

Heart of Darkness Questions

Study Guide

1. What is significant about the manager's and the brickmaker's characteristic blabbering? What does it say about their characters?
2. How does Marlow receive information about Kurtz? Are these sources reliable? What expectations does Marlow form about Kurtz based on this hearsay?
3. What is Marlow's style of narration? Does the fact that he is telling the story compromise our belief in its validity? Is he a reliable narrator? What might be his goal in relating the story to his fellow passengers?
4. What is Marlow's opinion of women's position in society? Does Conrad seem to agree with this? Which characters demonstrate Marlow's claim and which dispute it?
5. Although men make up the majority of the authority figures in the book, powerful women are not utterly absent. Name at least two powerful women and state how they exercise their power.
6. Which characters are concerned with gaining more power and rank within the Company? What does their obsession for power cost them?
7. How is Kurtz's power more absolute than any other characters'? Conversely, how is his control over himself especially weak? How does this tie into Marlow's comments about his "lack of restraint"?
8. How are the white pilgrims deprived of their senses and reason as they descend deeper and deeper in the interior?
9. How are the differences between white and black people depicted in *Heart of Darkness*? What kinds of activities does each group participate in?
10. What kinds of white European expectations does Marlow bring into his journey up the Congo? How are they dispelled? Look specifically at the examples of the accountant, manager, brickmaker, and Kurtz. What is Marlow's attitude towards the native Africans?
11. How is Kurtz's attitude towards the black Africans ambiguous? How might he be viewed as the ultimate symbol of imperialism and black subjugation? Alternatively, how might he be read as the exact opposite?
12. At first glance, what does civilization represent? What does nature represent? Does this distinction hold true as the novel progresses?
13. How does the concept of civilization become problematic as the novel progresses? How are the Company's attempts to 'civilize' the Africans hypocritical?
14. If nature is madness-inducing, what does this say about human nature, especially the native Africans?
15. How do different aspects of nature, especially the river and the jungle, become characters in their own right? What is nature's attitude towards man?
16. What is the "heart of darkness" of the novel's title? Think in terms of abstract concepts as well as of places and characters.