

Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad: Discussion Questions*

1. The form of this narrative is odd, the narrative narrates another's narration—It tells the story of a story-telling. What is the point of this curious device? (Conrad is not the only author to have adopted it.) Is there always a (perhaps suppressed) story about the telling of the story waiting to be told? Of course, the device allows the narrator to issue a judgment on Marlow's story. He calls it "inconclusive". Is the story inconclusive? What effect does it have on its audience?
2. Only two characters in the story have names, Marlow and Kurtz. The narrator has no name and all the others have titles, the Lawyer, the Manager of Companies, the Accountant, the Chief of the Inner Station, the Intended, and the rest of it. What is the point of these designations?
3. Like Hippolytus, this tale deals with things "unspeakable". Why are they not spoken? What is Kurtz doing in the jungle and why do we not see him doing it?
4. Marlow, near the outset of his narrative, tells of a young Roman coming to Britain when it was still a savage land—at least, in the eyes of the Romans, and he speaks of the temptations, the shame, "the fascination of the abominable". What is the meaning of this last phrase? What is Marlow talking about?
5. Uneasy about employment with the company, Marlow talks with his aunt and at one point she says, "The laborer is worthy of his hire". What is the force of this remark? How does Marlow respond to it? What attitude about women does Marlow communicate to his listeners in the story?
6. With regard to the cannibals on board his ship, Marlow speaks of restraint, as if it were a mysterious but all-important factor in life. Who has restraint in this text and who does not? What is its value?
7. Marlow says he admires the Accountant, whom he meets at the outer station. Does he really admire him? How would you compare him with the brickmaker of the inner station, of whom Marlow says, "He had nothing inside him. A little loose dirt, maybe"?
8. Later, when confronted with the El Dorado expedition at the Inner Station of the company, Marlow says that he felt that he had to take sides, either with these fellows or with Kurtz, whom he had not yet met, and that he chose Kurtz and remained faithful to him to the last. Did he make the right choice? How did he remain faithful and why?
9. Whatever it was that attracted Kurtz to the African wilderness, it has no allure for the Chief of the Inner Station. Is he a better man on that account? How does Kurtz's yielding to temptation differ from Macbeth's?
10. In discussing the idea of Empire at the outset of the story, Marlow says that what redeems it is an idea, an idea that you can bow down to and make sacrifices to. Does the rest of the story bear out this view?
11. Marlow says that he hates a lie worse than anything, that a lie is like death, and yet at the end of the story he lies to the Intended. Why does he lie?
12. Like Melville, Conrad has been charged with presenting an image of blacks which demeans them. Does he deserve this charge? If the charge holds, does it impair the value of the text?

Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad: Essay Assignments*

1. What is the function of the “frame” narrative (the story of the telling by Marlow of the story) in *Heart of Darkness*? Why does Marlow insist on the difficulty of the telling? Why does he lie to the Intended? What does he mean by his “being faithful to the nightmare of his choice”? We see very little of the reaction of the group that is told the story and the nameless “I” who tells the frame narrative does not comment on his response, either. What is suggested by this absence of delineated response and how does it relate to what Marlow has to tell?

2. “I was within a hair’s breadth of the last opportunity for pronouncement, and I found with humiliation that probably I would have nothing to say. This is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it.” Marlow thinks this makes Kurtz worthier than the other “pilgrims”, as Marlow called them, who have come to Central Africa. Considering what Kurtz has been doing (the man of “unsound methods”), how would you support Marlow’s view?

3. Answer any of the following questions about *Heart of Darkness* by an argument that refers to details of the book: *Heart of Darkness* is a story told by someone without a name, who relates a story told by Marlow, about someone named Kurtz. Whose story is it? What is the effect of the narrative upon the nameless teller? What is the effect on Marlow? Why does he tell the story? What effect did the events of the story have on him? Marlow says that he hates a lie more than anything, yet at the end he tells the Intended a lie--why? What is the heart of darkness? What does Kurtz do and why don’t we see him doing it?

4. A larger question: why does Marlow, presented (as he says) with “a choice of nightmares”, chose Kurtz? In comparing Kurtz (whom he has not yet met) with the “pilgrims” at the Central Station, Marlow says that “There is something after all in the world allowing [that is to say, in the fact that the system of justice allows] one man to steal a horse while another must not look at a halter.” (We might say, “allowing one man to steal an automobile while another will be punished for stealing a hub-cap.”) What does this imply about the contrast between Kurtz and the other Europeans? Again, the journalist says of Kurtz that he could belong to any party but that is not because he hypocritically reflects the views of those whom he would lead (keeps his eyes on the polls, as some have said of Clinton; rather it is because he is, as the journalist says, an Extremist and believes every Big Idea. Compare this with the Chief of the central station, who is “sincere” in his expression of sadness that Kurtz is dying, despite his hatred of him--once Kurtz is no longer a rival.

***Massachusetts Institute of Technology All-School Read**