

# Marlow and Human Limitations

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## Marlow and Human Limitations

In Heart of Darkness Marlow takes us on a journey into the heart of darkest Africa, at a time when explorers and treasure seekers were venturing up the Congo River in search of the riches of ivory. What separates Marlow's tale from a mere adventure story, however, are the uncomfortable truths about civilization and humanity that [Marlow](#) uncovers during his voyage. One of the inescapable truths he runs up against concerns the basic [limitations](#) of the human species. While humans may become so utterly confident in our civilization's prowess, and sometimes even believe we can act like gods, the truth is that we are still human and are bound by the basic human limitations that are inherent to our world and species. Although in a rush of confidence we humans may believe ourselves to be immortal, omnipotent, and omniscient, Marlow realizes the reality is that humans are limited by death, have weaknesses, and sometimes must contend with knowing less than the absolute truth. It is Marlow's contending with human limitation and weakness that provides a major focus for Heart of Darkness.

In the following passage, Marlow states his attitude towards the human limitations implied by the act of lying. In order to reach an understanding of the significance of [lies](#) to Marlow

it is important to note how he finds in lies “a taint of death”:

“You know I hate, detest, and can’t bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appals me. There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies,—which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world—what I want to forget”[1]

This quote shows how the inevitability of never knowing the absolute t...

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...art of his own self-knowledge. But he deliberately lies, submerging himself in the detested taint of death and mortality, for the greater protection of civilization and humanity from the subversiveness of naked truth. Marlow comes to the realization that he must live and sometimes bathe in the appalling waters of human limitations in order not to disrupt the whole human world.

[1] Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, London, Penguin, 1995, 49-50.

[2] Conrad, 101.

[3] Conrad, 92.

[4] Conrad, 16.

[5] Conrad, 20.

[6] Conrad, 60.

[7] Conrad, 58.

[8] Conrad, 62.

[9] Conrad, 106.

[10] Conrad, 62-63.

[11] Conrad, 60.

[12] Conrad, 63.

[13] Conrad, 28.

[14] Conrad, 20.

[15] Conrad, 20.

[16] Conrad, 28.

[17] Conrad, 28.

[18] Conrad, 115.

[19] Conrad, 115.

[20] Conrad, 80.

[21] Conrad, 114.

[22] Conrad, 104.

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