

Heart of Darkness Analysis Questions

Mrs. Maas

12 IBHL2

1. Is *Heart of Darkness* a racist story? Or is Conrad a social activist? Based on the novella, what are Conrad's views on race and European imperialism in Africa?

2. *Heart of Darkness* is ostensibly about Marlow's journey into the heart of Africa, but this literal journey has symbolic implications as well, implications which Conrad purposefully leaves ambiguous. In response to a reader's letter inquiring the actual meaning of a text, Conrad responded, "Coming to the subject of your inquiry, I wish first to put before you a general proposition: that a work of art is very seldom limited to one exclusive meaning and not necessarily tending to a definite conclusion. And this for the reason that the nearer it approaches art, the more it acquires symbolic character" (vii-viii). So without Conrad spelling it out for us, what do you think the heart of darkness represents within this novella?

3. Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* (1899) may have been influenced of Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man* (1871), in which Darwin concluded that "the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate and replace throughout the world the savage races." This Darwinian belief also influenced Nietzsche's "Superman Theory" (1870s) that allowed traditional morality to be suspended by those extraordinary individuals who were acting for the betterment of humanity... a justification for murder in the name of improving the human condition. Discuss how Conrad treats these ideas through Marlow's experience on the Congo River.

4. Conrad plays on various world mythologies throughout his novella, principally Christianity and Greek/Roman mythologies. A recurring classical allusion to the Fates appears throughout the work: "Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. Ave! Old knitter of black wool. Morituri te salutant" (16). Conrad presents the reader with Clotho (the spinner of thread) and Lachesis (the measurer of thread), but he deliberately leaves out Atropos (the cutter of thread). Why is Atropos so conspicuously left out? Does another character take on her role? If so, who?

5. Mr. Kurtz is often referred to as a voice. How does Conrad make use of this image of the voice to develop his narrative style for *Heart of Darkness*? How is this choice an effective tool for developing his themes of morality, sanity, and imperialism?

6. Rivers have long held symbolic meaning in literature... consider the symbolism of the Mississippi River in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and rivers in general in Langston Hughes' poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." Compare the symbolic meaning of rivers in these works to that of the Congo River in *Heart of Darkness*.

7. Mr. Kurtz's final words were "The horror! The horror!" (118). To what is Kurtz referring? What is he judging as a horror? What implications does Kurtz's deathbed denunciation have on Marlow and the novel as a whole? Do his dying words make Kurtz more or less sympathetic to the reader?
8. Read the Book-a-Minute rendition of *Heart of Darkness*. Where does this satirical version hit and miss the mark of the original text?
9. Some critics believe that in *Heart of Darkness* Conrad illustrates how "the darkness of the landscape can lead to the darkness of social corruption." What does this statement mean? How can one's environment affect one's actions, feelings, and morals?
10. *Heart of Darkness* seems to blur the line between the so-called "advanced" society of Europe and the "primitive" society of Africa. What makes one culture "civilized" and another "savage" in the eyes of the world? Are these distinctions valid?
11. Some readers claim that *Heart of Darkness* is strictly a political novella. Others, however, say it's really a story about the human condition. Can a work of fiction be interpreted in different ways? Should readers consider the author's intent when analyzing a story?
12. What is the point of providing a "frame narrator"? How does the presence of this kind of narrator affect your view of Marlow's authority as a narrator?
13. Keep track of references to maps. What significance lies in Marlow's references to maps? How, for example, do they represent the novella's frequent opposition between light and "darkness"?
14. When Marlow has reached the Company's Outer Station, he offers us some observations about it. What does he say about the reigning "Devil" in this Outer Station? How does this "Devil" differ from others with whom he has made acquaintance?
15. Marlow says that he detests lies. Does this implied (and elsewhere stated) preference for truth hold constant in the novella? Does Marlow seem to understand his own character, or is he at times confused about his interests and beliefs? Explain.

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