

# Heart of Darkness

## Study Guide

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For the novel by Joseph Conrad



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## Synopsis

*“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked:  
who can know it?” —Jeremiah 17:9 KJV*

Charles Marlow is a young man desiring adventure in exotic lands. With the help of an influential aunt, Marlow is assigned to be captain of a Belgian trading company’s steamer in the Congo Free State (modern-day Zaire) of Africa. As he prepares to journey up the Congo River to the company’s inner station, he hears tales about the station’s manager, Mr. Kurtz, an ivory trader who has amazing power over the natives of the region. Determined to meet this man, Marlow begins his journey. Instead of excitement and glamour, Marlow finds horror, and far up river, he encounters the mysterious Kurtz.

## Background Information

In 1483 Portuguese explorers first reached the mouth of the 3,000-mile-long Congo River (also known as the Zaire). At that time, much of the Congo River Basin was part of the Kingdom of Kongo which flourished during the 1400s and 1500s. Kongo embraced Christianity and invited Portuguese trade and technical assistance. Ambassadors were exchanged with the courts of Lisbon and the Vatican, and during the next three centuries traders and missionaries attempted to penetrate the interior of the region. By the end of the 17th century, internal struggles, incursions by neighboring states and conflict with Portugal left the Kingdom of Kongo in ruins. Forsaking Christianity, the people returned to their traditional religions.

Commercial interest in the region was mainly in ivory and slaves. At its peak between 1800 and 1850, the European slave trade shipped more than 150,000 people a year from the region. Arab slave trade was taking an additional 55,000 by 1875.

After 1850, European explorers pushed further into the region, but it was Henry Morton Stanley who, from 1874 to 1877, first navigated the length of the Congo River from its upper course to the Atlantic Ocean. Hired by King Leopold II of Belgium, Stanley set up posts and signed treaties with local tribal chiefs in the name of Leopold's International Congo Association. At the Berlin Conference on Africa (1884–1885) Leopold II was recognized as sovereign of the Congo Free State, an economic venture that had no institutional links with Belgium. Trade in the region increased, but so did economic exploitation of the region's resources and people. *Heart of Darkness* is set during the period of harsh exploitation before international criticism eventually prodded Leopold to take over the Congo Free State as a Belgian colony in 1908.

First published in 1910, *Heart of Darkness* contains characters and language that portray social attitudes of the time. Some of these portrayals appear bigoted and condescending to us today, but we must remember that they reflect many of the attitudes of the time. We must also remember that just as there were many at that time who did not accept bigotry and ethnocentrism, there are many today who cling to them as strongly as ever.

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13. Marlow tells of watching the river for hidden banks or sunken stones that would have “ripped the life out of the tin-pot steamboat. . . .” Marlow says:

When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality . . . fades. The inner truth is hidden—luckily, luckily. But I felt it all the same; I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey tricks, . . . I had to watch the steering, and circumvent those snags, and get the tin-pot along by hook or by crook. There was surface-truth enough in these things to save a wiser man.

On one level Marlow is talking about watching for snags to prevent damage to the boat. On another level what might Marlow be talking about?

14. When he is describing his reaction to natives dancing and shouting at them as the boat passed their village, Marlow says “the mind of man is capable of anything.” Do you think he means this as a positive or negative comment? Read Jeremiah 17:9. What does this say about the mind, or heart, of man? Read Romans 8:5–8. What does this passage say about the capabilities of a person’s mind? How do either of these passages compare with Marlow’s statement?
15. Marlow had read a report Kurtz wrote for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. How did the report characterize relations between Europeans and native Africans?

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What comparison might Conrad be making in these passages? What other passages can you find that would support this comparison? How does this affect your image of Kurtz?

18. From what you know about the attack on the steamboat and the Russian's statements, how did the natives feel about Kurtz?

### **Dig Deeper:**

19. Early in his story, Marlow says most people don't know the hardships and temptations of isolation because they have people around them and social structure. Kurtz has none of these and is accountable to no one except for the amount of ivory he sends out. What do the following verses say about accountability to others?

Proverbs 13:20

Proverbs 27:17

Ecclesiastes 4:9–12

Hebrews 3:12, 13

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Hebrews 10:24, 25

20. In describing or explaining what is happening to the Europeans in the Congo, Marlow says, “Principles won’t do. Acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags—rags that would fly off at the first good shake. No; you want a deliberate belief.” What does he mean?

Do you think this is true only in circumstances such as Marlow experienced? Read Matthew 6:19–21, 31–33; Hebrews 11:1–3, 6. Do these verses fulfill what Marlow was talking about?

What is the difference between relying on principles or possessions and relying on God? What do you rely on?

## Answer Key

*Note:* Most of the questions in Progeny Press study guides deal with students' understanding and interpretation of issues in the novel; therefore, most answers will be individual to the student. Progeny Press answer keys are designed to be as inclusive as possible for the teacher and/or parent, giving enough background and information to judge whether the student has grasped the essence of the issue and the question. We try to point out some directions students' answers might take, which directions might be best, and some errors that may appear. Students are not expected to answer as completely as the answers provided in the Answer Key.

### *Part I*

#### *Vocabulary:*

Part 1: yawl: the smallest mast on a boat; mizzenmast: the farthest most mast on a three-masted ship; man-of-war: a warship; ensign: a commissioned officer ranking below a lieutenant; an emblem, badge, etc., that may show rank; aft: at or near the stern (back end) of a ship.

Part 2: 1. adjective / practicing self-denial; 2. adjective / calm, composed; 3. adverb / peacefully, tranquilly; 4. adjective / majestic, inspiring awe; 5. noun / state of changelessness or being resistant to change; 6. noun / a burial vault or tomb; 7. noun / sleepwalker; 8. adverb / with forceful expression, pompously; 9. noun / something that is puzzling or inexplicable; 10. adjective / tasteless, lacking flavor or zest; 11. adjective / mournful or sad; 12. verb / obliterated, removed; 13. adjective / conciliating, appeasing; 14. noun / voracity, greed; 15. verb / mixing, joining together.

#### *Questions:*

1. The setting is a boat on the Thames River near Gravesend, England. They were in the *Nellie* on the edge of the sea. It was almost dusk.
2. Marlow is saying that at one time England was an unexplored place, a blank space on a map of the known world. He is drawing a comparison with Africa, which was at that time largely unexplored. Marlow is laying the groundwork for the story of his journey up the Congo River into unexplored Africa by asking his listeners to imagine what it must have been like to be among the first Romans to explore the British Isles and sail up the Thames. He is also placing the events he is about to recount within the framework of history. What happened in the Congo also happened in England, as at one time the natives of the British Isles were the "savages."
3. Imperialism is the policy of extending a nation's power or territory by establishing dominance over other nations through political, military, or economic means. Marlow felt most people colonized other lands because of greed, ambition, or lust for power.
4. Marlow went to the Company seeking a position and was turned down. He then went to his aunt, who used her influence to help him get the job.
5. Marlow's aunt thought of the work of the Company and Marlow's job as noble missionary work for western civilization—that they would convert the African "savage" with new laws, culture, and clothing. She could only understand Marlow's work in terms of nobleness, not curiosity or desire for adventure.
6. To the brickmaker, Marlow is perceived as the kind of man who will work and trade for virtuous reasons or causes instead of exploiting the natives. He sees Marlow as someone who comes highly