

## British Masterpiece

# from Heart of Darkness

Novel by Joseph Conrad



Joseph Conrad  
1857–1924



**READING 5A** Analyze how complex plot structures and devices function and advance the action in a work of fiction.

**BACKGROUND** When he set foot in Britain for the first time in 1878, the 20-year-old Polish immigrant Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski knew only a few words of English. Less than two decades later, he was writing books in English as Joseph Conrad, drawing on his seafaring experiences in the British merchant navy for the settings and themes of his fiction. First published in 1902, *Heart of Darkness* is a short novel based on Conrad's traumatic stint as a steamboat captain in the Congo, then a Belgian colony notorious for exploiting native Africans. Most of the novel is narrated by Charlie Marlow, a steamboat captain for a European company engaged in the African ivory trade. On the long, difficult journey up the Congo River to the company's Inner Station, Marlow is appalled by what he sees of colonial Africa. Several Europeans join Marlow on the trip, including a harsh, incompetent company manager and a group of prospective ivory traders, whom Marlow ironically calls "pilgrims." Most of the Europeans view the natives fearfully or with contempt, but Marlow hopes for better from Kurtz, a legendary figure who successfully runs the Inner Station and is reputed to be an educated man of great charisma.

**LITERARY ANALYSIS** In the excerpt that follows, the details of the **setting** describe the time and place and contribute to the overall **mood** of the passage. In turn, the mood mirrors the mental state of the characters. The "choking, warm, [and] stifling" fog, which keeps the steamboat immobile; the jungle with its dense "river-side bushes" that conceal the people with "eyes that have seen"; and "unexpected, wild, and violent" cries all contribute to a mood of uncertainty and fear, which is exactly what the characters are feeling.

**WRITE** Using the excerpt as a model, write a scene in which the setting reflects the emotional frame of mind of a character or characters in an uncertain situation. Make sure to choose a setting that is different than the one Conrad describes.

“‘It is very serious,’ said the manager’s voice behind me; ‘I would be desolated if anything should happen to Mr. Kurtz before we came up.’ I looked at him, and had not the slightest doubt that he was sincere. He was just the kind of man who would wish to preserve appearances. That was his restraint. But when he muttered something about going on at once, I did not even take the trouble to answer him. I knew, and he knew, that it was impossible. Were we to let go our hold of the



bottom, we would be absolutely in the air—in space. We wouldn't be able to tell where we were going to—whether up or down stream, or across—till we fetched against one bank or the other,—and then we wouldn't know at first which it was. Of course I made no move. I had no mind for a smash-up. You couldn't imagine a more deadly place for a shipwreck. Whether drowned at once or not, we were sure to perish speedily in one way or another. 'I authorize you to take all the risks,' he said, after a short silence. 'I refuse to take any,' I said, shortly; which was just the answer he expected, though its tone might have surprised him. 'Well, I must defer to your judgment. You are captain,' he said, with marked civility. I turned my shoulder to him in sign of my appreciation, and looked into the fog. How long would it last? It was the most hopeless look-out. The approach to this Kurtz grabbing for ivory in the wretched bush was beset by as many dangers as though he had been an enchanted princess sleeping in a fabulous castle. 'Will they attack, do you think?' asked the manager, in a confidential tone.

"I did not think they would attack, for several obvious reasons. The thick fog was one. If they left the bank in their canoes they would get lost in it, as we would be if we attempted to move. Still, I had also judged the jungle of both banks quite impenetrable—and yet eyes were in it, eyes that had seen us. The river-side bushes were certainly very thick; but the undergrowth behind was evidently penetrable. However, during the short lift I had seen no canoes anywhere in the reach—certainly not abreast of the steamer. But what made the idea of attack inconceivable to me was the nature of the noise—of the cries we had heard. They had not the fierce character boding of immediate hostile intention. Unexpected, wild, and violent as they had been, they had given me an irresistible impression of sorrow. The glimpse of the steamboat had for some reason filled those savages with unrestrained grief. The danger, if any, I expounded, was from our proximity to a great human passion let loose. Even extreme grief may ultimately vent itself in violence—but more generally takes the form of apathy. . . .

"You should have seen the pilgrims stare! They had no heart to grin, or even to revile me: but I believe they thought me gone mad—with fright, maybe. I delivered a regular lecture. My dear boys, it was no good bothering. Keep a lookout? Well, you may guess I watched the fog for signs of lifting as a cat watches a mouse; but for anything else our eyes were of no more use to us than if we had been buried miles deep in a heap of cotton-wool. It felt like it, too—choking, warm, stifling. Besides, all I said, though it sounded extravagant, was absolutely true to fact. What we afterwards alluded to as an attack was really an attempt to repulse. The action was very far from being aggressive—it was not even defensive, in the usual sense: it was undertaken under the stress of desperation, and its essence was purely protective."