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Prestwick House
Literature
Teaching Unit
Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Heart of Darkness

by Joseph Conrad

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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P.O. Box 658, Clayton, DE 19938
www.prestwickhouse.com
800.932.4593

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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:
 - 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.

Heart of Darkness

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.

Heart of Darkness

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?

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?

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?

13. Marlow tells us, “The glimpse of the steamboat had for some reason filled those savages with unrestrained grief.” Why is this the case?

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

15. Marlow feels an “extreme disappointment” when he assumes that Kurtz is probably dead, too. Why?

16. At the end of the paragraph that begins, “The other shoe went....” Why do you suppose the listeners aboard the *Nellie* sigh?

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

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

15. As they begin their return, and "the brown current ran swiftly out of the heart of darkness," what is happening to Kurtz?

16. In the paragraph that begins "Kurtz discoursed," what important observations does Marlow make about the man?

17. Kurtz says with his dying breath, "The horror! The horror!" To what is he referring?

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

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