

## *Heart of Darkness* Reading Guide Part I

1. **Narrative Structure.** In *Heart of Darkness*, we encounter a “frame narrative,” as some of you may know from works like *Frankenstein*. That is, the initial narrative frame-story, told by a first narrator (never named) establishes the situation for and “frames” the telling of a second embedded (and the main) story, told by a second and main narrator, Marlow. Who are the two narrators of the novel? Describe the situation and characters on board the Nellie. How does Marlow differ from the other men, his audience, on board the Nellie? What does the first unnamed narrator and the frame-story contribute to *Heart of Darkness*?
2. **Parallels & Foreshadowing.** The unnamed first-person narrator prepares the way for Marlow's initial meditation “evok[ing] the great spirit of the past upon the lower reaches of the Thames” river. Marlow begins his story suddenly: “And [England] also . . . has been one of the dark places of the earth' . . . when the Romans first came here nineteen hundred years ago--the other day . . .” In describing the Roman conquest of England, Marlow suggests parallels to the main story of *Heart of Darkness*: what seems to be foreshadowed? How does Marlow define “conquerors” and what kind of “idea” might redeem such conquest?
3. **More Foreshadowing.** Consider Marlow's account of what drew him out to Africa. What is suggested by his likening the Congo River to a “snake” and himself to a foolish, charmed “bird”? Note the case of Fresleven, the river captain whom Marlow is to replace; Marlow's comparison of the city of his employers to “a whited sepulchre” the ominous atmosphere of the Company's office with the two women knitting black wool and “guarding the door of Darkness;” the doctor [“alienist” = early psychologist] who measures Marlow's head because he has a scientific interest in measuring “the mental changes of individuals” who venture out to Africa in the Company's employ. What type of experience, what type of journey, do these signs seem to predict?
4. **Europeans in Africa.** Describe Marlow's first impressions of the European presence in Africa, captured in his observations regarding the French steamer firing into the coast and regarding the Company's lower station. Contrast the Europeans' naming of the Africans as “enemies” to Marlow's view of the Africans.
5. **Marlow's Devils.** Consider Marlow's description of the “devils” he has seen. What are the different types of “devils” he describes? Why is he so appalled by the “flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly” that he sees in most Europeans in Africa? What does he mean?
6. **Europeans in the Congo.** Consider the Europeans that Marlow meets at the Company's stations:
  - (a) the Company's chief accountant (why does Marlow respect him?),
  - (b) the manager (why is such a man in command?),
  - (c) the “faithless pilgrims” (why does Marlow call them that?),
  - (d) the “manager's spy” (what kind of “devil” is this “papier-mache Mephistopheles”?),
  - (e) the “sordid buccaneers” of the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, (how does Marlow assess these men and their motives for coming to and remaining in Africa?)
7. **African Wilderness as Setting & Character.** How does Marlow describe the setting: the Congo jungle—the “wilderness”?
8. **Marlow & Kurtz.** Long before he meets Kurtz, Marlow hears from others that Kurtz is extraordinary, “remarkable.” On what evidence do these claims seem to be based?

## *Heart of Darkness* Reading Guide Part II

1. **Marlow & Kurtz.** Marlow, unobserved, overhears a conversation about Kurtz between the manager and his nephew, and states, "...I seemed to see Kurtz for the first time," turning his [Kurtz's] back on headquarters and home, "setting his face towards the depths of the wilderness..." Marlow wonders at Kurtz's motive in turning back to the Inner Station instead of returning home as he had intended. A bit later Marlow begins to supply an answer: "Everything belonged to him--but that was a trifle. The thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own." What do you think had called Kurtz back to his Inner Station in the "heart of darkness"?
2. **Marlow & Kurtz.** As Marlow progresses on his journey upriver, he grows increasingly "excited at the prospect of meeting Kurtz;" and when he thinks Kurtz might die before Marlow gets to him, Marlow confesses "extreme disappointment": he had looked forward to "a talk with Kurtz"—why? What do you think is the source of Marlow's fascination with Kurtz? Why does Marlow feel that to miss Kurtz would be to miss "my destiny in life"?
3. **African Wilderness as Setting & Character.** Marlow observes: "Going up the river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world," a past remembered "in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream," amid this "strange" African "silence, a "stillness" without "peace"--the "stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect." They "crawled toward Kurtz" and "penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness" (note this title allusion). "We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth"—an atavistic journey into the human past—"We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil." What is this "accursed inheritance" that Marlow envisions? Kurtz has travelled up this river before Marlow—what has happened to Kurtz?
4. **Attitude toward Africans.** Describe Marlow's attitude toward black Africans. In particular, consider the attitudes expressed around p110. Why does he say that "the worst of it" is suspecting "their not being inhuman"? Why is the thought of "remote kinship" judged "Ugly" by Marlow? What is their "terrible frankness"—"truth stripped of its cloak of time"? What does Marlow mean when he says: "The mind of man is capable of anything--because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future"? What does it take to prove that one is "as much of a man as these [Africans] on shore"?
5. **Self-Awareness.** Marlow admits that there is "an appeal to me in this fiendish row [the "wild and passionate uproar" of the Africans onshore]...Very well; I hear;...but I have a voice, too, and for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced." A bit later Marlow argues with himself about "whether or no I would talk openly with Kurtz," but doubts seriously whether it would matter: "my speech or my silence ...would be a mere futility," for "The essentials of this affair lay deep under the surface, beyond my reach, and beyond my power of meddling." Still, Marlow wants to talk to Kurtz and he must tell his [Marlow's own? Kurtz's] story of *Heart of Darkness*. Consider the theme of voice(s) : Marlow makes what he calls "the strange discovery" that Kurtz "presented himself as a voice." The Russian says, "You don't talk with that man--you listen to him." Consider Kurtz's pamphlet for the "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs"—Kurtz's 17-pages of "eloquence" and its "luminous and terrifying" postscript: "Exterminate the brutes!"—as examples of what Kurtz has to say.
6. **Motif.** There is a dominant motif of perception that becomes particularly clear in this section (no pun intended). For example, the section starts with Marlow believing that he could "see Kurtz [clearly] for the first time." The attack on the boat is filled with references to sight and blindness and Kurtz is even referred to as a "shade" [pun intended this time]. Why is this motif so central to this section? How does it influence the reader's opinion of Marlow? of Kurtz?

### *Heart of Darkness* Reading Guide Part III

1. **The Russian.** What is the function of the Russian in the novel? What motivates him? What is his relationship to Kurtz? Why does Marlow consider the Russian “bewildering” and “an insoluble problem”? What do we and Marlow learn about Kurtz from the Russian? What was Kurtz doing in the “heart of darkness”?
2. **Kurtz.** When Kurtz finally appears in the story, does he confirm the advance accounts that we have had of him? Marlow describes Kurtz repeatedly as “a voice”—again; what is the significance of this description? What other terms used to describe Kurtz seem to you particularly important?
3. **Marlow & Kurtz.** What is the source of Marlow's feeling of kinship with Kurtz? What leads him to call himself “Mr Kurtz's friend—in a way,” to confess that “I did not betray Mr. Kurtz—it was ordered I should never betray him,” to take into his keeping Kurtz's personal papers and his fiancée’s photograph, and to remain “loyal” to Kurtz to the end?
4. **Marlow & Kurtz.** When Marlow finds Kurtz after he disappeared from the ship, it is the “moment, when the foundations of our intimacy were being laid.” Marlow tries “to break the spell—the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness—that seemed to draw [Kurtz] to its pitiless breast”—and understands what “had driven him out to the edge of the forest...towards...the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations;...beguiled his unlawful soul...beyond the bounds of permitted aspiration.” What is driving Marlow into this terrible “intimacy” with Kurtz? Here, in the heart of darkness, Marlow proclaims: “Soul! If anybody had ever struggled with a soul, I am the man.” Kurtz's soul, “Being along in the wilderness,...had looked into itself, and by heavens! I tell you, it had gone mad. I had—for my sins, I suppose—to go through the ordeal of looking into it myself.” Interpret this moment of crisis—for Kurtz and for Marlow.
5. **Kurtz.** To what do Kurtz's final words, “The horror! The horror!” refer? It is because of Kurtz's last words, finally, that Marlow affirms, “Kurtz was a remarkable man.” Why does Marlow call these words “an affirmation, a moral victory”? and why does Marlow later lie to the Intended when she asks for Kurtz's final words?
6. **The Lie.** The final scene between Marlow and Kurtz's fiancée is charged throughout with verbal and dramatic irony: that is, when the speaker's implicit meanings differ from what he says, and/or the readers share with the author or character knowledge of which another character (i.e. the Intended) is ignorant. Identify some instances of such ironies in this final scene.
7. **Foreshadowing.** Revisit the opening section of Part I, from “when the Romans first came here” to “What redeems it is the idea only...an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to...” Consider the parallels foreshadowing what you now know happens to Kurtz, and to Marlow, in the heart of darkness. Reconsider also Marlow's allusion to a redeeming “idea” in relation to the Intended's “mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering...the faith that was in her,...that great and saving illusion” before which Marlow bows his head—and which Marlow preserves by telling a lie.
8. **Narrative Structure.** The novel concludes by returning to the narrative frame, set aboard the *Nellie*: the tide is now turning; the unnamed narrator observes that “the tranquil waterway [the Thames]” seems now “to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.” Marlow is described as sitting “apart...in the pose of a meditating Buddha”: do you think Marlow has achieved some sort of enlightenment? Have you? Now that you, too, have experienced Marlow's story, revisit and reinterpret the unnamed narrator's description of where the meaning lies of one of Marlow's tales. What, for you, seem to be the meaning(s) of *Heart of Darkness* ?