

Good day learners and welcome to

Joseph Conrad's **Heart of Darkness**.

This module is titled 'Themes in Conrad's **Heart of Darkness**'.

In this module we will be discussing

briefly the title of Conrad's novella.

Heart of Darkness.

We will also have a short discussion

on the various themes in this novella.

At the end of this module,

learners will be familiar with the title,

significance of Conrad's **Heart of**

Darkness. Learners will also gain insights

into the various themes and issues

raised by Conrad in his narrative.

The title **Heart of Darkness**

has multilayered meanings.

At a geographical level,

it talks about the heart of the

African continent, the Congo.

Marlow's journey into the heart of

this dark African continent can

be seen also at a psychological
level more than mere geographical.

At a psychological level,
one can view it as the propensity
to stoop to evil or dark ways.

Kurtz is a quintessential example of this...this propensity to stoop to dark ways.

The entire journey into the
physical heart of darkness makes Marlow at the end of this novella, a sadder but wiser man who has
been able to feel the pulse

of this propensity to stoop to dark
ways. He has been exposed to the dark side of the white man's burden.

He has been exposed to this evil side of the white man's imperialistic ventures.

We will now look at the 'themes in

Joseph Conrad's **Heart of Darkness**'.

What are themes?

Themes are the fundamental and universal
ideas explored in the literary text.

We will be exploring for
themes in this novella.

1. The Double Standards of Imperialism.
2. Mania as a result of imperialism.
3. The absurdity of evil.

4. And racism-- in which we will explore the 'Black versus White antagonism'.

Let us look at the first theme:

1. The Double Standards of Imperialism---Heart of Darkness explores the issues surrounding imperialism in complicated ways. As Marlow travels from the outer station to the central station and finally up the river to the inner station, he encounters scenes of torture, cruelty, and near slavery.

At the very least, the incidental scenery of the book offers a harsh picture of colonial enterprise.

The impetus behind Marlow's adventures too has to do with the hypocrisy inherent in the rhetoric used to justify imperialism. The men who work for the company describe what they do as trade.

And their treatment of Native Africans is part of a benevolent project of civilization.

Kurtz, on the other hand, is open about the fact that he does not trade, but rather takes ivory by force...by coercion, and he describes his own treatment of the natives with the words separation, and extermination.

He does not hide the fact that he rules

through violence and intimidation.

His perverse honesty leads to his

downfall as his success threatens

to expose the evil practices

behind European activity in Africa.

So through Kurtz's moral downfall, we see the gross double standards

and hypocrisy of this so called

'white man's burden'.

2. Mania, as a result of Imperialism- is the second theme.

Africa is responsible for mental

disintegration as well as physical illness.

Madness has two primary functions.

Firstly, it serves as an ironic device

to engage the reader's sympathies.

Kurtz who has turned mad is suggestive of this mania.

Marlow is told from the beginning that Kurtz is mad.

However, as Marlow and the reader begin to

form a more complex picture of Kurtz, it becomes apparent that his

madness is only relative. That, in the context of the company's insanity, it is difficult to define it.

However, the company views madness differently.

Africans are mere objects for the company.

Marlow refers to the helmsman as a piece

of machinery and the African mistress,

of course, is like a mannequin. Although social mores and explanations,

justifications are shown through the

Heart of Darkness to be utterly false,

and even leading to evil, they are necessary for both

groups to harmoniously coexist.

Madness in **Heart of Darkness** is a result of being removed from one

social context and allowed to be the sole arbitrator of one's own action.

The ivory mania can make man into a

demi-god like it has done to Kurtz, who sacrifices his morality and human soul.

It is thus no surprise that his last

words are "The horror, the horror!"

3. The Absurdity of Evil --is the third theme.

This novella is above all an exploration of hypocrisy, ambiguity and moral confusion.

It explores the idea of the proverbial

choice between the lesser of two evils.

As the ideal, this model is forced to align himself

with either the hypocritical and malicious colonial bureaucracy or the

openly malleable and rule abiding Kurtz.

It becomes increasingly clear that

to try to judge, either alternative is an act of folly.

How can moral standards or social values relevant in judging evil?

Is there such thing as insanity in a

world that has already gone insane?

The number of ridiculous situations

Marlow witnesses as he journeys into

the heart of darkness is significant.

At one station, for instance,

he sees a man trying to carry water

in a bucket with a large hole in it.

At the outer station,

he watches native labourers

blasting away at a hillside with

no particular purpose in mind.

The absurdity involves both insignificant

silliness and life or death issues.

Often simultaneously.

A profound moral confusion and tremendous

hypocrisy is suggested very covertly,

in this text. Towards the end,

it is terrifying that all this causes homicidal

megalomania and a leaky bucket.

Both provoke essentially the

same reaction from Marlow. He still cannot fathom the

absurdity of such evil.

4. Racism-- is the next theme.

Racism explores the Black

versus White antagonism. Marlow's observations about the

natives as having the utmost self

control is worthy of mention. The whites were supposed to

be beacons of civilization. They are in fact more cruel, brutish, inhuman,

and have lost all sense of morality. Besides this, ironically,

one can observe that racism as a theme is sensitively explored by the novelist in this text.

The White intruders in the 'heart of darkness' actually reach the abyss of their morality.

We can observe this in the behavioral transformation of Kurtz from an intellectual from the

West into a demi-god among the

Natives; one who walks on all fours like an animal.

We can see Kurtz reduced from a brilliant scholar to a brute. In the 'heart of darkness'---one who has lost it all.

In conclusion we can assess that

the themes in Joseph Conrad's **Heart of Darkness** help in understanding

the text with a deeper insight. The double standards of imperialism, madness, absurdity of evil and racism are overpowering universal ideas in this novella which make the reading of this text a memorable experience. With the aid of motifs and symbols, we can understand the themes of this novel more closely and profoundly.

Thank you.