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**CONRAD'S HEART OF DARKNESS
& SECRET SHARER**



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HEART OF DARKNESS AND THE SECRET SHARER

NOTES

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- *Chapter Summaries and
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- *Character Analyses*
- *Questions for Review*

by
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HEART OF DARKNESS

INTRODUCTION

....We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness....We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet....

....we crept on, towards Kurtz. But the snags were thick, the water was treacherous and shallow, the boiler seemed indeed to have a sulky devil in it, and thus neither that fireman nor I had any time to peer into our creepy thoughts....

....how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of solitude—utter solitude without a policeman—by the way of silence—utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbour can be heard whispering of public opinion? These little things make all the great difference. When they are gone you must fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness. Of course you may be too much of a fool to go wrong—too dull even to know you are being assaulted by the powers of darkness....

—*Heart of Darkness*

Critics regard Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as the most subtle of his works. This story invites attentive reading and contemplation, for it touches the foundations of life and exposes the extremes of good and evil which dwell together in every man.

These *Notes* are not intended to be read in lieu of the text but rather as a supplement; the Cliff's Notes analysis of Conrad's work is intended to lead the student to a better understanding and greater appreciation of *Heart of Darkness*.

PLOT SUMMARY

Heart of Darkness is really two stories—(1) the story of Marlow's trip from the civilization of Europe to the primitive interior of an uncivilized

continent (Africa)*, then home again, and (2) the manager-Kurtz story in the Belgian Congo. It is the interplay of these two stories which constitutes the plot of *Heart of Darkness*, and it is the effect of (2) on (1) which carries the theme, or unifying principle, of the novel.

At the beginning of *Heart of Darkness*, the yawl *Nellie* lies at anchor in the Thames, awaiting the turn of the tide. On her deck five persons sit watching the great stir of lights in the river: the director of companies, a lawyer, an accountant, the narrator, who does not identify himself as to profession and who introduces Marlow, the only one present who still follows the sea.

To this group of listeners Marlow spins a tale of his only experience with fresh water sailing. He prefaces the story by a reference to ancient times in Britain, when, "This, too, has been one of the dark places of the earth."

Home from his seafaring in the Far East, he tires of his long vacation and tries to find another ship. Through the influence of an aunt, he secures a job with a company engaged in the ivory trade. Marlow finds that everyone in the company office treats him like a doomed person; he finds out why later.

He leaves Europe on a French steamer. From the time he boards the vessel, his whole adventure takes on an unreal dream quality, as though he voyaged into the regions of fantasy. The languid sea, the monotonous coastline, his isolation, seem to keep him "away from the truth of things." The black men who come out to trade with the ship fascinate and delight him. They are of real substance, a brief contact with reality.

Marlow leaves the French ship at the river's mouth and takes passage on a river boat commanded by a Swede. The captain's remarks about the government and the country trouble Marlow. He relates how he took a Swedish compatriot up the river and the fellow hanged himself on the road. When Marlow asks why, he says, "The sun too much for him, or the country perhaps."

After a hundred-mile trip, Marlow lands at the company's lower station, and the waste he sees everywhere appalls him. Valuable machinery, tools, and material lie about in the grass, rusted and broken. A gang of chained black men clank past him. He turns from the blinding sunlight into a grove of trees and finds that it shelters a throng of dying Negro workers, animated skeletons, worn out and sickened through labor for the company.

*Conrad does not name the Congo or Africa, but he *infers* by details of travel, etc., that the river which carries Marlow's steamer to Kurtz's station is indeed the Congo, that the continent is Africa. He *does* name the Thames river and Europe, the river and continent of the civilized, known world.

Marlow hurries up the slope to the company buildings and meets an astonishing contrast—a vision in a high starched collar, huge white cuffs and the most elegant of clothes. This “fashion model” proves to be the company’s chief accountant, who keeps the books for the whole operation. He has been out three years and his quarters are as neat as his clothing. Everything else about the station is chaos.

From this man, Marlow first hears of Kurtz. The accountant describes Kurtz as a first-class agent, a remarkable person in charge of an important station. He sends down more ivory than all the other agents combined. The accountant also confides the information that Kurtz is in line for a big promotion. He will be made *somebody* in administration before long.

After ten hot and disappointing days at the lower station, Marlow sets out with a caravan of sixty blacks and one white man for the two-hundred-mile trek overland to the company’s central station. Each of his carriers has a sixty-pound load strapped to his back. The white man proves a poor traveler and must be carried, thus causing trouble with the carriers. The man is much too heavy.

The trek takes fifteen days. Marlow hobbles into the central station only to discover that his steamboat is at the bottom of the river. His informant says it is “all right.” The manager himself was there. The manager is waiting to see him now.

The manager is far from courteous. Although he knows that Marlow has just come two hundred miles over a difficult trail, the manager does not ask him to sit down. He begins babbling at once about the wreck. He “doesn’t know whether Mr. Kurtz is alive or dead.” He estimates that it will take three months to raise the steamer and repair it.

Marlow regards the manager as a “chattering idiot” and turns his back on both manager and station. He gives his attention to raising the sunken boat. He cannot, however, avoid observing the pilgrims—a group of sixteen to twenty white men who carry long staffs and loiter about the station talking about ivory in reverential tones.

One evening a shed full of cheap trade goods catches fire and burns down. Marlow goes to look and overhears the manager discussing Kurtz with one of the agents, a hook-nosed fellow with eyes like mica.

Later the agent (see *the brickmaker*, under *Minor Characters*) invites Marlow to his room and engages him in conversation. Marlow marvels at the elegance of the young agent’s quarters as compared with the rest of the station. Marlow thinks the agent must be in favor with the manager. Marlow sees that the agent wants to pump him, trying to find out about Marlow’s influential friends. Marlow does not cooperate.

On his way out the door, Marlow sees a small sketch in oils on a panel. It pictures a draped and blindfolded woman carrying a lighted torch. The agent explains that Kurtz painted the picture here at the central station more than a year ago.

Marlow questions him further about Kurtz. He finds that the agent expects Kurtz to be advanced to the position of assistant within a year. He says Marlow must know what else the company has planned for Kurtz. He and Kurtz both belong to the new "gang of virtue" and are recommended by the same sources in Europe. Marlow can hardly suppress a laugh. He asks the agent if he reads the company's private correspondence. The man doesn't reply, and Marlow assures him that when Kurtz becomes general manager, he will not have the opportunity.

The agent snuffs the candle, and they go outdoors where this "papier mâché Mephistopheles," as Marlow calls him, rambles on, still trying to extract some information. Marlow decides to let him believe anything he wishes about his European connections, maybe it will help Kurtz. He knows now that this agent wants to be assistant manager of the central station, of course he resents Kurtz. Marlow thinks he has almost lied "letting that young fool believe what he likes." The agent has been sent out to make bricks, but although he has been on the station over a year, he has made no bricks yet. He does only secretarial work for the manager.

Marlow now brings up the subject of rivets, for he has plates with which to repair the steamer, but no rivets to fasten them on. Marlow has tried for weeks to get rivets, without success. He knows that black carriers come every week bringing supplies from the lower station, but they are loaded with cheap trade goods—no rivets. Marlow reminds the agent that he, as the manager's secretary, should be able to get those rivets. The agent says he writes only from dictation. When Marlow still demands action on the rivets, the agent turns cool and changes the subject. Many more weeks pass before any rivets show up.

After the agent leaves, Marlow goes aboard his steamer and finds another white man—a boiler maker by trade and a fine workman, although the pilgrims despise him. Marlow tells him they are going to get rivets now, and together they dance triumphantly on the steamer's deck.

Instead of rivets, an invasion comes—invasion by the Eldorado Expedition, whose leader and guide is the manager's uncle. Marlow overhears enough of their conversation to understand the manager's attitude toward Kurtz. In over a year the manager has made no effort to provision the inner station. Kurtz started down the river some months ago, but, after descending three hundred miles with his shipment of ivory, he decided to turn back, leaving his half-caste clerk to complete the delivery. The clerk reported that Kurtz had been very ill and had not fully recovered. Now no news has come from Kurtz for nine months.

At last rivets come and Marlow repairs the boat, and he sets out on the voyage upriver with the manager and three or four pilgrims on board. A crew of twenty natives will keep the engine fires going and run the steamer. The journey takes two months, the steamer seems to crawl. To Marlow it crawls toward just one object—Kurtz. In the jungle along the banks, they pass settlements where the people greet them with wild yells, hands clapping, feet stomping, bodies swaying, eyes rolling, and drums beating. Marlow admits an inner response to this passionate uproar, but he is too busy keeping his “tin-pot” steamer afloat to go ashore for a “howl and a dance.”

Fifty miles below Kurtz’s station they come upon an abandoned hut where a supply of fresh firewood is stacked. Here Marlow finds a book. It has no cover, but to Marlow it seems the only real object he has found on the trip. The delays are many, but the manager displays “a beautiful resignation.”

A mile and a half below the inner station an attack takes place and the steamer is showered with arrows. A spear thrown through the pilothouse window fatally wounds the black helmsman. Marlow blows the whistle and stops the attack. In great fright, the manager orders Marlow to turn back down the river, but before Marlow can comply with the order, the inner station comes in sight.

A curiously dressed Russian welcomes them. He proves to be Kurtz’s disciple, devotee, and victim. He tells Marlow that Kurtz is very ill but still alive. The manager and his pilgrims go up to the house to bring Kurtz. Marlow talks to the Russian and learns that Kurtz ordered the attack on the steamer. Kurtz has been without trade goods for many months, yet he has collected ivory at gunpoint until he has a huge supply. He has become a god among the natives, and they worship him, he even participates in their horrible secret rites. He has even tried to shoot the Russian, who has nursed him through two nearly fatal illnesses.

The men bring Kurtz down to the steamer on an improvised stretcher. He is scarcely more than a cadaver, yet his voice is strong. The shore fills with natives who do not want their “deity” to leave. Among them is a magnificent woman—“savage and superb....”

That night Kurtz escapes and crawls toward a savage devil ceremony in the nearby jungle. Marlow goes after him and brings him back, but not before he has glimpsed the vile and “inconceivable” degradation of the man’s soul.

Kurtz entrusts Marlow with a packet of private papers. A few days later Kurtz dies with a final cry, “The horror! The horror!” The pilgrims bury him the next day in a muddy hole. Marlow ignores both death and burial.

After the return trip, Marlow sickens and is shipped home. Three persons call on him with reference to Kurtz's papers; one is a company officer, another a musician who claims to be Kurtz's cousin, and a third who is a journalist. He satisfies them with papers of no value, saving the packet for Kurtz's "Intended."

Later at her door he is almost overcome with a vision he sees of Kurtz in a dying condition with his mouth open voraciously as though to devour the whole world. The awful cry, "The horror! The horror!" rings all about him. He enters and finds the girl, beautiful, pale, robed in black, in agony over her loss. Her words reveal that she holds Kurtz to be the most noble of men, honest, lovable, faithful, and true.

For a long time Marlow answers her in evasive words which have double meanings. At last Marlow admits that he heard Kurtz's last words, which she demands to know. He lies to her and assures her that her own name was the last word on her lover's lips. The girl's loud cry of exultation, of "inconceivable triumph and of unspeakable pain," and her subsequent weeping show that the healing tears have come at last. By his lie, he has freed the girl from her agony to make a healthy recovery. As Marlow leaves the house he half expects the heavens to fall in retribution for his lie; but nothing happens.

The listeners on the deck of the *Nellie* respond rather insensitively to Marlow's story. The narration of the novel returns to the unnamed narrator, who describes Marlow now as sitting "apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha." The book ends, as it began, with allusion again to the Thames—"the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness."

GUIDE TO SECTIONS OF STORY

Joseph Conrad indicates only three major divisions in *Heart of Darkness*—I, II, and III. In order to offer the student a simplification of the Conrad story through the Cliff's Notes method of summary and commentary, the outline writer takes the liberty of dividing each part—I, II, and III—into sections.

It needs to be emphasized, then, that in the following list the six sections under I, the five sections under II, and the four sections under III do not represent actual divisions made by Conrad himself but rather by the outline writer for the sake of thorough analysis.

I

1. From the beginning to the paragraph ending "to hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences."
2. From "I don't want to bother you much with what happened to me personally" to "I felt as though, instead of going to the centre of a continent, I were about to set off for the centre of the earth."
3. From "I left in a French steamer" to "Four boxes did you say? So. Farewell."
4. From "I came upon a boiler wallowing in the grass" to "I could see the still treetops of the grove of death."
5. From "Next day I left that station at last" to "that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams..."
6. From "He was silent for a while" to the end of part I.

II

1. From the beginning of part II to "that trailed behind them slowly over the tall grass without bending a single blade."
2. From "In a few days the Eldorado Expedition went into the patient wilderness" to "The essentials of this affair lay deep under the surface, beyond my reach, and beyond my power of meddling."
3. From "Towards the evening of the second day we judged ourselves about eight miles from Kurtz's station" to "asked the manager, in a confidential tone."
4. From "I did not think they would attack" to "He was silent for a long time."
5. From "I laid the ghost of his gifts" to the end of part II.

III

1. From the beginning of III to "but Mr. Kurtz was not there."
2. From "I think I would have raised an outcry" to "I could see nothing more for smoke."
3. From "The brown current ran swiftly" to "took himself off with this plunder."

4. From "Thus I was left at last with a slim packet of letters" to the end of III.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

I—SECTION I

Summary

The *Nellie*, a cruising yawl, swings at anchor, awaiting the turn of the tide in the River Thames. Five persons lounge on her deck: the director of companies, captain and host; a lawyer; an accountant; Marlow; and the narrator who is the first "I" of this boxed story.

The accountant brings out his dominoes, but the men do not play. They contemplate the river with its "great stir of lights."

Harlow, the only one present who still follows the sea, sits cross-legged, Buddah-like, leaning against the mizzen mast. He speaks out suddenly, "And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth."

His remark introduces a soliloquy on the first Romans to land in the British Isles. He pictures their hardships—the cold, fog, tempests, disease, death, and encounters with wild people which must have been the new settler's lot as he felt the savagery of the place close in around him. "The fascination of abomination" goes to work on him. Marlow imagines "the poor devil's longing to escape, his powerless disgust, his surrender and hate."

He declares that conquerors want only brute force, nothing to brag about either, because one's strength is but an accident growing out of another's weakness. He denounces such colonization as "robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness." He sees the conquest of the earth as taking it from those who "have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses."

Silence ensues and the men on the *Nellie's* deck gaze out over the multicolored lights of the river traffic. They must wait patiently, for they can do nothing until the tide turns.

After a long silence, Marlow resumes his narrative. He reminds his companions that he once turned fresh-water sailor. The narrator remarks that the group on the *Nellie's* deck know now, that before the ebb tide begins to run, they are fated to listen to one of Marlow's "inconclusive experiences."

Commentary

The introduction frames what writers call a "boxed story." Such a story always opens with a narrator who speaks in first person. This first "I" lays a suitable foundation for another "I" (Marlow here) who takes up the story.

Note how the author sets the story mood with such words as "red," "dark," "mournful," "brooding," "sombre," "hate," "murder," and many others. Everything about the opening is significant.

The time—night.

The lights—"A great stir of them."

Marlow's pose—*Buddah-like (in meditation)*.

Flood tide—Opportune time.

Profession of listeners—*Materialistic*.

Location—A ship's deck.

The reference to Roman colonization sets the pattern for the course of Marlow's story. The tragedy he depicts as the lot of early Roman settlers in England will be given a modern setting in Marlow's revelation. His philosophy on conquest "by right of might" is strikingly modern. "The fascination of abomination" will follow every reader to the story's end.

I—SECTION 2

Summary

Marlow begins by flashing ahead to tell how he ascended to the upper reaches of a river and "met the poor chap." He describes this experience as somber, not very clear, pitiful, not extraordinary; yet "it seemed somehow to throw a kind of light."

He comes back to the chronological sequence of his tale and tells how maps fascinate him, especially their blank spots. The "biggest, the most blank" of them all seems to appeal to him most. Now it is no longer blank. It has become a place of darkness. A river flows through that blank area, a mighty river (the unnamed Congo) like "an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land." The snake charms him.

Marlow has just returned from a six-year "dodge" of the Far East and, after a period of rest, begins to hunt for a new ship. None of the ship companies want him. He decides to apply to a company developing trade in the vast, dark land. He exploits his aunt's affectionate interest to finagle him an appointment. She quickly arranges an acceptance with the ivory company.

Here Marlow flashes ahead again to relate how the company has just received word that one of their river captains has been killed in a scuffle with the natives. Marlow tells how, months later, he attempted to collect the mortal remains of Fresleven, his predecessor, and found them undisturbed where he fell, with long grass growing up through the skeleton. The village Marlow found deserted, and rumor informed him that a quarrel over two black hens ended the river captain's life.

Again Marlow returns to the chronology of his story. He flies about getting ready. Within forty-eight hours after receiving a favorable reply, he crosses the Channel and presents himself at the offices of his new employers.

Two women in the company office catch his attention. One is fat, one is thin. They both knit "feverishly" on skeins of black wool. A map pictures the world in rainbow colors. The yellow patch at the "dead center" is Marlow's destination. The river is there, fascinating and deadly as a snake. Ushered into the manager's office, he gets an impression of pale plumpness behind a massive desk and is reminded of the millions of francs this man controls. In a few moments he has signed his contract, concluding his business. Again he passes through the outer office, where the two women still knit their black wool. He feels uneasy. The white-haired secretary seems to pity him openly and the knitting women look at him in a strange way.

A young clerk leads Marlow forth. Since it is too early to see the doctor, the two sit down for a drink. The young man speaks so glowingly of the company's prospects that Marlow expresses surprise that he has not gone out there himself. The youth replies, "I am not such a fool as I look." The doctor astonishes Marlow by asking permission to measure his head, also by his question, "Ever any madness in your family?" He advises that a calm spirit is the most vital requirement for survival in the tropics.

After a dutiful and grateful farewell to his generous aunt, Marlow is ready to leave. For an instant he has a panicked feeling that he is setting out for the center of the earth.

Commentary

Marlow's statement that his somber and pitiful contact with Kurtz "throws a kind of light" is important. The symbolism of *light* appears often

in *Heart of Darkness*. One of Conrad's themes is *Blindfolded light-bearers destroy what they profess to enlighten*. The frequent references to the fierce sunlight throughout the book develop this theme.

Several other symbols mentioned in this section are: the yellow patch on the map; yellow probably denotes ivory, also corruption. The comparison of the Congo to a snake foreshadows the deadly dangers Marlow will encounter in Africa. The knitters of black wool refer to the fates weaving their black pall.

Nowhere has Conrad made more effective use of his suggestive powers. The secretary's pitying attitude suggests her feeling that the man before her is doomed. Marlow's apprehensions are also suggestive. Note his reference to the "whited sepulchre" city, and his statements, "a queer feeling came to me that I was an imposter" and "an eerie feeling came over me." See also his remark that he felt as though he had undertaken a journey to the "center of the earth." (*The center of the earth—location of hell*)

In all his works, Conrad makes frequent reference to the Scriptures. He draws many figures of speech and some of his most important themes from the Bible. The term, "whited sepulchre" is such a reference. The remainder of this text says, "full of dead men's bones." The implication is that the flourishing ivory trade, "the biggest thing" in the city, is a death-dealing operation full of dead men's skeletons.

I—SECTION 3

Summary

Marlow leaves on a French steamer which travels slowly and stops at every French port to unload soldiers and customhouse officers. Inactivity, isolation, monotony of coastline, combine to depress Marlow. He feels himself kept from the truth, held "within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion."

Occasionally Marlow hears the surf and the sound gives him pleasure "like the speech of a brother." Sometimes black men put out from the shore in dugouts. They comfort Marlow because he sees them as natural and true "as the surf along their coast."

One day the steamer comes upon a French man-of-war shelling the jungled coast. Their ship delivers mail to the man-of-war and it is learned that the sailors aboard her are dying at the rate of three a day. Nowhere does the ship stop long enough for Marlow to get any definite impression of the country; but wonder grows in him. He begins to regard his voyage as a "pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares."

In thirty days the ship reaches the mouth of the big river, but since Marlow's work will be farther upstream, he takes passage on a small sea-going steamer commanded by a Swedish captain. He befriends Marlow and confides to him his low opinion of colonizing agencies in the region. Note again that Conrad never identifies by name either Africa or the Congo. He says he took a fellow Swede up the river the other day and the fellow hanged himself on the road. When Marlow asks why, he answers evasively, "the sun too much for him, or the country, perhaps." At last they tie up at a jetty below a rocky hill crowned with the buildings of the ivory company's outer station—three barrack-like structures.

Commentary

Throughout *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad builds a mood of unhealthy darkness, hopeless stupidity, senseless cruelty, avid greed, and unholy ambition. He never allows the reader to forget the direction and focus of the story. At every turn he sees some evidence of a monstrous evil at work in the land.

Life in the Congo shows up as difficult and dangerous even for the exploiters themselves. Conrad continually points out the heavy price the land demands for the invasion of its secrets and the looting of its treasure. The Swede's unaccountable suicide underlines these dangers. The dying seamen on board the French man-of-war suggest that France shares the booty and the punishment.

I—SECTION 4

Summary

Marlow's real introduction to the land and the enterprise begins here. He starts to walk up the slope toward the company buildings and comes across "a boiler wallowing in the grass," a small railway truck on its back, wheels in the air. Rusted and broken machinery and quantities of loose rails clutter the area.

He sees, at his left, a grove of trees where dark shapes stir feebly. Then his attention is captured by what seems a senseless explosion and simultaneously a chain gang clanks past driven by an arrogant guard. Marlow, shocked by the hideous sight, hesitates, turns his back until the chain gang is out of sight; then he walks toward the grove. He reflects that he has already met cruel, red-eyed lusty devils, but here he is about to meet a pale, weak-eyed devil, a rapacious demon of pitiful folly.

Avoiding a vast and useless hole, Marlow almost falls into a ravine where defunct and corroded machinery and a quantity of broken drain-pipes