Heart of Darkness Background Information

Requires background information – you can’t just jump in

Published in installments in 1899

Setting:
- 1890 (so contemporary fiction for its time)
- Begins near London on the Thames River
- Brief portion in Brussels, Belgium
- Mostly in the Congo, Africa

1890s in Africa → colonization
Western European nations were “carving up” Africa
King Leopold of Belgium began positioning to acquire, actually OWN Congo
By 1885: he owned the Congo… personally.

Why colonize Africa?
- Wealth
- Resources (diamonds, gold, metals, slave trade, ivory, rubber)

12-13 years: Leopold extracted resources *brutally* for personal use (estimated 2-20M Congolese killed…!), maintaining a heavy-handed, brutal rule of the country from Belgium by decree

1908: Leopold pressured politically and “sold” Congo to Belgium
Became Democratic Republic of Congo in 1960

The novel could be read politically…

Like WH, a frame story…

External narrator (unnamed in HoD; Lockwood in WH) → Internal narrator (Marlow in HoD; Nelly in WH) → Brief interruption from external narrator; Marlow quickly resumes
The narrative effect of a frame story creates a haze; in fact, there is a haze motif in the book.

Conrad in Impressionist literary movement, which was a reaction against Realism.
Impressionists include Monet, Manet, Renoir, Degas
Impressionist pieces are blurry; best viewed from afar

Realist paints tree to canvas
Impressionist paints tree to mind to canvas

Writing is about a sense impression – often requires more of us as readers
(Ex.: guy being shot in the book – takes a while to see it)

Impressionism is about creating an atmosphere

Fundamental conflicts
1. passion/instinct vs. reason
2. savagery vs. civility (noble savage)
3. fascination vs. repulsion
4. imperialist vs. indigenous

Big Ideas
1. Question of human nature – are we inherently good, or evil at the core?
2. What drives our desire for power?
3. Cost of knowledge

Key motifs
Light and dark
Futility and/or absurdity
Archetypal quest

Thames→Brussels→4 locations in Congo
Mouth of the Congo
Outer Station
Central Station
Inner Station (the heart of darkness)

Be patient with opening of novel

When you hear “You might have heard I took a turn as a freshwater sailor…”, Marlow’s story begins.