

Heart of Darkness Key Info

Writer: Joseph Conrad | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

Key Facts

- **Full Title:** Heart of Darkness
- **Original Title:** Heart of Darkness
- **Author:** Joseph Conrad (1857–1924)
- **Title of the Author:** The Novelist of the Sea, The Master of Psychological Realism, & The Prophet of Modernism.
- **Source:** Inspired by Conrad's own voyage to the Congo Free State in 1890, where he witnessed the brutality of European colonialism and the exploitation of Africans under King Leopold II's rule.
- **Written Time:** 1898–1899
- **First Published:** 1899 (serialized in Blackwood's Magazine); 1902 (published in book form in Youth: A Narrative, and Two Other Stories)
- **Publisher:** Blackwood's Magazine (UK, serialization); William Blackwood and Sons (book publication)
- **Genre:** Novella / Modernist Fiction / Imperial Gothic / Psychological Fiction
- **Form:** Prose novella (frame narrative; a story within a story; divided into three parts)
- **Structure:** Framed storytelling—Marlow recounts his Congo journey to fellow sailors on the Thames; filled with symbols, irony, allegory, and ambiguity
- **Tone:** Dark, ironic, mysterious, pessimistic, and critical of imperialism
- **Point of View:** First-person (Marlow as narrator) within a frame narrative (unnamed narrator recounting Marlow's story)
- **Significance:** Considered Conrad's most famous and controversial work; critiques imperialism, exposes human greed and moral corruption, and anticipates modernist explorations of alienation and ambiguity
- **Language:** English (by a non-native speaker, which adds to its unique style and rhythm)
- **Famous Line:** "The horror! The horror!" (Kurtz's final words)

- **Setting:**
- **Time Setting:** Late 19th century, the height of European imperial expansion (1880s–1890s)
- **Place Setting:** Begins on the Thames River, England → shifts to the Congo River in Central Africa.

Key Notes

- **The Title “Heart of Darkness”:**
- **Geographical Sense:** Here, “Heart” means the center or innermost part, and “Darkness” means obscurity. It refers to the journey into the interior of Africa, deep into the Congo River and the jungle. The European sailor Marlow travels from the edge of civilization into the dark core of savagery.
- **Colonial Sense:** “Darkness” at first seems like the unknown geography of Africa, but its real meaning is the greed and cruelty of European imperialism. In the name of civilization, Europeans carried out exploitation, looting, and killing in Africa. This is the true darkness.
- **Psychological Sense:** The “darkness” is not only in the African jungle, but also inside the human soul. Greed, lust for power, moral corruption, and cruelty reveal the inhuman side within people. Kurtz’s character symbolizes this inner darkness.
- **Philosophical Sense:** The title shows that “darkness” is not limited to one place. It represents the hypocrisy of human civilization, the mask of power, and the cruel truth hidden within the human spirit.
- **Imperialism and Colonial Exploitation:** In Heart of Darkness, Joseph Conrad exposes the horrors of European imperialism. In the Congo, European traders and administrators enslave, exploit, and torture local people in the name of bringing civilization. Africa’s natural wealth is looted, while the African people sink into misery and poverty. The novel reveals colonial exploitation as a mask of inhumanity hiding behind the word “civilization.”
- **Frame Narrative:** The novel is written as a story within a story. The main tale is told by Marlow, who sits on a boat on the Thames River and shares his Congo journey with fellow sailors. This frame structure makes the novel mysterious and multi-layered, forcing the reader to ask again and again—what is the real truth?

Heart of Darkness - Background (English):

Joseph Conrad wrote Heart of Darkness in 1898–1899, while living in England with long years of seafaring experience behind him. Conrad was born in Poland, later moved to France, and eventually joined the British Merchant Marine. In 1890, he traveled to the Congo Free State

(then a Belgian colony) as a steamboat captain for a Belgian company. There, he witnessed firsthand the greed of Europeans, their cruelty, and the brutal exploitation of Africans. This experience left a deep mark on his mind.

At that time, Europeans believed themselves to be the bearers of civilization, but in reality, they were destroying Africa. Behind the mask of civilization, there was only exploitation and violence. Conrad wanted to portray this inhuman reality through literature. Thus, he created the story of a sailor named Marlow, who journeys into the heart of Africa and sees the horrifying face of European imperialism.

The novel clearly reflects Conrad's personal experiences. The African jungle, the Congo River, the suffering of local people—he had seen them with his own eyes. Blending his real-life experiences with imagination, he turned it into a symbolic and philosophical novella. It was first published in 1899 in Blackwood's Magazine in serial form, and later in 1902 in book form. From the beginning, the novella was controversial. Some saw it as a raw picture of Africa's exploitation, while others praised it for exposing the hypocrisy of European civilization. Over time, it gained recognition as a classic of Modernist literature.