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Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Heart of Darkness

by Joseph Conrad

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Heart of Darkness

Introduction

Martin Tucker, a literary critic, points out that *Heart of Darkness* can be read on three levels:

1. As a mystery story, a story of the mystery of character (especially the true character of Kurtz).
2. As an adventure story, the story of an African journey which the narrator, Marlow, takes in his quest to meet the legendary Kurtz.
3. Above all, the record of a descent into the center, into the darkness at the core of existence.

What precisely this third level of reading means will be a major focus of this unit.

To understand Conrad, we need to look at some of the traditional symbols he uses.

1. A journey. In literature, physical journeys are often used to represent intellectual, emotional, or spiritual searches.
2. The jungle. While the term “jungle” is often used in everyday speech to represent the world of business, commerce, or daily life itself, in a larger sense, “jungle” also represents that which is unknown because it is deep, dark, and difficult to penetrate. In this regard, critics suggest that in this story the “jungle” symbolizes truth and/or reality. In this story, the “heart of darkness” is found deep in the jungle.
3. Darkness and the color black. Traditionally, these symbolize the unknown, the difficult to penetrate, the foreboding, and, most frequently, evil.
4. Light and the color white. Traditionally, these symbolize that which is plainly seen or goodness, the opposite of evil. They also can represent, however, that which is hollow, phony, or spiritually void of substance. (Consider the Biblical phrase that occurs in the book, “the whited sepulchre.” (Pg. 14) In the Bible, the word “pale” is also used to suggest or represent death. When this word appears toward the end of the novel to describe Kurtz’s fiancée, its interpretation is of importance.

Heart of Darkness

Objectives

By the end of the unit, the student will be able to:

1. recall the literal events in this story and give an account of Marlow's physical journey.
2. identify the major symbols in this story and give a symbolic interpretation for Marlow's journey.
3. write a one-page paper stating how the following comment does or does not apply to this novel: Traditionally, journeys result in the enlightenment of the hero-traveler; the hero learns something about the world, the nature of man or God, the nature of good and evil, or himself.
4. provide ample details from the novel to support the following thesis: The novel *Heart of Darkness* reflects Conrad's anger at the barbarities of imperialistic greed.
5. discuss the following themes that appear in the novel and be prepared to write an essay on how they are developed in the story:
 - a. Man acts with inhumanity toward his fellow man.
 - b. Man's nature is dualistic in that it has both a dark and light side; that is, man's nature contains the potential for good and evil.
 - c. To confront the dark side of oneself may lead to self-knowledge, but it can also lead to disastrous consequences.
 - d. Those who claim to be bringing light and enlightenment to Africa wound up destroying the continent.
6. prove the following thesis: In the way he frames his story, Conrad is saying that the practical, materialistic person cannot understand or appreciate the spiritual search of the non-materialistic person.
7. discuss the following comment: A work of art is said to have a universal significance. How does Conrad demonstrate the universality of his story?
8. state the ways in which this novel is ambiguous. Ambiguity rather than definitiveness is prized by most critics and writers. Begin with the phrase "heart of darkness", but do not limit yourself to that one phrase.
9. identify and find examples of the following literary terms:
 - simile
 - metaphor
 - symbolism
 - sarcasm
 - pun
 - personification
 - irony

Heart of Darkness

Notes

We hope it is clear that the writer of this study guide does not claim to have the last word on this novel. Further, we doubt that any critic does. Therefore, answers or comments should be viewed as tentative and open to argument. Conrad uses the term “nigger” at various times throughout the book. It should be understood that, while the word did have the same vile connotations then as now, its usage was not condemned.

All references come from the Prestwick House Touchstone edition of *Heart of Darkness*, copyright 2004.

Heart of Darkness

Terms and Definitions

Irony - a subtle, sometimes humorous perception of inconsistency in which the significance of a statement or event is changed by its content. For example: the firehouse burned down.

- *Dramatic irony* - the audience knows more about a character's situation than the character does, foreseeing an outcome contrary from the character's expectations. The character's statements have one meaning for the character and a different meaning to the reader, who knows more than the character.
- *Structural irony* - a naïve hero whose view of the world differs from the author's and reader's. Structural irony flatters the reader's intelligence at the expense of the hero.
- *Verbal irony* - a discrepancy between what is said and what is really meant; sarcasm. Example: calling a stupid man smart.

Metaphor - a comparison of two things that are basically dissimilar but are brought together in order to create a sharp image. Example: The moon, a haunting lantern, shone through the clouds.

Personification - a figure of speech in which an object or animal is given human characteristics. Example: The pig laughed all the way to the barn.

Pun - an expression that achieves emphasis or humor by utilizing

- two distinct meanings for the same word. Example: play(fun)/play(on stage)
- two similar sounding words. Example: close/clothes

Sarcasm - the use of harsh words to deride someone.

Simile - a comparison between two different things using either *like* or *as*. Example: I am as hungry as a horse.

Symbol - an object, person, or place that has a meaning in itself and that also stands for something larger than itself, usually an idea or concept; some concrete thing which represents an abstraction. Example: The sea could be symbolic for "the unknown;" since the sea is something which is physical and can be seen by the reader, but has elements which can not be understood, it can be used *symbolically* to stand for the abstraction of "mystery," "obscurity," or "the unknown."

Heart of Darkness

Questions for Essay or Discussion

1. Discuss the significance of the title of this novel. State how you know the title is significant, and identify at least three things that the phrase “*heart of darkness*” may mean.
2. A number of times, the river (the Congo) is described as a snake. In the Bible, the snake is an obvious symbol. Can you suggest any relationship between these two symbols?
3. Conrad goes to some lengths to avoid using geographic place names. For example, although the reader knows he is referring to London, Brussels, Africa, and the Congo River, Conrad rarely mentions places specifically. Why do you suppose he avoids using their names?
4. Why do you suppose Conrad uses a story-within-a-story framework? What might Conrad have been after by having Marlow tell his story to four friends rather than just having him tell the story directly?
5. Write a character profile for the following people. Try to describe their behavior, motives, ideals, and personalities.
 - a. the manager
 - b. Kurtz
 - c. Marlow
6. The novel begins and ends on a boat tied up in the Thames River. Identify the significance of the last line in the novel.
7. Given his distaste for lies, are you surprised when Marlow lies to Kurtz’s fiancée? Why or why not? In the same situation, what would you have done?
8. Identify what the following people or items symbolize in the novel:
 - a. the color white
 - b. darkness, blackness
 - c. Kurtz
 - d. Marlow’s four friends on the *Nellie*
 - e. the jungle, the wilderness
 - f. the journey
9. Ambiguity means a word that has more than one meaning, none of which is exactly clear. List at least three different ways the word “heart” is used in this novel. Write a short paragraph on each.

10. Point out at least five examples that demonstrate that this novel attacks imperialistic greed.
11. Kurtz, we find out, has a dark, savage side and a good, moral side. Make an argument for the position that Conrad believes, given the right conditions, Kurtz could represent all of us.
12. Kurtz's conclusion about life is in his last words, "The horror! The horror!" (Pg. 66) To what extent do you think Marlow shares Kurtz's conclusion?
13. Consider the following comment in relation to Kurtz: To confront the dark side of oneself may lead to self-knowledge, but it can also have disastrous consequences. How appropriate do you think it is?
14. Prove the following statement, and include discussions of the oil sketch done by Kurtz: Those who claimed to be bringing light and enlightenment to Africa wound up destroying the continent.
15. Explain the significance of the names of the company's stations: Outer, Central, and Inner. Relate these names to the development of the story.

Heart of Darkness

Test

Multiple Choice

1. In addition to Marlow and the story's narrator, the three people on the deck of the *Nellie* are
 - A. a company director, a poet, and an editor.
 - B. a company director, a lawyer, and an editor.
 - C. a company director, a lawyer, and an accountant.
 - D. a lawyer, an accountant, and an actor.
 - E. an accountant, an actor, and a designer.
2. The Congo River is referred to as
 - A. a cruel tyrant.
 - B. a bird in flight.
 - C. an unforgiving lover.
 - D. a snake.
 - E. a mistress.
3. Marlow's predecessor, Fresleven, dies in Africa
 - A. of a tropical disease.
 - B. from a gunshot by a crazed manager.
 - C. in the arms of another man's wife.
 - D. by his own hand.
 - E. from a spear stuck in his back.
4. The company doctor is in the habit of
 - A. drinking his lunch.
 - B. falling asleep during the examination.
 - C. missing appointments.
 - D. measuring the heads of employees going to Africa.
 - E. losing medical records.
5. One aspect of Conrad's style is that he
 - A. omits all details.
 - B. cites the details and lets an inner meaning reveal itself.
 - C. has his characters speak in short, rapid dialogue.
 - D. uses as many adjectives and adverbs as possible.
 - E. never uses sentence fragments.

6. Marlow suggests that the agents whom he describes as looking like pilgrims
 - A. all carry long staves.
 - B. appear to worship the word "ivory."
 - C. are all dressed in white cloaks.
 - D. all wear white cone-shaped hats.
 - E. Both A and B

7. On a number of occasions, Marlow describes his travels in Africa as
 - A. a wonderful adventure.
 - B. a nightmare.
 - C. a lesson in politics.
 - D. an awakening.
 - E. Both C and D

8. Marlow realizes quite early after his arrival that
 - A. the natives are treated very cruelly.
 - B. the whole business operation is very inefficient and wasteful.
 - C. it is greed that motivates the company and its employees.
 - D. Both A and B
 - E. A, B, and C

9. Upon arriving at the Central Station, why does Marlow have to wait months before traveling to the Inner Station?
 - A. The station manager has hit some rocks and put a hole in his boat.
 - B. The station manager refuses to get him a crew and fuel.
 - C. The station manager says it is not safe for anyone to go into the interior.
 - D. The dry season makes it impossible to go up river until after the rains.
 - E. The rainy season creates rapids that are impossible to navigate.

10. The oil painting done by Kurtz shows
 - A. ten starving natives guided by an exceptionally large white man.
 - B. a burning forest in the background with a white man on a balcony.
 - C. a blindfolded woman with a sinister look on her face carrying a torch.
 - D. a huge, snarling dog guarding a small, meatless bone.
 - E. a canoe with a hole in it, heading over a waterfall.

11. Both Kurtz and Marlow are disliked by the young agent (the brickmaker) because he sees both of them as
 - A. exploiters of Africa.
 - B. part of the new gang of virtue.
 - C. sailors first and company men second.
 - D. corrupt Europeans.
 - E. religious fanatics.

12. The leader of the Eldorado Expedition is
 - A. a sworn enemy of Kurtz.
 - B. a talkative man and great storyteller.
 - C. the father of Kurtz's fiancée.
 - D. the station manager's uncle.
 - E. a former Catholic priest who is now a Protestant missionary.

13. It is important for a ship to get through to Kurtz as soon as possible because
 - A. he has not received any supplies in a very long time.
 - B. he is surrounded by enemy rebels.
 - C. a rival company is trying to force him out so they could get the business.
 - D. his lease on the land has to be renewed.
 - E. the French are going to blockade the river with a gunboat.

14. After they finally get under way, Marlow is excited about getting to Kurtz because
 - A. Marlow sees himself as Kurtz's savior.
 - B. he has heard so much about how extraordinary Kurtz is.
 - C. he wishes to take over Kurtz's position.
 - D. he will fulfill his obligation to the company, and then he can go home.
 - E. it is revealed that he plans to kill Kurtz.

15. In *Heart of Darkness*, the darkness stands for
 - A. the jungle.
 - B. the unknown.
 - C. the soul/nature of man.
 - D. Both A and B
 - E. A, B, and C

16. What does Marlow think keeps the starving cannibal crew from attacking himself, the manager, and the agents?
 - A. Fear of retribution from the army.
 - B. The unhealthy appearance of the agents.
 - C. A restraint that involves a code of honor.
 - D. A belief that the white man is a god.
 - E. Both A and B

17. Kurtz's last words are
 - A. the name of his intended.
 - B. not clearly heard by Marlow.
 - C. "God, what a waste."
 - D. "The horror! The horror!"
 - E. "Et tu, Marlow?"

18. Marlow says that it is the silence and solitude of the deep jungle that
 - A. brings him to God.
 - B. is the only thing that impresses the manager.
 - C. covers up the many sins of the white man.
 - D. brings out the dark, savage nature of Kurtz.
 - E. brings peace to the world.

19. Kurtz is used to symbolize
 - A. all that is savage in man.
 - B. all that is noble and good in man.
 - C. the corrupt imperialist.
 - D. the greedy, materialistic person.
 - E. Western man.

20. In reading Kurtz's report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, Marlow is surprised by
 - A. the savage postscript .
 - B. the noble sentiments expressed.
 - C. the trickery and deceit that are involved.
 - D. the ungrammatical sentences and flaws in logic.
 - E. the way religion is used to exploit Africa.

21. Marlow calls the Russian dressed in patched clothing
 - A. a harlequin.
 - B. a pest.
 - C. a new kind of man of the world.
 - D. a coward.
 - E. a tyrant.

22. Marlow learns from the Russian that
 - A. Kurtz is adored by the natives.
 - B. Kurtz orders the native attack on their boat.
 - C. Kurtz plans to flee the ship.
 - D. Kurtz has hidden a large supply of weapons and explosives.
 - E. Both A and B

23. Marlow's phrase to describe Kurtz, "hollow at the core," is used to suggest that Kurtz
 - A. has gone mad.
 - B. has no strong beliefs in anything.
 - C. is a complete phony.
 - D. is not a man who can be depended upon.
 - E. is a coward in the end.

24. By the end of the story, the manager
 - A. admires both Kurtz and Marlow.
 - B. dislikes both Kurtz and Marlow.
 - C. admires Kurtz but dislikes Marlow.
 - D. dislikes Kurtz but admires Marlow.
 - E. None of the above

25. Marlow lies to Kurtz's Intended because
 - A. lying has become second nature to him.
 - B. he knows she suspects Kurtz was in love with a native woman.
 - C. he fails to bring the letter Kurtz wants her to have.
 - D. he does not wish to hurt her.
 - E. Both A and C

Heart of Darkness

Essay Questions (Answer any two)

1. Critics describe Marlow's journey as the mythic journey which results in self-realization. In that regard, Martin Tucker says, "Marlow's greatest moment comes at the end of the story, when, knowing the truth, he does not state it to Kurtz's fiancée. He chooses to allow her to continue to live in a world of sunny illusion, a world from which he has now been cast out." Describe Marlow's journey, and indicate what he has learned.
2. By citing comments and incidents from the story, prove the following thesis: Conrad believes that materialistic people cannot understand or appreciate the spiritual journey of the non-materialistic.
3. Cite at least four examples from the story that demonstrate that a major theme in this novel is man's inhumanity to man.
4. The novel begins and ends on the Thames River. In the last sentence of the novel, the narrator says: "The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness." (Pg. 72) In terms of all that has preceded it, what is the significance of this last sentence?

Heart of Darkness

Answer Key

- | | | | | |
|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. C | 6. E | 11. B | 16. C | 21. A |
| 2. D | 7. B | 12. D | 17. D | 22. E |
| 3. E | 8. E | 13. A | 18. D | 23. B |
| 4. D | 9. A | 14. B | 19. E | 24. B |
| 5. B | 10. C | 15. E | 20. A | 25. D |

Heart of Darkness

Study Guide Teacher's Copy

Chapter One

Vocabulary

abomination – something arousing disgust
alacrity – haste
alienist – psychiatrist
apprehend – understand
ascetic – morally severe, strict
august – grand
bights – loops
declivity – descending
divine – guess, infer
flood – incoming tide
immutability – constancy, changelessness
inscrutable – mysterious, unknowable
insidious – treacherous, seductively harmful
insipid – dull
interminable – unending
lugubrious – gloomy
moribund – deathly
nicety – precision
ominous – grimly foreboding
prevaricator – liar
rapacious – greedy
recrudescence – return, renewal
sententiously – in a terse, proverb-quoting manner
sepulcher – tomb
skulking – lurking
somnambulist – sleepwalker
trenchant – sharp
whited sepulcher – hypocrite
worsted – smooth wool fabric
yawl – type of sailing ship

1. What in the second paragraph sets the mood for the story? How would you describe the mood?

The air is dark, mournful, gloomy, brooding, motionless. No distinction exists between the sky and the sea. A key word would be “interminable,” a symbolic reference to the unending journey about to take place. (Pg. 9) The mood is dark and somber.

2. Who is on the deck of the *Nellie*, and where is the *Nellie*?

*On the deck are the Director of Companies, a lawyer, an accountant, Marlow, and the story’s first narrator. The *Nellie* is tied up at the dock in the Thames River, near London.*

3. What do the occupations of the director, the lawyer, and the accountant suggest about them?

They are practical men concerned with the realities, accounts, and figures of business.

4. What two literary terms are used in the phrase on page 11 referring to the sailor: “...the sea itself...is the mistress of his existence and as inscrutable as Destiny.”?

Conrad compares the sea’s mystery to the future, a simile, and claims it is a mistress to a seaman away from home, secure with another, which is a metaphor.

5. How is Marlow described in this chapter?

He has “sunken cheeks, a yellow complexion, a straight back, an ascetic aspect, and, with his arms dropped, the palms of hands outwards, resembled an idol.” (Pgs. 9 - 10)

6. The narrator observes, “Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch...” (Pg. 10) What are the sword and the torch, and what do they have to do with a story about Africa?

The sword represents military power. The torch stands for enlightenment, knowledge, and religion. In the beginning, the torch was what the Western powers set out to bring to Africa, but greed, cruelty, and corruption overpowered everything else.

7. Marlow makes some observations about the Roman conquest of Britain. How do you suppose these observations relate to this novel's main topic, Africa?

Conquest, he says, "mostly means the taking it [land] away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves"; examining these concepts reveals them to be ugly and cruel. (Pg. 12) Marlow relates the conquest and exploitation of Africa to the Roman treatment of Britain two thousand years earlier.

8. How does the phrase "the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside" relate to the story? (Pg. 11)

Conrad does not give answers to the essential heart of Marlow's story. That part is left ambiguous, for the reader to try to discern.

9. As Marlow begins his story, the narrator says, "We knew we were fated...to hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences." (Pg. 12) How would you describe the tone of that comment?

The narrator is resigned to hearing the tale but already knows that Marlow will not give any definitive answers.

10. When Marlow says, "The snake had charmed me," to what is he referring? (Pg. 13)

Although he chooses not to identify it explicitly by name, he is referring to the Congo, one of the mightiest African rivers.

11. His predecessor, Fresleven, has died there while "engaged in the noble cause." (Pg. 14) What was "the noble cause," and how did Fresleven die?

Bringing civilization to Africa was the noble cause. Fresleven dies in an argument over two hens, which, obviously, points out the fallacy of Britain's colonization of Africa.

12. Why do you suppose Marlow describes Brussels as the "whited sepulcher"? (Pg. 14)

He must feel the city, while beautiful on the outside, is filled with death, hypocrisy, corruption, and darkness.

13. What does the description of the secretary as, "compassionate...full of desolation and sympathy" suggest? (Pg. 15)

She feels sorrow and sympathy for those she is helping to send to Africa.

14. The company doctor measures the size of the head before people leave, but what does he say about the changes as a result of the African experience?

He comments that “the changes take place inside,” and he asks, as if wondering about the insanity of even going to Africa, “...any madness in your family?” (Pg. 16)

15. These comments suggest what about Marlow’s upcoming experience?

If he returns, he will be a changed person.

16. Marlow observes, “I felt as though, instead of going to the center of a continent, I were about to set off for the center of the earth.” (Pg. 17) Consider how this statement relates to the following statement:

...the archetypal myth dramatized in much great literature since the book of Jonah: the story of an essentially solitary journey involving profound spiritual change in the voyager. In its classical form, the journey is a descent into the earth, followed by a return to light.

The comment suggests that Marlow’s journey will involve a spiritual change. He will go into the heart of darkness, but he will return to the light a dramatically changed person.

17. An aspect of Conrad’s style is to cite the details and let an inner meaning emerge from the accumulated details. This is well depicted in his description of Marlow’s approach to the Outer Station. Which details are used to show the uselessness and wastefulness of the European enterprise?

Customs clerks and soldiers are let off in isolated areas. Some drown in the surf, but no one seems to notice. The French fire cannons into dense jungles; sailors die at the rate of three a day. Equipment lies around rusting, and great holes are dug for no apparent purpose. Conrad uses the words “farcical,” “insanity,” “feeble,” “dangerous,” “death,” “rotting,” “slime,” “impatient,” “oppressive,” etc., to describe the African coast. (Pg. 18)

18. Marlow describes the “criminals” he sees chained together. (Pg. 19) He observes that in his life he has seen all kinds of devils of violence, greed, and desire. But, as he stands on the hillside in the blinding sunshine, he foresees that he will become acquainted with the “devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly.” (Pg. 20) What reality has he come face to face with?

More than anything else, the whole African enterprise is marked by greed and stupid cruelty, not the “high and just proceedings” to which Marlow sarcastically refers. (Pg. 20)

19. The single white cloth around the native boy's neck is paired with the white elegance of the company's accountant. Critics suggest the white cloth around the boy's neck symbolizes innocence. What do you suppose the accountant's attire symbolizes?

It could easily symbolize vanity and shallowness. Standing among the sick and the dying, the accountant complains that the groans distract him from his work.

20. At this Outer Station, Marlow first hears the name of Kurtz. What is the accountant's opinion of Kurtz, and where is Kurtz?

The accountant has a high opinion of Kurtz, whom he thinks will one day be important in the company because Kurtz trades a great deal of ivory. Kurtz is at the Inner Station, deepest in the jungle, in the heart of the darkness of Africa.

21. What is suggested by the names of the three Stations: Outer, Central, and Inner?

A progression is suggested, a journey, perhaps, marked by degrees, each station closer to the inside of man's soul.

22. Marlow remembers the words of the doctor about its being scientifically interesting to observe the mental changes of individuals while in Africa and observes, "I felt I was becoming scientifically interesting." (Pg. 23) Why?

He must be starting to change. From the context, we can conclude that he is becoming very sympathetic to the black man in Africa and upset with the white man.

23. After trekking through the jungle, Marlow arrives at the Central Station. His job is to pilot the steamboat from the Central Station to the Inner Station. What problem does he find when he arrives at the Central Station?

The manager has taken the boat and run it aground. In doing so, he tore a big hole in the bottom of the boat.

24. Marlow's first opinion of the manager is that he is "a chattering idiot." Marlow then says, "Afterwards, I took it back..." (Pg. 25) Why?

Marlow suspects that the steamship accident was no accident since the manager was correct about the estimate of time necessary for repairs, etc.

25. Marlow turns his back on the station. It is the only way, he tells us, "I could keep my hold on the redeeming facts of life." (Pg. 25) Why?

This second station seems like a crazy, absurd place. Only by throwing himself into his work can he avoid falling prey to the absurdity all around.

26. Because they all carry staves as they stroll about, Marlow calls the agents at the station “faithless pilgrims.” (Pg. 25) What do these pilgrims pray to?

They pray to ivory. Throughout, Marlow describes the pilgrims’ “imbecile rapacity.” (Pgs. 25 - 26) Ivory is white, it must be remembered, which is the opposite color of Africa.

27. When the shed catches fire, Marlow overhears the manager and one of the agents talking about Kurtz. “I heard the name of Kurtz pronounced, then the words, ‘take advantage of this unfortunate accident.’” (Pg. 26) What does this indicate about the manager’s attitude toward Kurtz?

It suggests that he sees Kurtz as a rival, as all the agents see their fellow agents.

28. As they walk outside, what further act of severe cruelty does Marlow observe?

A black man is beaten for having started the fire, but there is no reason to believe he started the fire.

29. By this point, Marlow is negative about the whole business operation. To him, it represents inefficiency, greed, and exploitation. Then he notices a small oil sketch that the agent tells him was painted by Kurtz. Critics suggest that this painting symbolizes Kurtz’s feeling about the company’s work in Africa. Find this description and state what you think the sketch could possibly symbolize.

A blindfolded woman carrying a torch has a sinister look on her face. Critics see this as the torch of enlightenment the Europeans bring to Africa. The torchbearer wearing a blindfold is symbolic of colonial Britain, with its stated good intentions, to civilize the world and Britain’s blindness to the destruction it caused in doing so. Other interpretations are certainly possible.

30. Why does the young agent, the brickmaker, link Marlow with Kurtz?

Both men have been sent by the same people. He says they are both part of “the new gang—the gang of virtue.” (Pg. 27)

31. What seems to be the brickmaker’s attitude toward Marlow, Kurtz, and the new gang?

He seems to resent them. He is envious of Kurtz and fears not having a job if Kurtz becomes station manager.

32. Marlow says, “I hate, detest, and can’t bear a lie.” (Pg. 29) Why not? Why is this statement contradictory to Marlow’s deeds?

He says, “There is a taint of death...in lies.” (Pg. 29) It suggests corruption of the spirit, perhaps. Marlow has already lied to the brickmaker about supposed connections in Brussels, so the statement about lying has an element of falsity in it.

33. What is delaying work on the repair of the steamboat? Why?

Marlow cannot get the rivets he needs. The manager will not order them because he does not really want Kurtz relieved.

34. What is the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, who is the leader, and what is Marlow's opinion of the men in the expedition?

The Eldorado Exploring Expedition is a group out to grab any treasures it can, and the manager's uncle leads it. Marlow describes the men as reckless, cruel, greedy, and lacking any redeeming features.

35. By the end of Chapter One, Marlow says he is not very interested in getting relief to Kurtz anymore but is curious to see him. Why?

*Although Marlow has given up worrying about the rivets, he is curious about Kurtz because Kurtz is "equipped with moral ideas." This is unusual among this group. Marlow wonders if Kurtz "would climb to the top after all and how he would set about his work when there."
(Pg. 32)*

Chapter Two

Vocabulary

chaff – debris from threshing grain

disinterred – removed from the grave

evanescent – fleeting

half-caste – person of mixed racial descent

harlequin – in a play, character with a traditionally multi-colored costume

impalpable – unable to be felt

implacable – unchangeable

incontinently – in an uncontrolled manner

inexorable – unrelenting

perdition – damnation

peroration – conclusion

recondite – incomprehensible

scow – large flat-bottomed boat

shade – ghost

wraith – ghost

1. Whom does Marlow overhear in conversation, and about whom are they talking?

Marlow hears the manager and his uncle talking about Kurtz.

2. To what is the uncle referring when he says, “Ah! my boy, trust to this.” (Pg. 34) Why?

He is referring to the jungle and implies the jungle will take care of Kurtz. Therefore, his nephew need not worry about this potential rival.

3. Earlier, the phrase “turning his back suddenly on the headquarters, on relief” is used to describe Kurtz. (Pg. 34) Literally, how does Kurtz, in that instance, turn his back on the station?

He has come three hundred miles downstream with a load of ivory. But, then, as he nears the Central Station, Kurtz sends his assistant to the station with the ivory, and he returns to the Inner Station.

4. Finally, the steamboat is ready and Marlow says, “I was then rather excited at the prospect of meeting Kurtz very soon.” (Pg. 35) Why do you suppose he is excited about that?

Marlow has heard so much about Kurtz, who arouses so many different kinds of emotions in people, that he must have assumed the agent to be an extraordinary person.

5. How does Marlow describe going up the river? Give some examples that illustrate the malevolence and mystery of the trip.

His descriptions of the place make it appear primordial. He uses phrases and words such as "traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world," "...the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention," "you lost your way," "vengeful," "no joy," "bewitched," "deserted," and "cut off for ever." (Pg. 35)

6. Marlow comments, "When you have to attend to things of that sort [looking for wood to fuel the boiler], to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality—the reality, I tell you—fades. The inner truth is hidden—luckily, luckily." (Pgs. 35 - 36) How would you interpret his remarks? What literary device is used?

The routine of survival hides the underlying truth or reality. It is lucky, perhaps, that this inner truth is hidden. Wood must float on the "surface" of the water in order to burn; not paying attention to the inner truths of life means you concentrate on the "surface." In this way, Conrad uses a pun to get a double meaning out of "surface."

7. Marlow says, "We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness." (Pg. 36) What emphasizes that he is talking about a darkness no one can understand in that description?

There is a nightmarish quality to the whole description. The boat is compared to a beetle; the forest moves; drums can be heard; the entire journey is unreal and "prehistoric." (Pg. 37)

8. "The bush around said nothing, and would not let us look very far, either." (Pg. 38) What figure of speech is used in the above quote? What does it do for the image of the jungle?

The term used is personification. It gives the jungle a more menacing, more alive, more human presence.

9. Marlow gets a flash of insight. "What did it matter what anyone knew or ignored? What did it matter who was manager? ...The essentials of this affair lay deep under the surface, beyond my reach, and beyond my power of meddling." (Pg. 39) What is his point?

Students' answers to this will probably be both vague and wide reaching, depending on how much they read into it. The consideration of the question is more important than any specific answer.

Answers may vary. Example: Marlow has a feeling that this experience carries deep spiritual significance and has more meaning than mundane daily concerns.

10. Why are the crewmen, the cannibals, so hungry? How does their situation reflect the attitude of the company?

They have had very little to eat. Although they are paid in little pieces of wire that can be traded for food in the villages, the manager will not stop at the villages for the men to do so. In setting up the trip, the company takes no interest in how the crew might eat; this, Marlow says, is characteristic of its way of doing business with the natives.

11. Marlow observes that the crew, being hungry cannibals, could easily overpower the whites and eat them, but they do not. What conclusion does Marlow draw?

He says it cannot be fear that stops them because fear cannot stand up to hunger. He concludes it must be a restraint that involves some kind of honor on their part.

12. Restraint appears to be an admirable quality in Marlow's mind; yet he tells us the manager, whom he despises, also has restraint. In what regard?

His restraint involves his wish to preserve appearances.

13. Marlow tells us, "The glimpse of the steamboat had for some reason filled those savages with unrestrained grief." (Pg. 43) Why is this the case?

Shortly, we learn that the savages adore Kurtz and do not wish to see him leave.

14. What happens to the helmsman? What is odd about both the method of attack and its end?

The helmsman is killed with a spear. The attack is begun and continued with a flurry of arrows, which seem so puny that Marlow calls them sticks; it ends, not by firing guns, which seem ineffective, but by Marlow scaring the natives with the sound of the steam whistle.

15. Marlow feels an "extreme disappointment" when he assumes that Kurtz is probably dead, too. (Pg. 46) Why?

He has been looking forward to meeting this man that he has heard so much about.

16. At the end of the paragraph that begins, "The other shoe went...." Why do you suppose the listeners aboard the *Nellie* sigh? (Pgs. 46 - 47)

Marlow is very upset about a person he has never met. This, they think, is absurd.

17. What do you suppose prompted Marlow to say, “The thing was to know what he [Kurtz] belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own”? (Pg. 48)

Marlow goes on to relate, “He had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land,” which suggests that Kurtz has been acting with evil or savagery. (Pg. 48) There are no policemen, neighbors, or public opinion to control man’s weaknesses.

18. What causes Kurtz’s condition, according to Marlow?

The silence and solitude of the deep jungle, which is far removed from the amenities of civilization, cause the condition.

19. Marlow says, “...breathe dead hippo, so to speak, and not be contaminated.” (Pg. 48) To what does this comment refer?

It is another implication of the corruption of the flesh and/or spirit.

20. Marlow reads Kurtz’s report written for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. The report, he says, is filled with noble sentiments. Why is Marlow shocked by the postscript?

The report concludes, “Exterminate all the brutes!” (Pg. 49) Throughout, Kurtz wrote beautifully, with good intentions, and was seemingly sympathetic to the natives, so his final comment is shocking and incongruous.

21. Toward the end of this chapter, we meet the intruder. He is a young Russian, and Marlow describes him as a “harlequin.” (Pg. 51) Why?

The Russian looks like a clown because he has been patching his clothes with odds and ends of material, so his clothing is multicolored at this point.

22. What is the Russian’s attitude toward Kurtz?

Although he fears him, he also has great respect and admiration for him.

23. What does Marlow return to the Russian that he thinks he has lost?

Towson’s book on seamanship.

24. What reason does the Russian offer for the native attack on the steamboat?

The natives do not want Kurtz to leave. Later, he will tell us that Kurtz had ordered the attack.

25. What words come to mind when the Russian talks about Kurtz?

Answers will vary. Examples: Awe, admiration, mystery, oddness, confused, incongruity, etc. “I tell you...this man [Kurtz] has enlarged my mind.” (Pg. 52)

Chapter Three

Vocabulary

abject – downcast

absconded – secretly ran away from

jocose – merry

voracious – ravenous, greedily hungry

1. What does Marlow say motivates and rules the young Russian?

A spirit of adventure drives the harlequin.

2. Marlow says, “I assure you that never, never before, did this land, this river, this jungle, the very arch of this blazing sky, appear to me so hopeless and so dark, so impenetrable to human thought, so pitiless to human weakness.” (Pg. 54) What may we infer prompted this comment? In general, to what is he referring?

Marlow, once again, is commenting on the inscrutability and mystery of the journey, the jungle, Kurtz, and life itself.

3. Kurtz, we are told, would have killed the Russian for his ivory, but the Russian excuses this. How? What kind of man is Kurtz, so far?

We are told by the Russian, “This man suffered too much. He hated all this, and somehow he couldn’t get away.” (Pg. 55) Kurtz is a mass of contradictions. He speaks, teaches, postulates on love, and yet raids the country. He is able to have the natives adore him as a god, yet he succumbs to illnesses that do not bother them. He could leave but does not. Kurtz, at this point, represents darkness, mystery, and the unknown.

4. What is Marlow’s comment on and evaluation of Kurtz at this point?

“Why! he’s mad.” (Pg. 55)

5. What is grotesque about the black knobs on Kurtz’s fence?

They are shrunken human heads.

6. What does Marlow conclude is Kurtz’s problem?

Kurtz “lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts,” and his “methods” are questionable. (Pg. 56) Even the heads on stakes testify to Kurtz’s madness: all but one look toward the house.

7. What has brought on Kurtz's condition?

"[The wilderness] had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know.... It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core..." (Pg. 56)

8. The phrase "hollow at the core" suggests what?

Kurtz lacks something, perhaps beliefs, which are compromised by the lure of ivory and power. Kurtz's eloquence is brilliant; but his mind is diseased, and his being is empty.

9. Why is Marlow scornful when the Russian explains that the heads on the fence are those of rebels?

Any label seems inadequate to justify Kurtz's savage cruelty: "...enemies, criminals, workers—and these were rebels." (Pg. 56)

10. How is Kurtz described?

"He looked at least seven feet long. His body [was] pitiful and appalling...an animated image of death." (Pg. 57)

11. Marlow says, "I am Mr. Kurtz's friend—in a way." (Pg. 60) In what way does he mean?

He despises the corruption of the manager and all he represents. Kurtz has gone wrong, but in some odd way, he captivates Marlow.

12. Where does Kurtz seem to be headed when Marlow cuts him off and returns him to the ship?

Kurtz is going to a savage ritual of some unspeakable horror. We learned earlier that sacrifices have been offered up to Kurtz at these rituals in which he participated.

13. What does Marlow conclude happened to Kurtz's soul?

"...it had looked within itself, and... it had gone mad.... No eloquence could have been so withering to one's belief in mankind as his [Kurtz's] final burst of sincerity.... I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear..." (Pg. 63)

14. "And then that imbecile crowd down on the deck started their little fun, and I could see nothing more for smoke." (Pg. 64) What is implied by the above quotation?

The implication is that Kurtz's woman is shot and killed.

15. As they begin their return, and “the brown current ran swiftly out of the heart of darkness,” what is happening to Kurtz? (Pg. 64)

He is dying; “[his] life...was ebbing out of his heart into the sea of inexorable time.” His is the heart of darkness, mankind’s, and Africa’s.

16. In the paragraph that begins “Kurtz discoursed,” what important observations does Marlow make about the man? (Pgs. 64 - 65)

Despite his weakness, Kurtz’s voice and eloquence remain strong. Marlow’s impressions of Kurtz include referring to him as having a wasted brain, being a “shade” of his former self, and possessing a soul “satiated with primitive emotions.” (Pgs. 64 - 65) The power of Kurtz’s words cannot hide completely the torment in his heart.

17. Kurtz says with his dying breath, “The horror! The horror!” (Pg. 66) To what is he referring?

Life, his life, and life without faith are all possible answers that can be discussed. Possibly, he is commenting on what evil he wrought upon Africa. It may also be Conrad’s comment on humanity’s flaws or the death that Kurtz sees coming imminently.

18. The dramatic peak occurs with the announcement of Kurtz’s death. Who makes it, and how is the announcement made?

The manager’s insolent serving boy says with contempt, “Mistah Kurtz—he dead.” (Pg. 66)

19. What happens to Marlow after Kurtz’s death?

He falls seriously ill himself.

20. What is Kurtz able to do at death’s door that Marlow is not?

Kurtz is able to find something to say; Marlow cannot.

21. Marlow says that Kurtz’s cry “The horror! The horror!” was an “affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats... But it was a victory!” (Pg. 67) Do you agree with this?

For most of us, it is hard to agree with Marlow’s point of view, but the speculation should be interesting since there is no definitive answer one way or the other.

22. Why does he resent the people back in the streets of the “sepulchral city”? (Pg. 67)

Caught up in their own small world of petty duties and desires, they have no real knowledge of life as Marlow understands it now.

23. What impels Marlow to visit Kurtz's fiancée?

He suspects it is an impulse of unconscious loyalty, but he is not sure. This uncertainty parallels the insecurity, amorphousness, fog, mystery, and doubt of the rest of the book.

24. What is the irony in the bundle of papers he is bringing her?

Marlow is not even sure that Kurtz had given him the right bundle of papers.

25. The fiancée begs Marlow to tell her Kurtz's last words. He wants to cry out, "Don't you hear them?" (Pg. 72) Marlow can almost hear them in the woman's room. What does this suggest about Marlow's view of life?

It suggests that Marlow shares Kurtz's point of view to some extent. Marlow has been as mesmerized by Kurtz as everyone else.

26. What does he say to her instead? How is his lie ironic?

Marlow claims, "The last word he pronounced was—your name." (Pg. 72) The woman is positive that Kurtz remembered her, but he spoke of the opposite of her beauty.

27. How do we know that for Marlow to tell a lie is a major event for him?

He says he expects the heavens to fall in. Students should remember that Marlow previously said that he hates lies.

28. Why does Marlow lie to her?

He wants to provide her with comfort, rather than give her more pain.

29. What conclusions, if any, may we come to about life due to Marlow's decision?

Answers may vary. Example: Morality has shades of gray.

30. Critics suggest that the director's comment after Marlow finishes his story is significant. What do you suppose they suggest it represents?

Practical men of the world see little meaning in Marlow's story.

31. The story ends as it started. Speaking of the Thames, Marlow says, "...leading to the uttermost ends of the earth, [it] flowed somber under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness." (Pg. 72) What has Conrad linked at this point?

Physically, he has linked the two rivers, the Congo and the Thames. He has also linked Kurtz's heart of darkness with everyone else's.

Heart of Darkness

Study Guide Student Copy

Chapter One

Vocabulary

abomination – something arousing disgust
alacrity – haste
alienist – psychiatrist
apprehend – understand
ascetic – morally severe, strict
august – grand
bights – loops
declivity – descending
divine – guess, infer
flood – incoming tide
immutability – constancy, changelessness
inscrutable – mysterious, unknowable
insidious – treacherous, seductively harmful
insipid – dull
interminable – unending
lugubrious – gloomy
moribund – deathly
nicety – precision
ominous – grimly foreboding
prevaricator – liar
rapacious – greedy
recrudescence – return, renewal
sententiously – in a terse, proverb-quoting manner
sepulcher – tomb
skulking – lurking
somnambulist – sleepwalker
trenchant – sharp
whited sepulcher – hypocrite
worsted – smooth wool fabric
yawl – type of sailing ship

1. What in the second paragraph sets the mood for the story? How would you describe the mood?
2. Who is on the deck of the *Nellie*, and where is the *Nellie*?
3. What do the occupations of the director, the lawyer, and the accountant suggest about them?
4. What two literary terms are used in the phrase on page 11 referring to the sailor: "...the sea itself...is the mistress of his existence and as inscrutable as Destiny."?
5. How is Marlow described in this chapter?
6. The narrator observes, "Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch..." (Pg. 10) What are the sword and the torch, and what do they have to do with a story about Africa?

7. Marlow makes some observations about the Roman conquest of Britain. How do you suppose these observations relate to this novel's main topic, Africa?

8. How does the phrase "the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside" relate to the story? (Pg. 11)

9. As Marlow begins his story, the narrator says, "We knew we were fated...to hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences." (Pg. 12) How would you describe the tone of that comment?

10. When Marlow says, "The snake had charmed me," to what is he referring? (Pg. 13)

11. His predecessor, Fresleven, has died there while "engaged in the noble cause." (Pg. 14) What was "the noble cause," and how did Fresleven die?

12. Why do you suppose Marlow describes Brussels as the "whited sepulcher"? (Pg. 14)

13. What does the description of the secretary as, "compassionate...full of desolation and sympathy" suggest? (Pg. 15)

14. The company doctor measures the size of the head before people leave, but what does he say about the changes as a result of the African experience?

15. These comments suggest what about Marlow's upcoming experience?

16. Marlow observes, "I felt as though, instead of going to the center of a continent, I were about to set off for the center of the earth." (Pg. 17) Consider how this statement relates to the following statement:

...the archetypal myth dramatized in much great literature since the book of Jonah: the story of an essentially solitary journey involving profound spiritual change in the voyager. In its classical form, the journey is a descent into the earth, followed by a return to light.

17. An aspect of Conrad's style is to cite the details and let an inner meaning emerge from the accumulated details. This is well depicted in his description of Marlow's approach to the Outer Station. Which details are used to show the uselessness and wastefulness of the European enterprise?

18. Marlow describes the "criminals" he sees chained together. (Pg. 19) He observes that in his life he has seen all kinds of devils of violence, greed, and desire. But, as he stands on the hillside in the blinding sunshine, he foresees that he will become acquainted with the "devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly." (Pg. 20) What reality has he come face to face with?

19. The single white cloth around the native boy's neck is paired with the white elegance of the company's accountant. Critics suggest the white cloth around the boy's neck symbolizes innocence. What do you suppose the accountant's attire symbolizes?

20. At this Outer Station, Marlow first hears the name of Kurtz. What is the accountant's opinion of Kurtz, and where is Kurtz?

21. What is suggested by the names of the three Stations: Outer, Central, and Inner?

22. Marlow remembers the words of the doctor about its being scientifically interesting to observe the mental changes of individuals while in Africa and observes, "I felt I was becoming scientifically interesting." (Pg. 23) Why?

23. After trekking through the jungle, Marlow arrives at the Central Station. His job is to pilot the steamboat from the Central Station to the Inner Station. What problem does he find when he arrives at the Central Station?

24. Marlow's first opinion of the manager is that he is "a chattering idiot." Marlow then says, "Afterwards, I took it back..." (Pg. 25) Why?

25. Marlow turns his back on the station. It is the only way, he tells us, “I could keep my hold on the redeeming facts of life.” (Pg. 25) Why?

26. Because they all carry staves as they stroll about, Marlow calls the agents at the station “faithless pilgrims.” (Pg. 25) What do these pilgrims pray to?

27. When the shed catches fire, Marlow overhears the manager and one of the agents talking about Kurtz. “I heard the name of Kurtz pronounced, then the words, ‘take advantage of this unfortunate accident.’” (Pg. 26) What does this indicate about the manager’s attitude toward Kurtz?

28. As they walk outside, what further act of severe cruelty does Marlow observe?

29. By this point, Marlow is negative about the whole business operation. To him, it represents inefficiency, greed, and exploitation. Then he notices a small oil sketch that the agent tells him was painted by Kurtz. Critics suggest that this painting symbolizes Kurtz’s feeling about the company’s work in Africa. Find this description and state what you think the sketch could possibly symbolize.

30. Why does the young agent, the brickmaker, link Marlow with Kurtz?

Chapter Two

Vocabulary

chaff – debris from threshing grain

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evanescent – fleeting

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1. Whom does Marlow overhear in conversation, and about whom are they talking?
2. To what is the uncle referring when he says, “Ah! my boy, trust to this.” (Pg. 34) Why?
3. Earlier, the phrase “turning his back suddenly on the headquarters, on relief” is used to describe Kurtz. (Pg. 34) Literally, how does Kurtz, in that instance, turn his back on the station?
4. Finally, the steamboat is ready and Marlow says, “I was then rather excited at the prospect of meeting Kurtz very soon.” (Pg. 35) Why do you suppose he is excited about that?

5. How does Marlow describe going up the river? Give some examples that illustrate the malevolence and mystery of the trip.

6. Marlow comments, “When you have to attend to things of that sort [looking for wood to fuel the boiler], to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality—the reality, I tell you—fades. The inner truth is hidden—luckily, luckily.” (Pgs. 35 - 36) How would you interpret his remarks? What literary device is used?

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18. What causes Kurtz's condition, according to Marlow?

19. Marlow says, "...breathe dead hippo, so to speak, and not be contaminated." (Pg. 48) To what does this comment refer?

20. Marlow reads Kurtz's report written for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. The report, he says, is filled with noble sentiments. Why is Marlow shocked by the postscript?

21. Toward the end of this chapter, we meet the intruder. He is a young Russian, and Marlow describes him as a "harlequin." (Pg. 51) Why?

22. What is the Russian's attitude toward Kurtz?

23. What does Marlow return to the Russian that he thinks he has lost?

24. What reason does the Russian offer for the native attack on the steamboat?

25. What words come to mind when the Russian talks about Kurtz?

Chapter Three

Vocabulary

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absconded – secretly ran away from

jocose – merry

voracious – ravenous, greedily hungry

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4. What is Marlow’s comment on and evaluation of Kurtz at this point?
5. What is grotesque about the black knobs on Kurtz’s fence?
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7. What has brought on Kurtz’s condition?

8. The phrase “hollow at the core” suggests what?

9. Why is Marlow scornful when the Russian explains that the heads on the fence are those of rebels?

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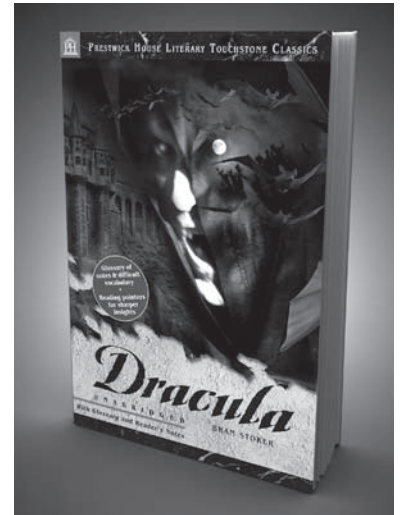
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