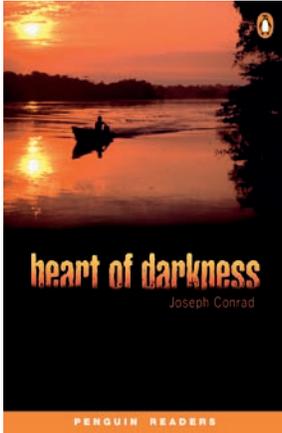




# Heart of Darkness

Joseph Conrad



## About the author

Joseph Teodor Konrad Korseniowski, better known by his pen name, Joseph Conrad, was born in Poland in the 1850s. At the age of 17, he joined the French Navy and some years later, the British one even though he barely spoke English. In the following years, he travelled all over the world as a seaman, visiting and exploring what he considered the most exotic places he had ever been to. In the 1890s, he went on a journey up the River Congo in Africa and this was a turning point in his life. He was appalled by the European venture there, its methods and the treatment given to native Africans. As a writer, Joseph Conrad would later draw on this particular experience. *Heart of Darkness*, which was first published in the early 1900s, somewhat reflects what the author saw, felt and thought as a European in Africa during the colonial times.

## Summary

*Heart of Darkness* is a story within a story. Five men on board the *Nellie* are anchored in the Thames Estuary at dusk. One of them narrates what happened aboard but mainly retells the story told by another crew member, Charlie Marlow, about his journey to Africa and up the River Congo as a representative of a trading company. Marlow shares his experiences as a steamboat captain transporting ivory downriver but particularly focuses on the lack of efficiency of white trading agents and how they mistreated the natives. However, the centre of his story is his search for the mysterious Kurtz, an ivory trader, who gathers huge quantities of ivory through very peculiar and secret methods and who has raised himself as the god of the tribes surrounding his station. It is through Kurtz that Marlow discovers the various forms of darkness in Congo and this throws light on himself.

**Chapter 1:** Waiting for the tide to turn, the men listen to Marlow's story. He tells them how he has always been interested in Africa and how he used his aunt's contacts in Belgium to find a job in a colonial trading post up the River Congo. Marlow starts a thirty-day journey on a French steamboat up to the mouth of the river and then joins another steamboat until they get to the Company's Outer Station. He stands in horror when faced with the living condition of the native people there and the way in which they are treated. Marlow spends ten days at the station which is run by a white chief accountant and, for the first time, he hears about the extraordinary, best ivory-trading agent, Kurtz. Marlow begins a three-hundred-kilometre journey on foot to his steamboat together with another white man and learns more about Kurtz. Marlow arrives at the Central Station and finds that his steamboat is stuck at the bottom of the river and that it will take some months to have it repaired. He meets the Station Manager and is told a lot more about the unique Kurtz, who appears to be presently ill. As time goes by, Marlow is increasingly discouraged and upset by white men's rules and behaviour and interested in Kurtz's ideas, principles and success.

**Chapter 2:** Marlow repairs his boat and prepares to start his journey up the River Congo with a big crew, the Manager, his assistants, some agents and a group of natives, towards the Inner Station to meet Kurtz. By now, finding Kurtz, and learning from him, has become his only purpose. When Marlow's steamboat is getting closer to Kurtz's station, they are stranded in a thick blanket of fog and they can't keep moving upwards. When the fog lifts and they are about to get to the Inner Station, they are attacked by several natives and the pilot dies. Marlow starts feeling that he will never get to see Kurtz, since he must have been killed. Yet, Marlow manages to edge the steamer towards the riverbank and he sees Kurtz's hut through his telescope, but not him. Instead, Marlow meets a Russian seaman who has been assisting Kurtz and who worships him as much as all the other men around him. The Russian tells Marlow the story of his life and all about his relationship with Kurtz, but he particularly focuses on the mysterious Kurtz, his endeavours and achievements. He also tells Marlow that the natives have attacked his steamer because Kurtz was with them and they didn't want him to leave the heart of the continent.

**Chapter 3:** The Russian speaks about how he nursed Kurtz through two illnesses and confesses to Marlow that



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It was Kurtz who ordered the attack on his steamboat because he didn't want to leave. He also describes Kurtz's frightening ivory hunt and his peculiar methods, which ruined further trade in the region, and his madness, which together with his desires and blind greed, took control over him and even governed him. Kurtz arrives at his hut lying on a rough bed carried by some natives and followed by several more, among which is his mistress, a beautiful mysterious woman. The manager tells Marlow that Kurtz has done more harm than good to the Company due to his forceful action and faulty methods. Marlow tells the Russian that the manager and his assistants were plotting to have him hanged, since they believed that he was stealing from the Company. Therefore, he decides to run away. Before doing so, he tells Marlow that he knows many secrets that could damage Kurtz's good name. However, Marlow decides to remain loyal to Kurtz. All the men, including Kurtz, get on board and this time Marlow's steamboat moves quickly downstream. Kurtz opens up to Marlow and gives him some secret papers. As Kurtz lies dying his last words are 'The horror! The horror!' Back in Brussels, Marlow is visited by many people, a Company agent, Kurtz's cousin and a journalist, who want to know more about Kurtz's death. Finally Marlow visits Kurtz's Intended and lies to her, telling her that his last words were her name.

### Background, themes and symbols

**The abuse and hypocrisy of colonialists:** The book explores issues related with the colonial rule in Africa. Marlow is faced with a harsh picture of colonial trade: the inefficiency and hypocrisy of white agents, the greedy impulses and harsh methods of the traders, the destruction of the land, and the exploitation of and brutality towards the African tribes surrounding the stations astound him and make him challenge his ideas and values. However, what particularly shocks him is the true nature of the so-called extraordinary Kurtz, who actually rules through violence and oppression and ends up wanting to 'exterminate the savages'.

**Good vs evil:** *Heart of Darkness* can be seen as the individual's inner conflict between good and evil. Just like Kurtz, or even Marlow, people struggle with their moral ideas, strength and values, and fight with the dark forces inside them, their hidden repressed drives. Yet, when they finally see their own 'heart of darkness' they are left with no words but 'The horror! The horror!'

The change in Kurtz's ideas and purposes from educating and guiding the natives towards a better life, to his exploiting them and seizing their land and ivory, reflects how he broke away from his initial beliefs, as his greed for power and control, his darkest side, took over him.

**The river, the fog and darkness:** Natural elements in the book set the scenario for the journeys and discoveries that individuals will go through, since they symbolically represent moods, feelings and thoughts.

**The Congo River** is the threshold that divides outside and inside and it is the access to the centre of the continent. It is described as a 'snake that charms', and thus, it both attracts and scares away. Marlow struggles to travel upstream towards the Inner Station to meet Kurtz at the very 'heart of darkness', but he smoothly flows downstream back to 'civilisation'.

**The fog** anticipates darkness. It creates obscurity and confusion and it clouds perception. Marlow's boat is lost and stranded in the fog, and this makes it impossible for him to see, and even understand, what lies ahead in his troubled journey, beneath the men around him, and even inside Kurtz, the man he is fascinated with.

**Darkness** is everywhere: in London, in the Congo and in the innermost part of the individual. Darkness stands for the mysterious, the unknown, the savage, the unrepressed. It is at the heart of the continent and it appears to be opposed to the 'light of civilisation'. Yet it also reflects the evil purposes, the faulty methods and the moral obscurity of the colonial project.

### Discussion activities

#### Before reading

- 1 Discuss:** Have students talk about the book and the cover. Write 'Heart of Darkness' on the board. Divide the class into groups and tell them to imagine what the Reader is about. Write their answers in spider-webs.
- 2 Discuss:** Have students talk about the colonial rule in Africa or anywhere else in the world.  
*What was the purpose of establishing colonies? How did colonies work? What did the British want from the colonies? What did they offer the colonies? What did the British think of the native people there?*
- 3 Read:** Have students to read aloud pages v and vi.
  - a** Divide the class into two. Have Group A underline all the dates and the places (countries and states) mentioned and Group B underline the phrases that describe the relation between white colonisers and natives.



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- b Bring a world map to the classroom and have students mark each of the places underlined by Group A.
  - c Based on what Group B underlined, discuss how the Africans were affected by colonisation.
- 4 **Research:** Tell students to form groups and go to the library or surf internet sites for more information on the colonial rule in Africa and to answer the questions you asked in exercise 3 in further detail. Ask them to prepare presentations to share with the other students.

### Chapter 1

#### While Reading

- 5 **Pairwork and Role-play:** Have students choose between any of the two situations below.
- a *You are Marlow and his aunt having tea and celebrating Marlow's getting the job at the Company.*  
**Student A:** *You are the aunt. Talk about the new ideas that you have read in the papers. Tell Marlow how proud you are of him and why.*  
**Student B:** *You are Marlow. Tell your aunt how you always liked exploring and why this journey is so important to you.*
  - b *You are Marlow and an agent at the Company's office in Brussels during Marlow's job interview.*  
**Student A:** *You are one of the Company's representatives. You have to interview Marlow. Tell him about the company's projects, expectations and methods. Ask him all the necessary questions.*  
**Student B:** *You are Marlow. Make sure you make a good impression on the Company. Tell them why you are the right person for the job.*

Choose three to five pairs to act out their interviews in front of the class.

- 6 **Discuss:** Have students look at the picture opposite page 1 that reads: 'Would this land and this river control us or would we control them?'
- a Ask: *What impression does the picture give you? What is suggested in the question below it? How do they both relate to what you have read in the chapter?*
  - b Write the heading above on the board and brainstorm ideas. Tell students:  
*Some of the natural elements in the book seem to be personified, or given human qualities; others are compared to animals; and others are given magical or supernatural powers. Why is this so? Do you remember reading any of these? What view of nature is presented in the story?*
- 7 **Group work:** After the discussion, tell students to form groups and to choose one of the following activities:
- a Read from 'The Thames was confident in its power' until the end of the paragraph (p. 2). *How is the River Thames described? Which qualities is it given? Why?*
  - b Read from 'I found myself on a street in London looking at a map of Africa' until the end of the

paragraph (p. 5) *How is the River Congo described? Which qualities is it given? Why?*

- c Read from 'I left a French steamboat' until the end of the paragraph (p. 10). *How is the coast described? Which qualities is it given? Why?*
  - d Read from 'I felt alone among these passengers and the crew' until the end of the paragraph (p. 9). *How is the sea described? Which qualities is it given? Why?*
  - e Read from 'We continued along the coast' until the end of the paragraph (p. 10). *How are the waves described? Which qualities are they given? Why?*
- 8 **Discuss:** After students have finished the exercise above ask:  
*What does water seem to do? What does it divide? What problems does it bring about? Why? What is water preventing men from doing? Why?*

#### After reading

- 9 **Guess:** Ask students how they think the Africans see Marlow.  
*You are one of the African natives in Congo. What do you think about all the white men in your land collecting your ivory? What are they like? What is strange about them? What are they doing here? What do you think of their customs and methods?*
- 10 **Discuss:** Ask students to look back at exercise 4 in chapter 1 in the Activity Worksheet.  
*Discuss with your partner why African people are described in so many different ways. What does each of them suggest? What does this show about people's assumptions about African people? Discuss how things or even people change depending on who is looking at them.*
- 11 **Write:** Have students imagine what would have happened:  
*If Marlow's aunt hadn't spoken so highly about her nephew, people would have had a different perception of Marlow and he would have been given a different job. Surely the manager and his agents would have treated him differently. How? What would have happened?*
- 12 **Discuss:** Have students look back at exercise 2 in chapter 1 in the Activity Worksheet.  
*Look at the chart you completed about England now and during the Roman times. Why do you think Marlow mentions this? What does he want to show about England? How different was England in the past from present Africa?*  
Have the whole class share their opinions.
- 13 **Write:** Give students these instructions:  
*There are many parts in the book in which nature seems to suggest what is happening to men or to anticipate what will happen to them. Choose one of the following situations and write a short paragraph in which nature suggests or predicts what men go through.*
- a *As Marlow is leaving Brussels in the French boat he looks back.*



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- b** Marlow walks towards his steamboat stuck at the bottom of the river and stares at it.
- c** It is very hot and late at night. Marlow is on the deck of his steamboat. As he is falling asleep, he starts thinking of Kurtz.

**14 Read and write:** Have students do the following:  
On page 6, Marlow describes Freslaven's fight with the chief of the village using irony, i.e., he says other than what he means, and uses a bit of humour for the situation not to be so shocking to the listener.  
Re-read the paragraph with your partner and choose any other situation in the chapter that could be retold using irony with the same effect.

### Chapter 2

#### While Reading

- 15 Read and Discuss:** Have students discuss how the setting and characters are presented.  
Re-read from 'We entered deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness' up to 'the noise and activities of these wild creatures' (p. 30) and discuss how Congo and the African people are shown in this chapter.
- 16 Role-play:** Have students write a dialogue that could have been in the story and perform it.  
On pages 25–28, the Manager of the Central Station and his uncle talk about the Company, trade and Kurtz without knowing that Marlow is listening to them. Imagine that Marlow talks to them. Decide when he will interrupt them and what each of them will say. Decide how the conversation will change.
- 17 Pairwork:** Have students work in pairs and imagine they are two of the cannibals on Marlow's boat.  
You are travelling on Marlow's boat. How do you feel? What do you think about your people? What do you think about all the white men around you? What do you expect from the journey?
- 18 Write:** Have students write the following:  
You are Marlow. Everyday you write in your logbook what has happened, what the weather is like, how the tide changes, how the crew behaves, etc.
- 19 Pairwork:** Have students analyse what the fog means in the book. Give students these instructions:  
With your partner re-read pages 34 and 35 trying to keep in mind what we have already said about the role of nature in the book. Then answer these questions: Why does the fog appear now? What does it suggest? What does it prevent men from doing?

#### After reading

- 20 Pairwork:** Have students do this activity.  
Imagine one of you is Marlow and the other is the Manager. You are trapped in the fog at night and you start wondering whether you'll ever see Kurtz.  
**Student A:** You are Marlow. As you fall asleep you start hearing Kurtz's voice. What does it say?

**Student B:** You are the Manager. As you fall asleep you start hearing Kurtz's voice. What does it say?  
Compare your writings.

- 21 Write:** Give students these instructions.  
Nobody knows what happened to Kurtz and why he changed his ideas so much and ended up writing 'exterminate the savages!' Imagine you are Kurtz and write down what was going on in his mind at the time
- 22 Read and discuss:** Have students re-read pages 42 and 43 paying special attention to what Marlow says about women and about people who live in the city. Discuss the two issues below using these questions:
- a** Why is it that there are practically no women in the story? Why does Marlow say that women 'should be out of it'? What view of women does he have?
- b** Why does Marlow tell the European men listening to his story that 'they can't understand what he is talking about'? Do you agree? Do you have to live like Kurtz in order to understand?
- 23 Write:** Have students do the following activity.  
You are the Russian. You have just met Marlow and his crew. Write your thoughts and feelings in your diary.

### Chapter 3

#### While reading

- 24 Read and discuss:** Tell students to re-read pages 53–55 where Marlow describes a different Kurtz. What view of Kurtz is shown in these pages? How different is this Kurtz from the one presented by Marlow before? Which Kurtz is the true one? Why?
- 25 Discuss:** Have students read the following quotation (p. 56) out loud then ask these questions:  
'I think this knowledge came to Kurtz at last – but only at the end. However, the jungle and the river had discovered his greedy secrets early and had punished him for his terrible attack on them'.  
How has nature been affected by Kurtz? In how many ways was Kurtz punished by nature? Why?
- 26 Guess:** Have students imagine a different arrival.  
Kurtz arrives at the station being carried and followed by the natives. Even though they shout and complain, they are pacific. Imagine a scenario in which they react differently. Write or draw what happens.
- 27 Guess:** Have students do the following activity.  
We are told by the Russian that Kurtz and the beautiful woman used to argue a lot. Imagine what they could fight about and write down what they both say.
- 28 Group work:** Have students do this activity.  
On his death bed, Kurtz gives a packet of papers to Marlow. Everybody seems to be interested in them, but we never know what they say. With your partners plan what is in the packet. What each paper says. Write them down in Kurtz's style.



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### After reading

- 29 Read and discuss:** Tell students to re-read page 73 where Marlow talks about Kurtz's final cry (The horror) and his journey into the heart of darkness. *Do you agree with Marlow's view of Kurtz? Why do you think Kurtz cries 'the horror'? How do you understand the title of the book, Heart of Darkness after this dramatic moment?*
- 30 Predict:** Ask students what happens next? *Imagine you are all fortune-tellers, who will predict the future of the Company, Marlow, the Manager, the natives, the beautiful woman and the Intended after Kurtz's death. Take turns to talk about them.*
- 31 Role-play:** Give students the following instructions. *Imagine that Kurtz and the Company have to stand trial in an African court because of what they have done. Play the roles of the judge, the members of the jury, the lawyers, Kurtz and the Company men.*
- 32 Write:** Have students write about Kurtz's memoirs after 'The horror! The horror' *Imagine that after 'the horror' Kurtz survives and sees the light. Imagine what he would write in the central chapter of his autobiography.*

### After reading

- 33 Discuss:** Guide students with questions about Europeans and Africans. *Has the reading of the book changed your views about Europeans, Africans and colonial trade?*
- 34 Discuss:** Have students discuss good and evil. The book shows that Kurtz, Marlow, and all people are good and evil and that they have a savage and an evil side as well as a civilised side. Do you agree? How do these show in the book?
- 35 Discuss:** Have students discuss 'The horror!' *On page 12 Marlow stands in horror and on page 71 Kurtz stares in horror. What are these men horrified about? What does Joseph Conrad suggest by this?*
- 36 Discuss:** Guide students with questions about women. *There are four different types of women in the book: the aunt, the blindfolded woman, the beautiful woman and the Intended. What is each of them like? Are these stereotypes representative of women in general? Why?*
- 37 Find:** Get students to find examples of Kurtz an idol and a monster. *Throughout the book, Marlow has mixed feelings about Kurtz. He sees him as both an idol and a monster. Look for examples of both.*

### Projects

- 38 Discuss:** if you have access to films on video or DVD, you can discuss scenes in *Apocalypse Now*.
- 39 Group work:** Have students do these activities.
- Divide the students into groups. Have each draw a chart and compare one of the following

in the book and the film: Marlow and Willard, Mr Kurtz and Colonel Kurtz, the African and the Cambodian jungles, African and Cambodian tribes. Then have students share their findings.

- Watch the scene in which Willard and one of his crew members, Chef, end up venturing into the jungle to fetch some fruit. Ask students to do the following:  
*Analyse how the two men are shown as two small beings against a background of huge trees in the immensity of the jungle. Discuss this and write down your thoughts.*  
*Look for passages in Joseph Conrad's book in which nature dwarfs men. Then share your writings and findings.*
  - Watch the scene in which Willard, played by Martin Sheen, enters Colonel Kurtz's compound. Ask students to do the following:  
*Write down what this scene shows and suggests about Kurtz and his relationship with the natives.*  
*Also discuss whether the images show the outpost as you imagined it.*
- 40 Listen:** Get students listen to the song *The End* by The Doors, which is played in the opening and closing soundtrack of *Apocalypse Now*. Ask these questions:  
*Why has this song been chosen? How does it relate to the book? And to the film?*
- 41 Read:** Have students read the poem 'The Hollow Men' by TS Eliot. Ask students to do these activities:
- Identify which lines are spoken by Colonel Kurtz (at the end of the film) when he expresses what he has discovered.*
  - Discuss why the poem makes reference to Conrad's Kurtz in its opening lines.*
- 42 Discuss:** Talk about the effects of colonial trade and war. Ask students to do these activities:
- Discuss how Mr Kurtz in the book and Colonel Kurtz in the film are transformed and how they change their original ideas and morals due to colonial trade and war.*
  - Discuss which view of the British venture in Africa and the American venture in Cambodia are presented in the book and the film. Analyse what these views have in common.*
- 43 Write:** Get students in groups. Tell them to choose their favourite newspaper or magazine and to write a film review of *Apocalypse Now* to be published in the film section.

### Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to [www.penguinreaders.com](http://www.penguinreaders.com).