

WOLFNOTE SUMMARY OF...

JOSEPH CONRAD'S

HEART OF DARKNESS



CONTEXT

The novel begins in London on board the British ship 'Nellie' which is anchored in the River Thames.

An anonymous narrator listens to Marlow's tale of his journey up the Congo River together with the Director of Companies, the Accountant, and the Lawyer.

What we read is the narrator's recollections of Marlow's tale.

From a very young age Marlow was always fascinated with maps and in particular Africa with its large areas of unexplored territory. Through his aunt who has contacts with a Belgian Company, he is able to secure a job as a Steamboat Captain to ferry supplies on the River Congo.

He eventually arrives at the Company's Outer Station in the Congo.

He witnesses a scene of desolation, waste, brutality and chaos.

While the local natives suffer under the yoke of colonialism, the dominant whites enjoy a comfortable existence apart from the rigors of disease and hot climate. At least they have plenty of food.

He has a discussion with the Accountant who is dressed immaculately and he first learns about their best Agent, Kurtz who is in charge of the Company's Inner Station. Kurtz obtains more quality ivory than all the other agents put together.

Marlow has to travel overland for some two hundred miles to reach the Company's Central Station where he will join his steamboat. On arrival he finds that it has been wrecked and has sunk. He will have to wait some time at the Central Station until the boat is salvaged and repaired.

Unlike the other whites Marlow enjoys hard work and he is determined to have his boat up and running as soon as possible. He was also encouraged to come here by his aunt to help civilize the natives and bring them salvation. He is also not concerned with personal gain out of his visit to this Dark Continent.

There is a suspicion that his steamboat was deliberately grounded with a view to putting pressure on Kurtz regarding the transportation of the ivory he has collected. However, Kurtz arranges for the ivory to be transported by canoe, but for reasons unknown he only accompanies the ivory to the point where it is safe and then he returns up-river to his Station.

Marlow also meets the Brick maker whose position seems totally unnecessary, as he does not have any materials for making bricks, another example of waste.

The local Manager's uncle arrives leading the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, which is another ruse for exploiting the land of its resources.

Marlow overhears the Manager and his uncle conspiring to bring about Kurtz's downfall. The Manager fears for his own position, seeing Kurtz as a rival, but the uncle calms him by saying that the jungle will solve all their problems.

Finally Marlow's boat is repaired and they travel up to Kurtz's Station.

On the way they discover a stock of wood left for them by a Russian Trader who works with Kurtz, with a note telling them to be careful. Marlow also finds an English book and keeps this as a tenuous link with civilization.

Just below Kurtz's camp the steamboat is attacked by natives and the Helmsman is killed. It is only when Marlow sounds the boat's whistle that the natives retreat into the jungle.

They reach the Inner Station, which is also in a run-down state, but the natives have not attacked it. Around Kurtz's house are stakes with the heads of rebels impaled on them. Marlow meets the Russian Trader who is dressed in a multi-colored patched coat and looks like a harlequin. The Russian Trader has become a great admirer of Kurtz, who has broadened the Trader's mind. He tells Marlow that Kurtz had arranged the attack on the steamboat hoping that this would deter the Company's men from traveling further.

The Russian advises Marlow that Kurtz has been very ill and he has nursed him through two severe illnesses already.

Kurtz suddenly appears, being borne on a stretcher, and at the same time a large group of natives emerges from the jungle fearing that Kurtz will be taken away from them. However, Kurtz waves an emaciated arm towards them and they disband. He is taken on board the steamboat and meets with the Manager and they have a heated debate.

Marlow is shocked at Kurtz's appearance, but strangely sides with him, even though he is clearly a tyrant. Kurtz, however, still has the power of life and death and he would rather be Kurtz's ally than side with the Company's men.

Kurtz reads his mail, which was brought up on the steamboat, and there is a letter there concerning Marlow. He feels he can trust him and Kurtz gives Marlow some personal papers and reports to avoid them falling into the hands of the Manager.

Despite the protests from the natives, the boat leaves next day with Kurtz on board who dies shortly afterwards with the words 'The horror! The horror!' on his lips, symbolizing his realization that he has degenerated from an upstanding European to a primitive despot.

Marlow returns to Europe relieved that he has not succumbed to the temptations of the Dark Heart of Africa unlike Kurtz.

From the reports received from those who knew Kurtz in Europe he was a multi-talented genius. Marlow does not have the heart to tell Kurtz's fiancée the truth about his degeneration and he tells her that Kurtz's last words were her name.

The Author

Joseph Conrad was born Teodor Jozef Konrad Korzeniowski on 3rd December 1857 in the Polish Ukraine. He did not learn English until he was 21 years old.

His father was a respected literary figure in Russia who was exiled to Siberia by the Russian Government. The whole family went with him to Siberia and Conrad's mother died when he was only eight.

His father sent him to his uncle's home in Krakow to be educated.

Conrad was never to see his father again.

Conrad eventually made his way to Marseilles where he spent the next twenty odd years as a sailor. He worked on British ships and in 1886 he became a British subject.

He started writing in 1889 and his first novel was called 'Almayer's Folly'.

He became a Captain of a steamship in the Belgian Congo where he took detailed notes which would form the basis of his greatest work.

He wrote many other major works including 'Lord Jim', 'The Secret Agent' and 'Nostromo'.

He had a successful literary career and lived happily with his wife and children until his death in 1924.

'The Heart of Darkness' represents a radical departure from the rest of his works, which requires a lot of work from the reader, as it is intensely psychological and analytical.

It is clear that this book is semi-autobiographical touching on experiences that Conrad had himself.

Main Characters

The Anonymous Narrator

He recounts the story of Marlow's adventure in Africa. We know nothing about him and the reader has to judge how well the narrator recalls Marlow's story.

Charlie Marlow

Conrad's novel is mainly concerned with Marlow's story of his journey to Africa up the River Congo to the Heart of Darkest in 1900.

He has obtained a position as steamboat Captain whose first task is to persuade Kurtz to return from his outpost to his Company's main office. The excesses of the white colonists shock Marlow and he is forced to radically change his views on imperialism.

Kurtz

He is the best ivory trader that the Company has and he works out of the Inner Station. He is extremely well educated and is described as a universal genius, but he has degenerated to a tyrant due to the temptations that this Dark Continent provides.

The natives regard him as a god and Marlow has great difficulty in persuading him to return on his boat. The harsh environment has taken its toll on Kurtz and he does not survive the voyage.

The Manager

He is based at the Company's Central Station and he oversees the Company's activities in the Congo. He seems to be almost unique out of the white people in this land in that he does not succumb to the local diseases and harsh climate. The Manager tries to undermine Kurtz's position as he fears that Kurtz is after his job.

The Chief Accountant

He is also based at the Central Station and always somehow is able to keep himself spotlessly clean, but has no feelings for the local inhabitants who suffer under the yoke of imperialism.

The Brick maker

He is the Manager's favorite and is considered by the other Agents to be the Manager's spy. He never actually produces any bricks and is supposedly waiting on the materials being delivered. He is a very shallow person.

The Pilgrims

They are based at the Central Station and are incompetent, greedy Agents. They are keen to be assigned to one of the outposts so that they can trade for ivory and exploit the environment. They are uncaring and treat the natives harshly.

The Cannibals

They are hired as crewmembers of the steamer and are surprisingly levelheaded and responsible. Marlow respects them for their restraint and the respect they show the white people despite the harshness of their surroundings.

The Russian Trader

He is totally loyal to Kurtz and is a colorful character and a true adventurer of Africa. He wears a multi-colored patched coat, which gives him the appearance of a harlequin. He can be described as Kurtz's court jester.

In Europe

Summary

The Heart of Darkness opens on board a pleasure ship called 'Nellie' which is anchored on the River Thames, London.

The ship lies just east of the city and it is sunset.

Five men unwind on the deck, the Director of Companies who is the Captain, the Lawyer, the Accountant, the narrator of our tale, and Marlow.

The novel tells the story of Marlow's journey to Africa which is relayed to us by the unnamed narrator, so what follows now is the narrator's recollection of Marlow's journey to Africa as told on this boat.

The novel is, therefore, a story within a story and this form is called a frame tale.

As darkness begins to fall, the men indulge in small talk during which time Marlow says that London was once a dark place on earth and that the Romans, when they came to Britain, regarded the invasion as a conquering of a wild wilderness, yet now London is the center of a great empire itself and is often the setting-off point for journeys of exploration and discovery.

Marlow decides to tell them a story about how he once was a Captain of a steamship going up the Congo River. Maps had always fascinated him, in particular those of Africa, which contained large areas marked 'unexplored'.

Through his aunt, Marlow obtained a position as Captain of a steamship from a Belgian Company as she wanted him to fulfill his dreams. He traveled to Brussels, which he described as a 'whited sepulchre' in order to sign the Company's Contract. At the office there are two women, one knitting using black wool, and the other stroking a cat.

He briefly meets with the head of the Company and then he goes to have a medical with the company doctor. The doctor measures his skull and warns him to avoid irritation in the wilderness, even more than exposure to the sun. He starts to feel daunted about his journey to the Congo, which he likens to a snake winding its way into the heart of Africa.

He makes his farewells to his aunt who hopes that he will be able to civilize the natives in the service of the Company and bring them salvation.

Interpretation

It should be made clear at the start that the book's main story is contained within a framing story told by the unnamed narrator who was one of those listening to Marlow's account of his experiences in Africa.

These men were on board a boat on the Thames estuary and are not named, but identified by their occupations. This in a way gives them a symbolic position at the start of the book and gives no clue as to their character, but only their position in society.

One must also question the accuracy of the facts as the reader is obtaining the information second-hand. There is also some doubt as to the impartiality of the unnamed narrator.

The main theme of the novel is the contest between civilized and primitive cultures - white versus black and good versus evil.

Marlow hints that in its history London was regarded as a savage, inhospitable place by the conquering and so-called civilized Romans.

Conrad uses symbolism to indicate the hypocrisy of the colonial countries Britain and Belgium. He describes how as the sun sets into the city horizon, it appears to be consumed and killed, and he describes Brussels as appearing like a white sepulchre which in the Bible is described in Matthew's Gospel as a pure and white façade hiding death and decay.

Conrad refers to the Congo River as a snake winding its way into the heart of Darkest Africa, the serpent being a well-known symbol of evil, especially in the book of Genesis.

The general view is that civilization represents good while savagery is normally linked with evil. The city of London comes across as a foreboding place, which extinguishes the light of the sun as it sets in the west.

Just as Britain was at the fringes of the Roman Empire, so does the River Congo represent the borders of the known world.

The author describes imperialism, as the 'flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil' and Marlow's description of the colonial officials are as greedy, inefficient men who are driven into a world of corruption.

Marlow is the main storyteller of the novel, but his story seems to have no clear meaning, perhaps he tells the story to the others on the boat with a view to obtaining some understanding from them as to the purpose of his experiences. The story is hard to follow, as Marlow tends to digress and give details, which are not in chronological order. There are also various references to death i.e. the description of Brussels as a white sepulchre; the woman knitting with black wool in the Company office and the vacancy that arose on the steamship was due to the death of Marlow's predecessor.

When Marlow sees the woman knitting in black wool, it reminds him of the mythical fates and he silently addresses her 'morituri te salutant' or 'we who are about to die, salute you'. This gives Marlow some apprehension about his journey to the Congo.

At the Coast of the Belgian Congo

Summary

The steamer bringing Marlow to Africa eventually arrives, but Marlow is frustrated that before reaching his destination, the boat stops at various staging posts to land customhouse officers and soldiers. He eventually reaches the mouth of the River Congo where he joins a smaller steamer that will take him up to the Company's outer station.

The Company's main business in this area of the world is ivory.

He notices a French warship firing its guns indiscriminately into the jungle, presumably intimidating rebellious natives.

The journey up to the station is around thirty miles and Marlow makes friends with the Captain of the ship who is a young Swede and they share sea yarns together.

The young Captain tells Marlow an unpleasant story about a fellow countryman who he had recently taken up the river and he had hanged himself. It is strange what this country can do to white people.

Marlow disembarks at the Company's outer station, which comprises of three wooden huts on a rocky escarpment. They are in a terrible state of dilapidation. Close by men are attempting to blast away the cliff with limited success and without any apparent reason. About lies scattered pieces of machinery, rusting away indicating much waste and inefficiency.

A group of black prisoners walk by in chains under the guard of another black man in a shabby uniform. Close by is a grove of trees under which lie a group of native laborers apparently dying. One of them has a piece of white European yarn tied around his neck. Marlow wonders at its significance.

He meets the well-dressed Company's Chief Accountant who advises Marlow that he will need to wait here for ten days until the next caravan leaves for the Company's central station where Marlow's steamer awaits him as Captain.

The best agent that the Company has is Mr. Kurtz. He acquires more ivory than all the other agents put together and the Company's Chief Accountant asks Marlow to convey a message to him, this being the most secure method.

The Accountant describes Kurtz as a 'remarkable person' who is being groomed for a high-up position in the Company's administration section. The Accountant impresses on Marlow to tell Kurtz that everything is satisfactory here at the outer station.

Interpretation

We assume that Marlow is shocked at the real Africa that he sees all around him compared with the romantic notion he had regarding the Dark Continent.

He sees the effects of the corrupt colonial rule in this part of Africa demonstrated in the waste and inefficiency all around.

The outer station is in decay and for its inhabitants it is a dismal place in which to live. All around lies broken machinery and some colonials spend their time blasting a cliff for no apparent reason. There is no organized distribution of supplies and while some starve to death, others lie comfortable with an abundance of food.

The description of the French warship that discharges its canon blindly into the wilderness is a symbol of the war that the colonial nations are making on the continent itself.

Marlow is appalled that the local inhabitants are merely part of the economic structure and are viewed by the Company as tools for extracting as much ivory as possible from the land regardless of the effects it has on the environment. Marlow tries to relate to the natives' situation and sympathizes with them regarding their suffering.

Marlow is also disturbed that he appears to be the only white person who is appalled by the specter of men and women dying in the streets and in the grove of death.

Initially Marlow was impressed by the African coast and its seductive hold over him, but now that he is close to the land, he can see all the corruption and ugliness of the environment brought about by the abuse of power of the white man.

Again there is reference to black and white, good and evil, and the reader has to decipher which is which e.g. the dying black laborer who wears a piece of white cloth around his neck, the meaning of which Marlow fails to grasp, must be a symbol of good (Conrad flags this with a white cloth to symbolize that the native is in essence good). The Company's Chief Accountant must take responsibility for the decay and waste, which flag him as evil even although he is a white colonial.

Marlow clearly gives an accurate observation of the natives' conditions and the reader can be confident that the situation is not overstated.

Inland to the Company's Central Station

Summary

Eventually the caravan leaves comprising of around sixty men who embark on the two hundred mile trip overland to the Central Station.

Marlow only has one other white companion and he soon falls ill and has to be carried by the native bearers.

Some of the natives desert along the way, returning to the jungle.

After fifteen days they arrive at the run-down Central Station to find that Marlow's steamer has sunk. Apparently the General Manager had taken the boat out to try and help Kurtz transport downriver his stock of ivory, but only managed to tear the bottom out of the boat on some rocks. Marlow is not impressed with the General Manager who strikes him as being quite ordinary, lacking in drive and determination. It seems that his only attribute in the eyes of those below him is his resistance to the local tropical diseases i.e. his good survival. It had been rumored that Kurtz had been taken ill which was another reason why the Manager wished to make the trip to Kurtz's station.

Marlow decides to set about salvaging his ship and repairing it, and this task takes three months. During this time one of the sheds housing trade goods burns down and the native laborers dance about in delight. It is suspected that one of the natives started the fire, and he is severely beaten.

Marlow overhears the Manager talking with the Brick maker about Kurtz, so he joins in the conversation. The Brick maker quizzes Marlow about the Company's intentions regarding this part of Africa, assuming that Marlow would have this information. He lets the Brick maker assume that he has influence in the high places of the Company.

Marlow sees a painting on the wall that Kurtz has painted. It portrays a blindfolded woman holding a torch similar to the Statue of Liberty.

The Brick maker tells him that Kurtz is destined for great things with the Company. He was sent as a special emissary by the Company's directors to promote European ideals.

It is clear that the Brick maker had plans to apply for the Assistant Manager's job and that Kurtz's arrival had spoiled any chance he had.

Marlow decides to use his apparent influence in the Company to demand that rivets are sent up from the coast to repair his ship.

Marlow goes to the ship and tells the foreman that they will have rivets in three weeks and he dances around in celebration. However, three weeks pass and the rivets do not arrive. Instead, the Eldorado Exploring Expedition arrives led by the Manager's uncle who engages in subterfuge with his nephew.

Marlow gives up on ever receiving the rivets and his thoughts turn to the intriguing Kurtz.

Interpretation

At this stage of the novel, Marlow's interests start to change from the mysterious Congo River to the intriguing Kurtz. The more he learns about this man, the more intrigued he becomes. This 'remarkable

person' who obtains more ivory than all the other agents put together seems to fire Marlow's imagination. Kurtz is clearly a multi-faceted person demonstrated by his artistic prowess illustrated in the painting at the Central Station.

The figure in the painting is intended to represent the embodiment of European ideals, but the shadows cast by the light of her symbolic torch create an ominous effect which suggest that Imperialism and, therefore, Kurtz's programme has failed.

It is clear that at the outset the conquering of this part of Africa was full of good intentions, but the reality is that the greed of man to exploit the resources of this land has taken over.

There are many references to the poor health of the white colonials. This part of Africa was known as the White Man's Grave. Just as the whites suffer and die, so do now the blacks equally suffer and die under the yoke of colonial civilization.

Marlow also observes that the General Manager and also the Brick maker are shallow people and it is clear that to survive in this part of Africa you must have an inner strength. This may be a fatal flaw in regards to both the Manager and the Brick maker. Marlow wonders if this flaw will be evident in Kurtz's nature.

The Manager is viewed as a kind of wasted devil who exerts authority through nothing more than a good constitution and a knack of making those around him feel uneasy. Therefore, his praise of Kurtz may be insincere and Marlow wonders if in fact the grounding of the steamer was deliberate with a view to putting pressure onto Kurtz. It should be pointed out that so far the information that Marlow has gleaned about Kurtz has all come to him by third parties. He therefore has no real image of the man to put in his head. This problem is communicated to the listeners in the frame story.

It is clear that Marlow struggles with the problem of this incomplete picture, which he has of Kurtz and that trying to describe him is like trying to describe a dream.

One could also describe Marlow's journey up the Congo River as a nightmare, as it differs so much from what he imagined it would be like.

At the Company's Central Station

Summary

One evening Marlow rests on the deck of his dilapidated steamer and overhears a conversation between the Station Manager and his uncle, who as we have said, is the leader of the Eldorado Expedition. In essence they are scheming the downfall of Kurtz. The Manager complains that Kurtz has not fulfilled his promise to turn the Stations into the beacons of civilization. There has also been no improvement to the moral and spiritual well being of the natives. Instead, Kurtz has directed all his efforts into producing as much ivory as possible without regard to the effects on the environment.

The Manager goes on to say that Kurtz had sent a huge load of ivory of the highest quality in canoes with his Clerk. Kurtz had turned back after three hundred miles to his Station, presumably once he was sure that the load of ivory was safe. However, the Clerk indicated that Kurtz was not well and although he was making a recovery it is not thought he will return to full fitness.

There has also been trouble with a wandering trader and the Manager's uncle tells him that he has the authority to have him hanged if he can be caught and no-one would challenge his right to do this.

It is clear that the Manager is angling to obtain Kurtz's position, probably based on avarice. He expresses the hope that Kurtz will succumb to either the harsh conditions or one of the local diseases.

Marlow is alarmed at this conversation and this conspiracy that the two men are hatching, and he decides to reveal himself to the two men below.

They are startled and move off without acknowledging Marlow's presence.

Soon after this, the Eldorado Expedition sets off into the wild lands and no further word is heard of them apart from the fact that all their donkeys died.

Interpretation

This part of the novel deals with the Manager's efforts to increase his power by engaging in a conspiracy with his uncle at Kurtz's expense.

The Manager hopes that the untamed Congo jungle will take its toll on Kurtz bringing about his death as has happened with so many white people before, but if this fails he has taken steps to undermine the work that Kurtz has done, albeit he may have satisfied the quotas required for ivory produced, but he has failed to civilize the area and care for the natives surrounding the Company's stations.

One obtains the impression that Kurtz has created his own empire based at the Inner Station and this may be one of the reasons why he returned without seeing his haul of ivory delivered. On the other hand, it may be for health reasons that he returned whether these were physical or mental.

Marlow is fascinated by this image of Kurtz turning back from civilization to return to his work in the interior, and this will urge Marlow on to repair his steamer so that he can travel up river to meet Kurtz.

Marlow appears unique amongst the colonials in that despite the conditions he works hard to repair his vessel. This is an important factor in him keeping a grip of reality, unlike his fellow white colleagues. He views his work on the ship as almost a spiritual endeavor which helps protect him from the dark, malevolent realities of the world that is Darkest Africa.

In this section of the novel Conrad gives the reader some of the most concentrated passages, which include sentences such as 'It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention'. At first this seems to be a contradiction, but it is Marlow's way of trying to describe what it is like traveling through the dense jungle, a transition from civilization to a primeval world. He suggests that language is incapable of providing the reader with the full picture of the terrors and marvels of this part of Africa.

Certainly, his companions on the Nellie will not be able to fully appreciate what Marlow is driving at all the while they stay secure in Europe.

Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' is Marlow's story and the road that he has taken which will bring him face to face with his own soul. Thus the novel is both impressive and mysterious, and the reader can rely on certain things and be thrown off at a tangent by others.

Conrad is carefully preparing the reader for the eventual meeting between Marlow and Kurtz by providing him with key details of Kurtz's lifestyle and character.

The Journey to the Inner Station (Heart of Darkness)

Summary

At last Marlow's steamer is repaired and he is making all preparations for the two months trip upriver to Kurtz. He will take with him the Manager and several pilgrims (the term used for the greedy Agents of the Central Station).

The river above the Central Station is hazardous and the trip will be difficult so it will be necessary to use the help of a crew of cannibals who are an even-tempered gang of workers.

They start their journey and see very little life on the thickly wooded banks of the river. Occasionally they spot natives engaged in primitive dancing, and at night they can hear their drums like the beat of a giant heart.

Marlow has a strange feeling of brotherhood with these primitive natives, but he has little time to ponder on this as he is fully employed in keeping the ship afloat and running correctly.

They make steady but slow progress up the river until they reach a point just fifty miles away from the Inner Station. There is a hut with a stack of firewood with a note saying 'Wood for you, hurry up, approach cautiously'. The signature is illegible but it clearly does not belong to Kurtz.

Inside the hut Marlow discovers rubbish, which indicates that the tenant was white. He finds a book concerned with seamanship and with some mysterious writing, which Marlow assumes is a code. He slips the book in his pocket.

The Manager suggests that the wandering trader, which he and his uncle had discussed, previously must have left the wood.

They continue up the river Marlow working vigorously to keep the steamer going and struggling to navigate the river. When they are just eight miles from Kurtz's Station Marlow wants to journey at night, but the Manager tells him that the river is too dangerous.

The next day they are surrounded by an oppressive fog and they hear the sound of savage voices and, therefore, they prepare themselves for an attack by these hostile natives when the fog lifts.

The headman of the cannibals advises Marlow that his people would like to eat the owners of the voices in the fog. He then realizes that the cannibals must be really hungry for their type of food especially when their food supplies which consisted of rotting hippo meat was thrown overboard by the pilgrims. They decide to continue their journey in the fog rather than staying dead in the water hoping to outrun the natives on the shore. It is clear from the noise of the natives that their intentions are warlike. The fog lifts when they are only a mile and a half from the Station and the natives on the shore immediately attack the boat.

The boat has to travel underneath a steep cliff from which a dense shower of arrows falls. The channel is quite narrow here and there is little room for maneuver. All on board ship run for cover. Marlow notices that the brush is swarming with natives. Just up ahead there is a snag in the river and Marlow tries to negotiate this.

The pilgrims have organized themselves and they start shooting at the natives with their Winchester rifles.

The helmsman leaning out of the window with his gun takes a spear in his side and falls at Marlow's feet. Marlow frightens the natives by sounding the steam whistle repeatedly and they make off into the

jungle with cries of fear. The helmsman dies and strangely Marlow changes his shoes and socks and makes the statement 'I expect Kurtz is dead now as well'.

Marlow then drags the dead helmsman's body out of the pilothouse and throws it overboard. This shocks everyone on board, the pilgrims because they wanted to give him a proper burial and the cannibals because they wanted to eat him. They have assumed incorrectly that these natives have overrun Kurtz's camp so they are surprised when they arrive to find the Station intact, although run down.

Interpretation

This part of the journey is the final stage in the transition from the civilized world to a prehistoric age and Marlow feels that he is degenerating the further he travels up the river towards Kurtz.

It is strange that Marlow admits that he feels a brotherhood with the savages on the shore despite being bewildered at their customs and wild dances.

Marlow has a feeling of being lost on his tiny boat with the immense forest of the Congo all about him, but he is not depressed by this situation. He sees the inhabitants of the forest as representatives of man at his earliest existence on this planet.

Although he is hard pressed to keep the steamer going, he finds that his thoughts more and more turn to his destination and Kurtz. He realizes that he can have little effect on Kurtz and so he does not know whether he will speak bluntly to him when they meet.

When the helmsman dies, Marlow engages in the strange act of changing his socks and shoes before discarding the body into the river. Marlow's thoughts then immediately turn to the Inner Station and its probable destruction and Kurtz's death. Although he has never met Kurtz he feels grief-stricken at this prospect.

The Company may not have brought enlightenment to Africa, but Marlow is increasingly illuminated about his own humanity.

Another interesting aspect is the use of cannibals to crew the steamboat, which to the reader is a disturbing factor. In the Congo this seems normal practice and the cannibals way of life is acceptable. Marlow describes them as reliable, levelheaded people who are invaluable in carrying out the day-to-day functions on the boat. These cannibals symbolize man at his basest level, but there is no indication that they will attack their white superiors, although this would be an easy feat for them. Although the cannibals show great restraint in that they do not attack their superiors even though they are hungry, this is in stark contrast to the colonials who have an insatiable hunger for ivory, and use barbaric acts to acquire it.

When Marlow finds the book inside the hut entitled 'An Enquiry into some Points of Seamanship', he holds on to it affectionately as it is a symbol of the civilized world, which is now so far away.

At the Inner Station

Summary

On the shore stands a white man whose clothes are patched all over in bright colors and he reminds Marlow of a harlequin (perhaps this is Kurtz's jester). He informs them that Kurtz is up in the station house and Marlow views the area with his binoculars. He sees stakes circling the station house with severed heads impaled on them all facing towards Kurtz's home.

The white man is the Russian Trader who had left the wood for Marlow's steamboat. He tells them that the heads on the stakes belong to rebels.

Suddenly Marlow sees a group of natives appear around the corner of the house bearing Kurtz on a stretcher. Natives emerge from the surrounding jungle and Marlow is concerned that they may attack again. All on the steamboat stand still in anticipation. However, Kurtz raises an emaciated arm and the natives return to the cover of the jungle.

The Manager leaves the boat with some of the pilgrims and they bring Kurtz on board and place him in one of the cabins.

Marlow has a conversation with the Russian who informs him that he has spent many nights with Kurtz in the jungle and they have discussed a wide range of topics. These sessions have enabled the Russian to broaden his mind and improve his knowledge. He says that the natives will not do any harm to the Company men all the while Kurtz is in control. They merely fear that Kurtz will be taken away from them.

Marlow gives the Russian his book on seamanship realizing that the code was in fact Russian handwriting.

The Russian tells Marlow that Kurtz had arranged for the attack on the steamship, as he does not wish to travel back down the river, and he hoped that this show of force might have persuaded the pilgrims that the station had been attacked as well, and that he was dead.

On the steamship Kurtz is in a heated debate with the Manager who emerges from the meeting trying to look calm, but he is clearly agitated. Kurtz has amassed a remarkable quantity of quality ivory, but the Company are concerned that he has outgrown his usefulness. They are fearful that Kurtz's methods will leak back to Europe and that this will have an adverse effect on the standing of the Company. Marlow is suspicious that Kurtz's white rescuers are actually here to do him harm recalling the conversation he overheard between the Manager and his uncle.

Marlow also advises the Russian that he too may be in danger revealing that the Manager has the power to hang him if he wishes, without any repercussions. The Russian decides that he will leave and he asks Marlow for some rifle cartridges and shoes, and also to protect Kurtz's reputation when he returns to Europe.

Marlow is surprised by Kurtz's appearance. Clearly he has suffered from recent bouts of illness, which the Russian had nursed him through. His skin is white resembling old ivory and he is emaciated. Despite this he still exerts power over the natives who regard him as a god.

During the night the jungle is filled with the sounds of drums and natives yelling and performing pagan rites. Marlow decides to check on Kurtz and finds that he has escaped. He goes ashore and finds a trail through the long grass, presumably made by Kurtz. He follows it and finds Kurtz crawling on all fours. They are quite close to the jungle's edge and the fires of the natives. Marlow suddenly realizes the danger of his situation as Kurtz could quite easily call out to the natives and he could be killed on the spot. However, when Kurtz was reading his backlog of mail one letter contained details about Marlow and Kurtz looks on him favorably, perhaps the only ally working in the Company. Kurtz tells him to go and hide and Marlow looks over to see an imposing figure of a native witchdoctor. Marlow asks Kurtz if he is clear what he is trying to do and eventually persuades him to return back to the ship. They will travel back down the river next day.

Interpretation

The crew of the steamboat has arrived in the realm belonging to Kurtz who has absolute power over the local inhabitants. He even has a court jester who appears like a harlequin, this being the Russian Trader. The trader is a true adventurer and Marlow is envious of him and realizes that like him, he came to Africa not for material gain, but to perhaps do good and obtain some personal enlightenment. Kurtz is like a god and even his 'palace' or run-down station house has the heads of his rivals surrounding it.

The Russian explains that these heads belong to rebels, but Marlow doubts this and guesses that they belong to those who oppose Kurtz.

The whole novel is concerned with the meeting of Marlow and Kurtz and in some respects Marlow's life mirrors that of Kurtz's.

Conrad suggests that if Marlow remains in Africa long enough he too could degenerate the way Kurtz has, for Kurtz is not a benevolent god, but a despot.

However, none of the events that had gone before prepared Marlow for the actual image of Kurtz. The ivory god actually looks as if he is made of old white ivory because of his emaciated state. The Russian Trader has clearly had his mind extended through the conversations he has had with Kurtz on a one-to-one basis. He has been sucked in to Kurtz's court and he is a willing servant of this god-like figure. As a dutiful servant, he has nursed Kurtz through two illnesses and has gone on expeditions with him to obtain ivory. He suggests that Kurtz cannot be judged as one would judge a normal man because he has moved beyond the level that his fellow man is at and achieved a god-like status. This is not just an illusion in Kurtz's mind for all the neighboring tribes pay homage to him even though the Company forced some into slavery. They show loyalty only to Kurtz and there were quite willing to attack the Company steamboat at Kurtz's request.

Marlow decides to side with Kurtz which at first seems an odd choice. However there are several reasons for this. Clearly Kurtz has the power here of life and death and to come out against Kurtz might endanger Marlow's life. Also Marlow admires Kurtz because he has moved beyond the confines of morality and the accepted criteria for right and wrong. He has 'kicked himself loose of the earth' which metaphorically suggests that Kurtz has broken free from all the restraints of basic morality. He has, in fact, dismissed the idea of morality altogether. The Company wants to dispose of Kurtz because he exposes the falseness of their methods. He is able to accumulate more ivory than any other agent because of his single-minded obsession to acquire this commodity regardless of the effects it has on the people and environment.

Marlow sees Kurtz as an example of what can happen to colonials who come to this Dark Continent. The primeval part of all of us (our Heart of Darkness) is reawakened when in the confines of this prehistoric world. Marlow has made the journey into the Dark Heart of this Continent and sees in Kurtz what can happen to him and all others who make this journey. One's own dark-side that is suppressed in the civilized world emerges to take control.

Marlow had originally been cautious about his voyage into the Heart of this unknown Continent, but what he fears now is not the land, but the unknown recesses of his soul into which he has now journeyed.

Underneath the façade of civilization there lurks in every man the 'brute'. Most people contrive to suppress this part of them, but Kurtz chose to exploit it.

Downriver to the sea and home to Europe

Summary

The steamship leaves the Inner Station at the start of the next day. Three natives covered in bright red earth come out onto the riverbank and shout incantations at the boat. They are wearing horned headdresses and they are joined a beautiful native woman who was Kurtz's mistress. More and more natives emerge from the jungle and the native woman leads the chanting and the natives, who number about one thousand, repeat her chants.

The pilgrims start to get nervous and they aim their rifles at the crowd on the shore. Hoping to avoid a massacre Marlow sounds the steam whistle and the bulk of the natives scatter leaving the woman standing on the shore in defiance.

The swift river current soon whisks the boat out of sight just as some of the pilgrims let off a few parting shots.

The Manager is pleased with the way things have gone in that he has managed to secure Kurtz on the steamer. He is very ill and will soon die.

Marlow has made up his mind that he wishes to be free of the Company and plans to return to Europe as soon as possible. He has had enough of the greedy pilgrims and the insensitive conspiring Company Agents. He has a conversation with Kurtz who hopes to continue to make great profits in some other region of the world and to obtain great fame and notoriety.

Kurtz gives Marlow a packet of papers and a photograph of his Intended so that he can prevent these from falling into the hands of the Manager.

The steamer breaks down and they have to stop for repairs and Marlow is hampered from doing this work by a bout of sickness. Like the majority of white people in this part of Africa, he is succumbing to the local diseases and climate.

Kurtz is moved to the pilothouse as this is cooler, but this does little to avoid the inevitable and he is merely waiting for death.

Marlow succeeds in repairing the steamship and returns to talk with Kurtz. He now has a strange look on his face that is a mixture of pride and despair. He then cries out in a whisper 'The horror! The horror!' and then he dies. Marlow goes to the mess room and soon afterwards a servant boy comes in to announce 'Mistah Kurtz he dead'. The pilgrims buried Kurtz in the jungle next day.

Marlow's narration resumes back in the sepulchered city of Brussels, but it is clear that he was extremely depressed at Kurtz's death. Still feeling the effects of the illness that started in Africa, Marlow's aunt nurses him back to health. A Company representative calls on Marlow requesting Kurtz's papers. He refuses to comply, but eventually agrees to give him Kurtz's report on 'The Suppression of Savage Customs' but with the postscript 'Exterminate all the brutes!' ripped off.

Marlow then meets Kurtz's cousin who tells him that his death is a great loss as he was such a great musician and a 'universal genius'. Marlow gives the cousin some unimportant family letters.

He then meets a journalist who is eager for information regarding Kurtz. He tells Marlow that Kurtz could have been a great politician as he had charisma and a voice suited to public oratory in that he could electrify large meetings. He gives the reporter Kurtz's report on Savage Customs and the journalist says he will print it.

Marlow looks at the photograph Kurtz gave him of his Intended and he decides to go and visit her. It is now a year since Kurtz died and he finds the Intended still dressed in black. She continually praises her Kurtz saying that she will mourn him forever. She says that she was the only one who really knew him and Marlow takes pity on her. She asks Marlow what were Kurtz's last words and he lies and tells her it was her name.

Marlow ends his story here and the narrator looks at the overcast sky and the dark clouds that are forming over the River Thames, which seems to him to lead to a Heart of Immense Darkness.

Interpretation

This last section of the novel deals with Kurtz's final struggle with evil and Marlow's dubious loyalty to him.

Marlow believes that the sole purpose for his journey was for him to be the Company's representative in all dealings with Kurtz.

Marlow digresses and thinks back to the events that have brought him to this situation. He remembers the scene where the pilgrims shoot ineffectually into the jungle. He recalls the French gunboat doing the same. All of these events had no effect on this Heart of Darkness, which beats relentlessly like the native drums.

Kurtz is torn between love and hate, between the wonders that this wilderness has and his lust to exploit and harvest as much ivory as possible. The Heart of Darkness is consuming him and the unseen spirit of this land is slowly extinguishing the life in Kurtz's body. He is racked with disease.

The natives on the shore chanting in an unfamiliar tongue seem to Marlow to be performing a devilish ritual. This is the voice of primitive savagery and Kurtz knows its meaning, being the only character in the book who speaks the local dialect, but he refuses to translate its meaning to Marlow.

The pilgrims are suspicious of Marlow because he has formed this allegiance with Kurtz. Despite all his evils, Marlow prefers to side with Kurtz rather than with the Manager and his pilgrims.

At the end, Kurtz comes to the inescapable truth that his own dark self has corrupted him in that he has given way to temptation and has pursued this evil side of his nature to excess. This is demonstrated in his last words.

Conrad describes Kurtz's final moments with interesting symbolism. Kurtz was unable to see the candle towards the end, perhaps because his inner darkness had consumed him utterly.

Marlow goes for some dinner in the mess room and he describes the host of flies present. Perhaps these are symbolic of the triumph over the fat, greedy devil. The entrance of the servant boy breaks the scene.

Conrad is deliberately obtuse here. Life Africa Kurtz is an enigma and the workings of his heart at the end remain mysterious.

After consideration, Marlow decides that all one can hope for out of life is a knowledge of oneself. He believes that at the end, Kurtz did establish the true knowledge about himself and that is why he exclaimed 'The horror! The horror!'

Since his return from Africa, Marlow too has been very ill and has brushed with death, but his aunt has nursed him back to full fitness. He is perhaps getting a second chance. The inference throughout the book has been that if circumstances had been different, Marlow could quite easily have found himself in Kurtz's shoes.

Kurtz's last words are his judgment on his soul.

Marlow is thankful that he did not follow the road that Kurtz had taken. He was able to draw back from the temptations. All those who he meets in Europe have complimentary things to say about Kurtz. Marlow wishes that he had known him before he had gone to Africa and been corrupted. The Europeans describe Kurtz as being a universal genius, being a good musician, artist, public speaker and so on.

Marlow only ever knew the corrupted Kurtz who had been consumed by the evil Heart of Darkness that he found in Africa, the primeval jungle that had reawakened the Heart of Darkness lurking within him and all men.

The Intended seems to live outside of time. She is still in mourning and dressed in black she seems out of place in sepulchered city. She knows so little about the Kurtz that Marlow knew in sharp contrast to Kurtz's native mistress who presumably knew of his excesses. This highlights Kurtz's split personality.

Marlow is resentful of the people back in Europe because of their shallowness. They believe in the absolute rightness of their civilization, but he pours scorn over their beliefs. He realizes that all Empires are built on the suppression of people, just as the English were suppressed by the Roman conquerors, so are the Congo natives suppressed by the Company and their Agents.

Although Marlow does not wish to desert civilization in favor of the path chosen by Kurtz, he can no longer be as enthusiastic about it as he did before starting to work for the Company. Marlow is consumed with pity for Kurtz's Intended and cannot bring himself to tell her what his dying words were. He cannot resist lying to her because it would have been far too dark to tell her the truth. As the Intended gratefully accepts Marlow's lie, so does Europe accept the lie that building Empires is all about civilizing lands and their inhabitants.

Questions for Study and Ideas for Answers

Q: The structure of The Heart of Darkness is that of a 'frame tale'. What does this mean?

Ideas: The novel is about Marlow's journey to Africa, which he tells on the 'Nellie' to some friends of his. One of those who are listening is the narrator of our book and what we read is his recollection of Marlow's tale. The book is, therefore, a story within a story and is thus called a frame tale. It is left to the reader to establish the accuracy of facts given to us by the narrator. We do not know what his status is apart from the fact that he is in the company of a Lawyer, an Accountant and a Director. Has the impact of Marlow's tale been tempered in any way?

That is for the reader to decide having regard to the actual history of colonizing European nations.

Q: What are the factors that brought about Kurtz's degeneration?

Ideas: Power : The Company gave Kurtz complete control over the Inner Station. His only task was to produce as much ivory as possible for which he was well paid. Absolute power corrupts.

Morality : The Company had no means to police Kurtz's activities, although it was understood that Agents of the Company would try to civilize the local inhabitants. Kurtz was not interested in this because it had no bearing on the productivity of the extraction of ivory. Any loyalty he had for his Intended soon vanished and he had at least one black mistress.

Greed : He had an all-consuming desire to produce as much ivory as possible being oblivious to the needs of those around him. Anyone who stood against him faced the ultimate punishment – death.

Egotism : As his excesses grew he became a god-like figure to the primitive natives of his station. He displayed the heads of those that opposed him around his house on stakes like trophies. He allowed the dark side of his personality to take control of his life thus becoming a tyrant.

Q: Most of the colonials degenerated because of their stay in Africa, but Marlow seems to have resisted this. Why?

Ideas: It is clear that the climate and the poor immunity of whites to the local diseases make it an inhospitable place for Europeans to live in. These oppressive conditions generally make the Company workers lethargic and when they do engage in work it seems inefficient and pointless.

Marlow, however, keeps himself busy mainly by working on his boat by repairing it and keeping it going so he is able to immerse himself in this almost spiritual work. Although there are signs towards the end of the story that the Dark Continent may claim him as another victim, the sight of Kurtz is enough to make him pull back and he decides to return to Europe. In a way, through Kurtz's death and the final realization that he has become evil, Marlow is shocked into pulling back from the abyss.

One can also assume that Marlow keeps in mind the words of his aunt telling him to civilize and give salvation to the natives. This clearly cannot be done by working for the Company and so he returns home.

Q: Why do you think Conrad uses the title 'Heart of Darkness' for this story?

Ideas: There is a light and dark side to everyone and this story explores the dark side of human nature in all its ugliness.

Conrad suggests that man is able to suppress this dark side while he is living in a civilized society. Suppression is made easier with the fact that those people who give in to the temptations of evil are punished by society. However, where there is no rule of law as was the case in Africa at the turn of the century, it is easier for man to let evil corrupt and take over his life.

The location of the novel in Africa is not accidental, as it was known at that time as the Dark Continent full of mystery and primeval forces. It was the duty of colonizing nations to bring about enlightenment to this dark, non-Christian land.