

Heart of Darkness Summary

Writer: Joseph Conrad | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

Plot Summary - Heart of Darkness

Introduction / Background: Heart of Darkness is a remarkable novella written by Polish-English novelist Joseph Conrad. It was first serialized in Blackwood's Magazine in 1899 and later published as a book in 1902. In this novella, Conrad exposes the inhuman face of European imperialism. In the Congo region of Africa, European powers claimed to bring civilization and progress, but in reality, they represented greed, violence, and exploitation. The ivory trade and the enslaved lives of the African people are depicted in horrifying detail.

Conrad himself had traveled to the Belgian Congo in 1890 as a steamboat captain. He personally witnessed the cruelty, slave-like labor, and inhuman behavior of white Europeans in Africa. Therefore, his descriptions are not merely imaginary but drawn from real experience. Although Conrad himself was a white European, he boldly portrayed the atrocities against the African people and exposed the hypocrisy of European civilization. Through this, he not only criticized colonialism but also revealed the deeper darkness of the human soul—greed, lust for power, and moral decay. Through the voice of the main character, Marlow, we receive Conrad's vision. Marlow's journey is not only a geographical voyage into the heart of Africa but also a symbolic descent into the darkness of the human soul.

Marlow's First Experience of Imperialism: The main story begins on the Nellie, a ship anchored on the Thames. There, before fellow passengers, Marlow recounts a special experience of his life—his journey into the Congo. With the help of his aunt, Marlow gets a job as a riverboat captain for a European trading company. The company's true purpose is to collect ivory from the Congo and bring it back to Europe.

At the start of his work, Marlow travels to the company's headquarters in Brussels. From the outside, the headquarters looks clean and magnificent, but inside it hides a dreadful truth. Marlow calls it the "White Sepulchre." A sepulchre means a tomb or grave. In other words, while the headquarters shines white like marble from the outside, inside it carries signs of death, decay, and exploitation.

When Marlow arrives in Africa, he immediately begins to see the true face of European imperialism. He notices a French warship randomly shelling into the coastal forest. There is no

real reason—no enemy, no war. Yet nearby, African workers are laboring, and even if they die from the bombardment, their lives hold no value in the eyes of Europeans.

(The “White Sepulchre” of the headquarters symbolizes the hypocrisy of European civilization—an outer mask of refinement hiding exploitation and death within. The French warship’s senseless shelling symbolizes the irrational violence and cruelty of colonial powers. The African workers’ lives have no value; this shows that white colonizers did not see them as human beings, but only as laboring bodies or tools.)

Marlow’s Outer Station Experience: After arriving in Africa, Marlow spends some time at the Company’s Outer Station. Here he meets the Chief Accountant. Outwardly, the Accountant appears polite, well-dressed, and attractive, but inwardly he represents selfishness and jealousy. From this man, Marlow first hears the name of Kurtz. Kurtz is described as the Company’s most successful agent, managing the Inner Station deep in the Congo jungle. His success in gathering ivory makes him indispensable to the Company. Yet the Accountant dislikes Kurtz. Instead of admiration, he feels envy toward Kurtz’s immense success. He secretly wishes to remove Kurtz and take his place of power.

Marlow at the Central Station and the Journey Toward the Inner Station: Later, Marlow arrives at the Central Station. There he discovers that the steamboat meant to carry him to the Inner Station has already been damaged in an accident and is broken down. Repairing the vessel takes nearly three months.

During this long wait, Marlow gradually learns more details about Kurtz. Everyone speaks of his extraordinary personality and his role in advancing the Company’s business. His talent, leadership, and success make Marlow increasingly curious.

The General Manager is in charge of the Central Station, assisted by a Brickmaker, who is mostly his loyal follower. Both men fear Kurtz deeply. They believe that one day Kurtz might seize control of the Central Station and strip them of their authority.

In these three months, Kurtz becomes a figure of fascination for Marlow. Hearing stories filled with fear, envy, and respect, Marlow grows restless to meet him. At last, when the steamboat is repaired, Marlow, the General Manager, and a group of others begin their dangerous journey to the Inner Station.

The voyage is extremely difficult and perilous. As they move deeper into the Congo’s dark forests, the steamboat suddenly comes under attack by the local villagers, who fire arrows and spears. In the assault, one of the crew members is killed, marking the dangers of the road ahead.

Encounter with Kurtz at the Inner Station: After a long and dangerous journey, Marlow and his companions finally reach the Inner Station. There they are welcomed by a mysterious Russian trader, whom Marlow sees as a strange, clown-like man dressed in colorful clothes. The Russian informs Marlow that Kurtz is still alive, though seriously ill. From him, Marlow learns that Kurtz is more than just an agent—he has become almost a violent demi-god to the local villagers. Through fear and influence, Kurtz has made them obey him like a deity. They worship him, follow his orders, and secure his unrivaled position in the ivory trade.

Kurtz, however, is weak and close to death. Soon, the General Manager goes to see him. After a while, Kurtz is brought out on a stretcher. The sight causes chaos among the villagers, who cry out in agitation. Yet even in his failing state, Kurtz calms them with his frail voice. This shows that his personality and influence remain powerful even at the edge of death. At this time, Marlow also sees Kurtz's African mistress for the first time. She is a mysterious and commanding woman, adorned with ornaments, standing with a solemn presence. Her appearance and bearing symbolize Kurtz's power, dominance, and deep ties with the locals.

The Death of Kurtz: That night, Marlow notices Kurtz trying to make his way toward the local camp despite his fragile body. Drawn by his strange bond with the people, Kurtz seems unwilling to leave them. Marlow stops him and urges him to return to the ship. At first, Kurtz refuses, knowing that if he leaves, his "god-like" power at the Inner Station will be gone forever. But he is too weak to resist, and eventually, he is taken back to the steamer with Marlow.

During the journey back, Kurtz's condition worsens rapidly. At the edge of death, he utters the novel's most famous and mysterious words: "The horror! The horror!". These words reflect his final vision of the corruption inside himself, the empire, and the darkness within human nature.

Marlow's Return and the Lie to the Intended: After Kurtz's death, Marlow also falls gravely ill, but he survives. Following the painful return journey, he comes back to Europe. There he delivers some of Kurtz's papers and documents to the proper authorities. Later, he visits Kurtz's fiancée, the Intended. She still believes that Kurtz was a noble and extraordinary man, a true representative of civilization who had done great work in Africa.

She asks Marlow what Kurtz's last words were. In truth, Kurtz had said, "The horror! The horror!"—a cry exposing the hypocrisy of civilization and the darkness of the human soul. But Marlow does not reveal this. Instead, he lies and tells her, "Your name was his last word." He does not wish to shatter her beautiful illusion of Kurtz. For her, Marlow preserves the image of Kurtz as a "great hero."