Heart of Darkness (Everyman's Library) by Joseph Conrad

Dark Masterpiece

Introduction by Verlyn Klinkenborg

Features:

"Heart of Darkness" is Joseph Conrad's most famous and arguably best work - not only one of the greatest short works ever but simply one of the greatest period. At once vividly realistic and profoundly symbolic, it on the one hand did much to expose the Belgian Congo's atrocities and on the other is a brilliant allegory whose precise meaning is still hotly debated over a century later. One would be very hard-pressed to find a text of such length with so many and various interpretations - nay, a text of any length; Shakespeare and a few other mainstays aside, hardly any other English language text has proven so malleable. It has been seen through lenses ranging from historical to psychoanalytic to seemingly every thing between them - not least including biographical, as the scariest thing about the story is just how closely it is based on Conrad's experience. "Heart" is in many ways the culmination of early Conrad, which featured, among other focuses, a strong sea element and an emphasis on European colonialism in Africa and elsewhere. It fuses both into a dark masterpiece that works on many levels. Most simply and obviously, it can be appreciated as a sort of adventure story involving exploration and human endurance pushed to its limit; it has some fine suspense in this sense. Far more importantly, it is an unflinching look into the darkness of humanity's heart - a dramatization of just how low human nature can sink. This is most overt in the depiction of brutal inhumanity toward fellow human beings, but multiple symbolic layers make it all the more disturbing. Conrad shows that, for all civilization's supposed progress, the bestial instincts underlying humanity are only repressed - and quite weakly at that. It takes only an ostensibly primitive setting to bring them out, and when unleashed they can be at least as vicious as any wild animal's and worse in being malicious. The speaker Marlow's own harsh experience suggests all this, but it comes across most forcefully in the legendary character Kurtz. Like many
ambitious but unethical Europeans of the era, Kurtz had no problem exploiting those in the Congo for personal gain, but the shocking conditions and enforced brutality eventually wear him down to the point where he snaps. It is debatable whether his days end in madness or some extreme guilt/shock combination, but his immortal final words - "The horror! The horror!" - sum up the whole story and all it symbolizes. The realization of just how bad things are hits Marlow so hard that he cannot bring himself to tell Kurtz's widow the truth, letting her think that his last words were her name, though he was so far gone that he had no time to even think of such things. As his final comment says, "It would have been too dark--too dark altogether..." Much the same may be said of the story itself, so realistically unflattering is its humanity depiction, which is a large part of the reason it is a masterwork. There are many others, not least Conrad's hauntingly beautiful and complex prose. Much of his reputation as a stylist comes from this, and it is simply incredible that he was not a native English speaker.

These factors among many others made "Heart" a standard of English curricula for decades, and its popularity shows no sign of lessening. However, it has been the focus of attention for another reason in the last few decades - racist accusations stemming from African writer Chinua Achebe's famous essay. Conrad was certainly prejudiced and ethnocentric, if not necessarily racist in today's sense, which is reflected in "Heart" and most of his other work. That said, for what it is worth, he was no more so than the average writer - much less the average person - of his day. Indeed, his experience as a Polish, initially non-English speaking outsider on ships around the world and in England gave him more empathy for those outside mainstream Western culture than nearly anyone else in it could have had. One can even argue that it is perverse to pick on "Heart" when racist overtones can be found in nearly every work from the Victorian era - nay, nearly everything right up until the last few decades - since it shows some empathy for Africans, is generally seen as anti-colonialist, and eventually helped lead to reform. Many also say that such a stance misses the story's larger point, racist or not. Yet there is much to Achebe's reading, and all serious fans should read it and make their own decision. Many editions include it, but all should seek it out.

"Heart" is one of the most anthologized works in English, available in many collections of both Conrad and general literature. It is possible to get it alone or with almost any number of other works by Conrad and others along with widely varying amounts of supplemental material. Cost of course varies along with this. Readers must decide what fits their needs, but anyone wanting an inexpensive "Heart" need look no further than this.

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