

Heart of Darkness

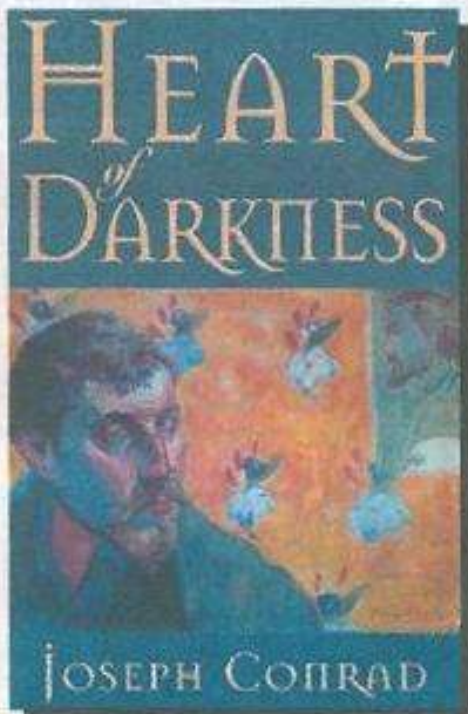
By Joseph Conrad
(Penguin Classics)

The author that western literature knows as Joseph Conrad was not technically an English writer. He was born and raised in Poland as Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, and although he later acquired English citizenship, he did not speak English fluently until he was in his twenties. Despite this linguistic disadvantage, he succeeded in becoming one of the most respected authors in early 20th century English writing.

Heart of Darkness, first printed in 1902, is arguably his most famous – or notorious – work. In structure it's a framed narrative told by seaman Charlie Marlow to a group of fellow sailors while waiting for the tide of the Thames to turn.

Marlow, a born wanderer, had in his youth striven for employment in the Congo, and eventually succeeded. Sent off to Africa by an ivory trading concern, his first – and as it turns out, his last – mission was to retrieve the incredibly successful agent Kurtz from his camp deep in the jungle.

From here on in, the story is



dominated by the persona of Kurtz. Everyone Marlow comes into contact with assures him that Kurtz is wonderful, although they are often vague on precisely why.

As Marlow moves further into the jungle, he also heads into Kurtz's heart, the world he has created by raising himself to the status of a tyrannical demi-god at the head of a remote tribe. It is a menacing place, where everyone is obsessed with Kurtz – including Kurtz himself. This twisted and masterfully portrayed psychological element is the alpha and omega of this brief work.

Much has been made of *Heart of*

Darkness' relation to colonialism. Is it an imperialist novel? After all, very little is said about the Congolese tribe who are for the most part an extension of Kurtz's dark world. Or is it anti-colonial? After all, the character of Marlow often expresses contempt for the brutal practices of the ivory trade, while taking care to portray the suffering and emotionality of its victims.

Whatever the verdict on this point, the main thrust of the book is surely a shrewd portrayal of self-love, both on an individual level and of society as a whole – a crazy self-confidence capable of blinding everyone it comes into contact with. In this sense, one could interpret the work as a prescient portrayal of Nazism, or even the current fad for narcissistic, media-hyped and "adored" celebrities.

The possibility of myriad interpretations has always been a reason for this work's longevity, while the sheer creepiness of the writing means it easily competes with any modern horror story.



Roslyn Fuller is the author of political thriller *ISAK*.

More information about the Canadian, her work and the

Irish Writers' Exchange can be found at www.irishwriters-exchange.com