CHAPTER - V

HEART OF DARKNESS
CHAPTER 5

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Subject Matter and Setting:

In general, the Heart of Darkness is a novel of adventure written in the objective spirit of French Naturalism. Not only is this novel rooted in social facts, but it is also the most autobiographical of Conrad's novels. Externally the book runs like an account of the adventures of the captain of a river steamer which sails into the Belgian Congo. At a deeper level, the book is a profound psychological study. One of the chief characters, Captain Marlow, can be taken to be Conrad's mouthpiece. It is through the eyes of Marlow that Conrad presents the whole story. (To a great extent Conrad's own).

Firstly, the subject matter deals with Marlow's impression of Belgian imperialism in the Congo, and the exploitation and cruelty to which the native savages were subjected by the white conquerors of that country.

Secondly, the book is also an exploration of the mind and the soul of a white ivory trader who stays in the Congo and who, in course of time identifies himself with the natives, without losing his own identity completely. This trader, Mr. Kurtz, is an agent of the Belgian trading company and he acquires
the status of a man-God among the savages of the whole region. He becomes a
cult figure for them and begins to share many of the beliefs, superstitions and
bestial customs of these people. In short, he becomes so degraded that in
Marlow's view, this man, who thinks of himself to be the master of everything
around him, would be ultimately claimed by the powers of darkness (present in
the human mind). The subject matter, as suggested by the title of this novel not
only refers to the journey into the heart of the Dark Continent of Africa, but
also into the dark chambers of the human heart. The powers of darkness
according to Marlow, refer to the degrading values of his own western culture
which are about to devour Kurtz's soul. They also refer to the primitive
instincts which have started to dominate him. When Marlow comes to the inner
trading post, Mr. Kurtz is very ill. The powers of darkness (represented by the
native savages) protest against his being taken away (to civilization). Even
Kurtz himself tries to slip back and rejoin the savages, but with great difficulty,
Marlow prevails on him to go to Europe for medical treatment. However, Mr.
Kurtz dies on the way and the rest of the story is only an epilogue.

Conrad has based this novel on his own experiences also. There is clear
proof of this in the form of The Congo Diary Map and the text of The Congo
Diary given at the end of the novel. Even before that, Conrad's own words
from the author's note will help confirm the fact:
This Story, and one other, not in this volume, are all the spoil I brought out from the centre of Africa, where, really, I had no sort of business...

'Heart of Darkness' is experience, too; but it is experience pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case for the perfectly legitimate, I believe, purpose of bringing it home to the minds and bosoms of the readers.

In the year 1890 Conrad had sailed from the French seaport of Bordeaux for the Congo as the captain of a Belgian steamship. Since the story is based on the actual voyage, the immense and sombre tropical wilderness adjacent to the 3000 mile long river Congo, the small trading settlements and native villages form the setting for this novel. As in the other works of Conrad, the setting is not just a background, but is an actively charged natural force that exerts its own influence on the unfolding human drama.

The setting of the dense, impenetrable jungles where even sunlight hardly penetrates in the daytime, and the small human settlements that appear to be constantly under threat from the jungle (that threatens to reclaim them from man) are used by Conrad as the external symbols of the dark and wild forces within the human mind. Like the dark jungle outside, these dark forces of evil like lust and other brutal passions threaten to reclaim the mind and the soul of a civilized man. In fact, Marlow's voyage is that of self discovery wherein at one
point he feels that if he stayed any longer in the atmosphere of barbarism and savagery, he too would become evil like Kurtz.

When Conrad sailed on the Congo, a very large part of Africa called by the same name (Congo) was under the imperialist rule of the Belgian king, Leopard – II. Conrad was the captain of the steamship plying between trading stations established along the river by the Belgian government, mainly to collect ivory which was then exported to Belgium to be sold to various European countries. Working for the Belgian trading company, Conrad got a chance to study at first hand the conditions prevailing in the Congo. By his study he formed his own impressions of the life led by the natives under the Belgian imperialist rule. He observed the mind-set (psyche) of the white traders and the authoritative manner in which they treated natives. What Conrad saw was very unpleasant and he was in fact shocked by what he saw. He was dismayed at the cheating, brutality, atrocity, injustice, purposelessness, greed and cunning of the whites with whom he interacted. He was taken aback by the ruthless exploitation of the natives at the hands of the white man, and the inhuman conditions in which the natives were forced to live. What he observed becomes the subject matter of the novel. Conrad had maintained a diary throughout his journey on the Congo and he later drew mainly from this source for writing the *Heart of Darkness*. 
Method:

The *Heart of Darkness* is one of the shortest of Conrad’s works (118 pages [New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2001]). It is something between a novel and a short story and therefore can be called a ‘Novella’. As in most of his other novels, Conrad employs a fast moving technique to narrate the tale. In his ‘Nigger of the Narcissus’, critics complained of the shifting and inconsistent identity of the narrative voice but in this novel, Conrad has improved upon that aspect. Conrad has developed some styles of characters as opposed to types, where the individual’s behaviour in the face of an ordeal defines that style. Three basic styles of characters that can be found in most of his novels are the base man, the man of integrity, and the man who achieves self-knowledge. This third type of character is the Chief protagonist in many of his novels, especially in *Heart of Darkness*, *The Secret Sharer* and the *Shadow Line*, where this character is the first person narrator of the story. Conrad creates a realistic effect by using a detached and objective (scientific) method of narration.

Conrad was strongly in favour of the first-person method of narration. With a sense of experience as ordeal, Conrad felt that the realistic effect of his fiction would be heightened by the use of a character who could show the effect of the ordeal on himself either by being himself the person undergoing the
ordeal, or by his role as a close observer. In *Heart of Darkness*, he invents a fictional narrator who is a retired English sailor named Marlow, who greatly resembles Conrad himself in his quality of experiences and the psyche on which the experiences work. At the same time, Marlow is distinct from Conrad because of the Englishness of his character and by the way in which he is himself characterized through the eyes of other observers.

Though the novel contains Conrad’s own experiences, Conrad does not speak in his own person. Conrad’s own experiences have been attributed to the narrator Marlow. The story begins on the deck of a yacht at the mouth of the river Thames. The crew members are friends, and they are waiting for the tide to turn so that they can head for the open sea. Marlow is one of the crew and it is he, who narrates the whole story to pass the time. But before that, Marlow, and the circumstances in which he is narrating the tale are introduced to us by a narrator who is supposed to be one of the audience (or crew). Therefore, though the ordeal described in the novel is mostly Conrad’s own, it is distanced from the reader because Marlow himself is set at a distance but at the same time, it does not lose immediacy of narrative effect because the story flows in Marlow’s tones, with its personal inflections, hesitations, and emphases. In the beginning, the narrative runs like an adventure story of Marlow as a young man attracted by the mysteries of unexplored Africa. As the story progresses, the
nature of the story changes from one of physical exploration to that of mental and moral exploration. The search into the Heart of Darkness (The Dark Continent) becomes a search into the dark recesses of the human heart. This search is externally symbolized by captain Marlow's search for the ivory trader Kurtz. Kurtz, who had come to Africa with the high European ideals of civilizing and enlightening the ignorant natives, himself ends up as a moral degenerate — a monstrous dark deity of the very natives whom he had come to redeem.

There is no doubt that like other naturalist works this one is also a novel of degeneration, but the fast paced and powerful narrative brings the story alive to the readers, who are made to undergo the ordeals by identifying with Marlow. As sensitive readers, they should end up transformed by the chastening experience of reading the novel.

An emphasis on meticulous details and scientific objectivity which are some other characteristics of the naturalist method can be seen throughout the novel. Let us consider a piece where Marlow is horrified by the sight of human heads drying on the poles of Mr. Kurtz's fence. Later in the story, the Russian tells Marlow that they are the heads of native men ordered to be beheaded by Kurtz because they did not obey him. The emphasis on minute details and objective portrayal is what warrants our attention:
These round knots were not ornamental but symbolic; they were expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing – food for thought and also for the vultures if there had been any looking down from the sky; but at all events for such ants as were industrious enough to ascend the pole. They would have been even more impressive, those heads on the stakes, if their faces had not been turned to the house. Only one, the first I had made out, was facing my way. I was not so shocked as you may think. The start back I had given was really nothing but a movement of surprise. I had expected to see a knob of wood there, you know. I returned deliberately to the first I had seen - and there it was, black, dried, sunken, with closed eye-lids, - a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and, with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of the teeth, was smiling too, smiling continuously at some end-less and jocose dream of that eternal slumber.²

This is just one of the numerous such passages and it ascertains Conrad’s naturalistic method of writing

**Plot and Characters:**

The plot in *Heart of Darkness* revolves around the two main characters of Marlow and Kurtz. The rest of the characters in the novel are secondary, as they only help in the exposition of the main characters. The plot is developed around Marlow’s voyage up the river Congo into the deeper, less explored region of the country. Superficially, we follow Marlow’s physical voyage but there is also an undercurrent of mental exploration. It has been mentioned earlier that naturalist works are characterized by a large number of characters
and an idealized leading character involved in personal problems or adventures. This is very much true of this novel also because the plot follows the adventures of Marlow. Marlow and Kurtz can be understood through their relationship with their physical and social surroundings. The characters are shown to be in subordinate relation to their environment. This also is typical of naturalist works. Apart from the two main characters, the other characters are as follows:

**Major Characters:**

1) The Chief Accountant of the Trading Company that hires Marlow.

2) The Manager of the Central Station.

3) The Brick Maker.

4) The Group of white traders working for the company (nick-named ‘Pilgrims’ by Marlow).

5) The young Russian adventurer who has become a great admirer of Mr. Kurtz.

6) Mr. Kurtz’s intended (fiancée).

**Minor Characters:**

7) Marlow’s aunt.

8) The two knitting women.
9) The company's doctor.

10) The Negro boy servant of the manager at the central station.

11) The manager's uncle, who is fat and cunning.

12) The native woman, who is close to Mr. Kurtz.

13) The native helmsman of the steamboat, who gets killed.

14) The cannibal crew of Marlow's steamer.

15) The Foreman, who helps Marlow repair the wrecked steamer.

16) The three men, who meet Marlow in Brussels to claim the packet of papers given to him by Kurtz.

It is noteworthy for us that Conrad has not given any names to these characters.

Marlow has a childhood dream of exploring remote areas of the world and to realize this passion, he takes help from an influential aunt to get employed as the captain of a steamer sailing to the interior parts of the Belgian Congo. Due to his long and hard seafaring life, Marlow is an exceptionally intelligent and capable man with extraordinary powers of observation, meditation, and analysis. Because of long years of life spent on the sea, Marlow is not only a man of action but also a man with a very acute
psychological insight. Like most of the characters in naturalist works, Marlow is a product of his circumstances and environment.

Marlow represents Conrad’s own reactions to things and people, and he represents Conrad’s own point of view, to a greater extent. Though the character of Kurtz seems to dominate the final part of the story, it is Marlow who is to be regarded as the moving spirit throughout this novel. The plot runs in such a way that it is through Marlow’s eyes that we see and understand the people and events, including the characters of Kurtz. Since Marlow represents Conrad himself, he seems well qualified to make philosophical and neutral comments and analyses of characters.

As Marlow progresses on his voyage, he is shocked by the prevailing conditions in the Congo. In the name of exploration and trade, he sees the White man’s greed, selfishness, cruelty, and unscrupulous exploitation of the simple and ignorant natives. The conquering whites were supposedly civilizing and enlightening the ignorant savages, but what Marlow saw was that the white man was much more barbaric and savage in his ways of appeasing his lust for power and wealth. Marlow’s aunt thinks that the white man is doing a great service to the ignorant and backward natives by civilizing them. But Marlow differs on this point:
I was also one of the Workers, with a capital—you know. Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle. There had been a lot of such rot let loose in print and talk just about that time, and the excellent woman, living right in the rush of all that humbug, got carried off her feet. She talked about “weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways,” till, upon my word, she made me quite uncomfortable. I ventured to hint that the company was run for profit. (emphasis added)

During the voyage, Marlow sees the French navy shooting cannons indiscriminately at the families of the native villagers, calling them enemies. Marlow says that there was a touch of insanity in the whole affair of purposeless violence. He is just shocked when the whites call the natives as enemies, rebels and criminals, for no just reason. Marlow observes that on account of their superior technology in the form of guns and cannons, which the natives had never seen, the whites were misusing their power to treat the natives inhumanly. Marlow abhors the wicked cunning of the whites:

You know, I hate, detest and can't bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appalls me. There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies, - which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world — what I want to forget. It makes me miserable and sick, like biting something rotten would do.  

There are several minor incidents on the way to the inner station where Kurtz is the chief. But all along, the plot also presents the unseen journey of
Marlow into the dark recesses of the human soul and the darker aspects of the human beings (whether white or black). Though Marlow is a very specially talented strong character, on seeing so much of evil all around, his strength weakens. Like the ignorant natives and the Russian adventurer, he too is impressed by Kurtz’s personality. As they say, evil also has its own charms, Kurtz’s personality attracts Marlow and makes him very eager and curious to meet him. But there is a difference between Marlow and Kurtz. Kurtz has let the power of evil overcome him totally. He has almost stopped listening to his good side whereas Marlow resists the temptation of evil, fights it and comes out of it.

We can say that Kurtz is like the devil-incarnate, because he had crossed over to the evil side completely. His soul was consumed by the evil tendencies. By being associated with Kurtz, Marlow also gets a feel of devilish experiences. In fact, Marlow feels that if he stayed any longer in that evil atmosphere, he too would be sucked into it. Conrad seems to be suggesting that evil tendencies are lying dormant in every human being, be it Marlow or Kurtz. But in an atmosphere that encourages them, these latent tendencies grow up to manifest themselves and whether they are suppressed and fought against, or given a free reign as done by Kurtz, depends on the human strength of character. This self knowledge comes to Marlow at the end of his harrowing experience:
No! It is his extremity that I seem to have lived through. True, he had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot. And perhaps in this is the whole difference; perhaps all the wisdom, and all the truth, and all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible.

When Marlow arrives at the inner station, it is known that he is very ill. But before they arrive at the station, their ship is attacked by the natives in Kurtz’s territory. It is later learnt that the attack was ordered by Kurtz himself because he did not want to go back to civilization. Even the natives who worshipped him as a man-god did not want him to leave them and return to his own country in Europe. Kurtz had established a close relationship with the natives and he feared that his plans would be upset if he were to go away from the station. Even as he is brought to the ship on a stretcher, he says that he would come back to carry out his plans. He slips away from the ship at night and hides in the trees with an intention of rejoining the natives. Marlow succeeds with great difficulty to bring him back to the ship. His native followers are very reluctant to let him go and they have to be driven away from the river bank by using the loud whistle of the steamer that frightens them. Ultimately, Kurtz dies on the way back and is buried somewhere in the jungle, along the river side.
The whole story is narrated by Marlow to four other sailors as a reminiscence. In discussing the plot of the story and the character of Marlow, the gist of Kurtz’s character and personality has been pointed out already. A few more interesting aspects of his personality will help confirm that his character is governed by social and environmental forces.

Swami Budhananda in “The Mind and its Control”, says,

*Opposites sometimes look alike. Two types of persons do not have inner struggle; those who have become unquestioning slaves of their lower nature, and those who have completely masterd their lower nature. All others have inner struggles.*

Kurtz belongs to the first category mentioned above; saints come under the second one and Marlow belongs to the third.

‘Kurtz’ is a German name which means ‘short’. Marlow says that his life was also short to fit his name. In this novel Kurtz is a representative of the European white populace and all the atrocities done by him represent the evil that is present in the white race. In fact Marlow reflects that England and Englishmen too were savages when the civilized Romans conquered them. He says that they were more savage and more backward than the blacks who were apparently being civilized by the Europeans now.
There is no doubt that Kurtz is an especially gifted man with exceptional power of eloquence. He is described as a universal genius by some people, but what brings him to the heart of this dark and savage land is the greed for money. In fact, the family of the girl he wants to marry is opposed to his alliance because he is of a lower financial status than theirs. He is so bold and adventurous that he braves the dangers of exploring cannibal-inhabited regions. But all his good qualities get eclipsed by the evil that manifests through him. After he stays in the deep interiors in the company of the savages, he becomes utterly depraved and hollow. In the end, there is very little of humanity and human values left in him. It looks as though the powers of darkness and evil have totally taken over his soul. Kurtz is initially known to have a belief that it is the duty and destiny of the white men to civilize the natives of the dark continent of Africa. In course of time he himself becomes a part of the backward and superstitious beliefs of the black savages. By using his guns (thunder and lightning) which they could not understand, he becomes a man-god to the natives, whose chiefs come crawling on all fours to pay obeisances to him. He presides at their midnight dances which ended in abominable, unspeakable rites. Some critics suggest that these rites involved sacrifice of a young man followed by Kurtz eating a certain portion of him in order to
perpetuate his power as a man-god. In the absence of any kind of social or moral restraint Kurtz had degenerated into a personification of evil. For his selfish desires he could kill anybody he felt like, without any scruples. Even his Russian admirer is not above the possibility of being killed at Kurtz’s whim and fancy. This fact forces the Russian to hand over his ivory to Kurtz. As an agent of the Belgian trading company, Kurtz sends as much ivory as all the other agents put together. The poles in the fence of his house are decorated by human heads: the heads of rebels who dared to disobey Kurtz. All these evidences of selfishness, cruelty and depravity point to the hollowness of his heart. The character of Kurtz can be taken as a symbol of European imperialism. Marlow says, “The original Kurtz had been educated partly in England, and – as he was good enough to say himself – his sympathies were in the right place. His mother was half-English, his father was half-French. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz”.\(^7\) (emphasis added)

A certain International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs had asked Kurtz to prepare a report that could guide them in future. He tries to convince in the report that by virtue of being developed, the whites must appear as supernatural beings to the natives and that the whites must approach them with the might as of a ‘deity’. The brick maker describes Kurtz as a ‘prodigy’ and says that he is an “emissary of pity and science, and progress, and devil
knows what else.” Kurtz also writes of love, altruism and other noble sentiments in his report, but the final words expose the harsh reality: “Exterminate all the brutes!”

The discussion so far illustrates that characters in a naturalist’s works are governed by the forces of heredity, environment, passions and instincts. But, in spite of this, a naturalist writer does not dehumanize the characters. According to Marlow, Kurtz’s last words (The horror! The horror!) show his victory over the evil within himself and over the evil in the world outside. The victory lies in the fact that at least before dying Kurtz realizes that the evil within him is horrible and it is this realization that makes him human.

Themes:

*Heart of Darkness* is considered as one of the most scathing indictments of European imperialism ever written in the English language, but this is not the only theme in the novel. It has a multiplicity of themes which are interwoven skillfully to give an effect of artistic unity. All these themes are so smoothly blended that they cannot be seen separately. Conrad presents an acute analysis of the deterioration of the white man’s morale when he is let loose from the restraints of European society and is placed in the remote tropical jungles of Africa as an emissary of light and progress. In comparison with the primitive
and backward natives, he is all-powerful with his modern weapons. He uses these to satisfy his greed for power and wealth which is gained by exploiting the natives. One can notice a psychological analysis of the two cultures in conflict. The deep gulf between the white man’s cruel system and the black man’s understanding of the results of that system, the isolation of the ethically degenerating whites, and the helpless bewilderment of the unhappy savages in the grasp of their greedy, cruel and callous conquerors, are the major themes that are skillfully depicted. The theme of physical exploration of the unexplored and wild regions of Africa by the whites deals with the time when the Belgian Conquerors under King Leopald – II were running an overseas empire in the Congo and making huge profits. In this context, Conrad is not only exposing the hollowness and futility of the Belgian imperialist rule but is also indirectly reminding readers of the British imperialism in various countries during his time. Today, white imperialism has ended, and most of the African and Asian countries have become independent. But in Conrad’s time, all the African countries and most of the Asian countries were ruled by the whites, mainly the British. Therefore, this theme of the imperialist misrule and exploitation in the backward countries had a strong relevance in those days. Indian readers will find it very relevant even today because of the suffering undergone during the British misrule. Conrad’s denunciation of the imperialist
rule in the Congo had a valuable message for both the exploiters and the exploited.

Conrad presents on the surface level through Marlow, his views on conquest, which necessarily has an element of evil. This is because a military conquest of other people's territories is invariably associated with cruelty, brutality and slaughter. Marlow's words on the Roman conquest of Britain provide an insight into his views:

They were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force – nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got: It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind – as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea – something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to . . .

One of the dominant themes of the twentieth-century English literature that is portrayed in this novel is that of the fear and disillusionment about the western man's place in the world and the values by which he lives. As Marlow witnesses the violence and hypocrisy of the white man's colonizing culture, his
faith in the western world and even his own sanity is threatened. Thus, it is found that the theme of internal exploration has taken an artistic and objective form. The themes of isolation, evil, self-restraint and the working of the subconscious mind of man are closely blended with the themes of exploration and exploitation. Another minor theme that can be identified is that of reality versus unreality.

The influence of isolation, barbarism, and primitivism on a civilized man who is cut off from civilized society for a long period of time is very clearly presented through the character of Kurtz. Kurtz represents the civilized European who is left isolated in the uncivilized wilderness. This situation has deep social and cultural implications. Let loose from the moral and social restraints of a civilized society, the brute within the white man emerges and finds manifestation. It is very clear that a perverted version of the 'white man's burden' was adopted by the white traders who are greedy for ivory (material gain). These themes explore the fundamental questions about man's nature, his capacity for evil, the necessity for self restraint, the effect of physical darkness and isolation on a civilized soul and the need to give up pride for one's own spiritual salvation. The effect of isolation in case of Kurtz is simply disastrous, but at the same time, Marlow perceives that Kurtz suffers internal struggles when he tries to convince him to return to the ship and civilization.
To sum up, most of the themes that are characteristic of naturalist works are present in this novel. One can find the white man's struggle to survive the extreme climate, the tropical diseases and the dangers of the jungle; Kurtz is controlled by external and internal natural forces. The 'brute within' Kurtz is released; One can find in him passions like lust, greed, desire for dominance and pleasure. Violence between the whites and blacks and also amongst the blacks themselves can be seen; both Marlow and Kurtz have their internal mental struggles.

**Interaction of Man and Nature:**

The novel is replete with instances of conflict between man and nature, man's attempt to assert his supremacy, and the triumph of the human spirit. In fact, the dark and sombre jungles of the Congo pervade the whole novel. The reader can feel the constant presence of the dark, oppressive wilderness which sometimes appears to mock the humans, threaten them, challenge them and observe them.

Marlow's journey in the steamer is actually an up-river journey, against the flow of the river that is flowing towards the sea. This by itself is a situation of conflict between man and nature. At some spots in the river, the water runs
very shallow and there is a risk of the ship getting wrecked on the rocky 
bottom. Captain Marlow is ever alert and navigates around such recurring 
threats. The same is true when he avoids the other snags present in the river, 
caused by mounds of driftwood. He even uses this dry driftwood from the river 
to fire the boiler on his steamer. It shows how the human beings sometimes 
gain an upper hand in the conflict between man and nature. When the steamer 
gets stuck, the cannibal-crew gets into the water to push it on.

It is made evident that no white man lasted for more than six months in 
the climate of the Congo. He either got sick or returned or died there. (Marlow 
describes flies that did not sting but stabbed him). In spite of this, the Belgians 
are going there and maintaining their despotic rule in the region. This shows 
that individual human beings may die, but the human race persists in its attempt 
to overcome nature.

The Cannibal crew that served under Marlow were hard-working men 
and they had carried some hippopotamus meat for sustenance. When the meat 
rots and becomes inedible, they continue to work without complaint. The fact 
that they could have easily outnumbered the whites on board and killed them to 
satisfy their hunger, shows their extreme self-restraint which is a great human 
quality. Though their self-restraint remains a mystery to Marlow and the 
readers, it symbolizes their victory over their natural urge. Fighting hunger is
definitely one of the most difficult fights as Marlow tells us, and their victory is an assertion of the human spirit.

The conflict between man and nature is a constant feature in this novel. In the earlier part of the novel Marlow describes how he finds the body of the earlier captain of the steamship, with grass growing out through his ribs. When we see the scenes of the rusting boiler lying in the central station and the steamer lying at the bottom of the river, we feel as though nature (the wilderness) is constantly trying to reclaim its possession on the territories exploited by man. When Marlow is proceeding to the central station on a French steamer, he comes across a French warship shooting its cannons at the natives’ camps in the jungle at the river’s edge. In this situation, he remarks:

We gave her letters (I heard the men in that lonely ship were dying of fever at the rate of three a - day) and went on. We called at some more places with farcical names, where the merry dance of death and trade goes on in a still and earthy atmosphere as of an overheated catacomb; all along the formless coast bordered by dangerous surf, as if Nature herself had tried to ward off intruders; in and out of rivers, streams of death in life, whose banks were rotting into mud, whose waters, thickened into slime, invaded the contorted mangroves, that seemed to writhe at us in the extremity of an impotent despair.\(^{11}\) (emphasis added)

Nature in the Congo is described as an awesome force; dark, inscrutable, mysterious. It makes Marlow feel very small. Even to the readers it appears as
though it is silently mocking the futility of the white man’s fantastic invasion. We get a mixed feeling of unspoken antagonism and awe at the natural presence of the wilderness that persists even in daylight, as silence: ‘The silence of the land went home to one’s very heart, - its mystery, its greatness, the amazing reality of its concealed life’.  

Faced with the immensity of the river and the jungle on a moon-lit night, Marlow wonders whether the stillness of nature represented a menace or an appeal to man:

> What were we who had strayed in here? Could we handle that dumb thing, or would it handle us? I felt how big, how confoundedly big, was that thing that couldn’t talk, and perhaps was deaf as well. What was in there?  

Man may be a puny mortal in front of nature’s immensity, but his spirit can have a colossal will. In spite of his physical smallness, he persists in his endeavours to achieve his goals. This grand sentiment is beautifully conveyed through Marlow’s struggle. Marlow’s steamboat is described as ‘little’ and ‘begrimed’, as it moves along the river bank against the current. It is compared to a sluggish beetle crawling on the floor. With a backdrop of millions of huge and tall trees growing on the banks of the river, the narrative voice says that ‘It made you feel very small, very lost, and yet it was not
altogether depressing that feeling. After all, if you were small, the grimy beetle
crawled on – which was just what you wanted it to do’. 14

Conrad’s Vision of Man:

The most prominent aspects of Conrad’s vision of man are human
struggle and the sublime nobility of the human soul that emerges from the
struggle. Running parallel to the struggle is man’s subtle desire for self-
knowledge. At the beginning of the novel, Marlow is seen to be narrating his
experiences of the Congo to his shipmates in a sitting position with his legs
folded before him and the palms of his hands outwards. The narrator says that
“he had the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a
lotus-flower- . . .”15  This description symbolizes man’s elemental quest for
self-knowledge that is an important part of Conrad’s vision of man. There is
another passage where this quest is indicated. As Marlow is working to repair
the wrecked steamship that has been pulled out from the river, he describes his
attitude towards work – he is a believer in work and he feels attracted to people
who do their work efficiently and conscientiously. He says that the ship and his
work gave him a chance to find out what he could do to discover his own inner
self:
No influential friend would have served me better. She had given me a chance to come out a bit – to find out what I could do. . . . I don’t like work – no man does – but I like what is in the work, - the chance to find yourself. Your own reality – for yourself, not for others – what no other man can ever know. They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means.  

Before meeting the Russian adventurer who is with Kurtz, Marlow finds a note of warning and a book on sailing left by him in an abandoned hut by the river. It is only later that Marlow finds out that he is a Russian. In that context, Marlow says to the manager that the person who had left the book there must be English. In reply, the manager says that being an Englishman would not save him from getting into trouble if he were not careful. This is when we read Marlow’s words; “I observed with assumed innocence that no man was safe from trouble in this world”.

At one point in the story, the hippo-meat brought by the cannibal crew working under Marlow gets rotten and inedible. Even when the crewmen are constantly hungry, they work meekly. Though they are strong men and outnumber the whites on board six to one, they do not attack the whites to satisfy their hunger. Why the cannibals do not attack the whites is a mystery to Marlow. It is their self-restraint that illustrates Conrad’s vision that man has to fall back on his own innate strength and capacity for courage, endurance and loyalty in order to win over difficult circumstances. The incident could be
taken as a representation of Conrad’s faith in the ability of the human soul to assert its innate nobility and save itself. Marlow looks at the Negroes with a “curiosity of their impulses, motives, capacities, weaknesses, when brought to the test of an inexorable physical necessity”\(^{18}\) Marlow wonders whether their restraint was the result of superstition, disgust, patience, fear or some kind of primitive honour. He comes to the conclusion by his own experience that hunger makes a person overcome any kind of fear and disgust. Even superstition, beliefs and principles could not be strong enough to defeat hunger. According to Marlow, ‘**It takes a man all his inborn strength to fight hunger properly.** It is easier to face bereavement, dishonour, and the perdition of one’s soul – than this kind of prolonged hunger. Sad, but true’.\(^{18}\) (emphasis added)

The same vision of Conrad is reiterated when Marlow finds it difficult to understand the devil of a man that Mr. Kurtz is. Here Marlow says that in a civilized society a man has neighbors, policemen, fear of social censure, or the law to prevent the uncontrolled manifestation of evil desires. But in the utter solitude and total freedom from such social controls as is the case of Kurtz, it is only man’s innate strength of goodness that can save him from doing evil. When the social controls are gone, ‘**you must fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness**’.\(^{19}\) (emphasis added)
According to Conrad’s vision of man, human life is like a dream where man is constantly engaged in vain hope. Human life is to him a great riddle and the most that one can hope from it is some kind of knowledge about the self. This knowledge sometimes comes too late and in the form of regrets about the futility of our struggles. He is of the opinion that, ‘If such is the form of ultimate wisdom, then life is a greater riddle than some of us think it to be.\footnote{\textit{interaction between Atmosphere and Character:}}

Nature in the form of the dense jungles and the mighty river Congo provides the atmosphere in \textit{Heart of Darkness}. It is through the interaction with the atmosphere that the characters come to life.

As Marlow travels up the Congo by a French steamer to take charge as the captain, he describes vividly the grim and horrifying conditions prevailing there. Though Marlow describes the sights and scenery lucidly, he speaks of the ‘unreality’ of what he sees. The wild scenario creates wonder and confusion together in him. The uniform darkness of the coast and the dullness of the sea make him feel isolated among the men on board because he cannot relate to them. His experience during the voyage is so hazy that he feels as though the
elements of nature are keeping him in 'senseless delusion'\textsuperscript{21} and 'away from the truth of things'.\textsuperscript{21}

The struggle between Marlow's sense of reality and the overpowering impression of unreality continues throughout the novel. In fact, this clash between the awareness of reality and the sense of unreality of experience is a continuing theme in this novel. It gets more pronounced after Marlow reaches the central station and begins his voyage as the captain of a steamer.

The native blacks are one with nature but the white man has intruded with his fantastic invasion. Therefore, the civilized white man gets a feeling of alienation and unreality when his mind interacts with the nature of that dark and savage land. Through his interaction with nature, the white man senses the unreality and emptiness of his existence and the futility of his efforts in the Dark Continent. The effect that the interaction between man and the nature has on Marlow's mind can be seen from his words when he observes the white ivory traders loitering aimlessly in the sunshine at the central station. Marlow asks himself the meaning of what he sees and he is at a loss to assign any meaning. He says that he had never seen anything so unreal in his life. His feelings at that moment are to be understood through his words; "And outside, the silent wilderness surrounding this cleared speck off the earth (the central
station) struck me as something great and invincible, like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion.”

Nature is always neutral, but it is man’s relationship with nature that makes him feel that it is friendly or hostile. The river Congo and the jungle alongside appear to be gloomy and hostile to Marlow’s mind. He says that, traveling up the river is like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation dominated the earth and the big trees were kings. He traces the primordial images and feels that the river is an empty stream, along with a great silence and impenetrable forest. He describes the air to be warm, thick, heavy and sluggish. To him, there is no joy even in the brilliance of sunshine here. He talks of the ‘Gloom of overshadowed distances’.

He says that it was as easy to get lost in the branches of the river as in a desert:

... trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off forever from everything you had known once – somewhere - far away – in another existence perhaps.

... overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect.

The malignant character of the external nature here suggests the inner darkness or the potential evil in man, with the darkness of the jungle
symbolizing the darkness and evil in the heart of man and this evil only requires certain kinds of stimuli to be aroused and to manifest itself. In case of Kurtz, the nature within him and around him interacts, resulting in an unrestrained outlet for the latent evil within. This turns him into a wolf. In no other character in this novel can we see such an example of the interaction between nature and the human mind as in the character of Kurtz. In Marlow's words, Kurtz was 'hollow at the core'. During his stay in the interior of the Congo, Mr. Kurtz had been losing his hair and becoming bald. It seemed that the surrounding wilderness had patted him on the head and changed it into a ball, an ivory ball. The wilderness seemed to have permeated the very being of Kurtz. It appeared as though the wilderness had caressed him, had taken him, had loved him, embraced him, entered his veins, consumed his flesh and taken complete possession of his soul. According to the manager, Mr. Kurtz had become a spoiled and pampered favourite of the wilderness. When Kurtz talks of everything around him with a sense of possession, Marlow feels that if the wilderness were to hear him, it would burst into a mocking laugh. Earlier in the novel when the Russian adventurer tells Marlow about the devilry of Kurtz, Marlow reflects that "There was no sign on the face of nature of this amazing tale. . . . The woods were unmoved, like a mask - heavy, like the closed door of
a prison — they looked with their air of hidden knowledge, of patient expectation, of unapproachable silence^24.

When Marlow comes to know that Kurtz talks of the ivory, the station, the river and his fiancée with a sense of ownership, he feels that the question is; to whom does Mr. Kurtz himself belong? Obviously, the answer is that Kurtz belongs to the powers of darkness. Marlow’s comments on the effect of the forces of nature on Kurtz illustrate this point: Marlow says that Kurtz not only lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, but he also lacked something important (love and humanity). He is not sure whether Kurtz himself is aware of this deficiency and thinks that he realized it at the end, when it was too late. Marlow says that the wilderness had found out Kurtz’s weakness and taken a terrible vengeance on him for invading its territory. When Kurtz lived in the solitude of wilderness, it is said to have ‘whispered to him things about himself which he did not know’, 25 and the whisper ‘echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core . . . ’ 25 [emphasis added]. It is very clear now that the nature and circumstances in which Kurtz lived have interacted with him and gradually brought out the inherent evil in him. Even when seriously ill, he slips back from the cabin of the ship with an intention to join the savage natives, with whom he has identified himself. According to Marlow, the call of the wilderness had aroused Mr. Kurtz’s primitive instincts
once again, and had reminded him of the gratification of his passions which he had been enjoying in the company of the savages. When Marlow tries to get him back to the ship by speaking to him convincingly, Kurtz is quite reluctant to return to civilization. During that episode, Marlow says that Kurtz is not mad in mind, but that his soul had gone mad.

A few days later during the voyage back to the central station, Kurtz, who is lying on a bed asks Marlow to close the shutter saying that he cannot bear to look at the jungle outside. When Marlow closes the shutter, Kurtz cries at the invisible wilderness - “Oh, but I will wring your heart yet!” It can be deduced here that the sight of the wilderness reminds Kurtz of his incomplete plans of exploitation and domination of the dark land and its natives, and the frustration he feels is expressed in his cry.

With the vivid descriptions of the jungle and the river, Conrad has created an atmosphere of mystery and fear for both Marlow and the reader. The barbarism of the natives intensifies this dark, brooding and ominous atmosphere. In addition to the natural scenery, the ignorance and backwardness of the natives adds to the effect. The darkness outside makes Marlow delve into the dark recesses of his own mind and soul. In a sense, it is also a journey of exploration into the subconscious mind of all mankind. The story symbolizes an essentially solitary journey involving a profound spiritual change in the
voyager. With the help of the psychological and mystic aspect, Conrad has been able to blend morality and adventure very well.

In interaction with the atmosphere, the character of Marlow develops from idealism to disillusion and he develops a greater understanding of life. This is very much the same as Conrad's own development during his exploration of the Congo. Immediately after his return from the Congo, Marlow falls seriously ill. This is perhaps because of the spiritual agony which he undergoes, when he witnesses the tragedy of Kurtz. When he returns to Brussels, he finds himself resenting the trivial, everyday concerns of the common people with their vulgar interests. He has contempt at the unthinking complacency of the so-called 'civilized' man. Because of his interaction with the atmosphere, he is now a different man from the one he was, before going into the African wilderness. He now has the deepest knowledge, because he has had a vision of truth.

As a part of the atmosphere in the novel, the dense, dark forests and the city of Brussels symbolize two kinds of evil. The dense forests symbolize the larger darkness which is in the heart of man. In contrast, the city of Brussels symbolizes the inner corruption of the white man's civilization. To Marlow, Brussels seems to be a white washed sepulchre that is outwardly holy, but inwardly dirty and degenerated. Therefore, Brussels becomes a symbol of the
moral deficiency of the white man. The savages in the Congo are evil because they are dominated by the primitive instincts. Whereas, the so-called civilized men of the white cities have become corrupt because they are dominated by the new vices brought along with modern civilization; such as love of pleasure and idleness, loss of comradeship and fellow-feeling, and the complete absence of any genuine sentiment such as love and sympathy. After undergoing a moral ordeal in the atmosphere of savagery and barbarism, Conrad gets another shock and a feeling of revulsion when he returns to Brussels with its atmosphere of hypocrisy and deceit of the whites.

It is proved in this way that next to Kurtz, the character of Marlow is the best example of Conrad’s use of the interaction of atmosphere and character to develop realistic characters.
**Conrad’s Philosophy of Life:**

In this novel the character of Marlow turns out to be the perfect vehicle, the perfect mouthpiece to convey Conrad’s philosophy. Though the novel has a dark atmosphere throughout, and though it ends in the tragedy of Kurtz’s death, Marlow’s concern with the moral ordeal and his sense of oneness with human kind in the form of the natives, saves him from moral downfall. Many critics say that Marlow’s friendship and loyalty to Kurtz appears as a contradiction to Marlow’s judgment that Kurtz is hollow at the core.

It is even suggested that Marlow is attracted to Kurtz because the devil also is said to have its own charm. This can be looked at from a different perspective. Perhaps Marlow is getting an opportunity to rise and be great by giving the evil Kurtz at least a chance to repent, if not change. Perhaps Marlow has faith that deep inside Kurtz the spark of humanity and goodness would make him realize his sins and repent later, if not sooner. Consequently, Marlow says that Kurtz’s last words “The horror! The horror!” represent his moral victory because at least before dying, he seems to have realized that the seriousness of his sins is abominable. It can be said that at least in the end Kurtz’s humanity had asserted itself. Marlow had taken risk and come all the way to the inner station to take back the sick Kurtz who had slipped away from the ship to rejoin the savages; that is, to save him – not only from sickness, but
also from the grasp of the dark and evil forces of the wilderness. He is like an emissary of civilization who has come to take Kurtz back to civilization. Since Marlow is Conrad’s mouthpiece to a great extent, we can say that Marlow’s loyalty to Kurtz need not be a mystery, but only an affirmation of Conrad’s philosophy of fidelity and sacrifice between man and man. When Kurtz slips back from the steamer to rejoin his savage worshippers, he is found hiding in the dense undergrowth by Marlow. Marlow could have chosen to desert him and sail back. But Marlow disregards his own safety, puts his life in danger (from the savages who are reluctant to let Kurtz go back), and convinces Kurtz to go back to civilization. Kurtz himself is initially reluctant, but later lets himself be taken back by Marlow. This is an example of the fidelity and sacrifice between man and man, which according to Conrad’s philosophy, is the only thing that enables man to wage a successful war against evil and to overcome it. Marlow of course overcomes the evil within himself, but in his final moments in the jungle, Kurtz also overcomes the temptation to stay back and enjoy the barbaric atrocities that he had been enjoying all these days. When Marlow is convincing him to return, the mental struggle between the decision to stay back or return to civilization, is an intense moral ordeal for Kurtz.
Since Marlow’s character is that of an adventurer cum philosopher, we find that many of his reflections and observations are highly philosophical. When he talks about the Roman conquest of Britain and the white man’s conquest of Africa, he says that conquest is not such a heroic or a pleasant thing.

The brick maker is under the impression that Marlow has great influence among the higher officials of the trading company, which is false. Though Marlow has not lied, he passively allows the brick maker to believe the falsehood. In this context, Marlow’s words about his hatred of lies reflect Conrad’s philosophy too:

You know, I hate, detest and can’t bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appalls me. There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies, - which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world – what I want to forget. It makes me miserable and sick, like biting something rotten would do.28

Conrad’s philosophical purpose of awakening in us the feeling of unavoidable solidarity that binds men to each other and all mankind to this visible world, can be seen through Marlow’s introspection, when he sees a group of natives howling and dancing on the river bank:
what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yours – the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to 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. And why not?  

In the same context Marlow says that, for a man to face the stark and painful realities of life, he must do so with his own inborn strength. Principles and possessions would be useless and the only thing that can help to face the truth would be a strong and deliberate belief.

Another notable philosophical observation by Marlow expresses the idea that, what we see in this world is like a dream – that is, it is not the whole truth and moreover, man is actually alone though he lives in society. Marlow says that, “We live, as we dream – alone.”
NOTES


2 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 88.

3 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 22.

4 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 44.

5 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 107, 108.


7 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 77.

8 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 41.

9 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 78.

10 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 14.


12 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 42.

13 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 43.

14 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 14.

15 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 57, 58.

16 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 47.

17 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 60.

18 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 65, 66.

19 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 76.


21 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 24.
22 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 38.
23 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 54.
24 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 87.
25 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 89.
26 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 105.
27 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 106.
28 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 44.
29 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 57.
30 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 44.