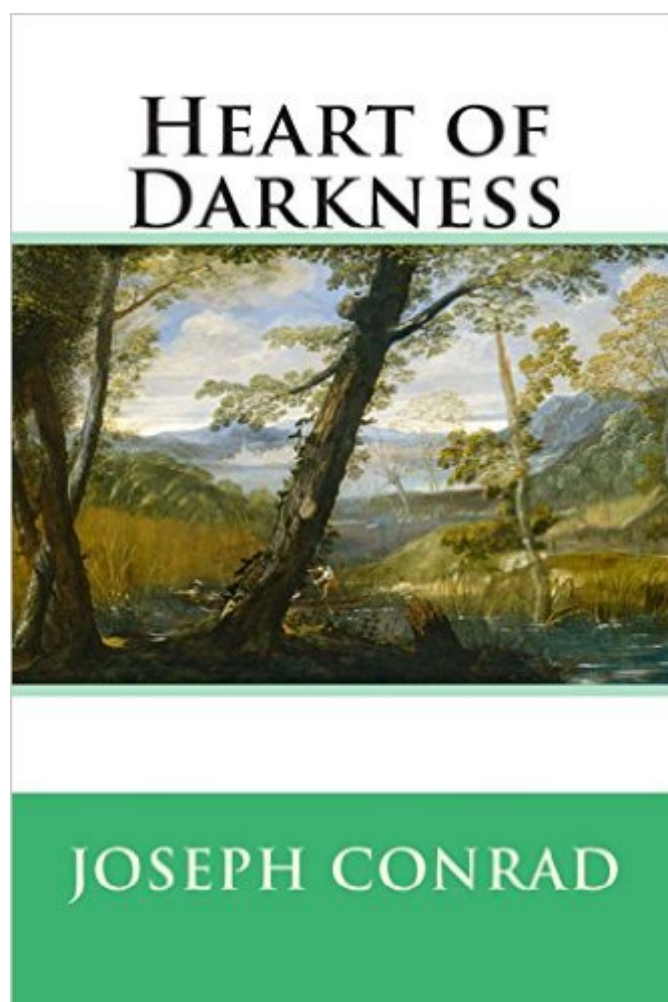


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Heart Of Darkness



Synopsis

Heart of Darkness (1899) is a short novel by Polish novelist Joseph Conrad, written as a frame narrative, about Charles Marlow's experience as an ivory transporter down the Congo River in Central Africa. The river is "a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land". In the course of his travel in central Africa, Marlow becomes obsessed with Mr. Kurtz. The story is a complex exploration of the attitudes people hold on what constitutes a barbarian versus a civilized society and the attitudes on colonialism and racism that were part and parcel of European imperialism. Originally published as a three-part serial story, in Blackwood's Magazine, the novella Heart of Darkness has been variously published and translated into many languages. In 1998, the Modern Library ranked Heart of Darkness as the sixty-seventh of the hundred best novels in English of the twentieth century.

Book Information

Paperback: 78 pages

Publisher: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform (November 29, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1503275922

ISBN-13: 978-1503275928

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.2 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 5.9 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.9 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (574 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #3,043 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #164 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > Classics](#) #253 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > Genre Fiction > Horror](#)

Customer Reviews

Reading Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad is a lot like running a 5K (3.2 miles) race. You start out slow and steady trying to get your pace and make your way through the convoluted mess of other racers, but by mile two you're huffing and puffing and ready to quit because it's a lot harder than you thought it would be. By the time you hit mile three you think you can't possibly keep going until finally the endorphins kick in and you realize, hey, you're actually having fun! Then before you know it the race is over, and you're left with a sense of wonder and accomplishment at having run the whole thing. Most importantly you take away a new identity of yourself; you, my friend, are now a Runner. Just as a 5K is 3 miles, Heart of Darkness is divided into

3 parts. For me, the first part of the story was initially hard to get into because I found it difficult to adjust to Conrad's dense writing style, and I found myself confused by Conrad's use of one narrator to begin the story and then the shift in point of view to the character of Marlow telling his own story. I read something about an interview and something about a river boat captain, but few things made sense. By the second part, I thought I was beginning to understand. Marlow's predicament with his broken down boat and the puzzle pieces began to come together. To grasp the meaning, I looked at reviews and others' critiques of the story, and I realized I might not be understanding what was going on. I moved into part 3 with a tentative understanding. The plot, muddy and dark, became tinted grey. Marlow finally meets the man I'd read about in pages before -- Mr. Kurtz, a man spoken of with a weird sense of awe. Marlow, this idealist, comes to understand that some really bad things are happening in his world.

This is a brilliant novella that is at once overread and underappreciated. It is required reading for students at the end of high school or at the beginning of college. Given some of the difficulties of Conrad's deliberate, complex, turn-of-the-century style, this is probably a mistake -- and has produced a generation of students who don't want to read anything else by the man. Conrad should not be force-fed in this fashion. I think the work is also wrongly criticized by modern critics as racist. Apart from the fallacy of "presentism" in criticizing an 1899 story by the standards of the 21st century, I don't believe the book is a celebration of racism or colonialism. Conrad's narrator, to be sure, throws around the "N" word and dismisses the Africans as savages. But he also dismisses the Europeans as savages for taking undue advantage of the historical accident of their power over other cultures and for callous exploitation. Also, the narrator is different from the writer. Conrad himself is a master of ambiguity. It's not altogether clear what the story means, and it resonates precisely because of its troubling moral ambiguities. For Conrad, the interior of Africa -- or the vast sea and other unexplored territories as indicated in the story's final paragraph -- is the heart of darkness. This is not because the natives are inferior to the white man. What makes it the heart of darkness is the ability to wield unchecked power in dangerous and hostile circumstances. If anything, this is a critique, not a celebration of colonialism. Is Kurtz a hero or villain? That is the essential ambiguity raised by the book, as well as by the "Apocalypse Now" movie that is based on the book.

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