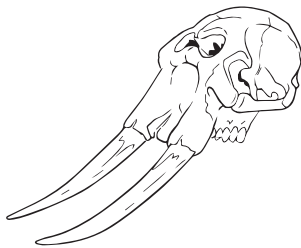


WORLDVIEW GUIDE

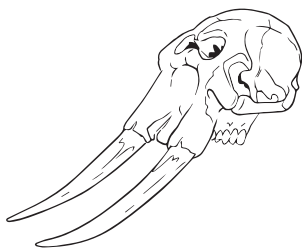
HEART OF DARKNESS



Marcus Schwager

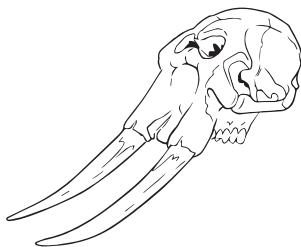
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INTRODUCTION

Heart of Darkness spellbinds its reader from its title to its final word, perhaps the only predictable word in the work: “darkness.” Indeed, Joseph Conrad held so true to his title’s promise that, generations later, readers still recoil, calling out for light.

So, what is this strange tale before you? The epicenter of sin? Racist propaganda? An attack on imperialism? An absurd experiment? Thanks to Conrad’s unforgettable novella, this guide is a rumination on one of “the dark places of the earth.”



WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS

Heart of Darkness's interpretation hangs on perspective. Although we may think of perspective as something that distorts or obscures the truth, perspective is actually the handmaid of wisdom. How many times did Christ Jesus answer a question with a question, or a parable, or a surprising turn? Why? Partially, no doubt, to confound and reorient the listener. For instance, consider the man who asked Jesus the following: "Good teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Now, you might expect Jesus to jump right into sharing the gospel; wouldn't we all? Someone actually asked for it! Instead, Jesus responds, "Why do you call me good?" (Lk. 18:19). Jesus begins by questioning the address ("good"), challenging the man's (and audience's and reader's) view of this teacher before him. How disorienting; yet also, what an effective means of re-orienting the audience. Paradoxically, an indirect route is sometimes the surest way to wisdom. Conrad employs a

manifestly indirect route to meaning. Is it a path to wisdom or an unnecessary obscurity? You'll have to judge for yourself.

In our novella, recognize first that we have a frame narrative on our hands, which adds an element of circuitry or ambiguity. The framing element is an anonymous man on the yawl listening to Marlow. The framed work within is Marlow's own tale. From Marlow himself smaller framed stories emerge, since Marlow is sometimes recalling other men's tales (such as the Russian or Kurtz himself). Thus, we may be reading the narrator's recollection of Marlow's recollection of the Russian's recollection. Like a telephone game, the reader knows that each narrative layer adds complexity and ambiguity. There's complexity because each narrator recalls a story from the vantage of their own character, shading colors; there's ambiguity because, like a real person, that character may have a poor recall or may willfully manipulate the facts. The reader usually seeks clues concerning the reliability of the narrator. In the case of the narrator, the reader has very little to go on. He does seem frustrated with another one of Marlow's "inconclusive experiences" at the outset, but story-grip sets in for the whole party while Marlow word-weaves (at the end, the tide had turned some time before they decide to continue their journey; the listeners were so deeply engaged). Overall, the anonymous narrator seems reliable enough, given the little the reader has to judge from.