

## *Heart of Darkness* Discussion Questions Section I

### **LONDON—THE THAMES SETTING:**

1. Who is the narrator? What kind of person is he?
2. Notice the description of the tide, river, and ships. What atmosphere does Conrad create by his description of the Thames scene?
3. Who are the friends of Marlow who are on board the *Nellie* with him? Record their occupations. What do their various occupations suggest about the subjects important to the novel?
4. Marlow is like the setting of the river—the “brooding” nature that he describes. The narrator says that he sits like an “idol.” What is suggested by his sitting position and his state of mind?
5. What is Marlow’s background and experience? How is he different from the others?
6. What does Marlow mean by his comments on the telling of a story? On the “kernel” and “the misty halo”?
7. As the ship sits at anchor on the Thames, Marlow is reminded of the past. The Thames is a “waterway . . . to the utmost ends of the earth”; the river represents the “spirit of the past.” Why has the Thames been “one of the dark places”? What is the significance of the reference to the invasions of the Romans?
8. What are some of Marlow’s ideas and values?
9. Look at the description of the map that Marlow studies as he contemplates his journey. Why is the river like a snake?
10. Why does Marlow want to go to the Congo? How does he get the appointment?
11. What is Marlow’s attitude toward women? Look at the references to his aunt, for example.
12. Who is Fresleven?
13. What effect is created by Marlow’s interruption by the first narrator? The narrative technique in the novel is like a series of Chinese boxes—Conrad the author, an unnamed narrator who tells us about Marlow, Marlow who tells about his journey and about Kurtz, and the voice of Kurtz who is the innermost voice. What thematic and narrative purposes might be served by these layers of narrative voices? [“he paused” . . .”He broke off. . . inconclusive experiences” . . .”He was silent for a while” . . .3 times]

### **BRUSSELS—PREPARATION FOR THE JOURNEY:**

14. Look at the description of the map that Marlow studies as he contemplates his journey. Why is the river like a snake?
15. In what way do “the women” help Marlow?
16. As you read, notice the ways in which women are presented in the narrative. Try to develop a concept of what you think Marlow’s attitude toward women is. Notice that even though his aunt gets the job for him, he observes near the end of this section that she is like other women “out of touch with truth.” What does he mean?
17. What kind of place is Brussels? What mood is associated with this city?
18. Who is Fresleven?
19. Explain the comparison of Brussels to a whited sepulcher.
20. What is the doctor’s “quiet joke”?

21. How does Marlow feel before he leaves for the Congo? (mentally-- ; physically )
22. Marlow builds a series of images to describe the Company Office. Many of these details have traditional symbolic meanings. Think about the meanings of the following, and if possible connect them to either the Bible or classical mythology:

- “whited sepulchre” ( )
- narrow street ( )
- two women knitting ( )
- the deadly snake ( )
- the center of the map, of Africa, of the earth ( )
- the color black ( )
- the doctor who prophesies madness ( )
- the sun ( )
- the imposter character type ( )
- the archetypal journey (the entire book)

## *Heart of Darkness* Discussion Questions Section II Part I

### **THE JOURNEY TO THE INNER STATION:**

1. What does Marlow learn when he overhears the manager and his uncle? What new image of Kurtz is suggested? Note the mixture of idealistic beliefs and rumors.
2. What are Marlow's difficulties as skipper on the trip upriver?
3. Study the descriptions of the river—"the hidden evil" and "the profound darkness of its heart." Find other descriptive phrases.

### **LIFE ON THE RIVER**

4. In what dual sense is Marlow "penetrating deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness"?
5. What do the circumstances of his journey contribute to his assertion that human beings need "a deliberate belief"? Do you agree with him? What is his belief in?
6. What are we to think of the natives depicted in *Heart of Darkness*?
7. What does Marlow learn from *An Inquiry into Some Points of Seamanship*?
8. Marlow again insists on the importance of his work, of being at work. Why?
9. Marlow says that the "essentials of this affair lay deep under the surface." How does his subsequent description of the landscape capture that hiddenness? How does the fog affect Marlow's attitude toward his work?
10. Marlow is very complimentary of the cannibals on board his ship. Why? Think about the ways in which the Europeans Marlow has met have not shown "restraint."
11. Who is the "enchanted princess sleeping in a fabulous castle"? Is the language of the description appropriate? Explain.
12. How do you interpret Marlow's remarks about "the women"?
13. Why do the natives attack?
14. Why does Marlow react as he does to the murder of his helmsman? Why does he throw away his shoes?
15. The pilgrims shoot into the jungle. Remember the warship shooting into the African coastline? What is Marlow suggesting is like about the two?
16. For what different reasons do the cannibal crewmen and the pilgrims object to Marlow's disposal of the dead helmsman?
17. What does Marlow think of his companions on the steamer?

### **THE ARRIVAL**

18. This is a very important section of the novel. What does Marlow say about belief and the loss of belief?
19. Consider the voices: the voice of Kurtz, of the first narrator, of the Intended. What is the "voice" of civilization? What is its value? What do these voices mean?
20. Marlow says that all of Europe is responsible for Kurtz. In what way is this true?
21. Kurtz is a man who is eloquent with words; he is also the man who declares, "Exterminate all the brutes!" Explain this irony of his character.

22. What is the nature of Kurtz's report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs? What is the contrast between the main body of the report and its postscript?
23. What do we learn about Kurtz's methods of securing ivory and of his relationship with the natives? Cite passages which indicate these things.
24. What is the bond Marlow feels for Kurtz? How is the theme of restraint important here?
25. What does Marlow admire about Kurtz? Disapprove of in Kurtz?
26. What do Marlow and Kurtz have in common? How are they different?
27. When Marlow looks at the Inner Station through his binoculars, what exactly does he see?
28. What is Kurtz's place like? What has been going on?
29. Who is the "harlequin"? Describe him.
30. What does he symbolize? What is his function in the novel?
31. What advice does he give Marlow?
32. What is the book that Marlow gives him?
33. What is the young Russian sailor's attitude toward Kurtz? What information does he give Marlow about Kurtz?
34. In what way do you think the harlequin's mind has been enlarged?
35. How much credibility do you attach to the remarks of the Russian harlequin? Explain.
36. How does Part II change the portrait we see of Kurtz?
37. To what does the title *Heart of Darkness* refer?
38. Discuss the symbolic significance of Marlow's journey up the river.
39. Discuss the imagery of light and dark in one of the scenes.
40. What protections does Marlow list from the temptations of savagery in the absence of civilization?
41. Discuss the theme of restraint in the novel.
42. How would you describe Conrad's style of writing? Do you find it effective? (Why/why not)

## *Heart of Darkness* Discussion Questions Section II Part II

### **THE JOURNEY: THE FIRST STAGE**

#### **COAST OF AFRICA:**

1. As Marlow journeys down the coast of Africa on the French steamer, he is struck by the appearance of the coastline, the brightness of the sun, the ridiculous shooting into the jungle of the warship, and the mixture of death and trade. What feelings about Africa, about Europeans, and about the job he is about to assume are aroused by these first encounters of his journey?
2. What scenes of the journey reveal to Marlow the heartless exploitation of the natives and the futility of the colonial system?
3. Look at a map of Africa. What river does Marlow journey upward?

#### **THE OUTER STATION:**

4. Describe what Marlow sees at the First Station. What is signified by the abandoned machinery, the chaotic appearance, and the suffering of the slaves?
5. What is the “devil of rapacious and pitiless folly”?
6. In the grove of death Marlow sees a slave wearing a bit of “white worsted” about his neck. How does this detail connect to the theme of European invasion of Africa?
7. Why does Marlow regard “work” as important?
8. Describe the Chief Accountant. Why does Marlow notice him? What does he do?
9. What does the accountant represent? Do you admire or dislike him? Why?
10. What is Marlow’s attitude toward the accountant and the work going on at the Outer Station?
11. Why do you think Conrad included the accountant in the novel?
12. Find the reference to Kurtz. What kind of person do you imagine him to be?
13. Marlow emphasizes the motif of “paths” as he describes the land journey to the Central Station. What is the symbolic significance? What does Marlow say about death?

#### **THE CENTRAL STATION:**

14. Marlow finds his steamer at the bottom of the river and a manager who seems to take it for granted that nothing will be done efficiently. How does Marlow react? How does he adjust? What does he mean when he says there are “no external checks”?
15. What are his reactions to the explanation given to him? How is the situation concerning the rivets typical of the colonial system as he sees it?
16. Who is “the flabby devil” who is “running the show”?
17. Why is Marlow so frustrated by what he sees in Africa and by the Europeans he meets?
18. What sort of character is the manager; how is he described?
19. What does he learn about Kurtz?
20. What does the overheard conversation between the manager and the brickmaker contribute to his knowledge of Kurtz?
21. What is Marlow’s attitude toward the manager and toward the work of the Central Station?

22. Look at the description of the oil painting by Kurtz of the blindfolded woman. Remember this image; it will have important connections at other points in the novel. What is the meaning of Kurtz's painting?
23. What impression does the painting give of Kurtz the painter?
24. What impression does the painting give of the woman?
25. What do you make of the strange episode of the fire and the hold in the bottom of the watering pail? What does this event contribute to Marlow's and the reader's sense of European life in Africa?
26. What details do you learn about the character of the brickmaker? What is a "papier-mâché Mephistopheles"? Why does he call the brickmaker a papier-mâché Mephistopheles?
27. What is Marlow's lie? Why does he tell it? Is it justified? Explain.
28. As he assumes his task, Marlow says that work is a way of keeping hold on "the redeeming facts of life." What do you think he means? Why is this attitude toward work important for him in Africa?
29. In the midst of the narrative, Marlow stops and speaks to his listeners: "Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream..." What effect is created? What is the significance of the repetition of the verb "to see"? Marlow seems to call special attention to the particular episode that is occurring, suggesting that it is important and especially difficult to understand. What do you think he wants us to see?
30. Why are rivets important to Marlow? Again, he talks about work: "I don't like work...but I like what is in the work—the chance to find yourself. Your own reality..." As the novel progresses, think about whether or not this is true for the European invaders of Africa, for Marlow, for Kurtz.
31. Who is the dark figure in front of the manager's hut? Give evidence for your answer.
32. What does Marlow say about the Eldorado Exploring Expedition? What is the true nature of the expedition?
33. To what themes is the Eldorado Exploring Expedition connected?
34. What are the different stages of Marlow's journey and what does each stage represent?

## *Heart of Darkness* Discussion Questions Section III

### **THE INNER STATION**

1. Why does this section change take place in the middle of an action? Is that what happens with Section II? Are these seemingly abrupt breaks appropriate in any way? What do you think Marlow intends to convey by this three-part division of his story?
3. What new interpretation of the harlequin is suggested by this opening section?
4. What are the knobs Marlow describes?
5. Look at Marlow's response to Kurtz. What other motifs in the novel can you connect to Marlow's emphasis on his lack of restraint; the fact of his eloquence when he is "hollow at the core"?
6. What does the manager say about Kurtz's methods?
7. What details make up the scene in which Kurtz is carried on a stretcher to the ship?
8. Describe the native woman.
9. Why do you think Kurtz tries to escape from the steamer back to his station?
10. How does Marlow persuade Kurtz to return to the ship?
11. What does Kurtz talk about on the voyage down the river?
12. What different references does Marlow make to Kurtz's voice and why?
13. Examine Marlow's feelings about Kurtz and the manager. What changes in attitude is Marlow experiencing? How does he feel about each of these men by the time they begin the journey back down the river and as that journey progresses?
14. How is Kurtz's life related to the flow of the river and the heart of darkness of the jungle?
15. What are the significance of Kurtz's last words? What do Kurtz's last words mean to him? To Marlow? To you?
16. What is "the horror"? Why does Marlow call his cry a moral victory?
17. What motifs that have been developed throughout the novel are recapitulated here?
18. What is Marlow's view of Kurtz at the end of this section?
19. What has Marlow learned from his journey? What darkness does he see in himself?

### **BRUSSELS**

20. After Marlow's return to Brussels, what three people ask him about Kurtz? What is the purpose of each?
21. Describe the Intended and her environment.
22. Contrast the Intended with the native woman on the docks. Are these negative or positive portrayals of women?
23. Recall the painting by Kurtz and the description of the native woman mourning his departure. What similarities do you see in colors and gestures? What differences are there?
24. How do the Intended and the native woman symbolize the oppositions of the novel?
25. What interpretation of the Intended's role in the novel is suggested by her appearance, the appearance of her surroundings, and by her statements?
26. Examine carefully each statement that is made by Marlow and by the Intended in their interview. What ironies do you see?
27. What lie does Marlow tell? Do you agree with his decision?

28. Why does Marlow like to tell the Intended when he has said how much he hates lying? Why not tell her the truth, or tell her that Kurtz had no last words, rather than affirming her sentimental and mundane ideas?
29. How is Marlow's decision to lie related to his earlier comments about women?
30. Consider the possibility that in a certain way, Marlow does not lie to the Intended. What is the connection between "her name" and "the horror"?
31. How has Marlow been changed by his journey to Africa?
32. Would the Director of Companies, or the Lawyer, or the Accountant, be affected by a term of service at the Inner Station the way Kurtz was? Explain.
33. How does the last paragraph relate to the beginning of the story?
34. Why is Marlow again described as a Buddha?
35. What is meant by the comment, "We have lost the first of the ebb..."? Where does the novel end?



## *Heart of Darkness* Discussion Questions Book as a Whole

1. What are the motives of the Europeans in the novel? Are these motives good? Are the Europeans sincere? Explain.
2. Does Marlow's attitude toward colonialism and imperialism change over the course of the novel? Explain.
3. What does *Heart of Darkness* suggest about society? Do you agree? Why or why not?
4. The Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe has claimed the *Heart of Darkness* is an "offensive and deplorable book" that "set[s] Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest." Achebe says that Conrad does not provide enough of an outside frame of reference to enable the book to be read as ironic or critical of imperialism. Based on the evidence in the text, argue for or against Achebe's assertion.
5. Discuss the symbolic importance of the Congo River in this narrative. Why does Marlow travel primarily by boat and seldom on land?
6. Conrad's narrative technique imitates the methods of an oral storyteller – sudden jumps in time, pauses, hesitations, digressions, repetitions, and impressionism (often repeating a series of impressions before putting them together to decide what they mean). Provide and discuss examples of each element.
7. In a critical essay, C. P. Sarvan writes, "The darkness which is often mentioned refers not only to the darkness within man, to the mysterious and unpredictable, but also to ignorance and illusions." Relate this concept to the novel and its recurring motif of darkness, citing specific examples to prove your point.
8. 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? Is this statement believable or not? Have you ever experienced a change in yourself that resulted from a change in your environment? What kind of change was it?
9. *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? Do you think that the culture you live in is "advanced" or "civilized"? Why?
10. The novel is filled with comparisons and contrasts that help develop the plot, theme, and characters in Conrad's novel. Discuss the following:
  - Thames River & Congo River
  - The Company Offices & the Intended's House
  - White Imperialists & Black Natives
  - Flabby Devils & Red-Eyed devils
  - Who Kurtz is vs. Who he appears to be
  - The Brickmaker & the Russian
  - Kurtz & Marlow
  - The Intended & The Native Woman
  - Wilderness & Civilization
  - Light & Darkness