**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."