

# Heart of darkness response paper

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



The Road to Self Discovery Heart of Darkness, by Joseph Conrad, is a short novel about Marlow, a pensive sailor, and his journey up the Congo River to meet an idealist named Kurtz. Marlow works as a riverboat captain with a Belgian company organized to trade in the Congo. Throughout his journey, Marlow encounters extensive forms of brutality, thus taking him on another journey: one of self discovery and a newfound attitude towards life through encountering “ the heart of darkness”. The notion of a change in character was first introduced at the start of the novel when Marlow visits a doctor to receive a physical examination before his journey. The doctor alludes to an internal transformation among those who take the same expedition that Marlow is about to embark upon. As Marlow recounts: “ The old doctor felt my pulse, evidently thinking of something else the while. ‘ Good, good for there,’ he mumbled, and then with a certain eagerness asked me whether I would let him measure my head. Rather surprised, I said Yes, when he produced a thing like callipers and got the dimensions back and front and every way, taking notes carefully. He was an unshaven little man in a threadbare coat like a gabardine, with his feet in slippers, and I thought him a harmless fool. ‘ I always ask leave, in the interests of science, to measure the crania of those going out there,’ he said. ‘ And when they come back too?’ I asked. ‘ Oh, I never see them,’ he remarked; ‘ and, moreover, the changes take place inside, you know” (Conrad 130). The doctor’s comments foreshadow two inevitable situations within the novel: the brutal path Marlow was about to continue down, and the change he would eventually experience from within. It can also be argued that the doctor’s allusion was not of a change of heart, but of a change in mental stability. Marlow endured many

brutalities throughout the course of his journey up the Congo River; therefore, having tremendous effects on his psyche. It is often reported that soldiers return home a bit crazed after fighting in a war. Even in today's civilization, "[a] study in The Journal of the American Medical Association says the invisible injuries plaguing soldiers returning from war in Iraq – such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression or just a sense of "not feeling normal" – are common mental health problems, and are most likely to show up several months after a soldier gets home. Scientists at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research compared the health care questionnaires that soldiers fill out when they first come home and again several months later. After six months, they're more likely to report problems with alcoholism, depression and PTSD. Also, they were four times more likely to say they're having problems getting along with spouses, children or with colleagues and bosses at work" (npr.org). Perhaps the experience in the Congo changed Marlow in a different way; one in which the lines between fiction and reality are blurred. Who is to say that the accounts he is speaking of are purely factual? Marlow is a character the reader watches lie consistently throughout the novel. First he allows the brick maker to believe he has more influence in the company than he actually had. Later in the novel, he tells Kurtz's fiancée that his last words were her name (even though they were actually "the horror!"). It is possible that his entire recollection of the events in the Congo may not have been completely true, but rather skewed by his ability to remember events in a way that is more comfortable for him to reflect upon, so as to put his own mind at ease. Throughout the novel, a parallel between Marlow's and Kurtz's journeys is

evident to the reader. Both have been sent to the Congo to take control, and in doing in which Marlow finally encounters Kurtz, when the idealist is on his deathbed, that he comes to the realization that he must forge his own path. Up until this point, Marlow was consistently leading his life at the commands of others. He started a new job as a steamboat captain that was provided for him by his aunt, and went on a wild goose chase through the Congo at the command of the company. However, witnessing the aftermath of the direction he was headed was enough to convince Marlow he was destined for other things. He states "...I did not go join Kurtz there and then. I did not. I remained to dream the nightmare out to the end, and to show my loyalty to Kurtz once more. Destiny. My destiny! Droll thing life is— that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself— that comes too late— a crop of unextinguishable regrets" (Conrad 169). Upon the end of the novel, the reader is convinced of Marlow's change of heart. As he is wandering the streets of his hometown, Marlow comments on the ignorance of the surrounding people, and how his journey to the Congo has been an enlightening experience for him. As Marlow expresses to his audience, " I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams. They trespassed upon my thoughts. They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretense, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew" (Conrad 169). It is at this juncture that Marlow has noticed a change in

himself and of his attitude. Before his voyage to the Congo, Marlow was one of those people he now finds so irritating. He was oblivious to anything outside of his own life by solely paying attention to that in which was directly affecting him; however, encountering “ the heart of darkness” lead him to a new, enlightened life in which he treasured the lessons he learned from his experience through the imperialism of the Congo. One could argue that encountering “ the heart of darkness” means to completely let one’s guard down and search the very depths of his or her soul. It is not until one truly looks inside oneself that he or she can completely change. To come across “ the heart of darkness” is to continually search within oneself, regardless of the demons they may be harvesting, to emerge enlightened in the form of a new sense of self and regarding a new meaning of life. Heart of Darkness is an insightful novel about one man’s endurance through the brutalities of imperialism. It depicts how it is never too late to find one’s own destiny, and to live life by learning from one’s experiences, regardless of how one found oneself to be involved even in an atrocity. It is the journey of self discovery and enlightenment that makes venturing through “ the heart of darkness” worth all the while. Bibliography Conrad, Joseph. Heart of Darkness. 1902. Rpt. in The Norton Introduction to the Short Novel. By Jerome Beaty. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1999. 125-173. “ Study: Mental Health Issues After War. ” NPR. org. 14 Nov. 2007. National Public Radio. 20 Oct. 2008 .