

IB History HL

20th Century Topics

Summer 2009 Reading Study Guide

In reading Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, from a historical studies perspective you should be thinking along lines of how to answer these and similar questions:

- When is this book taking place? What is this Imperialism? What is its significance to the events of the novel *Heart of Darkness*?
- How do Europeans (Westerners) view Africa? How do they see themselves in relation to both Africa and Africans? Does everyone view this relationship the same way? If not, how widespread are these differing views and which seems to be the principal majority viewpoint? Why is that?
- Why *Heart of Darkness*? What qualities about Africa are “dark”? Describe the use of “darkness” both in the book’s title and as a symbol throughout the text for relations between civilization and culture. What does darkness represent? What is civilization vs. barbarism? Are they really that far apart? Is its definition constant or does it change?
- What methods of breaching the interior of Africa are available to the Europeans of the 19th Century? In what ways does this “limit” the geography of the novel? If they are so powerful, why does this seem so limiting? What does this say about Europeans and their perceptions of themselves and the world?
- The Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe has claimed that *Heart of Darkness* is an “*offensive and deplorable book*” that “*set[s] Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace will be manifest.*” Achebe says that Conrad does not provide enough of an outside frame of reference to enable the novel to be read as ironic or critical of imperialism. Based on the evidence in the text, be able to argue for or against Achebe’s assertion.
- How does physical illness relate to madness? How does one’s environment relate to one’s mental state in this book? What does that say about the relationship between European and Africa? Between European and African?
- Why does Marlow lie to Kurtz’s fiancée about Kurtz’s last words? Why not tell her the truth, or tell her that Kurtz had no last words, rather than affirming her sentimental and mundane ideas? In what ways does this reflect common European perceptions of the time?
- How was *Heart of Darkness* received in Europe upon its publication? What was its impact if any? Why do you suppose that is so?

On a related note, you should plan to view/watch the movie *Apocalypse Now*, which is a modern analogy of *Heart of Darkness* using the Vietnam War as the backdrop, instead of Africa.

On your return to school, be prepared to hold an inner/outer seminar on both the *Heart of Darkness* as a novel, as a reflection of historical events, and as a comparison piece – the movie *Apocalypse Now*.