

Heart of Darkness—Heart of the Empire?

Lecture 40

[The term “British Empire”] is ... inescapable ... if one’s looking at 19th- and 20th-century literature. ... Britain and its monarchy presided ... over an empire on which it was said “the sun never set.” ... And by the second half of the 20th century, incredibly, “the winds of change” had blown away that huge possession, the empire.

The subject of this lecture is Joseph Conrad, but in a larger sense, the subject is the British Empire. During the 19th and 20th centuries, Britain acquired and ruled over an empire that stretched from the median line at Greenwich, to Australasia, Palestine, the subcontinent of India, and Africa. By the second half of the 20th century, that empire was virtually gone.

As we’ve seen in these lectures, literature is a sensitive recorder of social change, registering both facts and emotions. The British frame of mind regarding the empire was touched equally by pride and shame. Rudyard Kipling’s poem “The White Man’s Burden” (1899) stands as an example of imperial pride. In it, Kipling laments the suffering of Britain in maintaining imperial domination. Some critics have argued that Kipling’s poem is essentially satirical, designed to subvert imperial arrogance, but he seems to stand sentimentally behind the poem. Kipling believed that in its military actions and occupations of the Philippines at the end of the 19th century, the United States was offering to share the responsibilities of empire with Britain. In fact, the poem addresses America and was first published there. The idea of the poem is clear: Empire is the imposition of a white civilization on a savage world, with no thought of personal gain, or exploitation of natural resources, or military advantage, and most poignantly, with no expectation of any reward nor any gratitude from those lucky enough to be colonized by the white man. Today, we find the poem racist and grotesque, but it was met with approval in its day, in both Britain and America.

In this lecture, we’ll look at Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. This novel came out in the same year as “The White Man’s Burden” but offers us the other side of the colonial coin.

Joseph Conrad (1857–1924) was born in Poland as Teodor Korzeniowski. Teodor’s father was a patriot, an aristocrat, a poet, and a rebel against the Russian occupation of his country, which meant that his son would not be able to root his life in his native Poland. Exile and cosmopolitan culture would be Teodor’s destiny. Later in life, he became an officer in the British merchant marine and changed his name to Joseph Conrad.

In the 1890s, while in his mid-30s, Conrad turned to literature. His experiences at sea and in countries he had come to know as a sailor furnish much of his later writing, including *Lord Jim*, *Nostromo*, *Youth*, *The Shadow Line*, and of course, *Heart of Darkness*.

In 1890, Conrad made a trip up the Congo River, an experience that proved transforming. The Belgian Congo was one of the most extreme examples of colonial crime in the 19th century. Under Leopold II, the territory had been opened to rampant commercial exploitation for ivory and rubber. Licenses were sold by the Belgian government for the extraction of natural resources, and no remuneration was required for the indigenous peoples. What is now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (then the Congo Free State) may never recover from the crimes committed against the country by the European West. The manual work of plundering was done, not by Belgians, but by natives of the region. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad gives us a brief glimpse of six such workers, near starvation and chained together at the neck, as they carry out their task.

Conrad was a proponent of artful narration. Like his friend Henry James, Conrad held that how a novelist told a story was as important as the story itself. *Heart of Darkness* is constructed as a story within a story.

The novel opens on the mouth of the Thames, gateway to London and the heart of the British Empire. As his small boat bobs on the water at sunset, the skipper Marlow, who will be the hero-narrator of the tale that follows, reminisces about his first command of a vessel. He is inspired by his memories and by thoughts of all the great explorers and mariners, from Sir Francis Drake onward, who have navigated the Thames. Suddenly, Marlow is struck by a different sentiment: “And this also,” he says, “has been one of the dark places of the earth.” At the root of all imperial conquest is crime.

The story proper begins in Brussels, but neither that city nor the Congo is mentioned by its geographical name. They are, respectively, the “White City,” with a sarcastic overtone of the biblical “whitened sepulcher” metaphor of hypocrisy, and the “heart of darkness,” an allusion to the heart shape of the African continent.

The “Company,” that is, Leopold II’s Union Miniere, contracts the young mariner to voyage up the Congo River to the inland station, where the current agent, Kurtz (meaning “short” in German), is posted. Kurtz has apparently gone mad; even worse, he has “gone native,” sunk into savagery. To some extent, he has lost that important sense of division between a colonizer and the colonized. Marlow’s journey is a pilgrimage of enlightenment to the depths of darkness to which the human condition can descend.

Conrad has a poetical power of imagery and gives us many vivid depictions of the violence and futility of the European imperial enterprise as Marlow makes his way from Europe to Africa.

All Europe, Marlow says at one point, went into the making of Kurtz, and one feels that power of generalization about all empires. As his ship approaches the African mainland, Marlow sees a French warship anchored off the coast, pointlessly shelling the bush. “There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding,” he writes. But there is more than just a touch of insanity here. Three men a day are dying onboard the battleship.

When Marlow finally reaches Kurtz, he is revealed to be wholly mad and corrupted. But we are led to believe that Kurtz’s madness is the only sanity possible in this insane place. A manuscript written by a younger Kurtz shows that he was once an ardent idealist, who came to the Congo with the intention of bringing the torch of enlightenment to the natives. The manuscript trails off, however, with Kurtz’s final, terrible injunction: “exterminate the brutes.” Genocide is the final solution of the imperial enterprise, wherever and however nobly it starts. After exploitation, there will be no further use for the natives, as much brutes and as expendable as the elephants. Kurtz dies

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exclaiming, “The horror!” He has looked deep into the heart of darkness and seen what that darkness contains.

Marlow, who has himself looked into the darkness, disposes of Kurtz’s body. He returns to Brussels and tells Kurtz’s fiancée that Kurtz died with her name on his lips. Unlike Marlow, she lives in a world of what Henrik Ibsen, elsewhere during the same period, called “life lies.”

Marlow’s attitude toward Kurtz, the avatar of imperialism, is complex. He asserts that Kurtz was a remarkable man, despite the fact that he had slipped into madness. Marlow even wonders if all wisdom and truth are compressed into the moment when “we step over the threshold of the invisible.”

It has been said that tragedy, by showing humanity at the extremes of existence, brings out the essence of human greatness. It’s not easy to align Kurtz with the tragic heroes we’ve seen, such as Shakespeare’s Lear or Hardy’s Jude Fawley. He is, after all, indirectly responsible for that hideous chain gang in what Marlow calls the garden of death. But in a world of falsehood, ideology, and self-serving sentimentality about such things as the “white man’s burden,” Kurtz’s life and his death are tokens of truth. His death is, necessarily, solitary. As Conrad says, we die as we dream: alone. That is part of the darkness that we must look into.

Heart of Darkness has always been a popular text, but its reputation has been altered remarkably over the century. In the early 1900s, it was regarded in Britain as a scathing indictment, not of colonialism in general but of Belgian colonialism.

In the post-imperial period, from the mid-1950s, the reputation of *Heart of Darkness* changed dramatically. It was elevated to the condition of a post-colonial classic text and read as an indictment of empire in general. Generations of college students in the United States and Britain read *Heart of Darkness* in this light. Such blurring of the specific into the general often happens when a book is canonized. For example, we read *1984* as a classic denunciation of totalitarianism, but what Orwell had in mind when he wrote it was an attack on the then-ruling Labour Party in Britain.

In 1975, the reputation of *Heart of Darkness* changed again. The Nobel Prize-winning novelist Chinua Achebe, one of the great writers of our time and an African, denounced Conrad's novel as "bloody racist." Achebe noted that Africans existed in this narrative as nameless décor, such as Kurtz's jewel-bedecked princess concubine. They were just part of the color black, the continental dark. They weren't human beings; they were pigments. Why, Achebe asked, should the suffering inflicted by Europe on a whole continent and hundreds of millions of people be relegated to background for one European's nervous breakdown and another European's discovery of the "meaning of life"? The Eurocentricity of *Heart of Darkness* is what one might call higher racism. Thus, we must learn to read the novel in a different light yet again. Achebe's onslaught, initially delivered as a lecture at an American campus, has been influential in how the current generation reads the book and even in having it banned in various places.

Whether or not we agree that *Heart of Darkness* is a great novel, it is a novel that matters and has conditioned the thinking of millions of people over a century. A work such as this, particularly if one sees it in the context of the controversies and the historical situations that surround it, can help create the critical apparatus that is needed to understand literature. No one wants a great work of literature that is like a pill to be swallowed to obtain a certain effect. We want works of literature that leave us more uncertain after we've read them than before. Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden" confirmed the prejudices of its time for its readers. But the same is not true of *Heart of Darkness*; we come away from this novel not knowing quite what to think but nonetheless thinking very hard indeed. ■

Suggested Reading

Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and the Congo Diary*.

Meyers, *Joseph Conrad: A Biography*.

Stape, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*.

Questions to Consider

1. The distinguished African novelist, Chinua Achebe, has attacked *Heart of Darkness* for its “bloody racism”? How just is this criticism?
2. Why did Conrad make Kurtz the hero of his narrative?