European nations battled each other for wealth and power in the late 19th and early 20th century, driven by colonialism and imperialism of European nations from Africa to the Far East in the genre of colonial literature. When Published: HIST. Date of Birth: 1857. Place of Birth: Berdichev, Poland (now Berdichev, Ukraine). Date of Death: 1924. Brief Life Story: Jozef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski was an orphan by the age of 12; his mother and father both died as a result of the time they spent in exile in Siberia for plotting against the Russian Tsar. At 17, he traveled to Marseilles and began to work as a sailor. Eventually, he began to sail on British ships, and became a British citizen in 1886, at the age of 29. It was about this time he changed his name to the more British-sounding Joseph Conrad and published his first short stories (he wrote in English, his third language after Polish and French). For the next eight years, Conrad continued to work as a sailor (even spending time commanding a steamship in the Belgian Congo), and continued to write. He published his first novel (Almayer’s Folly) in 1894. In 1896, Conrad married Jessie George. He quickly won critical praise, though financial success eluded him for many years and both he and his wife suffered serious illnesses. He wrote his best-known works in the years just before and after the turn of the century: Heart of Darkness (1899), Lord Jim (1900), and Nostromo (1904). Conrad died in 1924. Key Facts: Full Title: Heart of Darkness. Genre: Colonial literature; Quest literature. Setting: The Narrator tells the story from a ship at the mouth of the Thames River near London, England around 1899. Marlow’s story-within-the-story is set in an unnamed European city (probably Brussels) and in the Belgian Congo in Africa sometime in the early to mid 1890s, during the colonial era. Climax: The confrontation between Marlow and Kurtz in the jungle. Protagonist: Marlow. Antagonist: Kurtz. Point of View: First person (both Marlow and the Unnamed Narrator use first person). Narrator: Heart of Darkness is a framed story: Marlow tells the story of his time in the Congo to an unnamed Narrator, and the Narrator describes hearing Marlow tell the story to the reader. Historical and Literary Context: When Published: 1899. Literary Period: Victorianism/Modernism. Related Literary Works: Joseph Conrad’s novels reside in the transition period between Victorianism, with its strict conventions and focus on polite society, and Modernism, which sought to explode old conventions and invent new literary forms to convey human experience more fully. Conrad’s work was instrumental in this effort, particularly his experimentation with the use of time and non-chronological narratives. Heart of Darkness also fits squarely into the genre of colonial literature, in which European writers portrayed the colonialism and imperialism of European nations from Africa to the Far East in the late 19th and early 20th century. Related Historical Events: During the last two decades of the 19th century, European nations battled each other for wealth and power. This battle caused the “scramble for Africa,” in which European countries competed to colonize as much of Africa as possible. While the colonizing Europeans claimed to want to “civilize” the African continent, their actions spoke otherwise: they were interested solely in gaining wealth and did not care how they did it, or who was killed. One of the most brutal of the European colonies in its treatment of the native Africans was the Belgian Congo, the property of the Belgian King Leopold I. In 1890, Joseph Conrad worked as a pilot on a steamship in the Belgian Congo, and Heart of Darkness is at least in part based on his experiences there.
for safekeeping. His dying words are: "The horror! The horror!" Marlow believes Kurtz is judging himself and the world.

Marlow also falls ill, but survives. He returns to the sepulchral city in Europe and gives Kurtz's papers to the relevant people. The last person he visits is Kurtz's Intended (his fiancé). She believes Kurtz is a great man, both talented and moral, and asks Marlow to tell her Kurtz's last words. Marlow can't find it in himself to destroy her beautiful delusions: he says Kurtz's last words were her name.

On the ship in the Thames, Marlow falls silent, and as the Narrator stares out from the ship it seems to him that the Thames leads "into the heart of an immense darkness."

**CHARACTERS**

Marlow – One of the five men on the ship in the Thames. Heart of Darkness is mostly made up of his story about his journey into the Belgian Congo. Marlow is a seaman through and through, and has seen the world many times over. Perhaps because of his journeys, perhaps because of the temperament he was born with, he is philosophical, passionate, and insightful. But Marlow is also extremely skeptical of both mankind and civilization, and, to him, nothing is simple. As the Narrator describes him: "to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze," The one thing Marlow does seem to believe in as a source of simple moral worth is hard work.

Kurtz – The fiancé of his Intended, and a man of great intellect, talent, and ambition who is warped by his time in the Congo. Kurtz is the embodiment of all that's noble about European civilization, from his talent in the arts to his ambitious goals of "civilizing" and helping the natives of Africa, and can be seen as a symbol of that civilization. But in his time in Africa Kurtz is transformed from a man of moral principles to a monster who makes himself a god among the natives, even going so far as to perform "terrible rites." His transformation proves that for all of his talent, ambition, and moral ideas, he was hollow at the core.

General Manager – The head of the Company's Central Station on the river. Untalented and unexceptional, the General Manager has reached his position of power in the Company because of his ability to cause vague uneasiness in others coupled with an ability to withstand the terrible jungle diseases year after year. The General Manager has no lofty moral ambitions, and cares only about his own power and position and making money.

The Russian Trader – A wanderer and trader who wears a multi-colored patched jacket that makes him look like a harlequin (a jester). Through some miraculous stroke of luck, he has ended up alone in the jungle along the Congo and survived. He is naïve and innocent and believes Kurtz is a great man beyond any conventional morality. He even nursed Kurtz back to health on a number of occasions though Kurtz once threatened to shoot him. Of all the white men in the Congo, only the Russian refrains from trying to assert control over the jungle.

Narrator – One of the five men on the ship in the Thames, he is the one who relays to the reader Marlow's story about Kurtz and the Congo. He is insightful, and seems to understand Marlow quite well, but otherwise has little personality. He does seem to be affected by Marlow's story.

The Brickmaker – The General Manager's most trusted agent. A sly, lazy, power-hungry fellow who despite his title seems to have never made a brick; the Brickmaker cares only about his own advancement and therefore sees Kurtz as a threat. He also thinks that Marlow and Kurtz are somehow allied within the company.

Kurtz's Intended – The woman in Europe to whom Kurtz is betrothed to be married. She is incredibly idealistic about both Kurtz and the colonization of Africa. She continues to mourn Kurtz as a great man even a year after he dies.

Marlow's Aunt – A well-connected and idealistic woman, she helps Marlow get the job as a steamer pilot for the Company. She is extremely idealistic about the European colonization of Africa, seeing it as a beautiful effort to civilize the savages.

Director of Companies – One of the five men on the ship in the Thames who listen to Marlow's story.

Lawyer – One of the five men on the ship in the Thames who listen to Marlow's story.

Accountant – One of the five men on the ship in the Thames who listen to Marlow's story. He is not the same as the Chief Accountant.

Fresleven – A steamship pilot who got into a silly argument that cost him his life. His death opened the position into which Marlow was hired.

Doctor – A medical man in the sepulchral city who is interested in how the Congo drives men crazy.

Swede – A steamship captain who has nothing but disdain for the "government chaps" who care only about money.

Chief Accountant – A Company employee at the Outer Station who wins Marlow's admiration simply by keeping himself impeccably groomed. (Do not confuse him with the Accountant on the ship in the Thames.)

The Foreman – A man who helps Marlow repair the steamship.

The Pilgrims – Company agents that Marlow gives the derisive nickname Pilgrims because they carry long wooden staves wherever they go.

The Helmsman – A coastal native of Africa trained to man the helm of a steamship. He works for Marlow until he's killed.

African Woman – A savage and stately African tribeswoman who seems likely to have been Kurtz’s lover.

The General Manager’s servant – A native boy who has grown insolent because he works for the General Manager.

**THEMES**

In LitCharts each theme gets its own color. Our color-coded theme boxes make it easy to track where the themes occur throughout the work.

**COLONIALISM**

Marlow's story in Heart of Darkness takes place in the Belgian Congo, the most notorious European colony in Africa for its greed and brutality of the native people. In its depiction of the monstrous wastefulness and casual cruelty of the colonial agents toward the African natives, Heart of Darkness reveals the utter hypocrisy of the entire colonial effort. In Europe, colonization of Africa was justified on the grounds that not only would it bring wealth to Europe, it would also civilize and educate the "savage" African natives. Heart of Darkness shows that in practice the European colonizers used the high ideals of colonization as a cover to allow them to viciously rip whatever wealth they could from Africa.

Unlike most novels that focus on the evils of colonialism, Heart of Darkness pays more attention to the damage that colonization does to the souls of white colonizers than it does to the physical death and devastation unleashed on the black natives. Though this focus on the white colonizers makes the novel somewhat unbalanced, it does allow Heart of Darkness to extend its criticism of colonialism all the way back to its corrupt source, the "civilization" of Europe.

**THE HOLLOWNESS OF CIVILIZATION**

Heart of Darkness portrays a European civilization that is hopelessly and blindly corrupt. The novella depicts European society as hollow at the core: Marlow describes the white men he meets in Africa, from the General Manager to Kurtz, as empty, and refers to the unnamed European city as the "sepulchral city" (a sepulcher is a hollow tomb). Throughout the novella, Marlow argues that what Europeans call "civilization" is superficial, a mask created by fear of the law and public shame that hides a dark heart, just as a beautiful white sepulcher hides the decaying dead inside.
Marlow, and *Heart of Darkness*, argue that in the African jungle—“utter solitude without a policeman”—the civilized man is plunged into a world without superficial restrictions, and the mad desire for power comes to dominate him. Inner strength could allow a man to push off the temptation to dominate, but civilization actually saps this inner strength by making men think it’s unnecessary. The civilized man believes he’s civilized through and through. So when a man like Kurtz suddenly finds himself in the solitude of the jungle and hears the whisperings of his dark impulses, he is unable to combat them and becomes a monster.

**THE LACK OF TRUTH**

*Heart of Darkness* plays with the genre of quest literature. In a quest, a hero passes through a series of difficult tests to find an object or person of importance, and in the process comes to a realization about the true nature of the world or human soul. Marlow seems to be on such a quest, making his way past absurd and horrendous “stations” on his way up the Congo to find Kurtz, the shining beacon of European civilization and morality in the midst of the dark jungle and the “flabby rapacious folly” of the other Belgian Company agents.

But Marlow’s quest is a failure: Kurtz turns out to be the biggest monster of all. And with that failure Marlow learns that at the heart of everything there lies only darkness. In other words, you can’t know other people, and you can’t even really know yourself. There is no fundamental truth.

**WORK**

In a world where truth is unknowable and men’s hearts are filled with either greed or a primitive darkness that threatens to overwhelm them, Marlow seems to find comfort only in work. Marlow notes that he escaped the jungle’s influence not because he had principles or high ideals, but because he had a job to do that kept him busy.

Work is perhaps the only thing in *Heart of Darkness* that Marlow views in an entirely positive light. In fact, more than once Marlow will refer to work or items that are associated with work (like rivets) as “real” while the rest of the jungle and the men in it are “unreal.” Work is like a religion to him, a source of support to which he can cling in order to keep his humanity. This explains why he is so horrified when he sees laziness, poor work, or machines left out to rust. When other men cease to do honest work, Marlow knows the he is so horrified when he sees laziness, poor work, or machines left out to rust. When other men cease to do honest work, Marlow knows the

**RACISM**

Students and critics alike often argue about whether *Heart of Darkness* is a racist book. Some argue that the book depicts Europeans as superior to Africans, while others believe the novel attacks colonialism and therefore is not racist. There is the evidence in the book that supports both sides of the argument, which is another way of saying that the book’s actual stance on the relationship between blacks and whites is not itself black and white.

*Heart of Darkness* attacks colonialism as a deeply flawed enterprise run by corrupt and hollow white men who perpetrate mass destruction on the native population of Africa, and the novel seems to equate darkness with truth and whiteness with hollow trickery and lies. So *Heart of Darkness* argues that the Africans are less corrupt and in that sense superior to white people. But it’s argument for the superiority of Africans is based on a foundation of racism. Marlow, and *Heart of Darkness*, take the rather patronizing view that the black natives are primitive and therefore innocent while the white colonizers are sophisticated and therefore corrupt. This take on colonization is certainly not “politically correct” and can be legitimately called racist because it treats the natives like objects rather than as thinking people.

**SYMBOLS**

Symbols appear in red text throughout the Summary & Analysis sections of this LitChart.
masts. In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech—and nothing happened. Nothing could happen.

When one has got to make correct entries, one comes to hate those savages—hate them to the death.

The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it. A taint of imbecile capacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse. By Jove! I've never seen anything so unreal in my life. And outside, the silent wilderness surrounding this cleared speck on the earth struck me as something great and invincible, like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion.

I let him run on, this papier-mache Mephistopheles, and it seemed to me that if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him, and would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt, maybe.

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 reality. This is the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend.

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!"

"I tell you," he cried, "this man has enlarged my mind."

PART 3 QUOTES

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.

"The horror! The horror!"

"Mistah Kurtz—he dead!"

I was within a hair’s breadth of the last opportunity for pronouncement, and I found with humiliation that probably I would have nothing to say. This is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it. . . . He had summed up—he had judged. "The horror!" He was a remarkable man.

I heard a light sigh and then my heart stood still, stopped dead short by an exulting and terrible cry, by the cry of inconceivable triumph and of unspeakable pain. 'I knew it—I was sure!' . . . She knew. She was sure. I heard her weeping; she had hidden her face in her hands. It seemed to me that the house would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head. But nothing happened. The heavens do not fall for such a trifle.

The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.
**PART 1**

The *Narrator* describes the scene from the deck of a ship named *Nellie* as it rests at anchor at the mouth of the River Thames, near London. The five men on board the ship—the *Director of Companies*, the *Lawyer*, the *Accountant*, the *Narrator*, and *Marlow*, old friends from their seafaring days—settle down to await the changing of the tide. They stare down the mouth of the river into the Atlantic Ocean, a view that stretches like “the beginning of an interminable waterway.”

In silence they watch the sunset, and the *Narrator* remembers the fabled ships and men of English history who set sail from the Thames on voyages of trade or conquest, carrying with them “The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empire.”

Suddenly *Marlow* interrupts the silence. “And this also,” Marlow says, “has been one of the dark places of the earth.” He imagines England as it must have appeared to the first Romans sent to conquer it: a savage, mysterious place that both appalled and attracted them, that made them feel powerless and filled them with hate.

*Marlow* observes that none of the men on the boat would feel just like those Romans, because the men on the boat have a “devotion to efficiency,” while the Romans wanted simply to conquer.

Yet *Marlow* adds that conquest is never pretty and usually involves the powerful taking land from those who look different and are less powerful. Conquest, Marlow says, is redeemed only by the ideas behind them, ideas that are so beautiful men bow down before them.

*Marlow* then reminds the other men that he once served as captain of a freshwater riverboat, and begins to tell his story. As a young boy, he had a passion for maps and unknown places. As he grew older, many of those places became known, and many he visited himself. Yet Africa still fascinated him, especially its mighty river, the Congo. After years of ocean voyages in which he had “always went by [his] own road and on [his] own legs,” Marlow asks his *aunt* to use her influence help him get a job as a steamship operator for the Company, a continental European trading concern in Africa.

The Company hires him immediately; it has an open position because one of its captains, a Dane named *Fresleton*, had recently been killed. After some time in the jungle, the normally mild-mannered Fresleton had started hitting the native chief of a village with a cane over a disagreement regarding two black hens, and was accidentally killed by the chief’s son. The natives, in fear, immediately abandoned their village.

*Marlow* travels to the unnamed European city where the Company has its headquarters. He describes the city as a “whited sepulcher.”

At the Company’s office, *Marlow* is let into a reception area presided over by two women, one fat, one slim, both of whom constantly knit black wool. There, Marlow examines a map of Africa filled in by various colors representing the European countries that colonized those areas. He briefly meets the head of the Company (a “pale plumpness in a frock coat”), then is directed to a *doctor*. While measuring Marlow’s head, the doctor comments that in Africa “the changes happen inside” and asks Marlow if his family has a history of insanity.

*Marlow* has a farewell chat with his *aunt*, who sees her nephew as an “emissary of light” off to educate the African natives out of their “horrid ways.” Marlow points out to his aunt that the company is run for profit, not missionary work, and expresses amazement to his friends on the boat how out of touch women are with the truth.
Marlow boards the steamer that will take him to the mouth of the Congo with a sense of foreboding. To Marlow on the steamer, the forested coast of Africa looks like an impenetrable enigma, inviting and scaring him at the same time. He occasionally sees canoes paddled by native Africans, and once sees a French ship firing its guns into the dense forest at invisible "enemies."

At the mouth of the Congo, Marlow gets passage for thirty miles from a small steamer piloted by a Swede. The Swede mocks the "government chaps" at the shore as men who will do anything for money, and wonders what happens to such men when they get further into the continent.

At last they reach the Company’s Outer Station, a chaotic and disorganized place. Machinery rusts everywhere, black laborers blast away at a cliff face for no reason. Marlow comments to the men on the Nellie that he had long known the "lusty devils" of violence and greed that drive men, but in Africa encountered "a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly."

Marlow then stumbles upon what he calls the Grove of Death, a grove among the trees that is filled with weak and dying native laborers, who are living out their last moments in the shade of the ancient trees.

At the station, the Chief Accountant impresses Marlow with his good grooming. One day the Chief Accountant mentions that further up the river Marlow will probably meet Mr. Kurtz, a station head who sends in his agents and also conveys the backbiting and politics going on under the surface in the Company. Marlow admires the Chief Accountant’s grooming because such hygienic habits involve disciplined work, especially in the midst of the chaos of Outer Station.

Yet beneath the Chief Accountant’s civilized exterior, he’s filled with the sense of "powerlessness and hate" that Marlow earlier described infecting the Roman conquerors of England.

The pilot, a man who works, condemns the colonialists who care not about work, but about money. The pilot’s question about what happens to such people in the jungle is more foreboding.

Marlow goes to Africa because he had a passion for unknown places. He wanted to know the unknown. But Africa resists being known, and makes colonialists do ridiculous, hollow things like shoot at forestals.

Note Marlow’s horror at the inefficiency of the station and the rusting of machinery. The "lusty devils" are the desires that move men to act badly, but without deception. The "pretending" devils move men to take their noble intentions for greedy ends.

Marlow sees the death of the natives with the same horror as the rusting machinery. It’s a tragedy to him, but not a human tragedy.

The Chief Accountant’s comments both introduce Kurtz as a remarkably talented fellow and also convey the backbiting and politics going on under the surface in the Company. Marlow admires the Chief Accountant’s grooming because such hygienic habits involve disciplined work, especially in the midst of the chaos of Outer Station.

A few days later Marlow joins a caravan headed the two hundred miles upriver to Central Station. After a fifteen-day trek through the jungle during which the only other white man fell ill and many of the native porters deserted rather than carry the sick man, Marlow reaches the Station.

At the station, Marlow is greeted by the first man he sees with news that the ship he was supposed to pilot has sunk. Apparently, the General Manager had suddenly decided to try to reach Kurtz at the Inner Station with an inexperienced pilot at the helm of the steamship. The steamship promptly sank.

Marlow, on the Nellie, says that though he can’t be sure, he suspects that it’s possible the General Manager wanted the steamship to sink.

Marlow is immediately taken to see this General Manager, who is thoroughly unremarkable in intelligence, leadership, and unskilled at even maintaining order. Marlow believes the General Manager holds his position through two traits: he inspires vague uneasiness in others, and unlike any other Europeans he’s resistant to all the tropical diseases.

The General Manager explains why he took the steamship onto the river before Marlow, its pilot, arrived: Kurtz, the Company’s best agent, is sick. The General Manager takes special interest when Marlow mentions he heard Kurtz’s name mentioned earlier. His main trait is that he doesn’t die! He’s defined by his lack of identity. In other words, he’s hollow.

The General Manager’s interest that Marlow had earlier heard of Kurtz implies the Manager’s concern at Kurtz influence and power in the Company. The Manager’s perfect guess about the time needed to fix the ship implies he did purposely sink it.

Men who do no work strike Marlow as "unreal" and without substance. Work provides a reality one can cling to.

One night a shed bursts into flame. As Marlow approaches he sees a laborer being beaten for setting the blaze and overhears the General Manager talking with another man about Kurtz, saying they should try to "take advantage of this unfortunate accident." The General Manager departs, and Marlow ends up in a conversation with the other man, a young "agent" whose responsibility it is to make bricks (which he never does) and whom the other agents think is the General Manager’s spy.

The General Manager’s concern for Kurtz is obviously faked. He has to try to save the sick Kurtz because it would look bad if he didn’t, but as long as he has an excuse (the sunken steamship) to avoid helping Kurtz, he’ll take it. The Brickmaker has a job he never does: the essence of hollowness, hypocrisy, and inefficiency.
Marlow follows the Brickmaker back to his quarters, which are much nicer than any but the General Manager's. As they talk, Marlow realizes the Brickmaker is trying to get information from him because Marlow's Aunt indicate that Kurtz isn't like the other agents. Rather than hide his greed behind false civility, Kurtz seems actually to be a man profoundly dedicated to ethics and morality. Marlow begins to see Kurtz as an antidote to the evils and hollowness of civilization.

The revelation that Kurtz is backed by the same people who are close to Marlow's Aunt indicate that Kurtz isn't like the other agents. Rather than hide his greed behind false civility, Kurtz seems actually to be a man profoundly dedicated to ethics and morality. Marlow begins to see Kurtz as an antidote to the evils and hollowness of civilization.

Without rivets, Marlow can't do any work either. He has lots of time to think, and begins to wonder about Kurtz's morals, and about how Kurtz would act if he did become general manager.

What he's heard of Kurtz makes Marlow ponder if perhaps civilization isn't hollow, if perhaps there is some truth, if maybe colonialism can match the beautiful idea behind it.

### PART 2

Some time later, as Marlow rests on his steamship, he overhears the General Manager talking with his Uncle about Kurtz. They are annoyed that Kurtz has so much influence in the company and sends back so much ivory. The General Manager also mentions a trader who lives near Kurtz and is apparently stealing Company profits. The uncle advises the General Manager to take advantage of the fact that there's no authority around and just hang the trader.

They next discuss the rumors that Kurtz is sick. Kurtz was supposed to return to the Central Station along with his latest batch of ivory, but apparently came halfway down the river and then turned back. The General Manager angrily mentions Kurtz's conviction that the stations should be focused as much on humanizing and civilizing the savages as on trade. The General Manager's uncle replies that the General Manager should trust the jungle, implying that tropical disease will eventually kill Kurtz.

A few days later the General Manager's uncle and his Eldorado Expedition head into the jungle. Marlow later heard that all their donkeys died, but never heard what happened to the “less valuable animals”—the men.

After three months of work, Marlow finishes repairing the ship. He immediately sets off upriver with the General Manager, a few pilgrims, and thirty cannibals as crew. Marlow prefers the cannibals, who don't actually eat each other and of whom he says, “They were men I could work with.”

The Uncle's advice that the General Manager just hang the trader since there are no authorities around is the ultimate sign that civilization is hollow. The Uncle is saying that acting in a civilized way isn't a deeply held conviction or inherent human characteristic, but rather just an act designed to avoid punishment.

Marlow isn't just bitter: he really thinks the donkeys are more valuable. Donkeys work and aren't hollow, as opposed to the Eldorado men.

Marlow prefers the cannibals for the same reason he prefers the donkeys: they're primitive and simple, so they aren't hollow. (Though the depiction of the cannibals as simple is racist and condescending.)

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The trip is long and difficult. Marlow describes the jungle as a “thing monstrous and free” and the natives as beings “who howled and leapt and made horrid faces.” Yet Marlow feels some connection to the “terrible frankness” of the natives, knowing that he has some of that primitiveness in his own heart. He is thankful that his work keeping the ship afloat occupies his attention most of the time, and hides the “inner truth.”

Still, Marlow tells the other men on the Nellie; he often has a sense of the “mysterious stillness” watching him at his “monkey tricks, just as it watches you fellows performing on your respective tight-ropes for—what is it? half a crown a tumble?” One of the men on the Nellie warns Marlow to “try to be civilized.” Marlow responds, “I beg your pardon. I forgot the heartache that makes up the rest of the price.” Then he continues with his story.

Fifty miles from Kurtz’s headquarters at Inner Station, the ship comes upon a hut with a stack of Srewood outside. Inside the hut, Marlow discovers a technical book on sailing that seems to have code written on it. He is signed illegibly. The book is “real” to Marlow in a way that nothing else is because to produce what he takes to be the code must have taken great and concentrated effort. It must have taken work. Everything else is absurd to the point of meaninglessness: “Hurry up. Approach cautiously.” Those commands are mutually exclusive.

The white fog surrounding and blinding the steamship while natives scream outside is a marvelous symbol. The white fog hides from view the dark jungle and black natives screaming outside, just as the “whited sepulcher” of civilization blinds itself from the primitive darkness at its own heart.

The turning on the white men on the ship, and mankind’s desire to catch and eat the men on the Nellie warns Marlow to be “civil.” Heart of Darkness makes the point that civilization prefers the mask of proper behavior to the truth. This self-deception is what makes civilization hollow.

The pilgrims open fire into the bush, putting out smoke that blocks Marlow’s vision.

A shotgun blasts just behind Marlow: the helmsman has dropped the wheel and started shooting out the window. Marlow jumps to take the wheel and avoid the snag ahead. The helmsman falls back from the window, a spear in his side. Blood fills the pilothouse, soaking Marlow’s shoes. Marlow pulls the ship’s steam whistle, which terrifies the attacking natives and drives them off. A pilgrim wearing “pink pyjamas” comes with a message from the General Manager and is aghast to see the dead helmsman.

Marlow realizes Kurtz is probably dead and feels an intense disappointment at the thought. Marlow then tells the pilgrim to steer and flings his bloody shoes overboard.

The morning reveals a thick white blinding fog enveloping the ship. A roar of screaming natives breaks the silence, then cuts off. Frightened pilgrims hold their rifles at the ready, but can’t see anything. The cannibals want to catch and eat the men on the riverbank. Marlow realizes the cannibals must be incredibly hungry, and marvels at their restraint in not turning on the white men on the ship. The General Manager authorizes Marlow to take all risks in going upstream, knowing full well that Marlow will refuse to take any. After two hours, the fog lifts and the steamship continue upstream.

By commenting on his own sense of kinship with the “primitive” natives, Marlow is implying that all men have aspects of the primitive within them. He believes that work provides escape from this “inner truth.”

The trip is long and difficult. Marlow describes the jungle as a “thing monstrous and free” and the natives as beings “who howled and leapt and made horrid faces.” Yet Marlow feels some connection to the “terrible frankness” of the natives, knowing that he has some of that primitiveness in his own heart. He is thankful that his work keeping the ship afloat occupies his attention most of the time, and hides the “inner truth.”

Still, Marlow tells the other men on the Nellie; he often has a sense of the “mysterious stillness” watching him at his “monkey tricks, just as it watches you fellows performing on your respective tight-ropes for—what is it? half a crown a tumble?” One of the men on the Nellie warns Marlow to “try to be civilized.” Marlow responds, “I beg your pardon. I forgot the heartache that makes up the rest of the price.” Then he continues with his story.

Fifty miles from Kurtz’s headquarters at Inner Station, the ship comes upon a hut with a stack of Srewood outside. Inside the hut, Marlow discovers a technical book on sailing that seems to have code written on it. He is signed illegibly. The book is “real” to Marlow in a way that nothing else is because to produce what he takes to be the code must have taken great and concentrated effort. It must have taken work. Everything else is absurd to the point of meaninglessness: “Hurry up. Approach cautiously.” Those commands are mutually exclusive.

The white fog surrounding and blinding the steamship while natives scream outside is a marvelous symbol. The white fog hides from view the dark jungle and black natives screaming outside, just as the “whited sepulcher” of civilization blinds itself from the primitive darkness at its own heart.

The turning on the white men on the ship, and mankind’s desire to catch and eat the men on the Nellie warns Marlow to be “civil.” Heart of Darkness makes the point that civilization prefers the mask of proper behavior to the truth. This self-deception is what makes civilization hollow.

The pilgrims open fire into the bush, putting out smoke that blocks Marlow’s vision.

A shotgun blasts just behind Marlow: the helmsman has dropped the wheel and started shooting out the window. Marlow jumps to take the wheel and avoid the snag ahead. The helmsman falls back from the window, a spear in his side. Blood fills the pilothouse, soaking Marlow’s shoes. Marlow pulls the ship’s steam whistle, which terrifies the attacking natives and drives them off. A pilgrim wearing “pink pyjamas” comes with a message from the General Manager and is aghast to see the dead helmsman.

Marlow realizes Kurtz is probably dead and feels an intense disappointment at the thought. Marlow then tells the pilgrim to steer and flings his bloody shoes overboard.

The morning reveals a thick white blinding fog enveloping the ship. A roar of screaming natives breaks the silence, then cuts off. Frightened pilgrims hold their rifles at the ready, but can’t see anything. The cannibals want to catch and eat the men on the riverbank. Marlow realizes the cannibals must be incredibly hungry, and marvels at their restraint in not turning on the white men on the ship. The General Manager authorizes Marlow to take all risks in going upstream, knowing full well that Marlow will refuse to take any. After two hours, the fog lifts and the steamship continue upstream.

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Marlow returns to the dead helmman, saying that Kurtz was a remarkable man, but wasn’t worth the lives they lost in trying to find him. Marlow mourns his helmman deeply. The man had “done something, he had steered!”

Everyone on board assumes the Inner Station has been overrun and Kurtz killed. The pilgrims are happy, though, that they probably killed so many savages with their rifles. Marlow, however, is certain all the pilgrims shot too high, and killed no one.

When they arrive at Inner Station, Marlow and the other men on the ship are amazed to discover it in perfect shape. They are met onshore by a white man wearing clothes covered in colorful patches. Marlow thinks the man looks like a harlequin (a clown or jester). The man knows that the steamship has been attacked, but says, “it’s all right” now. As the General Manager and pilgrims go to get Kurtz, the harlequin comes on board and speaks with Marlow. The man explains that he’s a twenty-five year old Russian sailor who deserted and through a series of adventures working for various colonial powers ended up wandering through the Congo alone for two years.

When the Russian says that the hut with the stacked wood was his old house, Marlow returns the book about sailing to him. The Russian in his joy tells Marlow that the natives attacked the ship because the ship’s captain was also a Russian. Marlow asks whether the Russian still wants to go back to his old house. The Russian says that he doesn’t want to go back because it’s not worth the trouble. Marlow explains that he was a remarkable man, and the other men on the ship were appalled and attracted by his savagery. His hollow civilized core, for all its outward beauty, could not hold out against the jungle’s “inner truth.”

Here is Marlow’s first solid evidence that Kurtz has abandoned his morals. (When Marlow earlier told the men on the Nellie that Kurtz became a monster, he was flashing forward in his narrative.)

When he described the Roman conquerors in England at the beginning of Heart of Darkness, Marlow imagined them as appalled and attracted by their savagery. The same is true for Kurtz, who both “hated all this” and spiked heads to stakes. His hollow civilized core, for all its outward beauty, couldn’t hold out against the jungle’s “inner truth.”

Here’s another instance of Marlow’s condescending preference for the simplicity of the “savage” natives to the corrupt and complicated civilized men.

The naive Russian can’t see past Kurtz’s eloquence to the hollowness within.

Kurtz, the epitome of civilized man, has transformed himself into a god to the natives. He even looks like a god: “an image of death carved out of ivory.” The lure of power and domination was too great for him too resist.

Kurtz was so transformed by the jungle he even betrayed his Intended.

Meanwhile, the Russian begs Marlow to take Kurtz away quickly. He tells of his first meeting with Kurtz, in which Kurtz “talked of everything” and the Russian only listened. Since then, he says he’s nursed Kurtz through two illnesses, even though Kurtz had once threatened to shoot him over some ivory.

Here’s the Russian’s secret. He’s the only white man in colonial Africa not looking for money or power. Without the will to dominate, he seems safe from corruption.

Kurtz talked of “everything.” Of course, talking of everything is a lot like talking of “nothing.” Note that the color white, the color of blindness in Heart of Darkness, is the result of every color brought together into one.

Kurtz was transformed by the jungle he even betrayed his Intended.

Somehow Kurtz still sees himself as a man of great ideas, just as civilized Europeans continue to see colonialism as noble while it abuses the Africans and steals their wealth.
The General Manager exits from the cabin. He tells Marlow that Kurtz is very ill and that Kurtz’s “unsound methods” ruined the district for the company. Marlow comments that Kurtz’s methods couldn’t be “unsound” because he seemed to have had “no method at all!” Yet Marlow is more disgusted by the General Manager’s fake show of sadness at Kurtz’s demise than with Kurtz’s atrocities, and says that Kurtz is still a remarkable man. This loses Marlow whatever favor he’d held in the General Manager’s eyes.

When Marlow is alone, the Russian approaches. He has decided to slip away, correctly sensing that he’s in danger from the General Manager and his men, and seeing nothing more that he can do for Kurtz. But before departing he tells Marlow that it was Kurtz who ordered the native attack on the steamship in order to scare the General Manager away and thereby be allowed to remain at his station. The Russian gets Marlow to give him some supplies and disappears into the night.

Marlow goes to sleep, but wakes suddenly just after midnight. As he looks around he notices Kurtz has disappeared. On the bank of the river Marlow finds a trail through the grass and realizes Kurtz must be crawling. He catches up to Kurtz just before he reaches the native camp. Marlow realizes that though he’s stronger than Kurtz, all Kurtz has to do is call out and the natives will attack. Kurtz, realizing the same thing, tells him to go around him. Marlow says, “You will be lost, utterly lost.” Kurtz pauses, struggling with himself. Marlow watches him, and realizes that Kurtz is perfectly sane in his mind, but his soul is mad. Kurtz’s soul, Marlow says, “knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear.” Yet in the end Kurtz allows Marlow to support him back to the ship.

The next day the ship departs. Kurtz, in the pilothouse with Marlow, watches the natives and his mistress come to the shore. Marlow spots the pilgrims getting their rifles and pulls the steam whistle. All the natives but the woman disperse. The pilgrims open fire, blocking Marlow’s vision with the smoke.

Marlow has a choice to make between the General Manager’s “pretending” devil of false civility, and Kurtz’s “lusty” devil of monstrous domination. He chooses Kurtz, perhaps for the same reason he prefers donkeys and savages to Europeans. In Kurtz, though there was monstrouness, there was no lie. The jungle filled Kurtz’s hollowness, but not the General Manager’s.

As they travel swiftly downstream, the General Manager is pleased. After all, soon Kurtz will be dead and the General Manager will be secure in his position without having to do a thing. Marlow is often left alone with Kurtz, who speaks in his magnificent voice and with his magnificent eloquence about his moral ideas, his hopes for fame in Europe, and his desire to “wring the heart” of the jungle.

The steamship soon breaks down, which doesn’t surprise Marlow. But Kurtz becomes concerned he won’t live to see Europe. He gives Marlow his papers, fearful that the General Manager might try to pry into them, and one day tells Marlow that he is “waiting for death.” Marlow is pierced by the expression on Kurtz’s face “of somber pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror—of an intense and hopeless despair.” Suddenly Kurtz cries out in a voice not much more than a breath: “The horror! The horror!” A short while later, the General Manager’s servant appears and informs everyone: “Mistah Kurtz—he dead.”

Soon after, Marlow himself falls ill. He calls his struggle with death “the most unexciting contest you can imagine,” and is embarrassed to discover that on his deathbed he could think of nothing to say. That’s why he admires Kurtz. The man had something to say: “The horror!” Marlow’s describes Kurtz’s statement as a moral victory paid for by “abominable terrors” and “abominable satisfactions.”

Marlow returns to the “sepulchral city” in Europe, where his aunt nurses him back to health but can’t soothe his mind. The people of the city seem to him petty and silly.

A representative of the Company comes to get Kurtz’s papers from Marlow, who offers him only On the Suppression of Savage Customs (with the scrawled “extirminate all the brutes torn off” torn off). The representative wanting more, wanting something more profitable, storms off.

Kurtz’s cousin soon shows up. The cousin, a musician, tells Marlow that Kurtz was himself a great musician, then leaves with some family letters Marlow gives him.

Marlow’s esteem for Kurtz’s statement is part of his general respect for work. Through the corruption of his ideals, Kurtz saw the world as it was. And like the helmsman who “had done something, he had steered,” Kurtz did something, he judged; the horror!

The people in the city, who have never seen the jungle, can’t see the hollowness of their civilization. They can’t see the horror.

The same greed visible in the Company agents is visible in the Company representative. Note how Marlow protects Kurtz’s reputation.

Kurtz seems to have just reflected people back at themselves. Another indication that he was more surface than self.
Soon after, a journalist stops by. He says Kurtz wasn’t a great writer, but was a great speaker. He could have been a great radical political leader—he could electrify a crowd. Marlow asks what party Kurtz would have belonged to. The journalist says any party: Kurtz could convince himself of anything. He takes *On the Suppression of Savage Customs* for publication.

At last, Marlow works up the nerve to go to see Kurtz’s Intended and give her the last of his letters. When she lets Marlow into her house he notices that though it’s a year after Kurtz’s death, she is still dressed in mourning black. She praises Kurtz as the best of all men.

The journalist’s assertion that Kurtz could convince himself of anything further supports the idea of Kurtz’s hollowness. He didn’t care what his ideals were, as long as he was passionate about them.

Marlow’s aunt established women in H of D as symbols of society’s blindness to its own hollowness. Kurtz’s Intended further supports this symbolism: she is completely clueless about Kurtz’s true nature.

Marlow, on the Nellie still at anchor in the Thames, goes quiet. The Narrator looks off into the distance, and says that the Thames seems to lead to the “uttermost ends of the earth,” seems to lead “into the heart of an immense darkness.”

Though Marlow knows Kurtz’s triumph lay in his understanding of men’s pretty delusions about themselves, he can’t bring himself to make Kurtz’s Intended see the dark reality. And Marlow knows that if he, who sees civilization’s hollowness, can’t bring himself to reveal the darkness beneath, then civilization’s blindness is complete.

Marlow, full of pity, does not dispute her claims. Finally, the Intended asks to hear Kurtz’s last words. This is the question Marlow’s been dreading. He pauses, then tells her that Kurtz’s last words were her name. She cries out that she knew it and begins to weep. Marlow feels only despair, knowing he failed to give Kurtz the justice he deserved. But he just couldn’t get himself to tell the Intended the truth—it would have been too dark.

Marlow’s story, though, forces the Narrator to see civilization’s dark heart. The Narrator’s connection of that darkness to the Thames indicates he now realizes his former romantic ideas of colonialism were symptoms of civilization’s self-delusion.