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Heart of Darkness

A JOURNEY INTO THE HUMAN CONDITION

Heart Of Darkness

Joseph Conrad

(First edition, 1899.) Penguin Classics
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What happens if one has all restraints removed? Do we at last flourish, to become our true selves? Do we become happy? Or would our flaws turn us away from both happiness and flourishing? Such a question is usually meaningless. We are social creatures embedded in relationship networks that jointly determine our behaviour and our path. But some unusual individuals, often leaders, manage to achieve an unusual level of autonomy, totally dominating the led. Unrestrained. This usually ends in tears.

Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* is often remembered as the inspiration for Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 film *Apocalypse Now*, the action transposed to the Vietnam War and containing one of Marlon Brando's last great roles. *Heart of Darkness* itself is easily forgotten, yet it remains a vividly pessimistic account of the human condition.

In 1890 Joseph Conrad, a Pole who had become a British citizen, captained a river boat up the Congo for a trading company. The Belgian Congo was arguably the worst end of the spectrum of Western imperialism. Conrad was an unusual man. He wrote in fluent and flawless English, yet Bertrand Russell found that he spoke:

*'... with a very strong foreign accent ... He was an aristocratic Polish gentleman to his fingertips.'*¹

Russell and Conrad became great friends. Russell had an optimistic view of human nature, an acute contrast to Conrad.

Conrad's experience became the basis for his 1899 novel *Heart of Darkness*.

Conrad begins his tale on the Thames, with a rich and breathtaking picture of the river as a highway to the ends of the earth. Conrad's protagonist Marlow is clearly his alter ego in a partly autobiographical story. But by giving a fictional account he both distances us from his experience and yet emphasises the inhumanity and disorder that he found as he travelled into the Congo.

The book is the ultimate misanthropic road trip. Marlow journeys upriver to find Kurtz, the company's most profitable agent. The journey into Africa reflects Conrad's journey into the human condition. In the earlier part of the book Kurtz is much talked about, a great success. He is making huge profits for his imperial masters even if his methods may be tough. Finally Marlow finds Kurtz, ill but still the absolute master of the local Africans. His compound is surrounded by the severed heads of those Africans who have displeased or disobeyed him. Conrad portrays Kurtz as having lost all restraint in the pursuit of profit. Kurtz sees people as objects. Those who disobey

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him are eliminated as ruthlessly as in Stalin's Russia.

In recent decades Conrad has been criticised by African writers as portraying 19th-century Africans as less than human. In one sense they are right, but surely that is Conrad's point? The removal of peer constraints reveals us as cruel and ruthless — in *Heart of Darkness* it is the Europeans who are the savages, not the Africans.

No doubt we wish to see ourselves as more civilised than Kurtz. And we can certainly see Conrad's view of humanity as our *fin-de-siècle* selves regretting our fall from innocence and seeking to come to terms with Darwin. The history of the 20th century though has hardly blunted Conrad's argument. The Vietnam War is just one of so many episodes of madness beyond even Conrad's vision.

So should we be optimistic or pessimistic about human nature? As CS Lewis puts it, surely being human is:

*'... both honour enough to erect the head of the poorest beggar, and shame enough to bow the shoulders of the greatest emperor.'*²

So we do not have to end with only. Conrad's verdict: *'the horror, the horror'*.

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