

Advanced Placement in  
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

**Heart of Darkness**

by Joseph Conrad

Written by Dan Welch

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# Heart of Darkness

## Objectives

*By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:*

1. analyze the characters of Marlowe, Kurtz and the Intended and how each relates to one another and to the themes of the book.
2. explain how minor characters reinforce the central themes of the story or act as foils for the major characters.
3. illustrate, with examples from the book, the causes, effects and moral implications of European colonialism in the late nineteenth century.
4. explain the impact of narrative distance and the multiple levels of narrative employed.
5. identify and explain Conrad's social themes as expressed in the book.
6. discuss the use of imagery to reinforce the themes of the book.
7. analyze the importance of literary elements, including irony and foreshadowing, on the development of the plot.
8. interpret characters and characterization from a variety of viewpoints.
9. discuss Conrad's use of mystery, uncertainty, and ambiguity as they are used to reinforce the themes of the story.
10. give a close reading of the text using specific examples from the text to support all assertions.
11. answer multiple choice questions similar to those that appear on the Advanced in Placement English Literature and Composition exam.
12. respond in writing to topics similar to those that appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition Exam.

# Heart of Darkness

## Lecture

### JOSEPH CONRAD AND HIS TIMES

Joseph Conrad was born to aristocratic Polish parents at a time when Poland was a part of the Russian empire. To avoid being drafted into the Russian army, he fled first to France and then to England. He did not learn English until he was twenty years old. He entered the Merchant Marine to continue a career at sea that he had already begun in France. He earned his certificate as a ship's officer and in a few years attained the rank of captain. His career at sea took him literally around the world, although most of his time was spent in Asia and the South Pacific. Eventually, he was forced to retire due to health problems. Friends encouraged him to become a writer. At first his novels and stories were not well received, and he was viewed as a writer of adventurous sea stories for young boys. Some important writers of his time, however, including H. G. Wells and John Galsworthy, appreciated the quality of his writing, and—with their support—he eventually found a wider and more appreciative audience.

Clearly Conrad's experience as a seafarer had a major influence on his works, but he did not write only about the sea. His major focus was the capacity of human beings to endure—under extreme conditions—the constant threat of the dissolution of human integrity and a surrender to the darkness that he saw as the essential heart of the entire universe. His works always focus on human beings under stress, and he never comes to clear conclusions about why people behave as they do. This ambiguity is one of the traits that mark him as a transitional figure between mainstream nineteenth-century novelists and the modern writers of the twentieth century who were influenced by him.

### COLONIALISM

Joseph Conrad's career as a sailor, from approximately 1870 to 1900, coincided with the peak of the British Empire. British colonies circled the globe and it was said, correctly, that the sun never set on British soil. The powerful British navy protected the sea lanes, but it was the British merchant marine that moved people and cargo throughout the empire. Imperial governments were primarily concerned with exploiting the natural resources of their colonies while using the colonies as markets for their manufactured goods. This situation was frequently a matter of oppressing native populations and taking advantage of their relative lack of sophistication. For the British, however, there was also the feeling that it was their duty to bring the fruits of civilization to the non-white populations they governed. The contradictions between the goals of greed and bringing culture, education, and scientific enlightenment to native peoples were concepts Conrad was very aware of from his experience, but it was a problem with which many educated Europeans could not identify. Conrad's works were, at least in part, an effort to make the people back home more aware of the problems and contradictions that the colonial enterprise entailed.

# Heart of Darkness

## Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. The setting for the beginning of the book—on a small sailing craft on a river as night falls—and Marlow’s comparison, by implication, of the dark heart of Africa (the Belgian Congo) and the barbarian darkness on the northern fringes of the Roman Empire, both are examples of irony and foreshadowing. Discuss how one or both of these devices are developed and expanded as Marlow’s adventure progresses.
2. In the preface to his novel *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, Conrad wrote that a novelist “speaks to our capacity for delight, for wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation—and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts; to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hopes, in fear, which binds men to each other.” Which parts of this description of the role of the novelist applies most appropriately to this novel? Which do not? Explain.
3. Each of the three main characters in this story—Marlow, Kurtz and the Intended—represents a clearly different point of view on the nature of the world and perhaps even on the meaning of life. How can each of these views be described? To what extent are they mutually exclusive?
4. During Marlow’s physical examination before he leaves for Africa, the doctor takes certain measurements, which he says are for scientific research. Marlow asks him whether he examines his subjects when they return. The doctor says that he does not because the changes are on the inside. Discuss ways in which Kurtz and Marlow are both changed internally by their experiences in the jungle.
5. There are two prominent female figures in the story—the Intended and the magnificent African woman who appears twice on the shore—but women are also represented by the two women knitting at the Company headquarters and by Marlow’s aunt. How can these women be analyzed in order to further develop the themes of the novel?
6. Marlow spends little time describing the jungle except that it seems timeless, prehistoric, and vast. What are his main concerns and activities as the steamboat proceeds up the river?
7. There is a group of men Marlow meets and travels with whom he describes as “pilgrims.” Since they are never explicitly defined or described, what can be inferred about them and their goals? Start with what little we are told about them.

# Heart of Darkness

## Chapter 1

1. Describe in detail the setting where the story begins.

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2. Who is the narrator of the story?

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3. Describe Marlow's physical appearance.

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4. The narrator describes the recent history of the Thames. What are some of the activities of the men who have sailed out, from the mouth of the river?

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5. What effect does Conrad achieve by alluding to the pirates Francis Drake and John Franklin?

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**Chapter 2**

1. On what suspenseful note does this second installment begin?

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2. What does Marlow learn when he overhears the station manager talking to his uncle?

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3. What is significant about the image Marlow begins to develop of Kurtz?

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4. What is the prevailing metaphor Marlow uses to describe traveling up the river?

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5. How do the cannibals help Marlow?

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### Chapter 3

1. The Russian says, "I had gone so far that I don't know how I'll ever get back". What does this mean literally and symbolically?

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2. When Marlow asks what Kurtz had traded for ivory, what does the Russian reply?

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3. Why did Kurtz threaten to shoot the young Russian?

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4. What does the Russian tell Marlow about Kurtz's recent activities?

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5. What does Marlow suddenly realize about the knobs on the posts by the building and the symbolic meaning they may have?

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6. As Marlow talks with the Russian, a group of men suddenly appears with a stretcher. What happens next?

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