

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Heart of Darkness

by

Joseph Conrad

Book Information

Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness

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Book Level: 9.0

Interest Level: UG

A man travels up the Congo River by steamer, manages to survive an unforgiving land and persistent disease, and uncovers his own true nature.

Topics: Adventure, Discovery/Exploration; Classics, Classics (All); Continents, Africa; Natural Environments, Rivers/Lakes/Ponds; Natural Environments, Wilderness; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Short Stories, Short Stories (All)

Main Characters

Charlie Marlow a wanderer and seaman who tells the tale of his quest for Mr. Kurtz

Manager at Central Station Mr. Kurtz's nominal superior in the Company's African ivory trade

Mr. Kurtz an ivory agent who has mysteriously gone deep into the wilderness and must be either rescued or apprehended from the natives among which he operates

the Intended Kurtz's fiancée in England, on whom Marlow pays a visit when his journey is done

the Russian disciple a young wanderer and follower of Kurtz, who has been living near the Inner Station in a hut of his own

Vocabulary

alacrity cheerful readiness

alienist a specialist in the legal aspects of psychiatry

fusillade a number of shots fired at the same time

stanchion an upright pole or bar, used to support a roof

staves rungs or strips of wood placed edge to edge, as in the making of barrels

ulster a long overcoat of Irish origin

Synopsis

The tale is told by Charlie Marlow to companions aboard a yawl on the Thames. A seaman of no particular ambition or distinction, he was hired by an agency known as the Company to take a steamboat upriver from their Central Station on the dark continent and find Mr. Kurtz, an ivory agent who has mysteriously been lost or lost himself in the wilderness.

Marlow receives a hint of the challenge before him from a French doctor before he departs. The doctor conveys the possibility of madness among the changes the jungle inflicts upon those who enter it. At Central Station, however, Marlow finds inefficiency, pomposity, and lassitude, rather than madness.

The manager is a man without imagination, or even a great deal of business acumen, but with a gift for mere endurance and survival. For some time, Kurtz has been on his own in the wilderness, sending back incredible quantities of ivory. Delayed by the need to repair his sunken steamboat, Marlow gradually learns that Kurtz is a remarkable man who took his unique talents and idealism into the bush. The Company's men fear and possibly envy him. Mystery surrounds the exact nature of his fate among the natives.

Three months after arriving, Marlow leads his small crew upriver. As they near Inner Station, natives attack with arrows and spears from the shore. Surrounded by the sheer, terrifying fact of the savage place, the crew moves past the attack closer to Kurtz's camp. It is a place of horror. Heads adorn stakes around the station, and innumerable natives are seemingly everywhere, hidden among the vegetation.

Kurtz has become a kind of false god and operates without restraint among "his people." So ill that he is

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virtually helpless, Kurtz is brought aboard the steamship. The Company's men are appalled at both him and his effect on the natives. Kurtz escapes to shore, and Marlow alone retrieves him. At that point, Kurtz could well have caused the extermination of the entire crew with a few words. Marlow convinces him with perhaps even fewer words to return: "You will be lost," he tells Kurtz, referring to something like Kurtz's soul. Kurtz is carried back. He dies on the return trip. In his dying words, "The horror, the horror," Marlow perceives in Kurtz a heroic capacity to form moral judgment in that ambiguous abyss where life and death are unbound from society and any meaning but its own dark, chaotic essence.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Literary Analysis

In what ways was Kurtz a "universal genius"?

The term was applied to indicate his many talents. More than an intellectual, Kurtz is a painter, as Marlow learns by viewing one of his works at Central Station. He was reputed to be a fine musician. Another associate gives Marlow the opinion that Kurtz's gift for oratory would have suited him perfectly in the profession of politics. He was a man, in short, who could have become anything he liked.

Inferential Comprehension

How was Kurtz different from the manager of the Central Station?

Where Kurtz was unorthodox, daring, and talented, the manager was a man who owed his superiority to the single fact that he remained healthy in a climate that killed most Europeans. A prototypical faceless bureaucrat, the manager's greatest service to the Company is that he could keep its routines going. By contrast, Kurtz was supremely an individual, one with the power and intent to create.

Inferential Comprehension

Marlow believed that Kurtz's dying words, "The horror, the horror," represented a victory for Kurtz. In what sense would Marlow be correct?

Kurtz had become more than a man bound by society's rules and restraints. In the wilderness, he arrived at a place where his will became the actions of his followers. In that heart of darkness, where existence is itself and nothing else or "more," Kurtz was able at the end to exert his own moral judgment and proclaim the experience horrible. Weaker men would have either gone mad or become the evil they faced.

Inferential Comprehension

Why did Marlow lie to Kurtz's Intended about her fiance's dying words?

The young woman's clearly romanticized, idealistic view of Kurtz as a man could not have comprehended "The horror, the horror." By telling her Kurtz's last act was to pronounce the Intended's own name, Marlow frees her to retain her false vision of loss. In Marlow himself, the reader sees that the "truth" is a weight and ambiguous responsibility that few can bear.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Conrad's brief novel has often been cited as a kind of marker for the beginning of "modern" literature. Ask students to consider in which senses this claim might be true. Aspects of the tale they could consider would include its views of colonialism, God, primitive societies, nature, morality, and the individual.

Understanding the Author's Craft The simplicity of Conrad's tale is striking, in comparison with its symbolic depth and resonance. Kurtz, the object and subject of Marlow's quest, is actually present on fewer than twenty of the story's ninety-odd pages. Ask students to explore the structure of the story and speculate on Conrad's reasons for it. Why does Marlow tell his tale on the Thames? Why is Kurtz physically present for so brief a

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time? How does Marlow come to know the man whose brief encounter with him was so life-altering?

Drawing Conclusions There are three main female figures in the story: Marlow's aunt, a striking native woman at Kurtz's camp, and Kurtz's Intended. Thus, we can assume that Conrad was not entirely indifferent to women in his world view. Ask students to examine their scenes and determine Conrad's ideas about how women fit or do not fit in the world defined by the "heart of darkness." One way to perhaps provoke such a discussion would be to ask how the story would have been changed if the Intended had gone upriver with Marlow.

Responding to Literature Kurtz appears, in Marlow's view of him, to be essentially a tragic hero. His encounter with evil destroys him, but in the struggle a certain nobility emerges. You may want students to deepen this aspect of their understanding of Kurtz by comparing him to other literary tragic heroes. Macbeth and Captain Ahab would be two examples of figures who, like Kurtz, penetrate the heart of darkness.