

English IV AP
Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*
Discussion Questions

Section I:

1. Conrad structures *Heart of Darkness* as a frame story. For a writer, what benefits does this structure provide?
2. In the frame story section of the book, what details does Conrad include to create a sense of comfort and peacefulness? What elements contrast the serenity?
3. The unnamed narrator comments that Marlow is “not typical” of seamen. In what ways is he different?
4. As Marlow recounts his boyhood experiences, he says that he was like “a silly little bird.” What perceptions do you think this image might have for most readers?
5. Marlow notes that he “tried the women” in his attempts to become a steamer captain. In the novel, what is Marlow’s attitude towards this strategy? How do you react to his attitude?
6. As part of the employment process, Marlow visits an old doctor who works for the company. What measurements does the doctor take and why? How does this meeting affect Marlow?
7. How does Marlow’s aunt, “the excellent woman,” depict him to the wife of the high dignitary? What problems might this pose for Marlow? Why?
8. How does Marlow describe the African coast?
9. On occasion, “black fellows” in boats visit the ship that Marlow is aboard. Do you think that the description of these fellows is mostly positive or mostly negative? And, how do these descriptions compare to most depictions of whites in the novel?
10. When he reaches shore, Marlow encounters a chain gang of Africans. What impression does the encounter make on Marlow?
11. To allow the convicts to proceed up the trail, Marlow steps into a grove of trees. How does his impression of the Africans there compare to his attitude towards the convicts?
12. What impression does the Accountant make on Marlow? How does Marlow’s description of the Accountant contrast with his descriptions of the Africans he has encountered? What effect does this contrast have on readers?
13. How does the Accountant maintain his appearance? What does the Accountant insinuate (or communicate without actually stating it)?
14. What is the Accountant’s attitude towards Kurtz?
15. How does the Accountant’s attitude towards the man who is dying in his hut affect readers’ impressions of him?
16. What feeling does the Station Manager inspire in Marlow? To Marlow, what seems to be the Station Manager’s best qualification for his job?
17. During his talk with the Brickmaker, Marlow realizes that the man is pumping him for information about Company politics. What aspects of characterization (details, images, diction) does Conrad use to make Marlow’s skepticism believable?
18. How does the Brickmaker characterize Kurtz? How does this characterization compare to what others have said about Kurtz?
19. On occasion, a night-roaming hippo comes ashore and the pilgrims empty their rifles into it to no effect. What do their actions convey about the pilgrims? What could the hippo symbolize?
20. Perhaps the closest companion Marlow makes at the Central Station is the foreman of the mechanics. Is the foreman a sympathetic character? Why?
21. What is Marlow’s reaction to the arrival of the Eldorado Exploring Expedition? How does Marlow react to the Station Manager’s Uncle?

Section II:

1. In the conversation between the Station Manager and the Station Manager's Uncle, what details does Conrad include that create a sense of mystery about Kurtz?
2. What do the Station Manager and the Station Manager's Uncle hope will happen to Kurtz? Why do they want to be rid of Kurtz?
3. Towards the end of their conversation, what affects Marlow so much that he leaps to his feet and startles the two speakers?
4. What causes one of the listeners on the Nellie to say, "Try to be civil...?"
5. According to Marlow, what for sailors is "the unpardonable sin"? How does this detail lend tension to the journey upriver?
6. In the paragraph that begins, "The earth seemed unearthly," what elements does Conrad include to reinforce the sense of alienation Marlow feels?
7. Marlow provides a lengthy description of his fireman, a native that he trusts to perform his duties of firing and monitoring the steamer's boiler. While he feels positively towards the man, does Marlow's description contain elements that are negative or patronizing? If so, what are some of the most significant ones?
8. What are some of the reasons Marlow calls the Russian Sailor's hut "an extravagant mystery"?
9. Why does the Station Manager feel enmity towards the Russian Sailor?
10. Eight miles downstream from Kurtz's camp, Marlow feels particularly anxious. What elements in the story contribute the most to his feeling this way?
11. How do the pilgrims react when they hear what Marlow calls a cry "of infinite desolation"? Given the circumstances, is the pilgrims' reaction reasonable?
12. What reasons does Marlow give for the crew's head man wanting to eat the Africans on the shore?
13. What does Marlow ironically call "the playful paw-strokes of the wilderness"?
14. As the steamer sits anchored in the fog, Marlow says that the idea of an attack is inconceivable to him because of the nature of the noise. The pilgrims fear an attack. In Section II, what are some other ways Conrad depicts Marlow's differences from the other whites on the steamer?
15. Characterize Marlow's description of his helmsman. What elements in the description best convey his skepticism?
16. In what ways do the helmsman and whites aboard jeopardize the steamer when it comes under attack from the shore?
17. After the attack, Marlow suspects that Kurtz might be dead. What about this loss creates a sense of extreme disappointment in Marlow? What will he now be unable to do?
18. During Marlow's retelling of this section, one of the Nellie listeners criticizes the narrative as "absurd." What major differences does Marlow cite to distinguish himself in the Congo from the listeners aboard the Nellie?
19. Marlow realizes that everything at the Inner Station belongs to Kurtz. Then, he wonders to what Kurtz might belong. Based on your understanding of Kurtz and Marlow's story thus far, what do you think motivates Kurtz? To what beliefs does he subscribe?
20. To what does Marlow attribute the helmsman's death? What did he lack?
21. As Marlow releases the corpse of his helmsman into the river's current, he says that the helmsman was "heavier than any man on earth." What elicits such a profound response for a man Marlow thought so little of in life?
22. What elements in the characterization of the Russian Sailor at the end of Section II make him seem out of place in such a foreboding setting?

Section III:

1. What useful information does the Russian Sailor provide about Kurtz and the situation at the Inner Station?
2. Based on the Russian Sailor's ramblings, characterize Kurtz's methods of maintaining order and acquiring ivory.
3. In sections II and III, Marlow often recounts sights he viewed through binoculars. Does using this technique provide Conrad with any benefits in telling Marlow's story? How do the binoculars change Marlow's perspective of the events on the shore?
4. Using your own words, describe as fully as you can the "rounded knobs" that Kurtz has mounted around his hut. Upon reviewing the section, do you think that your reaction to the sight was stronger than Marlow's? Why or why not?
5. Marlow says that the heads only show Kurtz's lack of restraint. Do you think this is true? At this point, do you think that Marlow is a reliable narrator? What biases might he have that readers probably do not?
6. Marlow refers to the "symbolic row of stakes" that circle Kurtz's hut. What might the stakes symbolize?
7. When the whites bear Kurtz away from his hut on a stretcher, how is he dangerous even though illness has decimated his strength?
8. What apparently does Kurtz tell the natives to do as he is being carried to the steamer? Is this command consistent with your understanding of the man and his motivations?
9. When Kurtz encounters Marlow for the first time, he says, "I am glad." What impression does Kurtz have of Marlow before he has even met him? What has he based this impression on?
10. What is Kurtz's attitude towards the Station Manager?
11. Marlow says he is "Mr. Kurtz's friend—in a way." In what ways do you think Marlow is Mr. Kurtz's friend?
12. When Kurtz escapes from the steamer, Marlow pursues him. In what ways does Marlow act differently when he is ashore? In what ways does he become like Kurtz?
13. Marlow says, "There was nothing either above or below [Kurtz]....He had kicked himself loose of the earth." Using your understanding of the story, what do you think this represents? What is Kurtz free from or not subject to?
14. When the steamer leaves, Marlow describes the natives, especially the three men "plastered with bright red earth." What elements of the description convey how little Marlow understands about the natives' culture?
15. During their trip downriver, Marlow says that Kurtz's was "an impenetrable darkness." What do you think this darkness represents?
16. After Kurtz's death, Marlow falls deathly ill. As he compares his near-death experience with Kurtz's, Marlow recognizes a key difference—in his opinion, what makes him inferior to Kurtz?
17. What is Marlow's attitude towards the Company representative who visits Marlow in Europe to gather Kurtz's documents? Do you think Marlow's attitude is justified?
18. A man calling himself Kurtz's cousin visits Marlow and calls Kurtz "a universal genius." Do you think the cousin has biases about Kurtz? Does Kurtz possess any elements of genius?
19. How does the journalist's description of Kurtz succeed as a summary of Kurtz's exploits in Africa?
20. What are the most significant and/or effective details Conrad uses to characterize Kurtz's Intended?
21. Characterize the Intended's beliefs about Kurtz. In the context of the novel, are these views accurate? What does she base her beliefs on?
22. Why doesn't Marlow tell Kurtz's Intended the truth about Kurtz's last words?

23. After Marlow ends his tale, the frame story also concludes after only a brief paragraph. What effects does this structure have on readers? Do you think that the ending is effective?