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JOSEPH CONRAD

Heart of Darkness, 1899

Although his native tongue was Polish (and French his second language), Joseph Conrad (1857–1924) became one of the leading English novelists of the era of British imperialism. Drawing on his experience as a mariner and ship captain, he secured a post as an officer on river steamboats on the Congo River in 1890. Nine years later he published *Heart of Darkness*, a novel that has introduced generations since to Africa, the Congo, the era of colonialism, and European ideas of “the other.”

In this selection from the novel, Conrad's narrator, Marlow, tells of his voyage up the Congo to meet the enigmatic European Kurtz, who has secured prodigious amounts of ivory for his Belgian employer but (we learn at the end of the novel) has lost his mind in the process.

What impression does *Heart of Darkness* give of Africa and Africans? What does it suggest were the motives or intentions of European explorers and traders in Africa? What feeling does this selection convey about European colonization of Africa?

THINKING HISTORICALLY

Like many novels, *Heart of Darkness* is based on the actual experiences of the author. Despite the basis in fact, however, it is very different from historical writing. Imagine Conrad writing a history of the events described in this selection. How would it be different? Would one account be truer, or merely reveal different truths?

Source: Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, A Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1988), 35–39. Originally published by *Blackwood's Magazine* (London, 1899, 1902).

Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances. On silvery sandbanks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands. You lost your way on that river as you would in a desert and butted all day long against shoals trying to find the channel till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once—somewhere—far away—in another existence perhaps. There were moments when one's past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare to yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants and water and silence. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect. I got used to it afterwards. I did not see it any more. I had no time. I had to keep guessing at the channel; I had to discern, mostly by inspiration, the signs of hidden banks; I watched for sunken stones; I was learning to clap my teeth smartly before my heart flew out when I shaved by a fluke some infernal sly old snag that would have ripped the life out of the tin-pot steamboat and drowned all the pilgrims; I had to keep a look-out for the signs of dead wood we could cut up in the night for next day's steaming. When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality—the reality I tell you—fades. The inner truth is hidden—luckily, luckily. But I felt it all the same; I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey tricks. . . .

I managed not to sink that steamboat on my first trip. It's a wonder to me yet. Imagine a blindfolded man set to drive a van over a bad road. I sweated and shivered over that business considerably, I can tell you. After all, for a seaman, to scrape the bottom of the thing that's supposed to float all the time under his care is the unpardonable sin. No one may know of it, but you never forget the thump—eh? A blow on the very heart. You remember it, you dream of it, you wake up at night and think of it—years after—and go hot and cold all over. I don't pretend to say that steamboat floated all the time. More than once she had to wade for a bit, with twenty cannibals splashing around and pushing. We had enlisted some of these chaps on the way for a crew. Fine fellows—cannibals—in their place. They were men one could work with, and I am grateful to them. And, after all, they did not eat each other before my face: they had brought along a provision of hippo-meat which went rotten and made

the mystery of the wilderness stink in my nostrils. Phoo! I can sniff it
I had the Manager on board and three or four pilgrims with their
—all complete. Sometimes we came upon a station close by the
—changing to the skirts of the unknown, and the white men rushing
—a tumbledown hovel with great gestures of joy and surprise and
—some seemed very strange, had the appearance of being held there
—by a spell. The word “ivory” would ring in the air for a
—and on we went again into the silence, along empty reaches,
—and the still bends, between the high walls of our winding way, rever-
—ing to hollow claps the ponderous beat of the stern-wheel. Trees,
—millions of trees, massive, immense, running up high, and at their
—bugging the bank against the stream, crept the little begrimed
—rampboat like a sluggish beetle crawling on the floor of a lofty portico.
—made you feel very small, very lost, and yet it was not altogether de-
—pressing that feeling. After all, if you were small, the grimy beetle
—crawled on—which was just what you wanted it to do. Where the pil-
—grims imagined it crawled to I don't know. To some place where they
—expected to get something, I bet! For me it crawled towards Kurtz—
—reluctantly; but when the steam-pipes started leaking we crawled very
—fast. The reaches opened before us and closed behind, as if the forest
—had stepped leisurely across the water to bar the way for our return. We
—penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. It was very
—dark there. At night sometimes the roll of drums behind the curtain of
—fog would run up the river and remain sustained faintly, as if hovering
—in the air high over our heads till the first break of day. Whether it meant
—war, peace, or prayer we could not tell. The dawns were heralded by the
—descent of a chill stillness. The woodcutters slept, their fires burned low,
—and the snapping of a twig would make you start. We were wanderers on a
—prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown
—planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking posses-
—sion of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound
—anguish and of excessive toil. But suddenly as we struggled round a
—bend there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a
—burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet
—stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling under the droop of heavy
—and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of
—a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing
—at us, trying to us, welcoming us—who could tell? We were cut off from
—the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms,
—pondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an
—epidemic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because
—we were too far and could not remember because we were travelling in
—the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a
—trace—and no memories.

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon a shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly and the men were not. No they were not inhuman. Well, you know that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly upon you. They howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces, but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—like the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough, but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of the ages—could comprehend. And why not? The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future. What was there after all? Joy, fear, sorrow, devotion, vanity, rage—who can tell?—but truth—truth stripped of its cloak of time. Let the fool gape and shudder—the man knows and can look on without a wink. But he must at least be as much of a man as these on the shore. He must meet that truth with his own true stuff—with his own inborn strength. Principles? Principles won't do. Acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags—rags that would fly off at the first good shake. No, you want a deliberate belief. An appeal to me in this fiendish row—is that very well. I hear, I admit, but I have a voice too, and for good or ill mine is the speech that cannot be silenced. Of course, a fool, what with sheer fright and fine sentiments, is always safe. Who's that grunting? 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 whitelead and strips of woollen blanket helping to put bandages on those leaky steam-pipes—tell you. I had to watch the steering and circumvent those snags and get the tin-pot along by hook or by crook. There was surface-truth enough in these things to save a wiser man. And between whiles I had to look after the savage who was fireman. He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat walking on his hind legs. A few months of training had done for him a really fine chap. He squinted at the steam-gauge and at the water-gauge with an evident effort of intrepidity—and he had filed teeth too, the poor devil, and the wool of his pate shaved into queer patterns, and three ornamental scars on each of his cheeks. He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of what he was hard at work, a thrall to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge. He was useful because he had been instructed; and what he knew was this—that should the water in that transparent thing disappear the evil spirit inside the boiler would get angry through it.

...ness of his thirst and take a terrible vengeance. So he sweated and
...ed up and watched the glass fearfully (with an impromptu charm,
... of rags, tied to his arm and a piece of polished bone as big as a
... stuck flatways through his lower lip) while the wooded banks
...ed past us slowly, the shore noise was left behind, the interminable
... of silence—and we crept on, towards Kurtz.