

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.

Lecture 11

Heart of Darkness Two

Heart of Darkness : Part II

- ❖ While Marlow is waiting for his ship to be repaired, he overhears one night the manager and his uncle complaining about Kurtz and discussing how to get rid of him. He hears them say that Kurtz was very ill and they hope he would just die.
- ❖ Marlow then leaves on a two-month trip up the river to Inner Station where Kurtz is. He takes along the manager and several "pilgrims." The river is treacherous and the trip is difficult; the ship proceeds only with the help of a crew of natives the Europeans call cannibals, who actually prove to be quite reasonable people.
- ❖ Fifty miles away from Kurtz's Inner Station, Marlow and his companions find a hut with a stack of firewood and a note that says, "Wood for you. Hurry up. Approach cautiously." They can't read the signature, but it is clearly not Kurtz's.
- ❖ Inside the hut, Marlow finds a battered old book on seamanship with notes in the margin in what looks like code. The manager concludes that the wood must have been left by the Russian trader, a man about whom Marlow has overheard the manager complaining. After taking aboard the firewood that serves as the ship's fuel, the party continues up the river, the steamer struggling and about to give up working completely.
- ❖ Marlow wonders about Kurtz constantly as they crawl along toward him..
- ❖ They stop again 8 miles away from Kurtz' station because of the fog. They hear a loud, desolate cry, followed by savage voices, and then silence again. They prepare for attack. The whites are badly shaken, but the African crewmen respond with quiet alertness.
- ❖ The leader of the cannibals tells Marlow that his people want to eat the people making the loud cries. Marlow realizes that the cannibals must be very hungry. their only food, a supply of rotting hippo meat, was long since thrown overboard by the pilgrims.
- ❖ Marlow does not think the natives will attack because their cries sounded more sorrowful than warlike. But they do attack about a mile and a half from the station. Suddenly the air was filled with arrows. The helmsman is killed with a spear.
- ❖ Marlow frightens the attackers away by sounding the steam whistle repeatedly, and they give up the attack and make a prolonged cry of fear and despair. Marlow thinks that Kurtz is now dead as well, and he feels a terrible disappointment at the thought.
- ❖ The narrative comes back to the Nellie on the Thames. Marlow notes that Kurtz had a fiancée, his Intended (as Kurtz called her), waiting for him in Europe. What Marlow find significant about her is the air of possession and ownership Kurtz assumed when speaking about her: indeed, Kurtz spoke of everything - ivory, the Inner Station, the river - as being his. It is this sense of dark mastery that disturbs Marlow most.

- ❖ Marlow also mentions a report Kurtz has written at the request of the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. The report is eloquent and powerful, if lacking in practical suggestions. It concludes, however, with a handwritten postscript: "Exterminate all the brutes!"
- ❖ Marlow suggests that this is the result of Kurtz's absorption into native life—that by the time he came to write this note he had assumed a position of power with respect to the natives and had been a participant in "unspeakable rites," where sacrifices had been made in his name. At this point, Marlow also reveals that he feels he is responsible for the "care of [Kurtz's] memory," and that he has no choice but to remember and continue to talk about the man.
- ❖ Marlow returns back to the story. The Inner Station comes into view now. It looks decayed but is still standing.
- ❖ A white man, the Russian trader, beckons to them from the shore. He wears a patchwork suit and babbles incessantly. He tells Marlow that the natives mean no harm, and that the ship's whistle is the best means to scare them off. He tells Marlow he has been a merchant seaman and was working for a Dutch company.
- ❖ The Russian tells Marlow that the steamer was attacked because the natives do not want Kurtz to leave. The Russian also offers yet another enigmatic picture of Kurtz. One does not talk to Kurtz but listens to him. He credits Kurtz for having "enlarged his mind."

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."

Lecture 13

Heart of Darkness / Themes

Colonialism and Imperialism

- ❖ Perhaps the central theme in *Heart of Darkness* is colonialism and imperialism.
- ❖ When Marlow sets off on his adventure in Brussels, the colonization of the Congo is presented as a humanitarian project whose purpose is to help the Africans live in the modern world. This assertion is presented on the Nellie at the opening of the novel and by Marlow's aunt and seems to be the culture of the company in Brussels.
- ❖ From Belgium to the Congo, and from the Outer Station to the Central Station and finally up the river to the Inner Station, Marlow encounters scenes of torture, cruelty, forced labor, large-scale exploitation and mass-murder.
- ❖ The novel exposes the hypocrisy of colonialism and imperialism. The men who work for the Company describe what they do as "trade," and their treatment of native Africans is part of a benevolent project of "civilization."
- ❖ "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."

Heart of Darkness (Part 1, Section 4)

Kurtz Vs. The Company

- ❖ But the novel also sets against the hypocrisy of the company and the Europeans in general, the model of Kurtz, and Marlow (and Joseph Conrad through him) prefer Kurtz's honesty to the Company's and the Europeans' hypocrisy.
- ❖ Kurtz, at least, is open about the fact that he does not trade but rather takes ivory by force, and he describes his own treatment of the natives with the words "suppression" and "extermination": he does not hide the fact that he rules through violence and intimidation.

- ❖ Unlike the other Europeans, Kurtz does not claim to be in Africa to “help” the Africans. He is frank about the fact that he is there to steal and plunder ivory.
- ❖ Kurtz’ perverse honesty leads to the success of the Company because he brings them a lot of ivory, but his honesty also brings his downfall, because his honesty exposes the evil practices behind European activity in Africa.

The Africans

- ❖ However, for Marlow as much as for Kurtz or for the Company, Africans in the novel are mostly objects: Marlow refers to his helmsman as a piece of machinery, and Kurtz’s African mistress is at best a piece of statuary.
- ❖ Africans are also often described in zoological terms (ants, animals, insects, etc) and it can be argued that *Heart of Darkness* participates in the dehumanization of the Africans. Notice that no African is allowed to speak in the novel, and they are often portrayed as sub-humans and primitives. They just make primitive sounds, but they never talk.
- ❖ “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. And why not?”

Heart of Darkness

Lecture 14

Heart of Darkness / Characters and Symbols

Characters: Marlow

- ❖ Marlow appears in several of Conrad’s other works. He is a complicated character who anticipates the figures of high modernism while also reflecting his Victorian predecessors. Marlow is in many ways a traditional hero: tough, honest, an independent thinker, a capable man. Yet he is also “broken” or “damaged,” like the characters of modernist fiction. The world has defeated him in some fundamental way, and he is weary, skeptical, and cynical. Marlow also shifts between the role of the intellectual and that of the “working tough.”

- ❖ In the end, he sides with Kurtz against the Company, but he does not side with the Africans... And when he meets Kurtz' fiancée, he prefers not to tell her the truth about Kurtz and the situation in Africa.

Characters: Kurtz

- ❖ Kurtz resembles the archetypal "evil genius": the highly gifted but ultimately degenerate individual whose fall becomes legendary. Kurtz is related to figures like Faustus, Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Moby-Dick's Ahab, and *Wuthering Heights*'s Heathcliff. Like these characters, he is significant both for his style and eloquence and for his grandiose, almost megalomaniacal scheming.
- ❖ Kurtz can be criticized in the same terms that *Heart of Darkness* is sometimes criticized: style entirely overrules substance, providing a justification for amorality and evil.
- ❖ Kurtz is utterly lacking in substance. Marlow refers to Kurtz as "hollow" more than once. It shows Kurtz's ability to function as a "choice of nightmares" for Marlow
- ❖ Kurtz provides Marlow with a set of paradoxes that Marlow can use to evaluate himself and the Company's men.
- ❖ Kurtz is not so much a fully realized individual as a series of images constructed by others for their own use. As Marlow's visits with Kurtz's cousin, the Belgian journalist, and Kurtz's fiancée demonstrate, there seems to be no true Kurtz. To his cousin, he was a great musician; to the journalist, a brilliant politician and leader of men; to his fiancée, a great humanitarian and genius.

Symbols: Darkness

- ❖ Darkness: The word is part of the book's title. But it is difficult to say exactly what it means, because it is used extensively. Almost everything in the book is cloaked in darkness. Africa, England, and Brussels are all described as gloomy and somehow dark, at one point or another.
- ❖ Darkness is most often used metaphorically. Darkness is the inability to see: this may sound simple, but think about it as a description of the human condition, and it will prove to have profound implications. Failing to see mass-murders, failing to see that exploitation and destruction of Africa is not humanitarian work, and failing to see that Africans are human beings are very grave and consequential facts.

Symbols: Fog

- ❖ Fog is similar to darkness. Fog not only obscures but distorts: it gives one just enough information to begin making decisions but no way to judge the accuracy of that information, which often ends up being wrong. Marlow's steamer is caught in the fog, meaning that he has no idea where he's going and no idea whether peril or open water lies ahead.

Symbols: The White Sepulchre

- ❖ The “whited sepulchre” is probably Brussels, where the Company’s headquarters are located. A sepulchre implies death and confinement, and indeed Europe is the origin of the colonial enterprises that bring death to white men and to their colonial subjects.
- ❖ It is also governed by ideologies that both enable cruelty, dehumanization, and evil and prohibit change. The phrase “whited sepulchre” comes from the biblical Book of Matthew. In the passage, Matthew describes “whited sepulchres” as something beautiful on the outside but containing horrors within (the bodies of the dead); thus, the image is appropriate for Brussels, given the hypocritical Belgian rhetoric about imperialism’s civilizing mission.

Symbols: The River

- ❖ The Congo River is the key to Africa for Europeans. It allows them access to the center of the continent without having to physically cross it; in other words, it allows the white man to remain always separate or outside. The river also seems to want to expel Europeans from Africa altogether: its current makes travel upriver slow and difficult, but the flow of water makes travel downriver, back toward “civilization,” rapid and seemingly inevitable. Marlow’s struggles with the river as he travels upstream toward Kurtz reflect his struggles to understand the situation in which he has found himself. The ease with which he journeys back downstream, on the other hand, mirrors his acquiescence to Kurtz and his “choice of nightmares.”

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