

Heart of Darkness
Lesson 6
Handout 15

Name _____

Date _____

Heart of Darkness—Layers of Meaning

Directions: Joseph Conrad's novel is a rich example of the many layers of meaning often found in good literature. Read the following description of some of these levels of interpretation.

1. It is an adventure story.

This is evident in chapter 2, replete with suspense, hazards of river navigation, fog traps, armed conflict, a mysterious written warning, even intimations of cannibalism and blood-filled shoes.

2. It is a travelogue.

Like a story from *National Geographic*, it describes an exciting trip to an exotic and intriguing place.

3. It is a condemnation of European imperialism.

Marlow/Conrad presents the Belgian ivory trade as an evil and destructive force devastating to Africa and Africans.

4. It is a document about the consequences of brutal exploitation on the imperialists.

The devastation of imperialism is equally destructive to the white invaders, from Fresleven to Kurtz. Notice the ironic reference to the pilgrims; their devotion to profit is as intense as a religion.

5. It is the story of an epic journey into the underworld.

Like *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, and *The Inferno*, Conrad's novel describes a kind of descent into hell, beginning with Brussels (the vestibule) and culminating in the kaleidoscope of horrors at Kurtz's station.

6. It is the story of a journey to self-knowledge. It tells the story of Marlow's growth from work-oriented seaman and adventurer to enlightened storyteller.

Read this way, the novel is less about Kurtz and more about Marlow. For him, the events he is recounting served as an epiphany, a life-changing source of insight.

7. It is a study of global race relations.

On this level the novel is a subject of substantial controversy. Here white and black are polar opposites. The white world seems to represent culture and business acumen; the black world is savage and unknowable. Marlow himself often uses derogatory language to refer to the indigenous people. Does Conrad predict a world of harmonious interracial harmony?