CONRAD'S VOYAGE TO THE CONGO
CONRAD'S JOURNEY UP THE CONGO RIVER

MAHLOW'S JOURNEY IN HEART OF DARKNESS
Heart of Darkness


Some qualified readers believe "Heart of Darkness" to be the greatest story written in English. Even allowing for some exaggeration, the opinion is a tremendous tribute to a Pole (Joseph Theodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski) who entered the marine service at seventeen years, began to learn English at twenty-one, and finished his first novel, Almayer's Fo'ly, at thirty-seven. "Heart of Darkness" was written at the height of his literary power (1898): what is the nature of this achievement?

Whose story is it? Some readers give the story to Marlow, others to Kurtz. It has been argued that unless we understand the psychological transformation which takes place within Marlow, the meaning of the story is lost. On the other hand, unless we understand the cause of Marlow's transformation there is no story at all — and the cause is the story of Kurtz. The symbolic action of the story can be found by answering at least four questions: What kind of man was Kurtz before he left for Africa? Why did he go? What happened to him at the Inner Station? And, most important of all, why does Marlow call Kurtz's final "judgment," or "affirmation," ("The horror! The Horror!") a "moral victory"?

Before we probe these questions, let us note that the story's basic integrating symbol — the symbol which fuses and makes meaningful all the facts — is the ivory. The ivory operates here as a beckoning crown operates in Macbeth. How else explain the ironic asides of Marlow (for example, "the jolly pioneers of progress") and the Faust theme? What is the slow process by which Kurtz gives his soul to evil (the Devil)?

Before Kurtz left for Africa, he had been a talented man, "a universal genius" whose "impatience of comparative poverty...drove him" to Africa to make his fortune to overcome the objections of his intended's family to their marriage. The ivory and also his talents, recognized by the Company, were to bring him happiness. Kurtz left as "an emissary of pity, and science, and progress...equipped with moral ideas of some sort," and yet when Marlow found him at the Inner Station, Kurtz had been accepted as a deity who "presided at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites, which...were offered up to him...." What had happened to Kurtz?

Kurtz had been confronted with two basic temptations: his desire to make a fortune through ivory, and his discovery of his latent kinship with the savages, as Marlow discovered in himself. Marlow tells us: The savages "howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity — like yours...remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar." Within Kurtz these two temptations coalesced, and he yielded to their combined power by using his authority as deity to help him steal "more ivory than all the other agents together." "The wilderness," Marlow tells us, "had
patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a ball — an ivory ball [the integrating symbol]...; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation.... [The] wilderness...seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions." (Italics added.) "If," Marlow says, "anybody had ever struggled with a soul, I am the man."

These quoted passages, interpreted within the context of the entire story, will help us to answer our final question, why does Marlow call Kurtz's final judgment a "moral victory"? When Marlow found Kurtz crawling through the grass back to the village, Marlow told him, "You will be lost — utterly lost," and Kurtz permitted himself (he could have roused the warriors against Marlow) to be carried back to the riverboat. This was the first basic decision by Kurtz, an affirmation that he had bargained with evil and had lost. When therefore, just before he died, he cried, "The horror! The horror!" he had, as Marlow tells us, "pronounced a judgment upon the adventures of his soul on this earth." The judgment was a moral victory because Kurtz had not only acknowledged the evil in himself, but his final vision "was wide enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness." (Italics added.) The judgment is a bitter warning to all men against the ever-latent evil in their hearts. Kurtz's discovery came too late; the implication for us is obvious.

The story, then, has at least three levels of meaning, all related to the title. Literally, the heart of darkness means, of course, the heart of Africa — the savage darkness outside civilization. Symbolically, it means the heart of Kurtz; but deepest of all it means the heart of mankind which was — shall we say? — at its birth given to evil, a condition man has fought against for centuries. Kurtz's judgment, "The horror!" seems to come as a result of this insight into the hearts of all men, and this revelation to Marlow appears to be the cause of Marlow's psychological transformation.

The theme of universal guilt, prominent in the history of letters, is presented, for example, rather conventionally in Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," but in "The Hollow Men," Eliot, unlike Conrad, does not merely warn us of the consequences; he tells us we are no longer even sensitive to its presence. Eliot's epigraph, "Mislah Kurtz — he dead," implies in the context of the poem that we, unlike Kurtz, will not cross "With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom." Kurtz saw the horror of evil, affirmed the evil, and gained a moral victory, while "We grope together/And avoid speech," neither living nor dying heroically.

Although Conrad's celebrated Preface does not refer explicitly to "Heart of Darkness," their dates of composition are close together, and the Preface is suggestive of Conrad's artistic purposes in his story. To read them as companion pieces is an enlightening literary experience.