

THE  
CONNELL GUIDE  
TO JOSEPH CONRAD'S



HEART  
OF  
DARKNESS

“This is a subtle and intelligent guide to Conrad’s most well-known, most controversial and most mysterious work. If you’re going up-river with Marlow, this is the book to take with you.”

PHILIP PULLMAN

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE  
NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

*by Graham Bradshaw*

*The  
Connell Guide  
to  
Joseph Conrad's*

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Heart  
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Darkness

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# Introduction

Conrad finished *Heart of Darkness* on 9<sup>th</sup> February, 1899 and it was originally published in three parts in that important organ of Victorian high culture, *Blackwood's Magazine*, Part One appearing in the 1,000<sup>th</sup> issue. Three years then passed before it was republished in book form as the second story in the collection *Youth: A Narrative, and Two Other Stories*. While “Youth” has always been highly regarded, the third story in this volume, “The End of the Tether”, has had little critical attention – even Conrad himself said in later life he didn’t think it likely he’d read it again.

But *Heart of Darkness* had an impact as powerful as any long short story, or short novel ever written – it is only 38,000 words. It quickly became, and has remained, Conrad’s most famous work and has been regarded by many in America, if not elsewhere, as his greatest work. Exciting and profound, lucid and bewildering, and written with an exuberance which sometimes seems at odds with its subject matter, it has influenced writers as diverse as T.S.Eliot (in *The Four Quartets* and *The Waste Land*), Graham Greene (*The Third Man*, *A Burnt-Out Case*), William Golding (*The Inheritors*) and Ngugi wa Thiong’o (*A Grain of Wheat*). It has also inspired, among others, Orson Welles, who made two radio versions the second of which, in 1945, depicted Kurtz as a forerunner of

Adolf Hitler, and Francis Ford Coppola who turned it into the film *Apocalypse Now*.

More critical attention has probably been paid to it, per word, than to any other modern prose work. It has also become a text about which, as the late Frank Kermode once complained, interpreters feel licensed to say absolutely anything. Why? What is it about *Heart of Darkness* that has captivated critics and readers for so long and caused so many millions of words to be written about it? And why has its peculiarly dark and intense vision of life so frequently been misunderstood?

## A summary of the plot

The story opens at dusk on the deck of a cruising yawl, the *Nellie*, moored in the Thames estuary. An unnamed narrator sits with four friends, one of whom, Marlow, begins to tell the clearly traumatic story of his journey on another river – in Africa. After a number of false starts, Marlow describes how he goes to Brussels where a trading company recommended by his aunt appoints him as a riverboat captain in the Congo. He travels by ship to take up his post and on arrival is disgusted by what he sees of the greed of the ivory traders and the brutal way in which they exploit the natives.

At the company’s Outer Station he hears about the most remarkable and successful ivory trader of

all, Mr Kurtz, who is stationed in the heart of the country. Marlow sets out to find him, first making an arduous cross-country trek to the company's Central Station. There, however, he finds that the steamboat he is to command on the journey upriver to find Kurtz has been mysteriously wrecked. He hears that Kurtz is seriously ill and believes the manager and others at the Central Station – jealous of his success – are plotting to deprive him of supplies and medicine in the hope that he will die. Marlow takes Kurtz to be an idealist with higher and nobler motives than his fellow traders and is anxious to meet him. He also becomes convinced his departure from the Central Station is being deliberately delayed.

Finally, after frustrating months of repairs to the steamboat, he sets off on the eight-week journey upriver to find Kurtz. He feels growing dread. The journey is “like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world”. As the boat draws near to the Inner Station it is attacked by tribesmen and the helmsman is killed. When Marlow arrives he meets a half-mad young Russian, who tells him of Kurtz's brilliance and the semi-divine power he wields over the natives.

Marlow, however, soon realizes that Kurtz has achieved his status by indulging in barbaric rites: a row of severed heads on stakes round his hut testify to the way this educated and once civilised man has achieved his ascendancy. He is now

dying. As Marlow attempts to move him back down river, Kurtz tries to justify his actions, then, before dying, utters his famous and cryptic last words: “The horror! The horror!” After Kurtz's death, Marlow has a breakdown and remembers little of his journey home. A year later, he visits Kurtz's fiancée in Brussels. Faced with her grief he can't bring himself to tell her the truth. Instead he simply tells her that the last words spoken by Kurtz were “your name”.



*John Malkovich and Iman as Kurtz and Black Beauty in Nicholas Roeg's 1993 film adaptation*

## AT A GLANCE: CONRAD'S MAJOR WORKS

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### THE NIGGER OF THE NARCISSUS: A TALE OF THE SEA (1897)

Conrad's first great novel. The story of a West Indian sailor of African descent, who falls ill during a voyage from Bombay to London on the merchant ship *Narcissus*.

### YOUTH (1898)

A semi-autobiographical short story based on Conrad's first ill-fated journey to Bangkok, first, published in 1902 as part of the same volume that contained *Heart of Darkness* (with which it shares its fictional narrator, Marlow).

### LORD JIM (1900)

Also narrated by Marlow. Jim – one of Conrad's most enigmatic figures; we never learn his surname – is first mate on the *Patna*. In a moment of weakness, he abandons ship when it runs aground. Publicly disgraced, he is sent to a fictional island near China where he becomes a local hero, falls in love and finally dies for his honour.

### NOSTROMO (1904)

Conrad's greatest novel. Charles Gould inherits a silver mine from his father in the fictional South American republic of Costaguana, which he reopens. But the wealth he creates leads only to corruption and violence. Gould entrusts his silver to the "incorruptible" Nostromo, who hides it. But this is

Conrad, and no one is incorruptible. Nostromo meets his death when, attempting to recover more of the silver for himself, he is mistaken for a trespasser.

### THE SECRET AGENT: A SIMPLE TALE (1907)

Conrad's only London novel. Adolf Verloc, owner of a seedy pornographic shop in Soho and member of a largely ineffectual anarchist terrorist group, is employed as a secret agent by an unnamed foreign country and instructed to blow up the Greenwich Observatory. Verloc's brother-in-law is killed by the bomb, which prompts Verloc to confess to his wife, who goes mad and stabs him to death.

### UNDER WESTERN EYES (1911)

A young Russian student, Razumov, finds a fellow student, Victor Haldin, hiding in his apartment. Haldin confesses to a political assassination, and asks for Razumov's help. Instead, Razumov goes to the police, and Haldin is hanged. Meanwhile, Haldin's sister receives a letter from Haldin saying Razumov has helped him. Razumov travels to Switzerland, where he falls in love with her and ends up confessing what he has done.

### CHANCE (1913)

The fourth and last of Conrad's stories to feature Marlow, this is the novel that, finally, brought him commercial success and turned him into a celebrity, selling 13,000 copies in its first two years in Britain and 20,000 in its first seven months in America. Unusually for Conrad, it has a female central character – Flora de Barral, whose father is bankrupt and imprisoned – and a happy ending.

# What is *Heart of Darkness* about?

The English critic F.R. Leavis, the American critic Lionel Trilling, and the American-Palestinian critic Edward Said – three of the most important and influential critics of Conrad – all answered this question in very different, sometimes incompatible ways. That could be taken as a warning that there is no simple, timeless or final answer to the question of what *Heart of Darkness* is about, and these three critics didn't even agree whether it was an “exasperating”, “badly marred” work (Leavis), or a “very great work” (Trilling), or Conrad’s “very greatest work” (Said). But the differences between these critics are also instructive, and help us to see how the novel engages the reader in two ways.

On the one hand it is a courageous and passionate attack on imperialism. On the other it is an early and extraordinarily original example of what came to be called “modernism”, both in the complexity of its narrative method and in its urgent existentialist concern with how we are to live and with what we can live by in an unaccommodating world that is hostile or, at best, indifferent to human values.

There is, of course, no contradiction between saying that *Heart of Darkness* is both an early modernist classic and a powerful political assault

on the ideology of imperialism. James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), arguably the greatest of all modernist novels, is also vehemently political in its attack on the two foreign powers that, in Joyce’s view, had blighted Irish history, namely England and the Roman Catholic Church.

Among those who have done most to highlight the political aspect of Conrad’s work is the Palestinian-American, Edward Said. Conrad was the writer who meant most to Said during his immensely productive life as a critic and political activist, and the book which meant most to him was *Heart of Darkness*. In *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century*, a volume dedicated to the memory of Said, who died in 2003, the editors argue that he

changed the landscape of British and Anglophone literary studies by moving Conrad and the issues of imperialism foregrounded in his writings to its center, reversing the metropolitan biases and blindness of the Western canon as previously constructed, and opening the door to global and postcolonial articulations of literary and cultural history.

Certainly, Said “foregrounded” the “issues of imperialism” that had not been addressed in the essays of some of the great early critics of Conrad, like Trilling and Leavis, although it is not so