

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

British author of Polish origin, Joseph Conrad is remembered for novels which drew on his experience as a mariner and addressed profound themes of nature and existence.

The adventure novel *Heart of Darkness* is based on the author's journey to the Congo and focuses on imperialism and colonialism and the so called 'white man burden'. While the white man claims he wants to bring faith and development to the poor savages, his real purpose is the opening of new markets and the exploitation of lands rich in raw materials.

The story opens on a boat on the Thames. One man, Marlow, begins telling about a trip to central Africa. He was the captain of a steamship and the company he worked for wanted him to rescue Kurtz, a powerful agent at the Inner Station, who had been isolated for months and was now sick. Marlow sailed with the station manager, but the natives attacked them: they did not want Kurtz to leave because he was an idol for them. When finally Marlow met Kurtz, the ivory trader was going to die. Kurtz tried to explain his opinion about colonialism and in a moment of clarity, he said his last words: "The horror! The horror!". Back in London, after a year, Marlow paid a visit to Kurtz's fiancé, a faithful woman who loved Kurtz and believed in his ideals. Marlow told her that Kurtz had died with her name on his lips. The story ends on the boat on the Thames where it had begun, travelling into the heart of darkness.

Kurtz can be considered a symbol of violent colonialism: he has abandoned the moral values of his culture, murdering and forcing the natives to adore him as a god.

In the passage below Marlow comes to understand the real nature and meaning of darkness.



The Horror!

One morning he gave me a packet of papers and a photograph, - the lot¹ tied together with a shoe-string. 'Keep this for me,' he said. 'This noxious² fool' (meaning the manager) 'is capable of prying³ into my boxes when I am not looking.'

In the afternoon I saw him. He was lying on his back with closed eyes, and I withdrew⁴ quietly, but I heard him mutter,⁵ 'Live rightly, die, die...' I listened. There was nothing more. Was he rehearsing⁶ some speech in his sleep, or was it a fragment of a phrase from some newspaper article? He had been writing for the papers and meant to do so again, 'for the furthering⁷ of my ideas. It's a duty.'

His was an impenetrable darkness. I looked at him as you peer⁸ down at a man who is lying at the bottom of a precipice where the sun never shines. But I had not much time to give him, because I was helping the engine-driver to take to pieces the leaky⁹ cylinders, to straighten a bent connecting-rod,¹⁰ and in other such matters. I lived in an infernal mess of rust,¹¹ filings, nuts, bolts, spanners, hammers, ratchet-drills¹² - things I abominate, because I don't get on with¹³ them. I tended¹⁴ the little forge¹⁵ we fortunately had aboard; I toiled wearily¹⁶ in a wretched scrap-heap¹⁷ - unless I had the shakes too bad to stand.

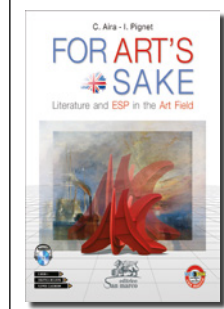
One evening coming in with a candle I was startled to hear him say a little tremulously, 'I am lying here in the dark waiting for death.' The light was within a foot of his eyes. I forced myself to murmur, 'Oh, nonsense!' and stood over him as if transfixed.¹⁸

Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before, and hope never to see again. Oh, I wasn't touched. I was fascinated. It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of somber¹⁹ pride, of ruthless²⁰ power, of craven²¹ terror - of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail

GLOSSARY

1 whole - 2 poisonous - 3 looking into - 4 (withdraw, withdrew, withdrawn) moved back - 5 whisper - 6 repeating - 7 spreading - 8 look closely - 9 cracked - 10 curved connecting piece of metal - 11 metal corrosion - 12 series of tools - 13 like - 14 was in charge - 15 workshop where objects are made by heating metal - 16 tiredly - 17 miserable pile of unwanted material - 18 hypnotized - 19 grave, serious - 20 brutal - 21 cowardly





of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision, - he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath -

'The horror! The horror!'

I blew the candle out²² and left the cabin. The pilgrims were dining in the mess-room,²³ and I took my place opposite the manager, who lifted his eyes to give me a questioning glance, which I successfully ignored.

He leaned²⁴ back, serene, with that peculiar smile of his sealing²⁵ the unexpressed depths of his meanness.²⁶ A continuous shower of small flies streamed upon the lamp, upon the cloth, upon our hands and faces. Suddenly the manager's boy put his insolent black head in the doorway, and said in a tone of scathing²⁷ contempt²⁸ -

'Mistah Kurtz - he dead.'

All the pilgrims rushed out to see. I remained, and went on with my dinner. I believe I was considered brutally callous.²⁹ However, I did not eat much. There was a lamp in there - light, don't you know - and outside it was so beastly, beastly dark. I went no more near the remarkable man who had pronounced a judgment upon the adventures of his soul on this earth. The voice was gone. What else had been there? But I am of course aware that next day the pilgrims buried something in a muddy hole.

And then they very nearly buried me.

GLOSSARY

22 put off - 23 dining-room - 24 reclined - 25 shutting - 26 lack of understanding - 27 mocking -
 28 sarcasm - 29 cruel

ACTIVITIES

- 1 Say whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F) and correct the false ones.
 - 1 The action takes place in England. T F
 - 2 The narrator speaks about a man who is going to die. T F
 - 3 The man is a black man. T F
 - 4 The dying man gives the narrator a packet of papers and a photo. T F
 - 5 He wants people to learn about his memories. T F
 - 6 Kurtz's last words are his fiancé's name. T F
 - 7 The captain announces Kurtz's death. T F
 - 8 The manager's boy shows respect and fear for Kurtz when he announces his death. T F
 - 9 The pilgrims go on with their dinner at the news of Kurtz's death. T F
 - 10 The captain buries Kurtz. T F
- 2 The two men in the passage seem to represent two opposed points of view about imperialism. Answer the following questions.
 - 1 Does Marlow's attitude change after hearing Kurtz's cry 'The Horror! The Horror!'?
 - 2 What does Marlow see on Kurtz's face?
 - 3 What is Marlow's reaction at the news of Kurtz's death?
 - 4 What is Marlow's opinion about Kurtz after his death?
 - 5 How does Marlow consider Kurtz's last words?

