

Lecture 12:
Heart of Darkness Three

Heart of Darkness: Part III

The Russian trader begs Marlow to take Kurtz away quickly. He tells Marlow that Kurtz is a great man, that he nursed Kurtz through two illnesses but sometimes would not see him for long periods of time, during which Kurtz was out raiding the countryside for ivory with a native tribe he had gotten to follow him. ❖

Although Kurtz has behaved erratically and once even threatened to shoot the trader over a small stash of ivory, the trader nevertheless insists that Kurtz cannot be judged as one would judge a normal man. He has tried to get Kurtz to return to civilization several times. The Russian tells Marlow that Kurtz is extremely ill now. ❖

As he listens to the trader, Marlow looks through his binoculars and sees that what he had originally taken for ornamental balls on the tops of fence posts in the station compound are actually severed heads turned to face the station house. He is repelled but not particularly surprised. The Russian apologetically explains that these are the heads of rebels, an explanation that makes Marlow laugh out loud. The Russian makes a point of telling Marlow that he has had no medicine or supplies with which to treat Kurtz; he also asserts that Kurtz has been shamefully abandoned by the Company. ❖

At that moment, the pilgrims emerge from the station-house with Kurtz on an ❖
improvised stretcher, and a group of natives rushes out of the forest with a piercing
cry. Kurtz speaks to the natives, and the natives withdraw and allow the party to
pass. The manager and the pilgrims lay Kurtz in one of the ship's cabins and give him
his mail, which they have brought from the Central Station. Someone has written to
Kurtz about Marlow, and Kurtz tells him that he is "glad" to see him. The manager
enters the cabin to speak with Kurtz, and Marlow withdraws to the steamer's deck.
From here he sees two natives standing near the river with impressive headdresses
and spears, and a beautiful native woman draped in ornaments pacing gracefully
along the shore. She stops and stares out at the steamer for a while and then moves
away into the forest.

Marlow hears Kurtz yelling at the manager inside the cabin. Kurtz accuses the men ❖
of coming for the ivory rather than to help him, and he threatens the manager for
interfering with his plans.

The manager comes out and tells Marlow that they have done everything possible ❖
for Kurtz, but his unsound methods have closed the district off to the Company for
the time being. He says he plans on reporting Kurtz's "complete want of judgment"
to the Company's directors.

Marlow is thoroughly disgusted by the manager's hypocritical condemnation of Kurtz, and he tells the manager that he thinks Kurtz is a "remarkable man." With this statement, Marlow permanently alienates himself from the manager and the rest of the Company functionaries. Like Kurtz, Marlow is now classified among the rebels like Kurtz who use "unsound methods."

The Russian asks Marlow to protect Kurtz's reputation, Marlow tells the Russian that the manager has spoken of having him (the Russian) hanged. The trader is not surprised. He asks Marlow for tobacco, gun cartridges, and shoes, leaves in a canoe with some natives.

Marlow gets up in the middle of the night and finds that Kurtz is gone. He is worried, but he does not raise an alarm, and instead decides to leave the ship to search for Kurtz himself. He finds him crawling on all four and convinces him to come back telling him that people in Europe think of him as a success.

The steamer departs the next day at noon, and the natives appear on the shore to watch it go. Kurtz watches through the window as the natives make cries and sad chants. Marlow sounds the whistle as he sees the pilgrims get out their rifles, and the crowd scatters. Only the woman remains standing on the shore.

The steamer sails back on river upward toward civilization. The manager, seeing that Kurtz so sick and might die, is pleased to have things under his control; he ignores Marlow, who now is seen to belong to the "unsound" but harmless party.

Marlow, for the most part, is left alone with Kurtz. Kurtz talks on a variety of ❖ subjects. Marlow is alternately impressed and disappointed. Kurtz’s philosophical musings are interspersed with grandiose and childish plans for fame and fortune.

The steamer breaks down, and repairs take some time. Marlow also becomes ill, and ❖ the work is hard on him. Kurtz seems troubled, probably because the delay has made him realize that he probably will not make it back to Europe alive. Worried that the manager will gain control of his “legacy,” Kurtz gives Marlow a bundle of papers for safekeeping.

Kurtz’s ramblings become more abstract and more rhetorical as his condition ❖ worsens. Marlow believes he is reciting portions of articles he has written for the newspapers: Kurtz thinks it his “duty” to disseminate his ideas. Finally, one night, Kurtz admits to Marlow that he is “waiting for death.”

As Marlow approaches, Kurtz seems to be receiving some profound knowledge or ❖ vision, and the look on his face forces Marlow to stop and stare. Kurtz cries out— “The horror! The horror!”—and Marlow flees, not wanting to watch the man die. He joins the manager in the dining hall, which is suddenly overrun by flies. A moment later, a servant comes in to tell them, “Mistah Kurtz—he dead.”

The pilgrims bury Kurtz the next day. Marlow becomes ill and nearly dies himself. He suffers greatly, but the worst thing about his near-death experience is his realization that in the end he would have “nothing to say.” Kurtz, he realizes, was remarkable because he “had something to say. He said it.” Once he has recovered sufficiently, he leaves Africa and returns to Brussels. ❖

In Brussels, Marlow resents people for their petty self-importance and smug complacency. His aunt nurses him back to health, but his disorder is more emotional than physical. A representative of the Company comes to retrieve the packet of papers Kurtz entrusted to Marlow, but Marlow will give him only the pamphlet on the “Suppression of Savage Customs,” with the postscript (the handwritten “Exterminate all the brutes!”) torn off. The man threatens legal action to obtain the rest of the packet’s contents. ❖

Another man, calling himself Kurtz’s cousin, appears and takes some letters to the family. The cousin tells him that Kurtz had been a great musician. Marlow and the cousin ponder Kurtz’s myriad talents and decide that he is best described as a “universal genius.” ❖

A journalist colleague of Kurtz’s appears and takes the pamphlet for publication. This man believes Kurtz’s true skills were in popular or extremist politics. ❖

Finally, Marlow is left with only a few letters and a picture of Kurtz's Intended. ❖
Marlow goes to see her without really knowing why. Kurtz's memory comes flooding back to him as he stands on her doorstep. He finds the Intended still in mourning, though it has been over a year since Kurtz's death. He gives her the packet, and she asks if he knew Kurtz well. He replies that he knew him as well as it is possible for one man to know another.

His presence fulfills her need for a sympathetic ear, and she continually praises ❖
Kurtz. Her sentimentality begins to anger Marlow, but he holds back his annoyance until it gives way to pity.

She says she will mourn Kurtz forever, and asks Marlow to repeat his last words to ❖
give her something upon which to sustain herself. Marlow lies and tells her that Kurtz's last word was her name. She responds that she was certain that this was the case.

Marlow ends his story here, and the narrator looks off into the dark sky, which ❖
makes the waterway seem "to lead into the heart of an immense darkness."