



## Environmental and Ecocritical Perspectives on "Heart of Darkness"



Marlow's &  
Conrad's  
1889-90  
journey into  
*"Heart of  
Darkness"*



Joseph Conrad (1857-1924)



## Presentation Outline:

- Introduction and overview
- Explanation of environmental and ecocritical perspectives:
  - Review of existing scholarly works on environmental and ecocritical readings of "Heart of Darkness"
  - Comparison of different interpretations and arguments
  - Identification of common themes or divergent viewpoints among scholars
- Water in *The Heart of Darkness*
- Conclusion





## Ecocriticism and The Heart of Darkness:

- Emphasizes nature's importance in literature
- Analyzes how nature is portrayed and its impact on society
- Nature seen as a real entity with potential consequences for mistreatment
- "Heart of Darkness" portrays nature as dark, mysterious, and untamed
- Jungle depicted as daunting and oppressive, influencing characters like Marlow
- Kurtz's oppression of natives reflects nature's influence on him
- Nature envelops characters in confusion and danger
- Different characters react to nature differently: some thrive, some perish

1. Bakhtiari Hojjat, Mahdi, and Esmail Najar Daronkolae. "By the Name of Nature but Against Nature: An Ecocritical Study of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness." *Asian Journal of Humanities and Social Studies*, vol. 01, no. 03, August 2013, Asian Online Journals, [www.ajouronline.com](http://www.ajouronline.com), pp. 108-114.

Key quotation: "Conrad wants to tell us the clear cultivation of the native Congolese was hypocritically concerning the dark intention to achieve the natural resources, wealth and every useful thing from the black. Another feature of this novella is that the human and nature conflict has happened by human destruction. Therefore, it seems that human gain much more profit than the loss. But the subsequent loss of humankind is considerable and disastrous as well. The extermination and slaughtering of the natives almost brought an end to an alternative culture, and the conscience of people has been lost in the pursuit of ivory and fame as it occurred to Kurtz." (113).

2. Jonah, Caleb Monday. "Anthropocentrism and the Exploitation of Nature: An Ecocritical Analysis of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*." *AHYU: A Journal of Language and Literature (AJOLL)*, vol. 3, 2020, pp. 15-22.

Key quotation: “This concept maintains that humans are the most significant entity of the universe and therefore the universe should be evaluated in terms of human values and experiences. From the portrayals in the text, the idea of human-centeredness does not portend well for the sustainability of nature and its elements. In the text, the exploitative activities of the Trading Company and the Eldorado Exploring Expedition show how nature stands on the cusp of degradation as a result of emphasis on human values. The narrator sums up the aim of these two organizations thus: “to tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe” (19)

3. Lata, Lavanya. "Reviewing 'Heart of Darkness': An Environmental Perspective." *Literary Herald* ISSN: 2454-3365, vol. 3, no. 4, December 2017, p. 280-287.

Key quotation: “Heart of Darkness” reflects Conrad’s deep concern for “despoliation of the earth in the name of progress” and he criticizes the western viewpoint which reduces all relationships between the human and the natural world as relations which are solely motivated by the idea of profiteering. Nature is at the heart of “Heart of Darkness”. The colonial experience was highly destructive for the environment, with the violent abuse of indigenous land. Nature was used as a means of imperial conquest” (284).

4. Hosseini, Seyed Majid. "It Was the Stillness of an Implacable Force": A Lyotardian Study of Ecology in the Heart of Darkness. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, vol. 11, no. 3, May 2022, pp. 31-36. Advance access: May 2022.

Key quotation: “Kurtz’s powerful voice, however, gives way to the silent power of nature. In fact, his long, unsustainable engagement in “grubbing for ivory in the wretched bush” of the Congo seriously affects his health, mentally and physically (Conrad, 1899, p. 44). Speaking of him, Marlow observes that the wilderness had “got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation” (p. 49). Kurtz dies by the end of the novella, a hard lesson from nature which Marlow describes as a revelatory moment: “I think the knowledge came to him at last—only at the very last. But the wilderness had found him out early and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know” (p. 57). What Kurtz and, by extension, the reader realize is the illusive power of European developed culture over nature, that “nature, far from manifesting civilization’s priority, shows instead humanity as an unsettled and incidental wanderer across nature” (McCarthy, 2009, p. 641). Even his dying words “The horror! The horror!” (Conrad, 1899, p. 68) confirm this, a haunting echo of nature’s silent power over any human who encroaches upon it” (35).

5. Saikia, Tejoswita. "Postcolonial Ecocriticism of Conrad's Heart of Darkness." *Abhinav National Monthly Refereed Journal of Research in Arts & Education*, vol. 3, no. 11, November 2014, p. 1-6. Online ISSN-2277-1182. Available online on [www.abhinav\\_journal.com](http://www.abhinav_journal.com). Published by Abhinav Publication.

Key quotation: "It has been found that Conrad remains incompetent in offering a fully vindicated critique of colonial exploitation of Africa and its people because the novel gives us an impression that Africa and its natives are inarticulate beings of primitive nature, powerless to fight for themselves. He presents the white, European male, sympathetic to the distressing conditions of life of the African blacks as the only voice that could bring upon them salvation from the shackles of colonial exploitation. It has been examined how the limited and false knowledge of the Europeans has caused the pilfering of the distinct identity and culture of Africa as a land and people. It is the decadent ignorance of the white, European male that has cost the fecund colonized lands their identity and opulence" (5).



# The Congo

- It was not until 1877, after the English-born American explorer Henry Morton Stanley had completed a three-year journey across central Africa, that the exact length and course of the mighty Congo River were known.
- Stanley discovered that the Congo extends some 1,600 miles into Africa from its eastern coast to its western edge, where the river empties into the Atlantic Ocean, and that only one stretch of it is impassable. That section lies between **Matadi**, two hundred miles in from the mouth of the Congo, and **Kinshasa**, yet another two hundred miles further inland.
- In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad calls **Matadi the Company Station** and **Kinshasa the Central Station**. Between those two places, one is forced to proceed by land, which is exactly what Marlow does on his "two hundred-mile tramp" between the two Stations, described in the book.



An aerial photograph of a river winding through a dense, lush tropical forest. The river is dark and calm, reflecting the surrounding greenery. The forest is composed of various types of trees and thick undergrowth, creating a vibrant green landscape. In the lower right portion of the river, two small figures can be seen in a boat, providing a sense of scale to the vastness of the jungle.

## **The Congo river \_\_\_\_**

- ❑ Symbolizes movement, both literal and metaphorical**
- ❑ Facilitates ivory trade and colonial exploitation**
- ❑ Vital for British Empire's economic interests**
- ❑ Enables navigation into the heart of Africa**
- ❑ Represents Marlow's journey towards understanding**
- ❑ Serves as a barrier between civilization and wilderness**
- ❑ Resists European presence with its challenging currents**
- ❑ Reflects Marlow's internal struggles and moral dilemmas**
- ❑ Signifies acquiescence to horrors witnessed and Kurtz's "choice of nightmares"**



# Order in the midst of Chaos: *HOD's* Structure

- **Patterns of Three:**

- Three chapters
- Three times Marlow breaks off the story
- Three stations
- Three women  
(Aunt, Mistress, Intended)
- Three central characters  
(Kurtz, Marlow, Narrator)
- Three characters with names
- Three views of Africa  
(political, religious, economic)

Thank you

