

## **Olentangy Local School District Literature Selection Review**

Teacher: OOHS English      Grade: 11      School: OOHS

Book Title: Heart of Darkness Genre: Historical Fiction

Author: Joseph Conrad Pages: pages 52-164, copy includes The Secret Sharer

Publisher: Signet Classics      Copyright: 2008

*In a brief rationale, please provide the following information relative to the book you would like added to the school's book collection for classroom use. You may attach additional pages as needed.*

**Book Summary and summary citation:** (suggested resources include book flap summaries, review summaries from publisher, book vendors, etc.)

From Amazon.com

Novella by Joseph Conrad, first published in 1902 with the story "Youth" and thereafter published separately. The story reflects the physical and psychological shock Conrad himself experienced in 1890, when he worked briefly in the Belgian Congo. The narrator, Marlow, describes a journey he took on an African river. Assigned by an ivory company to take command of a cargo boat stranded in the interior, Marlow makes his way through the treacherous forest, witnessing the brutalization of the natives by white traders and hearing tantalizing stories of a Mr. Kurtz, the company's most successful representative. He reaches Kurtz's compound in a remote outpost only to see a row of human heads mounted on poles. In this alien context, unbound by the strictures of his own culture, Kurtz has exchanged his soul for a bloody sovereignty, but a mortal illness is bringing his reign of terror to a close. As Marlow transports him downriver, Kurtz delivers an arrogant and empty explanation of his deeds as a visionary quest. To the narrator Kurtz's dying words, "The horror! The horror!" represent despair at the encounter with human depravity--the heart of darkness.

**Provide an instructional rationale for the use of this title, including specific reference to the OLSD curriculum map(s):** (Curriculum maps may be referenced by grade/course and indicator number or curriculum maps with indicators highlighted may be attached to this form)

*Heart of Darkness* is one of the top 10 texts cited on the AP Literature and Composition exam. The Curricular Requirements for the AP Course Audit for AP Literature & Composition includes the following statements:

- "Writing to Evaluate: Analytical, argumentative essays in which students draw upon textual details to make and explain judgments about a work's artistry and quality, and its social and cultural values." I
- "Writing to Interpret: interpretation of a piece of literature that is based on careful observation of the work's textual details, considering such elements as the use of figurative language, imagery, symbolism, and tone."

**Include two professional reviews of this title:** (a suggested list of resources for identifying professional reviews is shown below. Reviews may be "cut and pasted" (with citation) into the form or printed reviews may be attached to the form)

### **Review #1**

From NCTE (2005)

Conrad's powerful writing is unique in its style and syntax. He is deliberate in telling of Marlow's journey, his slow decent from England to the continent to the mouth of the Congo and finally to the Inner Station some eight months later. He mirrors this physical journey with the mental one that Marlow embarks upon as he slowly finds traces of inhumanity within his own heart.

Conrad is almost heavy-handed with his comparisons of Europe and Africa, using light and dark imagery throughout the text. The contrast of England to Africa, the contrast of the Thames River to the Congo River, the contrast of the crew of the *Nellie* to the crew of the steamboat are set up in the first few pages for the reader and resonate throughout the rest of the novel.

Though it runs under 100 pages, *Heart of Darkness* is a slow read, as Virginia Woolf puts it, an immense lethargy, but with good reason. Through his masterful manipulation of the English language, Conrad constantly provokes his audience to compare themselves to Mr. Kurtz, a character who is supposed to be the very picture of civilization, but turns out to be the most savage character in the novel.

Though a fictional story, Conrad's own experiences in the Congo provide the background to *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad himself was quite a seaman and had circumnavigated the globe aboard many ships before he became a writer. Many literary critics have mused that Marlow is Conrad's mouthpiece and, as such, conveys the same bias and innocence Conrad must have had as a European seeing the continent and people of Africa for the first time. Conrad saw first-hand the cruelty of European society towards the Africans and the farce of civilization in general. He felt what it was like to be a stranger in a strange land.

This is exactly the point that Conrad tries to make throughout the novel. When pushed to the brink of their limits, humans have to make the sacrifice of what they believe is civilized in order to survive. The mere incidents of the surface are harshly wiped away, revealing the inner truth, which, though it is always there, is usually not revealed. As he hears the chants and howls coming from the shore of the River Congo, Marlow is suddenly thrilled by the notion that these passionate uproars are coming from humans just like him, and here Marlow directly engages the reader by questioning whether in these noises there is not even a dim of suspicion of there being a meaning which you—you who are so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend. In the end, Conrad is doing the same as Marlow, questioning whether civilization is as human as it claims to be. After all, it was civilization that pulled Kurtz into the depths of the jungle in pursuit of ivory and fame, and ultimately civilization that killed him because he could not handle the ugly truth of what lay inside his heart.

## **Review #2**

[Conrad's] books are full of moments of vision. They light up a whole character in a flash . . . the beauty of surface has always a fiber of morality within . . . He could not write badly, one feels, to save his life.

—Virginia Woolf, from *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays* (1973)

Conrad is undoubtedly one of the great stylists of modern fiction and a good storyteller in the bargain. His contribution, therefore, falls automatically into a different class—permanent literature—read and taught and constantly evaluated by serious academics.

—Chinua Achebe, from "An Image of Africa," *The Massachusetts Review*. 18. (1977)

Conrad brings into the English fiction of the day, not only an artistry that is vastly more fluent and delicate than the general, but also a highly unusual sophistication, a quite extraordinary detachment from all petty rages and puerile certainties.

—H.L. Mencken, from *Joseph Conrad, A Book of Prefaces* (1977)

## **What alternate text(s) could also fulfill the instructional requirements?**

Title: Lord Jim Author: Joseph Conrad

Title:

Title: Author:

Title: Author:

Title: Author:

**Document any potentially controversial content:**

Graphic language used within the following context:

Marlow (the protagonist) lumps all Africans into one group and uses the words savages, natives, cannibals, niggers, and dogs to describe the people of Africa that he meets along his journey. The use of this language accurately represents the time period and shows the inhumane treatment of Africans by Europeans who only intended to make profit from the natural resources of the land.

Graphic violence used within the following context:

1.) There are many scenes in which the Africans are brutally beaten for no apparent reason or left to die without so much as a thought. One incident that highlights their brutal treatment occurs when the helmsman of Marlow's steamboat lies dying, and the African members of the crew urge Marlow to let him perish so that they can eat him. The reader understands that these crew members have not been fed for over six months and will not be fed because the Company did not set aside food for them for the journey.

2.) Marlow's descriptions of the rituals of the Africans present them as devilish and diabolical. At their worst, they are barbaric and primal. Shrunken heads on top of stakes surround Kurtz's hut, and the members of the village keep watch around it at all times of day and night. Apart from the question of how the African culture is depicted, these images may be offensive to some simply on the basis of their association with the supernatural.

**Keeping in mind the age, academic level, and maturity of the intended reader, what is the suggested classroom use: (check all that apply)**

Gifted/Accelerated Regular

**GRADE LEVEL(S):** 11 12

**Reading level of this title (if applicable):**

**Date Submitted to Department Chair:** 4/18/2007

**Suggested Professional Literary Review Sources:**

School Library Journal

Horn Book

Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books

VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocates)

Library Journal

Book Links

Publisher's Weekly

Booklist

Kirkus Review

Wilson Library Catalog

English Journal (and other resources of the National Council of Teachers of English)

The Reading Teacher (International Reading Association)

Literature for Today's Young Adults