

Reflections:

*A Student Response Journal for...*

# *Heart of Darkness*

*by Joseph Conrad*

written by Dan Welch

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## Chapter One

1. Writers often work hard on the first paragraph of a story. Think about what words in the first paragraph create a mood. Have you ever been on a boat, at the beach, or by a body of water? Did you feel lively and active or quiet and still? Write a paragraph describing the mood of that experience.
2. The second paragraph of *Heart of Darkness* might seem like the description of a painting. What words does Conrad use to help you “see” the scene? Make a list of words from the first two pages that help you picture the setting. What do these words have in common? How do they contribute to the mood?
3. At the start of the story, the Accountant has a box of dominoes. However, the men don’t play the game because they “felt meditative, and fit for nothing but placid staring,” Marlow explains.

Have you ever played this game? Think about games you play with others and games you play by yourself. Write an article for a games magazine pointing out the advantages of one or both types of games.

4. Five people are on the boat at the start of the story, but only one is given a name.

Why does Conrad do this? Which character do you think will be the most important to the story? Briefly answer these questions.

Next, write the beginning of a story in a specific place that mentions several people but gives the name of only one. Your characters can be people you know or entirely fictional. Be sure to give your characters distinguishable traits since only one will be named. Why did you choose to name this character over the others?

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5. Marlow and his friends are sitting on a small sailing ship at the mouth of the Thames River in England. In front of them is the vast sea; behind them is the city that is the most powerful, wealthy, and cultured in the world. Marlow comments that this very spot was once on the edge of darkness. (Remember that the English people were illiterate tribes in the past.)

Describe the things that show how this place was once itself the heart of darkness. What places might be characterized as being in darkness today? Why?

6. Before Marlow leaves for Africa, he is examined by a doctor who, among other things, measures his skull. (A popular theory at the time was that measurements of the skull could reveal moral character). The doctor, however, has never measured the skull of someone who has returned. That doesn't matter, he says, because "the changes take place inside, you know."

Has something like that ever happened to you—something that changed you on the inside without showing on the outside? Write a short story about someone who experiences this type of transformation.

7. When Marlow first arrives in Africa, he is surrounded by images of death, decay, and despair. Broken machinery, starving natives, and menacing terrain are a few examples of what surrounds Marlow.

Based on the details of the story, write a poem about how cruel and meaningless life can be for some people who are in bad situations. Be sure to state the group (or groups) of people you are describing and give vivid examples of their hardships. What can be done to help them?

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8. Marlow travels on a steamer up the river to the central company station in the jungle.

How is the company's chief accountant a vivid contrast to the sights Marlow has seen so far? What is good or bad about this difference? Briefly answer these questions by doing an interview with the chief accountant. Begin with: "Good afternoon, sir. How did you happen to get a job in this remote place?" Continue the interview. Ask at least six questions and include the responses.

9. Three ships—the yawl, the ship firing at the jungle, and the steamboat—are mentioned in the story. Each one is functional, but each is also ineffective or not useable in some way.

Do these ships suggest something about the world as it exists in this story? Write a short essay about what these ships might say about society and about the attempts of Europeans to deal with the heart of darkness.

10. Many characters in this story have adopted characteristics or rituals that help them survive. Some of these characteristics may be admirable and some may not.

What characteristics, both internal and external, help you survive and succeed in your world? How do your strategies compare to the actions of the characters in the story? Write a letter to a pen pal in another country discussing your own survival skills.

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11. Marlow says, “I had never seen anything so unreal in my life” when talking about the behaviors of his companions at the Central Station. Marlow feels the men have become obsessed with ivory and consequently lost the “redeeming facts of life.”

Have you ever had an experience that, at the time, seemed unreal to you? How did the event and surrounding people contribute to your feelings? Write a diary entry describing the experience and how you felt about it. Then, write a diary entry about how you feel about it now. What did you learn from the experience?

12. One evening the shed bursts into flames. As the men gather to put out the fire, Marlow notices that a black man is being beaten. “They say he had caused the fire in some way; be that as it may, he was screeching most horribly. I saw him later, for several days, sitting in a bit of shade looking very sick and trying to recover himself,” he says.

Do you think that the man started the fire? Why or why not? Does Marlow think he started it? Why or why not? Answer these questions briefly.

Next, write a short story about someone who is either justly or unjustly punished for a crime. Be sure to mention the crime, the punishment, and the perpetrator. Give clear reasons as to why and how the person is convicted.

13. One of the characters says to Marlow, “We live as we dream—alone.”

Why does the character say this, and what does it mean? Do you think this is true? Write two responses to this statement for the school newspaper: one from a student who agrees with it and one from a student who disagrees. Make a good argument with examples to support each side.

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14. Marlow mentions a man who truly believes that there are people on Mars. When asked what they look like, he gets shy and mutters something about walking on all fours.

Write an article for a tabloid newspaper about how aliens from outer space would look and act. Include the following elements in your article:

- In the first paragraph, capture the readers' attention with an interesting introduction.
- Answer the fundamental questions: who, what, when, where, why, and how.
- Include quotes from people in your article (these can be from the aliens, witnesses, or other sources).

15. Marlow says, "I hate, detest and can't bear a lie" because it appalls him; yet he lets a foolish man keep believing that he is important by not saying anything to contradict him.

Is keeping quiet the same as lying? Write a dialogue between two friends where the truth doesn't come out because one of them keeps quiet when he or she could speak out. What is the consequence for keeping silent?

16. There is an old hippo in the story that gets out of the river and wanders around the station. The men are intrigued by the animal and stay up at night to see it.

Write a children's story about a hippo in the wild that likes to do something unusual or strange. Give your hippo a name and state the reasons for its behaviors.