



Heart of Darkness Study Guide

by Bethine Ellie

For the novel by Joseph Conrad

CD Version



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A Progeny Press Study Guide

by Bethine Ellie

with Andrew Clausen, Michael Gilleland

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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.

Part II

“The inner truth is hidden—luckily, luckily.”

Vocabulary:

Part 1:

Sometimes we can discover the general meaning of a word by finding its *root word* and then looking at the prefixes and suffixes added to it. For the words below, find the root word and write its definition, then write the definition of the original word.

1. pestiferous—root word: _____
root word definition: _____
definition: _____
2. sagacious—root word: _____
root word definition: _____
definition: _____
3. intrepidity—root word: _____
root word definition: _____
definition: _____
4. incontinently—root word: _____
root word definition: _____
definition: _____
5. farcical—root word: _____
root word definition: _____
definition: _____
6. profundity—root word: _____
root word definition: _____
definition: _____

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7. promptitude—root word: _____
root word definition: _____
definition: _____

Part 2:

Look up the underlined word and define it. Paraphrase the sentence in your own words.

1. Can you imagine such impudence!
definition: _____
paraphrase: _____
2. I . . . remained still, having no inducement to change my position.
definition: _____
paraphrase: _____
3. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention.
definition: _____
paraphrase: _____
4. I looked on them as you would any human being . . . when brought to the test of an inexorable physical necessity.
definition: _____
paraphrase: _____
5. [I]f he lost sight of you, he instantly became the prey of an abject funk. . . .
definition: _____
paraphrase: _____

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6. [A]t the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you. . . .

definition: _____

paraphrase:

Questions:

1. As Part II begins, the manager of the central station is discussing Kurtz. What is the manager's concern?
2. Marlow and the crew of his steamer took a two-month trip up the river. What was the main challenge Marlow, as captain of the steamer, faced on the river?
3. Find three phrases Marlow uses to describe the jungle. What mood do these descriptions convey?
4. How did the fireman think the boiler worked?

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5. What was discovered at the reed hut 50 miles below the inner station?

6. On the way up the river the steamer encountered fog and was surrounded by unseen enemies. What did the cannibals on board the boat want to do? Why?

7. Marlow marvelled that the cannibals on board the steamer showed restraint:

Restraint! What possible restraint? Was it superstition, disgust, patience, fear—or some kind of primitive honor? . . . It's really easier to face bereavement, dishonor, and the perdition of one's soul—than this kind of prolonged hunger. . . . Restraint! I would just as soon have expected restraint from a hyena prowling amongst the corpses of a battlefield.

From what did Marlow say they were restraining themselves?

Why might Marlow have marvelled at this restraint?

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8. What happened to Marlow's helmsman during the attack?

9. Why did Marlow throw the body of the dead helmsman overboard?

10. Why does the station manager dislike or fear Kurtz?

11. What does the Russian say is the reason the steamer was attacked?

Analysis:

12. Read Genesis 3:17–19. As the steamboat moves up the river, Marlow says, “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.” To what is Conrad alluding? What does it imply about Marlow's surroundings?

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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 note did Kurtz write at the bottom of the last page? What do you think this means?

16. Kurtz wrote that Europeans “must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings.” How could this attitude lead him to accept “unspeakable rites” offered to him at midnight dances? Compare Kurtz’s actions with Paul’s in Acts 14:8–18. From their actions, which had more reason to accept worship, Kurtz or Paul? Was Kurtz’s or Paul’s response best? Why?
17. Read Ezekiel 28:12–19 (generally accepted to be referring to Satan); Luke 4:5, 6; 2 Corinthians 4:4, 11:14. Compare these verses with Marlow’s descriptions of Kurtz:

The point was in his being a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts the one that stood out preëminently . . . was his ability to talk, his words—the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the contemptible, the pulsating stream of light. . . .

You should have heard him say, “My ivory. . . . My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my—” everything belonged to him.

He had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land—I mean literally.

He began with the argument that we whites . . . “must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings—we approach them with the might as of a deity.”

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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?

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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 recommended, has connections and influence, and whose goal is the civilization of the natives. In this way, he is seen as being similar to Kurtz.
7. He has accomplished something. He has been trying to instruct one of the native women about the station. He holds to the discipline expected of his position while all those around him seem to let discipline slip away.
8. It has sunk to the bottom of the river. It needs serious repairs before it can be taken up river. Two days before Marlow’s arrival, the steamer had struck stones on the river bottom under the command of a volunteer captain. (Marlow implies something suspicious about the circumstances, but does not go into it.)
9. a. The accountant describes Kurtz as a first-class agent; a remarkable person in charge of a very important trading post. Kurtz sends in more ivory than all the other trading posts together. He says Kurtz is someone who will go far in the Company. b. The manager calls Kurtz the best agent he had, an exceptional man of great importance to the Company. c. The brickmaker says Kurtz is a prodigy, an emissary of pity and progress, a universal genius. He speaks of Kurtz as an agent for the cause of bringing science and civilization to the natives. He also sees Kurtz as a man with influential people behind him.
10. The manager had worked in the region since his youth. He sees Marlow, like Kurtz, as having influential people behind him, and this probably causes him to worry about his position with the Company.
11. Marlow describes the manager as inspiring “neither love nor fear, nor even respect. He inspired uneasiness.” The manager was healthy, unlike others in the region. His behavior seemed to be a façade, all external, but inside him was all darkness.
12. Marlow is repulsed by the “philanthropic pretense,” the façade that Europe was overtly interested in making the Africans better people with better lives and better living conditions. He knows that *he* is not going as an “emissary of