

Quadrant II - Notes

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Module Name: Plot and Characters in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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Notes

Plot of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

- *Heart of Darkness* tells a story within a story. The novella begins with a group of passengers aboard a boat floating on the Thames. One of them, Charlie Marlow, relates to his fellow seafarers an experience of his that took place on another river altogether—the river Congo in Africa. Marlow's story begins in what he calls the "sepulchral city," somewhere in Europe. There "the Company"—an unnamed organization—appoints him captain of a river steamer. He sets out for Africa optimistic of what he will find.
- But his expectations are quickly soured. From the moment he arrives, he is exposed to the evil of imperialism, witnessing the violence it inflicts upon the African people it exploits. As he proceeds, he begins to hear tell of a man named Kurtz—a colonial agent who is supposedly unmatched in his ability to procure ivory from the continent's interior. According to rumour, Kurtz has fallen ill (and perhaps mad as well), thereby jeopardizing the Company's entire venture in the Congo.
- Marlow is given command of his steamer and a crew of Europeans and Africans to man it, the latter of whom Conrad shamelessly stereotypes as "cannibals." As he penetrates deeper into the jungle, it becomes clear that his surroundings are impacting him psychologically: his journey is not only into a geographical "heart of darkness" but into his own psychic interior—and perhaps into the darkened psychic interior of Western civilization as well.

- After encountering many obstacles along the way, Marlow's steamer finally makes it to Kurtz. Kurtz has taken command over a tribe of natives who he now employs to conduct raids on the surrounding regions. The man is clearly ill, physically and psychologically. Marlow has to threaten him to go along with them, so intent is Kurtz on executing his "immense plans." As the steamer turns back the way it came, Marlow's crew fires upon the group of indigenous people previously under Kurtz's sway, which includes a queen-figure described by Conrad with much eroticism and as exoticism.
- Kurtz dies on the journey back up the river but not before revealing to Marlow the terrifying glimpse of human evil he'd been exposed to. "The horror! The horror!" he tells Marlow before dying. Marlow almost dies as well, but he makes it back to the sepulchral city to recuperate. He is disdainful of the petty tribulations of Western civilization that seem to occupy everyone around him. As he heals, he is visited by various characters from Kurtz's former life—the life he led before finding the dark interior of himself in Africa.
- A year after his return to Europe, Marlow pays Kurtz's partner a visit. She is represented—as several of *Heart of Darkness's* female characters are—as naively sheltered from the awfulness of the world, a state that Marlow hopes to preserve. When she asks about Kurtz's final words, Marlow lies: "your name," he tells her. Marlow's story ends there. *Heart of Darkness* itself ends as the narrator, one of Marlow's audience, sees a mass of brooding clouds gathering on the horizon—what seems to him to be "heart of an immense darkness."

Characters in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

- **Marlow**

The narrator of Conrad's novel, an archetypal character who appears in Conrad's other novels as well.

A complex man, in some ways a traditional hero---tough, honest, an independent thinker, a capable man.

He vacillates between being the intelligent natural philosopher and the cynical-weary and skeptical individual---all at once.

His experiences in the 'heart of darkness' leave a harrowing impression on his mind.

- **Kurtz** -the chief of the Inner Station, the finality of Marlow's quest.
- **General manager**- the chief agent of the company in its African territory
- **Brickmaker** -Marlow meets him at the Central Station, a kind of corporate spy. He is the manager's favourite. He is petty, conniving and never produces any bricks.

- **Chief accountant**– dressed in spotless white despite the heat and filth of the Outer Station. He embodies the double-standards of the colonisers. He has trained a native woman to look after his wardrobe.
- **Pilgrims**-- Carrying wooden staves, they are the greedy agents of the Central station. They greedily trade for ivory for a pricey commission.
- **Cannibals**– natives hired as the crew of the steamer, well disciplined bunch. Marlow respects their restraint and their calm disposition.
- **Russian trader**– boyish in appearance, this Russian sailor gone to the African interior as a representative of a Dutch company.
- **Helmsman**—A youth from the coast, trained by Marlow to pilot the steamer. He is killed when the steamer is attacked by natives.
- **Fresleven**—a good, non-violent man killed in a petty scuffle. Marlowe's predecessor captain of the steamer.
- **The men aboard the Nellie**– Marlowe's friends and audience to his narrative. They are moral, ignorant about anything beyond England.

Women characters in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

- **Kurtz's African mistress**– a fiercely beautiful dusky woman loaded with ivory, a model to carry Kurtz's trophies. She exudes fear and awe. Like Kurtz, she is enigmatic.
- **Kurtz's Intended**– his naïve and long-suffering fiancée, whom Marlow visits after Kurtz's death. Her unshakable sureness about Kurtz's fidelity and love towards her reinforces Marlowe's belief that women are dreamers, insulated from the real, hard world.
- **Aunt**– Marlowe's doting relative, who secures him a position with the company. She firmly believes in the White man's creed of imperialism being a charitable enterprise to "civilize the heathen races".

Conclusion

- The plot of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* amplifies themes related to imperialism, racism and exploitation of humans.
- It exposes the colonial mindset of the White man who has the potential to become like Kurtz.
- The character who can be divided into two broad categories i.e. whites and natives, expose the true meaning of 'civilization' as being display of restraint and self-control.
- Conrad's portrayal of women characters in this novel as dreamers and illusionary drifters has made him a soft target for several feminists.
