

## CILIPS COVID-19 Book Reviews – Heart of Darkness

**Reviewer name:** David Kenvyn

**Book title:** Heart of Darkness

**Author name:** Joseph Conrad

**Genre:** Literary Fiction

**Overall Rating:** Excellent

**Brief summary:** Joseph Conrad wrote “Heart of Darkness” at the end of the nineteenth century. One of the things that we have to be careful about when reading the book now is that we do not project our knowledge of what happened back to the time when a book was written. In the case of “Heart of Darkness” we do not have to worry about this. Conrad had been to the Congo. He knew about, and describes, the atrocities that King Leopold II of Belgium was inflicting on his personal colony. One of the scenes that Conrad describes is Kurtz’ enclosure with head displayed on poles along the palisade. Conrad was writing before the 1904 International Commission of Inquiry into the rule of King Leopold II in the Congo. It may be that Conrad toned things down to make them believable. The report uncovered evidence, from eye-witnesses, of mutilations and other atrocities, as well as outright murder and massacre. The Commission led to King Leopold II being deprived of his personal colony, which was handed over to the Belgian state. Conrad is merciless in his description of King Leopold’s officials. Their motivation is simple. It is to extract as much money from the country for their personal gain as possible. What they were after was “white gold” – ivory. Rubber and diamonds came later. The reason why Kurtz is held in such awe by his fellow colonialists is that he had been able to get his hands on more ivory than all the rest of them put together. To describe the white colonialists that we meet as avaricious and grasping does not begin to describe their corruption. Marlow is telling the narrator about what happened and is contemplating “the horror! The horror!”. The one sympathetic white character is the young Russian who is looking after the sick Kurtz, despite being robbed and threatened by his hero. This is where the problem comes. There are no black characters. There are black people, but they are there as a sort of threat. There is a magnificent description of a black woman, presumably Kurtz’ mistress, on the banks of the river. There is an attack in which a black crewman is killed by a spear. The black crew of the steamer are referred to as cannibals, and it is stated that they ate human flesh. This may or may not be true. There have certainly been allegations of cannibalism in the Congo in the recent wars there. The point, however, is that only one black character actually says anything at all in this story and that is “Mistah Kurtz – he dead.” Black people are there on the periphery and as a threat. That, of course, is how they were seen. – a threat. Conrad was reflecting European attitudes of the time. Africa itself is also presented as a threat. The rainforest looms over everything. It is implacable. It is dangerous. It is there, and when the white men have gone, it will still be there. That is how it is presented. The black people are seen as an adjunct to the forest, a part of it. It is difficult to know whether Conrad was actually racist in his view of Africa. The white men he depicts certainly are. They are racist because they have come to exploit. They are racist because they feel threatened. They are racist to the core of their being. This is an uncomfortable book to read. I first read this book on the plane to Arusha in Tanzania, where I was taking part in an International Solidarity Conference organised by the African National Congress. It was clear to me then that the Heart of Darkness was colonialist Europe. Reading this book during the Coronavirus crisis has not changed my mind.

**What you liked:** It is a masterpiece.

**Anything you didn't like:** That the Africans are there in the background as something deeply menacing.

**Who should read this book?:** Anyone who wants to learn about colonial attitudes towards Africa and the racism that resulted from them.