



AP Literary Analysis: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

We are going to take our own literary journey into Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The vehicle for our trek will not be a dilapidated steamer; we'll travel with the currents of literary analysis. Together, we'll explore the dimensions of the story with the tools for critical considerations.

Specifically, each student will be assigned one question for which he or she will be the resident expert. Please respond to your question using specific textual evidence (either direct or indirect). Outside research is permissible as long as proper attribution is made. Prepare to share your answer via a slide and image on our class PowerPoint presentation. And when we finish the journey, we'll speak knowingly of the adventure. Bon voyage, mes chers étudiants!

1. **Setting** reaches beyond the two-dimensions of time and place. The full exploration of setting can reveal stunning literary facets. In this novella, what are the various settings of the novel? Go wide on this to consider physical, geographic, social, economic, and political settings.
2. **Point of view:** From what vantage point is the story told? Who is the stated narrator? What is his relationship to the tale? Who is the real narrator? Why would Conrad layer the *narrative framework* in this manner? What does it achieve?
3. **Mood:** Revisit the opening pages of the novel. What mood is established? Record images and phrases (note the page reference) that establish this overall mood. What other rhetorical devices are employed to develop mood?
4. **Character:** Who are the major characters? What is their relationship with one another – both the stated and real relationship? Who are the minors? What do they reveal about the majors (remember the dance between the two).
5. **Characterization:** Interestingly, Conrad awards names to only three characters; the rest are identified only by the position they hold. Please identify the named and list the unnamed. What might Conrad's design be in this? Consider possible literary reasons. What methods are employed to reveal character?
6. **Character Motivation:** Grapple with Kurtz for a moment. His transformation from a man who enters the Congo with a moral purpose to one seemingly bereft of humanity is stunning in its scope and scale. What explains why he changes so significantly? Consider the ways.
7. **Archetype:** If we accept the premise that the river serves as both an archetype and a plot device (as Marlow travels the river, the plot flows with him), trace how both Kurtz and Marlowe change from the beginning of their journeys until their ends. Use direct textual references as well as summative comments.
8. **Archetype:** The text is rife with them. Will you examine how Conrad employs *fog (mist, haze)*, the *wilderness* (the woods, jungle), the *river, light, dark*, and *snakes* are employed as

central archetypes? How do they add to the story?

9. **Archetype:** It's unanimous: literary critics note the truest aim of the quest is self-discovery (self-knowledge). The journey is ultimately about transformation. What does our main character discover about himself? What effect does that revelation have on him?
10. **Allusion:** Research the story of the three Fates. Explain the story, image the Fates, and explore the metaphor it makes in the novella.
11. **Allusion:** Investigate the architecture of the Greek underworld. Notice its designs, gatekeepers, rivers, ferryman, groves, and characters. What comparisons can be drawn to *Heart of Darkness*?
12. **Conflict:** All of plot is driven by conflict, both the external and internal. The tensions engage the reader's interest and offer instruction on how to walk through difficulties. Identify the external and internal conflicts that fuel the story. What might a reader find enlightening in the struggle? Discuss.
13. **Symbols:** What central symbols and motifs are woven into the fabric of the novel? To what effect?
14. **Title:** Describe the significance of the title: what is the literal and figurative meaning of the "heart of darkness?"
15. **Character foil:** In literature, a **foil** is a character who, by sharp contrast, serves to stress and highlight the distinctive temperament of another character. The characters have similar qualities but with a stark difference. It is the difference that is most revelatory. What character foils does Conrad develop? To what effect?
16. **Characterization:** What is the role of women in this novella? Why? Explore and discuss.
17. **Style:** How would you describe Conrad's style of writing? Do you believe he is a literary artist? Explain your thinking on this matter.
18. **Dualities:** Polarities or dualities (think yin and yang) are opposites that are woven into the story to create both tension and unities. In a novel such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain posits a host of dualities amid the episodic plot to hold it together: black and white, free and slave, north and south, gentry and crooks, child and adult, water and land. What polarities or dualities are woven in *Heart of Darkness*?
19. **Theme:** What are the themes of the story? Remember to express in full and complete ideas.
20. **Intertextuality:** Intertextuality is the dialogue or conversation among texts. The intertextual dialogue deepens and enriches the reading experience, bringing multiple layers of meaning to the text, some of which readers may not even consciously notice. Please read T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" and note the relationship with *Heart of Darkness*. How does the poem reflect the novella?