

Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition *Heart of Darkness* Class Discussion Questions

Modified heavily from those of Janeen Wagemans (Seaway High School, Ontario)

1. How do the three main female characters (Marlow's Aunt, Kurtz's Intended, and Kurtz's Mistress) function in the novel? What does Marlow mean in Part I when he says that women are "out of touch with truth" and "live in a world of their own" (14)?
2. Marlow, sitting on the deck of the *Nellie* in "the pose of a Buddha" (7), begins his narration by saying, "And this also . . . has been one of the dark places of the earth" (5). To what does he refer? What causes him to suddenly launch into his tale?
3. Early in Part I, Marlow says, "The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only . . . something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to" (7-8). What do you think he means by this? Is this passage a criticism of colonialism in general?
4. Conrad uses the term "nigger" throughout *Heart of Darkness*. Do you feel, as Chinua Achebe does, that Conrad is being racist in these remarks? Why or why not? Consider which character(s) use the word and how Conrad depicts those characters.
5. Marlow is from England, the Company's offices are in Belgium, Marlow travels on a French steamer, and then he completes his journey to Africa on a steamer with a Swedish captain. Why does Conrad connect the Company to many European nations? What is he revealing about the Company and about Europe? What does Marlow think of the futility and waste that goes on in the Company? Give some examples.
6. Marlow's journey down the Congo (and Kurtz's as well) is paralleled by a psychological journey from superego to id. At the Central Station, Marlow encounters "a sketch in oils, on a panel, representing a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch" (29) that Kurtz created the year before and abandoned. What does this painting reveal about Kurtz's psychological journey?
7. The journey between the Central Station and the Inner Station is a perilous one for Marlow. They face ominous messages, and Marlow describes the jungle as "quite impenetrable—and yet eyes were in it, eyes that had seen us" (52). How does Marlow react to his encounters with the savages? What does he reveal about his own humanity in these moments?
8. Early in Part III, Marlow describes Kurtz's house and the gateposts around it. He is startled by the shrunken heads atop the posts that are turned toward the house. He remarks that they would be more impressive if turned outward. Why does Kurtz have them turned towards the house?
9. Marlow says that "it was something to have at least a choice of nightmares" (78)? What does he mean?
10. What is "the horror" for Kurtz (86)? Might Marlow define it differently?
11. Near the end of Part III, Marlow, talking about Kurtz states, "True, he had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot" (88). To what is he referring?
12. In Part I, Marlow states, "You know I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appalls me. There is a taint of death, a flavor of mortality in lies—which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world—what I want to forget" (32). Yet in Part III, he lies to Kurtz's Intended. Why do you think that is? Why has he abandoned a principle he holds so dear? What has become more important than that principle?