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What is the main idea of heart of darkness

Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad "Heart of Darkness advances and withdraws as in a succession of long dark waves borne by an incoming tide. The waves encroach fairly evenly on the shore, and presently a few more feet of sand have been won. But an occasional wave thrusts up unexpectedly, much further than the others; even as far, say, as Kurtz and his Inner Station"- Albert J. Guerard. This electronic version of Heart of Darkness is a scholarly edition. It includes links to vocabulary words, themes, and other study information. The targeted audience for this project is high school students or college freshmen reading the novel as part of an English course. The text of the novel was taken from the web, and although I thoroughly checked it, I cannot guarantee that it is one hundred percent accurate. The novel is divided up into three parts. To keep the download time lower, I have put each chapter on a separate page. This page is designed to run on a frames capable browser such as Netscape or Internet Explorer. There is a no-frames option, however I recommend you use the frames if possible. The screen is divided into two frames. The larger top frame contains the text, while the lower small frame contains footnotes such as definitions when links in the text are followed. This allows you to keep your place in the text. How to use this site When you click on one of the chapter links above, you will be taken to a page with two frames, the larger top frame will contain the text of the chapter you chose. Within the text there are links which update the bottom frame. For example, if you click on the underlined word "estuary" in the text, the definition for estuary will appear in the bottom frame. The links in the text will either be to definitions, themes, or questions. Unless your browser is set to override the site settings, un-followed links will be gray and underlined, while followed links will be black and underlined. To return to the home page, do not use the back button from your browser. At the bottom of the top frame is a link to return home. Within the text there are links to pages describing some of the themes and structure of Heart of Darkness. While most of themes can best be understood after reading the text, a few of them are more helpful if read in advance. This page links to all the theme pages: Themes and Structure of Heart of Darkness. There is a page describing the life of Joseph Conrad: Life of the Author There are also pages for five of the more interesting and symbolic characters in Heart of Darkness: Marlow Kurtz The Manager The Brickmaker The Accountant When you have finished reading the novel, there is a page of questions that will help you study for possible essays on Heart of Darkness: Questions about the novel Finally, there is a page listing outside resources for studying and reading Heart of Darkness. They are somewhat listed in order of relevance. There are several papers, lectures, web sites, and a radio adaptation among them. A particularly good resource is Professor Dintenfass' Freshman Lecture: Outside links In making this site, I used several resources: Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness: Complete, Authoritative Text with Biographical and Historical Contexts, Critical History and Essays from Five Contemporary Critical Perspectives, 2nd ed. edited by Ross Murtin: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, NY c.1996. Conrad the Novelist by Albert J. Guerard: Cambridge Harvard University Press, c.1958. Heart of Darkness Cliff notes: Edited by Gary Carey, c.1997 Plus the sites listed in the outside links page. All texts and images used belong to their respective owners, and are reproduced here only for educational purposes. If you have any questions or comments regarding this site, contact me, Coreen Csicseri, at: csicser@acsu.buffalo.edu Life of the Author Joseph Conrad was born Teodor Jozef Konrad Korzeniowski on December 3, 1857, the only child of a patriotic Polish couple living in the southern Polish Ukraine. Conrad's father was esteemed as a translator of Shakespeare, as well as a poet and a man of letters in Poland, and Conrad's mother was a gentle, well-born lady with a keen mind but frail health. When Conrad was five, his father was arrested for allegedly taking part in revolutionary plots against the Russians and was exiled to Northern Russia; Conrad and his mother went with him. His mother died from the hardships of prison life after three years; she was only thirty-four. Conrad's father sent him back to his mother's brother for his education, and Conrad never saw him again. The poet-patriot lived only four more years. Conrad was eleven years old, but the emotional bond between him and his father was so strong that a deep melancholy settled within the boy; much of his writing as an adult is marked by a melancholy undercurrent. Conrad received a good education in Cracow, Poland, and after a trip through Italy and Switzerland, he decided not to return to his father's homeland. Poland held no promise; already Conrad had suffered too much from the country's Russian landlords. Instead, the young lad decided on a career very different from what one might expect of a boy brought up in Poland; he chose the sea as his vocation. Conrad reached Marseilles in October of 1874, when he was seventeen, and for the next twenty years, he sailed almost continually. Not surprisingly, most of his novels and short stories have the sea as a background for the action ad as a symbolic parallel for their heroes' inner turbulence. In fact, most of Conrad's work concerns the sea. There is very little old-fashioned romantic interest in his novels. Part of this romantic void may be due to the fact that while Conrad was in Marseilles and only seventeen, he had his first love affair. I ended in disaster. For some time, Conrad told people that he had been wounded in a duel, but now it seems clear that he tried to commit suicide. Conrad left Marseilles in April of 1878, when he was twenty-one, and it was then that he first saw England. He knew no English, but he signed on an English ship making voyages between Lowestoft and Newcastle. It was on that ship that he began to lean English. At twenty-four, Conrad was made the first mate of a ship that touched down in Singapore, and it was here that he learned about an incident that would later contribute to the plot of Lord Jim. Then, four years later, while Conrad was aboard the Vidar, he met Jim Lingard, the sailor who would become the physical model for Lord Jim; in fact, all the men aboard the Vidar called Jim "Lord Jim." In 1886, when Conrad was twenty-nine, he became a British subject, and in the same year, he wrote his first short story, "The Black Mate." He submitted it to a literary competition, but was unsuccessful. This failure, however, did not stop him from continuing to write. During the next three years, in order to fill empty, boring hours while he was at sea, Conrad began his first novel, Almayer's Folly. In addition, he continued writing diaries and journals when he transferred onto a Congo River steamer the following year, taking notes that would eventually become the basis for one of his masterpieces, Heart of Darkness. Conrad's health was weakened in Africa, and so he returned to England to recover his strength. Then in 1894, when Conrad was thirty-seven, he returned to sea; he also completed Almayer's Folly. The novel appeared the following year, and Conrad left the sea.He married Jessie George, a woman seventeen years younger than he was. She was a woman with no literary or intellectual interests, but Conrad continued to write with intense, careful seriousness. Heart of Darkness was first serialized in Blackwood's Magazine; it appeared soon afterward as a single volume, and Conrad then turned his time to Lord Jim, his twelfth work of fiction. After Lord Jim, Conrad produced one major novel after another- Nostromo, Typhoon, The Secret Agent, Under Western Eyes, Victory, and Chance, perhaps his most "popular" novel. He was no longer poor, and, ironically, he was no longer superlatively productive. From 1911 until his death in 1924, he never wrote anything that equaled his early works. His great work was done. Personally, however, Conrad's life was full. He was recognized widely, and he enjoyed dressing the part of a dandy; it was something he had always enjoyed doing, and now he could financially afford to. He played this role with great enthusiasm. He was a short, tiny man and had a sharp Slavic face which he accentuated with a short beard, and he was playing "aristocrat," as it were. No one needed, for within literary circles, Conrad was exactly that- a master. When World War I broke out, Conrad was spending some time in Poland with his wife and sons, and they barely escaped imprisonment. Back in England, Conrad began assembling his entire body of work, which appeared in 1920, and immediately afterward, he was offered a knighthood by the British government. He declined, however, and continued to live without national honor, but with literary honor instead. He suffered a heart attack in August, 1924, and was buried at Canterbury. Back Home This article was taken from "Conrad's Heart of Darkness & Secret Sharer Cliff Notes" c.1997 Themes and Structure of Heart of Darkness Throughout the text there are links to most of these pages listed. The pages describe some of the themes and structure present in the novel. Some of these pages are more helpful if read before reading the novel, and others will not make sense unless you read the novel first. Here is a list of links to these pages: Before reading Heart of Darkness: Themes in Heart of Darkness Patterns in Heart of Darkness- Three's Three chapters Three times Marlow breaks the story Three stations Three women (Aunt, Mistress, Intended) Three central characters (Kurtz, Marlow, Narrator) Three views of Africa (adventure, religious, economic) Russian Doll Effect "To [Marlow] the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel, but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out as a glow brings out a haze." The structure of Heart of Darkness is much like that of the Russian nesting dolls, where you open each doll up, and there is another doll inside. Much of the meaning in Heart of Darkness is found not in the center of the book, the heart of Africa, but on the periphery of the book. In what happens to Marlow in Brussels, what is happening on the Nellie as Marlow tells the story, and what happens to the reader as they read the book. In Heart of Darkness, we have an outside narrator telling us a story he has heard from Marlow. The story Marlow tells seems to center around a man named Kurtz. However, most of what Marlow knows about Kurtz, he has learned from other people, many of whom have good reason for not being truthful to Marlow. Therefore Marlow has to piece together much of Kurtz's story. We gradually get to know very little more about Kurtz. What we do learn, is only through interpreting his actions by what we think we already know. Part of the meaning in Heart of Darkness is that we learn about "reality" through other people's accounts of it, many of which are, themselves, twice-told tales. Part of the meaning of the novel, too, is the possibly unreliable nature of our teachers; Marlow is the source of our story, but he is also a character within the story we read, and a flawed one at that. Marlow's macho comments about women and his insensitive reaction to the "dead negro" with a "bullet hole in his forehead" cause us to refocus our critical attention, to shift it from the story being retold, to the storyteller whose supposedly autobiographical yarn is being repeated. Contrast in Heart of Darkness Much of the imagery in Heart of Darkness is arranged in patterns of opposition and contrast. Examples: Light/dark Black/white Civilized/savage Outer/inner As you read the novel, be aware of how Conrad uses this device. What does Conrad accomplish by this contrast, especially of light and dark? Themes in Heart of Darkness Symbolism of black and white/ light and dark Black/dark- death, evil, ignorance, mystery, savagery, uncivilized White/light- life, goodness, enlightenment, civilized, religion. This symbolism is not new, these connotations have been present in society for centuries. We refer to the Middle Ages, when science and knowledge was suppressed, as the Dark Ages. According to Christianity, in the beginning of time all was dark and God created light. According to Heart of Darkness, before the Romans came, England was dark. In the same way, Africa was considered to be in the "dark stage". Yet, when it is looked into deeper, the usual pattern is reverse and "darkness means truth, whiteness means falsehood" This reversal tells a political truth about races in the Congo, a psychological truth about Marlow and all of us (the truth within, therefore dark and obscure), and any number of moral truths (the trade in ivory is dark and dirty). Themes in Heart of Darkness Like a knight of the Round Table, Marlow sets off in search of strange adventures. He only gradually acquires a grail, as he picks up more and more hints about Kurtz. Like a knight he is frequently tested by signs he must confront, question and interpret. Signs are things you see or experience or are told which have meaning beyond the literal: old women knitting black wool might simply be relatives of the company personnel given some position of respect and usefulness, or the somber color of their wool and clothing, and their serious demeanour, might suggest that they mind the gateway to a mysterious underworld. You might take as signs the following: The Inner Station, with it's barrels of unused rivet, its needless blasting of a cliff as a railroad is built, its valley of death and shackled prisoners, and its gleaming white-suited Accountant, who frets over his figures while a man lies groaning his last in his office. The Central Station, rivetless and strawless, where the manager smiled his mysterious mean smile and the idle brickmaker (the "paper-mache Mephistopheles") drinks champagne and lights his privileged candle in its silver holder, where a man is dragged out a random and beaten for having set a fire (regardless of whether he did), and where Marlow's boat is sunk (meanwhile, the Eldorado expedition passes through- this section provides the most detail of Marlow's increasing fascination with the enigmatic Kurtz.) The Russian's cabin, then the Russian himself, a Shakespearean Fool with his motley clothes, his icon which is dull text (language pored over reverently in spite of content), and his ambivalent relationship with Kurtz. The "gateposts" which become heads on poles, shrunken and dried and made to face Kurtz's house: signs not of domestic order but of terror. Even before he sets out, omens present themselves to Marlow; old women knitting black wool in the Belgian office, the phenologist measuring Marlow's skull and warning of changes to take place inside, the tale of how his predecessor died in an uncharacteristic dispute over black hens. After reading Heart of Darkness: Themes in Heart of Darkness Civilization vs. Savagery A major theme of Heart of Darkness is civilization versus savagery. The book implies that civilizations are created by the setting of laws and codes that encourage men to achieve higher standards. It acts as a buffer to prevent men from reverting back to their darker tendencies Civilization, however, must be learned. London itself, in the book a symbol of enlightenment, was once "one of the darker places of the earth" before the Romans forced civilization upon them. While society seems to restrain these savage tendencies, it does not get rid of them. These primeval tendencies will always be like a black cloth lurking in the background. The tendency to revert to savagery is seen in Kurtz. When Marlow meets Kurtz, he finds a man that has totally thrown off the restraints of civilization and has de-evolved into a primal state. Marlow and Kurtz are two opposite examples of the human condition. Kurtz represents what every man will become if left to his own intrinsic desires without a protective, civilized environment. Marlow represents the civilized soul that has not been drawn back into savagery by a dark, alienated jungle. The book implies that every man has a heart of darkness that is usually drowned out by the light of civilization. However, when removed from civilized society, the raw evil of untamed lifestyles within his soul will be unleashed. The underlying theme of Heart of Darkness is that civilization is superficial. The level of civilization is related to the physical and moral environment they are presently in. It is a much less stable or permanent state than society may think. Themes in Heart of Darkness Views of the Wilderness There are three basic views of the African wilderness in Heart of Darkness: Some, like Marlow's Aunt, see Africa as full of savages that need to be saved. This view is demonstrated in the famous poem White Man's Burden. To others, like the Belgians in the Outer Station, Africa represents economic prospects such as free slave labor and ivory. This is the underlying reasoning of colonialism. To those such as Marlow, Africa represents a chance for adventure and self exploration. Themes in Heart of Darkness Deception Conrad recognized that deception is most sinister when it becomes self-deception and the individual takes seriously his own fictions. Kurtz "could get himself to believe anything- anything." His benevolent words of his report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage customs was meant sincerely enough, but a deeper sincerity spoke through his scrawled postscript "Exterminate all the brutes!" Themes in Heart of Darkness Protective Society We are protected from ourselves by society with its laws and watchful neighbors, Marlow observes. We are also protected by work. "You wonder I didn't go ashore for a howl and a dance? Well, no- I didn't. Fine sentiments, you say? Fine sentiments be hanged! I had no time, I had to mess about with white-lead and strips of woolen blanket helping to put bandages on those leaky steamships" But when the external restraints of society and work are removed we must meet the challenge with our "own inborn strength. Principles won't do." This inborn strength appears to be a restraint, the restraint that Kurtz lacked and the cannibal crew of the Roi des Belges surprisingly possessed. The hollow man, whose evil is the evil of vacancy, succumbs. In their different degrees the pilgrims and Kurtz share this hollowness. "Perhaps there was nothing within [the manager of the Central Station]. Such a suspicion made one pause -- for out there there were no external checks." And there was nothing inside the Brickmaker, "but a little loose dirt, maybe." As for Kurtz, the wilderness "It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core." Themes in Heart of Darkness Self-Discovery Heart of Darkness concerns Marlow (a projection to whatever degree great or small of Conrad) and his journey of self. Marlow reiterates often enough that he is recounting a spiritual voyage of self-discovery. He remarks casually but crucially that he did not know himself before setting out, and that he liked work for the chance it provides to "find yourself in what no other man can know." The Inner Station "was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience." At a superficial level, the journey is a temptation to revert, a record of "remote kinship" with the "wild and passionate uproar," of a "trace of a response" to it, of a final rejection of the "fascination of the abomination." And why should there not be a response? "The mind of man is capable of anything- because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future." Marlow's temptation is made concrete through his exposure to Kurtz, a white man and sometime idealist who had fully responded to the wilderness; a potential and fallen self. "I had turned to the wilderness really, not to Mr. Kurtz." Marlow returns to Europe a changed and more knowing man. Ordinary people are now "intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretense, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew." Themes in Heart of Darkness Heart of Darkness as a Night Journey Heart of Darkness explores something truer, more fundamental, and distinctly less material than just a personal narrative. It is a night journey into the unconscious, and confrontation of an entity within the self. Certain circumstances of Marlow's voyage, looked at in these terms, take on a new importance. The true night journey can occur only in sleep or in a waking dream of a profoundly intuitive mind. Marlow insists on the dreamlike quality of his narrative. "It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream - making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream - sensation." Even before leaving Brussels, Marlow felt as though he "was about to set off for center of the earth," not the center of a continent. The introspective voyager leaves his familiar rational world, is "cut off from the comprehension" of his surroundings, his steamer toils "along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy." As the crisis approaches, the dreamer and his ship moves through a silence that "seemed unnatural, like a state of trance; then enter a deep fog." The approach to this Kurtz grubbing for ivory in the wretched bush was beset by as many dangers as though he had been an enchanted princess sleeping in a fabulous castle." Later, Marlow's task is to try "to break the spell" of the wilderness that holds Kurtz entranced. Characters Marlow Charlie Marlow, thirty-two years old, has always "followed the sea", as the novel puts it. His voyage up the Congo river, however, is his first experience in freshwater travel. Conrad uses Marlow as a narrator in order to enter the story himself and tell it out of his own philosophical mind. When Marlow arrives at the station he is shocked and disgusted by the sight of wasted human life and ruined supplies . The manager's senseless cruelty and foolishness overwhelm him with anger and disgust. He longs to see Kurtz- a fabulously successful ivory agent and hated by the company manager. More and more, Marlow turns away from the white people (because of their ruthless brutality) and to the dark jungle (a symbol of reality and truth.) He begins to identify more and more with Kurtz- long before he even sees him or talks to him. In the end, the affinity between the two men becomes a symbolic unity. Marlow and Kurtz are the light and dark selves of a single person. Marlow is what Kurtz might have been, and Kurtz is what Marlow might have become. Characters Kurtz Kurtz, like Marlow,originally came to the Congo with noble intentions. He thought that each ivory station should stand like a beacon light, offering a better way of life to the natives. Kurtz mother was half-English and his father was half-French. He was educated in England and speaks English. The culture and civilization of Europe have contributed to the making of Kurtz; he is an orator, writer, poet, musician, artist, politician, ivory procurer, and chief agent of the ivory company's Inner Station at Stanley Falls. In short, he is a "universal genius"; however, he also described as a "hollow man," a man without basic integrity or any sense of social responsibility. At the end of his descent into the lowest pit of degradation, Kurtz is also a thief, murderer, raider, persecutor, and to climax all his other shady practices, he allows himself to be worshipped as a god. Marlow does not see Kurtz, however, until Kurtz is so emaciated by disease that he looks more like a ruined piece of a man than a whole human being.There is no trace of Kurtz' former good looks nor his former good health. Marlow remarks that Kurtz' head is as bald as an ivory ball and that he resembles "an animated image of death carved out of old ivory." Kurtz wins control of men through fear and adoration. His power over the natives almost destroys Marlow and the party aboard the steamboat. Kurtz is the lusty, violent devil whom Marlow describes at the beginning. He is contrasted with the manager, who is weak and flabby- the weak and flabby devil also described by Marlow. Kurtz is a victim of the manager's murderous cruelty; stronger men than Kurtz would have found virtuous behavior difficult under the manager's criminal neglect. It is possible that Kurtz might never have revealed his evil nature if he had not been cornered and tortured by the manager. Characters The Manager This character, based upon a real person, Camille Delcommme, is the ultimate villain of the plot. He is directly or indirectly to blame for all the disorder, waste, cruelty, and neglect that curses all three stations. He is in charge of everything. Marlow suggests that the manager arranged to wreck Marlow's steamboat in order to delay sending help to Kurtz. He also deliberately prevents rivets from coming up the coast to complete the steamboat's repairs. At the manager's command, a native black boy is beaten unmercifully for a fire which burned up a shed full of "trash." (The boy is probably innocent.) The manager's conversation with his uncle reveals the full, treacherous nature of both men. His physical appearance is ordinary; his talents are few. Excellent health gives him an advantage over other men. He seems to "have no entrails" and has been in the Congo for nine years. His blue eyes look remarkably cold, and his look can fall on a man "like an axe-blow." Characters The Brickmaker Despite his title, he is a man who seemingly makes no bricks; instead, he acts as the manager's secretary, and he is responsible for a good deal of the plot's entangling elements. For example, He reveals the reason why the manager hates Marlow He shows Marlow the painting which Kurtz left at the Central Station (one of the important symbols of the book). He reveals the reason why the manager hates Kurtz He unwillingly and indirectly lets Marlow know that the delay in getting rivets is intentional He lets Marlow know that the white men at the Central Station identify Marlow with Kurtz, as members of the "new gang of virtue." Characters The Accountant He is the keeper of all the company books; he gives Marlow his first information about Kurtz, and he also reveals the general hatred which the white men bear toward the blacks. In addition, he confides his conviction that there is shady business at the Central Station. Questions Here are some questions to ask yourself after reading the novel: Why are most of the novel's characters given only descriptive titles, and not actual names? (ex. brickmaker, accountant) Why is the framing narrator unnamed? What do the three women in the novel represent? (Marlow's Aunt, Kurtz Intended, and his Mistress) What does Marlow mean in Chapter 1 when he says that women are "out of touch with truth" and live in a beautiful world of their own? What does it mean to have a "choice of nightmares" (Chapter 3)? What is "the horror" (Chapter 3)? In chapter 1, Marlow states, "You know I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appalls me. There is a taint of death, a flavor of mortality in lies which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world." Yet in Chapter 3, he lies to Kurtz' Intended. Why do you think that is? Early in Chapter 1, Marlow says, "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...something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to." What do you think he means by this? Is this passage a criticism of colonialism in general? Conrad uses the term "nigger" in Heart of Darkness. Do you feel that Conrad is being racist in these remarks? Why or why not? What does Marlow think of the futility and waste that goes on in the Company? Give some examples. Often throughout the novel, when Marlow describes a black object or person, he then points out something light or white about it. For example, in chapter 1 he describes one of the workers at the Outer Station saying, "It looked startling round his black neck, this bit of white thread." What does Conrad accomplish by this contrast, what is he trying to express? The unnamed narrator breaks the story only a few times. Why do you think he broke the story where he did? Early in Chapter 3, Marlow describes Kurtz' house and the gateposts around it. He is startled by the shrunken heads atop the posts that are turned toward the house. He remarks that they would be more impressive if turned outward. Why did Kurtz have them turned towards the house? Near the end of Chapter 3, Marlow, talking about Kurtz states, "True, he had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot." To what is he referring?

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