

Joseph Conrad

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Joseph Conrad — Heart of Darkness (1899)

Overview — the story in simple English

Heart of Darkness is a short novel (novella) by Joseph Conrad, first published in 1899. The story begins on a boat named the Nellie, waiting on the river Thames near London. There, a sailor named Marlow tells his friends about a journey he once made into Africa. Marlow was hired by a Belgian trading Company to sail a steamboat up the great Congo River, deep into the African jungle. The Company's real business is taking ivory (হাতির দাঁত) out of Africa by force, while pretending to bring civilization (সভ্যতা). On his journey Marlow sees terrible cruelty (নিষ্ঠুরতা): African workers are chained, starved, and left to die, while the white agents think only of profit (মুনাফা). Marlow's main task is to find Mr. Kurtz, the Company's most successful agent, who lives at the Inner Station far up the river. Everyone praises Kurtz as a genius and a man of great ideals (আদর্শ), but when Marlow finally reaches him, he finds that Kurtz has become a savage god to the local people, taking ivory by terror and putting human heads on poles around his house. The dying Kurtz is carried onto the boat, and just before death he whispers his famous last words, "The horror! The horror!" — his final judgment (বিচার) on his own life, or perhaps on all mankind. Back in Europe, Marlow visits Kurtz's fiancée (বাগদত্তা), called the Intended, and tells her a lie: that Kurtz's last word was her name. The novel ends on the Thames again, which now seems to flow into "the heart of an immense darkness" — suggesting that the darkness is not only in Africa but also in Europe, and inside every human heart.

 **One-line meaning: The real "darkness" is not Africa but the greed and evil hidden inside so-called civilized man, exposed by the crime of imperialism.**

Quick Facts	
Published	1899 (serial in Blackwood's Magazine); book form 1902
Author	Joseph Conrad (1857–1924), Polish-born English novelist
Genre	Modern novella; frame narrative; colonial/anti-imperial fiction
Setting	The river Thames (frame story) and the Congo River in Africa (main story), 1890s
Narration / Form	Frame narrative — an unnamed narrator reports Marlow's oral tale; divided into three parts
Famous critical remark	Chinua Achebe attacked the novel's picture of Africa, calling Conrad "a thoroughgoing racist"

Themes & Technique

- 1. Imperialism and colonial exploitation (ঔপনিবেশিক শোষণ).** The novel strips away the noble mask of European colonialism and shows it as pure robbery. Marlow says openly that the conquest of the earth mostly means taking it away from people with different skin, and the Company's "civilizing mission" is only a cover for stealing ivory. This is the most exam-important theme: examiners repeatedly ask about the "horror of imperialism" and "colonial exploitation."

2. **The many meanings of "darkness."** Darkness in the novel is not one thing but many: the literal darkness of the jungle, the moral darkness (নৈতিক অন্ধকার) of European greed, the darkness of ignorance, the psychological darkness inside every human heart, and the darkness of death itself. Crucially, Conrad turns the word back on Europe — London too "has been one of the dark places of the earth."
3. **The journey into the self.** Marlow's voyage up the Congo is also a symbolic voyage into the hidden depths of his own mind. The further he travels from civilization, the closer he comes to the primitive truth about human nature. Critics such as Albert Guerard read the tale as a "night journey" into the unconscious self.
4. **The hollowness of civilization.** European civilization is shown as a thin shell. Kurtz, the finest product of Europe — poet, painter, orator — collapses into savagery once social restraints (সামাজিক বাধা) are removed. Marlow finds him "hollow at the core." Civilization, Conrad suggests, depends on outside control, not inner goodness.
5. **The lie and the Intended.** Marlow hates lies, yet he lies to Kurtz's fiancée at the end. The lie shows that ordinary life in Europe rests on comforting illusions (মায়ী): the truth of the darkness would be too terrible for the sheltered, "beautiful world" that men of that age wanted women to live in.
6. **Isolation and the limits of language.** Marlow repeatedly says his experience cannot be fully told: "We live, as we dream—alone." No one can completely share another person's inner experience, and words always fail before the deepest realities — a very modern, twentieth-century idea.
7. **Work and restraint (সংযম).** Marlow survives the darkness because he keeps busy with honest work (repairing the steamboat) and because he has inner restraint. The hungry cannibal crew show restraint; the greedy "pilgrims" and Kurtz, who have none, fall. Work and restraint are Conrad's only fragile defences against chaos.

Narrative technique:

- **Frame narrative** — a story within a story: an unnamed narrator on the Nellie reports Marlow's spoken tale, creating distance and doubt.
- **Oral tale / dramatized narrator** — Marlow is a talking, remembering voice, not an all-knowing author; his knowledge is limited and uncertain.
- **Impressionism** — Conrad gives sense-impressions first and explanations later; Ian Watt named this device **delayed decoding** (for example, Marlow sees little sticks flying in the air before he understands they are arrows).
- **Symbolism** — the river, ivory, fog, darkness and light, the knitting women, the heads on poles all carry symbolic weight.
- **Irony** — light imagery often means blindness (the "whited sepulchre" city, the Intended's shining faith), while darkness often means truth.
- **Ambiguity and open ending** — the novel refuses one fixed meaning; "The horror!" can be read in several ways.

Key Quotations — memorize

1. **"The horror! The horror!"** — Kurtz's dying words (Part III). The moral centre of the book: his final judgment on his own deeds, or on human nature itself.
2. **"Mistah Kurtz—he dead."** — the manager's servant boy announces Kurtz's death (Part III). Famous also because T. S. Eliot used it as the epigraph of *The Hollow Men*.
3. **"Exterminate all the brutes!"** — the scrawled postscript on Kurtz's report (Part II). It exposes the murderous truth beneath his beautiful humanitarian words.
4. **"And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth."** — Marlow's first words on the Nellie (Part I), turning "darkness" back onto England itself.
5. **"The conquest of the earth... is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much."** — Marlow (Part I); the clearest anti-imperial statement in the novel.

6. **"Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world."** — Marlow (Part II); the journey as movement back in time toward primitive origins.
7. **"We live, as we dream—alone."** — Marlow (Part I); human isolation and the impossibility of fully sharing experience.
8. **"He was hollow at the core."** — Marlow on Kurtz (Part III); the emptiness beneath Kurtz's eloquence and idealism.
9. Marlow describes the Company's European city as a place that always makes him think of **"a whited sepulchre"** (Part I) — beautiful outside, death and corruption inside.
10. The book's closing image: the calm Thames seems to lead **"into the heart of an immense darkness"** — the darkness finally covers Europe too.

Exam tip: quotations 1, 3, 4 and 5 are the safest and most powerful. If you can memorize only four, memorize these.

Critics' Views (safe to cite)

Critic	View	Use for
Chinua Achebe	In his lecture "An Image of Africa" (1975) he attacked the novel for dehumanizing Africans, using Africa only as a dark background for a European's mental collapse, and called Conrad "a thoroughgoing racist"	Imperialism essays; balanced discussion of race; darkness theme
F. R. Leavis	Placed Conrad among the great English novelists but criticized the book's "adjectival insistence" — vague, repeated words like "inscrutable" and "unspeakable" that gesture at mystery instead of defining it	Style and technique; limits of language
Albert J. Guerard	Read Marlow's voyage as a "night journey" into the unconscious self; Kurtz is Marlow's darker double (অপর সত্তা)	Journey-into-self theme; Marlow–Kurtz relationship; character of Marlow
Ian Watt	Named Conrad's impressionist device "delayed decoding" — the reader receives the raw sensation before its meaning	Narrative technique questions
Edward Said	In Culture and Imperialism argued that Conrad powerfully criticizes imperialism yet cannot imagine a world outside it; the novel is both anti-imperialist and limited by its age	Colonial exploitation essays; nuanced conclusions
Cedric Watts	Defended Conrad against Achebe, arguing the novel is one of the strongest attacks on imperialism written in its time	Counter-argument to Achebe; imperialism essays

Exam Q&A Bank

Part A — Reference to Context (5 marks)

RTC 1 — "The horror! The horror!" 🔥 **Very likely** (the 2019 PYQ list directly asks students to explicate Kurtz's dying words)

These are the dying words of Mr. Kurtz in Part III of *Heart of Darkness* (1899) by Joseph Conrad. Kurtz, the Company's brilliant ivory agent, has ruled the Inner Station like a savage god, collecting ivory by terror and violence. Now, dying on Marlow's steamboat as it moves back down the Congo, he stares into his own memory and cries out this final judgment just before death. The words carry several meanings at once. They may be Kurtz's horrified recognition (উপলব্ধি) of his own crimes — a last flash of moral clarity. They may be his verdict on the darkness inside all human hearts, or on the whole imperial project built on greed and murder. Marlow calls the cry a kind of moral victory, because Kurtz at least judged himself, which the hollow, self-satisfied Company men never do. The quotation is the moral centre of the novella, and Marlow later hides it from the Intended with his famous final lie.

RTC 2 — "And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth." ★ **Likely** (supports the twice-repeated "shades of meanings of Darkness" question)

This sentence is spoken by Marlow, the chief narrator of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, at the very beginning of the novel (Part I). The friends on the yacht *Nellie* are watching the evening light over the Thames, and the frame narrator has just been praising the river's glorious history of explorers and empire-builders. Marlow suddenly breaks in with this remark: "this" means England itself, which was once a wild "dark place" to its Roman conquerors, just as Africa now appears dark to Europeans. The significance is enormous. With one stroke Conrad destroys the comfortable division between "civilized" Europe and "dark" Africa: every civilization was once darkness, and can return to it. The sentence announces the novel's central irony — the true heart of darkness will be found not in the jungle but in European greed — and it prepares the closing image of the Thames flowing into "an immense darkness."

Part B — Short Notes (5 marks)

Short note 1 — Symbols in Heart of Darkness 🔥 **Very likely** (asked in both the 2019 and 2020 lists, in Part B and again as a Part C essay in 2019)

Heart of Darkness is built on symbols. (1) **Darkness and light**: darkness stands for evil, ignorance, the unknown and the savage depths of the human heart — but Conrad reverses the usual meaning, for "light" Europe proves morally darker than "dark" Africa. (2) **The Congo River**: the winding river, looking on the map like an uncoiled snake, symbolizes the tempting, dangerous path into the unknown — into Africa and into the self; going up it is like "travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world." (3) **Ivory**: the white ivory symbolizes European greed (লোভ); the agents worship it like a god, and Kurtz himself becomes an ivory-like idol of the trade. (4) **The whited sepulchre**: the Company's home city symbolizes the hypocrisy (ভণ্ডামি) of imperialism — fair outside, death inside. (5) **The two knitting women** in the Company office suggest the Fates guarding the door of darkness. (6) **Fog** stands for moral blindness and uncertainty, and the **heads on poles** around Kurtz's house symbolize his complete moral collapse. Together these symbols turn a colonial adventure story into a universal moral vision.

Short note 2 — Mr. Kurtz 💡 **Possible** (no separate Kurtz question appears in the recovered lists, but he is essential to the title, darkness and imperialism questions that do appear)

Kurtz is the dark centre of *Heart of Darkness*. He is the Company's most successful ivory agent, stationed deepest in the Congo, and "all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz": he is a poet, painter, musician and gifted speaker — the finest flower of European civilization. He came to Africa with high ideals, writing an eloquent report on civilizing the natives; but freed from all social restraint (সামাজিক বাধা), he lets the wilderness awaken his brutal instincts. He raids the country for ivory, allows the tribes to worship him as a god, and decorates his fence with human heads. The scribbled postscript on his report — "Exterminate all the brutes!" — exposes the savagery beneath his eloquence. Marlow finds him "hollow at the core," yet grants his dying cry, "The horror! The horror!", the dignity of the one honest self-judgment in the book. Kurtz symbolizes the hollowness of civilization and, in Albert Guerard's reading, acts as Marlow's darker double.

Part C — Essays (15 marks)

Essay 1 — "Justify the title of the novel 'The Heart of Darkness'." / "How does Conrad explore the different shades of meanings of Darkness in the novel?" 🔥 **Very likely** (both forms appear in the 2019 and 2020 lists; the title question is marked v.v.i. by the compiler in 2020)

The title *Heart of Darkness* is one of the most suggestive titles in English fiction. It does not point to one single darkness but to many overlapping darknesses — geographical, moral, psychological and metaphysical (আধিবিদ্যক) — and the word "heart" places that darkness at the centre of things: at the centre of Africa, at the centre of imperialism, and finally at the centre of man himself. A study of the novel shows that the title is not only apt but is itself the key to the novel's meaning.

On the simplest level, the title refers to the geographical setting. Marlow travels into the middle of the African continent, which Europeans then called the "dark continent" — dark because unmapped, unknown and covered by thick forest. The Congo, drawn on the map like a snake, leads him into deeper and deeper gloom, until, in Marlow's words, "Going up that river

was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world." The physical darkness of jungle, fog and night dominates the scenery, so that the reader constantly feels he is moving toward the dark core of a primitive world.

But Conrad immediately complicates this colonial meaning. Marlow's very first words on the Nellie are: "And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth." England itself was once dark to its Roman conquerors. Darkness, then, is not the special property of Africa; it is a condition every land and every people has known. The comfortable European division between the "light" of civilization and the "darkness" of savagery collapses at the very start of the tale.

The deepest shade of darkness in the novel is moral. The men who claim to carry light into Africa are shown to be the truly dark ones. The Company's city reminds Marlow of "a whited sepulchre" — shining outside, rotten inside. He states the naked truth of empire: "The conquest of the earth... is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much." At the Outer Station he sees the grove of death, where chained African workers are left to die, while the agents scheme for ivory and promotion. The horror of imperialism is the moral darkness at the heart of the European enterprise. As Edward Said observes, Conrad exposes the corruption of imperialism with extraordinary power even though he cannot imagine a world beyond it; Cedric Watts calls the book one of the strongest attacks on imperialism of its age — although Chinua Achebe warns that Africa itself is reduced to a dark backdrop in the process.

The darkness is also psychological: it lies in the heart of man. Kurtz, the finest product of European culture, is the book's demonstration. Removed from law, police and public opinion, his idealism rots into megalomania (ক্ষমতার উন্মাদনা) and slaughter; his noble report on civilization ends with the scrawl, "Exterminate all the brutes!" Marlow discovers that Kurtz is "hollow at the core" — the wilderness has only echoed the emptiness within him. Albert Guerard therefore reads Marlow's voyage as a "night journey" into the self, with Kurtz as Marlow's own potential dark double. The heart of darkness is finally the human heart.

Kurtz's dying cry gathers all these darknesses together: "The horror! The horror!" It is his verdict on his own soul, on imperialism, and perhaps on human existence itself. Fittingly, the novel does not end in Africa but on the Thames, which seems to lead "into the heart of an immense darkness." The darkness Marlow met in the Congo has followed him home and now covers Europe.

Thus the title works on every level of the book — setting, theme, psychology and symbol. Africa is the dark continent only on the surface; beneath, the darkness belongs to imperial Europe and to universal human nature. No other title could compress the novella's meaning so completely, and so the title is fully justified.

Essay 2 — "Discuss theme of colonial exploitation in the novel Heart of Darkness." / "Discuss the horror of imperialism." 🔥 Very likely (marked v.v.i. by the compiler in 2020; the 2019 list asks the same idea as "the horror of imperialism" and "the treatment of Theme of Imperialism")

Heart of Darkness is one of the earliest and most powerful exposures of colonial exploitation in English literature. Drawing on Conrad's own 1890 journey up the Congo, then ruled as the personal property of King Leopold II of Belgium, the novella tears the humanitarian mask off empire and shows the naked machinery of greed, cruelty and hypocrisy beneath. The theme of exploitation runs through every station of Marlow's journey and reaches its climax in the figure of Kurtz.

Conrad first attacks the ideology (মতাদর্শ) that justified empire. Europeans claimed they were bringing light, trade and religion to Africa; Marlow's aunt talks excitedly of civilizing the ignorant millions. Marlow demolishes this claim at the outset: "The conquest of the earth... is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much." Conquest, he says plainly, means taking the land from people who have flatter noses and darker skin than the conquerors. The "civilizing mission" is only an idea used to decorate robbery — and the novel shows that in the Congo even the idea has disappeared, leaving robbery pure and simple.

The physical horror of exploitation is presented with documentary force at the Outer Station. Marlow sees a chain-gang of Africans, starving, iron collars on their necks, called "criminals" under laws they never made. Nearby, in the grove of death, worn-out workers crawl into the shade to die slowly, thrown away like broken tools once their labour is used up. Meanwhile a French warship shells the empty bush and expensive machinery lies rusting on the ground: imperial "progress" is shown to be both murderous and absurd. Against this background, the Company's chief accountant keeps his collars perfectly white and starched — European elegance balanced on top of mass death.

Economic greed is the engine of the whole system, and its symbol is ivory. The word rings through the story like a prayer; the agents at the Central Station, whom Marlow mockingly calls "pilgrims," worship ivory as their true god while plotting against each other for promotion. Nothing is produced, nothing is built, nobody is "civilized": wealth is simply torn out of the land and shipped to Europe. The Company's head office in the city of the "whited sepulchre" completes the picture of organized hypocrisy — respectable, profitable, and founded on corpses.

Kurtz embodies the final truth of colonial exploitation. He is the Company's best agent precisely because he is the most ruthless: he raids villages for ivory, sets himself up as a god, and plants severed heads on poles around his house. Educated by all Europe, he begins with a beautiful, eloquent report on civilizing the natives and ends it with the scrawled postscript, "Exterminate all the brutes!" — the secret slogan of empire written out at last. His dying words, "The horror! The horror!", can be read as imperialism passing judgment on itself. As Cedric Watts argues, the novella is among the fiercest attacks on imperialism produced in its era, and Edward Said credits Conrad with exposing the rottenness of empire even while he remained a man of his imperial age.

Yet an honest essay must also note the limits of Conrad's critique. Chinua Achebe famously protested that the novel dehumanizes Africans — they are given drums, cries and moving limbs, but almost no names or speech — and he called Conrad "a thoroughgoing racist." Africa, in Achebe's view, becomes merely a stage-set for the breakdown of one European mind. Even if we accept part of this criticism, the novel's picture of colonial plunder remains devastating, and the two readings can stand together: Conrad condemns the exploitation while sharing some prejudices of his time.

In conclusion, *Heart of Darkness* presents colonial exploitation as robbery dressed up as charity: the chain-gang and the grove of death show its cruelty, ivory shows its greed, the "pilgrims" show its pettiness, and Kurtz shows its final madness. The "horror" that Kurtz names is, above all, the horror of what imperial Europe did in Africa — and of what such unchecked power reveals about the human heart.

⚡ One-Page Revision Sheet

Item	Content
Story in 3 lines	Marlow sails up the Congo for a Belgian ivory Company and sees the cruelty of empire. He finds the "great" agent Kurtz turned into a savage god, dying with the words "The horror! The horror!" Back in Europe, Marlow lies to Kurtz's fiancée — and the darkness now seems to cover Europe too.
2 must-quotes	"The horror! The horror!" (Kurtz, Part III) • "The conquest of the earth... is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much." (Marlow, Part I)
2 backup quotes	"Exterminate all the brutes!" (Kurtz's postscript) • "And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth." (Marlow, Part I)
2 critics	Achebe: the novel dehumanizes Africa, Conrad "a thoroughgoing racist" • Guerard: Marlow's voyage is a "night journey" into the self
Technique words	frame narrative, dramatized narrator, impressionism, delayed decoding (Ian Watt), symbolism, irony, ambiguity
Top 3 likely essays	1) Justify the title / shades of darkness 🔥 2) Colonial exploitation / horror of imperialism 🔥 3) Character and role of Marlow 🔥

Exam-timing tip: in the 4-hour exam give each 15-mark essay about 45 minutes — spend the first 5 minutes writing a one-line thesis and listing your quotations and one critic before you begin the introduction.