

Essay on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

Civilization vs. the Heart of Darkness

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The progress of humanity over the last few millennia has been substantial. From the ancient cities of Sumer in the cradle of civilization to the present day the scale of development has been extensive. The more outstanding of these achievements have been termed 'civilization'. Since those early days when societies rallied and overcame the limitations imposed by their environment to subsequent eras when new heights were reached in diverse fields, progress always found a way. However, the fact that progress has happened and has continued to happen for so long is not something that should be taken for granted. The ruins of many forgotten cities are scattered across the planet, whether overgrown by the tropics or obscured by sand, they serve as a reminder of a perilous existence. Periodic declines of societies and empires throughout history illustrate that progress can be easily stalled and even reversed if circumstances change and there is not enough force to resist these new developments. The advance of civilization is only possible when there is enough manpower to not only maintain what was achieved but to push things forwards. This implies that civilization, which is often taken for granted, may not be as firmly entrenched. But for the sake of progress, civilization learns from its mistakes and there is a substantial body of literature examining what happens when things do go wrong. One such book is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* which examines the frailty of civilization as personified by people that try to build it. The main events of the book take place in the jungles of the Belgian Congo¹ and it is this extreme environment that throws into relief those things that would have been difficult to detect in a normal setting.

Civilization and the Darkness:

To understand what defines civilization, the method is to examine how individuals coming from a civilized environment react to one that is diametrically opposite. This environment, the 'darkness', prevails in the jungle. There is also the 'heart of darkness' which prevails in the absolute depths of the jungle. The topics of interest are the actions, reactions and interactions of those that chose to come to the jungle with their surrounding environment. Regardless of their purpose they all had the same starting point, they were the products of civilization, they all came from societies that had varying degrees of structure and order. It was then left to the individual merits of those people as to how well they would fare when the atmosphere to which they were accustomed was no longer present. By looking at the actions of the different characters in the book as they are exposed to the darkness and then the heart of darkness, we can try to deduce the traits that are necessary to overcome a difficult environment and progress.

The book contains several themes that are recurrent throughout. Though each of them by itself is important, extra insights can be gained by examining their interactions. The main themes of the book examine the effects of the omnipotent entity that Conrad terms 'the darkness' on those that choose to engage it, both the successes and the failures. The book is interesting in that a summary of the main conclusions of these interactions is given at the beginning², while the explanation takes the rest of the book. It is only after reading the entire book that the weight of the statements at the beginning is fully

1 Joseph Conrad made a trip to the Belgian Congo in 1890. A sailor by profession before he became a writer, the characters described in the book are based on people he met there and throughout his travels. p.8, Murfin, R.

2 Marlow reminiscing about the Romans coming to what was now Britain - lines (II.) 125-225 in the referenced text

appreciated. For this analysis we first look at the definitions of civilization and the darkness as they are used in the context of this book, we then examine the actions of the characters described in the book relative to those two entities. Finally we step back and look at the successes and failures of these individuals and try to understand the lessons that can be learned from visiting the 'heart of darkness'.

There are two main abstract entities in the book, civilization and the 'darkness'. Before proceeding we need to define these terms and keep the rest of the events in this context. First we examine civilization. The concept of civilization as described in Heart of Darkness does not focus on the material aspects, but rather on the social and humanistic aspects that define civilized society. In a civilized society there is structure, meaning that things are ordered and a hierarchy exists. That if a task is assigned it is actually performed. Likewise, there is some type of focus underlying the actions of an individual or a group of individuals. For instance, the Company is a civilized presence, it has stations in the jungle, each station has a function and some agents assigned to it with the goal of keeping ivory shipments moving. Similarly, Marlow is the steamer's captain, he is expected to keep it in working order, it is, in a theoretical sense, not acceptable for Marlow to not do this, though the practical enforcement is another matter. Wages are also reliably paid³. Furthermore, there is the concept of social reciprocity, if a task is performed then it should be acknowledged, if it is done well, it should be rewarded. On the other hand if something is not done, there should be some type of punishment. All logical things to do to keep things moving forward, whatever they may be. The main underpinning though is stated to be efficiency. The main point of this is that things are not done just for the sake of doing them, that they are actually relevant and constructive. Any action that does not have this quality in some way cannot be considered truly civilized. Marlow mentions the devil of 'folly' early on in the book⁴, with the caveat for any action being that, although it can be performed, if it is not done with some foresight and turns out to be irrelevant then one cannot claim to have done anything. Conrad states early on that 'efficiency is what saves us'.⁵ Thus when civilization and civilized actions are mentioned they are meant in this context, that they are not only done, but done efficiently with foresight and purpose.

Along with civilization, the 'darkness' is the second amorphous entity in the book. It is never clearly defined what the darkness is but one gets the general impression that it is a mix of the emotional and the physical, a sort of presence⁶. The darkness is the antithesis of civilization and whereas the latter is defined by having attributes, the former can more easily be defined by a sort of 'nothingness'. However this 'nothingness' is still a state and not a vacuum and we are given enough of its attributes throughout the book to sort of understand what it is. The physical characteristics are easy to describe, things like the diseases, the humidity, the heat etc., but these are not the main attributes. These things only start to matter when a certain mental damage has been done and that damage is done by the intangible things. In describing the 'darkness', one characteristic is an indistinctness, there is nothing that is concrete in this entity. It is omnipotent, but it does not have any sharply defined characteristics, it is opaque to the outside observer. It has a slowness and a hopelessness that permeates the surroundings and tends to slow all action to a near crawl⁷. The indistinctness also breeds confusion and uncertainty which take a mental toll.

3 Describing the regular and pointless payments of brass wire to the woodcutters; 'their extravagant salary .. was paid with a regularity worthy of a large and honorable trading company' ll.1698-1704

4 '...as I stood on this hillside, I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly. How insidious he could be, too...' ll. 621-625

5 'What saves us is efficiency--the devotion to efficiency.' ll. 197-198

6 'I wondered whether the stillness on the face of the immensity looking at us...' ; ll. 1080-1082
'I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey tricks...' ll. 1412-1414

7 Marlow at the Inner Station: 'I felt an intolerable weight oppressing my breast, the smell of the damp earth, the unseen presence of victorious corruption, the darkness of an impenetrable night. . . .' ll. 2636-2639

The progression of mental changes is then played out accordingly. These combined attributes convey a sense of futility to any action undertaken since anything that is started is always slowed and takes much longer than expected. The indistinctness of the situation also takes away any perceivable reward, creating a sense that whatever was done, was done in vain. This breeds a sense of hopelessness that impacts those that can understand the situation and gauge that nothing is progressing. This then successfully destroys any attempts to impose structure. Once the structure is gone we see base instinct begin to dominate, which is a natural reaction. When one feels that they cannot influence the situation in any way, they desist from all undertakings and having lost the initiative they simply wait for whatever comes their way. Once something does come their way, and the 'darkness' doesn't bring anything good, they can't react in an organized manner as this has already failed them, so they react in the way that takes the least effort, on base instinct. There are many problems with doing this since these types of actions lack foresight and promote folly, things that Conrad cautions the reader about. This seems to be the general mechanic in which the 'darkness' operates. The overall result is that any constructive initiatives are suppressed by an oppressive and indistinct feeling of hopelessness which subsequently illicit a falling back to base instinct as the most effective way to act. In this reduced state of consciousness it is certain that nothing will get done. There are ample demonstrations of this throughout the book, for instance with the Pilgrims who end up doing nothing constructive⁸ and with Kurtz who was stripped of his civilization by his surroundings. In Kurtz's case the darkness awoke feelings ranging from megalomania at being a local king to outright violence in beheading those that opposed him and putting their heads on stakes⁹. These are the actions of a person whose initial intent was to exercise an 'august Benevolence'. Although there is nothing concrete about the darkness, the precipitous falls of those that come into contact with it serve to warn that the 'darkness' is a dangerous, destructive entity that has substantial capacity for nullification.

The Characters:

Since the focus of the analysis is on the characters and their reactions to the surroundings we examine each of them in detail before making final conclusions on what the lessons are. We look at the characters in roughly the same way that they are presented in the book, but leave the most important ones until the end. First we look at the characters encountered in on the continent, then the company representatives and ivory hunters found at the various stations and finally the main characters.

The first group of people that Marlow meets are representatives of the Company. These people are aware of the debilitating effects of being in the jungle, but having never been there themselves are only aware of them. They observe those that come in and those that come back in their altered state. The characters of note here are the secretary and the doctor. Since there are not a lot of agents sent on these types of missions, the secretary would get to see most of them. The atmosphere of Marlow's encounter with the secretary produced in him an ominous and uneasy feeling¹⁰ and reading into the episode after knowing the events of the book, we see that many things are foreshadowed. The compassion and sympathy displayed by the secretary would serve to emphasize the perilous nature of the enterprise that those passing through the office were embarking on. This sets the tone that everyone is tested by the darkness, not only Marlow, since substantially less than half would see the continent after leaving it.¹¹ The second character is the doctor. His interests are mainly in the psychological changes that occur in those that go to the jungle, alluding to the mental burden. The burden of disease in the jungle was already well known, but the psychological effects have been less explored. His casual

8 'They beguiled the time by backbiting and intriguing...but as to effectually lifting a little finger--oh, no.' ll. 977-985
9 ll. 2413-2429

10 'I began to feel slightly uneasy ... there was something ominous in the atmosphere' ll. 369
'...assured me the secretary, with an air of taking an immense part in all my sorrows' ll. 389-390

11 'Morituri te salutant.* Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again--not half, by a long way.' ll. 387
*Latin for: 'Those who are about to die, salute you.' Supposedly said by Roman gladiators.

remark that he never sees any of those coming back¹² is another hint about the dangers of the enterprise.

Once Marlow is off the continent we meet a number of other people that warn him of what to expect. At the same time we also see a number of episodes that reflect folly, a theme closely tied to maintaining civilization. Two simple examples are the battleship shelling the bush which stretched off into the horizon and the rusting machinery and pointless blasting at the first station that Marlow visits.¹³ It is at this station that we are also introduced to the company's chief accountant. By this time Marlow has already seen enough degeneration to make the accountant's immaculate manner of dress stand out. While he comments that the accountant looked like a 'hairstylist's dummy', at the same time he admires the backbone that it took to keep up such an appearance among the general demoralization.¹⁴ The accountant is seen at the first station, which is still far from the real darkness of the jungle, but even here it is already an achievement to keep a pristine appearance, considering that everything at the station was disorganized, except the accountant's ledgers.

As the journey progresses inland to the Central Station, the jungle gets thicker and the atmosphere gets more depressing. Arriving there we get to meet the manager and the pilgrims, all agents of the Company. The General Manager at the Central Station is an example of someone that can survive in the wilderness. His main merit is that he does not get sick and simply outlives everyone else that comes to the station. Since he has seniority, he remains in his position. The other reason that the general manager has been successful is because he does not aspire to do anything, he keeps the routine going, thus he is not frustrated when nothing gets done, since it does not matter to him if anything gets done.¹⁵ In fact it is never clearly stated as to what exactly he manages as he spends his time playing some political games, pulling rank and talking about ivory along with the other pilgrims. None of these are productive activities, so his actions cannot be considered civilized. However his personality is monolithic enough to not have any conflicts. His narrow focus also means that he does not take any issue with his surroundings and is grounded enough to not go off on a complete tangent to his assigned task, which is why he can handle the darkness. The other pilgrims are of a similar character to the station manager, except they suffer a much higher attrition rate. Their motivations are just as simple and they end up doing essentially the same things as the station manager. A good example is the brickmaker, who made no bricks at all, but somehow managed to work his way up the hierarchy and get a candle when only the manager was supposed to have one. Marlow remarks that if he poked him with his forefinger, he would 'find nothing inside but a little loose dirt'.¹⁶ Given that such people populated the station, the prevailing atmosphere was unreal, not the least because everyone was completely oblivious to their surroundings. It should be noted that the Central Station was not sustainable, if more agents were not constantly sent to it, it would promptly disappear into the jungle.

Another interesting example is the Eldorado Exploring Expedition¹⁷. An enterprise that was doomed from the start due to the sheer folly of those undertaking it. The quality that defined the expedition was a desire to 'tear treasure out of the bowels of the land'. Aside from other more superficial qualities, this sole purpose was enough to define this 'noble' enterprise in its entirety. Except the desire to pillage something and make money, the only other quality they could muster up was a sleepy cunning, possessed by the leader of the expedition, incidentally the uncle of the station manager.

12 'Oh, I never see them,' he remarked; 'and, moreover, the changes take place inside, you know.' He smiled, as if at some quiet joke.' ll. 413

13 Battleship: ll. 513-527; Machinery and blasting: ll. 574-585

14 ll. 684-709

15 'He had no genius for organizing, for initiative...He originated nothing, he could keep the routine going - that's all.' ll. 862-871

16 'I let him run on, this 'papier-mache' Mephistopheles, and it seemed to me that if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him, and would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt, maybe.' ll. 1065-1072

17 Description of the Eldorado Exploration Expedition - ll. 1248-1265

As is stated, they were 'reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity, and cruel without courage; there was not an atom of foresight or of serious intention in the whole batch of them, and they did not seem aware these things are wanted for the work of the world'. This phrase is an apt description of the expedition and the pilgrims of the Central Station. If a group of such individuals ever succeeds then it is the exception and not the rule, for any success will have been through pure luck. Without seriousness and foresight any enterprise, regardless of the starting resources, luck, weakness of opponents, etc., is doomed to fail over time. The darkness does not leave much room for error and while the same people may have survived their entire lives in civilized society without much trouble, the darkness is much less forgiving. The end of the Eldorado Expedition is simple enough, after going into the 'patient wilderness' the only subsequent news of them was that all their donkeys were dead and, although it is not mentioned explicitly, the rest of the expedition 'found what they deserved'.¹⁸

The Russian:

The Russian adventurer is introduced fairly late in the book. There are several allusions to his existence, but none of them seem significant until after the character is introduced. The first allusion to his existence is by the station manager in conversation with his uncle, namely that an unaffiliated trader has been operating in their territory. This is followed by the suggestion to hang him.¹⁹ In retrospect this comment should have stood out since an independent trader in a jungle is not exactly a trivial occurrence. The second prelude to the encounter comes about fifty miles downstream from Kurtz's station where Marlow finds a book, a note with a warning and some wood for the steamer.²⁰ This episode also does not immediately stand out, but it should be noted that books and notes that not casual finds in the wilderness. The encounter itself is short and is comprised of a conversation with Marlow, which details a character that forms the contrast to Kurtz as the Russian adventurer has succeeded where Kurtz failed - he has consciously and subconsciously carried and propagated civilization. From before the first meeting to parting his actions are those of a civilized individual and along with the narrator he is the only other character to have been in the heart of darkness and successfully resisted its influence.

The evidence of civilization left by the Russian adventurer is substantial, but comes in bits and pieces. First there is the book that Marlow finds, though it is in English, there are notes on the side written in Russian, indicating that the book was read for its subject matter. The further implication is that the Russian is self-taught when it comes to the English language. It was not taught to him in school, since he is originally from Tambov. Additionally, he is a self-taught writer, judging by the note with the warning to proceed with caution. The presence of the wood-pile at the same site is a friendly gesture to the weary traveler and a decent thing to do, however this was not done at any of the other stations even though they had an official affiliation. The encounter itself further reinforces this individual's set of values.²¹ Points that should be noted are that he took care of Kurtz throughout his illnesses and urged him to return to civilization, that he sent a shipment of ivory to the Dutchman that equipped him, the 'neatly patched' clothes and the emphasis that his relationship with his father was restored after he ran away from school. Furthermore, his admiration of Kurtz was the result of Kurtz's intellectual teaching as well as his eloquence, indicating a respect for knowledge. Kurtz could speak of love and justice and the conduct of life and yet never actually live up to what was said, but these speeches would have contained the loftiest aspirations for these subjects. It was doubtless these

18 The full fate: "'In a few days the Eldorado Expedition went into the patient wilderness, that closed upon it as the sea closes over a diver. Long afterwards the news came that all the donkeys were dead. I know nothing as to the fate of the less valuable animals. They, no doubt, like the rest of us, found what they deserved. I did not inquire.' ll. 1375-1379

19 '...a species of wandering trader--a pestilential fellow, snapping ivory from the natives...We will not be free from unfair competition till one of these fellows is hanged for an example.' ll. 1333-1336

20 Description of the Russian's hut - ll. 1534-1575

21 Description of the encounter - ll. 2222-2493 and ll. 2639-2691

aspirations and ideals of civilization that resonated with the Russian adventurer, just like they would resonate with a European intellectual or anyone that supports progress. That these topics should be of interest is not surprising. This is not a random individual, his father is the arch-priest for the Government of Tambov, so this is someone whose family is high-up in the social hierarchy. He would have had access to a good education and been taught certain morals and values throughout his youth. Based on his actions, progress and humanism were things that certainly resonated with him.

All these things combined, a commitment to social order, humanism, education and progress are all qualities that would be highly valued in progressive places for the above are all commendable actions. They would be reasonable too had the locale been closer to civilization, but they were all acted out in the depths of the Congo, in the 'heart of darkness', where nothing really matters to anyone. He appreciated Kurtz's eloquent speeches, but was arguably the only person in hundreds of kilometers around the Inner Station that could do so. Thus acted out, these qualities would seem strange to those that saw them. Marlow's one-word description for him was a 'harlequin', not a coincidence since someone that carries the ideals described above with such conviction into the absolute depths of the jungle would stand out. The very actions that are valued in a stable community would seem irrational and difficult to comprehend to someone what had a more rational take on the situation in the wilderness. The Russian echoes Conrad's statement at the start of the book, that an unselfish commitment to an idea was one way to counteract the debilitating effects of the darkness²² and the Russian's commitment was to the spirit of adventure and progress. It is stated that 'his need was to exist' which explains the undaunted motivation underlying his actions, for his actions are his own, he acts and reacts, but never stops moving. With the spirit of an adventurer, all he needs from the wilderness is 'space to breathe in and to push on through' and the darkness is not fast enough to envelop him.²³ It is this perpetual and constructive movement that does not allow him to stop and let the melancholy of the darkness seep in.

Marlow:

The narrator of the story, Charlie Marlow, along with Kurtz and the Russian adventurer, is the third character to have seen the 'heart of darkness'. Like Kurtz, but unlike the Russian adventurer, he is conscious of the darkness around him, its debilitating and demoralizing effects, however he has enough experience and innate strength to counteract it and being conscious of it he is able to describe it through the narration. Marlow's words are in effect Conrad's words as the author did travel to the jungles and this trip did have a lasting effect on him. In addition to stating the core facts, Marlow's narrative is punctuated with comments that may be interpreted as sarcastic or somewhat nihilistic on first impression, however they are often too pithy and contain too many kernels of truth to be classified as that. They serve to keep the reader aware of the actual situation and not let them fill in the blanks with prior conceptions as few have seen what is being described. Contrasting this with Kurtz's pamphlet on civilizing the natives that had 'no practical hints to interrupt the magic current of phrases', Marlow's narrative does the exact opposite, it always keeps the reader grounded, even if somewhat uncertain.

It is through Marlow's character that we learn what is important when faced with a situation like the darkness. Firstly it should be noted that Marlow is also an adventurer, though he has kept to the more civilized parts of the world for most of his travels, his trip to the heart of the Congo certainly tested his qualities. He is a shrewd judge of character as can be seen by his comments about the other characters in the book. Likewise he carries with him the qualities of a civilized individual. Firstly,

22 'What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea--something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. . . ' ll. 209-213

23 'He surely wanted nothing from the wilderness but space to breathe in and to push on through. His need was to exist, and to move onwards at the greatest possible risk, and with a maximum of privation. If the absolutely pure, uncalculating, unpractical spirit of adventure had ever ruled a human being, it ruled this be-patched youth.' ll. 2305-2309

unlike the other Pilgrims at the station, he worked. He had a specific objective to fix the steamboat and he worked at that objective until it was achieved. Similarly, during the trip he had to keep the steamboat going by fixing leaking pipes while making sure that he did not sink the boat on the trip upriver, a difficult task by his own admission.²⁴ His actions are consistent with what he said in the beginning about efficiency, he did his best to be efficient and do his job and although he may not have liked it, he still did it because he understood the alternative was degradation. Marlow can also react effectively when necessary, as demonstrated by his encounter with Kurtz, when the latter left the steamer to go back to his station.²⁵ His actions were decisive and resolved the situation, again keeping in mind that decisiveness and solutions are scarce in the entire narrative. Thus, along with the Russian adventurer, Marlow is someone who successfully survived the 'heart of darkness'. His method however was different; because Marlow was conscious of the situation, he had to rally all his strength in order to counteract his surroundings. It should be noted that there are a number of interesting similarities between Marlow and the Russian adventurer. Both are civilized individuals at the core, neither deviated from the principles they brought with them to the jungle. Both are also monolithic at the core, neither bent their actions to make them suit the immediate situation or succumb to primitive impulse. They only differ in the dimensions of intellect and their commitments to adventure. Though Marlow is clearly an adventurer, he does not have that absolute commitment to it, he did not strike out into the jungle alone with virtually nothing after arriving at some random trading station. On the other hand, while the Russian's mind is obviously sharp as he was able to survive the wilderness, Marlow is the superior intellect, as he was able to understand who Kurtz was. He was able to appreciate Kurtz's intellect and eloquence but was also able to look past that to see the empty core. Regardless of the differences though, Marlow had the necessary qualities to stand his ground against the darkness.

Kurtz:

Kurtz is in many ways the goal the narration moves towards, but he is not its main subject. He is one of the main characters, but the interpretation of his actions is only useful when compared to those of other characters. On the surface Kurtz is the embodiment of civilization, whether it is his pamphlet on the natives or his discussions with the Russian adventurer about higher order material like love, justice and the conduct of life. He had both the intellect to understand these things and the eloquence to convey them in an effective manner. It was never made clear exactly what he did before coming to the Congo, but the consensus was that he would be or was successful in all of the things he chose to attempt, suggested occupations were writer, musician, artist or a leader of an extremist party. In all of this the talents of Kurtz cannot be doubted and he was supposed to represent all of Europe as 'all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz'. He was also supposedly embodied with all the best ideals of civilization. Thus equipped, in intellect, training and with the backing of the Company, he set out to the jungle not only to get ivory and make money, but also to bring light to the 'darkness'.²⁶ He set out, and was destroyed. It is this defeat that emphasizes the qualities that are necessary, beyond what Kurtz had, to form a foundation for civilization.

The reader is not introduced to Kurtz until the end, there are only snippets of information about him that help to form the character. Firstly, we are told that Kurtz was sent out with a mandate to not only get ivory, but to also spread civilization. He even wrote a very eloquent treatise concerning the latter objective, the one that Marlow read. He was very successful in the primary objective, he did obtain lots of ivory, which earned him the contempt of the other Pilgrims, but owing to his high position, none considered doing anything against him. Other information however, is not particularly

24 'Fine sentiments, be hanged! I had no time. I had to mess about with white-lead ... I had to watch the steering, and circumvent those snags, and get the tin-pot along by hook or by crook.' ll. 1507-1512

25 'One gets sometimes such a flash of inspiration, you know. I did say the right thing.' ll. 2777-2779

26 In the spirit of the Spanish conquistadors, reminiscent of those described by Bernal Diaz del Castillo

positive. At one point Kurtz decided to leave the Inner Station and return with a fleet of canoes carrying his ivory, but turned back about half-way.²⁷ Here we see the internal conflict of Kurtz, on the one hand, he understands that staying in the jungle is not a good idea, but this reason is not enough to counteract the lure of remaining. In addition to being intelligent Kurtz is also an ambitious and power-hungry individual and the jungle allows him to realize these qualities, to his own detriment. In the jungle, he could do anything he wanted. Once he was allowed to indulge himself, he was unable to stop. As Marlow notes, the jungle 'whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception of'. Thus it came to pass that the person sent with a mission to civilize instead ended up playing out his fantasies by subjugating several tribes and becoming a local king. The execution of 'rebels' and the taking of a shipment of ivory from the Russian 'because he could do whatever he wanted' and 'would not listen to reason' illustrates his changed outlook. His participation in native rituals is a continuation of this. Once he started, he was unable to stop, as it was part of his nature to go with the flow, he was 'hollow at the core'.²⁸ Thus the longer he stayed the less civilized he became and the more he descended into carnal pleasures and otherwise. Unfortunately for Kurtz, he also understood what was happening to him but he was unable to reverse this. His demise was slow and painful. At first the understanding must have been intuitive, but at the end he was fully conscious of it, hence the last words to sum up his life's path: 'The horror! The horror!' That Kurtz was able to comment on his experiences, something that even Marlow was unable to do when he nearly died, indicates that he was conscious of his fall, the knowledge did come to him in the end.²⁹

The greatest irony is that had Kurtz not gone to the jungle but stayed in Europe, it is almost certain that he would have been successful. He would have had a wonderful life; he would have been admired by countless people, had married his Intended, been a successful politician, musician or whatever else he chose to be and after a stellar career would have died in the presence of his loved ones and received a splendid funeral oration. Life would have been good and it is not an exaggeration to say this, because he had everything necessary to be successful in civilized society, plus he had his eloquence. But the condition was that he would stay in civilized society because like Conrad said, through Marlow, he was 'hollow at the core'. He needed the surroundings to dictate his goals and check him if he started to stray or became overly zealous. The qualities that the jungle elicited in him would have stayed dormant. Once his surroundings changed, despite all the power of his intellect, he was unable to resist the atmosphere. It elicited in him qualities that need to have stayed hidden for his own benefit and would have stayed hidden had he not ended up in the jungle. Before he came to the Congo, Kurtz was not a vagabond, but a socially astute intellectual, he would not have been entrusted with his commission otherwise. But once these qualities were elicited, over time they came to dominate him and destroyed him. In the end he was not qualitatively different from the natives of the tribes he sought to control. His fall was absolute.

Conclusion:

The above analysis of the characters is not comprehensive. There are many more episodes in the book that illustrate other interesting characteristics of human nature. However, in this analysis the goal was to give a general overview of traits and behaviours that are vital for progress and having looked at the important points and characters in the novel we can make several conclusions about what it takes to

27 '...Kurtz had apparently intended to return himself... but after coming three hundred miles, had suddenly decided to go back' ll. 1307-1313

28 '[the darkness] had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till 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. . . .' ll. 2422-2437

29 Marlow on Kurtz's last words: 'He had summed up--he had judged. 'The horror!' He was a remarkable man. After all, this was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candor, it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper, it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth--the strange commingling of desire and hate.' ll. 2993-3001

sustain civilization.

The first thing that clearly stands out is that it takes a lot of effort. Those characters that actually get work done have to put in a lot of physical and intellectual effort to do something constructive. As evidenced by Marlow, the Russian, the accountant and others, in order to keep things going all of them have to put in many hours of diligent work. Marlow describes the somewhat harrowing journey upriver where he not only had to keep fixing the boat, but also make sure that it did not sink along the way. Added to that were a litany of other smaller problems. A failure in any one of these aspects would cause the entire enterprise to end in failure. On the flip side, for those that don't want to put in the effort, the Eldorado Expedition is a good example of what happens when people don't do things properly. Additionally, training people to do something constructive is not an easy task, for instance the accountant trained a maid to take care of his wardrobe which, by his own admission, was a difficult undertaking. Similar examples would be the pilot and the boiler attendant who were trained to perform their respective duties on the steamboat. The positive point here is that although it is difficult to do things properly, it is possible to do them if one has enough perseverance.

An aspect closely related to effort is efficiency. As was stated before, it is not enough to simply do some kind of work, one has to make sure that it is actually directed towards some type of goal and does not consume too much effort and time relative to what is accomplished. In this case the actions of the pilgrims at the Central Station are an illustration of inefficiency. Although they did do something, they did not do nearly enough of it to make it relevant, most of their energies were absorbed into talking about ivory. A prime example of their wasting resources was getting onto the steamboat and sinking it a few hours into the trip upriver. Although the intention was good it can be assumed that nobody had any idea what they were doing and in the end all they managed to do was waste another three months because they had to wait until Marlow fixed the boat. A more anecdotal example of inefficiency was when a storage hut caught fire and the pilgrim that went down to the river to get water used a pail with a hole in it. There is no denying these are actions of some sort and while everyone behaved 'splendidly', these actions are accompanied by folly, which made them pointless at best and damaging at worst.

Another lesson from the book is that once people are removed from society or any atmosphere that gives their existence some structure, very few people have something innate in them to continue acting like civilized individuals and uphold standards when they don't have to. Only a handful of characters described had something innate that kept them from degrading and of these only three stand out; Marlow, the Russian and the accountant. Although the general manager is a fourth character that did not go off the deep end despite spending nine years in the jungle, he was hardly a model example of a civilized individual to begin with. An individual that exemplifies a failure to remain civilized is of course Kurtz. The person that seemed the best equipped to understand the world around him did not have the innate qualities to keep him civilized. The implied conclusion here is that intellect in and of itself is not sufficient to keep one from falling. A high intellect will give a person the ability to understand what is going on around them and even give them the best way to go about certain things, but it will not help an individual if they do not have an innate strength to define their own actions. In the end intellect serves the motivation and in Kurtz's case the motivation ended up being dictated by the darkness since he was 'hollow at the core'. On the other hand we see Marlow, who also understands what is happening, but has something in him to keep him grounded through his exposure to the darkness. It affects him too, but he counteracts it and does not succumb to his impulses like Kurtz did. The emphasis given to Kurtz in the book serves to underscore the point that while intellect is crucial it can only get you so far, it is not sufficient to ward off the darkness since the motivations and standards of an individual have to originate from within.

This brings us to the question of motivation. The darkness is very good at modifying motivations and if it does not destroy them it can warp them into something abominable, like it did for Kurtz. From the point of view of progress, changing people's motivations for the worst is incredibly damaging. First, those that could have done something will do nothing since they will not believe anything is worth doing and second, those with base motivations will do a lot of short-sighted things and actively destroy the social structure. Once modified for the worse it is very difficult to reverse the damage as any intervention has to come from the outside and has to be very persistent and delicate to resurrect constructive initiatives from within an individual. A suggested way to guard against the hazard the darkness presents to motivation is a commitment to an idea, as Conrad states, 'not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea--something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to'. In this case the internal motivation will be strong enough to sustain an individual regardless of the surrounding circumstances. The best example of this in the book is the Russian adventurer, whose commitment to adventure and persistent propagation of civilization are so deeply embedded that the external environment is unable to modify it. After their parting, Marlow comments: 'Sometimes I ask myself whether I had ever really seen him--whether it was possible to meet such a phenomenon!', underscoring the rareness of the qualities he has just observed.

As formulated in the book, these are the main qualities that are required to uphold civilization. Work, efficiency, intellect, commitment and innate strength are all crucial components for progress. It is through observing the interplay of these qualities in the depths of the wilderness that it is possible to crystallize these as being the traits necessary to fend off the darkness. We see that with these qualities it is possible to be present in a negative atmosphere and be unaffected by it, moreover, it is even possible to push forward constructive actions under the most unfavourable of circumstances. Having said that, the fact that some have survived the darkness does not mean it is something one should seek any exposure to. Conrad himself appears to disfavour expounding on the experience to everyone, as he remarks through Marlow at the very end that telling the whole story 'would have been too dark--too dark altogether'. Asserting that not everyone should be exposed to the darkness is legitimate given the episodes described in the book. So if civilization masks the qualities that are necessary to survive in the 'heart of darkness', if the darkness does come, how many will be able to counteract it? The implied answer is - not many.

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