

HEART OF DARKNESS

Close Reading Worksheet One Chapter 1

Answer on this sheet. Write notes or sentences as directed by your teacher.

1. The setting in this story is nautical. List at least three terms which suggest that the narrator is a seaman.
2. What mood is conveyed in the second paragraph? Through what words and literary device does the author achieve this mood?
3. How is Marlow described? To whom is he compared? What might this comparison suggest?
4. The narrator refers to the sun as being "stricken to death" and to the tidal current's "crowded... memories." What mood is created by this imagery/personification?
5. Tell why the narrator alludes to several vessels of former days.
6. Conrad reinforces this mood of darkness, of timelessness, of Marlow's transcendental insights. Cite examples of this reinforcement.
7. Images of light and darkness help to establish the initial atmosphere of this tale. However, instead of acting as contrasts for each other, the light and dark combine to produce a more muted, almost hazy effect. Quote an instance of this use.
8. Marlow observes that he felt uneasy about his adventure even at the beginning. His sense of foreboding is obvious in his impressions of the Company's office and the preliminaries he attended to prior to being commissioned. Cite at least four passages that convey this sense of foreboding.
9. Identify at least two of the more noticeable or disquieting events that mark Marlow's passages to and arrival at the Company's station.
10. One of the clearest instances of foreshadowing occurs just prior to Marlow's descent into the ravine and grove. Cite this passage, and tell its effect.
11. Marlow's description of the grove of death is a powerful, compelling invective against imperialism. What effect is achieved by Marlow's abrupt departure from the grove and his meeting with the Company's chief accountant?

•TEACHER'S GUIDE

Heart of Darkness & The Secret Sharer

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Joseph Conrad, whose real name was Jozef Korzeniowski, was born in Poland in 1857, the son of a revolutionary who spent years in exile for his work to free Poland from Russian rule. As a teenager Conrad became fascinated by the sea. He joined the French merchant marine in 1874 and moved to the British service in 1880, becoming a British citizen and rising to the rank of captain by 1888. In 1890 Conrad made a trip to the Belgian Congo, the site of *Heart of Darkness*. At the age of nearly forty, he began writing, drawing on his wide experience of life at sea in the South Pacific, Africa, and Latin America. In 1896 he married and left sailing, settling in southeastern England for the rest of his life. There he wrote many novels, to growing popular acclaim, and died in 1924. He was one of the most respected writers of his era and is a rare example of a novelist who became a great success in a language other than his native tongue.

MAJOR WORKS

Lord Jim (1900) Narrated by the character Marlow from *Heart of Darkness*, this novel tells the story of a man's lifelong struggle to atone for what he sees as a youthful act of cowardice on shipboard.

Nostramo (1904) This tale of politics, revolution, and greed in an imaginary Latin American country is often considered Conrad's finest novel.

The Secret Agent (1907) A petty spy finds his own life is his most dangerous enemy when a bombing plot goes awry.

Victory (1915) Axel Heyst tries to withdraw from the world on his own small South Pacific island, but love and the greed and hostility of others draw him back to disaster and triumph.

CHIEF CHARACTERISTICS

Conrad's fiction is notable both for the vividness of its surface and the depth of the issues that lie beneath the surface. Like the sea of which he writes so often, his stories glitter above but are full of dark complexity beneath. Drawing on his own experience of foreign lands and strange events (he traveled up the Congo and had a first command like that of the captain in *The Secret Sharer*), Conrad tells stories with vivid details and dramatic incidents that capture the imagination. His writing is extremely visual, with a special emphasis on the contrasts of light and darkness.

But Conrad is concerned with more than exciting tales and precise descriptions. His settings are often symbolic, and he uses the incidents in his fiction to ask large questions about human freedom, personal behavior, and the meaning of life. In most of his books, characters are placed in extreme, often isolated, situations where they must choose between civilized manners or ethical codes and the wilder, less rational forces of nature or instinct. Some, like Kurtz, collapse under the strain, while others, like the young captain, make what appears to be the right choice.

Conrad's fiction, due to his indirect manner of storytelling, offers no easy answers to the problems it raises. We can never be sure if Marlow fully understands what has happened, or even if the Captain is telling us about things as they actually occurred or as he perceived them. In a larger sense we must judge for ourselves what Kurtz meant by "the horror," and whether Marlow's lie to the dead man's fiancée is justified. At the end of each story, we are left looking out over the dark waters, knowing that something important has happened but wondering what to make of it all.

RELATED READING

Herman Melville, *Billy Budd* Like Conrad's Leggatt, the young seaman Billy Budd is provoked to kill a shipmate but with far different consequences from those in *The Secret Sharer*.

William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* Cast away on a tropical island, a group of English schoolboys discovers the darkness in their own civilized exteriors.

Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* Two men of similar appearance achieve dissimilar fates in revolutionary France.