

Heart of Darkness Book Notes

Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad

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Contents

Heart of Darkness Book Notes.....	1
Contents.....	2
Author/Context.....	3
Plot Summary.....	5
Major Characters.....	6
Objects/Places.....	9
Quotes.....	11
Topic Tracking: Darkness Imagery.....	14
Topic Tracking: Dream/Nightmare.....	15
Topic Tracking: Imperialism/Commerce.....	16
Topic Tracking: Isolation.....	17
Topic Tracking: Mental/Physical Illness.....	18
Topic Tracking: Wilderness Imagery.....	20
Part 1.....	21
Part 2.....	27
Part 3.....	31



Author/Context

Born Joseph Korzeniowski in Poland in 1859, Joseph Conrad came late to writing but soon became one of the most-read writers in his adopted English language. Among his works are *Lord Jim*, *Nostromo*, *Youth*, *The Secret Sharer*, and *The Secret Agent*. A sailor by trade, Conrad began writing in *Almayer's Folly*, his first novel, in 1899, based on his experiences at sea. *Heart of Darkness* stands out from his other works in its cerebral and theme-heavy, rather than plot-heavy, nature; it is the telling of the tale, the internal feelings about the events, and not the events themselves that are emphasized.

As critic Marvin Mudrick noted, "it is one of the great originals of literature. After *Heart of Darkness* the craftsman of fiction could never again be unaware of the moral resources inherent in every recorded situation, or insensitive to the need of making the most precise record possible of every sensation: what now appears as an immemorial cliché of the craft of fiction has a date as recent as the turn of the century." In many ways, *Heart of Darkness* is the first "modern" novel, an essential precursor to the more complicated theme and character-driven, rather than plot-driven, fiction of the twentieth century.

In 1898, Conrad began the process of writing *Heart of Darkness*, basing it on his own trip to the Congo in 1890. While some critics have found structural relationships between *Heart of Darkness* and Dante's *Inferno*, such interpretation perhaps expands too far beyond the simpler explanation that Marlow reports Conrad's journey up the Congo River--the journey detailed in its real particulars in "The Congo Diary", which in a less ornate and deliberate fashion describes many similar situations, characters, and episodes as those presented by Marlow. Like Marlow, Conrad reported that as a child he declared an intention to grow up and go to the unexplored heart of Africa; like Marlow, he was recommended by a relative to a continental trading concern, the Societe Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce de Haut-Congo. The detailed descriptions of the Company Office, the various stations, and the trek upriver through the jungle are "extraordinarily vivid...nothing but the memory of actuality," according to biographer Gerard Jean-Aubry. The goal of Conrad's expedition was to recover an ill agent in the interior, a Georges-Antoine Klein, who died on the return voyage.

Conrad himself noted in his preface to *Youth and Two Other Stories*, the volume in which *Heart of Darkness* first appeared, that "*Heart of Darkness* is experience...but it is experience pushed a little (and only a very little) beyond the actual facts of the case for the perfectly legitimate, I believe, purpose of bringing it home to the minds and bosoms of the readers."

In a larger sense, Conrad's journey is a commentary not only on one trip, a few people, or one company; it remarks on the very essence of colonization and the nature of relationships between groups of people. Conrad referred to the colonization of Africa in an essay as "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration," and Marlow's cynical pessimism about the Company is Conrad's about imperialism--it brings out the worst in humans. When



Conrad/Marlow says that "all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz," he is expanding the irony between Kurtz's noble motives and savage results to the policies of Europe in Africa throughout the nineteenth century.

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Plot Summary

Heart of Darkness tells the story of Marlow, a sailor, who describes to his shipmates the unusual experience he had traveling upriver in the Congo and the effect it had upon him. Hired by a Continental trading company as a steamboat captain between the outer stations and the interior, Marlow's primary mission was to visit and, if necessary, retrieve the mysterious Kurtz, an extraordinarily successful agent who had lost contact and reportedly fallen ill. Marlow tells the men that the entire journey was a sort of dream--lacking any real-world logic, deeply affecting, and difficult to describe in its details. The trip took several months, occurring in stages--a trip along the coast, an overland trek to the Central Station, and finally the riverboat journey to Kurtz's outpost.

During the entire expedition Marlow was struck by the mistreatment of natives by the Company and its agents, the preponderance of disease, the intimidating presence of the jungle, and the absurdness of the colonial operation carrying on for a relatively small amount of ivory. He began hearing of Kurtz as soon as he arrived, and everything he heard--of Kurtz's eloquence, of his high moral principles, of his effectiveness, of his influence in the Company--aroused Marlow's interest. The idea of Kurtz began to obsess Marlow. When they arrived at his station, they found he had set himself up as a sort of god to the natives he had once wanted to civilize; he had become more savage than even the natives, taking part in bizarre rites and using violence against the locals to inspire fear and obtain more ivory.

Against his wishes, Kurtz was taken back by Marlow and the other whites; his illness overcame him on the return trip, and he died. His last words--"The horror! The horror!"--were his realization of the depths to which he had sunk from his noble goals. He entrusted Marlow before his death with his papers, including an article he had written on bringing enlightenment and progress to the natives of the Congo. As evidence of Kurtz's decay, however, was the postscript he'd scribbled at the end of this article: "Exterminate all the brutes!". Marlow was shaken by his encounter with Kurtz, who had, because of his isolation, been exposed to the darkness within himself and had gone mad as a result. When back in Europe, Marlow contacted Kurtz's fiancé but could not reveal to her the terrifying last words.

Ultimately, Marlow tells the story of how when the thin shell of civilization has fallen away, the corruption and evil within can surface. Seeing the darkness lingering immediately under the surface of a man who thought himself moral forever affected Marlow as a deep nightmare would. As Marlow finishes his story, trailing off as he reaches the lie about Kurtz's last words, the sky has grown dark.



Major Characters

Marlow: The story of Kurtz is told by Marlow, who speaks for the majority of the novel. He is a longtime seaman, a rootless wanderer and frequent storyteller. The stories he tells, though, tend to be more idea than episode. He was the captain of a small steamer that traveled up the Congo River to retrieve the mysterious Kurtz from the interior. His encounter with Kurtz shakes him for the rest of his life.

The Narrator: The unnamed narrator frames Marlow's story, but does not comment on it; he describes the boat and its environment.

Kurtz: A trade agent sent to Africa by the Company, he started out with the noble goal of bringing civilization and progress to the natives. Eloquent and charismatic, he had great favor in the Company and his virtue was praised, to the dismay of his jealous colleagues. No sooner had he arrived than the isolation torn away his civilized exterior and made his inner savageness emerge. He began to act as a god to the area natives. He decayed mentally and physically and ultimately died aware of the horror of his life.

The pilgrims: A group of sixteen to twenty men who Marlow brought on his trip into the interior. He barely talked with any of them; they fired rifles into crowds of natives onshore and were very suspicious of Kurtz. When Kurtz died, they buried him in the mud by the riverside.

The cannibals: The natives who acted as the crew on Marlow's ship to the interior. He became much closer to them than he did to the other white men. They received a meager pay of brass wire, which they were supposed to (but unable to) trade for food; as a result they were always hungry. They were generally distrusted or disregarded by the pilgrims.

The fiancé: Kurtz's fiancé back in Europe, who Marlow visited after his return from Africa. He told her the story of Kurtz's death but lied to her about Kurtz's last words. She was utterly devoted to Kurtz and believed strongly in his noble motives.

The young man: A Russian wanderer who ended up at Kurtz's station. Worshipful and fearful of Kurtz, he was most concerned with attempting to win Marlow over to Kurtz's side. He ran off before Kurtz was taken from the station, leaving Marlow with Kurtz's papers and an admonition to protect his memory.

Minor Characters

The Director of Companies, the Lawyer, and the Accountant: The three men who listen, along with the narrator, to Marlow's story. They are solid professional men who occasionally show skepticism about the story.

Marlow's aunt: She was able to get Marlow a job with the Company. She had the idea that the Company would ennoble and enlighten the savage African people.



Fresleven: The past captain along the Congo River, who Marlow was hired to replace. Normally a placid man, he killed a native chief over a chicken, and was killed, in retaliation, by the tribe.

The Secretary of the Company: Marlow interviewed with this distinguished old man at the Company offices.

Knitting Women: These women sat outside the offices of the Secretary for no apparent reason, knitting black wool. They made Marlow uneasy as they looked at him.

The Doctor: He gave Marlow a cursory examination, then measured his cranium out of curiosity. He was interested in the mental effects of the wilderness on Europeans.

The Swede: The Swede told Marlow the story of another Swede who traveled to the interior. Once stationed there, this man hung himself for no discernible reason. The story made Marlow uneasy.

Native laborers: At the outermost station, dozens of native laborers, captive prisoners supposedly enslaved for crimes, were building a railroad trestle. Many of them were sick or dying.

Chief Accountant: A well-dressed man who first told Marlow about Kurtz. He had come to hate the natives for how their noise distracted him.

Fat man: This greedy white man went with Marlow to the Central Station in order to make money. He was always complaining about the country and came down with a fever.

General Manager: A higher official with the Company, he went with Marlow into the interior in order to retrieve Kurtz. He was jealous of Kurtz's popularity with the Company in Europe and feared being usurped. He was incompetent and not very bright, but ambitious enough to stay in Africa.

Brickmaker: An ally of the Manager, this man befriended Marlow in order to gain information about Company politics. Like the manager, he worried about Kurtz's influence. He never made any bricks.

Treasure hunters: A caravan of greedy men who stopped at the Central Station on their way to the interior. Their goal was to raid natives for gold, ivory or other treasure. Marlow found them distasteful and cruel. They disappear, presumably dead, into the jungle.

Caravan leader: Uncle of the Manager, this man was the most unpleasant of the treasure-hunters. He worried about Kurtz's civilizing motives as a possible stumbling block to commercial considerations.



Boiler operator: A cannibal decked out with tribal decorations. Marlow noted that it was unfortunate that such an impressive native was forced to operate the boiler of a white man's ship.

Helmsman: A cannibal killed when Kurtz's tribes attacked the ship.

Native woman: A tall and beautiful woman who appeared strangely and menacingly when the white men took Kurtz aboard the ship. She also stared after them as they departed with Kurtz, unafraid of the noise of the ship's horn.



Objects/Places

The Company: The vast European trading company which sent Marlow to Africa.

Maps: As a child, Marlow was interested in the blank unexplored spots on maps, which inspired his interest in Africa. He saw such maps, with the blank spots filled, in the Company offices.

White city: This city, most likely Brussels, Belgium, struck Marlow as being sepulchral--like a coffin, cold and dead. He felt uneasy upon first arriving; when he returned he barely saw the people of the city as human. It is always a lonely, disturbing place for him.

French ship: This ship was firing for no apparent reason into a stretch of jungle; its crew claimed that there were 'enemies' they were firing at. The men on the ship, stricken with disease, were dying at a startling rate.

Company Station: The first stop for the ship taking Marlow to Africa. Here the journey to the interior would begin; here dozens of enslaved natives were beginning to build a railroad.

Ivory: The commercial good around which the entire Company revolved; the entire massive operation was carried out for only a small amount of ivory. Kurtz was bafflingly good at sending back huge quantities of ivory.

Central Station: The midpoint of Marlow's trip; here his ship, the pilgrims, and the Manager awaited his arrival. The atmosphere here was one of complicated Company politics.

Interior Station: The innermost point of the Company's penetration into Africa. From here Kurtz had established a dominion of power over the local tribes.

Ship: The steamer that Marlow was supposed to pilot had sunk in the river before he even arrived, and he had to spend months repairing it. It took Marlow and the pilgrims upriver to get Kurtz; it returned in rapidly declining repair.

Hut: A curious outpost of civilization halfway up the river, this hut was at one time occupied by the young Russian, who had left there a book and firewood for the next person to come along.

Article: A report on 'The Suppression of Savage Customs,' which Kurtz undertook to write with a mind towards progress and civilization. After writing the seventeen-page pamphlet, Kurtz angrily wrote 'Exterminate all the brutes!' at the end. Marlow eventually gave this pamphlet to a friend of Kurtz's, with the violent words removed.



Heads on stakes: The evidence that Kurtz, instead of being the noble missionary he intended, had become brutal. The heads were evidence of 'unsound methods'-- violence--by which he was able to control the natives and reap rich rewards of ivory.



Quotes

Quote 1: "The old river in its broad reach rested unruffled at the decline of day, after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks, spread out in the tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth... Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth!...The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealth, the germs of empires." Part 1, pg. 2

Quote 2: "'And this also,' said Marlow suddenly, 'has been one of the dark places of the earth.'" Part 1, pg. 3

Quote 3: "...In some inland post feel the savagery, the utter savagery, had closed round him--all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men. There's no initiation either into such mysteries. He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is detestable. And it has a fascination, too, which goes to work upon him. The fascination of the abomination--you know. Imagine the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate." Part 1, pg. 4

Quote 4: "The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much." Part 1, pg. 4

Quote 5: "Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. *Ave!* Old knitter of black wool. *Morituri te salutant.* Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again--not half, by a long way." Part 1, pg. 8

Quote 6: "She talked about 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways,' till, upon my word, she made me quite uncomfortable. I ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit." Part 1, pg. 9

Quote 7: "...Nothing happened. Nothing could happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight; and it was not dissipated by somebody on board assuring me earnestly there was a camp of native--he called them enemies!--hidden out of sight somewhere." Part 1, pg. 11

Quote 8: "In and out of rivers, streams of death in life, whose banks were rotting into mud, whose waters, thickened with slime, invaded the contorted mangroves, that seemed to writhe at us in the extremity of an impotent despair. Nowhere did we stop long enough to get a particularised impression, but the general sense of vague and



oppressive wonder grew upon me. It was like a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares." Part 1, pg. 11

Quote 9: ""When one has got to make correct entries, one comes to hate those savages--hate them to the death." Part 1, pg. 15

Quote 10: "I couldn't help asking him once what he meant by coming here at all. 'To make money, of course. What do you think?' he said scornfully." Part 1, pg. 16

Quote 11: "Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems I am trying to tell you a dream--making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is the very essence of dreams...no, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence--that which makes its truth, its meaning--its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream--alone..." Part 1, pg. 23

Quote 12: ""Is he alone there?' 'Yes,' answered the manager, 'he sent his assistant down the river with a note to me in these terms: 'Clear this poor devil out of the country, and don't bother sending me more of that sort. I had rather be alone than have the kind of men you can dispose of with me.' That was more than a year ago. Can you imagine such impudence?' 'Anything since then?' asked the other hoarsely. 'Ivory,' jerked the nephew, 'lots of it--prime sort--most annoying, from him.'" Part 2, pg. 27

Quote 13: "It was a distinct glimpse: the dugout, four paddling savages, and the lone white man turning his back suddenly on the headquarters, on relief, on thoughts of home--perhaps; setting his face towards the depth of the wilderness, towards his empty and desolate station." Part 2, pg. 27

Quote 14: "The reaches opened before us and closed behind, as if the forest had stepped leisurely across the water to bar the way for our return. We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness." Part 2, pg. 30

Quote 15: "Everything belonged to him--but that was a trifle. The thing to know was what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own. That was the reflection that made you creepy all over. It was impossible--not good for one either--trying to imagine. He had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land--I mean literally. You can't understand--how could you?" Part 2, pg. 43

Quote 16: "It was very simple, and at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you, luminous and terrifying like a flash of lightning in a serene sky: 'Exterminate all the brutes!'" Part 2, pg. 44

Quote 17: ""I tell you,' he cried, 'this man has enlarged my mind.'" Part 2, pg. 48



Quote 18: "He declared he would shoot me unless I gave him the ivory and then cleared out of the country, because he could do so, and had a fancy for it, and there was nothing on earth to prevent him killing whom he jolly well pleased." Part 3, pg. 50

Quote 19: "...Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts [...] there was something wanting in him--some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence. Whether he knew of this deficiency himself I can't say. I think the knowledge came to him at last--only at the very last. But the wilderness found him out early, and had taken vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude--and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core..." Part 3, pg. 51

Quote 20: "I turned to the wilderness really, not to Mr. Kurtz, who, I was ready to admit, was as good as buried. And for a moment it seemed to me as if I also was buried in a vast grave full of unspeakable secrets. I felt an intolerable weight oppressing my breast, the smell of the damp earth, the unseen presence of victorious corruption, the darkness of an impenetrable night..." Part 3, pg. 55

Quote 21: "I did not betray Mr. Kurtz--it was ordered I should never betray him--it was written I should be loyal to the nightmare of my choice. I was anxious to deal with this shadow by myself alone--and to this day I don't know why I was so jealous of sharing with anyone the peculiar blackness of that experience." Part 3, pg. 57

Quote 22: "I tried to break the spell--the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness--that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions. This alone, I was convinced, had driven him out to the edge of the forest, to the bush, towards the gleam of fires, the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations." Part 3, pg. 59

Quote 23: "They had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares." Part 3, pg. 59

Quote 24: "The horror! The horror!" Part 3, pg. 62

Quote 25: "Never see him! I saw him clearly then. I shall see this eloquent phantom as long as I live, and I shall see her too, a tragic and familiar shade, resembling in this gesture another one, tragic also, and bedecked with powerless charms, stretching bare brown arms over the glitter of the infernal stream, the stream of darkness." Part 3, pg. 68

Quote 26: "I raised my head. The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky--seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness." Part 3, pg. 69



Topic Tracking: Darkness Imagery

Part 1

Darkness Imagery 1: Before Marlow begins speaking, the sun is setting and dark clouds hang over the river.

Darkness Imagery 2: The knitting women in the office were sitting outside what Marlow calls "the door of Darkness," knitting black wool.

Darkness Imagery 3: The jungle that Marlow sailed along was extremely dark and foreboding.

Part 2

Darkness Imagery 4: As night fell, the manager's uncle pointed directly at the "profound darkness" of the jungle.

Darkness Imagery 5: Marlow describes his ship's course up the river as heading directly and deeply into the "heart of darkness."

Darkness Imagery 6: Marlow tells his shipmates that Kurtz belonged to the "powers of darkness."

Part 3

Darkness Imagery 7: In the middle of the night, Marlow awoke to hear chanting coming out of the "black, flat wall of the woods."

Darkness Imagery 8: Marlow says that his nighttime search for Kurtz had a "peculiar blackness."

Darkness Imagery 9: Marlow compares seeing the "impenetrable darkness" of Kurtz to looking down into a sunless hole.

Darkness Imagery 10: Marlow came across Kurtz sitting in the dark; as Kurtz died, Marlow blew out the candle he had brought in, and night was falling all around the ship.

Darkness Imagery 11: Marlow felt Kurtz as a "shadow darker than the night" as he entered the house of Kurtz's fiancé.

Darkness Imagery 12: The fiancé was wearing mourning black; and it was dusk when she came in the room. As the conversation proceeded the room became darker and darker.

Darkness Imagery 13: Night has come to the river; the narrator remarks on the intense, cloudy darkness around them.



Topic Tracking: Dream/Nightmare

Part 1

Dream/Nightmare 1: The knitting women appeared to Marlow as though in a nightmare--they made no logical sense sitting in front of the Company's door.

Dream/Nightmare 2: Marlow compares the trip along the coast to a "delusion" and says that he had no contact with reality.

Dream/Nightmare 3: Marlow says that trying to get across the voyage is like trying to explain a dream--the whole episode made him feel "captured by the incredible." The whole story, he says, has that "dream-sensation."

Part 2

Dream/Nightmare 4: Marlow heard the conversation of the Manager and his uncle while half-asleep, so he wasn't sure of what was really happening.

Dream/Nightmare 5: Marlow compares the trip upriver to an "unrestful and noisy dream" that he can only remember in images and with confused wonder.

Dream/Nightmare 6: From his fever, Marlow slipped into a delusion wherein he hoped to look more appetizing than his shipmates--the sort of logic that works in dreams but cannot really be explained.

Part 3

Dream/Nightmare 7: Marlow wondered whether the Russian really existed, whether he had seen him at all.

Dream/Nightmare 8: Marlow was awakened by drums, and he was unaware of what was really happening--he could not believe what was going on, with fires, drums, the dark jungle, and Kurtz gone. Not being able to make sense of his surroundings, he simply went out to look for Kurtz.

Dream/Nightmare 9: Marlow describes his loyalty to Kurtz as "the nightmare of my choosing."

Dream/Nightmare 10: When Marlow found Kurtz he was unable to grasp what was going on--nothing seemed to have any meaning and his words were like words spoken in dreams.



Topic Tracking: Imperialism/Commerce

Part 1

Imperialism/Commerce 1: The narrator thinks about empire-building and humans' constant desire to conquer the earth.

Imperialism/Commerce 2: Marlow had to sign papers agreeing never to reveal trade secrets of the Company.

Imperialism/Commerce 3: Marlow tried to tell his aunt that profit, not the ennoblement of mankind, was the Company's purpose.

Imperialism/Commerce 4: The Company, with its complete control over huge numbers of native people and land, operated entirely for a small amount of ivory.

Imperialism/Commerce 5: When Marlow asked the fat man why he had come to Africa, the man replied that his goal was to make money.

Part 2

Imperialism/Commerce 6: Marlow implies that the seemingly noble, actually corrupt Kurtz was produced by all of Europe--that he was typical of the colonizer.

Part 3

Imperialism/Commerce 7: The quest for ivory became more important to Kurtz than the mission to civilize the natives--he began using violence and power to get more ivory.



Topic Tracking: Isolation

Part 1

Isolation 1: Marlow asks his shipmates to consider the loneliness and sense of abandonment felt by the Roman legionnaire in the unfamiliar wilderness of pre-civilization Britain.

Isolation 2: Marlow felt very alone as he traveled along the coast--he does not even mention that he spoke to anyone. He "had no point of contact" with any of his fellow travelers.

Isolation 3: Marlow says that it is impossible for anyone to tell anyone else of his own life, that people are always trapped in themselves and apart from each other.

Part 2

Isolation 4: Marlow imagined Kurtz sailing off upriver, away from society and into his own world.

Isolation 5: Marlow felt cut off from his past and from civilization as he piloted the ship upriver. The trip was overwhelmingly silent and Marlow does not mention ever talking to the other passengers.

Part 3

Isolation 6: It is the "great solitude" which allowed Kurtz to be corrupted. Away from the distractions of society, Kurtz was able to be completely alone with his own mind, and it was from this isolation that he lost his principles.

Isolation 7: Marlow wanted to keep the experience of searching for Kurtz to himself--he wanted to be entirely alone when he confronted Kurtz.

Isolation 8: Marlow tells his shipmates that being alone in the wilderness is what drove Kurtz mad--not just the surroundings, but his self-imposed isolation within them. Looking too deeply into one's self, Marlow implies, is dangerous.

Isolation 9: When Marlow returned to the white city, he could not relate to any other person--could not take them seriously. His experience cut him off from every other person.



Topic Tracking: Mental/Physical Illness

Part 1

Mental/Physical Illness 1: The doctor was curious about the mental changes that individuals would undergo while in the wilderness. He asked Marlow about past madness in the family, and tells him to keep his wits about him when he goes.

Mental/Physical Illness 2: Marlow notes that the attack on the barren coast by the French ship seemed a little insane.

Mental/Physical Illness 3: The sailors onboard the French ship were dying of various illnesses at the rate of three a day.

Mental/Physical Illness 4: The slave laborers were afflicted with some sort of malaise; they laid under trees, some dying.

Mental/Physical Illness 5: The accountant's record keeping was disturbed by the loud groans of a man dying of some tropical disease.

Mental/Physical Illness 6: The fat man was struck with fever.

Mental/Physical Illness 7: Marlow was reminded by the fat man's futile desire for revenge of the doctor's words about the mental changes people would undergo under the stress of the wilderness.

Mental/Physical Illness 8: Kurtz had come down with some sort of disease.

Part 2

Mental/Physical Illness 9: The manager's uncle complained that like Kurtz, all of his men were suffering from various illnesses.

Mental/Physical Illness 10: Marlow describes himself as having had a constant low fever during this journey. The weakness of mind and body associated with this fever afflicted all of the pilgrims; when Marlow wondered why the cannibals did not eat them, he only had to look at the other passengers to know how unhealthy they all were. His fever-related delirium made him hope that he was not so unappetizing-looking.

Mental/Physical Illness 11: Kurtz's "nerves went wrong"--he had lost his mental health.

Part 3

Mental/Physical Illness 12: The Russian had nursed Kurtz through numerous illnesses and afflictions.

Mental/Physical Illness 13: Marlow elaborates on a theory of why Kurtz had become insane--he had been corrupted by isolation. His mental breakdown paralleled his physical sickness.



Topic Tracking: Wilderness Imagery

Part 1

Wilderness Imagery 1: Marlow describes for his shipmates the wild state of nature that must have existed when the Romans first visited England.

Wilderness Imagery 2: Marlow watched the jungle from his ship, seeing pure wilderness for the first time.

Wilderness Imagery 3: Marlow describes the wild and varied vegetation he saw on his journey, and the oppressive impression it had on him.

Wilderness Imagery 4: Marlow had an image, at the Central Station, of the surrounding wilderness waiting to outlast the invasion of the Company.

Part 2

Wilderness Imagery 5: Marlow imagined the forest looking back at the manager and his uncle--the wilderness is personified.

Wilderness Imagery 6: The vegetation and wild natural state along the river overwhelmed Marlow--he imagined it observing him from all sides.

Wilderness Imagery 7: Marlow looked back and could see no trace of where the ship had come from--it was as though the jungle was closing in behind them.

Part 3

Wilderness Imagery 8: Marlow says that the wilderness had taken control of Kurtz.

Wilderness Imagery 9: When he leaves the ship to look for Kurtz, Marlow ends up in the midst of the living, wild jungle he had been fearing all along.

Wilderness Imagery 10: Kurtz, cursing the wilderness, asked Marlow to close the shutters to keep him from seeing the "curtain of trees" around him.



Part 1

Five men--Marlow, the Director of Companies, the Lawyer, and the Accountant, and the narrator--are at rest in the midst of sailing down the Thames River on the *Nellie*, their small boat. The men are waiting for the turn of tide that will take them downriver. They sit idly and consider playing dominoes but never get started, as the sun sets.

Topic Tracking: Darkness Imagery 1

The narrator thinks about the long history of British exploration and conquest with fondness as he looks over the river:

"The old river in its broad reach rested unruffled at the decline of day, after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks, spread out in the tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth...Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth!...The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealth, the germs of empires." Part 1, pg. 2

Topic Tracking: Imperialism/Commerce 1

After a long silence lit only by the nearby lighthouses, Marlow speaks:

"And this also," said Marlow suddenly, 'has been one of the dark places of the earth.'" Part 1, pg. 3

The others on the boat listen, because Marlow is about to tell a story. Marlow is a little different from other seamen in his tendency to tell stories not with simple meanings but rather with wise, universal meanings. Marlow explains that he is thinking of the Roman times, when the "civilized world" was discovering the mysterious and unsettled British Isles, similar to how the British are now discovering and settling the unexplored areas of the world. Thinking from the point of view of a Roman commander, Marlow explains the feelings of trying to conquer a foreign wilderness:

"...In some inland post feel the savagery, the utter savagery, had closed round him--all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men. There's no initiation either into such mysteries. He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is detestable. And it has a fascination, too, which goes to work upon him. The fascination of the abomination--you know. Imagine the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate." Part 1, pg. 4

Topic Tracking: Wilderness Imagery 1

Topic Tracking: Isolation 1



Marlow contrasts the brute force used by the Romans with the efficiency of the British colonizers, but seems to say they are not that different:

"The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much." Part 1, pg. 4

After a pause, Marlow goes on to tell his shipmates about his experience as a freshwater sailor. He admits that his story is unclear, but says that what actually happened is less important than the effect it had upon him. He starts by saying that during a period of idleness, he began looking for a ship to crew. None were forthcoming, so he decided to offer himself to the Company, a continental trading concern, as a riverboat captain in the still largely mysterious continent of Africa, since, as a child, he was fascinated with the unexplored spots on maps. He contacted his aunt, who offered her assistance in getting him a spot on a riverboat. He got such a spot quickly, because his predecessor Fresleven had been killed by natives after he unexpectedly attacked a village chief. Marlow traveled to the Company's offices on the continent, in an unspecified white city which is most likely Brussels, Belgium. The Secretary of the Company had Marlow sign papers agreeing never to reveal trade secrets.

Topic Tracking: Imperialism/Commerce 2

Marlow sat in the waiting room of the Company, looking at the maps there. Outside of the office where his interview was to occur sat two knitting women, who made Marlow distinctly uneasy as they sat trance-like and without any apparent purpose or reason for being there:

"Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. Ave! Old knitter of black wool. Morituri te salutant. Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again--not half, by a long way." Part 1, pg. 8

Topic Tracking: Dream/Nightmare 1

Topic Tracking: Darkness Imagery 2

Marlow went on to visit the Company's doctor, who gave him a cursory examination before going on to measure his cranium. The doctor admitted that the skull-measurement was of no use whatsoever, because he never saw the explorers upon their return from voyages, and because, cryptically, the "changes" that would occur to an explorer would be strictly internal, not external. The doctor inquired about past madness in Marlow's family, and Marlow, taking offense, asked whether the question was in the interests of science. The doctor responded that the ideal thing would be to study the subjects in the field, to observe if mental changes occurred. He lets Marlow go with only a warning to keep calm.

Topic Tracking: Mental/Physical Illness 1



Marlow bid farewell to his aunt over a cup of tea. She expressed her hope that her gifted nephew would be an emissary of civilization to the wild colonies:

"She talked about 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways,' till, upon my word, she made me quite uncomfortable. I ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit." Part 1, pg. 9

Topic Tracking: Imperialism/Commerce 3

Marlow comments that women are essentially naïve, a fact frustrating to men. He continues his story, telling of how he traveled to Africa along its coast, stopping occasionally along the way and seeing pieces of the continent as he sailed. He felt very alone, and nothing seemed quite human, although everything happened with its own logic.

Topic Tracking: Wilderness Imagery 2

Topic Tracking: Darkness Imagery 3

Topic Tracking: Isolation 2

Topic Tracking: Dream/Nightmare 2

From the ship, Marlow occasionally saw lively, wild natives, or evidence of their existence. At one point he saw a French ship repeatedly shelling a spot of forested coast for no apparent reason--not even a dwelling of the natives was in sight.

"...Nothing happened. Nothing could happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight; and it was not dissipated by somebody on board assuring me earnestly there was a camp of native--he called them enemies!--hidden out of sight somewhere." Part 1, pg. 11

Topic Tracking: Mental/Physical Illness 2

The sailors in the French ship were dying at the rate of three a day.

Topic Tracking: Mental/Physical Illness 3

Marlow sailed further and was overwhelmed by the horror he saw all around him. The whole atmosphere was one of decay, an atmosphere that seemed almost intent on repulsing the invaders:

"In and out of rivers, streams of death in life, whose banks were rotting into mud, whose waters, thickened with slime, invaded the contorted mangroves, that seemed to writhe at us in the extremity of an impotent despair. Nowhere did we stop long enough to get a particularised impression, but the general sense of vague and oppressive wonder grew upon me. It was like a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares." Part 1, pg. 11

Topic Tracking: Wilderness Imagery 3



A Swede who was sharing the ship with Marlow commented to him on the foolishness of going in-country. When Marlow told him he was going in-country, the Swede responded with a story of how another Swede hung himself for no apparent reason after going there. The Swede bid farewell to Marlow as they reached shore; he saw there dozens of native laborers working on the Company's station. He walked aimlessly, hoping to figure out where to go. Around him, the Company laborers were dynamiting a rock face in an attempt to build a rail line, and others sat under the shade of trees, overwhelmed by the heat. Still other natives, in a chain gang, carried debris from the explosion in baskets. Marlow compares the explosions of the dynamite and the confused captive workers to the bombardment by the French gunship of its invisible "enemies"--the enslavement of natives to foreign law is, to him, just as senseless as the attacking of natives by foreign guns. He saw the laborers crouching in the shade of trees; these were not active workers but merely those who, overwhelmed by the work, had crawled off to rest or perhaps die.

Topic Tracking: Mental/Physical Illness 4

Marlow fed one laborer a biscuit, which the slave accepts without any emotion. The natives had been reduced to animals by their civilizers. Marlow met the chief accountant of the Company outside of the main building, a man surprisingly well dressed in the middle of foreign wilderness. He'd achieved this, he said, by teaching a native woman (with some difficulty) to do his laundering. Marlow was amazed at the great disorder of the station, which sent trade goods into the jungle and got in return a small amount of ivory.

Topic Tracking: Imperialism/Commerce 4

Marlow waited for ten days at the station, during which time the accountant told him of Kurtz, the unusual man in charge of the Interior Station, who shipped back more ivory than all the other agents put together. Marlow inquired after the mysterious Kurtz, but received little information, except that he was a remarkable man, expected to go far in the Company. A sick man groaned in the office, and other outside noises distracted the accountant. Marlow comments:

"When one has got to make correct entries, one comes to hate those savages--hate them to the death." Part 1, pg. 15

Topic Tracking: Mental/Physical Illness 5

Marlow left with a sixty-man caravan to make the two hundred mile trip to the interior. He comments to his boatmates that most of the natives were gone from the route. It is no surprise, Marlow notes; if the Africans had invaded England and killed or enslaved people on the route from the coast to the interior, the English villages would be depopulated in the same way. Nearly the only sign of life Marlow saw along the way was the body of an African man shot in the head. One of his traveling companions, a fat white man, was constantly complaining:



"I couldn't help asking him once what he meant by coming here at all. 'To make money, of course. What do you think?' he said scornfully." Part 1, pg. 16

Topic Tracking: Imperialism/Commerce 5

This man came down with fever and had to be carried, which infuriated the natives who were assigned to the job.

Topic Tracking: Mental/Physical Illness 6

The man ended up dumped by the carriers, who fled. After this, the feverish man wanted Marlow to take revenge, but there was no one to take revenge on. This memory makes Marlow think back to the old doctor's idea of watching the mental changes of people in the wilderness.

Topic Tracking: Mental/Physical Illness 7

Marlow and his traveling companions eventually arrived at Central Station, where Marlow was to get his ship and his orders. His ship was sunk in the river. He found that it would take a matter of months to repair it. He met with the General Manager of the Central Station, an odd and half-stern, half-smiling man who put Marlow ill at ease. The Manager had his position in spite of his lack of intelligence and training; Marlow suspects it was merely because he lasted that he was promoted to his level. This Manager told Kurtz that the situation in the interior was becoming difficult; Kurtz had reportedly fallen ill, causing worry for the Company, who knew little of his condition--communication with the interior being the difficult thing it was.

Topic Tracking: Mental/Physical Illness 8

Marlow, struck by the senselessness of the station in the middle of the jungle and of the drive for ivory that put the station there, spent three months restoring his boat.

Topic Tracking: Wilderness Imagery 4

At one point during these three months, a fire occurred for which a native worker was blamed and beaten brutally. In the commotion of the fire, Marlow overheard the Manager and another man discussing Kurtz, but could make little sense of the conversation. The other man was a brickmaker, accused by Marlow's presumptive shipmates of being a spy for the Company--he had access to favors unavailable to most agents and workers. No bricks were ever made. Marlow refers to the sixteen to twenty men who traveled with him on his ship as the pilgrims. The whole atmosphere at Central Station is one of plotting, ambition and paranoia. The brickmaker was very sociable with Marlow in an attempt to get information about the activities and plans of the Company. Marlow asked him about Kurtz; the brickmaker told him that Kurtz was sent especially as an emissary of civilization, not merely an agent, and his mission was not just commercial but noble--the Company hoped he would be a force for bringing progress into the interior. The brickmaker implied that Marlow was there for the same purpose--to



bring civilization into the wilderness. Thinking of his aunt's last words to him, Marlow laughed at the idea.

All this time, Marlow was becoming fascinated with the idea of Kurtz--having no idea what to expect, he still felt a certain loyalty to the man. Despite his distaste with dishonesty, he let the ambitious brickmaker believe he was connected with Kurtz and had powerful friends in the Company back in Europe. He stops the story here to wonder aloud if his listeners aboard the *Nellie* can understand what Kurtz meant to him, but doubts it.

"Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems I am trying to tell you a dream--making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is the very essence of dreams...no, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence--that which makes its truth, its meaning--its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream--alone..." Part 1, pg. 23

Topic Tracking: Dream/Nightmare 3

Topic Tracking: Isolation 3

The narrator notes that dark has fallen around the *Nellie*, and he is unsure whether anyone else is listening to Marlow's story. Marlow continues anyway. He says that he had been sleeping aboard the in-progress wreck, and the brickmaker still kept after him. He had no rivets to fix the ship, and the pilgrims were spending most nights trying to kill a wayward hippopotamus that wandered the Station. The brickmaker ordered rivets, to the delight of Marlow and the mechanics, but instead of rivets arriving, all that came were sections of a caravan of treasure hunters stopping over. These treasure hunters were coarse and greedy types whose only intention was plunder. Marlow was forced to wait to leave, and during that time thought occasionally of Kurtz, the great agent and moral leader.



Part 2

Waiting on the boat at Central Station, Marlow overheard the Manager speaking to the caravan leader, the manager's uncle. Marlow heard their conversation while half-asleep, so he made little sense of it at first.

Topic Tracking: Dream/Nightmare 4

He realized they were talking about Kurtz, about the influence he must hold in the Company and his unconventional ways:

"Is he alone there?" 'Yes,' answered the manager, 'he sent his assistant down the river with a note to me in these terms: 'Clear this poor devil out of the country, and don't bother sending me more of that sort. I had rather be alone than have the kind of men you can dispose of with me.' That was more than a year ago. Can you imagine such impudence?' 'Anything since then?' asked the other hoarsely. 'Ivory,' jerked the nephew, 'lots of it--prime sort--most annoying, from him.'" Part 2, pg. 27

Marlow ascertained from the conversation that Kurtz was bizarre but effective. He heard them tell the story of how Kurtz came downriver to accompany a load of ivory, but turned back himself halfway, to return with only his paddlers to the Interior Station. Marlow gets an imaginary picture of Kurtz from this story:

"It was a distinct glimpse: the dugout, four paddling savages, and the lone white man turning his back suddenly on the headquarters, on relief, on thoughts of home--perhaps; setting his face towards the depth of the wilderness, towards his empty and desolate station." Part 2, pg. 27

Topic Tracking: Isolation 4

The manager and his uncle expressed their frustration with Kurtz's obsession with civilizing the interior, having each station be a beacon of progress. The uncle noted that Kurtz had become ill and complained about the illness that was besetting his men.

Topic Tracking: Mental/Physical Illness 9

The uncle pointed disparagingly into the jungle. Marlow fantasized that the jungle was looking back, patiently awaiting the end of the invasion by such men as these.

Topic Tracking: Wilderness Imagery 5

Topic Tracking: Darkness Imagery 4

The expedition of the treasure hunters left, and first word came back that the donkeys had died, then no word came back at all. Full of anticipation about meeting Kurtz, Marlow left for the interior with the manager and the pilgrims on his boat. The navigation up the river was extremely difficult--the jungle on all sides and the varying depths of the



river gave Marlow the feeling of being cut off from everything else in the world. He began to feel the jungle was personified, and looking at him with contempt.

Topic Tracking: Wilderness Imagery 6

Topic Tracking: Dream/Nightmare 5

Topic Tracking: Isolation 5

Marlow had a crew of local cannibals assisting him in the operation of the ship. The ship would occasionally stop at smaller stations along the way, and the whites there were overwhelmingly happy to see it. Soon the ship fell into disrepair; the steam pipes leaked and this slowed progress into the interior:

"The reaches opened before us and closed behind, as if the forest had stepped leisurely across the water to bar the way for our return. We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness." Part 2, pg. 30

Topic Tracking: Wilderness Imagery 7

Topic Tracking: Darkness Imagery 5

As they went further inland, the stations were replaced by the mysterious sounds of native drums. Marlow was fascinated by the primeval lives of the people they began to see along the river. He notes how unfamiliar it was to see both nature and people in their free, uncivilized state. The idea that beneath the outer shell of civilized humanity lies this kind of unbridled, primitive passion is terrifying and exciting to him. Marlow almost regrets that the great tribally-decorated boiler operator is stuck on board the ship rather than out dancing with his fellow natives--he regrets that the boiler operator, and he, are constrained by the business of their duties to civilization.

Nearer to the station they came across a hut onshore with some stacked wood and a book full of margin notes. There was also a note left telling whoever came along to hurry but approach cautiously. Marlow wondered what he would say to Kurtz, but decided that the politics of the Company were not his business. They soon neared Kurtz's station, but delayed in order to approach in daylight--obeying the mysterious note's call for caution.

A fog came down around the ship, and in the fog a strange cry was heard. The pilgrims sat up all night with rifles, worried about attack. The cannibals who operated the ship were not as worried, though strangers to the interior--although they had become very hungry, since their provision of hippo-meat went bad and they had been paid only in brass wire, with which they were supposed to buy their own food. From whom they were to buy was unclear to Marlow; he was disappointed at the Company's shoddy treatment of the cannibals and wondered why they did not simply kill and eat the whites. Looking around, he noticed the sickly condition of his shipmates and, in a moment of feverish haziness, hoped that he did not look quite so unappetizing.

Topic Tracking: Mental/Physical Illness 10

Topic Tracking: Dream/Nightmare 6



Despite the threatening noise around the ship, Marlow was not worried about attack by natives. The cries, he believed, were not cries of violence, and Kurtz's station had to be nearby. As the fog lifted, the ship began being pelted with tiny arrows. This occurred within a narrow shoal, and Marlow realized that natives surrounded their boat. The native helmsman, instead of steering, opened the window and shot a rifle into the bush, forcing Marlow to steer--and his steering was made more difficult by the clouds of smoke from the rifles of the helmsman and the pilgrims. The helmsman was hit by a flying spear and knocked down. As one of the pilgrims rushed upstairs, the bleeding helmsman died. Marlow momentarily hoped that this would not end his voyage, as his desire to talk with Kurtz had become overwhelming. His worry was that these natives had destroyed the station and killed Kurtz. He threw the helmsman's shoes overboard, for reasons he admits he still does not understand.

As he lights a cigarette aboard the *Nellie*, Marlow again remarks on the impossibility of telling the story with its emotional impact intact. He remembers the whole voyage in terms of voices--the voices of Kurtz, the minor players, and even Kurtz's fiancé.

Marlow here digresses to jump ahead and discuss Kurtz and the way he spoke of his "Intended"--he mentions Kurtz's unusual appearance, with a cleanly bald head, and the way he spoke as though he possessed everything--the river, the station, and especially the ivory, the huge amounts of ivory he managed to acquire. He also mentions the way and extent to which Kurtz had been corrupted:

"Everything belonged to him--but that was a trifle. The thing to know was what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own. That was the reflection that made you creepy all over. It was impossible--not good for one either--trying to imagine. He had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land--I mean literally. You can't understand--how could you?" Part 2, pg. 43

Topic Tracking: Darkness Imagery 6

Marlow says that because he and Kurtz both spoke English, Kurtz was able to confide in him.

Topic Tracking: Mental/Physical Illness 11

Topic Tracking: Imperialism/Commerce 6

Marlow here tells of an eloquent article Kurtz wrote, which spoke nobly about the power of the benevolent whites to help the natives supersede their primitive ways and accept civilization. The whole report is written in the glowing moral terms, which all the managers along the way associated with Kurtz, except for the angrily scrawled postscript at the end:

"It was very simple, and at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you, luminous and terrifying like a flash of lightning in a serene sky: 'Exterminate all the brutes!'" Part 2, pg. 44



Marlow remarks that Kurtz entrusted him with this report and also with the preservation of his memory--Marlow keeps that memory despite his best efforts to get rid of it. He admits he really mourns the helmsman, who he partnered with in steering the ship for the months up the river, and who he threw overboard after the arrows stopped flying.

The pilgrims worried that Kurtz was killed, but believed they properly avenged him by shooting many of the natives in the bush along the shore. They realized Kurtz couldn't be dead, however, when moments later the ship came up to the shore of the intact station, where there waited an excited young man in patched clothes. The manager told this man that the ship had been attacked; the young man, who Marlow compares to a harlequin (a clown from the European theater who dressed in multicolored, patched clothes), assured him that everything was fine with Kurtz.

This young man began exuberantly expounding the learning experience he had by staying with the illustrious Kurtz--and it turned out this young man, a Russian, had been the one who had left the strange book, with its margin notes, that Marlow had found earlier. He said that the natives attacked only because they did not want anyone to take Kurtz away. Kurtz, it seemed, was regarded quite highly by everyone at the station:

"I tell you," he cried, 'this man has enlarged my mind.'" Part 2, pg. 48



Part 3

Marlow was bewildered by the seemingly impossible existence of the adventuresome young man, who had sought out Kurtz on his own and with great excitement. He envied the young Russian's liveliness, but not his single-minded devotion to Kurtz. The Russian went on about his talks with Kurtz and the wisdom he had gained, and noted that he nursed Kurtz through two illnesses.

Topic Tracking: Mental/Physical Illness 12

The clownish young man told Marlow that Kurtz tended to wander off into the forest alone, raiding nearby villages for ivory and gaining the loyalty of the natives. He also noted that Kurtz had once threatened to shoot him for some ivory--although this did not diminish his loyalty:

"He declared he would shoot me unless I gave him the ivory and then cleared out of the country, because he could do so, and had a fancy for it, and there was nothing on earth to prevent him killing whom he jolly well pleased." Part 3, pg. 50

The young man was offended by Marlow's suggestion that Kurtz was mad. He told Marlow that Kurtz had come back recently with the soldiers of a downriver tribe with him, the same natives who attacked the ship. Marlow comments that Kurtz's pursuit of ivory overcame his moral goals.

Topic Tracking: Imperialism/Commerce 7

Marlow looked through his binoculars at the main house of the Interior Station and noticed that the decorative posts in front of the main house are really heads on stakes. Marlow tells his listeners that he is not disclosing trade secrets--in fact, the heads on stakes performed no commercial function at all. Instead, they represented the way Kurtz's power and isolation were able to corrupt him:

"...Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts [...] there was something wanting in him--some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence. Whether he knew of this deficiency himself I can't say. I think the knowledge came to him at last--only at the very last. But the wilderness found him out early, and had taken vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude--and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core..." Part 3, pg. 51

Topic Tracking: Wilderness Imagery 8

Topic Tracking: Isolation 6



The young man told Marlow that the heads were heads of "rebels". Marlow associated this strange definition with that of the "enemies" of the French ship and the "criminals" and "workers" who were really slaves at the coast. The young man got increasingly offended at Marlow's opinion of Kurtz and broke down, decrying how everyone from the outside abandoned the great man in his state of illness. At that, some natives approached carrying a crude stretcher; on the stretcher was Kurtz himself, and natives poured out from all around to admire him.

Marlow could not hear what Kurtz was saying but hoped it would spare their lives. The sick Kurtz was lowered from his stretcher and taken by the Manager and the pilgrims, who carried him aboard the ship.

From the ship, the whites saw a beautiful native woman decked in gold jewelry. Kurtz was furious at being taken aboard the ship--he insisted that they were interfering with great plans of his which they could not understand. He insisted too that he was not sick. The manager took Marlow aside and told him the district had to be abandoned--despite the great quantities of ivory, the methods were too unsound. Marlow agreed, but also admitted that he thought Kurtz a remarkable man. The darkness and wilderness were overwhelming:

"I turned to the wilderness really, not to Mr. Kurtz, who, I was ready to admit, was as good as buried. And for a moment it seemed to me as if I also was buried in a vast grave full of unspeakable secrets. I felt an intolerable weight oppressing my breast, the smell of the damp earth, the unseen presence of victorious corruption, the darkness of an impenetrable night..." Part 3, pg. 55

The Russian made Marlow promise to protect Kurtz's reputation. He told Marlow that Kurtz himself had ordered the attack. With that, the young man vanished, leaving Marlow to wonder whether he had really even seen him.

Topic Tracking: Dream/Nightmare 7

All night the native drummers kept vigil for Kurtz outside the ship. Marlow woke up to hear their eerie drumming and chanting coming out of the woods.

Topic Tracking: Dream/Nightmare 8

Topic Tracking: Darkness Imagery 7

Topic Tracking: Wilderness Imagery 9

He looked for Kurtz but couldn't find him. He went ashore, being sure not to awaken any of the pilgrims.

"I did not betray Mr. Kurtz--it was ordered I should never betray him--it was written I should be loyal to the nightmare of my choice. I was anxious to deal with this shadow by myself alone--and to this day I don't know why I was so jealous of sharing with anyone the peculiar blackness of that experience." Part 3, pg. 57



Topic Tracking: Dream/Nightmare 9

Topic Tracking: Darkness Imagery 8

Topic Tracking: Isolation 7

Marlow noticed that some of the cannibals were standing guard around the all-important pile of ivory. He followed a trail that he thought must be Kurtz's. As he walked along the trail, he remembered brief and seemingly irrelevant images from his journey--the knitting women, the pilgrims shooting rifles into the bush. He pictured himself never going back to the ship, staying alone in the woods forever.

Marlow tracked Kurtz and soon caught up to him. Kurtz attempted to warn Marlow away from the intense and bizarre ceremony going on. A nearby native stood by a fire, wearing horns, and Marlow was struck with the danger of the situation. He asked Kurtz if he knew what he was doing. Kurtz replied that he did. Marlow was not sure whether to save him or kill him:

"I tried to break the spell--the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness--that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions. This alone, I was convinced, had driven him out to the edge of the forest, to the bush, towards the gleam of fires, the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations." Part 3, pg. 59

Marlow was full of fear, and as he tells his story, he has trouble getting across to his listeners on the *Nellie* why he was afraid--it was not of the natives but of the forces he was dealing with. He can report to them the words the two exchanged, but they would do no good:

"They had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares." Part 3, pg. 59

Topic Tracking: Dream/Nightmare 10

Marlow says that in that moment he realized Kurtz had been alone in the wilderness, his soul had been alone with itself, and that this was what had driven him mad. Marlow realized that he too had to look into that soul.

Topic Tracking: Isolation 8

Topic Tracking: Mental/Physical Illness 13

Kurtz collapsed into his arms, and Marlow carried him back on to the ship. The next day the ship left the station with Kurtz, and the natives looked on forbiddingly from the banks. Some of them were performing rituals--chanting, wearing red earth, and shaking feathers. Marlow asked Kurtz if he understood the rituals. He then noticed the pilgrims going for their rifles, as though to shoot the natives around the ship for sport. He quickly sounded the horn to warn them away. All of them fled, except for the native woman who appeared earlier when they first brought Kurtz on the ship.



As the ship went downstream, the pilgrims and the Manager looked on Marlow with suspicion, as though he was now allied with Kurtz. Kurtz would talk eloquently at length to Marlow, discussing his lofty motives, his great success, the fiancé he would be returning to--and cursed at the wilderness outside.

Topic Tracking: Wilderness Imagery 10

When the ship was delayed for repairs, Kurtz entrusted Marlow with some letters and papers, imploring him to keep them from the manager. One of these was the article. Marlow found it difficult to see into Kurtz's mind.

Topic Tracking: Darkness Imagery 9

Although he wished to keep vigil over Kurtz, Marlow was also occupied with making sure the boat was operating correctly. When Kurtz announced that he would die soon, Marlow, bringing a candle into his dark room, did not believe him. A strange expression crossed Kurtz's face, as though he were reliving the extremes of pride, power, fear, and despair that had been his life in the interior. He spoke his final words with only Marlow there to hear: "The horror! The horror!" Part 3, pg. 62

Marlow blew out the candle and left the room. He sat down at the table with the pilgrims and the manager; the manager's servant went into the cabin, then came out to announce that Kurtz was dead. The pilgrims rushed in to see.

Topic Tracking: Darkness Imagery 10

Marlow had nothing more to do with it; the pilgrims buried Kurtz nearby. They nearly buried him as well, Marlow says. Through Kurtz he was forced to look at death, for in the last moments of his life, Kurtz was able to say something true about the whole mess of human life--"The horror! The horror!" Marlow was able to look into the darkness that Kurtz had gotten lost in, and learn from that darkness--whether to his benefit or his detriment he is unsure.

After he emerged from the jungle, Marlow ended up back in the white city from which he departed. The people of the city were only a distraction from his thoughts.

Topic Tracking: Isolation 9

Having journeyed to the heart of Kurtz's darkness, Marlow subsequently found those living in the city stupid--he could hardly keep from laughing at their empty self-importance. He refused to give Kurtz's papers over to the Company. He found out that Kurtz's mother had died under the watch of his fiancé; he also found out details about Kurtz's past--he was a musician, for instance, and his friends wished he would go into politics. Marlow eventually gave the Company the article--with the postscript torn off. He also finally decided to go to the fiancé's house to leave the letters with her, and hopefully leave behind the memory. He felt Kurtz enter, ghostlike, into the fiancé's house, with him.



Topic Tracking: Darkness Imagery 11

Marlow saw, as he walked through the door of the Intended's house, the natives dancing around fires, and he heard Kurtz's voice discussing the ivory and saying his last words. Into these memories the fiancé emerged, dressed in black for mourning.

Topic Tracking: Darkness Imagery 12

The Intended asked if Marlow knew Kurtz; he replied that he knew him as well as it is possible for one man to know another. The room grew darker and darker as the woman talked about Kurtz, about how well she knew him, and about his great voice. She mourned that no one would ever see him again. Marlow had his own reasons to doubt this, but stayed silent. He thinks:

"Never see him! I saw him clearly then. I shall see this eloquent phantom as long as I live, and I shall see her too, a tragic and familiar shade, resembling in this gesture another one, tragic also, and bedecked with powerless charms, stretching bare brown arms over the glitter of the infernal stream, the stream of darkness." Part 3, pg. 68

Marlow admitted to Kurtz's fiancé that he had heard Kurtz's last words, but he could not admit the exact words to her. As Marlow stood before the Intended, he heard, "The horror! The horror!" all around him, but said, at last, that Kurtz's final words were the fiancé's own name. He could not, in the end, tell her the truth that Kurtz had revealed to him, because the truth was too terrible.

At this point, Marlow stops telling his story. The narrator looks off into the falling night.

Topic Tracking: Darkness Imagery 13

"I raised my head. The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky--seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness." Part 3, pg. 69