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**Response Journal**

Reflections: A Student Response Journal



*Heart of Darkness*  
Joseph Conrad



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## *Response Journal*

### **To The Student**

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

## 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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*Heart of Darkness*

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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17. Marlow has an interview with the general manager, a man who makes Marlow feel uneasy. The manager has a cold appearance and seems unable to perform his job properly. Marlow says, “He had no genius for organizing, for initiative, or for order even. That was evident in such things as the deplorable state of the station. He had no learning, and no intelligence. His position had come to him—why? Perhaps because he was never ill.”

Write several questions as though you were interviewing a stranger for a job or to be a contestant on a television show. Your questions should test the applicant’s competence for the position. Leave space between questions and then make up answers that might make you feel uneasy.

18. Marlow says, “I don’t like work—no man does—but I like what is in the work—the chance to find yourself.” He would rather “laze about and think of all the fine things that can be done.”

Do you ever like to work? Think about the kinds of work you have done, such as schoolwork, babysitting, a part time job, shoveling...etc. Choose one or two and write what you would tell a good friend about the experience. What did you learn about yourself?

19. Marlow calls the white men at the station “pilgrims.”

Who are these people? Is Marlow mocking them? How can you tell? Were the “pilgrims” and the natives in Africa friends? Write a journal entry about what a Native African or Native American child might say about pilgrims.

In America, we often think of Pilgrims and Native Americans at Thanksgiving. Were they friends? Write a journal entry about the experience a Native American child might have at Thanksgiving with the Pilgrims.

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29. The steamboat Marlow is piloting gets caught in a heavy fog just below the Inner Station.

Have you ever been caught in a weather situation where you could not see at all and therefore couldn't move? What was the experience like? Describe your experience (or Marlowe's if you have not had an experience) in a paragraph using concrete details as well as feelings.

30. The attack on the boat is ineffectual and the natives are frightened away by the boat's whistle.

What do you think caused the attack, and why do the natives give up so easily? Using short sentences and an impersonal manner, write a police or military report about the attack that clearly states why it started and the results.

31. Marlow feels he has lost a partner when the helmsman dies. "I missed my late helmsman awfully—I missed him even while his body was still lying in the pilot-house," he says. The men worked together on the ship as a "partnership."

Sometimes we get to know a person by working together as Marlow and the helmsman did. Write an advice column about getting along with a co-worker from a different background or dealing with the death of a loved one.