

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Heart of Darkness

by Joseph Conrad

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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.

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Introduction

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

- As a mystery story, a story of the mystery of character (especially the true character of Kurtz).
- As an adventure story, the story of an African journey which the narrator, Marlow, takes in his quest to meet the legendary Kurtz.
- 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.

- A journey. In literature, physical journeys are often used to represent intellectual, emotional, or spiritual searches.
- 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.
- Darkness and the color black. Traditionally, these symbolize the unknown, the difficult to penetrate, the foreboding, and, most frequently, evil.
- 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.” 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.

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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:
 - Man acts with inhumanity toward his fellow man.
 - 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.
 - To confront the dark side of oneself may lead to self-knowledge, but it can also lead to disastrous consequences.
 - 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.

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Questions for Essay and 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.
 - the manager
 - Kurtz
 - 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:
 - the color white
 - darkness, blackness
 - Kurtz
 - Marlow’s four friends on the *Nellie*
 - the jungle, the wilderness
 - 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.

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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?

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?
