Title:  Heart of Darkness
Document Type:  Work overview, Critical essay


Introduction Critical Reception Plot and Major Characters Major Themes Writings on the Work Further Readings about the Work
Footnotes:*This work contains the novella Heart of Darkness, which was published separately in 1942.

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

Short Fiction

• Tales of Unrest 1898
• Typhoon 1902
• "Youth: A Narrative, and Two Other Stories 1902
• Typhoon, and Other Stories 1903
• A Set of Six 1908
• 'Twixt Land and Sea 1912
• Within the Tides 1915
• Tales of Hearsay 1925
• The Sisters 1928
• The Complete Short Stories of Joseph Conrad 1933
• Congo Diary, and Other Uncollected Pieces (diary and short stories) 1978

Other Major Works

• Almayer's Folly (novel) 1895
• An Outcast of the Islands (novel) 1896
• The Children of the Sea (novel) 1897; also published as The Nigger of the "Narcissus", 1898
• Lord Jim (novel) 1900
• The Inheritors [with Ford Madox Ford] (novel) 1901
• Romance [with Ford Madox Ford] (novel) 1903
• Nostromo (novel) 1904
• One Day More (drama) 1904
• The Mirror of the Sea (autobiography) 1906
• The Secret Agent (novel) 1907
• Some Reminiscences (autobiography) 1908; also published as A Personal Record, 1912
• Under Western Eyes (novel) 1911
• Chance (novel) 1913
• Victory (novel) 1915
• The Arrow of Gold (novel) 1917
• The Shadow-Line (novel) 1917
• The Rescue (novel) 1920
• Notes on Life and Letters (essays) 1921
• Notes on My Books (essays) 1921
• The Rover (novel) 1923
• The Nature of a Crime [with Ford Madox Ford] (novel) 1924
• Suspense (novel) 1925
• Last Essays (essays) 1926
• Conrad to a Friend: 150 Selected Letters from Joseph Conrad to Richard Curle (letters) 1928; also published as Joseph Conrad to Richard Curle, 1928

Introduction

Heart of Darkness is considered one of the greatest novellas in the English language. On the surface it is a dreamlike tale of mystery and adventure set in central Africa; however, it is also the story of a man's symbolic journey into his own inner being. A profusion of vivid details that are significant on both literal and symbolic levels contributes to the ambiguity of Conrad's narrative and has led to conflicting interpretations of its meaning. Written in 1899, Heart of Darkness was initially published in serial form in Blackwood's magazine and finally published in book form in Youth: A Narrative, and Two Other Stories (1902). It was later published separately in 1942.

Plot and Major Characters

Throughout Conrad's career Heart of Darkness remained one of his most popular and highly regarded works. The novella details the story of the seaman Marlow who, fresh from Europe, is sent on a boat journey up the Congo River to relieve Kurtz, the most successful trader in ivory working for the Belgian government. Prior to their personal encounter, Marlow knows and admires Kurtz through his reputation and his writings regarding the civilizing of the African continent and sets out on the journey excited at the prospect of meeting him. However, Marlow's experience in Africa inspires revulsion at the dehumanizing effects of colonialism, a disgust that culminates when he discovers that Kurtz has degenerated from an enlightened civilizer into a vicious, power-hungry subjugator of the African natives. Marlow's journey forces him to confront not only Kurtz's corruption but also those elements within himself that are subject to the same temptations that affected Kurtz. When Marlow finally meets Kurtz, the mythical figure is near death, ravaged by disease and dissipation. After Kurtz's death, Marlow returns to Belgium and is visited by Kurtz's fiancée. During the visit he lies to her about Kurtz's activities and falsely claims that he called her name before he died. Critics have debated the motives behind this last deception: some feminist critics view the lie as an act of condescension; other commentators contend that Marlow wants to preserve his own illusions about Kurtz; and yet others perceive the lie as a compassionate act that functions to contrast Marlow's humanity with Kurtz's inhumanity.

Major Themes
Like many of Conrad's novels and short stories, *Heart of Darkness* is based in part upon the author's personal experiences. In 1890, after more than a decade as a seaman, Conrad requested the command of a Belgian steamer sailing for Africa. A diary kept during the subsequent voyage provides evidence that many of the characters, incidents, and impressions recalled in *Heart of Darkness* have factual bases. Contemporary critics, however, contend that Conrad's manipulation of the African environment in the novel, and the portraits of greed, destruction, and psychological regression that he creates, should be credited solely to his imaginative genius. Moreover, the relationship of Conrad to his character Marlow has been a fertile area of critical discussion. Marlow has been variously perceived as the spokesman for Conrad, a complex and separate creation, and as a combination of both. The affinity between Marlow and Kurtz is considered the most crucial relationship between characters in the story. Critics identify Kurtz's death scene and Marlow's lie to Kurtz's fiancée as seminal scenes in the novella; these scenes have been subject to a wide range of critical interpretations.

Many critics have commented on Conrad's evocative powers in *Heart of Darkness*, paying particular attention to his use of imagery, which manages to evoke a sinister atmosphere through the accretion of objectively described details of the African jungle and natives. The visual imagery, which heavily depends upon contrasting patterns of light and dark, contributes most appreciably to the consistently ambiguous tone of the work. To demonstrate the moral uncertainty of this world and of life in general, Conrad consistently alters common symbolic conceptions of light and dark. Thus, white is not synonymous with good, nor black with evil, but rather both symbols are interchangeable. Throughout the novella, white and black characters are alternately examples of acute suffering, civilized dignity, moral refinement, or violent savagery, demonstrating that no race is wholly good or evil, and that all human beings are a confusing mixture of propensities for all types of behavior. While some critics consider Conrad's imagery vague and confused in a manner that does not present a clear picture of the principal characters and events, most find that the ambiguity of description lends a psychological depth to the story that demands the close attention and involvement of the reader.

The political significance of *Heart of Darkness* has also received much critical attention. Social Darwinism and a strong belief in the Carlylean work ethic are two of the Victorian standards that are attacked in the novella. The first served to justify European exploitation of Africa and other areas of the world by purporting that the indigenous peoples were in need of the superior technological and religious knowledge of Europe. In *Heart of Darkness*, the hypocrisy of these aims is illustrated by the all-consuming scramble for wealth by the Europeans, who destroy the land and people without remorse. Critics contend that by contrasting the harmony that exists between the native Africans and their natural environment with the lazy, brutish grotesques that white imperialists become in Africa, Conrad proves that it is the Africans who are the fittest to survive in their native land and that Darwin's theory was in fact never intended to be applied to races or nations. In similar fashion, the work ethic that Marlow seems to embrace, praising its effectiveness in keeping his mind free of undesirable thoughts, is in fact instrumental in blinding him to the events around him. Throughout the novella, Conrad's portrayal of the failure of various European ideologies in Africa suggests the consequent failure and moral bankruptcy of Europe.

**Critical Reception**

*Heart of Darkness* remains a work popular with critics and readers alike. It has been studied from feminist, psychoanalytical, racial, and political perspectives. Conrad's consciously ambiguous presentation of the relative nature of truth and morality, which compels the reader to take an active part in understanding the novella, is often considered a forerunner of many modernist literary techniques. For this reason Frederick R. Karl has called *Heart of Darkness* the work in which "the nineteenth century becomes the twentieth." The novella's artistic cohesion of image and theme, its intricately vivid evocation of colonial oppression, and its detailed portrait of psychological duplicity and decay have inspired critics to call *Heart of Darkness* the best novella in the English language.

**FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**CRITICISM**


  Investigates the role of the two women in the waiting room in *Heart of Darkness*.


  Maintains that "one of the central themes of *Heart of Darkness* is Europe's wanton destruction of Africa."


  Examines the representation of Africans in *Heart of Darkness* and contends that Conrad's attitude toward
imperialism in the novella is ambiguous.

  
  Focuses on Marlow's personal journey in *Heart of Darkness*.

  
  Considers Conrad's attitude toward women through an examination of *Heart of Darkness*.

  
  Views *Heart of Darkness* as an exploration of English liberal nationalism and cultural imperialism.

  
  Asserts that "Marlow's narrative is the account of his coming to the awareness that mankind's most cherished belief, that civilization is ennobling, is the most deadly act of self-deception."

  
  Probes Marlow's relationship with the Russian sailor in *Heart of Darkness*.

  
  Contends that the white fog incident in *Heart of Darkness* functions to clarify "issues concerning western civilization and western world view."

  
  Contends that *Heart of Darkness* is a text inaccessible to female readers and regards Conrad's book as essentially a male-oriented fiction.

  
  Considers the "tricky line between adventure critic and adventurer that Marlow is attempting to tow throughout *Heart of Darkness*.

**Source Citation**


**Document URL**

http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1410001081&v=2.1&u=klnb_bluevalley&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w

**Gale Document Number:** GALE%7CH1410001081