**Reading Questions for *Heart of Darkness*Keyed to the Bedford edition by Ross C. Murfin (2nd ed.)**

The best beginning procedure is always to read the work (or at least a part) all the way through so that you know what's happening. The notes can help if you're stuck, but try to get the big picture of a part before getting bogged down in details. Read through, then go back and clear up details. Then you're ready to think about the questions.

***PART 1 (pages 17-48)***

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| 1. | **The Opening (17-24).** What is the situation at the opening of the work? Where are we, and who is there? How does **the narrator** connect the present and the past? |
| 2. | What does **Marlow** mean by his first statement (middle of p. 19)? Who is Marlow and how is he different from the others there with him? What does it mean that to Marlow "the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale . . . ."? How does Marlow describe the Romans in Britain? (Julius Caesar first attacked Britain in 55 BCE; Britain was finally conquered and made a part of the Roman Empire in 43 CE, and the Roman legions left in 410 CE.) |
| 3. | Notice the break in Marlow's narrative on page 21 and watch for others. How does the narrator describe Marlow's pose (page 21)? Look carefully at the rest of that paragraph on the middle of page 21. What is Marlow saying? What is the important element for him? |
| 4. | Why did Marlow want to go to Africa? See his discussion of maps on page 22, and the difference between the maps of his childhood and the more recent ones. |
| 5. | How did Marlow get his appointment as captain of a riverboat for the Company? Who is **Captain Fresleven**, what part does he play in Marlow's appointment, and how much of a part is he likely to play in the rest of the story? |
| 6. | **In the Sepulchral City (24-27).** The next episode takes place in "a city that always makes me think of a whited sepulchre" (24, actually Brussels, Belgium; the term "sepulchral city" appears on p. 88). From where has Marlow gotten the term "whited sepulchre"? (This isn't in the story, so don't worry if you don't recognize it.) What does Marlow make of the people he meets at the Company headquarters? What do you make of them? What is the effect on Marlow and the reader of the **two women knitting**? How does he comment about the map he sees there? Can you figure out what the various colors stand for? Who is "the**great man** himself"? What is the effect of "*Morituri te salutant*"? The footnote gives a translation. Do you know where the phrase comes from? What happens when Marlow sees the **doctor**? What happens when Marlow visits his **aunt** to say his farewells? How does the aunt view Marlow's mission? How does Marlow respond to this. How does Marlow feel as he is about to embark for Africa? |
| 7. | **Sailing to Africa (27-29).** How does Marlow describe the thirty days he spent sailing to the mouth of the river? What unusual things does he note, and how does he respond to them? |
| 8. | **At the Outer Station (29-34).** Marlow's first stop is at "the seat of the government" (Boma) near the mouth of the river (page 29), but he then travels to "a place thirty miles higher up" (Matadi, pages 29-34). Marlow later refers to Matadi as the "outer station" (notice that Conrad generalizes the story by omitting all specific place names.) What does the **captain** of the ship tell him? |
| 9. | What are the first things Marlow sees at the outer station (pages 30-31)? What terms does Marlow use to describe what he sees? How does Marlow seem to respond to what he sees? How does he generalize his experience so far in the passage about different kinds of devils (middle of page 31)? How does the Marlow's description of what he sees continue (pages 31-32)? How and why does he become involved? |
| 10. | What happens in Marlow's encounter with the **chief accountant** (pages 32-34)? What is surprising about this man, given what we and Marlow have just seen? How does Marlow respond to him? Who is **Mr. Kurtz** and what does Marlow learn about him from the chief accountant? What does he learn from the caravan that arrives (page 34)? |
| 11. | **Journey to the Central Station (34-35).** What does Marlow see on his journey to the central station (Leopoldville / Stanley Pool) and what are his responses? What does he think of the **white companion** and what happens to him? What does Marlow mean by "I felt I was becoming scientifically interesting" (35)? |
| 12. | **At the Central Station (35-46).** What does Marlow learn about his ship? What happened to it? What is Marlow's first reaction to the **manager** (36)? What is the effect of Marlow's addressing his audience at the top of p. 37? Keep watching for such returns to the situation in which Marlow is telling his story. What does Marlow learn from the manager, especially about Kurtz? |
| 13. | Who are the "faithless pilgrims" and why does Marlow call them that (38)? Keep this in mind; from here on, he will simply refer to these men as "pilgrims." What is interesting to Marlow about the fire (38-39)? |
| 14. | Who is the **young agent** (39) and what does Marlow learn from him? Note that Marlow later identifies him as **this fellow** (39). Why are the pilgrims waiting and what are they waiting for? |
| 15. | What does Marlow learn from the "fellow" about Kurtz? Pay attention to Kurtz' painting (40); what is it a painting of? What does it mean that the "fellow" identifies Marlow as of the "new [. . .] gang of virtue" (41) and how does this connect Marlow to Kurtz? |
| 16. | Who is the **man with the moustaches** (41 but originally appearing on 36) and what does Marlow learn from him? Why does Marlow call the "fellow" "this papier-mâché Mephisopheles" (41)? |
| 17. | What thoughts about the river does Marlow have as he leans against the wreck of his steamer (41-42)? What are his throughts about the forest and Kurtz? How do these thoughts lead to the break in the narrative on 42-43 as the narrator briefly takes over? |
| 18. | What is the importance of rivets to Marlow and why are they a problem? Who is the **foreman** (44) and why does Marlow like him? How does the foreman respond to what Marlow says about rivets? Which man was right? |
| 19. | What is the **Eldorado Exploring Expedition** (45-46) and why are they there? What does Marlow think of them? Who is the **leader** of the expedition? |

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***PART 2 (pages 46-71)***

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| 1. | **At the Central Station, continued (46-49).** What does Marlow learn by overhearing the manager and his uncle? What do they say about Kurtz and what is happening upriver? How does Marlow respond to this talk about Kurtz? What views did Kurtz hold about the nature of the colonial project? |
| 2. | Note what Marlow says on the bottom of page 48 about "the profound darkness of its heart." Watch for appearances of some version (such as this one) of the book's title. |
| 3. | What happens to the Eldorado Exploring Expedition and how does Marlow respond? |
| 4. | **The Journey Up the River (49-53)**. How does Marlow describe the river? Why does this cause him to insult his companions on the boat in the Thames and thus to create another break in the narrative? How does Marlow go on to describe the journey as "we penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness" (51)? |
| 5. | What does Marlow think of his **crew** (51-52)? Who are they? What does he think of the **fireman** (52)? |
| 6. | **Approaching the Inner Station (53-63).** What does Marlow find when the boat stops for wood (53)? What is the value of the book, according to Marlow? What does he find written in it? What can we learn about the speed of the boat from the numbers on page 54? How far is the boat from the inner station? |
| 7. | What happens the next morning in the fog? How does Marlow describe the cry (55)? How do the responses of the whites and the blacks differ? How does the **head-man** of the African crew respond (56)? Look closely at how Marlow responds to the idea that the Africans are hungry (56-58)? What attribute does he find in the Africans that he does not find in the whites? |
| 8. | What is the effect of having Marlow say "The approach to this Kurtz [. . .] was beset by as many dangers as though he had been an enchanted princess sleeping in a fabulous castle" (58)? |
| 9. | What happens as the boat approaches the inner station (59-63)? How do the pilgrims respond to the attack? What does the **helmsman** do and what is the result? How does Marlow scare off the attackers and how does he interpret their wail (62)? What does Marlow think has happened to Kurtz? |
| 10. | **Kurtz Interlude (63-67).** Why is Marlow so disappointed by the idea that Kurtz is dead (63)? What things come to his mind as he thinks of meeting Kurtz and what followed (64)? Pay special attention to the "girl" and the "lie" for future reference. What did Kurtz look like? What is meant by his reference to "My Intended"? What seems to be going on in Marlow's statement that "The wilderness [. . .] had [. . .] sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation" (64)? What sort of picture of Kurtz do we get from this interlude on him? Why is Marlow so bothered by Kurtz? |
| 11. | What is the report and what does Marlow think of it? What is the argument of the report? How is the report modified by the handwritten statement at the end? What sort of dancing is Marlow taking about? What have we learned about Kurtz so far? Why does Marlow also think again about the dead helmsman (67)? |
| 12. | **At the Inner Station (67-71).** What does Marlow do with the helmsman's body? Why? What do the pilgrims assume has happened to Kurtz and the station (68)? |
| 13. | What does Marlow see as he looks at the inner station through his binoculars (68)? Keep this description in mind. |
| 14. | Who is the first person Marlow meets? Why is he describes as "a harlequin" (69). Is this the sort of person we (or Marlow) would expect to meet here? How does the fact that he is a Russian help to solve the mystery of the book? (From here on he will be referred to as **the Russian**.) |
| 15. | Why, according to the Russian, did the natives attack the boat? What does he think of Kurtz? |

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***PART 3 (pages 71-95)***

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| 1. | **At the Inner Station, continued (71-80).** How does Marlow describe the Russian at the beginning of Part 3? What does the Russian tell Marlow to do with Kurtz (71)? How does the Russian describe his relations with Kurtz? How did Kurtz get so much ivory? |
| 2. | What does Marlow see when he turns his binoculars on Kurtz' compound again (73-74)? How does what Marlow sees relate to the idea of restraint? How does Marlow evaluate Kurtz on p. 74? How, according to the Russian, did Kurtz control the natives? |
| 3. | What happens that evening when Kurtz is brought out on a stretcher (75)? How does Marlow describe him? What to Marlow seems to be the most important of Kurtz' attributes? How was Marlow included in the letters that the boat had brought to Kurtz (77)? |
| 4. | How does Marlow describe the **woman** (77)? Notice her action at the top of p. 78 for later reference. What sort of encounter did the Russian once have with the woman (78)? |
| 5. | How does Kurtz respond to Marlow? How does the manager respond to Kurtz? What is wrong, to the manager, with what Kurtz has done? What does the Russian suggest to Marlow (79-80)? What does he ask for? What does the Russian now think of Kurtz? |
| 6. | **Marlow and Kurtz (80-88).** What happens to Kurtz that evening (80-81)? What images come to Marlow's mind as he tracks Kurtz? Where was Kurtz going? Why is the moment of their confrontation important to Marlow (82)? How does Marlow think of Kurtz (83)? |
| 7. | What does the woman do as the boat is departing with Kurtz (84)? What do the natives do when Marlow blows the boat's whistle? What does the woman do? Then what do the pilgrims do? |
| 8. | What does Kurtz talk about to Marlow on the boat and how does Marlow respond (85-86). What are Kurtz' last words (86)? How does Marlow interpret them? |
| 9. | What happens to Marlow after Kurtz' death? How does Marlow think of death? How much to we learn of Marlow's trip back down the river and back to the sepulchral city? |
| 10. | **Return to the Sepulchral City (88-90).** What happens to Marlow back in the sepulchral city? What does Marlow do with (and learn from) his three visitors: **the man in spectacles** (88), **Kurtz' "cousin"** (89), and the **journalist** (89)? What does Marlow think of them? |
| 11. | **Marlow and the Intended (90-94).** What does Marlow think of as he approaches the Intended's home? What is the setting in which Marlow and the Intended meet, and how does he describe her? |
| 12. | What do Marlow and the Intended say to each other? How is she responding to Kurtz' death? When she puts out her arms (93), what does Marlow see? |
| 13. | What does Marlow say Kurtz' last words were (94)? What were Kurtz' actual last words to Marlow (86)? Why is Marlow surprised when "nothing happened" (94)? What did he expect to happen? What does he think of his lie? (Remember p. 64.) |
| 14. | Consider Marlow's relation to women (especially, in this case, to the Intended). What does his statement (p. 64) say about him: "They -- the women I mean -- are out of it -- should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautifyl world of their own, lest ours get worse." Why might Marlow hold a position like this? Going to the next level: does this seem to be the position of Conrad, of the novel *Heart of Darkness*, or is the novel aware of and somehow commenting on Marlow's position? |
| 15. | **The Closing (95).** What is the effect of the closing paragraph, with its return to the ship on the Thames? What is the effect of the repetition of the image of Marlow as a Buddha (as also on pp. 18 and 21)? What do you make of the last repetition of the book's title in the last phrase? Which way are they going? |