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Heart of Darkness

Joseph Conrad · *1899* · *original English text*

On a cruising yawl in the Thames, Marlow tells of a journey up a great African river to find Kurtz, the Company's inspired agent. What he finds is not only a man, but a trade that takes the earth from those who have a different complexion, and a voice that can still say, at the last, The horror. Conrad writes a tale of imperial work, of lying, and of a darkness that is not only in the jungle.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

When a man goes into a trade that is not a pretty thing if you look into it too much, what does he bring back—truth, a lie, or only the memory of a voice?

"The horror! The horror!"

Kurtz · Marlow's account of Kurtz's last words

Marlow will not call Kurtz's last cry nothing. He takes it as a judgment—on the trade, on Kurtz's own soul, perhaps on all of us. He will not tell Kurtz's Intended that last word; he tells her the man died with her name. The lie costs him, and he tells it. The conquest of the earth is not redeemed by an "idea" once you have heard the postscript: Exterminate all the brutes.

KEY CHARACTERS

Charlie Marlow
The seaman-narrator, who tells the truth to the men on the Nellie and a lie to the Intended

Kurtz
The Company's inspired agent, a voice, a hunger for ivory, and a last cry of judgment

The Intended
Kurtz's betrothed in Europe, who must have a noble memory, and is given one

The Russian
A harlequin wanderer at the Inner Station, still loyal to Kurtz's talk

The General Manager
A Company man whose gift is survival, not greatness

The men on the Nellie
The Director, the Lawyer, the Accountant: a civilized audience on a tidal river

A CRY, A POSTSCRIPT, AND A LIE

> *"The horror! The horror!"*
>
> **Kurtz** · Last words

> *"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."*
>
> **Marlow** · Near the beginning of his tale

Grades 11–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

The Thames and the Dark Places

THE FRAME; THE START OF MARLOW'S TALE

A river at home, and the memory that this too has been one of the dark places of the earth.

- The Nellie waits for the tide; a lawyer, an accountant, a director, and Marlow sit on deck
- Marlow says that this also—the Thames—has been one of the dark places of the earth
- He has a commission from a continental trading Company to go up a great river in Africa
- Already the tale is not a boy's adventure, but a report on work, waste, and a name: Kurtz

> *"And this also," said Marlow suddenly, "has been one of the dark places of the earth."*
>
> **Marlow** · Opening of his tale

02

The Company's Shore

THE LOWER STATIONS

Useless work, a grove of death, and the first rumors of a remarkable man.

- Marlow finds a railway being made in waste, a chain-gang, and a grove where dying laborers have crawled away
- The Company's men talk of efficiency and ivory; the work on the ground is cruel and often pointless
- He hears of Kurtz, who sends in more ivory than all the others, and who has a gift of speech
- A wrecked steamer delays him; he must repair it before he can go up-river

03

The River

THE VOYAGE UP-STREAM

A slow approach, a fog, and an attack from the banks.

- The steamer crawls between walls of forest; Marlow feels he is travelling back toward the earliest beginnings of the world
- The pilgrims want ivory; the cannibal crew does the work and keeps a surprising restraint
- Near Kurtz's Inner Station they are attacked; the helmsman is killed
- Marlow begins to understand that the wilderness has found something in Kurtz that could answer it

> *"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."*
>
> **Marlow** · Early in the tale

04

Kurtz

THE INNER STATION

A remarkable voice, a report with a postscript, and a man who will not easily be taken out.

- The Russian wanderer at the station talks of Kurtz as of a god or a friend
- Heads on stakes show what Kurtz's rule has become
- Kurtz's pamphlet for the International Society ends with a scrawled postscript: Exterminate all the brutes
- He is carried to the steamer; he tries, even now, to go back to his ivory and his power

> *"Exterminate all the brutes!"*
>
> **Kurtz (postscript to his report)** · The Inner Station

05

The Horror, and a Lie

THE DEATH AND THE RETURN

A last cry, a Sunday drawing-room, and a name given in place of the truth.

- Kurtz dies on the way down, after crying The horror! The horror!
- Marlow, ill in Europe, does not take up the trade's rewards
- He visits Kurtz's Intended, who keeps a shrine of her betrothed's nobility
- When she asks for Kurtz's last word, Marlow says it was her name—and the tale ends with the Thames running out into an immense darkness

> *"The horror! The horror!"*
>
> **Kurtz** · Kurtz's last words

Truth and Lying | Judgment | Imperial Hunger | The Heart | Speech and Silence | Restraint

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. The hosted text is the novella only, opening with the Nellie on the Thames (Project Gutenberg #219). It is not bound here with "Youth."
2. Kurtz's postscript is "Exterminate all the brutes!" with a capital E, in single typographic quotes in this edition.
3. Marlow's sentence about the conquest of the earth is the book's plainest moral judgment. "What redeems it is the idea only" is the claim he then tests and finds wanting.
4. The last lie to the Intended is not presented as a triumph. Marlow tells it, and the river runs into an immense darkness.
5. "And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth" brings the darkness home to the Thames, not only to a distant colony.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #219, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/heart-of-darkness/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.