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Joseph Conrad — Heart of Darkness

Introduction

Heart of Darkness is one of the most important works of modern English literature. Published in 1899, the novella explores themes such as imperialism, human cruelty, moral darkness, and the hidden evil within human nature. Conrad presents a powerful criticism of European colonial rule in Africa, especially in the Congo region, through a deeply symbolic and psychological narrative.

Plot Summary

The story begins on a ship called the Nellie, anchored on the River Thames in England. The narrator listens to Marlow, a sailor, who tells his past journey into the African interior while working for a Belgian trading company.

Marlow travels to the Congo as a steamboat captain. During his journey, he witnesses brutality, exploitation, slavery, and suffering caused by European colonizers who claim to bring “civilization” but actually pursue greed and power.

He becomes curious about a mysterious and highly successful ivory agent named Kurtz, who lives deep inside the jungle.

When Marlow finally meets Kurtz, he discovers that Kurtz has become morally corrupted and almost worshipped like a god by the local people. Isolated from society, Kurtz has surrendered to madness, violence, and absolute power.

As Kurtz falls ill and is taken back by steamboat, his final words are:

“The horror! The horror!”

These words symbolize his realization of the evil within himself and within colonialism.

After Kurtz’s death, Marlow returns to Europe and meets Kurtz’s fiancée. Instead of telling the painful truth, he lies to protect her feelings, showing the contrast between illusion and reality.

Major Themes

1. Criticism of Imperialism

Conrad exposes the hypocrisy and cruelty of European imperialism.

Colonizers claim to spread civilization but actually bring violence, exploitation, and destruction.

2. Darkness Within Human Nature

The “darkness” in the title is not only the African jungle but also the moral darkness inside human beings.

Kurtz represents what happens when a person gains unlimited power without moral control.

3. Civilization vs. Savagery

The novella questions the idea that Europeans are civilized and Africans are savage.

Conrad suggests that true savagery exists in the human heart, not in any race or place.

4. Illusion and Truth

European society lives in comfortable illusions, while the reality of colonialism is brutal and cruel.

Marlow’s final lie shows how society prefers pleasant lies over painful truth.