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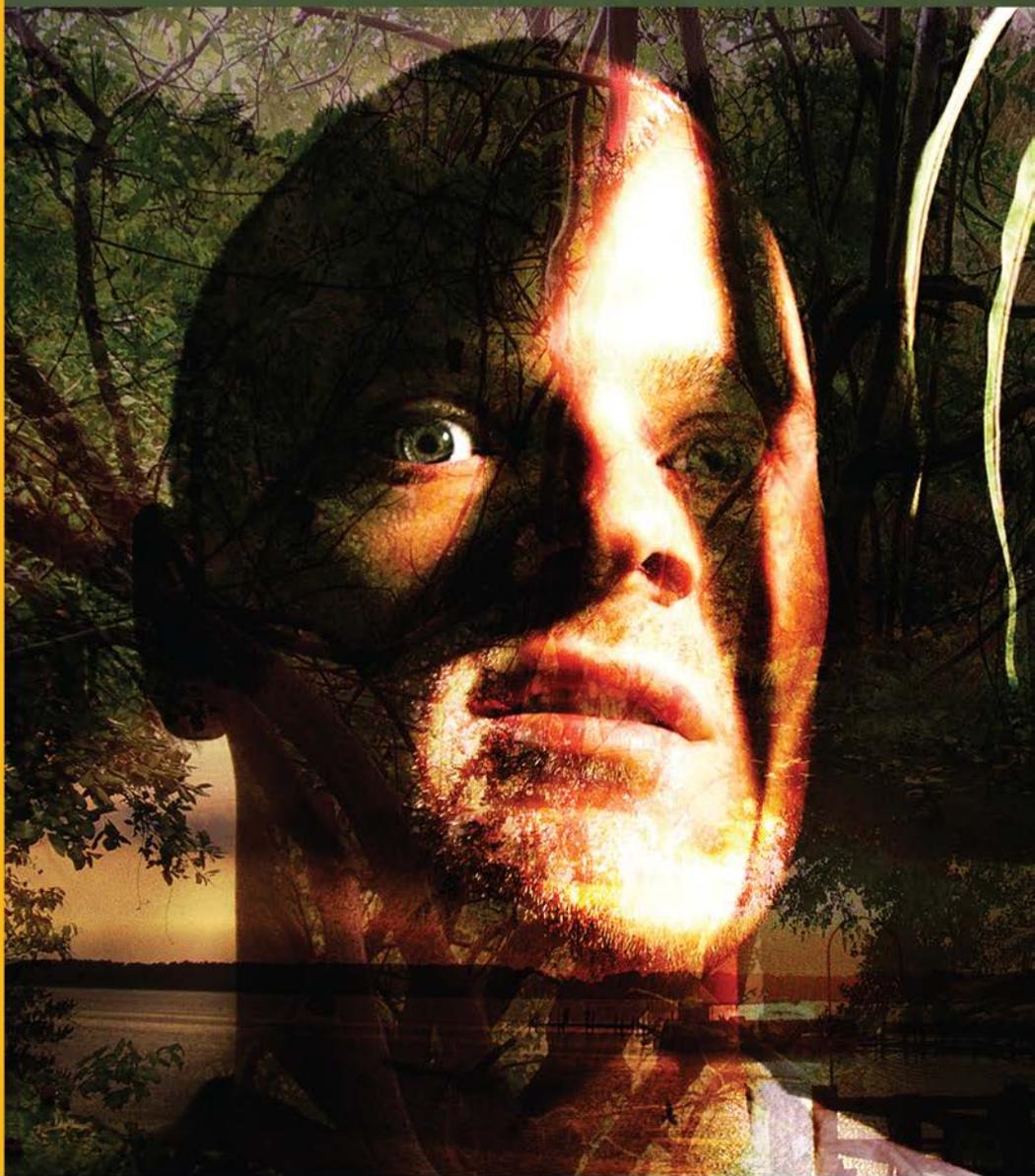
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# HEART OF DARKNESS

by Joseph Conrad



UNABRIDGED WITH GLOSSARY AND NOTES

# HEART OF DARKNESS



Joseph Conrad



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# HEART OF DARKNESS

BY JOSEPH CONRAD

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# Notes

N O T E S

## **What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?**

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

Joseph Conrad's (born Teodor Józef Konrad Korzeniowski, 1857-1924) three most acclaimed works, *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, and "The Secret Sharer," all depict Conrad's concern with the human situation, loneliness, and moral dilemmas. Although born in Poland, Conrad went to sea on a British ship, where he learned English. Remarkably, Conrad wrote all of his works in English and is today considered one of the most important British novelists of his time.

# Pointers

R E A D I N G P O I N T E R S

## Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

1. To understand *Heart of Darkness*, we need to look at some of the traditional symbols Conrad uses.
  - a. *The journey*. In literature, physical journeys are often used to represent intellectual, emotional, or spiritual searches.
  - b. *The jungle*. While the term *jungle* is often used to indicate a primitive and lawless environment where survival at any cost becomes the sole objective (“it’s a jungle out there”), the *jungle* also represents that which is unknown because it is deep, dark, and difficult to penetrate. In this regard, critics suggest that in this novel, the *jungle* symbolizes a hidden psychological truth and/or reality. In Conrad’s metaphysical tale, the “heart of darkness” is found deep in the jungle.
  - c. *Darkness and the color black*. Traditionally, these concepts have been used to symbolize the unknown, or something difficult to comprehend or understand; they also have symbolized foreboding and, frequently, evil.
  - d. *Lightness and the color white*. Traditionally, these concepts symbolize goodness, the opposite of evil. “The whited sepulchre” mentioned in *Heart of Darkness* is an allusion to Matthew 23:27. It refers to the Pharisees, who were priests, supposedly pure, but corrupt in their behavior (as a sepulchre is painted white on the outside to give the appearance of purity yet filled with dead and decaying bodies).

In Revelation 6:8, *pale*ness suggests illness and death (Death comes riding on a “pale horse”). When Kurtz’s fiancé is described as *pale* at the end of the novel, consider this interpretation and how it refers to Conrad’s description of Kurtz.

2. Also, note Marlow's physical journey as it relates to his emotional and spiritual experiences. In this regard, consider possible symbolic interpretations of Marlow's journey.
3. Frequently, journeys result in the enlightenment of the hero-traveler, in which he or she learns something about the world, the nature of humankind or God, or the nature of good and evil; on these occasions, the character also grasps an understanding of his or her personal self. To what degree do the characters in *Heart of Darkness* achieve enlightenment?
4. Highlight details and comments that support or relate to the following generalizations and themes that appear in the novel:
  - Humans act inhumanly toward their fellow humans.
  - Humankind's nature is dualistic in that it contains the potential for both good and evil.
  - Confronting one's own evil nature may lead to self-knowledge, but it can also lead to disastrous consequences.
  - Those who claimed to be bringing light and enlightenment to Africa were, in fact, destroying the continent. Consider how whites and natives interact in the novel.
  - Examine the proposition that *Heart of Darkness* reflects Conrad's anger at the barbarities of imperialistic greed.
5. Relate the religious allusions that are made throughout the text, especially those that refer to life, death, disciples, the soul, and Christ to specific characters and themes in the novel.



# CHAPTER 1

**T**HE *NELLIE*, A CRUISING YAWL, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river, the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide.

The sea-reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway. In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint, and in the luminous space the tanned sails of the barges drifting up with the tide seemed to stand still in red clusters of canvas sharply peaked, with gleams of varnished sprits. A haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea in vanishing flatness. The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth.

The Director of Companies was our captain and our host. We four affectionately watched his back as he stood in the bows looking to seaward. On the whole river there was nothing that looked half so nautical. He resembled a pilot, which to a seaman is trustworthiness personified. It was difficult to realize his work was not out there in the luminous estuary, but behind him, within the brooding gloom.

Between us there was, as I have already said somewhere, the bond of the sea. Besides holding our hearts together through long periods of separation, it had the effect of making us tolerant of each other's yarns—and even convictions. The Lawyer—the best of old fellows—had, because of his many years and many virtues, the only cushion on deck, and was lying on the only rug. The Accountant had brought out already a box of dominoes, and was toying architecturally with the bones. Marlow sat cross-legged right aft, leaning against the mizzen-mast. He had sunken cheeks, a yellow complexion, a straight back, an ascetic aspect, and, with his

arms dropped, the palms of hands outwards, resembled an idol. The Director, satisfied the anchor had good hold, made his way aft and sat down amongst us. We exchanged a few words lazily. Afterwards there was silence on board the yacht. For some reason or other we did not begin that game of dominoes. We felt meditative, and fit for nothing but placid staring. The day was ending in a serenity of still and exquisite brilliance. The water shone pacifically; the sky, without a speck, was a benign immensity of unstained light; the very mist on the Essex marsh was like a gauzy and radiant fabric, hung from the wooded rises inland, and draping the low shores in diaphanous folds. Only the gloom to the west, brooding over the upper reaches, became more somber every minute, as if angered by the approach of the sun.

And at last, in its curved and imperceptible fall, the sun sank low, and from glowing white changed to a dull red without rays and without heat, as if about to go out suddenly, stricken to death by the touch of that gloom brooding over a crowd of men.

Forthwith a change came over the waters, and the serenity became less brilliant but more profound. The old river in its broad reach rested unruffled at the decline of day, after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks, spread out in the tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth. We looked at the venerable stream not in the vivid flush of a short day that comes and departs forever, but in the august light of abiding memories. And indeed nothing is easier for a man who has, as the phrase goes, “followed the sea” with reverence and affection, than to evoke the great spirit of the past upon the lower reaches of the Thames. The tidal current runs to and fro in its unceasing service, crowded with memories of men and ships it had borne to the rest of home or to the battles of the sea. It had known and served all the men of whom the nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin, knights all, titled and untitled—the great knights-errant<sup>†</sup> of the sea. It had borne all the ships whose names are like jewels flashing in the night of time, from the *Golden Hind* returning with her rotund flanks full of treasure, to be visited by the Queen’s Highness and thus pass out of the gigantic tale, to the *Erebus*<sup>†</sup> and *Terror*, bound on other conquests—and that never returned. It had known the ships and the men. They had sailed from Deptford, from Greenwich, from Erith—the adventurers and the settlers; kings’ ships and the ships of men on ‘Change; captains, admirals, the dark “interlopers” of the Eastern trade, and the commissioned “generals” of East India fleets. Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth!...The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires.

The sun set; the dusk fell on the stream, and lights began to appear along the shore. The Chapman light-house, a three-legged thing erect on a mud-flat, shone strongly. Lights of ships moved in the fairway—a great stir of lights going up and

<sup>†</sup>Terms marked in the text with (†) can be looked up in the Glossary for additional information.

going down. And farther west on the upper reaches the place of the monstrous town was still marked ominously on the sky, a brooding gloom in sunshine, a lurid glare under the stars.

“And this also,” said Marlow suddenly, “has been one of the dark places of the earth.”

He was the only man of us who still “followed the sea.” The worst that could be said of him was that he did not represent his class. He was a seaman, but he was a wanderer, too, while most seamen lead, if one may so express it, a sedentary life. Their minds are of the stay-at-home order, and their home is always with them—the ship; and so is their country—the sea. One ship is very much like another, and the sea is always the same. In the immutability of their surroundings the foreign shores, the foreign faces, the changing immensity of life, glide past, veiled not by a sense of mystery but by a slightly disdainful ignorance; for there is nothing mysterious to a seaman unless it be the sea itself, which is the mistress of his existence and as inscrutable as Destiny. For the rest, after his hours of work, a casual stroll or a casual spree on shore suffices to unfold for him the secret of a whole continent, and generally he finds the secret not worth knowing. The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.

His remark did not seem at all surprising. It was just like Marlow. It was accepted in silence. No one took the trouble to grunt even; and presently he said, very slow—

“I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago—the other day...Light came out of this river since—you say Knights? Yes; but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker—may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday. Imagine the feelings of a commander of a fine—what d’ye call ’em?—trireme in the Mediterranean, ordered suddenly to the north; run overland across the Gauls in a hurry; put in charge of one of these craft the legionaries,—a wonderful lot of handy men they must have been too—used to build, apparently by the hundred, in a month or two, if we may believe what we read. Imagine him here—the very end of the world, a sea the color of lead, a sky the color of smoke, a kind of ship about as rigid as a concertina—and going up this river with stores, or orders, or what you like. Sandbanks, marshes, forests, savages,—precious little to eat fit for a civilized man, nothing but Thames water to drink. No Falernian wine here, no going ashore. Here and there a military camp lost in a wilderness, like a needle in a bundle of hay—cold, fog, tempests, disease, exile, and death,—death skulking in the air, in the water, in the bush. They must have been dying like flies here. Oh, yes—he did it. Did it very well, too, no doubt, and without thinking much about it either, except afterwards to brag of what he had gone through in his time,

perhaps. They were men enough to face the darkness. And perhaps he was cheered by keeping his eye on a chance of promotion to the fleet at Ravenna by and by, if he had good friends in Rome and survived the awful climate. Or think of a decent young citizen in a toga—perhaps too much dice, you know—coming out here in the train of some prefect, or tax-gatherer, or trader even, to mend his fortunes. Land in a swamp, march through the woods, and in some inland post feel the savagery, the utter savagery, had closed round him—all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men. There's no initiation either into such mysteries. He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable. And it has a fascination, too, that goes to work upon him. The fascination of the abomination—you know. Imagine the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate.”

He paused.

“Mind,” he began again, lifting one arm from the elbow, the palm of the hand outwards, so that, with his legs folded before him, he had the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus-flower—“Mind, none of us would feel exactly like this. What saves us is efficiency—the devotion to efficiency. But these chaps were not much account, really. They were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force—nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just 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. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to...”

He broke off. Flames glided in the river, small green flames, red flames, white flames, pursuing, overtaking, joining, crossing each other—then separating slowly or hastily. The traffic of the great city went on in the deepening night upon the sleepless river. We looked on, waiting patiently—there was nothing else to do till the end of the flood; but it was only after a long silence, when he said, in a hesitating voice, “I suppose you fellows remember I did once turn fresh-water sailor for a bit,” that we knew we were fated, before the ebb began to run, to hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences.

“I don't want to bother you much with what happened to me personally,” he began, showing in this remark the weakness of many tellers of tales who seem so often unaware of what their audience would like best to hear; “yet to understand the effect of it on me you ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up that river to the place where I first met the poor chap. It was the farthest point of

## Vocabulary

### Chapter 1

abomination – something arousing disgust  
alacrity – haste  
alienist – a psychiatrist  
apprehend – to understand  
ascetic – morally severe, strict  
assegais – spears  
august – grand  
benign – showing gentleness, favorable  
bights – loops  
catacomb – an underground cemetery  
concertina – a musical instrument similar to an accordion  
conflagrations – destructive fires  
connoisseur – a person with expert knowledge or training  
cravat – a fabric worn around the neck like a tie  
crestfallen – sad, melancholy  
declivity – a descending  
divine – to guess, conclude  
drollery – something comical  
emissary – an agent sent to represent or advance the interests of another  
ensign – a flag  
estuary – the wide lower area of a river where the current meets the tide  
gaberdine – a cloak worn especially by Jews during the Middle Ages  
hardihood – boldness; daring  
immutability – inflexibility, inalterability  
inscrutable – mysterious, unknowable  
insidious – treacherous, seductively harmful  
insipid – dull  
interminable – endless, tedious  
lugubrious – gloomy, mournful  
lurid – shining  
moribund – deathly, almost dying  
morose – gloomy  
nicety – precision  
ominously – forebodingly, with warning  
pall – a coffin or a cover for a coffin  
placidity – calmness, tranquility  
prevaricator – a liar  
propitiatory – atoning for sin  
rapacious – greedy  
recrudescence – return, renewal  
sententiously – having an abrupt and proverb-quoting manner  
sepulcher – a tomb, vault for sacred relics

**Chapter 2**

**abject** – downcast

**begrimed** – smeared, soiled

**chaff** – debris from harvesting grain; worthless matter

**cipher** – code

**circumvent** – to bypass

**disinterred** – removed from the grave

**evanescent** – fleeting

**fusillade** – a discharge of firearms

**half-caste** – an offensive term for a person of mixed racial descent

**harlequin** – a jester, clown, buffoon

**heralded** – proclaimed

**hullabaloo** – an uproar

**impalpable** – unable to be felt

**implacable** – unchangeable

**incontinently** – in an uncontrolled manner

**inexorable** – unrelenting

**perdition** – damnation

**peroration** – the conclusion of a speech

**precarious** – lacking stability, uncertain

**recondite** – incomprehensible

**sagacious** – wise

**scow** – a large, flat-bottomed boat

**Chapter 3**

**absconded** – secretly ran away from

**fecund** – fertile

**jocose** – merry, humorous

**litany** – a prayer that is repeated by a congregation to the leader

**motley** – having elements of variety

**precipice** – a large, steep cliff or rock

**sarcophagus** – a stone coffin