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Based on  
Joseph Conrad's  
"Heart of Darkness"

Heart of Darkness--A Fable

What are the essentials of this strange tale about obscure people set in a remote part of the African continent? The plot, the skeletal outline of this affair, appears simple enough. Marlow, a British seaman, is employed by a Belgian trading company as master of a steamboat supplying trading posts in the company's concession territory along the upper reaches of the Congo River. Aboard a French ship, he journeys down the west coast of Africa to the mouth of the Congo River and from thence some 215 miles upstream to the company's central trading station at Kinshasa, all the while absorbing a series of vivid impressions concerning the country, its native inhabitants, and the white men who have come to develop and exploit the land. En route to his new command, he hears talk of a mysterious Mr. Kurtz, an extraordinarily productive agent operating in the innermost district of the territory who appears to be slated for a key post in the company hierarchy. Arriving at the central station Marlow learns that Kurtz has not been heard from for over a year, is rumored to be ill and out of supplies, and that a rescue mission is being readied to steam up river and bring him back for treatment and rehabilitation--along with the company's ivory which he has presumably collected and stored during this time. Setting out aboard a battered steamer, accompanied by the station manager, four itinerant white traders and a crew of twenty recently enlisted cannibals, Marlow completes a hazardous journey up the uncharted river to Kurtz's district and the company's inner station. After a series of harrowing

incidents the expedition locates and retrieves a dying and half de-mented Kurtz, bundles him on board along with a considerable quantity of ivory and heads back downstream. Kurtz dies and a reluctant but fascinated Marlow inherits his papers and an unspoken commitment to preserve intact the memory and reputation of this "remarkable man". The story closes with an unforgettable scene in which Marlow confronts the dead man's fiancée and fulfills what he feels to be his final obligation to the departed Kurtz.

From the outset it's apparent this is no simple account of sus-pense and adventure in an exotic setting. In fact if a poll were taken here tonight among those who have read the story I believe it most unlikely we'd agree as to precisely what Conrad is telling us in Heart of Darkness. Reading him is like viewing a richly woven mediaeval tapestry. From a proper distance one senses a pattern--a design. Move up closer, however, and the pattern dissolves into a bewildering profusion of brightly colored threads that appear and disappear seemingly at random. In a word--Conrad is elusive. Well then, let us abandon precision, the empirical approach, and fall back instead on our imagination, the sum of our personal experience, and above all the way each of us happens to view the world we live in--analytical tools a good many people feel uncomfortable with nowadays. Still it's that kind of story; and, much like the searchers for Kurtz, we find ourselves engaged in an upstream quest, groping for meaning in a heavily freighted complex tale that defies easy analysis. Where does one begin? The sustained ironic tone of the narrative is as good a place as any.

Now irony, my friends is the art of two faced statement. An

author states a proposition, expresses an idea which appears to contradict itself. At its gentlest irony implies criticism, sometimes subtle, sometimes overt. At its most savage irony attacks and demolishes in a devastating way--devastating because it is so difficult to answer and defend against. Subtle or overt, gentle or savage, it serves notice on the reader that the author is less than neutral in his perception, less than objective in his account. From page after page of vivid narrative irony leaps out at us with unforgettable impact, bathing the story in a strange intensity almost unmatched in English fiction. Consider if you will, these examples. A French man-of-war lies anchored off the African coast, her crew dying of fever at the rate of three men a day.

It appears the French had one of their wars going on... 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...There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding...

Amidst the general disarray of the company's outer station Marlow encounters six chained prisoners toiling up a path, their outward appearance mutely testifying to their condition:

They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets of earth on their heads...I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope...They passed me within six inches, without a glance, with that complete death-like indifference of unhappy savages...They were called criminals and the outraged law had come to them, an insoluble mystery from the sea...

Behind this raw matter one of the reclaimed, the product of the new forces at work strolled despondently, carrying a rifle by its middle...seeing a white man on the path... (he) hoisted his weapon to his shoulder with alacrity... and with a large white rascally grin seemed to take me into partnership in his exalted trust. After all, I also was a part of the great cause, of these high and just proceedings.

Shortly thereafter, enroute overland to the company station at Kinshasa, Marlow meets a uniformed white man accompanied by an armed escort of Zanzibaris. Drunk and loquacious, he describes his mission as "...looking after the upkeep of the road." Whereupon Marlow laconically observes:

...Can't say I saw any road or any upkeep, unless the body of a middle aged Negro with a bullet hole in the forehead, upon which I stumbled three miles farther on, may be considered a permanent improvement.

In passages like these one is tempted to say we brush against the major thrust of this story. Is Heart of Darkness then a fictionalized polemic against the perceived folly of "The White Man's Burden", that nineteenth century notion which proclaims the white Westerner's moral duty to confer the spiritual blessings and the material benefits of Western progress on primitive societies in a benighted land, a land plagued by hunger, disease, a near intolerable climate; a land in fact ravaged by a systematic grab for wealth and power operating under the guise of legitimate trade; in short, the reality of nineteenth century Africa as perceived by one angry man.

One can make a convincing case for such a conclusion. Documented evidence, company records, personal letters, a diary, newspaper reports, all verify that Joseph Conrad was there--in the Congo from June to December of 1890, employed by a Belgian trading concern, Le Societe Anonyme Belge Pour le Commerce du Haut Congo as navigator aboard one of their river steamers. He made one trip up the Congo as far as Stanley Falls, a distance of eleven hundred miles before returning to Kinshasa in late September. He didn't stay long. By December of that year he was on his way home after serving only six

months of his three year contract with the company.

The documented evidence further indicates that Conrad departed Europe eagerly anticipating an active role in the development of a little known continent; that he returned to Europe broken in health, disillusioned by his Congo experiences, and embittered by his failure to obtain the river command he understood to have been promised him by the company's European management. Under the circumstances, one can assume he relished the chance to even scores with the Belgians. Still Heart of Darkness is so clearly a work of distinction one can't in good conscience dismiss it as a thinly disguised self indulgent polemic. Furthermore, the anger and indignation, apparent enough, genuine enough, and Heaven knows, understandable enough once the story's factual background is known, are insufficient in themselves to explain the enigma of Kurtz, that paragon of company agents. No documentary evidence exists to indicate that Mr. Kurtz is anything more than a fiction--a creature of Joseph Conrad's imagination; yet a nagging suspicion persists that all roads in this somber tale lead upstream to him.

"Who is Mr. Kurtz?", asks a mystified Marlow--and the gentleman emerges, shadowy, indistinct, a Protean figure amidst a shifting kaleidoscope of time and events. To an immaculate bookkeeper at the company's Matadi station he is a remarkable man--"Sends in as much ivory as all the others put together...". Further upstream a devious brickmaker observes that Mr. Kurtz is in fact "a prodigy, a veritable emissary of pity, science, progress and (ironically, as it later turns out) devil knows what else".

From other sources Marlow learns that Kurtz at times has been considered a talented painter, an accomplished organist, a potential political leader of extreme causes (any extreme cause). At the

last Marlow is unable to say what Mr. Kurtz's true profession was, "whether (indeed) he ever had any." His most impressive talent, however, Marlow remembers well:

...the one that stood out preeminantly was his ability to talk, his words, the gift of expression...that carried with it a sense of real presence.

A first hint of what the Congo wilderness holds for such a nature appears inside a pamphlet written by Kurtz for (mark its name) "The International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs"; "seventeen pages of close writing" proclaiming that

...we (whites), by the simple exercise of our will can exert on them (the savages), a power for good practically unbounded etc, etc...

"From that point", Marlow recalls,

He soared and took me with him. The peroration was magnificent...this was the unbounded power of eloquence...of burning noble words...

And then, interestingly, this:

There were no practical hints to interrupt the magic current of phrases unless a kind of note at the foot of the last page, scrawled evidently much later, in an unsteady hand, may be regarded as the exposition of a method. It was very simple, and at the end of that moving appeal...it blazed at you luminous and terrifying... 'Exterminate all the brutes!'

"He had apparently forgotten all about that valuable postscriptum", Marlow adds,

Because later on, when he in a sense came to himself, he entrusted me to take care of 'my pamphlet' (he called it) as it was sure to have a good influence on his career.

Shortly thereafter, some innovative details of Mr. Kurtz's now well advanced "career" become clearer to Marlow as he focuses his glass on a row of severed human heads drying atop posts in front of the district headquarters.

"He made me see things...Oh, he enlarged my mind!", cries the

bepatched Russian trader, Kurtz's last and most devoted disciple. The subtle contradictions that stem from enlarging one man's mind while simultaneously shrinking another's head have apparently eluded this delightful fellow. A thunderstruck Marlow further learns that Kurtz has abandoned all pretense of trading with the natives, has set himself up as the demi-god of a nearby lake tribe and taken to raiding the countryside in search of ivory which he now claims for himself. All of which suggests to Marlow that Mr. Kurtz, at the very least, lacked a measure of restraint--

...that there was something wanting in him, some small matter which, when the need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence...

To put it succinctly:

the wilderness had found him out early...had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know until 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...

And there you have it!! "hollow at the core!" The phrase strikes at one like a bolt of summer lightning. For one startled reader, at least, an entire story turns on the interpretation of a single line. It's as if the author, in the process of illuminating his central character, suddenly reveals a truth about ourselves as well. Call it judgment; call it prophecy; call it what you will. Marlow himself, long after the event, admits the affair seemed to cast a certain light--and then drops the subject without further elaboration, because, as he puts it:

The essentials of this affair lay deep under the surface, beyond my reach, and beyond my power of meddling.

"Hollow at the core". Well, hollowness denotes emptiness does it not? And no vacuum remains long unfilled. Hear then Conrad's dictum. Human energy, talent, ambition, charisma, are less than

effective core materials when confronting the dark places of this world. Kurtz was tested and found wanting. Outwardly he possessed all the makings of a Congo success story. What went wrong took place inside--an inevitable correction of certain illusions he held concerning himself, his mission, and the African countryside. For all his rhetoric, what really mattered to him was his own career, his station, his ivory, and above all his reputation in the eyes of his peers. Even his initial idealism turns out to be self centered, shallow rooted, illusory.

"By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for the good..." he has written. Let it be noted--his prescription, his will, his power, his perception of what is good. Well the jungle shortly makes a mockery of such nonsense, blows it to the four winds and the remarkable Mr. Kurtz descends into matching savagery and madness.

At the last, long past the point of no return, there occurs the barest hint of redemption--a death bed cry scarcely above a whisper: "The horror! The horror!" Not in the least conventional; no shred of remorse, no visible sign of repentance. A moment of lucidity, perhaps--a brief acknowledgement of what he has in fact become--and he's gone. For Marlow, somehow it sufficed. He heard it as

...an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions...

Whatever it was, it warranted a loyalty to Kurtz that remained firm long after they buried "the remarkable man" in a mud bank of that wild river.

A subdued reader puts the story down wondering where shadow begins and substance ends. Is it conceivable that one man can make



a definitive statement about darkness? In an oblique, tortuous way, Conrad seems to have tried. By any criterion the Congo Free State of 1890 qualifies as a dark place. There have been others--many! In our day alone a dreary litany of names--Uganda, Mai Lai, Cambodia, El Salvador--places characterized (in Marlow's words) by

robbery, violence, aggravated murder on a grand scale  
and men going at it blind--as is very proper for those  
who tackle a darkness.

Some among us may argue that Kurtz, after all, meant well. He simply underestimated the difficulties of his environment--disease, isolation, heat, loneliness. True enough, to a degree, but such reasoning begs the real issue here; namely, that Kurtz in fact overestimated his own resources in a final confrontation with the wilderness, a dark place that appealed to the vestigial remains of some dimly remembered savagery within himself. And therein lies the crux of our fable. The world's darkness is not centered in a piece of geography delineated by degrees of latitude and longitude. The Heart of Darkness is to be found within ourselves, in the latent savagery, the potential for human evil that lies in wait, biding its time inside all men. Never is it more threatening, never is it more fatal than when it goes unheralded and unrecognized as it does in the estimable Kurtz. He was neither the first nor will he be the last to go at it "blind in the Congo"--with predictable results.

Given this scenario, how then does one contend with a darkness? What are the available defenses? Very little elaboration from Conrad on this score. From Marlow we do have it that principles alone won't do. They are, it seems,

pretty rags, rags that would fly off at the first good  
shake...no; you want a deliberate belief...

Not a great deal to go on and scarcely attractive to those who

find shopping for a "deliberate belief" a decidedly unpalatable enterprise. Still, it does shed a certain light...

And finally there remains that intriguing subject of hollowness. Verily it teases the mind. Who is hollow? What are the recognizable attributes of hollow men? Is hollowness a pervasive fact of modern life or is it largely the product of one man's overwrought imagination? If, after proper investigation (of course) by duly constituted authority (certainly) it should be discovered that hollowness indeed dwells among us--does it really matter? We live in America, not the Congo. We are a society that devotes a significant portion of its energy and talents to acquiring what can be seen, what can be touched. Most of us are far too busy making a go of it under difficult circumstances to bother with neurotic concepts. Who then is left to comprehend hollowness in our time?

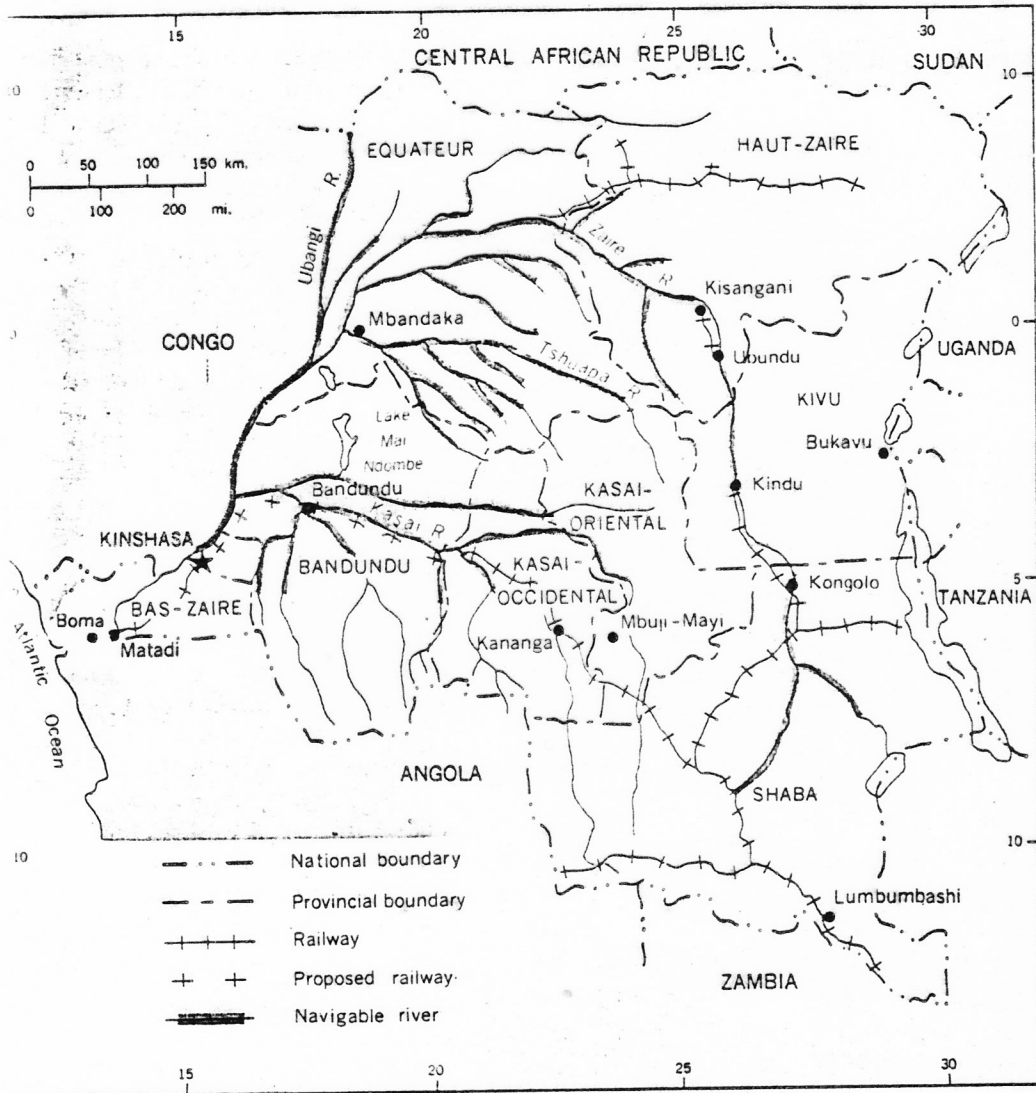


FIGURE 14-2 Zaire. General identification map.