HEART OF DARKNESS

Key Points

1. The narration is twice removed from Conrad. We have an unnamed narrator who introduces Marlow as the second narrator.

2. The book draws on a range of quest narratives in Marlow's ongoing search for Kurtz.

3. The title of the novel refers both to politics and psychology: it gives us an insight into what happens to Conrad's characters as they progress up the Congo, as well as the treatment of the Civilising Mission's treatment of the locals.

4. One of the paradoxes of the book is that Kurtz went out to Africa with honourable intentions, and yet became one of the worst and most violent colonizers.

5. Marlow also discusses how the blank space of maps, having been named and populated, has become a form of darkness, under Western control.

Quotations

• '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.'
  Heart of Darkness, p. 4.

• 'Mr. Kurtz was at present in charge of a trading post, a very important one, in the true ivory-country, at 'the very bottom of there. Sends in as much ivory as all the others put together....'
  Heart of Darkness, p. 39.

• 'the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs had interested him with the making of a report, for its future guidance ... it was a beautiful piece of writing'
  Heart of Darkness, p. 50.

• 'It was not a blank space any more. It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery - a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness.'
  Heart of Darkness, p. 8.

Further Reading

   A strong collection of twenty essays ranging over the novella's interests, with a particularly perceptive one on pedagogical approaches. Suffers from a hangover due to the African novelist Chinua Achebe's vigorous attack on the novella but does offer several stimulating perspectives.


5. Robert Hampson, 'Heart of Darkness and "The Speech that Cannot be Silenced"', English, 39.163 (Spring, 1990), 15-32.


Web Links

• The Victorian Web provides a rich array of resources, including a chronology and articles on Conrad's works: http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/conrad/index.html

• In Our Time BBC Radio 4 programme on Heart of Darkness: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0077474

• The OUP project Writers Inspire has some resources on Conrad, with an emphasis on post/colonialism:

  https://writersinspire.org/writers/joseph-conrad