

ENRICHED CLASSICS

Curriculum Guide to:

The Heart of Darkness

by
Joseph Conrad

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Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer, Joseph Conrad

Dear Colleague:

Joseph Conrad's two novellas, *Heart of Darkness* and *The Secret Sharer*, have nothing to fear from our tough age, in which the far boundaries of experience are often crossed and the darkness at the interior of the self is constantly probed. Conrad was a pessimist before pessimism was fashionable, a cynic before cynicism was a common attitude among teens. But that is where his strength lies with modern readers. He makes us look hard at the ugly landscapes of the soul, at the evil within all of us.

It is for this reason that you can expect your students to deal with these demanding texts with interest—to be fascinated with them and even to sneak more Conrad out of the library. Our students know we are living in a troubled time. A time when actions taken by the mighty for seemingly just reasons produce evil results. A time in which the very values we hold dearest seem foul when viewed from a different perspective. A time when students can see pictures on the nightly news of men and women they have been brought up to revere and support grinning grotesquely beside twisted and debased bodies in a far-off land. Yes, it is a time, as Kurtz would call it, of “horror.”

Our world is not so very different from Marlow's and Kurtz's. The activities presented in this guide will help students see we are, in a sense, all “in the same boat” with our Buddha-like narrator, floating toward the heart of an immense darkness.

Frederic Will

Each of the five lesson plans in this packet includes:

- Step-by-step instructions
- Materials needed
- Standards covered
- Questions students should be able to answer when the lesson is over

Curriculum Plan #1:

Painting the Congo (A Lesson in Analytical Reading)

This is an exercise aimed at training analytical reading skills. Students will concentrate on a small, but dense, passage from *Heart of Darkness* in which Joseph Conrad's Marlow describes the Congo River and the jungle around it. By penetrating Conrad's passage the student should learn a lot about the way Conrad's literary imagination works, and perhaps about the way he/she can use words imaginatively to paint a picture.

This lesson will take one class period.

NCTE Standards Covered:

2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.

What To Do:

1. Distribute Handout #1 ("Painting the Congo"), which presents Marlow's description of his trip up the Congo River to Kurtz's station. Ask your students first to read the passage silently to themselves. Then have one or two students read the passage out loud. Feel free to correct, then to give your own exemplary reading. Make sure the "music" of Conrad's writing gets heard.
2. Ask students to discuss what kind of imagination Marlow (Conrad) is using to portray the river. Is it visual? (That is, is he *seeing* the river and its environment? Is he making *you* see it?) Or is the description conceptual/intellectual? (Is he making you *think* about what he portrays?) Is it aural? (Is he making you pay attention to the *sound* of his words?)
3. Ask your students to give an oral depiction of movement through space. For instance: the path they walk (drive, ride) from home to school and back, or the space they traverse in some sports activity or in traveling in a car with the family. Dissect these descriptions for the kinds of imagination that constructs them. What makes an effective portrayal in words?

4. Divide your students into two groups or teams. Place the members of these two teams on opposite sides of the room, so that each side has the same number of participants. Let each member of each side ask the person opposite him/her to describe something visual for the whole class. Let the describer give him/herself a grade from 1 to 5 on his performance. See which team wins. Give that team the Golden Description Award.

What You Need:

Copies of Handout #1

A copy of the Enriched Classic edition of *The Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer* (ISBN: 0743487656) for each student

How Did It Go?

Did the students seem to think about the different forms of the imagination, and discover in practice how challenging it can be to describe action and surroundings of that action? Did people come to understand better Conrad's achievement as a portrait painter in language?

Curriculum Plan #2:

On the Double (A Lesson in Character)

This curricular unit will concentrate on the question of the double, the theme of much literature—including stories by Dostoyevsky, Poe, Melville, and Nabokov. Doubles and twins in fiction are often manifestations of the early human belief that all individuals are actually two selves: one natural, one spiritual or immortal. Sometimes doubles are used to represent good and evil within a character.

The discussion of this issue and *The Secret Sharer* should engage students on several levels, and should absorb two class periods.

NCTE Standards Covered:

2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.

What To Do:

Part 1: Thinking and Talking about the Double

1. Ask the students to look closely for and at the passages in which the narrator refers to Leggatt as his double. Ask what it says about the story that its narrator is so preoccupied with this theme. How would this story be different if the fugitive was simply a maritime escapee, without any special relation to the narrator?
2. Examine the title of the story, and decide whether the word “secret” is used as an adjective or a noun, and to whom it refers—to the narrator or to Leggatt? The basic issue

here is to encourage the students to ask what the “secret” of the tale is, and what kind of “sharing” takes place. This set of questions will move the issue of #1 toward the issue of #3.

3. Discuss the concept of depths or deep meanings in literature. On the surface Conrad’s story is simply a tale of flight, harboring, and eventual escape. Is it justified to search the story for deeper meanings? How do students feel about the interpretation by Robert Rogers (Handout #2: “On the Double”)?

Part 2: Relating the Double to Your Own Life

1. Divide the class into groups of three. Ask the members of each group to discuss whether they have had an experience of “the double” in their lives. If they have, ask them to formulate a description of this experience which they can present to the whole group. If they have not had a direct experience of the double, ask them to create a plausible story, in which the double is a crucial factor.

2. Call for volunteer pairs to extemporize stories in which a character is shadowed by his/her double.

3. Ask each student to write a two page story about a double and its function in the development of a character’s life. Trade the stories around and let the students read them to one another.

What You Need:

Copies of Handout #2

A copy of the Enriched Classic edition of *The Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer* (ISBN: 0743487656) for each student

How Did It Go?

Did the students seem to grasp the idea of the double, both in *The Secret Sharer* and in “real life”? Had they had personal experiences which helped them relate to the idea?

Curriculum Plan #3

Horror Show! (A Lesson in Mood and Theme)

Students are sophisticated viewers of “horror” in film and on television. Most of this horror is explicit and some of it violent. Literary attempts to awaken a sense of horror are often subtler. It may seem unclear to students exactly where the “horror” lies in *Heart of Darkness*.

That eternal question – What does Kurtz mean by “The horror! The horror!” – is the key focus in this curricular unit. Students will get a chance to portray physically the horror in *Heart of Darkness*. One day should suffice.

NCTE Standards Covered:

2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.

What To Do:

1. Tell students that the word “horror” comes from the Latin verb *horreo*, which means “to stand on end, bristle, tremble.” Ask them if they get that kind of physical “horrid” feeling from any of the scenes in *Heart of Darkness*. Have students locate and mark the scene they find most “horrible,” and discuss the different scenes.
2. Discuss the character of Kurtz. What kind of life did he have before he went to the heart of darkness? What was it that crippled him and destroyed his humanity at the heart of darkness? And what did he mean by “the horror”? What horrified him?
3. Break students into groups of three to five and ask them to select a short scene from *Heart of Darkness* that best demonstrates what Kurtz meant by “the horror.” They will then prepare a short enactment of the scene for the class. Tell them their purpose is to show the class the “horror” of the scene as Kurtz would have seen it. They need not memorize any lines or passage. The idea is to use the texts themselves as prompts and

nothing more; to keep the prompt in the back of the mind but to let spontaneous creation of the scene take over.

What You Need:

A copy of the Enriched Classic edition of *The Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer* (ISBN: 0743487656) for each student

How Did It Go?

Did the students find Conrad's notion of "horror" moving for their own enactments? Did they find ways to relate to Kurtz, and to see what kinds of obsession were driving him?

Curriculum Plan #4:

True Lies (A Lesson in Writing)

In *Heart of Darkness* Conrad is making fiction out of events and concerns which lay deep in his own personal life. There is no better case study of the way art transforms reality, and the point of this curriculum plan is to help the students experience that transformation.

Conrad (1857-1924) was born into a world in which the “scramble for Africa,” was starting in earnest; the great powers of Western Europe and England driving toward the mineral—and ivory—wealth of Africa. Thus world history fostered Conrad’s natural inclinations to travel and observe. Born in Poland, he took up the life of a sailor at age sixteen, sailed widely all over the globe, settled in England and became a master of English prose. In 1890, at the age of thirty-two, he took command of a stern-wheeler traveling up the Congo River from Stanley to Leopoldville. This experience was one of the many which lay behind the creation of *Heart of Darkness*. The purpose of this lesson is to look into the way Conrad transformed his personal experience and to think about the ways we transform our own experience into art (or imagination, or creativity).

This lesson will take one class period or two, depending on whether the writing is done in class or as homework.

NCTE Standards Covered:

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of

sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

What To Do:

1. Distribute Handout #3 (“True Lies”). List on the board the obvious parallels between Conrad’s personal experience of the Congo, the dream of which had haunted him since childhood, and Marlow’s experience as recounted in *Heart of Darkness*.
2. Discuss the transformation of experience that has taken place in the creation of *Heart of Darkness*, which Conrad didn’t write until a decade after he had left Africa. What happened to Conrad’s “aunt”? What happened to Conrad’s sunken steamer? What happened to Conrad’s preoccupation with maps? And so on? Look closely at the changes that Conrad has made in his personal experience.
3. Ask the students whether they see this kind of transformation as a key to what literature does to experience.
4. Ask students to write a short fictional interpretation of a real life experience – either theirs or someone else’s. Length may vary depending on whether they are doing the work as a homework assignment or in class. Tell students their task is to make a *good story* based on the facts, but that the story is the most important thing. They can make changes to “reality” to make the story more compelling.
5. Have students read their stories aloud and ask for reactions for the class. Then ask the student to explain what changes he/she made to “reality” to produce the story. Ask the class for their reactions. Are they disappointed by the changes? Is the story now a “lie”? Or is it “more true” because the writer/student made the events more powerful than reality?

What You Need:

A copy of the Enriched Classic edition of *The Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer* (ISBN: 0743487656) for each student

How Did It Go?

Did the students begin to think about the relation of art to life, as it bears on Conrad’s two novels? Did it occur to them that they might be able to make art of their own experiences?

Curriculum Plan #5:

Reverse Revelations (A Lesson in Plot and Character Development)

In this activity, students will enact *The Secret Sharer* in reverse. This play will twist usual procedure, and therefore sharpen the sense of the text, the way reversing a video tape will do, playing it backwards. Our play will run backwards, taking us from the end, the swimming away of Mr. Leggatt, to the beginning, the ruminations of the captain on his stilled ship in the Bay of Siam.

The lesson will take one class period.

NCTE Standards Covered:

2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.

What To Do:

1. Discuss who the main characters are in *The Secret Sharer* and talk through the basic narrative sequence of the plot. Sketch this sequence on the blackboard. Tell students that some novelists write the ends of their novels first, so they will know where they are supposed to be going. Then ask the students to help you rearrange the events of the plot so that it is organized from end to beginning. Write the new order of events on the blackboard as a series of numbered scenes, and discuss what is important about each scene. What is revealed? What do we learn about the characters? Where is the action taking place? Write this information on blackboard.
2. Select an appropriate number of actors for an extemporaneous and fast-moving enactment of *The Secret Sharer* as a backwards play. The characters should include the narrator, Mr. Leggatt, the Skipper of the *Sephora*, the chief mate, the second mate, and so on. If you want to give more students a chance to participate, you can break the exercise into two sections (first half, second half) and switch actors halfway through. The emphasis should be on extemporization, no checking back with the text once launched.

3. After performing the play in this fashion, promote an open discussion of what has been learned by doing it this way. This is a good time to raise general questions about the interrelation of beginning, middle, and end in works of literature and the value of reading a book more than once.
4. Ask students to read aloud some key scenes in the novel again:
 - Start with the first two pages. Ask students what hints, if any, Conrad gives us about the subject of the novella in this introduction. What mood is he creating? Ask students to point to specific phrases that create the mood.
 - Then refer students to the introduction of Leggatt and the narrator's immediate sense of connection to him (pages 11-13). Ask students to discuss, knowing what they know about the way the story ends, what they can see in the narrator's first impression of Leggatt that might foreshadow the ending. Besides physical resemblance, what exactly makes the narrator feel he has a special connection with Leggatt?
 - Ask students to look to the middle of the story, where the strain of concealing Leggatt is beginning to wear on the narrator (pages 40-42). Ask students to discuss what is happening to the narrator symbolically and psychologically.
 - Finally, look again at the last two paragraphs of the story: the narrator feels in full command, alone once more, and his "double" is "striking out for a new destiny." Ask students to discuss what process has just been completed. How does this ending serve as the culmination of events?

What You Need:

A copy of the Enriched Classic edition of *The Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer* (ISBN: 0743487656) for each student

How Did It Go?

Did the students find that running the reel of *The Secret Sharer* backward made them think freshly about the book and understand it better? Were they able to appreciate the way Conrad used landscape and language to create an atmosphere of psychological tension? Did students see the narrator's struggle with his "double" as a part of his personal development as a captain?

Painting the Congo

“...Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of over-shadowed distances. In silvery sand-banks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on that river as you would on a desert, and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, til you thought yourself bewitched and cut off forever from everything you had known once—somewhere—far away—in another existence perhaps ... And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention.”
Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 113.

Handout #2

On the Double: A Close Look at The Secret Sharer

“...The story therefore embodies a happy combination of the literal and the symbolic, and Conrad exercises a superb sense of balance and timing in moving back and forth between the two levels of meaning. Proof that in doing so he sustains an enormous amount of ambiguity can be seen in the number and wide-ranging variety of interpretations which the work has excited. They extend from the adventure-story reading, which is too literal, to the archetypal journey-into-the-self reading, which is certainly justified, and include what might be termed a Rorschach reading, which sees the relationship of Leggatt and the captain as involving a cozy but physically enervating homosexual interlude.”

Rogers, Robert, A Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970, pp. 42-43.

Handout #3

True Lies
The Heart of Darkness: Art and the Transformation of Reality

Conrad's Life	Heart of Darkness
Childhood yearning to explore; went to sea at age 17	Marlow describes passion for maps
Helped to get job on ship by his aunt	Marlow helped by "an aunt, a dear enthusiastic soul"
Captain named Freiesleben dies, which resulted in Conrad getting a command of a Congo River steamer	Marlow gets command after death of Captain Fresleven
Conrad kept diary recording travel from Matadi to Kinshasa	Marlow's descriptions of journey to "Central Station" very similar to Conrad's diary entries
Conrad journeys upriver to pick up a sick man who dies on the steamer soon thereafter	Marlow picks up Kurtz, who soon dies
Became sick in Africa and returned to England	Marlow became sick and returned to Europe