**Bloom's Literature**

**How to Write about Heart of Darkness**

**Reading to Write**

Readers of *Heart of Darkness* are often struck by the complexity of Conrad's style of storytelling. This includes the use of multiple points of view. These complexities make Conrad's novel an interesting one to write about. Whatever a writer chooses to discuss, he or she has to think through the complex nature of Conrad's use of point of view. This chapter will demonstrate how to read a few passages in *Heart of Darkness* in preparation for writing a paper. An attentive reader may move toward broader questions about the story. By asking questions, the writer may find the ideas that can become the center of his or her essay. They can lead the writer to examine issues, themes, and ideas that shed light on the possible ways the story can be read and understood. It may be helpful for you to annotate as you read. Jot down your ideas, impressions and questions. After you have read a portion of the story, see what sense you can make of this. What points might you develop for a paper?

Conrad's story begins in the voice of a frame narrator, who is one of the men on board the deck of a ship, the *Nellie*. This narrator introduces Marlow, who becomes the central narrator of the story. Marlow recalls the past in stops and starts, in a somewhat discontinuous way. He assembles the fragments of memory into a story. In the short story "Youth," Charlie Marlow, a sailor of experience, recalls his own youthful innocence, vitality, and sense of wonder about a life of adventure on the sea. *Heart of Darkness*, likewise, is a story told from memory. Marlow tells this story to a group of company men on board the *Nellie*, which is on the Thames, London's great central river. These modern listeners—an accountant, a lawyer, a director of companies—are soon set against the distant past of Roman Britain, as Marlow says, "And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth" (9). The "darkness" becomes identified with this remote time in history and with the vast wilderness of Africa. The story then launches into the Congo, which was Belgian territory under King Leopold. The writer might question why Conrad's story seems to exempt Britain from criticism in the colonial enterprise. In Marlow's view, the darkness of these regions will be enlightened by civilization. He sits on deck asserting this like a cross-legged Buddah, whose *bodhi* tree is the mizzenmast of the ship. He claims to have been naive or innocent when he first went to the Congo. A writer might explore how Marlow's narrative suggests the struggle of losing moral balance in the midst of a traumatic experience. Marlow has passed through experience into some knowledge of the darkness.

An important technique you can use to identify a topic, or to provide evidence for a claim you have already formulated, is close reading. When you closely read a passage, you read it many times, paying careful attention to the language. Ask yourself why Conrad selected and arranged the words of this paragraph in the way that he did. This can help you to focus on a theme. For example, the theme of journey and navigation is central in *Heart of Darkness*. What if the reader is paying careful attention to the journey Marlow takes through this wilderness and to Marlow's sense of anticipation as he approaches Kurtz? Could it be that Marlow is not only finding Kurtz elusive but is trapped in a wilderness that can no longer be defined morally? The reader of a Conrad story is much like the traveler who faces the wilderness and he has to find his way. It is important to read Conrad slowly and carefully.

The earth for us is a place to live in, where we must put up with sights, with sounds, with smells too, by Jove! —breathe dead hippo, so to speak, and not be contaminated. And there, don't you see? Your strength comes in, the faith in your ability for the digging of unostentatious holes to bury the stuff in—your power of devotion, not to yourself, but to an obscure, back-breaking business. (50)

Let's examine this passage. In what sense is this place moral wilderness, as well as physical wilderness? This passage begins with a statement that the earth is a place for humanity to live in. Yet, the words "dead hippo" and "contaminated" immediately confront us. In the midst of this experiencing of putting up with unpleasant sounds and smells, there is an affirmation of strength. One digs down for this strength. You might ask what is being said here about determination and dedication to work. How does Marlow realize this "power of devotion" or strength? What is he devoted to beyond himself? In what ways does he believe in the usefulness and validity of this enterprise? This passage occurs before the meeting between Marlow and Kurtz in the third part of the story. The writer may consider whether Marlow already sees the "horror" in experience. If he does, what moral insight is possible from this? How does this narrator find the words to articulate this experience and this awareness?
A close reading of a passage can raise questions and ideas. As you read Conrad's story, look for passages that raise questions for you or ones that you think will lead you toward some answers. Focus on analyzing these passages to reach your own conclusions about them and to develop a claim on which you can build your essay.

**Topics and Strategies**

This section of the chapter will discuss possible topics for essays on *Heart of Darkness* and will offer some general approaches to these topics. This is a series of suggestions intended to inspire your own inquiry. You may find a topic that follows a useful place from which to start your essay. Use this material to prompt your thinking about the novel. After you jot down your ideas and analyze relevant passages in the novel, you should formulate your claim, the argument you want your essay to make. Then, you can go back to your notes and begin to provide the evidence for your claim, organizing and arranging your thoughts into a persuasive essay.

**Themes**

A novel's themes are those major ideas or issues that the story is considering. There are several key questions that Joseph Conrad reflects on in his works. Each work expresses a distinct perspective on the themes with which it deals. Your job as a writer is to discover and articulate this perspective in your essay. *Heart of Darkness* is filled with themes and ideas such as concerns about individual and society, colonialism, power, civilization, and moral action. Writers who approach this novel may begin by identifying a central theme of Conrad's novel and then think about how this theme is addressed by the story. In your view, what is being said about this theme? If you read closely and ask questions about what you have read, you will find something to say. Focus on close reading and what you think the story is saying about a particular issue. This will help you to develop a claim on which to build your essay. Always make sure to write to express the point that you have to make about the themes that you see in this novel. It is important to be aware of the main points that you want to make. You do not need to write about the entire novel; stick to your main idea. Avoid straying into unrelated tangents of thought. Bring your essay back to focus on your main points.

The writer might ask if *Heart of Darkness* is mostly about the problems of European colonialism. Is this story intended as some kind of a moral tale? Is Conrad's story saying something about the unconscious? Or is it a traveler's tale, some kind of an adventure story? The writer on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* might argue for any of these interpretations. There is much in the story to support a psychological reading or a political one. Some critics have called this novel an indictment of imperialism. Others have asserted that Conrad is implicated in the colonialism he has described. The complexity of this story will challenge the writer to interpret the story in any of a variety of ways. Whatever your interpretive approach, it should be supported with evidence from the text.

The complexity in the novel's critical reception is characteristic of much of Conrad's work. Whatever lies in the setting or environment of "the heart of darkness" also lies within the viewer, the reader, or the traveler. Joseph Conrad once wrote that he sought to make us "see." One might add that he sought to make us see ourselves, as well as the world of his fiction—and to see in new ways. Your job as a writer is to help your own readers to see Conrad's story in new ways.

**Sample Topics:**

1. **Perspective:** We see this world through Marlow's perspective. This story is characterized by his angle of vision. The writer can gain insight into this novel by examining Marlow's attitude and his character. Does Marlow gain greater awareness, courage, and insight as he goes along? What is the point of Marlow's journey?

One might argue that Marlow's navigation is not going to add much to the existing record of this place. This area of the African continent has already been charted. Marlow's mission is not that of the anthropologist or the ethnographer. Rather, it is a commercial venture more than an exploratory one. It is a journey outward that is also an inward journey into the darkness of the self. The writer may examine Marlow's expeditions as a psychological-spiritual journey. Why is Marlow thinking of his journey as one like "travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world"? (35) How is he trapped in a bewildering world? He moves beyond the bounds of Western civilization. What is possible here? How does Marlow see the world around him? What do we see through Marlow's angle of vision?

2. **Civilization:** What does the work say about civilization?
Writing on *Heart of Darkness* can be enhanced by asking critical questions. You can open with a general idea about the story. Then allow this thought to branch out into new ideas that are supported with specific evidence as the paper develops. Can people consciously lead a moral existence? Does this story say that people are flawed and are so caught up in social constraints that they fall apart when those constraints are lifted, or when they are exposed to life-threatening perils? Is this a story about civilized people becoming savages, while wearing the masks of propriety?

In gathering evidence to support your view, you ought to listen carefully to how Marlow tells his story. Marlow's story opens onto a world that is not restrained by civilization. The dark landscape evokes the tragic cost of civilization, in which the sharp contest of competitors leads to destruction. The colonial enterprise brought together commercial objectives and evangelistic goals to improve African life. "I had immense plans," Kurtz says (65). When writing on *Heart of Darkness*, the writer might ask whether Marlow approves of colonialism or opposes and rejects it. Does he feel devoted to British colonialism for its efficiency, while rejecting Belgian colonialism for a perceived lack of it? Is the goal of improving the non-Western world with education and technology and Christian religion adequate? In this novel, it is never clear whether Conrad indicts all colonial experience in Africa or only some of it.

3. **Darkness and death:** What kind of commentary is the novel making about darkness or about death?

Is "darkness" in this story and in its title to be equated with death or with something else? Is death "the horror," or is "the horror" something more than death? Marlow's narrative concludes shortly after Kurtz's death, following his exploration of Kurtz's character in conversation. How is the story that Marlow has just told an effort to make meaning from his experience? Is Kurtz's death meaningful or meaningless? Look for passages in the text in which Marlow comments on the "darkness." What do these signify? How does Marlow feel about death? Compare his perception of death or of "darkness" with the perspectives of other characters.

4. **Nature:** How does the natural world play a role in *Heart of Darkness*? What relationship exists between human beings and nature?

What impact does the setting have on the quest? Does the setting symbolize anything internal, as well as being an external place? This is a story that occurs on land more than on water. Is this significant? Consider passages in which human technology is described. Why are objects described in this way? How does technology fit into this novel's message about humans' relationship to nature and their enterprise in Africa?

**Character**

A careful consideration of a novel's characters can help you to interpret the novel's themes. As you write on *Heart of Darkness*, you can focus on the ways in which main characters in this story change and how they develop across the course of the novel. For example, Marlow's perspective on Kurtz changes throughout the narrative he provides for us. In your work at analysis, reread the text and mark the passages that you think suggest something about the character you have selected to write about. Give your attention to Marlow's narration to develop a sense of how he views the people he has encountered. Also, consider the dialogue between Marlow and other characters. A writer might look at Conrad's means of characterization. How do our interpretations of Marlow or Kurtz change as the novel proceeds? To write on character, the writer will take a close look at how readers come to know these characters. One might also look at how these characters come to know one another. Marlow's narration is a good place to start. In exploring the characters, a writer can examine the dialogue between them. Characters often have a particular way of speaking. The way that characters speak and how they interact with one another also provide clues about what each character is like.

Reflect on how the character you have selected changes through the course of the novel. Why has this character changed? You might focus on Kurtz, for example, and use your analysis to determine how Conrad views him. Is he a "remarkable man," as Marlow says, or a villain? It is possible to make a convincing argument about Conrad's attention to a particular idea through an analysis of his characters or his primary narrator, Marlow. For example, what is Marlow's attitude toward isolation, commitment, or the colonial enterprise?

**Sample Topics:**

1. Solitariness: Which of Conrad's characters are alone and what impact does this isolation have on this character's actions and how the story develops?
Conrad's characters are often quite alone. In Marlow's narrative, he dwells on the isolation of individuals. He asserts, "We live, as we dream, alone." What does this sense of an essential loneliness have to do with Marlow's story? Does the personal nature of his adventure make it difficult for him to tell us about it? Each experience is a "fact dazzling, to be seen, like the foam on the depths of the sea, like a ripple on an unfathomable enigma [...]" (43). The writer may explore what Conrad is suggesting that separates people. As Kurtz dies, we read: "It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of somber pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror—of an intense and hopeless despair" (68). What veil has been torn and what has been revealed? What is the "darkness" that Kurtz, or Marlow, has faced? How do the characters Marlow and Kurtz express the aloneness of individuality? How are they affected by the society in which they participate?

2. **Marlow**: Explore the significance of Marlow and his journey.

Much critical emphasis has been placed on the psychology of Conrad's characters as they encounter "the dark continent." Some critics remind us that Marlow's moral dilemma lies at the center of *Heart of Darkness*. We see in Marlow's journey the nihilistic imagery of an indifferent natural world that appears set inexorably against humanity. Marlow's seaman's code is a stay against this decline and pessimism. The writer should observe how Marlow is a reflective person who stands within a set of values and expresses duty. In writing on Conrad, one may consider how the reader participates in the story through Marlow and his recollections. We see via the way that he has seen things, the way he tells us about them. One might analyze how Marlow enlisted in an adventure and participates in the exploitation of the land and of the Africans. He cannot keep his assumptions of moral superiority or about the civilizing mission of Europe. Marlow is forced to meet the darkness within his own being. He has the courage and faithfulness to endure without breaking. Yet, he appears overpowered by the darkness that is Mr. Kurtz.

As the writer follows Marlow's impressions and experiences, he or she can write about how Marlow tries to avoid the truth he is confronted with. How does Marlow attempt to maintain some sense of moral "rightness"? How does he struggle with the harsh truth of the imperialistic disruption and destruction he sees? In what ways does his narration show an effort to accommodate this? *Heart of Darkness* may move the writer to explore the ways in which Western civilization attempts to dominate others in the interest of civilizing values. The writer might question whether the novel suggests that there is something in the unconscious of the West that is tragic and self-destructive.

3. **Kurtz**: What does the writer think of Kurtz?

The writer should reflect on how Marlow's narrative has led to the meeting of Kurtz and to how Kurtz appears. The writer might pay special attention to the stirring encounter between Marlow and Kurtz in Kurtz's final scene:

"He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath—
"The horror! The horror!"
I blew the candle out and left the cabin. The pilgrims were dining in the mess room, and I took my place opposite the manager, who lifted his eyes and gave me a questioning glance, which I successfully ignored. He leaned back, serene, with that peculiar smile of his sealing the unexpressed depth of his meanness. A continuous shower of small flies streamed on the lamp, on the cloth, on our hands and faces. Suddenly the manager's boy put his insolent face in the doorway, and said in a tone of scathing contempt—
"Mistah Kurtz—he dead." (68–69)

How does Conrad make us feel present at this occasion? How is the ordinary juxtaposed with the extraordinary?

In what ways does Marlow appear to suppress the economic reasons why he and others have gone to colonial Africa? Marlow traces stories of the whereabouts of Mr. Kurtz, who is heralded by some as heroic. Kurtz has engaged in plunder and murder in the quest for ivory. He is revered as a god by a group of the Africans. Is Kurtz a hero or an antihero, a villain?

4. **Doubling**: Do any characters reflect or "double" as shadows of each other?

As in *Lord Jim* and "The Secret Sharer," Marlow encounters in *Heart of Darkness* his double in the form of the mad Kurtz. The writer might investigate the ways in which Marlow wonders about Kurtz and how he may be similar or different from him. The writer may reflect on how Marlow's unacknowledged inner self appears in Kurtz, deranged,
demonic, and obsessed by "the horror." Marlow returns to England disturbed by this meeting. His ideal of "civilization" has been shattered. An essay can be developed concerning Marlow's ideals and how they have been challenged by his experience.

**History and Context**

Another important approach to Conrad's novel is to research and write about the historical and social conditions surrounding the story. In one's effort to understand the motivation of the characters and the setting and action of this story, it is helpful to understand the novel's historical and social context. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is set in a specific place and time: the Belgian Congo in the nineteenth century. The European colonial enterprise of the late nineteenth century is central to this novel. While the novel specifically indict the practices of King Leopold of Belgium in the African Congo, the imperial practice of Britain is also implicated. A curious writer will explore this by looking at books such as *Empire* by Niall Ferguson (Basic Books, 2004); *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire* by Lawrence James (St. Martin's, 1997); and *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire* by Piers Brendon (Knopf, Doubleday, 2008). To discuss the novel in historical context, one might consider the Boer War in South Africa and make a comparative study of British colonialism in Africa, India, Australia, and the Far East. Papers can explore how Conrad's novel engages politics. One might look at Conrad's uses of terms or references to King Leopold and Belgium or to Britain and other European countries that held colonies in Africa in the latter part of the nineteenth century. One might successfully write a paper that compares European colonial enterprise with today's postcolonial situation.

**Sample Topics:**

1. **The psychology of imperialism:** What kind of commentary is the novel making about imperialism?

   The writer on *Heart of Darkness* can examine the psychology of imperialism generally or of Marlow in particular. Imperialism presents a strong topic for the writer. It is one that calls for some historical research. From 1870 to 1914, more than a quarter of the globe was colonized by about a dozen countries, dividing the world into dominant "advanced" states and weaker "developing" nations. Imperialism led to spheres of influence, and imperialistic extension into these territories was accompanied by political, social, emotional, patriotic, and racial appeals. Colonial conquest by Westerners led to their encounter with the traditional cultures of indigenous people. Colonialism represented a broad range of influences from European institutions, discourses, and practices. The scramble for Africa has been called primarily economically driven. France occupied much of West Africa. The Belgians occupied central Africa, or the Congo, where *Heart of Darkness* is set. The British, Dutch, and Germans all had economic interests in Africa. Political elites of the developing world recognized that it was profitable for them to westernize, and images, ideas, and aspirations were shaped by education in Western ways.

2. **Western civilization:** What kind of commentary is the novel making about Western civilization in relation to the conquest of the African continent?

   Themes in *Heart of Darkness* can be approached from more than one perspective. Marlow himself appears to not believe that Africa is being redeemed through Western civilization. Instead, "a rapacious and pitiless folly" occurs in which the so-called civilizers themselves appear devoid of any virtue or civilizing qualities. Yet, Marlow commits himself to the enterprise and appears to believe in it. The reader might explore this ambivalence in Marlow's attitude.

Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness* eight years after his own experiences in the Congo. His six months in the Congo were a significant experience in his life and had an "enormous physical and moral impact," notes Najder in his introduction to *The Congo Diary* (1). The memories and illness clung to Conrad and he used the setting for *Heart of Darkness*. He has created Marlow's story, and the writer may ask what this experience has meant to Marlow. The writer may examine the ways in which Marlow appears impressionable. As he moves beyond the bounds of Western civilization, he seeks the wonder of a new world, yet he finds terror in it. How does he feel vulnerable? Is there potential for a different definition of "reality" here? Marlow wonders whether he should "talk openly with Kurtz." He concludes that "my speech or my silence, indeed any action of mine, would be mere futility. What did it matter what anyone knew or ignored?" Is this a statement of nihilism? Is there a sense that all human achievement is futile? Or that underneath it all is a deep darkness?

**Philosophy and Ideas**
Conrad is often regarded as a philosophical novelist. That is, he frequently explores questions of human identity, isolation and community, and how different people each see the world from a unique point of view. An approach to formulating an argument about Conrad's novel is to inquire, like Conrad, into the philosophical ideas that move through this story. To discover these ideas, or philosophical problems, a writer may begin with the broad themes that the novel develops. What is implied here about how we come to get to know one another? As one follows Marlow, the very idea of human inquiry and exploration is present. What does this novel say about power and authority? When the boat is bogged down in the mud and the river is impassable, how does this reflect being stuck in one's action and attitudes? In what ways are these characters faced with existential issues or questions of meaning?

To write an essay on philosophical ideas, reread Conrad's story with this in mind. How do characters who are associated with your topic and passages express various philosophies? Analyze these characters and the passages you have identified, so that you can make a claim in your essay about this topic. If you wish to discuss ethics, for example, you might look closely at Marlow's attitudes toward the colonial enterprise and the people involved in it. You might evaluate the comments that are made by other characters in this story. Does Conrad enlist our sympathy for any of these characters? Why? Your analysis might lead you to a conclusion that Marlow has an ethical code, which is as necessary to abide by in the jungle as on the sea. However, Kurtz's goals have apparently led him elsewhere, to other actions and conclusions.

Sample Topics:

1. **Identity:** Does the novel suggest that our characters have already been shaped or that we are in the process of self-creation? How do these characters exercise free will?

   Consider the scenes in which Marlow struggles with questions like these. You might also look at Kurtz's transformation. What do the stories of people who have encountered Kurtz, or who have heard about him, tell us about how his character has changed during the African experience? Think also about how this adventure affects Marlow. As his narrative proceeds, reflect on the choices that he is making. What is Marlow's sense of himself now, as he recalls his experience? What is his attitude toward his younger self and his encounters on this epic journey? If Marlow's storytelling is an effort to make meaningful sense of the past, how is it also an effort to cast or to construct identity? How are the characters determined by circumstances or by the environment?

2. **Ethics:** What kind of commentary does the novel make about ethics, or moral responsibility?

   How do the characters decide what is ethical or acceptable in an environment so detached from normal, civilized society? Choose several characters and study the way in which they determine wrong from right. Marlow is presented by Conrad as an experienced sailor and a valued member of the English elite. It is clear that he is sociable enough to tell a story and that he embodies Victorian values. Marlow is, in this sense, representative of the preservation of these values. He is a man who has gone through a spiritual crisis. The writer, considering this, may look at how Britain itself was going through a crisis of moral awareness about its imperialist policies. Bertrand Russell has observed that Joseph Conrad "thought of civilized and morally tolerable human life as a dangerous walk on a thin crust of barely cooled lava which at any moment might break and let the unwary sink into fiery depths" (321). [The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 1872–1914, vol. 1. Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1967, p. 321]

   Feeling this wilderness, Marlow approaches Kurtz. He later says: "I couldn't have felt more of lonely desolation somehow, had I been robbed of a belief or had missed my destiny in life" (48). Could it be that he is trapped in a wilderness that can no longer be defined morally? Does the novel seem to suggest any character's choices or approach to life is the proper ethical approach? Does it suggest that any of these characters' ethics are wrong? Or does Conrad's story suggest that each individual must develop his or her own code according to his or her conscience?

3. **Racism:** What is the work expressing about race?

   Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe has sharply criticized Conrad and *Heart of Darkness* in a well-known essay in which he focuses on the racism he sees in Conrad's text. In Achebe's view, Conrad does not provide his African characters with humanness and "human expression." His argument holds that Conrad inscribes darkness on the black natives and Africa is portrayed as uncivilized and set in contrast to European civilization. Achebe calls *Heart of Darkness* "an offensive and deplorable book" and focuses on Conrad's representation of Africa and Africans. His claim is that Conrad "reduces" them to "props." One might investigate this argument and formulate one's own
The writer can consider Achebe's view of Conrad's story from several angles. For example, one might consider how the "primitive" is set in contrast with European technology in *Heart of Darkness*. Is this technology implicitly regarded as "superior" to native life? Or is it indeed unable to exercise any power to conquer it? The writer may note how this technology is mired in the jungle. Does this suggest the inefficacy of the colonial enterprise or the limitations of European technology? Are the Africans stereotyped and demonized, as Achebe suggests? Or might you agree with critics like Robert Hampson, who claims that Achebe attacks "a grossly simplified version of *Heart of Darkness*"? This critic observes that Achebe does not discuss the difference between Marlow and Conrad or Conrad's distance from his narrator. Nor does he address Conrad's irony. The writer can show how Conrad is giving his readers Marlow's account of experiences in Africa, not his own. The writer may note that the character of Marlow lives in a specific cultural and historical situation, with its attendant prejudices and categories. Whereas Marlow's views are frequently racist, it does not necessarily follow that Conrad's are also.

Achebe claims that Conrad participates in the dehumanization of Africans, which was fostered by an "agelong attitude." However, the writer might argue that *Heart of Darkness* is about exposing European discourses of power. Kurtz's "breakup" and disintegration may reflect this. The writer might also consider the audience for whom Conrad was writing, as does Benita Parry, who argues that "Conrad in his colonial fictions does not presume to speak for the colonial peoples...." In this critic's view, Conrad was addressing an audience "still secure in the conviction that they were members of an invincible power and a superior race" (Parry 1). Conrad knew that his readers were the readers of *Blackwoods* and that these readers were often civil servants. He wanted to make money with his story, and it is certainly possible that he did not wish to alienate those readers, who had their prejudices. Further, the writer could argue that Conrad was not writing a realistic account of life in the Congo. He was writing fiction. It is not "an image of Africa" in a sociological sense. Marlow's story is placed in context by a frame narrative. The writer may argue that this is a narrator who is coming to terms with imperialism. All of this suggests that Achebe's view needs to be placed in the context of other views. The writer can point out that Achebe tends to place this novel within our own times, not in Conrad's. The novel, rather, ought to be placed within its historical and cultural context.

**Form and Genre**

Form and genre are helpful ways of thinking about and describing literary works. Thinking about the form of *Heart of Darkness* can lead to writing an interesting essay. *Heart of Darkness* is a short novel. It is one that has elements of tragedy. A paper can question whether this novel meets our expectations of a tragedy and how it deviates from these expectations. How do these expectations affect how we write about this novel? *Heart of Darkness* is generally classified as a novelette. That is, it might be described as a long story or as a short novel. Could the story have been as effective if it were longer or shorter? It is sometimes helpful to view a story as a constructed work of art. When you read a Conrad story, it is essential to pay close attention to features of the work such as narration, point of view, and organizational scheme. Conrad was a very self-conscious technician in his writing. You should ask yourself why Conrad made the choices he did when constructing the work, and how the work would be different if he had made other choices. When studying *Heart of Darkness*, you will gain much by exploring the structure of the book—especially the ways in which the narrative weaves in and out of time. Marlow's narrative is discontinuous. It is a reflection based on memory. Perhaps Marlow is suggesting that storytelling is a way of making meaning.

**Sample Topics:**

1. **Narrative point of view**: How does the way this story is told affect how we read it and think about it?

   One of the most interesting features of Conrad's novelette is the shifting points of view from which this story is presented. Investigating this can lead to useful and interesting ways to write an essay. When reading *Heart of Darkness*, one should listen carefully to the narrator's voice. It is important to recognize that while we begin reading the account of a frame narrator, we encounter most of this story primarily through Marlow's perspective. Marlow himself appears to not believe that Africa is being redeemed through Western civilization. Instead, "a rapacious and pitiless folly" (65) occurs in which the so-called civilizers themselves appear devoid of any virtue or civilizing
qualities. Marlow's confidence in the orderly progress of civilization withers and he experiences disenchantment.

A writer may ask how Marlow holds onto dignity, even as he expresses moral disgust with what he sees in some of the colonizers around him. By reading closely, one can hear sarcasm and irony in his voice. Yet, it is clear that he too is in the midst of this enterprise. He is driven by curiosity and determination to seek out Kurtz, only to have the mask of his pride and propriety torn off in this encounter. He is forced to confront whether he too has participated in barbarous destruction. The writer should explore Marlow's perspective and his values. As in other Conrad novels, the virtues of courage, honesty, and fidelity to the human community are challenged here. Marlow's code of conduct is confronted with a situation in which the land of the Congo and the character of Kurtz have life-changing effects on him. As Conrad once told his friend Edward Garnett, "Before the Congo I was just a mere animal" (See *The Congo Diary*). Western efficiency and rationality have participated in a "merry dance of death and trade." Marlow has a shocking encounter with evil. Of Kurtz, he concludes, "He was a remarkable man" (73). Yet, he has also seen a nightmare.

> The fact is I was completely unnerved by a sheer blank fright, pure abstract terror, unconnected with any distinct shape of physical danger. What made this so overpowering was—how shall I define it?—the moral shock I received, as if something altogether monstrous, intolerable to thought and odious to the soul, had been thrust on me unexpectedly …

2. **Literary history:** Do any of the themes of *Heart of Darkness* appear in other important works of literature?

The writer might consider intertextuality and literary history. Does Conrad recall earlier literary sources as he writes *Heart of Darkness*? If the writer looks at *Heart of Darkness* as a moral journey, it may be compared with the descent of the heroic narrator of Dante's *Inferno*. Similarly, it may reflect the sixth book of Virgil's *Aeneid*, as Lillian Feder has pointed out: a journey into "the depths of his own and his nation's conscience" (1955, 280–81). Like Dante's *Inferno*, *Heart of Darkness* is an often symbolic tale of a journey into a cosmic nightmare. Marlow might be compared with the character that Dante creates in the *Inferno* who is on a moral journey. In each case, the geography of the journey is representative and significant. (Here this awareness occurs before he reaches the Inner Station.) Marlow's account considers his personal responsibility and the collective responsibility of Western civilization. On the other hand, whereas Dante emphasizes his narrator-protagonist's capacity for choice, repentance, and reform, Conrad's Marlow appears as an atom in an indifferent universe, a mere man within the system of Western imperialism. The writer might explore Marlow's position within this scheme. He has the ability to have moral judgment, yet he fears losing control. He tries to maintain his moral posture. He blames the suffering Africans, the dark, disturbing landscape. But has the foreign territory caused this corruption? Is Marlow an innocent victim? Or is he part of the system of victimizers? As in Dante's *Inferno*, we may say that there is a journey inward into the darkness of the self. The writer ought to remember that this outward journey by Marlow also involves an inward journey, or a psychological-spiritual journey, as well.

If the writer wishes to further consider Conrad's story intertextually, he or she might consider the character of Kurtz alongside the famous story of *Faust*. One might explore how Kurtz, like Faust, goes beyond social conventions and seeks to be powerful and godlike. How does Marlow portray Kurtz's decline and utter degradation? What "horror" has each of these characters struggled with?

3. **Heart of Darkness and film:** How would *Heart of Darkness* look as a movie?

The writer might also explore the filmic possibilities of *Heart of Darkness*, a story that has yet to be adapted into the form of a full-length feature film. Film director Orson Welles's first film project for RKO Pictures was to be *Heart of Darkness* but this project ran out of funds and was never completed. Francis Ford Coppola based his Vietnam War film *Apocalypse Now* (1979) on Conrad's story. The writer of a paper on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* might make a comparison of this film with the novel. Several critics, such as J. Hillis Miller, E. N. Dorall, and Linda Cahir, have considered Conrad's methods in his fiction alongside comments on this film.

**Language, Symbols, and Imagery**

By analyzing the language, symbols, and imagery of Conrad's story you can gain new insights and a new interpretation of the text. Look for Conrad's lengthy descriptions. Listen for how language is used in dialogue. As you read, highlight passages in which Marlow reflects on an important issue, event, or someone he has met. The environment is filled with
symbols and images you might want to give attention to. In your essay, provide your own interpretation of Conrad's story in which you analyze these symbols.

Sample Topics:

1. **Heart of darkness:** What does the heart of darkness represent?

   Is this title referring to something more than Africa or King Leopold's Belgian enterprise in the Congo? The writer might reflect on Conrad's title and ask whether it is symbolic. Is Marlow's search not only a scramble for wealth in Africa, or for the sources of the Nile, but also what one critic, Peter Firchow, has called "the quest for the final symbolic answer to the question of who we are"? The writer's essay can explore the story's title, as well as the story's language and symbols, for this broader meaning. How is Conrad's novella a metaphor for a psychological exploration of Marlow's inner self?

2. **Explore objects as symbols:** What attention does Marlow give to specific objects?

   The writer might also consider the way in which Marlow observes objects. The junk of abandoned machinery has apparently been overtaken by the environment. The boiler wallows. The truck is upended. The machinery is decaying, and the nails are rusty. We hear of "a heavy, dull detonation" for the blast to build a railway in this jungle. Marlow hears a "slight clanking" and notes that black men wearing iron collars are climbing a hill as if their joints were twisted "like knots in a rope." What is the interaction here of nature and machinery? How does imprisoned humanity fit into this scene? There are particular things here, points of contact with persons, however dehumanized. There is what F. R. Leavis calls an "overwhelming sinister and fantastic atmosphere." The writer might explore these surroundings.

   Marlow's arrival at the company station is set within a context:

   I came on a boiler wallowing in the grass, then found a path leading up the hill. It turned aside for the boulders, and also for an undersized railway truck lying there on its back with its wheels in the air. One was off. The thing looked as dead as the carcass of some animal. I came on more pieces of decaying machinery, a stack of rusty nails. To the left a clump of trees made a shady spot, where dark things seemed to stir feebly …

   The jungle itself acts as a symbol for all of nature:

   I tried to break the spell—the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness—that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions. This alone, I was convinced, had driven him out to the edges of the forest, toward the gleam of the fires, the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations …

3. **Setting:** How is the time, place, or geography in which the story is set significant?

   Conrad's fiction provides an imaginative description of a setting that is African. Through research, the writer might distinguish this from the physical geography, or the historical and sociological makeup, of this region in the time in which this story is set. Conrad's fiction does not work factually. It works symbolically, through narrative and characterization. For example, Marlow has taken command of a steamboat in the Congo. We see how this boat runs aground and gets stuck in the mud, suggesting, perhaps, that the entire colonial enterprise has done so.

   The theme of journey and navigation is central in *Heart of Darkness*. How does this quest myth unfold in a symbolic way within this setting? As the first section of the story moves toward a close, we have a strong sense of the surrounding geography. The narrator is a steamer captain who will bring "civilization" to the Congo. This place is a wilderness in which Marlow becomes aware of himself as having an uncertain relationship to his surroundings. He navigates his ship through the fog. There is a native attack. The ship—or perhaps civilization itself—is stuck in the mud: immobilized by the "dark" geography of this place. How might you interpret this symbolism?

4. **Sights and sounds:** What sensory imagery does Conrad use in the narrative?

   As one investigates Conrad's uses of symbolism, one may also see the many places in which Conrad brings our
attention to the senses, particularly those of sight and sound. The writer may examine the story for all of those places where sights and sounds evoke a strong impression. Can Marlow ever make the reader "see" what has occurred, or is this impossible? Marlow asks 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—making a vain attempt" (30). He suggests that his listeners, through his story, have a clearer vision now than he once did as he was experiencing the events: "You fellows see more than I could then. You see me, whom you know" (30). As one follows the visual imagery of *Heart of Darkness*, one also ought to listen to Marlow's narrative, like Marlow's listeners on the deck of the *Nellie*. The initial narrator intervenes:

"It had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see one another. For a long time already he, sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice" (30).

We hear from Marlow:

"A voice. He was very little more than a voice. And I heard him—it—this voice—other voices—all of them were so little more than voices—and the memory of that time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense. Voices, voices—…” (49).

There is an auditory quality to this story that one should pay attention to. The African adventure is full of sounds. One may inquire where in the text we hear the voice of the native. Is it a feared voice or a compelling voice? We hear African drumming:

This alone, I was convinced, had driven him out to the edge of the forest, to the bush, towards the gleam of fires, the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations. (65)

What voices can be heard in this novel? What do these voices suggest about the interaction between African and European cultures? When Marlow offers his story, this is not entirely a monologue. The writer may first recognize that Marlow's story is framed by the introduction of another narrator. Then the writer can demonstrate how within Marlow's tale we hear dialogue from many different perspectives. We see gestures that characters make in an effort to communicate. How many voices besides that of Marlow appear? The writer might look for these, as Robert Hampson has done in his article on "the speech that cannot be silenced" in Conrad's story. Several European languages announce themselves within the text. The writer may also investigate the ways that natives speak or whether they can be heard behind the voices in the foreground of this story. Are their voices subsumed by others in the text?

**Compare and Contrast Essays**

A common way of writing a paper on a literary work is to compare or contrast elements of the work. This way, the writer can discover similarities and differences between certain aspects of the novel or story and then comment on the resonance of those comparative or contrasting elements and what it contributes to the work overall. This approach can help a reader focus on oppositions in the text and may bring into sharper detail the elements that need to be more closely observed.

It is important that the essay do more than merely list these similarities or contrasts. Thoughtful commentary helps to make your paragraph something more than just a list. Good writing is descriptive and thoughtful. Make sure to provide detail. Through critical thinking and analysis, a writer can look at differences among characters or patterns of imagery in the work. The writer might start by defining who each character is—as conveyed through his or her traits or behavior—or how each image is defined and presented. The differences or the ways Conrad alters or changes his representation can then be explored.

When you compare or contrast elements of Conrad's story, it is a good idea to use either a block method or a clear point-by-point method. In the block method, you will define each of your terms in separate "blocks." First you write about "A." Then you write about "B." After this, you can bring these two characters, places, or ideas together in more immediate contrast or comparison. When you are writing about the likenesses or the differences of these items point by point, make sure that your reader can clearly distinguish between them. Point-by-point comparison or contrast must proceed in an
organized way. Don't let your readers feel like you are playing ping-pong by going rapidly back and forth between these two elements. Develop your discussion carefully. Use your observations and analysis to make an argument, using comparison and contrast that gives your readers a unique and interesting interpretation of the text.

The challenge of this type of essay is determining what the differences between these characters, places, concepts, or images mean. It is the writer's purpose to explore these meanings. By asking questions, the writer will arrive at some answers. These notions will usually be individual to the writer of the paper. The questions will lead to the writer's own conclusions. That is what will make the paper interesting and original. To accomplish this effectively, it is best to go directly to the text of the novel to explore the similarities and differences. It is not enough to only state them. Rather, you must consider how those similarities and differences work in this text and what points they make.

Sample Topics:

1. **Marlow and Kurtz:** Compare and contrast Marlow and Kurtz.

   What if the writer wishes to analyze the ways in which Marlow reflects Kurtz? What do we know about Kurtz? Most of what we know is through Marlow's narrative and involves Marlow's viewpoint. Many critics have suggested that there are some similarities between them. If so, what do you think that these are? Why does Marlow feel a powerful connection with Kurtz? Why does he regard Kurtz as "remarkable," when he is also repulsed? In contrasting these characters, the writer can first observe how Marlow approaches his expedition. Then the writer can demonstrate how it appears that Kurtz has approached his own mission. At this point, the writer will contrast these two characters, showing that Marlow's way is an alternative to the ways that Kurtz has approached his engagement with his mission, the jungle, and its natives. The question could be raised about whether Marlow could have become as deranged as Kurtz.

2. **Characters in Conrad novels:** Compare Conrad's characters in two different works.

   If the writer has read other works by Conrad, a comparison and contrast might be developed concerning the "double" in *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, and "The Secret Sharer." How does the writer view the image of the "double" that appears in each of these stories? In *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz may be viewed as a double for Marlow. In *Lord Jim*, Jim struggles with his inability to admit his own cowardice, or the falsity of his romantic vision. He meets a ruthless character, Gentleman Brown: a man of egoism who is angry with the world. In "The Secret Sharer," the captain meets the murderer Leggatt and tries to hide and protect him. Marlow's narrative in *Heart of Darkness* might also be contrasted with his narrative in "Youth." Marlow's listeners to his tale in "Youth," have mixed reactions. What might be the responses of his listeners to *Heart of Darkness*?

Further Information


