

Heart of Darkness

Familiarize yourself with the following **stylistic elements and techniques** used in the novella; keep them all of them in mind as you read. Specifically choose four of them to carefully track and analyze during your reading and in your journal responses during your time with the work.

- Consider how the meaning and significance of the title is developed through Conrad's use of devices such as contrast, repetition, allusion, and point of view.
- Consider instances when the will of an individual opposes the will of the majority; when a fictional character is in opposition to his or her society, there are often moral and ethical implications.
- Consider how two contrasting places are used to represent opposed forces or ideas that are central to the meaning of the work; attend to how such places differ, what each place represents, and how their contrast contributes to the meaning of the work.
- Consider the fact that characters who appear only briefly in the novel – like Kurtz – can still have a significant presence in the work; observe how the character affects plot, the development of other characters, and the work's overall thematic meaning.
- Consider the ending of the novella as a sort of “happy ending” – not in the most traditional sense but as a sort of spiritual reassessment or moral reconciliation.
- Consider the investigation of the mystery of what happened to Kurtz throughout the novella; the solution to the mystery is perhaps less important than the knowledge gained in the process of its investigation.
- Consider how characters' apparent madness or irrational behaviors play an important role in the novella; analyze this “mad” behavior, how it might be judged reasonable, and how it affects the work's meaning.
- Consider how a morally ambiguous character – a character whose behavior discourages readers from identifying them as purely evil or purely good – plays a pivotal, significant role in the novella.
- Consider how a tragic figure who causes the suffering of others impacts the work; identify such a character who commits an action or makes a mistake that leads to his tragic downfall as well as the demise of others.
- Consider a central question the work raises and the extent to which it offers any answers; observe how Conrad raises such a question and what elements of the novella add to its meaning.
- Consider how the African Congo is used to establish certain values in the novella; while in some works, such a primal setting might be a place of virtue and peace, Conrad uses it quite differently.
- Consider how literal objects, actions, or events are used as figurative symbols to express ideas or to clarify meaning in the work; analyze these symbols whenever they appear.
- Consider how Conrad deals with his characters' isolation from home while in the Congo; analyze how this exile is both alienating and enriching for the characters.
- Consider the idea of justice – moral rightness – as it's explored in the novella; characters certainly respond in significant, searching ways to justice and injustice in the novella.
- Consider how cultural, physical, and geographical surroundings shape the psychological or moral traits of characters; Conrad uses these surroundings to shed light on the novella's overall meaning.

As you read, feel free to use the following questions (in conjunction with your other literature notes) as lighter fluid to inspire informed analysis of *Heart of Darkness*. These questions in particular are designed to push you to confidently interpret the **meaning of the work as a whole**.

MORALITY

- Does Conrad seem to have clear definitions of what constitutes good and evil? What actions does he portray as good or evil?
- *Heart of Darkness* is full of light and dark imagery. On what different levels do you see this imagery working?
- What abstract concepts might light represent? How about darkness? Do light and dark follow the convention of light representing goodness and dark representing evil?
- What is the "heart of darkness" of the novel's title? Think in terms of abstract concepts as well as of places and characters. Could the "heart" of darkness be a place of light rather than of dark?

NATURE

- What does civilization seem to represent at the beginning of the novel? What does nature represent? Does this distinction hold true as the novel progresses?
- How does the concept of civilization become problematic as the novel progresses? How are the Company's attempts to ostensibly civilize the Africans hypocritical?
- If nature is madness-inducing, what does this say about human nature, especially the native Africans?
- How do different aspects of nature, especially the river and the jungle, become characters in their own right? What is nature's attitude towards man?

RACE

- How are the differences between white and black people depicted in *Heart of Darkness*? What kinds of activities does each group participate in?
- What does imagery of light and dark seem to have to do with race in *Heart of Darkness*? What does this say morally about each group of people?
- What kinds of white European expectations does Marlow bring into his journey up the Congo? How are they dispelled? Look specifically at the examples of the accountant, manager, brickmaker, and Kurtz. What is Marlow's attitude towards the native Africans?
- How is Kurtz's attitude towards the black Africans ambiguous? How might he be viewed as the ultimate symbol of imperialism and black subjugation? Alternatively, how might he be read as a symbol of liberation and freedom?

IDENTITY

- How is Africa a place of emptiness from the white European perspective?
- How are even places of civilization – cities and trading stations – empty in terms of European amenities and values?
- What characters lack essential human characteristics? How do they show their fundamental emptiness? And are these characteristics actually essentially human?
- How are the white pilgrims deprived of their senses and reason as they descend deeper and deeper into the interior?
- What characteristics or understanding do both Marlow and Kurtz lack? How does this affect their interpretation of the events toward the end? It may be helpful to look at their comments about language here.

POWER

- How do white men overpower the black native Africans? Where do the Africans seem most powerless? Most powerful?
- Which characters are concerned with gaining more power and rank within the Company? What does their obsession for power cost them?
- How is Kurtz's power more absolute than any other characters'? Conversely, how is his control over himself especially weak? How does this tie into Marlow's comments about his "lack of restraint"?

FEMININITY

- What is Marlow's opinion of women's position in society? Does Conrad seem to agree with this? Which characters demonstrate Marlow's claim and which dispute it?
- What characteristics does Marlow associate with women?
- Compare and contrast the wild warrior woman to the Intended. Both are potential love interests for Kurtz. If the Intended is an embodiment of purity and idealism, what does the warrior woman represent? How do these characteristics reflect on Kurtz?
- Although men make up the majority of the authority figures in the book, powerful women are not utterly absent. Identify at least two powerful women and state how they exercise their power.

EXPLORATION

- What captures Marlow's curiosity about Africa? About Kurtz? What is similar about these two obsessions?
- Why does Marlow insist at first that he's not interested in Kurtz? Is he telling the truth at the time? Does he only get interested later?
- How does Marlow's curiosity compromise his integrity and bring about dire consequences? Or is his curiosity actually harmless?
- How does Marlow explore Kurtz? Is the human mind a legitimate path for exploration? How does this make his sense of right and wrong more flexible?

FEAR

- What exactly do the white men fear about the black native Africans? How is this enhanced by the jungle environment?
- What do the men fear about Kurtz? What makes them go after him anyway? Why does Kurtz pose such a big threat to them?
- How does Conrad enhance our fear and awe of Kurtz? What physical and mental characteristics does Kurtz display that render this man particularly disturbing to our sense of normality and morality?
- What does Kurtz fear? What exactly is "The horror! The horror!" that he dies fighting?

FATE

- How are the two old knitting women embodiments of Fate? Why does Marlow envision them at the end?
- Are all the accidents that keep delaying Marlow's journey into the interior truly incidental?
- How is Kurtz a product of fate? To what extent do his personal choices affect his descent into madness? Could his demise have been prevented?
- Is Marlow destined to meet Kurtz? How do his personal choices towards the end of the novel affect Kurtz, himself, and the Intended?

TIME

- How does Conrad maintain the aura of suspense in the first two chapters of the novel? What techniques does he use to prolong time?
- How do the numerous delays in Marlow's journey affect the pacing of the story?
- How does Conrad make the last part of the journey (to the Inner Station) seem timeless? Why does Marlow feel like he is going backwards in time?
- How do the two separate time sequences (that of Marlow's journey and that of Marlow's telling the story to his fellow passengers) complement each other? In other words, when Marlow interrupts his narrative, how does that interruption emphasize, parallel, or render ironic the action in the narrative?

COMMUNICATION

- What is significant about the manager's and the brickmaker's characteristic blabbering? What does it say about their characters?
- How does Marlow receive information about Kurtz? Are these sources reliable? What expectations does Marlow form about Kurtz based on this hearsay?
- What is Kurtz's relationship to language? How does his troubled psyche manifest itself in his words? What is Marlow's opinion of all this and how does it affect his own relationship to language? Does he see it as a cure for madness?
- What is Marlow's style of narration? Does the fact that he is telling the story compromise our belief in its validity? Is he a reliable narrator? What might be his goal in relating the story to his fellow passengers?

MADNESS

- How does Conrad define madness? How is Kurtz the ultimate embodiment of madness?
- What symptoms accompany the onset of madness in *Heart of Darkness*? What human faculties begin to break down? Does Marlow become a little crazy himself?
- Is madness caused by the trip up the Congo River and into the interior? Or is it something that is born into man, regardless of his environment? In other words, is madness caused by inherent nature or environment and experience?
- Can the harlequin be seen as a bridge between madness and sanity? How do his words make sense yet seem like folly to Marlow? How does Marlow relate to the harlequin? What does this say about Marlow's state of sanity?