

AP English Literature and Composition

***Heart of Darkness* pre-reading**

created by Dr. Lori Bowen, Mill Creek High School

Introduction

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, now his most famous work, was first published in 1899 in serial form in London's *Blackwood's Magazine*, a popular journal of its day. The work was well received by a somewhat perplexed Victorian audience. It has since been called by many the best short novel written in English. *Heart of Darkness* is based on Conrad's firsthand experience of the Congo region of West Africa. Conrad was actually sent up the Congo River to an inner station to rescue a company agent—not named Kurtz but Georges-Antoine Klein—who died a few days later aboard ship. The story is told in the words of Charlie Marlow, a seaman, and filtered through the thoughts of an unidentified listening narrator. It is on one level about a voyage into the heart of the Belgian Congo, and on another about the journey into the soul of man. In 1902, *Heart of Darkness* was published in a separate volume along with two other stories by Conrad. Many critics consider the book a literary bridge between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and a forerunner both of modern literary techniques and approaches to the theme of the ambiguous nature of truth, evil, and morality. By presenting the reader with a clearly unreliable narrator whose interpretation of events is often open to question, Conrad forces the reader to take an active part in the story's construction and to see and feel its events for him—or herself.

Historical Background

Conrad based *Heart of Darkness* on his journey to the Belgian Congo in 1890. By checking his diaries at the time, we can trace his experience against his fictional portrayal. But this novella is more than an autobiographical account of his time spent there. It is a modern work that challenges the basic ethical question of good and evil in mankind, a topic explored by many authors. We need only think of the Adam and Eve myth, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, and Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* to name a few. Francis Ford Coppola based his film, *Apocalypse Now*, on this philosophical concept by updating Conrad's story to the Vietnam War and the Southeast Asian jungle of the 1960s.

Conrad also tackled the political environment of the Congo in *Heart of Darkness*. When King Leopold of Belgium founded the "International Association for the Suppression of Slavery and the Opening Up of Central Africa," he attempted to impose civilization and order. Greed, though, fostered widespread abuse. By the time Conrad visited the Congo, exploitation festered everywhere. Brutality and degradation reigned, not progress and enlightenment. The natives' sufferings and Kurtz's writings about them reflect the historical reality.

Victorian England believed in materialism and progress. Their bourgeois (middle class) values served to stabilize all facets of society, so they believed. The writings of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens and George Eliot represented the standards of their time, with *Pride and Prejudice*, *Great Expectations*, and *Middlemarch* serving as landmarks in fiction at that time. Their novels usually followed the traditional three-volume format. They focused on many details, often writing at length about seemingly insignificant details.

As the era closed, reaction against Victorian life, commercialism, and community spread. The artist stood, not as a member of society, but in isolation from it. Once embraced by authors, religious faith even declined.

With formal religion destroyed, writers needed to discover a new faith to follow—with art often filling the void. New techniques emerged for novelists to tell their stories. The stream of consciousness and internal monologue emphasized a shift in focus from the external world to the interior world. Dreams, thoughts, and explanations of a character's mental process replaced lengthy descriptions of external objects. Even though Conrad did not use these devices *per se*, he did focus on the internal world of his characters, and the reality of their dreams and thoughts. Marlow's story suggests a nightmarish journey into the unknown.

More than any other factor, the advent and progression of psychology shaped the new vision of man in the universe, as well as the artist's conception of him. Freud's ideas showed the different aspects of man's personality. With Freud's analysis, man is not easily understood unless we consider his multi-layered make-up. His terms "ego," "id," and "super-ego" reveal the depth of our conscious and subconscious mind. After Freud's work appeared, many works received a "psychological" interpretation. This added a depth of meaning to each work which had not existed before.

Bergson's theories of time relate to Conrad's use of a non-chronological narration. He could have had Marlow tell his story without any alteration in time, by starting at the beginning and proceeding straight through until the end. Instead, Conrad lets Marlow jump ahead, then return at whim. This technique merges the past with the present, making the reading more challenging. It shuffles the pieces of a strict chronological plot. As with the symbols, the reader must order the time to organize the sequence of events.

Historical Context

European Presence in Africa

Today, the river at the center of *Heart of Darkness* is called the Zaire and the country is the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but at the time Conrad wrote of them, the country was the Belgian Congo and the river the Congo.

European explorers first discovered the Congo River in 1482 and maintained a presence on it for hundreds of years thereafter, never traveling more than two hundred miles upstream. It was not until 1877, after the English-born American explorer Henry Morton Stanley had completed a three-year journey across central Africa, that the exact length and course of the mighty Congo River were known. Stanley discovered that the Congo extends some 1,600 miles into Africa from its eastern coast to its western edge, where the river empties into the Atlantic Ocean, and that only one stretch of it is impassable. That section lies between Matadi, two hundred miles in from the mouth of the Congo, and Kinshasa, yet another two hundred miles further inland. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad calls Matadi the Company Station and Kinshasa the Central Station. Between those two places, one is forced to proceed by land, which is exactly what Marlow does on his "two hundred-mile tramp" between the two Stations, described in the book.

In 1878, King Leopold II (reigned 1865-1909) of Belgium asked Stanley to found a Belgian colony in the Congo. The King charged Stanley with setting up outposts along the Congo River, particularly at Matadi. Leopold II described his motives to the rest of Europe as springing from a desire to end slavery in the Congo and civilize the natives, but his actual

desires were for material gain. In 1885, at the Congress of Berlin, an international committee agreed to the formation of a new country to be known as the Congo Free State. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad refers to this committee as the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. Leopold II, who was to be sole ruler of this land, never set foot in the Congo Free State. Instead, he formed a company, called simply the Company in *Heart of Darkness*, which ran the country for him.

The Ivory Trade

A prevalent feeling among Europeans of the 1890s was that the African peoples required introduction to European culture and technology in order to become more evolved. The responsibility for that introduction, known as the "white man's burden," gave rise to a fervor to bring Christianity and commerce to Africa. What the Europeans took out of Africa in return were huge quantities of ivory. During the 1890s, at the time *Heart of Darkness* takes place, ivory was in enormous demand in Europe, where it was used to make jewelry, piano keys, and billiard balls, among other items. From 1888 to 1892, the amount of ivory exported from the Congo Free State rose from just under 13,000 pounds to over a quarter of a million pounds. Conrad tells us that Kurtz was the best agent of his time, collecting as much ivory as all the other agents combined.

In 1892, Leopold II declared all natural resources in the Congo Free State to be his property. This meant the Belgians could stop dealing with African traders and simply take what they wanted themselves. As a consequence, Belgian traders pushed deeper into Africa in search of new sources of ivory, setting up stations all along the Congo River. One of the furthestmost stations, located at Stanley Falls, was the likely inspiration for Kurtz's Inner Station.

Belgian Atrocities in the Congo

The Belgian traders committed many well-documented acts of atrocity against the African natives, including the severing of hands and heads. Reports of these atrocities reached the European public, leading to an international movement protesting the Belgian presence in Africa. These acts, reflected in *Heart of Darkness*, continued, despite an order by Leopold II that they cease. In 1908, after the Belgian parliament finally sent its own review board into the Congo to investigate, the king was forced to give up his personal stake in the area and control of the Congo reverted to the Belgian government. The country was granted its independence from Belgium in 1960, and changed its name from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Zaire in 1971. A relatively bloodless revolution in 1997 returned the country's name to the Democratic Republic of the Congo.