

HEART OF DARKNESS

(Signet Classic edition: *Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer*, New American Library)

The following materials were prepared for the study of this novel on electronic disk in the late 1980's. The disk contained the entire text of the novel. My job was to prepare various approaches for study. These are notes towards that purpose. Page references are to that Signet Edition.

Items for Footnotes

the flood had made	65
reach	65
Buddha	69
pilot	65
fairway	67
trireme	68
Gauls	68
Legionaries	68
Falernian wine	68
worry	71 as in harass or bother
to own	71 to acknowledge or admit
ave	74
morituri te salutant	74
an "alienist"	75
messieurs	75
Harlequin	126
ulster	141

Geographical Imagery

- The novel constructs a mythic world of land, sea and mariner.
- sky / sea / light: a place of a certain mystery though not necessarily negative
- the rivers (snakes) that link the light mystery of sea/sky to the darkness and gloom of land, and especially empire and commerce and conquest
- the journey is as toward the centre of the earth, from a sepulchral town in France.
- the story is told from a point of suspension on the lower reaches of the river Thames at a point where neither wind nor tide conspire to provide motion.
- Seamen usually regard sea and ship as home and country, unlike Marlow, who wants to journey into regions unknown. The sea is another mystery apart against which seamen judge the mysteries of foreign places as being minor stuff.
- The Company house in France is the classic Tartarus, guarded by two dogs (women) knitting black wool into palls.

- The river Thames is timeless, a myth uniting past and present into one interminable psychic event for all men, Romans and Brits
- the place to which Marlow journeys is, on the map, the largest blankness, a "delightful mystery" (70)
- Kurtz works at the "very bottom" of true ivory country

Tensions

- Surfaces vs Depths
- Lights vs Darks
- Time vs Eternity
- Truth and Falsehood
- Insight and Blindness
- Madness and Sanity
- Faith, Belief and Purpose vs Chaos
- Silence vs Voice (or Voice vs Action) Saying vs Doing Understanding vs Action

Ironies

- Empire as a source of light to savages. Colonizers see a mission. Marlowe sees the darkness of empire. It's blindness to the unknown. Marlowe inadvertently becomes an "apostle" of the empire which is a kind of religion, being an idea that is worshipped.
- The irony that the idea of empire and the doctor's ideas and theories of science are supposedly the highest forms of civilization yet they perpetrate violence.
- The ironies always produced by those who romanticize the empire and in so doing disregard the truth of its exploitation
- The doctor is a man of science, of rational investigation who measures craniums but knows that the real change occurs inside. He does not measure the cranium again because no one returns, yet he claims that his enrichment in the empire is in the realm of theory. He just never goes there to investigate realities. Himself mad, he asks Marlowe if there is madness in the family.
- That white civilization should produce so much devastation
- 80: that savages are as puzzled by the "outraged law" that has come from the sea, as whites are puzzled by the inscrutable jungle
- 80: the ironic voice: "these high and just proceedings"
- 83: that Marlow should respect the accountant, who is the epitome of colonial mind: something comforting in his singular view, or in his achievement of character"
- that while Marlow swore his narrative should not be personal, it is intensely so in personal vision
- 85: blacks dominating world and whites on the run (comic irony)
- 92: that Marlow should be thought by the pilgrims to be tight with European bosses and admin and there to spy on them
- 106: that work on the steamboat is a white man's "witchcraft" (to stave off heart of darkness)
- 113: that a hungry black in heart of darkness would have any restraint
- 113: surfaces are in some contexts wisdom, in others, folly
- 114: while pilgrims fear sounds of jungle are preparations for attack, Marlow hears them as unmistakable "attempt to repulse"
- 119: that travelling to the heart of darkness brings, in fact, personal illumination to Marlow.
- 120: the anticipated great voice of revelation in fact becomes senseless jabber

- 122: to be lost is to be wise?: only fools cannot connect with darkness
- 123: that Kurtz should write a report on the elimination of those savage customs which he has so completely embraced?
- 123: that Kurtz, throughout, is regarded by others as being of high moral vision and purpose
- 135: Kurtz means "short" in German, yet he is 7 feet tall

The motif (Theme?) of Spiritual Journey

- Marlowe as ascetic (66), idol (66) buddha (69)
- one who still follows the sea (67)
- a wanderer not representative of his class (seamen 67)
- Marlowe as story-teller is not one to settle on plot, but rather on the illuminations that surround events. He personally is unimportant: he, mythically, is important (68)
- In his youth he is charmed by the snake
- The journey begins in the sepulchral town, in a narrow deserted street in shadow
- attended by ceremonies
- passage by the two women guarding the door of darkness
- Marlowe is regarded (ironically) as an apostle of the light of empire
- So this is both true and false spiritual journey
- Pilgrims
- mephistopheles 93
- Kurtz is chief of the "inner" station
- 93 M's boat is like the carcass of some river animal
- 94 M believes that at the heart of darkness a man will be found
- 102: going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world
- 105: "we were wanders on a pre-historic earth...that wore the aspect of an unknown planet"
- 120/1: the journey toward a single voice of revelation
- 122: the spiritual life: breathing dead hippo and not being contaminated"
- Harlequin (and M) as disciples
- 144: the need either to speak to this devil or to murder it

Key Words

Is there some way of dealing with word sets rather than just single key words?

- Restraint
- faith/belief
- great/supernatural/fabulous/fantastic/extravagant/lunacy/enchantment/improbable
- darkness/light/sunlight/sunshine/gloom/shadow/illumination
- real/unreal/dream/phantom/fact/nightmare/phenomenon
- efficiency/survival/surface
- seeing, sight, blindness, impenetrable
- wilderness
- farcical, absurd, insane, folly
- purposes, causes, intentions
- horror, terror
- work, efficiency
- voice, mute, sound, silence 119 sense, jabber, words 123, 136 eloquence 144

Cast of Characters (In order of appearance)

- The narrator
- Marlowe
- Lawyer
- Accountant
- Director of Companies
- Aunt 76
- Fresleven 72
- The Romans
- The blacks 72-3
- Two knitting women 73
- The (scientific) Doctor 75
- The Swede Captain of the Sea Steamer (79)
- The Company's Chief Accountant (this miracle) 83
- Manager of the Central Station 87, 138
- The Pilgrims 89, 91, 146
- The stout man with moustaches 90
- The young Aristocratic secretary to the Station Manager (maker of bricks) 90
- Scotch sailmaker who believes in men on Mars (94)
- The Steamboat (my influential friend) 96
- The boiler maker 97
- Station Manager's nephew from the Eldorado Exploring Expedition 98
- The Half Caste Clerk 100
- The Savage Fireman 106
- Cannibal Headman (catch em, eat em)
- The Helmsman 116, 124
- The Poleman 116
- The Russian Harelquin (Kurtz last disciple) 126
- Van Shuyten (Dutchman who outfitted the Harlequin) 128
- Kurtz's Savage Woman 136, 145
- The Spectacled man 150
- Kurtz's Cousin 151
- Kurtz's Intended 153

Perspectives

1. Nature is an active force in the novel, a tragic force. It is a complex symbol. Can you interpret what nature "says" in the novel?
2. In a sense this is a very Canadian story. Our early history contains some of the concerns of colonists in a new land, faced with an apparently hostile or indifferent land. This theme is found in such poems as The Forsaken, Dark Pines Under Water, Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer, Canoe Trip, Country Without a Mythology, The Pride (John Newlove), The Gods (Denis Lee). Does Conrad's novel share any of the vision of the Canadian poems?
3. The quality of dream is essential to this story. What is that peculiar quality and how is it essential to the meaning of the tale?
4. Conrad once said that before he went to the Congo river one which he had a similar experience, he was "mere animal". At the start of the tale, Marlow said "I don't want to bother you much with what happened to me personally," but his whole story is really about that. What deep personal change and knowledge come to Marlow as a result of his journey?

5. Irony seems to be a key part of the structure of the story. For example, the ironies seem to increase and deepen as we go on. The ending of the novel is quite packed with double significance. Can you show that there is a pattern to this?

6. Within the story there is an acknowledged presence of other viewpoints that might be taken on the journey down the river. There is the romantic view expressed by the aunt and The Intended; the Imperial view expressed by the chief pilgrims; the Idealistic view implied in Kurtz's "Report" - and of course there is Marlow's view. Wherein lies the truth? Do you judge the other views to be false?

7. With a group of other students, become expert on one of the sets of key words from the story. What theme and images are expressed within that set?

8. Novels of Empire and colonization yield a picture of the cultural and/or personal conflicts encountered by the traveller. Comparing *Heart of Darkness* to another story of the sort might make an interesting independent study. It might be particularly interesting to read some African or South American writing on the theme. Here is a short list of some other works to consider:

Lord of the Flies
Passage to India

9. There are racist views in this novel. Do you think the author is racist? Is Marlow? What, in any case, is racism?

Kurtz's Many Titles (in order of occurrence)

70: the poor chap

84: first class agent: remarkable person

85: marked for administrative success, the epitome of successful trade

93: a prodigy, an emissary of pity, science and progress, a special being

95: a universal genius

101: a man of high moral purpose

114: an enchanted princess sleeping in a fabulous castle

123: all Europe contributed to his making

135: that atrocious phantom, that apparition, that pitiful Jupiter

136: this shadow

141: the nightmare of my choice (says Marlow)

142: this wandering and tormented thing, a vapour exhaled by the earth, that shadow

143: kicked loose from this earth

148: a remarkable man

151: an extremist

Conrad: Biographical Notes

(gleaned from edition of novel)

Born in Poland Dec 3, 1857: Died Aug 3, 1924 in Britain

Parents were aristocrats who died for revolutionary activities. Joe went to sea at 16, taught himself English, commanded merchant ships in orient and on the Congo river. Left sea at 32 for writing career. Married about then, fathered 2 sons. Critical acclaim but small sales. Admired by such friends as Henry James, Stephen Crane and Ford Madox Ford. Never saw England until he was 21.

In one particular year, fought a duel and smuggled arms to Spain.

Joseph Teodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski

Audience of his day received as foreigner's clumsiness with new language his experiments in style and structure.

Conrad like glamour and romance.

Marlow's journey up river parallels Conrad's journey up Congo in 1890, into heart of Africa. In 1889 returned to England a long voyage and impulsively began first novel (*Almayer's Folly*). In 1890, again impulsively, he sought and obtained command of a tiny steamer serving the upper Congo. He was there several months and nearly died of fever and dysentery. "Before the Congo I was just a mere animal." His journey began in Brussels. He, like M., walked 200 miles through the jungle (to Kinchassa) before reaching his ship, and travelled up river to an inner station. He picked up a company agent who died a few days later on board ship.

Probes

For the purpose of probing this very complex novel, we'll divide the story into seven "scenes" comprising the journey. This kind of sub-division is suggested by changing moods and deepening insights as well as by the physical movement through the landscape.

1. Meditation on Time and Story-telling pp 65-70
2. The Sepulchral City and The Snake 70-77
3. The Folly: Sailing to Central Station 77-86
4. The Pilgrims of Central Station 86-102
5. Going Up River 102-126
6. The Horror of Inner Station 126-149
7. My Intended 149-55

1. Meditation on Time and Story-Telling

The first narrator compares Marlow's story-telling to the narratives of other seamen: "to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel [as it was for other seamen] but outside, enveloping the tale...." At another point, the first narrator says "we were fated to hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences." By looking at the story Marlow tells of the Roman times, can you suggest what these comments reveal about Marlow's method as a story teller?

Any two practitioners of an art might become competitors. Gretsky will one day meet his equal. Here we have two story-tellers and one audience. Is there any sense of a professional jealousy or rivalry?

Marlow is a "Buddha" telling a story of empire to a lawyer, an accountant, and a "director of Companies". What difficulties are inherent in this situation? Is there any suggestion that Marlow's manner or story might create tensions in his audience, or will the "bond of the sea" prevail?

You may be helped in reading this story by starting to draw a map of Marlow's travels. You might

try to establish this in some "actual" geography, but it may be just as fruitful to draw a completely imaginary course. If you are so inclined, it may lead to a complex visual statement of your own response.

This is a strongly symbolic story. The narrator is deeply concerned with the significance of things. But we should be clear that symbolic significance expands, rather than reduces meaning. This is especially true of this story. We can never say that light, for example, means just wisdom. The novel is full of double-sidedness. What, so far, seems to be the significance of light and dark, of sea and river in the story?

2. The Sepulchral City and The Snake

What contrast is there between Marlow's view of the journey to be undertaken, and his aunt's view of the enterprise?

Read Margaret Atwood's poem "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer" and compare the pioneer experience there to Fresleven's story.

What mood is established in this part, and by what means, to suggest that the journey will be a rather ominous descent?

There is a famous collection of Arabian tales told by a young woman to cast a spell over a monarch who intends to have her beheaded - a version of that spell cast over you by a movie that prevents doing the homework. What "spell" is cast by Marlow in this section of the story?

Does Marlow seem an ordinary man; his journey an ordinary journey?

3. The Folly: Sailing to Central Station

As Marlow approaches the coast of Zanzibar, he says he is troubled by the feeling of drifting away from realities like the sea, the surf, and the natives: "For a time I would feel I belonged still to a world of straight-forward facts; but the feeling would not last long." (78) Can you explain this drift to fellow readers of the tale? Very empathetic readers might actually relate similar feelings in their own experience.

In this part, we get a window on the experience of colonists as they carry out Imperial purposes. The window we get, of course, is through Marlow who is fond of a kind of double vision: on the one hand we have "these high and just proceedings" (81); on the other, we have "a rapacious and pitiless folly" (81). What seems to be Marlow's analysis of Empire building as he sees it? Do you think any such colonization occurs in the contemporary world?

The sense of dream and irony are perhaps nowhere stronger than in the two scenes, back to back, of

the Grove of Death and Marlow's first meeting with the accountant. The irony has much to do with a difference between light and illumination as Marlow uses them. Can you help readers understand the sense of dream and its connection to these experiences?

4. The Pilgrims of Central Station

By this time in the story you might have the strong sense that something is happening to Marlow on his journey. What is it, and where can you see it most vividly?

Contrast Marlow's response to station life with the response of the Pilgrims. (A specific and good instance of this is his view of his work on the steamer, compared to the "aristocrat's" view of his brick making.)

There are conflicting views in this section of what sort of man is needed for the venture, but of course this also is influenced by how the venture is perceived - either as Imperial conquest, or as journey into darkness. What resources seem to be needed by a perfect candidate for such a voyage as Marlow undertakes?

Marlow (on page 94/5) seems quite overwhelmed by a fear of losing his audience. What is his difficulty at this point in the story? Do we get any sense of whether his audience is still with him?

To call a person a "pilgrim" is to imply a religious journey taken to some holy shrine. In what sense is this both incorrect and correct about the colonists? Is Marlow one of the pilgrims?

5. Going Up River

"We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings." If you have ever travelled you may have felt something similar. Without having such travel, you may also just imagine how Marlow feels. Can you explain the feeling? How is Marlow's feeling of strangeness different from what the Pilgrims feel? How about the black men travelling with them?

Is "restraint" a positive or negative thing as Marlow describes it? What does it prevent in blacks: in whites? Where are the ironies in this?

To Marlow, Kurtz's real presence is as a "voice". What is Kurtz to the pilgrims?

The attack on the boat ends with another extended interruption while Marlow goes after his audience once again. What is the problem for the story teller? How does he attempt to solve it?

You might have sensed by now a kind of change in the significance of Kurtz. Does Marlow's journey still seem to be towards the end you had anticipated?

Can you explain the ironies in the fact that the Helmsman is seen by Marlow to be much like Kurtz and nearly as valuable?

This part of the story intensifies the wide gap between the way Marlow and the Pilgrims view the journey. What's the difference?

6. The Horror of Inner Station

The Harlequin cuts a curious figure: glamorous, youthful, motley, ambiguous, deceiving, a betrayer - altogether "an insoluble problem." Can you solve him?

In a sense both the Harlequin and Marlow are "disciples" of Kurtz. How is this true, yet not true?

From the manager's view, Kurtz has used a "method" which has ruined the territory. What's the method and how has it ruined the territory, and for what?

How are Kurtz and the station manager "a choice of nightmares" to Marlow?

Can you shed some light for us on Marlow's "pure abstract terror" when he discovers Kurtz has fled the boat to return to his black followers?

From the language used to describe the event, can you uncover any sense that Kurtz has vanished or metamorphosed into Marlow himself? Recalling that Marlow's narrative method was to "envelope" the tale with a significance that comes from the "outside", can you see his method at work in this episode?

Any reader of this story has to make intelligent guesses as to what Kurtz means by "the horror". While speculating freely on this matter, please offer some reasons for reaching your conclusions.

7. My Intended

Love suddenly enters the story. Would you say Kurtz's "Intended" knows the man she loves? If Kurtz were to emerge from the heart of darkness to greet her, do you think she would remain his intended? Under what conditions?

Perhaps we can see the final episode as quite a muddling of the truth. Marlow tells a lie? Why does he not try to set the lady straight?

Given Conrad's female portraits in the story, he might be accused of being a little sexist. On what grounds?

By now Marlow has confessed to at least two lies. He lies to the Intended, as he lied to the aristocratic brick maker about his role and purpose in the Imperial effort. Do you forgive Marlow for his deceit? Is there some higher thing than honesty that forces you to do so? Will the real world always support the truth?

Marlow could never explain his truth concerning Kurtz to The Intended. What would prevent her

from hearing or understanding?

Do you think you could ever explain to a casual reader that this novel is not racist?.