

## 08. End of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>

### Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)

Tennyson was a poet, a poetic legend – widely admired in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and widely despised in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> as a chief representative of all things Victorian that Modernism strove to abandon and reject. He was poet laureate, the official, royally appointed poet of the English nation, and people looked up to him as a national bard; his influence and popularity was heightened by his appearance: he was a large man with long hair and beard, and with a deep, full voice. His success came after not-so-easy beginnings. His father was an Anglican clergyman who hated the job and later became an alcoholic; one of his brothers became insane, another brother was addicted to opium. At university Tennyson became part of a circle of students who were interested in writing and encouraged him to write poetry. One of his friends from the group, Arthur Hallam, died suddenly at the age of 22 and Tennyson was deeply shaken. Hallam was a close friend, an admired poet, and the fiancé of Tennyson's sister. Tennyson's first son, later, was named Hallam. The tragic death of Hallam became the subject of a famous elegy which he published in a collection of poems called *In Memoriam* (1850). There he deals not only with the loss of a beloved and admired friend but also with some of the big issues of the Victorian era: Tennyson was one of the first writers to reflect, in literature, the far reaching implications of geological and other scientific discoveries that seem to clash with the biblical story about the creation of the world and challenged the prevalent religious understanding.

That year, 1850, was a turning point in Tennyson's life. His poetry finally achieved recognition, he was appointed poet laureate and finally able to marry the woman he had loved for 14 years and hadn't been able to marry because of his poverty. Now he was financially secure, well-off, and very respected. Queen Victoria herself said: "Next to the Bible *In Memoriam* is my comfort." In 1855 he published a long poem called *Maud*; and then he attempted an ambitious epic poem inspired by the Arthurian legends called *Idylls of the Kings* (1859). Tennyson's interest in the past was an important influence on the painters of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. He also uses characters from Classical Antiquity, episodes from the *Odyssey*, or from Shakespeare. These serve as subject of his own poems; one of his very famous poems is called "The Lotos-Eaters," inspired by an episode from the *Odyssey* where Odysseus stops in the land of lotus fruit which makes people forget their desire for home and makes them want to stay there. Another famous poem on Odysseus imagines him back home, as an ageing king, tired of domestic life and longing for great deeds once again.

### Ulysses – one of Tennyson's best known poems

Full text with audio:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45392/ulysses>

A different performance of the ending of the poem:

Ulysses - Alfred Tennyson; by RedFrost Motivation; read by actor Victor Vertunni

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BRLX8y3uka0>

What later became the target of criticism is the limited Victorian focus of his writings; sometimes they feel shallow, melodramatic, "preachy" - especially when he assumes the role of

speaking for mankind and expressing generally held beliefs and sentiments. Difficult to digest are also his sometimes far-fetched attempts to “elevate” ordinary subjects by a grand style. Moreover, Tennyson often wrote in blank verse, or developed his own stanza structures, and this formalism was another source of annoyance in the time of Modernism.

*In Memoriam A. H. H.* is a collection of poetic reflections, gathered over the period of seventeen years, and then composed into a single elegy. The poet describes a whole range of emotions, settings, and events, from Hallam’s burial to his own feelings of loneliness. Gradually, the elegy moves from tragedy and despair to a sense of reconciliation and hope; the progress, however, is not steady, there are many “low” moments when despair and doubt gain the upper hand. One such climactic passage comes in stanzas 54-56, a famous part in which the poetic speaker deals with the question of loss in the wider framework of the contrast of human hopes with the impersonal, overpowering forces of nature. Tennyson studies the new discoveries in geology and other sciences and this led him to doubts about religion and the purpose of human life. Notice the sense of vastness of time, notice the references to dinosaurs – the dragons, the idea of nature as a ruthless force, as an organism which runs on its own laws, the sense of constant perishing that runs so forcefully against human desire for meaning, hope, justice.

O, yet we trust that somehow good  
Will be the final goal of ill,  
To pangs of nature, sins of will,  
Defects of doubt, and taints of blood;

That nothing walks with aimless feet;  
That not one life shall be destroyed,  
Or cast as rubbish to the void,  
When God hath made the pile complete (...)

Are God and Nature then at strife,  
That Nature lends such evil dreams?  
So careful of the type she seems,  
So careless of the single life (...)

“So careful of the type?” but no.  
From scarp’d cliff and quarried stone  
She cries, “A thousand types are gone:  
I care for nothing, all shall go.

“Thou makest thine appeal to me:  
I bring to life, I bring to death:  
The spirit does but mean the breath:  
I know no more.” And he, shall he,

Man, her last work, who seem’d so fair,  
Such splendid purpose in his eyes,  
Who roll’d the psalm to wintry skies,

Who built him fanes of fruitless prayer,

Who trusted God was love indeed  
And love Creation's final law —  
Though Nature, red in tooth and claw  
With ravine, shrieked against his creed —

Who loved, who suffered countless ills,  
Who battled for the True, the Just,  
Be blown about the desert dust,  
Or sealed within the iron hills?

No more? A monster then, a dream,  
A discord. Dragons of the prime,  
That tare each other in their slime,  
Were mellow music matched with him.

O life as futile, then, as frail!  
O for thy voice to soothe and bless!  
What hope of answer, or redress?  
Behind the veil, behind the veil.

*scarpd – cut away so that the strata are exposed; fanes – temples; tare – tore; matched with him – compared to him*

Another famous poem by Tennyson, one which he wrote late in life and wished to be always published as the final poem in collections of his work, is “Crossing the Bar.” Tennyson was inspired for this poem when he traveled from his summer home in Surrey to his main home on the Isle of Wight (off the south coast of England), the Farringford House. A peaceful reconciliation to approaching death with a subtle expression of his trust in a good God, the poem draws on the setting of evening and the sea to create an image of the end of life. Its serene mood, regular rhyme and structure and placid reference to God as his guide, are examples of those aspects of Tennyson’s poetry that made him a cherished author of the Victorian era, and that were not acceptable in the later period of Modernism.

### Crossing the Bar

Sunset and evening star,  
And one clear call for me!  
And may there be no moaning of the bar,  
When I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,  
Too full for sound and foam,

When that which drew from out the boundless deep  
Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,  
And after that the dark!  
And may there be no sadness of farewell,  
When I embark;

For though from out our bourne of Time and Place  
The flood may bear me far,  
I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
When I have crossed the bar.

*bar – a sand bar (bank, shoal) at the mouth of a harbor; bourne - boundary*

### **Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)**

Hardy was the son of a builder and he himself originally worked as an architect. Writing was first just a hobby and after his books became famous he gave up his architectural practice and devoted himself to writing full time. This success came when he was in his thirties. After a series of successful novels, he was discouraged when the last one was very poorly received, and after that he focused on poetry instead of fiction. Hardy is remembered for creating a fictional country in his novels which he called Wessex, modeled on his native Dorset. Wessex is a rural setting with villages and bigger towns and the characters of Hardy's novels are typically rural people. Hardy gives us a sense of everyday life, of work in agriculture, without romanticizing rural life (as Wordsworth would have): he depicts the poverty, the need, the lack, the hard manual labor, the very precarious life of the poor farm workers. And he is a tragic writer; there is a strong sense of elegy in his prose, the plot of his novels are tragic. Writing toward the end of the Victorian period, Hardy responded to the deep changes of mindset that were taking shape, like the transformative influence of Darwin's theory and the determinism that it seemed to lead to. Indeed, one of the most salient features of Hardy's fiction is certain fatalism, or a sense of a lack of control over one's life: not unlike in Greek tragedies, Hardy's heroes become victims of forces which shape and fatally influence their lives. These forces are social (social pressure, social restrictions), individual (their character traits and personal weaknesses), and also simply coincidence, e.g. a series of tragic coincidences which eventually destroys the character's hope for a happy life. Hardy also captures the sense of a vanishing world: he writes about the rural life in Wessex but it is a way of life that is already fading. There is railroad, there is capitalist business making, the city becomes a magnet attracting the country people.

Hardy focuses less on the broad scope society than for example Dickens and Thackeray but he creates considerable psychological depth for his characters, and especially for female characters, as for example in his novel *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) or in his tragic *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891).

His success as a novelist was interrupted after the publication of *Jude the Obscure* (1896) which Victorian readers found too shocking and distasteful in its very raw, naturalistic depiction of the struggles of the young villager Jude who wants to be educated, but is prevented from his goals



first by an ugly marriage to a very crude village woman, then by poverty, then genuine love prevents him from entering ministry, and the horrors of his struggle reach their climax when a son from his first marriage kills his two other sons from his second relationship and himself, and Jude finally dies, alone, broken, exhausted, poor, with no hope whatsoever.

After the readers' rejection of *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy turned to writing poetry and he never again returned to fiction. Because he lived a very long life, he is remembered equally as a poet as a novelist. The same tragic tone is present in much of his poetry; it is lyrical, often with an elegiac feeling, connecting a feeling of sorrow, or loss to some particular situation or event.

*Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is the name of the main heroine, Tess Durbeyfield, whose family was originally aristocratic but by the time of Tess' life is a poor, rural, uneducated family. Tess is a girl of 16. She goes to work for the rich Mrs d'Urberville and she is seduced by her son Alec. A child is born to Tess and soon dies. As a single mother Tess is "undone" in the Victorian society; she is an outcast. She finds work as a milk maid in a different part of the country where no one knows her; there she meets Angel Clare, a gentleman, they fall in love and Angel wants to marry her. Tess tries to tell him the truth about her past but he is so much in love that he never gives her the opportunity. On their wedding night Angel confesses to her that he had a love affair once. Relieved, Tess tells him of her seduction by Alec and of the baby, thinking that Angel will understand her when he, too, had a love affair before. But Angel can't take it and after a few days he leaves her. Alec keeps pursuing her, trying to make her his; she resists. Then, after a break in the narrative, the story resumes some years later. Angel has come back looking for Tess; he finds her living with Alec as Mrs d'Urberville (although they are not married because she is still officially married to Angel). Her relationship with Alec is disastrous, he treats her badly, Tess hates living with him but she feels that she has no choice. Now that Angel returns, her frustration wells up and she stabs Alec to death with a knife. She and Angel go into hiding and spend a few happy days together until the police come for Tess. The novel ends when a black flag is raised, signaling Tess' execution. There is at least some catharsis here: before her execution Tess asks Angel to take care of her younger sister, and in the closing scene of the novel we see Angel and the sister leave hand in hand.

This novel, too, was found shocking in Hardy's times, all the more so because he gave it a subtitle "A Pure Woman": a pure woman for Hardy, but for many of his contemporaries a single mother, no better than a whore, and a murderer. Hardy here unmasks one of the great hypocrisies of the Victorian society: the double standard on sexual conduct. While it was excusable or tolerable if a man had a love affair, women had to conform to the ideal of chastity and purity.

The excerpt shows the climactic conversation of Angel and Tess on their wedding night. Angel confesses his short love affair and asks Tess to forgive him; then Tess tells him how Alec seduced her—and Angel is shocked, he feels cheated, and he cannot forgive her.

"In the name of our love, forgive me!" she whispered with a dry mouth. "I have forgiven you for the same!"

And, as he did not answer, she said again—

"Forgive me as you are forgiven! I forgive you, Angel."

"You—yes, you do."

"But you do not forgive me?"

"O Tess, forgiveness does not apply to the case! You were one person; now you are another. My God—how can forgiveness meet such a grotesque—prestidigitation as that!"

(...)

“I thought, Angel, that you loved me—me, my very self! If it is I you do love, O how can it be that you look and speak so? It frightens me! Having begun to love you, I love you for ever—in all changes, in all disgraces, because you are yourself. I ask no more. Then how can you, O my own husband, stop loving me?”

“I repeat, the woman I have been loving is not you.”

“But who?”

“Another woman in your shape.”

*prestidigitation – skillful trick, deception*

An excerpt from the ending: after a few happy days together, Angel and Tess try to move to another part of the country to escape the police. One night they walk by Stonehenge and stop there, Tess falls asleep on an altar. As the sun rises, Angel sees that the police have discovered them and there is no escape:

“Let her finish her sleep!” he implored in a whisper of the men as they gathered round.

When they saw where she lay, which they had not done till then, they showed no objection, and stood watching her, as still as the pillars around. He went to the stone and bent over her, holding one poor little hand; her breathing now was quick and small, like that of a lesser creature than a woman. All waited in the growing light, their faces and hands as if they were silvered, the remainder of their figures dark, the stones glistening green-gray, the Plain still a mass of shade. Soon the light was strong, and a ray shone upon her unconscious form, peering under her eyelids and waking her.

“What is it, Angel?” she said, starting up. “Have they come for me?”

“Yes, dearest,” he said. “They have come.”

“It is as it should be,” she murmured. “Angel, I am almost glad—yes, glad! This happiness could not have lasted. It was too much. I have had enough; and now I shall not live for you to despise me!”

She stood up, shook herself, and went forward, neither of the men having moved.

“I am ready,” she said quietly.

In poetry, too, Hardy expresses grief over the human condition, the sense of being overrun by blind chance, a sense of loss, regret, sorrow. Here is just one poem as an example of Hardy’s poetry, again, sad in tone, dealing with the loss of love and feelings of sorrow and regret. Notice how much power the poems derives from its detailed visual setting of one particular event.

### Neutral Tones

We stood by a pond that winter day,  
And the sun was white, as though chidden of God,  
And a few leaves lay on the starving sod;  
– They had fallen from an ash, and were gray.

Your eyes on me were as eyes that rove  
Over tedious riddles of years ago;  
And some words played between us to and fro  
On which lost the more by our love.

The smile on your mouth was the deadest thing  
Alive enough to have strength to die;  
And a grin of bitterness swept thereby  
Like an ominous bird a-wing....

Since then, keen lessons that love deceives,  
And wrings with wrong, have shaped to me  
Your face, and the God-curst sun, and a tree,  
And a pond edged with grayish leaves.

*chidden – reproached, scolded; wrings – torments*

### **Edward Morgan Forster (1879-1970)**

Forster was born in London; his father died before he turned two and Forster was then brought up by his mother and a number of other female relatives. He attended a boarding school but he disliked it and was bullied there, and it was only during his university years in Cambridge that he actually enjoyed school. He started writing early, and it went hand in hand with his desire for travel; he stayed in Italy, Germany, and in 1912 went to India. During WW1 he went to Greece to work with the Red Cross. In 1921 he visited India again, and had some official duties as a temporary secretary to the Rajah of Dewas but it was especially the friendship of the Rajah that was important to him; among other things Forster experienced and enjoyed the festival Gokul Asthami, the celebration of the birth of Krishna. By then he was already a well-known author and friend of many other writers like Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, Somerset Maugham and many others. Forster never had a family of his own but lived for many years with his mother; he was a homosexual and had several love affairs throughout his life. His posthumously published novel *Maurice* (1971) depicts a successful homosexual relationship between two men.

Among his many novels, the first that made him really famous and successful was *Howards End* (1910), although even the earlier books like *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) or *A Room with a View* (1908) were widely reviewed. *Howards End* was a positive success; it tells the story of two families and a country house, Howards End. *A Passage to India* (1924) is Forster's best known work; it deals with British imperialism in India. Originally Forster thought of writing the novel during his first visit to India in 1912, but then set it aside and wrote it only after his second stay in India in 1921. The novel is a reflection of British-Indian relationships and the possibilities for friendship in an imperialist world. When Forster first thought of writing a novel about India during his first visit, he had a very different idea of it than the kind of book he eventually wrote. As he himself wrote in a letter to a friend: "When I began the book I thought of it as a little bridge of sympathy between the East and West, but this conception has had to go, my sense of truth forbids anything so comfortable."

*A Passage to India* tells of the trip taken by a young Englishwoman Adela Quested. She is coming to India to consider an engagement to a British official in India. Adela is open to the local people and seems not to be prejudiced. She befriends a local doctor, Dr Aziz, and his English friend, Cyril Fielding, the principal of an English college in the area, who is also liberal minded and open to being friends with Indians. Dr Aziz takes Adela and a group of Englishmen on a visit of the renowned Marabar caves (Forster's fictional version of the Barabar Hill caves, a complex of rock-cut caves). There in a moment of fear and confusion Adela believes that Aziz attacks her and she accuses him of attempting to rape her. At court, however, she finds the strength to admit that she was mistaken. Aziz is declared innocent but his reputation has suffered too much. Fielding, the college principal, was the only Englishman who believed in his innocence all along but their friendship has been irrevocably compromised anyway; the cultural and ethnic rift has become unbearable. Aziz turns completely against all Englishmen. Aziz and Fielding meet two years later and renew their friendship but as the closing passage symbolically implies, they can never really be friends as long as the English have power over India. As they take a last ride together before they know they must part for good, Aziz and Fielding discuss their opinions on the future of India and British presence there openly, even with a degree of humor and hyperbole. Their friendship is a temporary exception; true friendship between Indians and Englishmen is deferred until India is free.

Then [Aziz] shouted: "India shall be a nation! No foreigners of any sorts! Hindu and Moslem and Sikh and all shall be one! Hurrah! Hurrah for India! Hurrah! Hurrah!"

India a nation! What an apotheosis! (...) Fielding mocked again. And Aziz in an awful rage danced this way and that, not knowing what to do, and cried: "Down with the English anyhow. That's certain. Clear out, you fellows, double quick, I say. We may hate one another, but we hate you most. If I don't make you go, Ahmed will, Karim will, if it's fifty or five hundred years we shall get rid of you, yes, we shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea, and then"—he rode against him furiously—"and then," he concluded, half kissing him, "you and I shall be friends."

"Why can't we be friends now?" said the other, holding him affectionately. "It's what I want. It's what you want."

But the horses didn't want it—they swerved apart; the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single-file; the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they issued from the gap and saw Mau beneath: they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices, "No, not yet," and the sky said, "No, not there."

Adela comes because she wants to see "the real India," but what she expects is an Indian version of the kind of social life she knew in England. She is not prepared for how different it really is. What she experiences in the cave remains untold; at that moment there is a break in the narrative, and we don't even know if they were in the same cave. As Adela remembers the situation during the court trial, it seems most likely that she experienced a hallucination in the cave, that it was a moment of fear, there were strange echoes in the caves that challenged her sanity and made her feel unwell and deeply unsettled. All we as readers get to learn about Adela in the cave is what was on her mind before the incident took place: she experiences a moment of deep insight when she unexpectedly realizes that she doesn't love her fiancé and she unwittingly commits a social blunder by asking Aziz how many wives he has. There is really nothing that would suggest that Aziz would want to attack

Adela; as they enter the caves, they each think of their own worries—Aziz thinks about his role as a host of the English guests, and Adela thinks about the logistics of her wedding:

But as she toiled over a rock that resembled an inverted saucer she thought, “What about love?” The rock was nicked by a double row of footholds, and somehow the question was suggested by them. (...) She and Ronny—no, they didn’t love each other.

“Do I take you too fast?” inquired Aziz, for she had paused, a doubtful expression on her face. The discovery had come so suddenly that she felt like a mountaineer whose rope has broken. Not to love the man one’s going to marry! Not to find it out till this moment! Not even to have asked oneself the question until now! Something else to think out. Vexed rather than appalled, she stood still, her eyes on the sparkling rock. There was esteem and animal contact at dusk, but the emotion that linked them was absent. Ought she to break her engagement off? She was inclined to think not—it would cause so much trouble to others; besides, she wasn’t convinced that love is necessary to a successful union. If love is everything, few marriages would survive the honeymoon. “No, I’m all right, thanks,” she said, and, her emotions well under control, resumed the climb, though she felt a bit dashed.

“Are you married, Dr Aziz?” she asked, stopping again, and frowning.

“Yes, indeed, do come and see my wife”—for he felt it more artistic to have his wife alive for the moment. (...)

“And have you children?”

“Yes, indeed, three,” he replied in firmer tones.

“Are they a great pleasure to you?”

“Why, naturally, I adore them,” he laughed.

(...) [Adela thinks:] Probably this man had several wives—Mohammedans always insist on their full four, according to Mrs Turton. And, having no one else to speak to on that eternal rock, she gave rein to the subject of marriage and said in her honest, decent, inquisitive way: “Have you one wife or more than one?”

The question shocked the young man very much. It challenged a new conviction of his community, and new convictions are more sensitive than old. If she had said, “Do you worship one god or several?” he would not have objected. But to ask an educated Indian Moslem how many wives he has—appalling, hideous! He was in trouble how to conceal his confusion. “One, one in my own particular case,” he sputtered, and let go of her hand. Quite a number of caves were at the top of the track, and thinking “Damn the English even at their best” he plunged into one of them to recover his balance. She followed at her leisure, quite unconscious that she had said the wrong thing, and not seeing him she also went into a cave, thinking with half her mind “Sightseeing bores me” and wondering with the other half about marriage.

The book is made up of three parts, Mosque (to reflect Muslim India), Caves and Temple (to reflect Hindu India); each part corresponds to the three Indian seasons: cold weather, hot weather and rains. The novel gives no easy answers to English-Indian relations but rather portrays a variety of personal attitudes, and ends in a hope for a friendship in the future. Another pervasive theme is that of religion and mysticism; the title of the book is taken from a poem by Walt Whitman about a spiritual journey.

### **Joseph Conrad (1857-1924)**

Acclaimed as a Polish-English author, Conrad was actually born in what was then Russia. He was Polish but Berdichyv, where he was born and which today is a part of Ukraine, then belonged to the Russian Empire. Before it had been part of the Kingdom of Poland. The family's Polish name was Korzeniowski and they were strong Polish patriots, which led to their persecution and forced removal to northern Russia where Conrad's mother died when he was 8 years old, due to the harsh living conditions, and Conrad's father died only four years later. Conrad was then raised and supported by his uncle who sent him to study abroad but Conrad disliked school and became a sailor on French merchant ships. He sailed to the Caribbean and the West Indies and South America; when he returned to Europe, he was in debt and so became a sailor again in English merchant navy for many years. In between voyages he was based in England, he became a British citizen, he was married and had two sons. Apart from these voyages for a job, he also purposefully wished to visit Congo, which was then a "free state" but under the influence of the Belgians, and heavily exploited. His four-month stay there in 1890 was a crucial event in his life and left him shocked and traumatized; in his journal he wrote about the intrigues of the whites and the brutalities around him and at the same time realized that being there as an employer of the Belgian company he was in fact complicit in the exploitation. He suffered from nervous instability and generally poor health for most of his life.

In the 1890's he started to publish in English, a language which he started learning as late as in his twenties. Conrad is an early Modernist; his books are notable for their innovative narrative techniques, his fragmentation of chronology and perspectives. Some of his books were inspired by his sailing voyages: *The Nigger of "Narcissus"* (1897), *Lord Jim* (1900), or *Heart of Darkness* (1899). *Lord Jim* tells the story of a young sailor who at first has ideals about becoming the hero of adventures but when his ship sinks he flees without helping the other passengers; later he gets a job at a remote island in the South Seas where he becomes a leader of the native inhabitants. After his white adversaries attempt to overthrow him, Jim is killed by his former native friend and ally.

*Heart of Darkness* is a novella set in the Belgian Congo in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, based on Conrad's own experience in the country. It is a story within a story: the narrator, a man named Marlow, is traveling on a boat on the Thames, and he is telling a story to his fellow passengers. There is an outside narrator, a narrative voice that speaks of Marlow in the third person, and depicts him as he tells his story to the other passengers. Marlow was hired by a European company trading in ivory to become a steamboat pilot on the Congo River. When he arrives to the Congo, his ideals of European civilization in Africa are quickly shattered as he sees the effects of ruthless exploitation of the native people and their land. Marlow arrives to the Company's Central Station but finds out that the steamer he was supposed to operate has been wrecked. It takes him months to repair it. While he is stuck at Central Station he keeps hearing about the Company's employee Mr Kurtz, who is in charge of the Inner Station in the midst of the jungle and secures ivory for the Company. He is spoken of as a powerful man, successful in his ivory business, perhaps a threat to the chief of the Central Station, but there is rumor that he has taken ill. When the steamboat is repaired Marlow, the manager of the Central Station and a group of other agents travel on the river to the Inner Station to see what has happened to Kurtz and to bring ivory from him. They float through the jungle, at the constant danger of being attacked by the natives. In a dense fog they are indeed attacked and their African helmsman is killed but they proceed, arriving finally to



the Inner Station. The first man they meet there is not Kurtz but a Russian trader who tells them that Kurtz is not dead; he speaks with great reverence of Kurtz as a man who is so great that moral standards do not apply to him. When Marlow and the manager approach the Inner Station they realize that Kurtz has made himself a god to the natives; a tribe of native Africans works for him and worship him. His power over them is not only verbal, apparently he does not hesitate to use violence and kill anyone who might be disobedient or other natives who oppose his mad search for more and more ivory. Apparently he also has a native mistress. He is quite ill indeed; Marlow and the manager bring him on the steamboat but at night he escapes and crawls back to the native settlement. Marlow brings him back on board and they leave. Kurtz dies on the steamer. Marlow finds his notebook in which Kurtz wrote about the civilization of the natives but the essay ends with the exclamation: "Exterminate the brutes!" Kurtz's dying words are: "The horror! The horror!" Marlow eventually returns to Europe and manages to find Kurtz's cousin and also his fiancée; he realizes that they have a completely different image of Kurtz: for them he was a highly accomplished, civilized man of moral integrity and many talents. Kurtz's Intended, the fiancée, is still under his spell, still mourns his death, and Marlow doesn't have the strength to tell her what became of Kurtz in the Congo because, as he says, "it would have been too dark—too dark altogether." So he lies to her and tells her that Kurtz died with her name on his lips.

The book opens many issues, centrally, of course, the topic of European colonization and the exploitation of African people and resources by white men, the ruthless cruelty of the whites towards the natives. But the novella also explores the situation of the white civilized man alone in "wilderness" and among native people: is the European man able to uphold his civilized customs? What becomes of his integrity? Kurtz is a very special character. He is indeed a man of great talents and capacity and also a power over people. We see how even other white characters idolize him, like his cousin and his fiancée, or are simultaneously in awe of him and in disapproval, as the manager of the Central Station. Marlow himself as the narrator is by no means immune to Kurtz's spell, and at same time he is appalled by him. On a more general level, Conrad is also approaching the theme of literary interpretation and the connection between language and the experience of reality. As Marlow recounts the events of his stay in the Congo, he sometimes makes a general commentary. Here is one of the famous passages which move the novella definitely toward a Modernist, if not a postmodern mindset: an insight into the problematic, unstable connection between the signifier and the signified:

(...) that Kurtz whom at the time I did not see—you understand. He was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams....

He was silent for a while.

... No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone....

This impossibility of conveying the truth is also played out very concretely when Marlow lies to Kurtz's fiancée and cannot bring himself to tell her what happened.

The title of novella, *Heart of Darkness*, has several layers of meaning: it is a journey into the heart of the dark continent, Africa; it is also a journey into the dark recesses of human soul and European civilization. There are various motifs related to darkness, night, fog etc in the book. The title already suggests some of the impressions created by the story: sinister, bleak, even nihilistic. The moral appeal of the book, if one would like to think about it that way, would lie perhaps in this warning of the great frailty and fragility of human morality, as we gradually unveil the utter moral collapse of an initially great man. Kurtz' dying words, "The horror! The horror!" are perhaps his admission of the evils caused by white exploitation of the native Africans, or an insight into the deepest recesses of his soul, or perhaps a commentary on the human capacity for evil.

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the book became the subject of a heated academic debate because a Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe, criticized the book for its dehumanizing portrayal of the natives and argued that it was an example of white dominance and colonizing views of the native people. In postcolonial theory, *Heart of Darkness* is criticized because there are no black characters who would be depicted as human beings with a life of their own; in the book, the white characters see the Africans as brutes, devils, a mass of black bodies. They have no individuality, there is no understanding of their culture. The story doesn't show anything from their perspective. Likewise there is a feminist critique of the book; there are virtually no women, and even the few women, Kurtz's black mistress and his fiancée in London, are not full-bodied characters. Marlow comments when he first mentions Kurtz's fiancée that women "are out of it —should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse."

Here is an example of what Marlow sees when he first arrives at the Central Station. It gives us an idea of the suffering of the native people under white exploitation as they toil away at futile jobs for the Company (there is an unfinished and unused railway, there is a hole dug out apparently for no particular reason, there is a heap of broken drainage pipes) and slowly die of disease and exhaustion, but it also gives us an idea of the impersonal depiction of Africans that is so typical for the story.

My purpose was to stroll into the shade for a moment; but no sooner within than it seemed to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno. The rapids were near, and an uninterrupted, uniform, headlong, rushing noise filled the mournful stillness of the grove, where not a breath stirred, not a leaf moved, with a mysterious sound -- as though the tearing pace of the launched earth had suddenly become audible.

Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.

They were dying slowly -- it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now -- nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. These moribund shapes were free as air -- and nearly as thin. I began to distinguish the gleam of the eyes under the trees. Then, glancing down, I saw a face near my hand. The black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree, and slowly the eyelids rose and the sunken eyes looked up at me, enormous and vacant, a



kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs, which died out slowly. The man seemed young -- almost a boy -- but you know with them it's hard to tell.

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