Heart of Darkness

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOSEPH CONRAD

Jozef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski was an orphan by the age of 12; his mother and father both died as a result of time the family spent in exile in Siberia for plotting against the Russian Tsar. At seventeen, he traveled to Marseilles and began to work as a sailor. Eventually, he began to sail on British ships, and became a British citizen in 1886, at the age of 29. It was about this time he changed his name to the more British-sounding Joseph Conrad and published his first short stories (he wrote in English, his third language after Polish and French). For the next eight years, Conrad continued to work as a sailor (even spending time commanding a steamship in the Belgian Congo), and continued to write. He published his first novel (*Almayer's Folly*) in 1894. In 1896, Conrad married Jessie George. He quickly won critical praise, though financial success eluded him for many years and both he and his wife suffered serious illnesses. He wrote his best-known works in the years just before and after the turn of the century: *Heart of Darkness* (1899), *Lord Jim* (1900), and *Nostromo* (1904). Conrad died in 1924.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During the last two decades of the 19th century, European nations battled each other for wealth and power. This battle caused the "scramble for Africa," in which European countries competed to colonize as much of Africa as possible. While the colonizing Europeans claimed to want to "civilize" the African continent, their actions spoke otherwise: they were interested solely in gaining wealth and did not care how they did it, or who was killed. One of the most brutal of the European colonies in its treatment of the native Africans was the Belgian Congo, the property of the Belgian King Leopold I. In 1890, Joseph Conrad worked as a pilot on a steamship in the Belgian Congo, and *Heart of Darkness* is at least in part based on his experiences there.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Joseph Conrad's novels reside in the transition period between Victorianism, with its strict conventions and focus on polite society, and Modernism, which sought to explode old conventions and invent new literary forms to convey human experience more fully. Conrad's work was instrumental in this effort, particularly his experimentation with the use of time and non-chronological narratives. *Heart of Darkness* also fits squarely into the genre of colonial literature, in which European writers portrayed the colonialism and imperialism of European nations from Africa to the Far East in the late 19th and early 20th century.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Heart of Darkness*
- **When Published:** 1899
- **Literary Period:** Victorianism/Modernism
- **Genre:** Colonial literature; Quest literature
- **Setting:** The Narrator tells the story from a ship at the mouth of the Thames River near London, England around 1899. Marlow's story-within-the-story is set in an unnamed European city (probably Brussels) and in the Belgian Congo in Africa sometime in the early to mid 1890s, during the colonial era.
- **Climax:** The confrontation between Marlow and Kurtz in the jungle
- **Antagonist:** Kurtz
- **Point of View:** First person (both Marlow and the Unnamed Narrator use first person)

EXTRA CREDIT

Heart of the Apocalypse. Heart of Darkness is the source for the movie Apocalypse Now. The movie uses the primary plot and themes of Heart of Darkness, and shifts the story from Africa to Vietnam to explore the hypocrisy, inanity, and emptiness of the American war effort there.

PLOT SUMMARY

The Narrator describes a night spent on a ship in the mouth of the Thames River in England. Marlow, one of the men on board, tells of his time spent as a riverboat pilot in the Belgian Congo.

With the help of his well-connected aunt, Marlow gets a job as pilot on a steamship on the Congo River in Africa for a European business outfit called the Company. First he travels to the European city he describes as a "**whited sepulcher**" to visit the Company headquarters, and then to Africa and up the Congo to assume command of his ship. The Company headquarters is strangely ominous, and on his voyage to Africa he witnesses waste, incompetence, negligence, and brutality so extreme that it would be absurd if it weren't so awful. In particular, he sees a French warship firing into a forest for no discernible reason and comes upon a grove where exploited black laborers wander off to die. While at the Company's Outer Station, Marlow meets the Company's Chief Accountant. He mentions a remarkable man named Kurtz, who runs the

Company's Inner Station deep in the jungle.

Marlow hikes from the Outer Station to the Central Station, where he discovers that the steamship he's supposed to pilot recently sank in an accident. In the three months it takes Marlow to repair the ship, he learns that Kurtz is a man of impressive abilities and enlightened morals, and is marked for rapid advancement in the Company. He learns also that the General Manager who runs Central Station and his crony the Brickmaker fear Kurtz as a threat to their positions. Marlow finds himself almost obsessed with meeting Kurtz, who is also rumored to be sick.

Marlow finally gets the ship fixed and sets off upriver with the General Manager and a number of company agents Marlow calls Pilgrims because the staffs they carry resemble the staffs of religious pilgrims. The trip is long and difficult: native drums beat through the night and snags in the river and blinding fogs delay them. Just before they reach Inner Station the steamship is attacked by natives. Marlow's helmsman, a native trained to steer the ship, is killed by a spear.

At Inner Station, a Russian trader meets them on the shore. He tells them that Kurtz is alive but ill. As the General Manager goes to get Kurtz, Marlow talks to the Russian trader and realizes that Kurtz has made himself into a brutal and vicious god to the natives. When the General Manager and his men bring Kurtz out from the station house on a stretcher, the natives, including a woman who seems to be Kurtz's mistress, appear ready to riot. But Kurtz calms them and they melt back into the forest.

The Russian sees that the General Manager has it in for him, and slips off into the jungle, but not before telling Marlow that Kurtz ordered the attack on the steamship. That night, Marlow discovers Kurtz crawling toward the native camp. Marlow persuades Kurtz to return to the ship by telling him he will be “utterly lost" if he causes the natives to attack. The steamer sets off the next day. But Kurtz is too ill to survive the journey, and gives his papers to Marlow for safekeeping. His dying words are: "The horror! The horror!" Marlow believes Kurtz is judging himself and the world.

Marlow also falls ill, but survives. He returns to the sepulchral city in Europe and gives Kurtz's papers to the relevant people. The last person he visits is Kurtz's Intended (his fiancé). She believes Kurtz is a great man, both talented and moral, and asks Marlow to tell her Kurtz's last words. Marlow can't find it in himself to destroy her beautiful delusions: he says Kurtz's last words were her name.

On the ship in the Thames, Marlow falls silent, and as the Narrator stares out from the ship it seems to him that the Thames leads “into the heart of an immense **darkness**."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Marlow – One of the five men on the ship in the Thames. *Heart of Darkness* is mostly made up of his story about his journey into the Belgian Congo. Marlow is a seaman through and through, and has seen the world many times over. Perhaps because of his journeys, perhaps because of the temperament he was born with, he is philosophical, passionate, and insightful. But Marlow is also extremely skeptical of both mankind and civilization, and, to him, nothing is simple. As the Narrator describes him: "to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze." The one thing Marlow does seem to believe in as a source of simple moral worth is hard work.

Kurtz – The fiancé of his Intended, and a man of great intellect, talent, and ambition who is warped by his time in the Congo. Kurtz is the embodiment of all that's noble about European civilization, from his talent in the arts to his ambitious goals of "civilizing" and helping the natives of Africa, and can be seen as a symbol of that civilization. But in his time in Africa Kurtz is transformed from a man of moral principles to a monster who makes himself a god among the natives, even going so far as to perform "terrible rites." His transformation proves that for all of his talent, ambition, and moral ideas, he was hollow at the core.

General Manager – The head of the Company's Central Station on the river. Untalented and unexceptional, the General Manager has reached his position of power in the Company because of his ability to cause vague uneasiness in others coupled with an ability to withstand the terrible jungle diseases year after year. The General Manager has no lofty moral ambitions, and cares only about his own power and position and making money.

The Russian Trader – A wanderer and trader who wears a multi-colored patched jacket that makes him look like a harlequin (a jester). Through some miraculous stroke of luck, he has ended up alone in the jungle along the Congo and survived. He is naïve and innocent and believes Kurtz is a great man beyond any conventional morality. He even nursed Kurtz back to health on a number of occasions though Kurtz once threatened to shoot him. Of all the **white** men in the Congo, only the Russian refrains from trying to assert control over the jungle.

Narrator – One of the five men on the ship in the Thames, he is the one who relays to the reader Marlow's story about Kurtz and the Congo. He is insightful, and seems to understand Marlow quite well, but otherwise has little personality. He does seem to be affected by Marlow's story.

The Brickmaker – The General Manager's most trusted agent. A sly, lazy, power-hungry fellow who despite his title seems to

have never made a brick, the Brickmaker cares only about his own advancement and therefore sees Kurtz as a threat. He also thinks that Marlow and Kurtz are somehow allied within the company. Marlow describes the Brickmaker as a "papier-mâché Mephistopheles."

MINOR CHARACTERS

The General Manager's Uncle – The uncle of the General Manager, and the head of the Eldorado Exploring Expedition. Like his nephew, the uncle has come to Africa to make his fortune. He is generally untalented, and his expedition disappears in the jungle.

Kurtz's Intended – The **woman** in Europe to whom Kurtz is betrothed to be married. She is incredibly idealistic about both Kurtz and the colonization of Africa. She continues to mourn Kurtz as a great man even a year after he dies.

Marlow's Aunt – A well-connected and idealistic **woman**, she helps Marlow get the job as a steamer pilot for the Company. She is extremely idealistic about the European colonization of Africa, seeing it as a beautiful effort to civilize the savages.

Director of Companies – One of the five men on the ship in the Thames who listen to Marlow's story.

Lawyer – One of the five men on the ship in the Thames who listen to Marlow's story.

Accountant – One of the five men on the ship in the Thames who listen to Marlow's story. He is *not* the same as the Chief Accountant.

Fresleven – A steamship pilot who got into a silly argument that cost him his life. His death opened the position into which Marlow was hired.

Doctor – A medical man in the **sepulchral city** who is interested in how the Congo drives men crazy.

Swede – A steamship captain who has nothing but disdain for the "government chaps" who care only about money.

Chief Accountant – A Company employee at the Outer Station who wins Marlow's admiration simply by keeping himself impeccably groomed. (Do not confuse him with the Accountant on the ship in the Thames.)

The Foreman – A man who helps Marlow repair the steamship.

The Pilgrims – Company agents that Marlow gives the derisive nickname Pilgrims because they carry long wooden staves wherever they go.

The Helmsman – A coastal native of Africa trained to man the helm of a steamship. He works for Marlow until he's killed.

African Woman – A savage and stately African tribeswoman who seems likely to have been Kurtz's lover.

The General Manager's servant – A native boy who has grown insolent because he works for the General Manager.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

COLONIALISM

Marlow's story in *Heart of Darkness* takes place in the Belgian Congo, the most notorious European colony in Africa because of the Belgian colonizers' immense greed and brutal treatment of the native people. In its depiction of the monstrous wastefulness and casual cruelty of the colonial agents toward the African natives, *Heart of Darkness* reveals the utter hypocrisy of the entire colonial effort. In Europe, colonization of Africa was justified on the grounds that not only would it bring wealth to Europe, it would also civilize and educate the "savage" African natives. *Heart of Darkness* shows that in practice the European colonizers used the high ideals of colonization as a cover to allow them to viciously rip whatever wealth they could from Africa.

Unlike most novels that focus on the evils of colonialism, *Heart of Darkness* pays more attention to the damage that colonization does to the souls of white colonizers than it does to the physical death and devastation unleashed on the black natives. Though this focus on the white colonizers makes the novella somewhat unbalanced, it does allow *Heart of Darkness* to extend its criticism of colonialism all the way back to its corrupt source, the "civilization" of Europe.

THE HOLLOWNESS OF CIVILIZATION

Heart of Darkness portrays a European civilization that is hopelessly and blindly corrupt. The novella depicts European society as hollow at the core: Marlow describes the **white** men he meets in Africa, from the General Manager to Kurtz, as empty, and refers to the unnamed European city as the "**sepulchral city**" (a sepulcher is a hollow tomb). Throughout the novella, Marlow argues that what Europeans call "civilization" is superficial, a mask created by fear of the law and public shame that hides a **dark** heart, just as a beautiful white sepulcher hides the decaying dead inside.

Marlow, and *Heart of Darkness*, argue that in the African jungle—"utter solitude without a policeman"—the civilized man is plunged into a world without superficial restrictions, and the mad desire for power comes to dominate him. Inner strength could allow a man to push off the temptation to dominate, but civilization actually saps this inner strength by making men think it's unnecessary. The civilized man believes he's civilized through and through. So when a man like Kurtz suddenly finds himself in the solitude of the jungle and hears the whisperings

of his dark impulses, he is unable to combat them and becomes a monster.

THE LACK OF TRUTH

Heart of Darkness plays with the genre of quest literature. In a quest, a hero passes through a series of difficult tests to find an object or person of importance, and in the process comes to a realization about the true nature of the world or human soul. Marlow seems to be on just such a quest, making his way past absurd and horrendous "stations" on his way up the Congo to find Kurtz, the shining beacon of European civilization and morality in the midst of the **dark** jungle and the "flabby rapacious folly" of the other Belgian Company agents.

But Marlow's quest is a failure: Kurtz turns out to be the biggest monster of all. And with that failure Marlow learns that at the heart of everything there lies only **darkness**. In other words, you can't know other people, and you can't even really know yourself. There is no fundamental truth.

WORK

In a world where truth is unknowable and men's hearts are filled with either greed or a primitive **darkness** that threatens to overwhelm them, Marlow seems to find comfort only in work. Marlow notes that he escaped the jungle's influence not because he had principles or high ideals, but because he had a job to do that kept him busy.

Work is perhaps the only thing in *Heart of Darkness* that Marlow views in an entirely positive light. In fact, more than once Marlow will refer to work or items that are associated with work (like rivets) as "real," while the rest of the jungle and the men in it are "unreal." Work is like a religion to him, a source of support to which he can cling in order to keep his humanity. This explains why he is so horrified when he sees laziness, poor work, or machines left out to rust. When other men cease to do honest work, Marlow knows they have sunk either into the heart of **darkness** or the hollow greed of civilization.

RACISM

Students and critics alike often argue about whether *Heart of Darkness* is a racist book. Some argue that the book depicts Europeans as superior to Africans, while others believe the novel attacks colonialism and therefore is not racist. There is the evidence in the book that supports both sides of the argument, which is another way of saying that the book's actual stance on the relationship between blacks and whites is not itself black and white.

Heart of Darkness attacks colonialism as a deeply flawed enterprise run by corrupt and hollow white men who perpetrate mass destruction on the native population of Africa, and the novel seems to equate **darkness** with truth and whiteness with hollow trickery and lies. So *Heart of Darkness* argues that the Africans are less corrupt and in that sense superior to white people, but its argument for the superiority of Africans is based on a foundation of racism. Marlow, and *Heart of Darkness*, take the rather patronizing view that the black natives are primitive and therefore innocent while the white colonizers are sophisticated and therefore corrupt. This take on colonization is certainly not "politically correct," and can be legitimately called racist because it treats the natives like objects rather than as thinking people.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

WOMEN

Marlow believes that women exist in a world of beautiful illusions that have nothing to do with truth or the real world. In this way, women come to symbolize civilization's ability to hide its hypocrisy and darkness behind pretty ideas.

THE SEPULCHRAL CITY

The **white** sepulchral city symbolizes all of European civilization. The beautiful white outside evokes the lofty ideas and justifications that Europeans use to justify colonization, while the hidden hollow inside the sepulcher hides the hypocrisy and desire for power and wealth that truly motivate the colonial powers.

DARK AND WHITE

Darkness is everywhere in *Heart of Darkness*. But the novella tweaks the conventional idea of white as good and dark as evil. Evil and good don't really apply to *Heart of Darkness*, because everyone in the novella is somehow complicit in the atrocities taking place in Africa. Rather, whiteness, especially in the form of the white fog that surrounds the steamship, symbolizes blindness. The dark is symbolized by the huge and inscrutable African jungle, and is associated with the unknowable and primitive heart of all men.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Publications edition of *Heart of Darkness* published in 1990.

Part 1 Quotes

❝ The old river in its broad reach rested unruffled at the decline of day, after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks, spread out in the tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth [...] Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth!...The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealth, the germs of empires.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

At the novel's onset the narrator reflects on the significance of the River Thames. The Thames flows through London to the Atlantic Ocean, so it has served as the connector between the capital of England and the rest of the world. He focuses, here, on the English citizens engaged in exploration and imperialism, and tends to aggrandize the dreams and pursuits he describes.

Rivers are important and complicated symbols throughout *Heart of Darkness*, and the narrator presents the Thames as "unruffled" and possessing a "tranquil dignity." It is a placid and consistent force that contrasts with the movement of both Londoners and the "hunters" who journey forth. Yet the river also plays the boundary role between its "ebb" and the earth's "mystery." So the same calm and indifferent water described here is also responsible for the violent colonial events treated later in the text.

The narrator's opening reflections on English colonials reveal his position to be generally positive, even laudatory. Though he touches on potential sins of avarice ("gold") and vanity ("fame"), he casts their actions in the language of missionaries who bring something inherently positive and enlightening from "the sacred fire" of England. The fire imagery contrasts notably with the dark and aquatic Thames, highlighting the bright but short-lived energy of human pursuits in comparison to the cool stability of nature. The symbols shift once more in the final line, from sparks to "seed" and "germs," demonstrating a belief that these emissaries will be the origin points for positive developments wherever they travel. These images will repeatedly be called into question throughout the novel, so it is important to note how Conrad sets up the narrator as generally affirming of colonialism at the onset of the text.

❝ "And this also," said Marlow suddenly, "has been one of the dark places of the earth."

Related Characters: Marlow (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Marlow interjects here on two levels—first into the silence aboard the ship and second into the narrator's descriptions—to make this stark comment on the history of England.

Whereas the narrator praises English explorers and conquerers for bringing light to dark and foreign lands, Marlow locates darkness within England itself. To support this point, he references the land's more ancient history when it was taken over by the Romans—thus constructing a parallel between the Roman invasion and Europe's current colonialism in Africa. In this way, he stresses the relatively small time scale in which the Thames has served as the launch-pad for the world power, subtly undermining the narrator's focus on European civilization.

His choice of the term "dark" is critical. Conrad could have certainly opted for the more descriptive adjectives "savage" or "uncouth," but instead he selects a metaphorical term that contrasts directly to the fire-bearing image of the narrator, that implicates race, and that refers directly to the novel's title. If the narrator might locate the "heart of darkness" in the Congo, Marlow already hints that England holds its own corresponding darknesses. The symbolic and geographical lines, he implies, cannot be drawn as simply as the listener or reader might desire.

> In some inland post feel the savagery, the utter savagery, had closed round him—all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men. There's no initiation either into such mysteries. He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable. And it has a fascination, too, that goes to work upon him. The fascination of the abomination—you know. Imagine the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate.

Related Characters: Marlow (speaker), Kurtz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

To support his point on the old darkness of London, Marlow constructs a tale of a Roman citizen who arrived in what is now England. With a language that will later parallel his descriptions of the Congo, Marlow describes the insidious way a new and inhospitable environment will challenge the morality and identity of someone unfamiliar with its domains.

At first the description seems to juxtapose the inner civility of the Roman with the outer "savagery" of the environment: The "forest," "jungles," and "wild men" are all figures that must be confronted without any fore-knowledge. And that lack of understanding notably makes them "detestable," alluding to the deep hatred and fear that can stem from encountering foreign environments. Yet in the second half of the image, Marlow's position takes a dramatic turn. He observes that the savage "mysteries" also hold a "fascination." The inner civility of the Roman, he implies, is actually susceptible to and allured by the savagery of the external environment.

Whereas we might assume that the violence in the situation is the result of the Roman simply rejecting the new savage lands, Marlow implies that it comes from a strange combination of hatred and "fascination." The hypothetical character is pulled in two directions, hoping to leave, but also succumbing to the savagery and thus arriving at a state of intense "hate"—presumably for both himself and for others. These lines clarify the reason Marlow attributes darkness to London, and they also foreshadow the encounter of supposedly civilized Europeans with hostile foreign environments later in the text.

> The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.

Related Characters: Marlow (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

After having ruminated indirectly on colonialism, Marlow makes a more direct criticism of the enterprise here. The comment is a challenge both to the narrator and other listeners aboard the ship who may be implicated in colonialism—as well as to the European society reading the novel itself.

In order to substantiate this comment, Marlow first redefines the subtly positive term "conquest of the earth," which would present the English as powerful victors controlling the land of the earth. Yet Marlow points out that this earth is already populated by people and that to conquer means "taking it away" from others. Furthermore, the biggest difference between these others and the English is nothing moral or spiritual, but rather something based on surface-level physical details: "complexion" and "flatter noses." Marlow directly calls out the racism inherent in colonialism.

His reference to looking closely into things is, however, a bit more ambiguous. On the one hand, Marlow implies that his listeners should look more closely into the conquest of the earth and more critically evaluate their actions. This idea is supported by the fact the statement comes from a novel, in particular a novel dense with metaphorical imagery that demands its own reader look very closely. Yet at other times in the text, Marlow criticizes characters who investigate too much, who look too closely; he prefers, as a captain, to take solace in the surface of navigation and efficient work. We see here not so much an aggressive moral judgment as a portrayal of a character who has come to recognize deep flaws in colonialism and yet who remains uncertain of how to negotiate them.

Once, I remember, we came upon a man-of-war anchored off the coast. There wasn't even a shed there, and she was shelling the bush. It appears the French had one of their wars going on thereabouts. Her ensign dropped limp like a rag; the muzzles of the long six-inch guns stuck out all over the low hull; the greasy, slimy swell swung her up lazily and let her down, swaying her thin masts. In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech—and nothing happened. Nothing could happen.

Related Characters: Marlow (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

Marlow here recounts the irrational and bizarre actions of a French war ship he encounters while he's on the steamer that will take him to the mouth of the Congo River. To his eyes, the ship is shooting aimlessly into the "bush" without any direct or sensible goal.

This anecdote highlights the emptiness that undergirds many of the European colonial endeavors. The ship seems to be engaged in "one of their wars" but it has no actual enemy and attacks the imprecise "continent" of Africa itself. This functions a metaphor for how Europeans seek grandeur in their colonial journeys but often find themselves acting haphazardly and lacking a coherent goal. Specific descriptions of the ship are all decrepit or trivial—"limp like a rag" "low hull," "thin masts"—and contrast with the profound scale of the surrounding environment: "earth, sky, and water." Marlow juxtaposes the absurdities of human action with the natural realm, a realm so large that canons become "a tiny projectile" and "nothing could happen" from the actions of humans.

"Incomprehensible," one should note, is one of Marlow's and Conrad's most repeated words. This is a perplexing term for both a storyteller and a novelist, for it does not actually describe anything but rather notes that something cannot be understood or explained. This professed uncertainty is one way Marlow undermines the tropes of a traditional adventure story. His journey up the Congo is filled with more questions than answers, more uncertainties than explanations. No clear conclusion is ever presented about the French ship's actions. And in this sense, human acts of interpretation are themselves presented much like the ship's guns: They are overwhelmed by the largeness that they seek to comprehend.

When one has got to make correct entries, one comes to hate those savages—hate them to the death.

Related Characters: Chief Accountant (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

The Chief Accountant reflects on the role of order to Marlow during one of their conversations at the Outer Station. As a representative of European efficiency, the Chief Accountant is deeply frustrated with the Congolese who interrupt his numerical mind. He is provoked to frustration first by a dying local housed in his room and second by a caravan of locals who arrive at the camp and make a great deal of noise.

Marlow's perspective on the Accountant is ambivalent. On the one hand, he values the physical order and logical approach the Accountant maintains in a tropical environment that moves many Europeans to irrationality and despair. The "correct entries" of his accounting represent this steadfastness. Yet the obsession with that correctness also makes the accountant greedy and callous toward others—in particular the locals. Their supposed distractions cause him to call them "savages" and then to use a revealing expression "hate them to the death." Conrad has notably added in an extra article "the" to slightly disrupt the saying "hate them to death"—perhaps to draw our attention how the European hatred for the locals actually results in literal deaths. There is a deep horror beneath the order of the accountant to which Marlow has begun to be attuned.

The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it. A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse. By Jove! I've never seen anything so unreal in my life. And outside, the silent wilderness surrounding this cleared speck on the earth struck me as something great and invincible, like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion.

Related Characters: Marlow (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

As Marlow works to repair the ship at the Central Station, he reflects on the agents' obsession with ivory: the main commodity that interests the Europeans in the Congo. Marlow's earnest manual labor sharply contrasts the way others merely dream of wealth, and Marlow once more trivializes those wishes by alluding to the scale of the surrounding environment.

Ivory is presented in the passage not only as an economic commodity, but also as a kind of supernatural force. The fact that the agents seem to be "praying to it" gives it a religious aura, and the object transforms the station into something "unreal." Greed seems to drive that transformation: the "imbecile rapacity" that Marlow sees as mean, counterproductive, and decrepit. Comparing the greed to the "whiff from some corpse" implies that it is a fundamentally inhuman behavior, and the corpse imagery will resurface in his later descriptions of Kurtz.

Once more, Marlow contrasts these small human actions and greeds with the immensity of the "silent wilderness." That immensity, however, is not necessarily a positive force, for it is likened to both "evil" and "truth." Two interpretations seem possible here: Either truth is fundamentally evil or both terms are so vast, like the wilderness, that they evade the parameters of human ethical understanding. In contrast, the station is just a "speck," and all of colonialism becomes a "fantastic invasion." Like the French ship from earlier in the story, the enterprise becomes a ridiculous episode that will eventually fade into the massive scale of the landscape.

> I let him run on, this papier--mâché Mephistopheles, and it seemed to me that if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him, and would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt, maybe.

Related Characters: Marlow (speaker), The Brickmaker

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Marlow reflects on the falseness of the Brickmaker, an agent who never in fact makes bricks but is more likely the spy of the General Manager. Here the Brickmaker tries to extract information from Marlow on Kurtz and on those who sent both of them to the Congo.

Whereas Marlow could certainly be intimidated by the Brickmaker, he finds him relatively easy to understand and defend against. The Brickmaker is a "Mephistopheles," another term for the devil, but also made out of "papier-mâché": material mixed of pulp and adhesive and used to cover up structures or make hollow figures. Marlow reiterates the idea of vacancy when he adds how nothing would be inside him except "a little loose dirt." So while the Brickmaker may be wicked, his wickedness is built on no inner fortitude or substance.

Imagery of hollowness will be repeated when Marlow confronts Kurtz, so this is a key preoccupation when Marlow deals with Europeans. In contrast, we might note the incomprehensible evil that Marlow attributes to the surrounding wilderness. Whereas both the colonials and the environment are deemed wicked, the first are hollow men, but the second is, in its mystery, both more threatening and more meaningful.

> Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is the very essence of dreams... [...] ...No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone.

Related Characters: Marlow (speaker), Kurtz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Marlow suddenly breaks with his fluid narration to reflect on the process of narration itself. He anxiously wonders whether the listeners aboard the Nellie are following the story and notes that he cannot impart the full gravity of the events he experienced.

Though Marlow begins with a direct and sensible question, asking if the listeners can visualize the character of Kurtz, he soon moves to broader questions on storytelling. These play somewhat fast and loose with visual imagery: One does

not, after all, "see" a story, and the boat is now sufficiently dark that the sailors cannot literally see anything before them. On the one hand, Marlow is speaking about the specific conditions of the Congo adventure, which he repeatedly uses the term "dream" to describe—as if they were a fundamentally different reality ordered around rules that the sailors cannot possibly comprehend. But he is also making a general comment on storytelling, in which the complete "life-sensation" of a prior experience of "one's existence" cannot ever be truly captured in its recounting.

The use of the term "essence" is significant and seems to support the second option. At the novel's onset, Marlow observed that the essence of a tale was less important than its surface content or effect on the listener. In these lines, the "essence" of a dream is deemed "the incredible," but it is therefore the exact thing that cannot be conveyed to others. That primal and incredible sensation, Marlow implies, is only ever experienced "alone." And by equating living and dreaming in that final line, Marlow indicates that this inability to share an essence is a universal conclusion he has arrived at through his travels. Perhaps, then, the meaning of a story lies only in its surface because that is all that listeners can understand.

Part 2 Quotes

❝ In a few days the Eldorado Expedition went into the patient wilderness, that closed upon it as the sea closes over a diver. Long afterwards the news came that all the donkeys were dead. I know nothing as to the fate of the less valuable animals. They, no doubt, like the rest of us, found what they deserved. I did not inquire.

Related Characters: Marlow (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29-30

Explanation and Analysis

Marlow encounters the Eldorado Expedition as he waits for the rivets necessary to repair his boat. After spending some time in the camp, the pilgrims who comprise the group depart, causing Marlow to make this morbid and sardonic comment on their fate in the wilderness.

Once more, Marlow compares the scales of human endeavors and the natural environment. He links the Congolese wilderness with the earlier imagery of the ocean's vastness with the simile "as the sea closes over a diver." Unlike explorers who stay on ships above water, however, these submarine divers are blatantly unsuccessful. Instead of explicitly describing their death, Marlow notes that the donkeys died, and then he subtly belittles the pilgrims by referring to them as "less valuable animals." The implication, here, is that beasts of labor produce more value than the lazy and cowardly pilgrims. This is highlighted by their name: Eldorado is a non-existent city pursued by Spanish conquistadors in the Americas. The fact that this African expedition is unaware of this legacy and still selects the name reiterates the haphazardness of their goals.

Marlow's tone becomes even crueler in the final sentences when he asserts that the pilgrims' actions merited their fate. He seems to be developing a new ethical code that grows ever more critical of European colonial exploitation. In particular, the reference to "like the rest of us" demonstrates that this is not just a specific complaint about the Eldorado Expedition, but rather one that can be hoisted on himself and on those others aboard the Nellie.

❝ It was a distinct glimpse: the dugout, four paddling savages, and the lone white man turning his back suddenly on the headquarters, on relief, on thoughts of home—perhaps; setting his face towards the depth of the wilderness, towards his empty and desolate station.

Related Characters: Marlow (speaker), Kurtz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Marlow conjures this image of Kurtz as he eavesdrops on the General Manager's conversation with his Uncle. The two trade gossip about how Kurtz may be ill, and offer the evidence that he had planned on leaving the Inner Station before suddenly deciding to return.

Marlow finds himself taken with the poetry of this scene. On one level, it rejects the narrative desired by other Europeans seeking their fortune: that is, enter as deeply as possible into the Congo, extract large quantities of ivory, and then rapidly return to civilization. These people would equate headquarters with "relief" from the wilderness and see it as a step back across the sea toward a European home.

But Kurtz seems to be attracted to the "depth of the wilderness," the same incomprehensible entity for which

Marlow is developing both respect and fear. Kurtz turns away, too, from social contact and order, opting for a space described only in the negative terms of "empty" and "desolate." Instead of valuing the European comrades of his home, he chooses the "paddling savages." Though the General Manager and his uncle interpret the scene as either an indication of illness or a secret plot, Marlow focuses on the "distinct glimpse" or the poetry of the image. Something in Kurtz's rejection of civilization appeals to him.

> The reaches opened before us and closed behind, as if the forest had stepped leisurely across the water to bar the way for our return. We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness.

Related Characters: Marlow (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

At this point, Marlow has begun the final stage of his journey toward the Inner Station. He offers a series of poetic descriptions of that journey, trying to pin down the physical environment and the psychological experience of this new and uncanny realm.

These lines subtly trade agency between the environment and the humans. At first Marlow anthropomorphizes (gives human-like characteristics to) the forest. It can open and close as if it has a will of its own; the simile of "stepping" to block the group's access casts the environment as explicitly human. The adverb "leisurely" focuses our attention on the casualness of this behavior, and Marlow repeatedly stresses the indifference of the surrounding environment to the human presence. Yet the final line shifts a bit of control back to the boat with the term "penetrated." The aggressive, even phallic, verb highlights the way the expedition is intruding into the Congo, and makes their cohort seem less aimless than some of the travelers depicted before.

Finally, Marlow delivers the titular phrase "heart of darkness" to refer directly to Inner Station. But what is meant by darkness at this point in the text is far from self evident. Recall that Marlow describes London as a place of darkness and has repeatedly pointed to the darknesses in the behaviors of various Europeans. The Inner Station may be dark because it is the center of the Congo, but its darkness also stems from the hideous moral truth Marlow will uncover there, and because it epitomizes the evil actions of European colonists.

> It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—the suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend.

Related Characters: Marlow (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

After contemplating the physical environment of the Congo, Marlow begins to consider the Congolese people. The lines reveal a deep racism, for they deny the humanity of the "natives," but they also imply that the supposedly civilized Europeans engage in similarly brutal behaviors.

Marlow introduces these ideas not with an assertive claim, but rather through a self-correction. He catches himself about to compare the "unearthly" environment with the "inhuman" men, but realizes while forming the sentence that it would be erroneous. Unwilling to fully commit to the humanity of the Congolese, he describes this as a "suspicion." He also implies, when he describes this thought as coming slowly to him, that it is a conclusion he reached from his exploration of the Congo. The lesson, it seems, is to look beyond the appearances or superficial actions and instead consider the more common "kinship" and common "humanity" between the locals and the Europeans.

This similarity is not, however, located in a positive human ideal, but rather in a common horror, in something "ugly" about all humans. Perhaps it is the same greed Marlow has repeatedly observed in those surrounding him. The "trace of a response" recalls his earlier anecdote about the Roman citizen who, arriving in a savage England, became fascinated

by the abomination of the environment. And Marlow himself has been drawn to (and frightened by) the "meaning" of the inscrutable wilderness. Here, he implies that the "meaning" is found at the origin of humanity, and that to access that origin one must journey back in time to penetrate the heart of a human darkness. So while these lines are blatantly racist—a racism that has made many readers deeply skeptical of Conrad's work—they also reveal a complex relationship to human nature. Marlow points to a universal evil that Europeans have merely covered up in the social graces of their society.

> It was very simple, and at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you, luminous and terrifying like a flash of lightning in a serene sky: "Exterminate all the brutes!"

Related Characters: Marlow, Kurtz (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

Marlow sees this horrifying statement at the end of Kurtz's treatise "On the Suppression of Savage Customs." Kurtz, he goes on to explain, had been commissioned to write the report by an International Society of the same name. The majority of the text features grandiose statements on the need for Europeans to civilize natives, but the end radically shifts tone and calls for violent extermination.

The piece of writing shows Kurtz at both his most idealistic and his most brutal. Its simplicity and its attention to "altruistic sentiment" mark it as a prophetic text that could significantly alter colonial attitudes back in Europe. Perhaps the treatise would cause Londoners to adopt less brutal and more benevolent practices in the Congo. Yet after seventeen pages of that "serene sky," the scrawled postscript demands complete annihilation. The shift implies that Kurtz has lost his noble sentiments—perhaps due to mental illness, perhaps due to an epiphany reached in the Congo—and now has been consumed fully by hate and avarice.

That Marlow observes this change in a piece of writing is revealing, particularly considering his own role as a storyteller. Marlow is attentive to the way language functions as a mask that obscures rather than reveals reality. Though Marlow is at first enraptured by Kurtz's words—as he has been by the ideal of Kurtz to offer something less hollow than other Europeans—he comes to realize that the treatise is yet another linguistic mask.

> "I tell you," he cried, "this man has enlarged my mind."

Related Characters: The Russian Trader (speaker), Kurtz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

Marlow meets the Harlequin, a mislaid Russian sailor, as he arrives at the Inner Station. Whereas Marlow has become increasingly disillusioned with Kurtz, the Harlequin is still clearly under his spell and talks extensively about his many merits.

The phrase "enlarged my mind" stresses, in particular, the deified portrayal of Kurtz. He is often presented as a god-like figure, and, indeed, his treatise notes that to best accomplish their colonial goals, the Europeans should appear before the "natives" as gods. The Harlequin's phrase implies that Kurtz reaches beyond human realms and then transmits that knowledge back to enlarge the minds of others. In this view, his virtuosic writing and speech are not masks, but rather ways to convey saintly messages.

Yet Conrad sets up the Harlequin's character to seem ridiculous from the start. He sports flamboyant attire and has done only fickle work for a variety of colonial groups. And, having already seen the terrible postscript about exterminating the brutes, the reader is well primed to be skeptical of anyone overly complimentary of Kurtz. The passage does not serve to redeem Kurtz in Marlow's eyes, but rather to show just how effective his lies have been in manipulating both the Congolese and Europeans.

Part 3 Quotes

There was something wanting in him—some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence. Whether he knew of this deficiency himself I can't say. I think the knowledge came to him at last—only at the very last. But the wilderness found him out early, and had taken vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core.

Related Characters: Marlow (speaker), Kurtz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

Marlow's criticisms of Kurtz grow increasingly direct. Though the two have not actually met in the narrated story, Marlow often makes these retrospective asides in order to frame the events of the tale. His main contention here is a hollowness he perceives in Kurtz, which we know by now is a red flag for Marlow.

Marlow first contrasts the surface of Kurtz's "magnificent eloquence," epitomized by his writing, with his internal fortitude, which is "wanting." At first this might not seem to imply complete hollowness, but rather a "small matter" or tiny flaw. Yet Marlow asserts that the Congo unleashes the terror of that small deficiency. His language implies that the environment plays an evil nurturing role, "whispering" horrible truths that Kurtz takes into "counsel." Though other Europeans have described the Congo environment as driving colonists mad, these lines claim that the madness is not simply imposed. Rather, the environment allows pre-existing qualities to grow; it fascinates something that already existed inside Kurtz.

Yet Marlow does not use this conclusion to absolve Kurtz of guilt. Rather, he takes it as proof that "he was hollow at the core," just as vacant as the paper-mâché Brickmaker and as lacking in principle as any other colonialist. The heart of darkness, then, does not seem to be the physical environment at all, but rather the interior truth of man that only fully manifests itself in that certain environment.

"The horror! The horror!"

Related Characters: Kurtz (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

Kurtz speaks these famous final words to Marlow as their ship slowly returns from the Inner Station. They do not refer to the horror of any particular object or event, but rather are a broad diagnosis of the Congo and of humanity.

This open-ended quality makes the lines difficult to parse. The horror, here, may refer to Kurtz's failed attempt to instill reason in the Congo and his fall from a prophetic figure to a corpse-like body made of nothing but greed and rhetoric. We could consider the horror, then, to be the environmental factors of the Congo that caused Kurtz to go mad, or perhaps the central horror in humanity that was unleashed in Kurtz by the wilderness. The horror may, alternatively, be the colonial enterprise itself. It presumed to bring Enlightenment to the "natives" but actually led to terror and exploitation.

The lines also have a rhythmic quality formed by the repetition of the same phrase, indicating that even as Kurtz degenerates he still maintains the ability to forge powerful rhetoric. After all, these words stay in the minds of both Marlow and reader—they are the most cited of Conrad's work—so that even if Kurtz is deemed hollow, the way he conveys that hollowness still carries some value. There may be no answer as to the exact nature of the heart of darkness, but its very broadness makes it deeply compelling.

"Mistah Kurtz—he dead."

Related Characters: The General Manager's servant (speaker), Kurtz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

Soon after Marlow hears Kurtz's "The horror! The horror!" the General Manager's servant notifies him, and by extension the sailors on the Nellie and the reader, that Kurtz has perished.

Instead of actually describing the death, Conrad makes it a pithy phrase. It is especially odd considering Marlow's tendency to wax poetic on imagery and even on previous

morbid scenes. Why has the actual moment of Kurtz's death been hidden from the reader's vision? We can make sense of the scene by connecting it to Marlow's anxieties about rendering stories in all their detail. Instead of trying to give the full emotional weight of Kurtz's death, Marlow opts to present the lines "The horror! The horror!" as the final image and then avoid the moment itself.

This is also one of the only times that we see a native Congolese speak in the text. This shift is particularly poignant as the character is announcing the death of the person who epitomized the European forces. After all, voice and speaking power hve been repeatedly imbued with a deep significance in the novel. Conrad, then, takes Kurtz's story out of his own control, showing how at this moment of death his narrative will be ordered by others. It is the Congolese who will describe his death, and the burden will fall on Marlow to preserve his reputation back home.

> I was within a hair's-breadth of the last opportunity for pronouncement, and I found with humiliation that probably I would have nothing to say. This is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it. [. . .] He had summed up—he had judged. "The horror!" He was a remarkable man.

Related Characters: Marlow (speaker), Kurtz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

Marlow has by become deeply ill. As he fights to stay alive, he reflects on Kurtz's last words and concludes that they were braver and more laudable than he originally thought.

By this point, the reader has begun to see Kurtz in a very negative light, but Marlow switches his tone to "affirm" that he "was a remarkable man." Yet to be remarkable for Marlow is not to have accomplished anything ethical or even impressive, but rather to have vocalized an earnestly held belief. We should note that having "something to say" makes no claim on whether that "something" is good or evil, but simply comments on the conviction of saying it. "Summed up" lauds the phrase's ability to have encapsulated so many different meanings, while "judged" indicates a shrewd analysis of the content and how it will be received by an audience.

In this way, "The horror! The horror!" must be reevaluated. Marlow, now himself in a situation analogous to Kurtz's, no longer sees it as hollow, but rather takes its enigmatic quality as a sign of power. Here we see Marlow act based on the role of a storyteller, for he defines the significance of things based on their rhetorical strength: on the way they can convey the terrors of the world to others. Conrad indicates that while the search for substance and for ethical truth may be ultimately lacking in Marlow's journey, perhaps the language itself can carry an aesthetic truth capable of affecting the listeners.

> I heard a light sigh and then my heart stood still, stopped dead short by an exulting and terrible cry, by the cry of inconceivable triumph and of unspeakable pain. 'I knew it—I was sure!' . . . She knew. She was sure. I heard her weeping; she had hidden her face in her hands. It seemed to me that the house would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head. But nothing happened. The heavens do not fall for such a trifle.

Related Characters: Marlow, Kurtz's Intended (speaker), Kurtz

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 71-72

Explanation and Analysis

In his story's final scene, Marlow visits Kurtz's "Intended" (fiance) who asks him to recite Kurtz's last words. Fearful that admitting they were "The horror! The horror!" would betray Kurtz's descent into madness, Marlow decides to lie and tell her Kurtz spoke her name. Marlow debates whether the lie makes him ethically complicit in colonialism, or whether it was necessary to preserve the Intended's illusions.

The certainty with which the Intended responds speaks to how blind and distant Europeans are from the actual events in the Congo. She is entirely convinced by the idealistic image of Kurtz as a bearer of Enlightenment—and of him as a man faithful to her. (Remember that he had a mistress in the Inner Station!) Marlow stresses how ridiculous this certainty is by first quoting and then paraphrasing the lines. "I knew it" becomes "She knew"; "I was sure" becomes "She was sure." In the distance between first and third person, we see a tone both ironic and despairing.

The Intended's certainty causes Marlow to wonder about the ethics of his lie. Though the stakes of the individual lie may be small, they stand for a larger lie about the avarice and human terror he witnesses on his journey. To swap the Intended's name for "the horror" is a metaphor for how "civilized" Europeans obscure the horror of the Congo (and of all humanity). So Marlow expects divine retribution for this lie…except nothing of the sort occurs. That this discrepancy causes Marlow to consider the lie "such a trifle," returns us to the question of scale ever-present in this book. Even if the lie stands for a human heart of darkness, Marlow claims, that lie is still a trifle when compared to the earth and the heavens.

> The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

In its final moments, the text steps outside of Marlow's story and returns to the frame narrative. The narrator ruminates once more on the surrounding landscape, yet his imagery deviates sharply from the one used to open the text.

Whereas the narrator had previously used metaphors of fire and sparks to describe the Enlightenment brought by Europeans to distant lands, here he focuses on images of darkness: the alliterative "black bank" that "barred" the offing; the waterway that "flowed sombre"; the "overcast sky." As Marlow told his story, the light aboard the ship gradually darkened, and here that literal and metaphorical obscuring reaches its conclusion. The waterway is no longer the route to sharing London's brilliance, but rather only carries the darkness of England into the darknesses of distant lands. No real distinction can be made between civilized and uncivilized.

Yet despite this lack of light, the Thames is still deemed "tranquil," a consistency that reiterates once more the scale of the natural world in comparison to those existing among it. Though the narrator may now see colonial pursuits as more horrific, the water will stay consistent. Note, too, the addition of "immense" to the title "heart of darkness." At the novel's end, the narrator implies that the horror of the Congo is not simply located at its core. Rather, it is an extensive, perhaps universal, darkness that can be found at any point on the globe.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1

The Narrator describes the scene from the deck of a ship named Nellie as it rests at anchor at the mouth of the River Thames, near London. The five men on board the ship—the Director of Companies, the Lawyer, the Accountant, the Narrator, and Marlow, old friends from their seafaring days—settle down to await the changing of the tide. They stare down the mouth of the river into the Atlantic Ocean, a view that stretches like "the beginning of an interminable waterway."

The opening establishes a dark tone. Water is often a symbol of the unconscious, so the "interminable waterway" connecting civilized England to the rest of the world implies that England's civilization is just a veneer over the dark heart all men share. That the characters in the ship are known by their jobs and not their names hints at the hollowness of civilization: their selves have been swallowed by their roles.

In silence they watch the sunset, and the Narrator remembers the fabled ships and men of English history who set sail from the Thames on voyages of trade or conquest, carrying with them "The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empire."

The Narrator's thoughts about conquest and colonialism are conventional and romantic: that great men go out with great dreams and build great empires to the greater glory of the world.

Suddenly Marlow interrupts the silence. "And this also," Marlow says, "has been one of the **dark** places of the earth." He imagines England as it must have appeared to the first Romans sent to conquer it: a savage, mysterious place that both appalled and attracted them, that made them feel powerless and filled them with hate.

But Marlow takes an opposite view: he sees England itself as once one of the savage places, and imagines how that savagery warped its conquerors. The implication is that hidden behind its civilization England has a "dark" heart.

Marlow observes that none of the men on the boat would feel just like those Romans, because the men on the boat have a "devotion to efficiency," while the Romans wanted simply to conquer.

Marlow believes that a devotion to efficiency, a devotion to work, protects a man from being corrupted by powerlessness and hate.

Yet Marlow adds that conquest is never pretty and usually involves the powerful taking land from those who look different and are less powerful. Conquest, Marlow says, is redeemed only by the ideas behind them, ideas that are so beautiful men bow down before them.

The practice of conquest and colonialism is always ruthless. But the noble idea motivating conquest, such as civilizing the savages, can be so beautiful it hides the ruthlessness even from the conquerors.

Marlow then reminds the other men that he once served as captain of a freshwater riverboat, and begins to tell his story. As a young boy, he had a passion for maps and unknown places. As he grew older many of those places become known, and many he visited himself. Yet Africa still fascinated him, especially its mighty river, the Congo. After years of ocean voyages in which he had "always went by [his] own road and on [his] own legs," Marlow asks his aunt to use her influence help him get a job as a steamship operator for the Company, a continental European trading concern in Africa.

Marlow makes it clear he doesn't usually ask people for favors, instead going by "his own road and on his own legs" because of his belief in the honesty and importance of work. He is not comfortable relying on others to do his work for him, and sees it as a possibly dangerous and definitely shameful thing to do.

The Company hires him immediately: it has an open position because one of its captains, a Dane named Fresleven, had recently been killed. After some time in the jungle, the normally mild-mannered Fresleven had started hitting the native chief of a village with a cane over a disagreement regarding two black hens, and was accidentally killed by the chief's son. The natives, in fear, immediately abandoned their village.

The absurd story of Fresleven's death foreshadows Marlow's absurd experience in the jungle, where colonialist white men go insane and clash with the exploited natives, producing violence and more absurdity.

Marlow travels to the unnamed European city where the Company has its headquarters. He describes the city as a "**whited sepulcher**."

A sepulcher is a tomb, and hides in its heart either emptiness or death.

At the Company's office, Marlow is let into a reception area presided over by two women, one fat, one slim, both of whom constantly knit black wool. There, Marlow examines a map of Africa filled in by various colors representing the European countries that colonized those areas. He briefly meets the head of the Company (a "pale plumpness in a frock coat"), then is directed to a doctor. While measuring Marlow's head, the doctor comments that in Africa "the changes happen inside" and asks Marlow if his family has a history of insanity.

More foreshadowing of what Marlow will soon experience in colonial Africa. The women in black seem to symbolize fate or death, the head of the Company's "plumpness" covered by a "frock coat" implies greed masked by civility, and the doctor explicitly says that Africa drives Europeans crazy.

Marlow has a farewell chat with his aunt, who sees her nephew as an "emissary of light" off to educate the African natives out of their "horrid ways." Marlow points out to his aunt that the company is run for profit, not missionary work, and expresses amazement to his friends on the boat how out of touch **women** are with the truth.

Earlier Marlow said that the beautiful idea behind colonization masks the ruthless practice of colonialism. Well, his aunt clearly buys the idea, and in doing so establishes women as symbols of civilization's inability to see its hollow corruption.

Marlow boards the steamer that will take him to the mouth of the Congo with a sense of foreboding. To Marlow on the steamer, the forested coast of Africa looks like an impenetrable enigma, inviting and scorning him at the same time. He occasionally sees canoes paddled by native Africans, and once sees a French ship firing its guns into the dense forest at invisible "enemies."

Marlow goes to Africa because as a boy he had a passion for unknown places. He wanted to know the unknown. But Africa resists being known, and makes colonialists do ridiculous, hollow things like shoot at forests.

At the mouth of the Congo, Marlow gets passage for thirty miles from a small steamer piloted by a Swede. The Swede mocks the "government chaps" at the shore as men who will do anything for money, and wonders what happens to such men when they get further into the continent.

The pilot, a man who works, condemns the colonialists who care not about work, but about money. The pilot's question about what happens to such people in the jungle is more foreshadowing.

At last they reach the Company's Outer Station, a chaotic and disorganized place. Machinery rusts everywhere, black laborers blast away at a cliff face for no reason. Marlow comments to the men on the Nellie that he had long known the "lusty devils" of violence and greed that drive men, but in Africa encountered "a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly."

Note Marlow's horror at the inefficiency of the station and the rusting of machinery. The "lusty devils" are the desires that move men to act badly, but without deception. The "pretending" devils move men to fake their noble intentions for greedy ends.

Marlow then stumbles upon what he calls the Grove of Death, a grove among the trees that is filled with weak and dying native laborers, who are living out their last moments in the shade of the ancient trees.

Marlow sees the death of the natives with the same horror as the rusting machinery. It's a tragedy to him, but not a human tragedy.

At the station, the Chief Accountant impresses Marlow with his good grooming. One day the Chief Accountant mentions that further up the river Marlow will probably meet Mr. Kurtz, a station head who sends in as much ivory as all the others put together and who "will be a somebody in the [Company] Administration before long." He asks Marlow to tell Kurtz that all is satisfactory, saying he doesn't want to send a letter for fear that rivals at the Central Station will intercept it.

The Chief Accountants comments both introduce Kurtz as a remarkably talented fellow and also convey the backbiting and politics going on under the surface in the Company. Marlow admires the Chief Accountant's grooming because such hygienic habits involve disciplined work, especially in the midst of the chaos of Outer Station.

Just then a dying "agent' from up country" is brought into the Chief Accountants quarters for lack of other space, which gently annoys the accountant. When, a while later, there is a "tumult" of noise as a caravan of pilgrims and natives comes into the station, the Chief Accountant comments, "When one has got to make correct entries, one comes to hate these savages—hate them to death."

Yet beneath the Chief Accountant's civilized exterior, he's filled with the sense of "powerlessness and hate" that Marlow earlier described infecting the Roman conquerors of England.

A few days later Marlow joins a caravan headed the two hundred miles upriver to Central Station. After a fifteen-day trek through the jungle during which the only other white man fell ill and many of the native porters deserted rather than carry the sick man, Marlow reaches the Station.

The absurd inefficiency and waste of the colonial effort just keeps growing...

At the station, Marlow is greeted by the first man he sees with news that the ship he was supposed to pilot has sunk. Apparently, the General Manager had suddenly decided to try to reach Kurtz at the Inner Station with an inexperienced pilot at the helm of the steamship. The steamship promptly sank.

...and growing... until it's clear that the colonial effort isn't about building anything, and isn't motivated by a central civilized idea. It's motivated by greed, which is bound to produce inefficiency and waste.

Marlow, on the Nellie, says that though he can't be sure, he suspects that it's possible the General Manager *wanted* the steamship to sink.

Marlow's guess foreshadows the General Manager's negative feelings about Kurtz.

Marlow is immediately taken to see this General Manager, who is thoroughly unremarkable in intelligence, leadership, and unskilled at even maintaining order. Marlow believes the General Manager holds his position through two traits: he inspires vague uneasiness in others, and unlike any other Europeans he's resistant to all the tropical diseases.

The General Manager is the embodiment of the "pretending" devils Marlow mentioned earlier. His main trait is that he doesn't die! He's defined by his lack of identity. In other words, he's hollow.

The General Manager explains why he took the steamship onto the river before Marlow, its pilot, arrived: Kurtz, the Company's best agent, is sick. The General Manager takes special interest when Marlow mentions he heard Kurtz's name mentioned on the coast. The General Manager estimates that it will take three months to repair the ship, and turns out to be almost exactly right.

The General Manager's interest that Marlow had earlier heard of Kurtz implies the Manager's concern at Kurtz influence and power in the Company. The Manager's perfect guess about the time needed to fix the ship implies he did purposely sink it.

Marlow sets to work fixing the ship and watches the absurd happenings of Central Station, where the various company agents (employees) do no work, stroll about aimlessly, and dream of ivory and wealth. Marlow describes the place as "unreal."

Men who do no work strike Marlow as "unreal" and without substance. Work provides a reality one can cling to.

One night a shed bursts into flame. As Marlow approaches he sees a laborer being beaten for setting the blaze and overhears the General Manager talking with another man about Kurtz, saying they should try to "take advantage of this unfortunate accident." The General Manager departs, and Marlow ends up in a conversation with the other man, a young "agent" whose responsibility it is to make bricks (which he never does) and whom the other agents think is the General Manager's spy.

The General Manager's concern for Kurtz is obviously faked. He has to try to save the sick Kurtz because it would look bad if he didn't, but as long as he has an excuse (the sunken steamship) to avoid helping Kurtz, he'll take it. The Brickmaker has a job he never does: the essence of hollowness, hypocrisy, and inefficiency.

Marlow follows the Brickmaker back to his quarters, which are much nicer than any but the General Manager's. As they talk, Marlow realizes the Brickmaker is trying to get information from him because Marlow's Aunt's contacts in the Company are the same people who sent Kurtz to Africa. The Brickmaker bitterly says that Marlow and Kurtz are both "of the new gang—the gang of virtue" meant to bring proper morals and European enlightenment to the colonial activities in Africa.

The revelation that Kurtz is backed by the same people who are close to Marlow's Aunt indicate that Kurtz isn't like the other agents. Rather than hide his greed behind false civility, Kurtz seems actually to be a man profoundly dedicated to ethics and morality. Marlow begins to see Kurtz as an antidote to the evils and hollowness of civilization.

The Brickmaker, whom Marlow now calls a "papier-mâché Mephistopheles," continues to speak about Kurtz, and asks Marlow not to give Kurtz a wrong impression of him. Marlow realizes that both the General Manager and the Brickmaker see Kurtz as a threat to their dreams of advancement.

Mephistopheles is a devil. Papier-mâché is a craft that produces hollow structures. A "papier-mâché Mephistopheles" is therefore a hollow devil, and a heck of an insult.

Though he hates lies because they have a "taint of death" and telling them is like "biting something rotten," Marlow pretends to have as much influence in Europe as the Brickmaker thinks he has in order to get the Brickmaker to speed up the arrival of the rivets needed to fix the steamship. Marlow has an idea that the faster the steamship is fixed the better it will be for Kurtz.

By doing the thing he hates most in the world—lying—in order to faster fix the steamboat and get to Kurtz, Marlow shows a sudden sense of allegiance to the moral Kurtz. Marlow's lie also foreshadows a lie he will tell later to Kurtz's Intended.

Suddenly, Marlow breaks off telling his story in order to try to explain to the men sitting on the ship in the Thames how hard it is to get across his experiences, though he is comforted by the fact that his fellows on the ship, men who see and know him, can at least "see more than I could then." The Narrator observes that it was now so **dark** they couldn't see Marlow at all.

Marlow despairs about the inability for one man to explain himself to another. The novel emphasizes this point ironically: when Marlow takes comfort that at least the men on the Nellie know and see him, the fact is that the men actually can't see him at all..

Marlow resumes his story. When the Brickmaker leaves, Marlow boards his broken steamship, which he has come to love after putting in so much hard work to rebuild it. Marlow says of work: "I don't like work... but I like what is in the work—the chance to find yourself. Your own reality." Marlow tells his foreman they'll soon have rivets. The two of them do a little dance of joy.

Here Marlow explicitly describes why he values work. Note that the "reality" and "chance to find yourself" that work provides directly address Marlow's discomfort with the lack of truth in the world and his growing sense of the hollowness of civilization.

But weeks pass and the rivets don't come. Instead, a group of "pilgrims" calling itself the Eldorado Exploring Expedition arrives, led by the General Manager's uncle. They are all greedy, cowardly, and without any sort of foresight or understanding of work.

It's no coincidence the Eldorado Expedition is named after a mythical city made of gold. In Marlow's eyes, the pilgrims themselves are unreal, just hollow vessels for their greed.

Without rivets, Marlow can't do any work either. He has lots of time to think, and begins to wonder about Kurtz's morals, and about how Kurtz would act if he did become general manager.

What he's heard of Kurtz makes Marlow ponder if perhaps civilization isn't hollow, if perhaps there is some truth, if maybe colonialism can match the beautiful idea behind it.

PART 2

Some time later, as Marlow rests on his steamship, he overhears the General Manager talking with his Uncle about Kurtz. They are annoyed that Kurtz has so much influence in the Company and sends back so much ivory. The General Manager also mentions a trader who lives near Kurtz and is apparently stealing Company profits. The uncle advises the General Manager to take advantage of the fact that there's no authority around and just hang the trader.

The Uncle's advice that the General Manager just hang the trader since there are no authorities around is the ultimate sign that civilization is hollow. The Uncle is saying that acting in a civilized way isn't a deeply held conviction or inherent human characteristic, but rather just an act designed to avoid punishment.

They next discuss the rumors that Kurtz is sick. Kurtz was supposed to return to the Central Station along with his latest batch of ivory, but apparently came halfway down the river and then turned back. The General Manager angrily mentions Kurtz's conviction that the stations should be focused as much on humanizing and civilizing the savages as on trade. The General Manager's uncle replies that the General Manager should trust the jungle, implying that tropical disease will eventually kill Kurtz.

The General Manager here exposes his own disregard, and Kurtz's support, for any of the moral reasons for colonization, such as civilizing the natives given by Europeans. (Of course, the condescending idea that the natives needed to be civilized by Europeans at all would be considered racist today).

A few days later the General Manager's uncle and his Eldorado Expedition head into the jungle. Marlow later heard that all their donkeys died, but never heard what happened to the "less valuable animals"—the men.

Marlow isn't just bitter: he really thinks the donkeys are more valuable. Donkeys work and aren't hollow, as opposed to the Eldorado men.

After three months of work, Marlow finishes repairing the ship. He immediately sets off upriver with the General Manager, a few pilgrims, and thirty cannibals as crew. Marlow prefers the cannibals, who don't actually eat each other and of whom he says, "They were men I could work with."

Marlow prefers the cannibals for the same reason he prefers the donkeys: they're primitive and simple, so they aren't hollow. (Though the depiction of the cannibals as simple is racist and condescending.)

The trip is long and difficult. Marlow describes the jungle as a "thing monstrous and free" and the natives as beings "who howled and leapt and made horrid faces." Yet Marlow feels some connection to the "terrible frankness" of the natives, knowing that he has some of that primitiveness in his own heart. He is thankful that his work keeping the ship afloat occupies his attention most of the time, and hides the "inner truth."

By commenting on his own sense of kinship with the "primitive" natives, Marlow is implying that all men have aspects of the primitive within them. He believes that work provides escape from this "inner truth."

Still, Marlow tells the other men on the *Nellie*, he often has a sense of the "mysterious stillness" watching him at his "monkey tricks, just as it watches you fellows performing on your respective tight-ropes for—what is it? half a crown a tumble?" One of the men on the Nellie warns Marlow to "try to be civil." Marlow responds, "I beg your pardon. I forgot the heartache that makes up the rest of the price." Then he continues with his story.

By saying the distinguished men on the Nellie perform "monkey tricks," Marlow is saying that primitivism also exists in the heart of civilization. When the man tells Marlow to be "civil," Heart of Darkness makes the point that civilization prefers the mask of proper behavior to the truth. This self-deception is what makes civilization hollow.

Fifty miles from Kurtz's headquarters at Inner Station, the ship comes upon a hut with a stack of firewood outside. They stop to collect the firewood, and discover a note that says "Wood for you. Hurry up. Approach cautiously." It is signed illegibly, but with a name too long to be "Kurtz." The General Manager concludes the hut must belong to the trader he wants to hang. Inside the hut, Marlow discovers a technical book on sailing that seems to have code written on it. He is astonished, and calls the book "unmistakably real."

The book is "real" to Marlow in a way that nothing else is because to produce what he takes to be the code must have taken great and concentrated effort. It must have taken work. Everything else is absurd to the point of meaninglessness: "Hurry up. Approach cautiously." Those commands are mutually exclusive.

Eight miles from the Inner Station, the General Manager orders Marlow to anchor the ship in the middle of the river for the night. Marlow wants to continue on to meet Kurtz, but knows that stopping is the safer thing to do.

Marlow's desire to continue shows his obsession with finding Kurtz. Like other seekers in other quests, Marlow believes that Kurtz will have (or be) some sort of answer.

The morning reveals a thick **white** blinding fog enveloping the ship. A roar of screaming natives breaks the silence, then cuts off. Frightened pilgrims hold their rifles at the ready, but can't see anything. The cannibals want to catch and eat the men on the riverbank. Marlow realizes the cannibals must be incredibly hungry, and marvels at their restraint in not turning on the white men on the ship. The General Manager authorizes Marlow to take all risks in going upstream, knowing full well that Marlow will refuse to take any. After two hours, the fog lifts and the steamship continue upstream.

The white fog surrounding and blinding the steamship while natives scream outside is a marvelous symbol. The white fog hides from view the dark jungle and black natives screaming outside, just as the "whited sepulcher" of civilization blinds itself from the primitive darkness at its own heart.

A little over a mile from Inner Station, a tiny island in the middle of the river forces Marlow to choose the western or eastern fork of the river. He chooses the western, which turns out to be quite narrow. Just as Marlow spots snags ahead that could rip the bottom out of the boat, arrows shoot toward the steamship from the jungle. Marlow orders his helmsman, a tribesman from the coast, to steer straight.

The conflict between conquerors and conquered masked by the beautiful ideas motivating colonialism erupts into full view, as natives and Europeans fight to kill.

The pilgrims open fire into the bush, putting out smoke that blocks Marlow's vision.

The "civilized" colonists blind themselves.

A shotgun blasts just behind Marlow: the helmsman has dropped the wheel and started shooting out the window. Marlow jumps to take the wheel and avoid the snag ahead. The helmsman falls back from the window, a spear in his side. Blood fills the pilothouse, soaking Marlow's shoes. Marlow pulls the ship's steam whistle, which terrifies the attacking natives and drives them off. A pilgrim wearing "pink pyjamas" comes with a message from the General Manager and is aghast to see the dead helmsman.

Even in the battle, the absurdity of the colonial effort is always visible: here it's in the African helmsman fighting against other Africans, and neglecting his job to do it. The disaster of colonialism is also always near the surface, as in death the ridiculous helmsman suddenly becomes a tragic figure.

Marlow realizes Kurtz is probably dead and feels an intense disappointment at the thought. Marlow then tells the pilgrim to steer and flings his bloody shoes overboard.

With Kurtz dead, Marlow's quest for truth and a civilization that isn't hollow is likely over.

Suddenly, Marlow once again cuts short his story in order to address the men who are on the **Nellie** in the Thames. He tells them they couldn't hope to understand his despair at thinking he would never get to meet Kurtz, since they live in civilization with "a butcher round one corner, a policeman round another."

The men on the ship live in civilization, and so are blind to the meaninglessness and hollowness at its heart. The loss of Kurtz, to them, is nothing, because they have no idea what that loss entails: the possibility of meaning and wholeness.

After a long silence, Marlow says that Kurtz wasn't dead, and launches into a series of thoughts about him. Marlow says Kurtz saw everything, including his Intended (his fiancé) as a personal possession. Marlow explains that Kurtz, in the solitude of the jungle, transformed from a man of European enlightenment to a man who presided over "unspeakable rites" and accepted sacrifices made in his honor. Marlow recalls a magnificent, if impractical, treatise that Kurtz wrote called *On the Suppression of Savage Customs* in which Kurtz argues that white men, as veritable gods next to the natives, have the responsibility to help them. Later, though, across this treatise calling for idealism and altruism, Kurtz scrawled "Exterminate all the brutes."

Kurtz is alive! Awesome! Right? Wrong. Had Kurtz just died, Marlow's quest would have ended, but his hope for an answer would have lived on. But Marlow makes it clear that Kurtz didn't just live, he abandoned his morals and became a monster (as shown in his scrawl across his idealistic treatise). In other words, Marlow looked to Kurtz to provide an answer, and the answer Kurtz provided is that all men have darkness in their hearts.

Marlow returns to the dead helmsman, saying that Kurtz was a remarkable man, but wasn't worth the lives they lost in trying to find him. Marlow mourns his helmsman deeply. The man had "done something, he had steered."

Marlow mourns the helmsman as a fellow worker.

Everyone on board assumes the Inner Station has been overrun and Kurtz killed. The pilgrims are happy, though, that they probably killed so many savages with their rifles. Marlow, however, is certain all the pilgrims shot too high, and killed no one.

The absurdity and incompetence of the colonial agents immediately resurfaces.

When they arrive at Inner Station, Marlow and the other men on the ship are amazed to discover it in perfect shape. They are met onshore by a white man wearing clothes covered in colorful patches. Marlow thinks the man looks like a harlequin (a clown or jester). The man knows that the steamship has been attacked, but says, "it's all right" now. As the General Manager and pilgrims go to get Kurtz, the harlequin comes on board and speaks with Marlow. The man explains that he's a twenty-five year old Russian sailor who deserted and through a series of adventures working for various colonial powers ended up wandering through the Congo alone for two years.

Some critics have argued that the Russian serves little purpose in Heart of Darkness beyond telling Marlow what happened to Kurtz. However, the Russian's multicolored and patched harlequin jacket bears a striking resemblance to the map of Africa Marlow saw in the Company's headquarters. And the fact that he's worked for various colonial powers and survived years in the jungle alone also signals a kind of connection to and comfort with colonial Africa.

When the Russian says that the hut with the stacked wood was his old house, Marlow returns the book about sailing to him. The Russian in his joy tells Marlow that the natives attacked the ship because they don't want Kurtz to leave. It's soon clear to Marlow that the Russian also has fallen under the spell of Kurtz's amazing eloquence. The Russian says about Kurtz: "This man has enlarged my mind."

Both the Russian and the Natives seem to adore and revere Kurtz. The question, of course, is why? It's not clear yet, but Kurtz's eloquence connects to the hollowness of civilization. Eloquence is a talent for speech, but one can speak about anything, whether noble or monstrous.

PART 3

Marlow stares at the Russian in astonishment, and thinks that the Russian "surely wants nothing from the wilderness but space to breathe in" and that "if the absolutely pure, uncalculating, unpractical spirit of adventure had ever ruled a human being, it ruled this ... youth."

Here's the Russian's secret. He's the only white man in colonial Africa not looking for money or power. Without the will to dominate, he seems safe from corruption.

Meanwhile, the Russian begs Marlow to take Kurtz away quickly. He tells of his first meeting with Kurtz, in which Kurtz "talked of everything" and the Russian only listened. Since then, he says he's nursed Kurtz through two illnesses, even though Kurtz had once threatened to shoot him over some ivory.

Kurtz talked of "everything." Of course, talking of everything is a lot like talking of "nothing." Note that the color white, the color of blindness in Heart of Darkness, is the result of every color brought together into one.

Kurtz, the Russian says, is a god to the local tribesman, who adore him. They help him as he raids the jungle and other tribes for ivory. This comes as troubling news to Marlow, who had expected that Kurtz, with his morals, would trade for ivory, not take it by force.

Here is Marlow's first solid evidence that Kurtz has abandoned his morals. (When Marlow earlier told the men on the Nellie that Kurtz became a monster, he was flashing forward in his narrative.)

The Russian says that Kurtz can't be judged as other men are. He adds that Kurtz "suffered too much. He hated all this and somehow couldn't get away." Marlow, meanwhile, lifts binoculars to his eyes and looks at the building where he thinks Kurtz is lying ill. He's startled to see that what he thought were fence posts are actually spiked human heads. Marlow tells the men on the *Nellie* that for all Kurtz's magnificent talent, eloquence, and learning, he was hollow at the core, and the jungle filled that hollowness.

When he described the Roman conquerors in England at the beginning of Heart of Darkness, Marlow imagined them as appalled and attracted by its savagery. The same is true for Kurtz, who both "hated all this" and spiked heads to stakes. His hollow civilized core, for all its outward beauty, couldn't hold out against the jungle's "inner truth."

The Russian mentions that when the native chiefs came to see Kurtz they crawled up to him. This information disgusts Marlow, who comments that in contrast "uncomplicated savagery was a positive relief, being something that had the right to exist—obviously—in the sunshine."

Here's another instance of Marlow's condescending preference for the simplicity of the "savage" natives to the corrupt and complicated civilized men.

The Russian can't understand Marlow's scorn at Kurtz's savage actions. He says that the Company abandoned Kurtz, who had such wonderful ideas.

The naïve Russian can't see past Kurtz's eloquence to the hollowness within.

The pilgrims come out of the house bearing Kurtz on a stretcher. Marlow describes Kurtz as looking like "an animated image of death carved out of ivory." The natives swarm forward. The Russian whispers to Marlow that if Kurtz says the word, they'll all be killed. Kurtz speaks (Marlow can't hear him from so far away), and the natives melt back into the jungle.

Kurtz, the epitome of civilized man, has transformed himself into a god to the natives. He even looks like a god: "an image of death carved out of ivory." The lure of power and domination was too great for him too resist.

Along the shore of the river near the ship the natives gather. Among them, next to the ship a "savage and superb" African **woman** paces back and forth. The Russian's comments about her imply that she was Kurtz's mistress.

Kurtz was so transformed by the jungle he even betrayed his Intended.

Inside the cabin, an argument erupts between Kurtz and the General Manager. Kurtz accuses the General Manager of caring less about Kurtz himself than about the ivory Kurtz has, and also says the General Manager with his "piddling notions" is interfering with Kurtz's grand plans.

Somehow Kurtz still sees himself as a man of great ideas, just as civilized Europeans continue to see colonialism as noble while it abuses the Africans and steals their wealth.

The General Manager exits from the cabin. He tells Marlow that Kurtz is very ill and that Kurtz's "unsound methods" ruined the district for the company. Marlow comments that Kurtz's methods couldn't be "unsound" because he seemed to have had "no method at all." Yet Marlow is more disgusted by the General Manager's fake show of sadness at Kurtz's demise than with Kurtz's atrocities, and says that Kurtz is still a remarkable man. This loses Marlow whatever favor he'd held in the General Manager's eyes.

Marlow has a choice to make between the General Manager's "pretending" devil of false civility, and Kurtz's "lusty" devil of monstrous domination. He chooses Kurtz, perhaps for the same reason he prefers donkeys and savages to Europeans. In Kurtz, though there was monstrousness, there was no lie. The jungle filled Kurtz's hollowness, but not the General Manager's.

When Marlow is alone, the Russian approaches. He has decided to slip away, correctly sensing that he's in danger from the General Manager and his men, and seeing nothing more that he can do for Kurtz. But before departing he tells Marlow that it was Kurtz who ordered the native attack on the steamship in order to scare the General Manager away and thereby be allowed to remain at his station. The Russian gets Marlow to give him some supplies and disappears into the night.

The Russian disappears into the jungle, going off alone as no other European colonist would. That European, though, would be thinking of himself as in conflict with the jungle because, as a colonist, his goal is to dominate and subdue the jungle. But the Russian has no such dreams, and so is safe and unafraid.

Marlow goes to sleep, but wakes suddenly just after midnight. As he looks around he notices Kurtz has disappeared. On the bank of the river, Marlow finds a trail through the grass and realizes Kurtz must be crawling. He catches up to Kurtz just before he reaches the native camp. Marlow realizes that though he's stronger than Kurtz, all Kurtz has to do is call out and the natives will attack. Kurtz, realizing the same thing, tells him to hide. Marlow says, "You will be lost, utterly lost." Kurtz pauses, struggling with himself. Marlow watches him, and realizes that Kurtz is perfectly sane in his mind, but his soul is mad. Kurtz's soul, Marlow says, "knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear." Yet in the end Kurtz allows Marlow to support him back to the ship.

This is the climax of Heart of Darkness. With the words "You will be lost," Marlow forces Kurtz to battle in his own soul, to choose between his savage monstrousness and his civilized dreams of advancement and accomplishment. Kurtz ultimately chooses civilization. He chooses the impractical and idealism of his treatise "On the Suppression of Savage Customs" over his later brutish scrawl, "Exterminate all the brutes."

The next day the ship departs. Kurtz, in the pilothouse with Marlow, watches the natives and his mistress come to the shore. Marlow spots the pilgrims getting their rifles and pulls the steam whistle. All the natives but the woman disperse. The pilgrims open fire, blocking Marlow's vision with the smoke.

The pilgrim's pointless gunfire, a product of their colonialist greed and the savage desire to hurt and dominate, puts out a smoke as blinding as the white fog. Civilization continues to blind itself.

As they travel swiftly downstream, the General Manager is pleased. After all, soon Kurtz will be dead and the General Manager will be secure in his position without having to do a thing. Marlow is often left alone with Kurtz, who speaks in his magnificent voice and with his magnificent eloquence about his moral ideas, his hopes for fame in Europe, and his desire to "wring the heart" of the jungle.

Another example of false civility: the General Manager doesn't care that Kurtz is going to die as long as he can't be blamed for it. Kurtz, meanwhile, wavers between monstrous savagery and belief in the ideals of civilization that his actions have proved hollow.

The steamship soon breaks down, which doesn't surprise Marlow. But Kurtz becomes concerned he won't live to see Europe. He gives Marlow his papers, fearful that the General Manager might try to pry into them, and one day tells Marlow that he is "waiting for death." Marlow is pierced by the expression on Kurtz's face "of somber pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror—of an intense and hopeless despair." Suddenly Kurtz cries out in a voice not much more than a breath: "The horror! The horror!" A short while later, the General Manager's servant appears and informs everyone: "Mistah Kurtz—he dead."

In Kurtz, an enlightened European surrounded by the brutal primitivism of the natives and the greed of the Company agents, Marlow saw the possibility of an answer to his own despair about the darkness of men's hearts on one side and the hollowness of civilization on the other. And Kurtz does provide an answer, of sorts: there is no answer, only despair, only horror.

Soon after, Marlow himself falls ill. He calls his struggle with death "the most unexciting contest you can imagine," and is embarrassed to discover that on his deathbed he could think of nothing to say. That's why he admires Kurtz. The man had something to say: "The horror!" Marlow's describes Kurtz's statement as a moral victory paid for by "abominable terrors" and "abominable satisfactions."

Marlow's esteem for Kurtz's statement is part of his general respect for work. Through the corruption of his ideals, Kurtz saw the world as it was. And like the helmsman who "had done something, he had steered," Kurtz did something, he judged: the horror!

Marlow returns to the "**sepulchral city**" in Europe, where his aunt nurses him back to health but can't soothe his mind. The people of the city seem to him petty and silly.

The people in the city, who have never seen the jungle, can't see the hollowness of their civilization. They can't see the horror.

A representative of the Company comes to get Kurtz's papers from Marlow, who offers him only *On the Suppression of Savage Customs* (with the scrawled "exterminate all the brutes torn off" torn off). The representative wanting more, wanting something more profitable, storms off.

The same greed visible in the Company agents is visible in the Company representative. Note how Marlow protects Kurtz's reputation.

Kurtz's cousin soon shows up. The cousin, a musician, tells Marlow that Kurtz was himself a great musician, then leaves with some family letters Marlow gives him.

Kurtz seems to have just reflected people back at themselves. Another indication that he was more surface than self.

Soon after, a journalist stops by. He says Kurtz wasn't a great writer, but was a great speaker. He could have been a great radical political leader—he could electrify a crowd. Marlow asks what party Kurtz would have belonged to. The journalist says any party: Kurtz could convince himself of anything. He takes *On the Suppression of Savage Customs* for publication.

The journalist's assertion that Kurtz could convince himself of anything further supports the idea of Kurtz's hollowness. He didn't care what his ideals were, as long as he was passionate about them.

At last, Marlow works up the nerve to go to see Kurtz's Intended and give her the last of his letters. When she lets Marlow into her house he notices that though it's a year after Kurtz's death, she is still dressed in mourning black. She praises Kurtz as the best of all men.

Marlow's aunt established women in H of D as symbols of society's blindness to its own hollowness. Kurtz's Intended further supports this symbolism: she is completely clueless about Kurtz's true nature.

Marlow, full of pity, does not dispute her claims. Finally, the Intended asks to hear Kurtz's last words. This is the question Marlow's been dreading. He pauses, then tells her that Kurtz's last words were her name. She cries out that she knew it and begins to weep. Marlow feels only despair, knowing he failed to give Kurtz the justice he deserved. But he just couldn't get himself to tell the Intended the truth—it would have been too **dark**.

Though Marlow knows Kurtz's triumph lay in his understanding of men's pretty delusions about themselves, he can't bring himself to make Kurtz's Intended see the dark reality. And Marlow knows that if he, who sees civilization's hollowness, can't bring himself to reveal the darkness beneath, then civilization's blindness is complete.

Marlow, on the *Nellie* still at anchor in the Thames, goes quiet. The Narrator looks off into the distance, and says that the Thames seems to lead to the "uttermost ends of the earth," seems to lead "into the heart of an immense **darkness**."

Marlow's story, though, forces the Narrator to see civilization's dark heart. The Narrator's connection of that darkness to the Thames indicates he now realizes his former romantic ideas of colonialism were symptoms of civilization's self-delusion.

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