

WHS Book Rationale

Title: *Heart of Darkness*

Author: Joseph Conrad

- **Intended Audience**

A.P. English Literature and Composition students—this is a college level course.

- **Brief summary and educational significance**

While he sits on board a ship, waiting for the tide to go out, Marlow tell his shipmates about a time he worked for a Belgian company in colonial Africa and went up the Congo River in a steamship. He was in search of Kurtz, a man who had been a rising star with the company but who had recently cut himself off and was believed to be using unorthodox practices. This book is considered Conrad's masterpiece, and is a classic piece of literature addressing European colonialism.

- **Purpose of teaching the work and how it will be used**

Although this is a short work, it is very dense with broad themes about human nature and language that is abstract and evocative. Students must read slowly and very deliberately to see the significance of the story beyond a simply journey up a river. The structure—a frame story—provides for discussion of plot structure. The character of Kurtz allows for discussion of character development, even when a character only appears briefly. The novella, as a whole, serves as a metaphor for examining human nature, the definition of civilization, the gray areas of morality, and issues surrounding race, culture, and the nature of power. *Heart of Darkness* is referenced in other major works, such as T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*; we read the Eliot poem and view the Coppola film to discuss the ideas of each and compare and contrast them with Conrad's work and discuss his influence.

- **Potential problems**

Several scenes depict violent, dehumanizing treatment of Africans by Europeans. There are some critics who consider Conrad's novella racist.

- **Addressing potential problems**

Class discussion of varying views of Conrad's work and whether it is a racist portrayal or an early indictment of racist European colonialism, including reading and discussing essays on this issue by writers such as Chinua Achebe, Edward Said, and David Denby.