

# Great Books: *Heart of Darkness*

## Teacher's Guide

Grade Level: 9–12

Curriculum Focus: Literature

Lesson Duration: One class period

### Program Description

Embark on a journey through Joseph Conrad's 19th-century Belgian Congo. Students travel through Conrad's very personal story of European occupation of this African nation. Who were these colonials harvesting gold, ivory, and diamonds at the expense of five million Africans? How were these foreigners able to bring moral decay and primeval savagery to the Congo?

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### Onscreen Questions and Activities

#### Pre-viewing questions

- What do you know about colonialism throughout history? Can you think of any ideas or actions that have been common among colonial governments?
- As you watch the program, pay close attention to how the Belgian government treated Africa and Africans at the turn of the century.
- What drew Europeans to this “uncivilized” continent?

#### Post-viewing question

- Kurtz's dying words are a cryptic whisper: “the horror, the horror.” What “horror” might Kurtz have been talking about? Is there more than one possibility?
- Why do you think Conrad made this scene so ambiguous? Support your opinion with examples from the novel and Conrad's personal history

Activity: Conrad gives his African characters little personal identity. Write a scene in which one of Kurtz's workers tells his story to Marlow. Include dialogue that expresses how Africans might have felt toward the colonial presence on their continent.

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### Lesson Plan

#### Student Objectives

- Understand that critics have debated Conrad's ending of *Heart of Darkness*.
- Write their own ending, in which Marlow tells Kurtz's fiancée the truth about Kurtz's last words and how he had changed

## Materials

Great Books: Heart of Darkness video

## Procedures

1. As a class, discuss Conrad's ending for the novel, *Heart of Darkness*. Encourage them to share emotional responses as well as their own analytic interpretations. As this activity proceeds, students will have a chance to write their own ending for the novel. (In Conrad's version, Marlowe decides not to tell Kurtz's fiancée about her betrothed's final degradation. When she asks what Kurtz's final words were, Marlow wants to say, "The horror! The horror!" but he can't. Instead, he tells her that Kurtz spoke her name.)
2. After students discuss their responses and interpretations of Conrad's ending, share with them critics' comments on the ending. Critics have often written about Marlow's white lie at the end. Some critics say it illustrates Conrad's ideas about how we all must be protected from the savagery inside us, just as Marlowe protected Kurtz's fiancée from the ugly truth about the decline of the man she intended to marry. Other critics, however, call it the novel's one striking moment of weakness, when Conrad just couldn't bear to keep telling the novel's heavy story.
3. With the preceding discussion in mind, ask your students to write an alternative scene in which Marlow does tell Kurtz's fiancée the truth, not only about Kurtz's last words but also about everything Kurtz had become.
4. As students start prewriting, ask them to consider the following:
  - What words Marlow might use in talking to Kurtz's fiancée.
  - What feelings he might have while he talks to her, and how he might show or not show those feelings.
  - How Kurtz's fiancée might react to what she hears from Marlow.
  - What might happen between Marlow and Kurtz's fiancée after he discloses the truth.
5. As students begin their drafts, encourage them to stay with Conrad's tone and writing style.
6. Allow time for peer editing and revision. Then ask volunteers to read their new endings aloud, leading into a discussion about the choices that students made.

## Assessment

Use the following three-point rubric to evaluate students' work during this lesson.

**3 points:** Student's new ending includes believable words, feelings, and actions; writing clearly retains Conrad's tone and style; no errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics.

**2 points:** Student's new ending includes somewhat believable words, feelings, and actions; writing retains some of Conrad's tone and style; some errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics.

**1 point:** Student's new ending does not include believable words, feelings, and actions; writing does not retain Conrad's tone and style; many errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics.

## Vocabulary

### apocalypse

*Definition:* An imminent cosmic cataclysm

*Context:* In the film *Apocalypse Now*, director Francis Ford Coppola attempted to translate the events of *Heart of Darkness* into similar events during the war in Vietnam.

### colonialism

*Definition:* Control by one power over an area and people outside its own territory

*Context:* Colonialism in Africa was marked by the greed of the Europeans who dominated the continent.

### novella

*Definition:* A work of fiction intermediate in length and complexity between a short story and a novel

*Context:* *Heart of Darkness* is a novella packed with memorable descriptions of the jungle.

### primeval

*Definition:* Of or relating to the earliest ages in the world's history

*Context:* Conrad's novella is the story of a journey up a great river into a primeval jungle.

## Academic Standards

### Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

McREL's Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education addresses 14 content areas. To view the standards and benchmarks, visit <http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>.

This lesson plan addresses the following national standards:

- Language Arts – Reading: Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process
  - Language Arts – Reading: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts
  - World History – Understands patterns of global change in the era of Western military and economic dominance from 1800 to 1914
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## Support Materials

Develop custom worksheets, educational puzzles, online quizzes, and more with the free teaching tools offered on the Discoveryschool.com Web site. Create and print support materials, or save them to a Custom Classroom account for future use. To learn more, visit

- <http://school.discovery.com/teachingtools/teachingtools.html>
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## DVD Content

### How To Use the DVD

The DVD starting screen has the following options:

**Play Video** – This plays the video from start to finish. There are no programmed stops, except by using a remote control. With a computer, depending on the particular software player, a pause button is included with the other video controls.

**Video Index** – Here the video is divided into sections, indicated by video thumbnail icons. Watching all parts in sequence is similar to watching the video from start to finish. Brief descriptions and total running times are noted for each part. To play a particular segment, press Enter on the remote for TV playback; on a computer, click once to highlight a thumbnail and read the accompanying text description and click again to start the video.

**Curriculum Units** – These are specially edited video segments pulled from different sections of the video (see below). These nonlinear segments align with key ideas in the unit of instruction. They include onscreen pre- and post-viewing questions, reproduced below in this Teacher's Guide. To play a particular segment, press Enter on the TV remote or click once on the Curriculum Unit title on a computer.

**Standards Link** – Selecting this option displays a single screen that lists the national academic standards the video addresses.

**Teacher Resources** – This screen gives the technical support number and Web site address.

### Video Index

#### I. Heart of Darkness: An Apocalyptic Tale (12 min.)

An overview of Joseph Conrad's novel that includes a look at Conrad's journey up the Congo and screen adaptations of the book, including *Apocalypse Now*.

#### II. Conrad's Own Story (12 min.)

Biographical information about Joseph Conrad and a comparison of the author's experiences with those of the fictional Marlow. A look at Belgium's King Leopold II and his brutal rule of the Congo.

### III. Finding Kurtz (14 min.)

Marlow travels upriver and finds Kurtz; he hears the madman's dying words. A look at the parallels between the novel and the film.

### IV. Life After the Congo (11 min.)

Conrad's life after his experiences in the Congo and a discussion of the impact his writings had on political reformers. World War I with all its atrocities descends on Europe.

## Curriculum Units

Segment 1: Introduction: Heart of Darkness

Pre-viewing question

Q: Would you have accepted the job of finding Kurtz?

A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question

Q: Why is Marlow hired to find Kurtz?

A: Kurtz is no longer sending ivory, and the company wants to find out what is going on upriver.

Segment 2: The Ivory Trade

Pre-viewing question

Q: Why did missionaries go to the European colonies?

A: They wanted to "civilize" Africans.

Post-viewing question

Q: How did Conrad feel about the ivory trade in Africa?

A: He said it was the vilest scramble for loot that had ever disfigured the history of the human conscience.

Segment 3: Marlow Begins His Mission

Pre-viewing question

Q: How do you think the colonized Africans viewed the Europeans?

A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question

Q: Why do the men at the station speak of Kurtz with some hostility?

A: He no longer sends ivory, and they've heard rumors that he has "gone native." He is an ominous figure.

Segment 4: Traveling Upriver

Pre-viewing question

Q: Do you think Conrad was a racist?

A: Answers will vary.



Post-viewing question

Q: Did Marlow find the silence on the river peaceful?

A: No, he said the silence was not of peace but the stillness of an “implacable force rooting over an inscrutable intention.”

Segment 5: About Joseph Conrad

Pre-viewing question

Q: What makes Conrad's prose distinctive?

A: Answers will vary, but should include old-world lushness and use of allegory.

Post-viewing question

Q: What happened to Conrad after he left the Congo?

A: He left the Congo ill from malaria and dysentery. His career at sea was over, but he began writing; he published three novels and a collection of short stories before tackling the *Heart of Darkness*.

Segment 6: Europe's Tragedy

Pre-viewing question

Q: What does the title *Heart of Darkness* refer to?

A: Answers will vary, but may include the evils of imperialism, the evil that lurks in the human heart, an example of what happens when a person gives into temptations.

Post-viewing question

Q: Why does Marlow lie to Kurtz's fiancée?

A: He didn't want to force other people to carry the burden of Kurtz' words.