

Lecture 10:
Heart of Darkness One

Heart of Darkness: Part I

The novel begins on a yacht called the Nellie at the mouth of the river Thames in London. The yacht is waiting for the tide to go out. ❖

Five men relax on the deck of the ship: the Director of Companies, who is also the captain and host, the Lawyer, the Accountant, Marlow, and the unnamed Narrator. ❖

The five men, old friends held together by “the bond of the sea,” are restless yet meditative, as if waiting for something to happen. As darkness begins to fall, and the scene becomes “less brilliant but more profound,” the men recall the great men and ships that have set forth from the Thames on voyages of trade and exploration, frequently never to return.. ❖

Suddenly Marlow remarks that this very spot (London, the Thames) was once “one of the dark places of the earth.” ❖

He notes that when the Romans first came to England, it was a great, savage wilderness to them. He imagines what it must have been like for a young Roman captain or soldier to come to a place so far from home and lacking in comforts. ❖

This reminds Marlow of his experience as a “fresh-water sailor,” when as a young man he captained a steamship going up the Congo River. ❖

Marlow recounts how he obtained a job with the Belgian “Company” that trades on the Congo River (the Congo was then a Belgian colony) through the influence of his aunt who had friends in the Company’s administration. ❖

The Company was eager to send Marlow to Africa, because one of the Company's ❖ steamer captains had recently been killed in a fight with the natives.

After he hears that he has gotten the job, Marlow travels across the English Channel ❖ to a city that reminds him of a "whited sepulchre" (probably Brussels) to sign his employment contract at the Company's office.

At the Company's offices, Marlow finds two sinister women there knitting black ❖ wool, one of whom admits him to a waiting room, where he looks at a map of Africa color-coded by colonial powers.

Marlow signs his contract, and goes to be checked by a doctor. The doctor takes ❖ measurements of his skull, remarking that he unfortunately doesn't get to see those men who make it back from Africa.

The doctor tells Marlow, "the changes take place inside." The doctor is interested in ❖ learning anything that may give Belgians an advantage in colonial situations.

Marlow then stops to say goodbye to his aunt, who expresses the hope that he will ❖ aid in the civilization of savages during his service to the Company, "weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways."

Marlow is aware, though, that the Company operates for profit and not for the good ❖ of humanity, and he is bothered by his aunt's naïveté.

Before boarding the French steamer that is to take him to Africa, Marlow has a brief but strange feeling about his journey: the feeling that he is setting off for the center of the earth. ❖

The French steamer takes Marlow along the coast of Africa, stopping periodically to land soldiers and customs house officers. Marlow finds his idleness vexing, and the trip seems vaguely nightmarish to him. At one point, they come across a French man-of-war (a ship) shelling an apparently uninhabited forest along the coast. ❖

They finally arrive at the mouth of the Congo River, where Marlow boards another steamship bound for a point thirty miles upriver. The captain of the ship, a young Swede, recognizes Marlow as a seaman and invites him on the bridge. The Swede criticizes the colonial officials and tells Marlow about another Swede who recently hanged himself on his way into the interior. ❖

Marlow disembarks at the Company's station, which is in a terrible state of disrepair. He sees piles of decaying machinery and a cliff being bombed for no apparent purpose. He also sees a group of black prisoners walking along in chains under the guard of another black man, who wears a shoddy uniform and carries a rifle. ❖

Marlow remarks that he had already known the "devils" of violence, greed, and desire, but that in Africa he became acquainted with the "flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly." Finally, Marlow comes to a grove of trees and, to his horror, finds a group of dying native laborers. ❖

He offers a biscuit to one of them; seeing a bit of white European yarn tied around his neck, he wonders at its meaning. He meets a neatly dressed white man, the Company's chief accountant (not to be confused with Marlow's friend the Accountant from the opening of the book). ❖

Marlow spends ten days here waiting for a caravan to the next station. One day, the chief accountant tells him that in the interior he will undoubtedly meet Mr. Kurtz, a first-class agent who sends in as much ivory as all the others put together and is destined for advancement. He tells Marlow to let Kurtz know that everything is satisfactory at the Outer Station when he meets him. ❖

Marlow travels overland for two hundred miles with a caravan of sixty men. He has one white companion who falls ill and must be carried by the native bearers, who start to desert because of the added burden. ❖

After fifteen days they arrive at the dilapidated Central Station. Marlow finds that the steamer he was to command has sunk. The general manager of the Central Station had taken the boat out two days before under the charge of a volunteer skipper, and they had torn the bottom out on some rocks. In light of what he later learns, Marlow suspects the damage to the steamer may have been intentional, to keep him from reaching Kurtz. ❖

Marlow soon meets with the general manager, who strikes him as an altogether average man who leads by inspiring an odd uneasiness in those around him and whose authority derives merely from his resistance to tropical disease. ❖

The manager tells Marlow that he took the boat out in a hurry to relieve the inner ❖ stations, especially the one belonging to Kurtz, who is rumored to be ill. He praises Kurtz as an exceptional agent and takes note that Kurtz is talked about on the coast.

It takes Marlow three months to repair his ship. One day during this time, a grass ❖ shed housing some trade goods burns down, and the native laborers dance delightedly as it burns.

One of the natives is accused of causing the fire and is beaten severely; he ❖ disappears into the forest after he recovers.

Marlow overhears the manager talking with the brickmaker about Kurtz at the site ❖ of the burned hut. He enters into conversation with the brickmaker after the manager leaves, and ends up accompanying the man back to his quarters, which are noticeably more luxurious than those of the other agents.

Marlow realizes after a while that the brickmaker is pumping him for information ❖ about the intentions of the Company's board of directors in Europe, about which, of course, Marlow knows nothing.

Marlow notices an unusual painting on the wall, of a blindfolded woman with a ❖ lighted torch; when he asks about it, the brickmaker reveals that it is Kurtz's work.

The brickmaker tells Marlow that Kurtz is a prodigy, sent as a special emissary of ❖ Western ideals by the Company's directors and bound for quick advancement.

He also reveals that he has seen confidential correspondence dealing with Marlow's appointment, from which he has construed that Marlow is also a favorite of the administration. They go outside, and the brickmaker tries to get himself into Marlow's good graces—and Kurtz's by proxy, since he believes Marlow is allied with Kurtz. ❖

Marlow realizes the brickmaker had planned on being assistant manager, and Kurtz's arrival has upset his chances. Seeing an opportunity to use the brickmaker's influence to his own ends, Marlow lets the man believe he really does have influence in Europe and tells him that he wants a quantity of rivets from the coast to repair his ship. The brickmaker leaves him with a veiled threat on his life, but Marlow enjoys his obvious distress and confusion. ❖

The Eldorado Exploring Expedition, a group of white men intent on "tear[ing] treasure out of the bowels of the land," arrives, led by the manager's uncle, who spends his entire time at the station talking conspiratorially with his nephew. ❖

Marlow gives up on ever receiving the rivets he needs to repair his ship, and turns to wondering disinterestedly about Kurtz and his ideals. ❖