

# Joseph Conrad Searches for the Truth about Humanity

## Lesson Plan

**Grade Level:** 9-12

**Curriculum Focus:** Literature

**Lesson Duration:** One class period

### ***Student Objectives***

- Examine the debate among critics over Conrad's ending to *Heart of Darkness*.
- Write their own ending, in which Marlow tells Kurtz's fiancée the truth about Kurtz's last words and how he had changed.

### ***Materials***

- Discovery School video on *unitedstreaming: Great Books: Heart of Darkness*  
Search for this video by using the video title (or a portion of it) as the keyword.

Selected clips that support this lesson plan:

- Film Adaptations of
- A New Kind of Colonialism: Marlow's River Journey and Modern Global Conflict
- Kurtz's Descent into Moral Depravity (no title on this chapter)

### ***Procedures***

1. As a class, discuss Conrad's ending for the novel, *Heart of Darkness*. Encourage them to share emotional responses as well as their own analytic interpretations. As this activity proceeds, students will have a chance to write their own ending for the novel. (In Conrad's version, Marlowe decides not to tell Kurtz's fiancée about her betrothed's final degradation. When she asks what Kurtz's final words were, Marlow wants to say, "The horror! The horror!" but he can't. Instead, he tells her that Kurtz spoke her name.)
2. After students discuss their responses and interpretations of Conrad's ending, share with them critics' comments on the ending. Critics have often written about Marlow's white lie at the end. Some critics say it illustrates Conrad's ideas about how we all must be protected from the savagery inside us, just as Marlowe protected Kurtz's fiancée from the ugly truth about the decline of the man she intended to marry. Other critics, however, call it the novel's one striking moment of weakness, when Conrad just couldn't bear to keep telling the novel's heavy story.
3. With the preceding discussion in mind, ask your students to write an alternative scene in which Marlow does tell Kurtz's fiancée the truth, not only about Kurtz's last words but also about everything Kurtz had become.

4. As students start prewriting, ask them to consider the following:
  - What words Marlow might use in talking to Kurtz’s fiancée.
  - What feelings he might have while he talks to her and how he might show or not show those feelings.
  - How Kurtz’s fiancée might react to what she hears from Marlow.
  - What might happen between Marlow and Kurtz’s fiancée after he discloses the truth.
5. As students begin their drafts, encourage them to stay with Conrad’s tone and writing style.
6. Allow time for peer editing and revision. Then ask volunteers to read their new endings aloud, leading into a discussion about the choices that students made.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. In *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz is depicted as an upstanding European who has been transformed by his time in the jungle – away from his home, away from familiar people and food, and away from any community moral support that might have helped prevent him from becoming such a tyrant. There was nothing and no one, in essence, to keep him on the straight and narrow. Have you ever found yourself in a similar situation? Was there ever a time in which you felt alone, in a strange environment, or different from everyone else around you? How did that experience affect you or change you? Did you find yourself pulled toward base, cruel instincts as Kurtz was? What did you do to cope with those feelings?
2. Kurtz’s dying words are a cryptic whisper: “The horror, the horror.” What “horror” could Kurtz have been talking about? Is there more than one possibility? Why do you think Conrad made this scene so ambiguous?
3. *Heart of Darkness* can sometimes seem to readers like an incredibly dark, depressing story that paints civilizations in a very negative light. Did it seem this way to you, or did the story contain any positive moments? If so, what were they? Why did they seem positive?

### **Assessment**

Use the following three-point rubric to evaluate students' work during this lesson.

- 3 points: Student’s new ending has Marlow telling Kurtz’s fiancée the truth about Kurtz’s last words and everything Kurtz had become; includes believable words, feelings, and actions; writing clearly retains Conrad’s tone and style; no errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics.
- 2 points: Student’s new ending has Marlow telling Kurtz’s fiancée the truth about Kurtz’s last words and everything Kurtz had become; includes somewhat believable words, feelings, and actions; writing retains some of Conrad’s tone and style; some errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics.
- 1 point: Student’s new ending does not have Marlow telling Kurtz’s fiancée the truth about Kurtz’s last words and everything Kurtz had become; does not include believable words,

feelings, and actions; writing does not retain Conrad's tone and style; many errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics.

## Vocabulary

### apocalypse

*Definition:* An imminent cosmic cataclysm.

*Context:* In the film *Apocalypse Now*, director Francis Ford Coppola attempted to translate the events of *Heart of Darkness* into similar events during the war in Vietnam.

### colonialism

*Definition:* Control by one power over a dependent area or people.

*Context:* Colonialism in Africa was troubled by the greed of the Europeans who dominated the continent.

### novella

*Definition:* A work of fiction intermediate in length and complexity between a short story and a novel.

*Context:* *Heart of Darkness* is a novella packed with memorable descriptions of the jungle.

### primeval

*Definition:* Of or relating to the earliest ages in the world's history.

*Context:* Conrad's novella is the story of a journey up a great river into a primeval jungle.

## Academic Standards

### Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

McREL's Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education addresses 14 content areas. To view the standards and benchmarks, visit <http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>.

This lesson plan addresses the following national standards:

- Language Arts—Reading: Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process.
- Language Arts—Reading: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts.
- Science—Life Science: Understands biological evolution and the diversity of life.
- Technology: Understands the relationships among science, technology, society, and the individual.

## **Support Materials**

Develop custom worksheets, educational puzzles, online quizzes, and more with the free teaching tools offered on the Discoveryschool.com Web site. Create and print support materials, or save them to a Custom Classroom account for future use. To learn more, visit

- <http://school.discovery.com/teachingtools/teachingtools.html>

