repair. The
hollow Manager & the Brickmaker.
Obsession with Kurtz grows.

6 — Kurtz's End & Return

Kurtz retrieved; dying words "*The
horror! The horror!*" Marlow lies to
the Intended. The Thames leads
"into the heart of an immense
darkness."





Key Facts



Full Title: Heart of Darkness



Published: 1899



Literary Period: Victorianism /
Modernism



Genre: Colonial literature;
Quest literature



Setting: Thames River mouth (framing);
Belgian Congo & unnamed European
city (Marlow's story), 1890s.



Climax: Confrontation between
Marlow and Kurtz in the jungle



Antagonist: Kurtz



Point of View: First person – both
Marlow and the Unnamed Narrator



Extra Credit: Heart of Darkness is
the source for the film Apocalypse Now,
which shifts the story to Vietnam to
explore the hypocrisy of the
American war effort.



Characters: Major & Minor

Major Characters

Marlow

Philosophical, skeptical seaman; narrator of the Congo journey

Kurtz

Brilliant, ambitious – hollow at the core; becomes monstrous god to natives

General Manager

Untalented, hollow, power-driven; fears Kurtz

Russian Trader

Naïve wanderer in harlequin jacket; idolizes Kurtz

Narrator

Relays Marlow's story; affected by it

Minor Characters

- **Kurtz's Intended:** Idealistic fiancée, mourns Kurtz
- **Marlow's Aunt:** Well-connected, idealistic about colonialism
- **Brickmaker:** Spy, never makes bricks; "papier-mâché Mephistopheles"
- **Chief Accountant:** Impeccably groomed; hides hatred
- **Helmsman:** Native pilot, killed by spear
- **African Woman:** Kurtz's mistress; savage and superb
- **Fresleven:** Pilot whose death opened Marlow's position
- **Eldorado Expedition:** Greedy, cowardly pilgrims led by General Manager's uncle

Themes



Colonialism:

Europeans used noble ideals to mask brutal extraction of African wealth. Heart of Darkness exposes this hypocrisy.



Hollowness of Civilization:

European civility is superficial — a mask over dark impulses. Kurtz's collapse proves civilization does not run deep.



Lack of Truth:

Marlow's quest fails; Kurtz is the greatest monster. At the heart of everything lies only darkness — truth is unknowable.



Work:

The only honest reality. Work keeps Marlow sane; laziness signals moral collapse.



Racism:

The novel attacks colonialism yet treats Africans as primitively innocent rather than fully human — a patronizing racism.

Symbols & Motifs (In Order of Importance)



1. **Dark & White** — Whiteness = blindness (white fog, whited sepulcher);
Darkness = unknowable, primitive truth in all men.



2. **The Sepulchral City** — Beautiful white exterior masks hollow, corrupt European civilization.



3. **The River** — Connects civilization to darkness;
the Thames and Congo mirror each other.



4. **Ivory** — False god; object of idolatrous greed that
exposes colonialism's true motive.



5. **Women** — Symbolize civilization's beautiful delusions;
blind to hollow corruption (Marlow's Aunt, Kurtz's Intended).

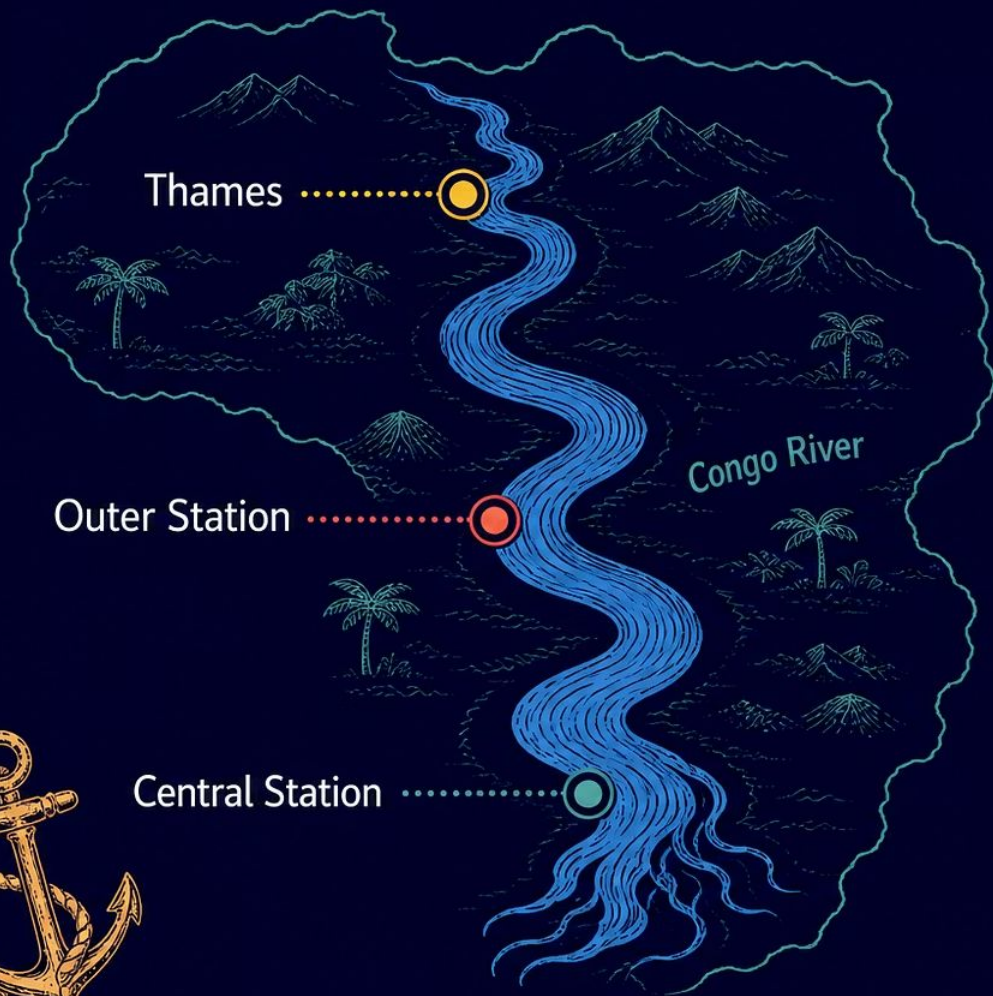


6. **Work & Rivets** — The only 'real' things;
honest labor as moral anchor.



7. **Kurtz's Eloquence** — Magnificent speech as mask
over inner hollowness.

Summary & Analysis — Part 1



Hollowness

The Narrator romanticizes English colonialism. Marlow counters: England itself was once a dark place. Civilization is a veneer.

Work

Marlow dislikes asking favors; goes by 'his own road and on his own legs.' Work is honesty. The Company headquarters is a whited sepulcher — beautiful outside, empty within.

Colonialism

Outer Station: rusting machinery, Grove of Death, French warship firing into a continent for no reason. The Chief Accountant hides hatred behind perfect grooming: 'one comes to hate these savages— hate them to death.'

Summary & Analysis — Parts 2 & 3

Part 2

Central Station: The Eldorado Expedition arrives — greedy, cowardly, hollow (named after a myth of false riches). Upriver: white blinding fog surrounds the ship while natives scream (symbol: civilization blinds itself). Native attack; helmsman killed. Kurtz is alive — but has made himself a god, spiked heads on stakes, ordered the attack. He is *"hollow at the core."* The wilderness *"whispered to him things about himself."*

Part 3

Kurtz's dying words: *"The horror! The horror!"* — a moral judgment on himself and all humanity. Marlow admires the honesty of it. Back in Europe: Marlow lies to Kurtz's Intended, telling her Kurtz's last words were her name. The Thames now leads *"into the heart of an immense darkness."* Civilization's blindness is complete.

Key Quotes in Chronological Order

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Narrator — Part 1

"The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires."

Analysis: Romanticizes colonialism — soon undermined by Marlow's counter-narrative.

”

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Marlow — Part 1

"And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth."

Analysis: England itself is dark; parallels Roman invasion to European colonialism.

”

“

Kurtz (written) — Part 2

"Exterminate all the brutes!"

Analysis: The postscript that destroys his idealistic treatise — hollowness exposed.

”

“

Kurtz — Part 3

"The horror! The horror!"

Analysis: Marlow calls this a moral victory — Kurtz judged himself and the world. The only honest statement in the novel.

”

"The tranquil waterway...seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness."

— Narrator, closing

A Key Double Entendre

"We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a monster, but there – there you could look at a thing, monstrous and free."

The Wild Congo

The quote warns of the untamed nature of the Congo: its wilderness, its peoples, its raw and ungoverned power. To European eyes, the "monster" is usually **shackled – contained by civilization**. Here, it roams free, unbound and incomprehensible to the colonial gaze.

Foreshadowing Kurtz

The quote foreshadows Kurtz – stripped of civilization's constraints after time in the jungle, **consumed by the same wildness** he once kept in check. He becomes the metaphorical "heart of darkness" the title alludes to: a European who, unshackled, becomes the very monster.

 **Synthesis:** This double entendre may be considered the key message of the novel – that the "monster" is not Africa, but the *darkness latent in all men*, freed when civilization's veneer is stripped away.

Relevance Today

“ *The conquest of the earth...is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.* ”

— Marlow.



Colonial Legacy:

Heart of *Darkness* anticipates modern debates on imperialism, extractive capitalism, and the damage done to colonized peoples and colonizers alike. *Apocalypse Now* (1979) transposed the story to Vietnam, proving its themes universal.



The Hollowness Problem:

Conrad's insight — that civilization is a mask over darker impulses — resonates in every era of political hypocrisy, propaganda, and moral failure. The question 'what holds you back?' is as urgent now as in 1899.

