

Heart of Darkness

Sample Analytical Paper Topics

TOPIC #1

Marlow's conflicting feelings toward Kurtz depend on a number of things. Sometimes he admires him, other times he denounces him. Write an essay analyzing these opposing feelings.

Outline

I. Thesis Statement: *Based on Kurtz's actions and ideas, Marlow's feelings toward him alternate between admiration and reprehension.*

II. Feelings of admiration

- A. Kurtz's talents
 - 1. Obtained ivory.
 - 2. Organized the natives to work for him.
 - 3. Wrote of his experience and honestly evaluated them.
- B. Idolatry for Kurtz
 - 1. Natives performed sacrifices in his honor.
 - 2. The Russian worships him.
 - 3. Marlow honors Kurtz's memory to protect him.

III. Feelings of reprehension

- A. Kurtz abandoned morality
 - 1. Killed people who opposed him (heads on poles).
 - 2. Threatened to kill the Russian over ivory.
- B. Kurtz shows little restraint
 - 1. Covets ivory and its importance.
 - 2. Regards the natives as inferior people. "Exterminate all the brutes" he wrote in his report.
 - 3. His methods are "unsound."

IV. Conclusion: Depending on what aspect of Kurtz Marlow considers, his feelings vary from one extreme to the opposite, from respect to revulsion.

TOPIC #2

Who is the main character in *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow or Kurtz? Develop an argument showing how each one can be viewed as the main character.

Outline

I. Thesis Statement: *Marlow and Kurtz each can be considered the main character. One cannot exist without the other.*

II. Kurtz is the main character

- A. He is Marlow's goal
 - 1. Marlow becomes obsessed with meeting Kurtz along the journey.
 - 2. Kurtz represents a side of Marlow that he is afraid to become.
- B. All the people and action revolve around Kurtz
 - 1. The chief accountant, manager, and other company workers deal with Kurtz.
 - 2. All the ivory trading goes back to Kurtz.

III. Marlow is the main character

- A. As narrator, Marlow's story is more important
 - 1. Marlow's feelings and judgment govern what the reader knows.
 - 2. The story shows his change after the journey.
 - 3. Marlow is in the entire novella, Kurtz isn't.
- B. Marlow makes Kurtz a great figure
 - 1. Only Marlow admires Kurtz in an extreme way.
 - 2. After Kurtz's death, Marlow keeps him alive by preserving his memory.

IV. Conclusion: An argument can be made for either Marlow or Kurtz as the main character.

TOPIC #3

Heart of Darkness shows how the forces of nature control man. The jungle exposes man's weakness. Write an essay showing how nature dominates all the people in the jungle.

Outline

I. Thesis Statement: *The jungle influences everyone's behavior. It not only affects them physically, but also mentally. It exposes man's weakness in many ways.*

II. Nature's power

- A. The forest's trees and heat
 - 1. Makes it difficult for the boats to sail.
 - 2. Blocks the natives and seamen from each other.
- B. Affects men physically and mentally
 - 1. Causes the helmsman's death.
 - 2. Marlow's fever.
 - 3. Kurtz's insanity.

III. Man's weakness

- A. Man must adapt to survive
 - 1. Lack of food and water affects their behavior.
 - 2. Breakdown leads to violence.

IV. Conclusion: Nature's power overwhelms man, exposing many weaknesses. Either mentally or physically, all the characters in *Heart of Darkness* succumb to nature's force.

TOPIC #4

The title *Heart of Darkness* refers to Africa as well as a psychological side of man. Develop these two meanings of the title.

Outline

- I. Thesis Statement: *Heart of Darkness is both a metaphor for an internal side of man, and a literal allusion to Africa. It simultaneously suggests a physical and mental reference.*
- II. **It is a literal place**
 - A. Africa is the dark continent
 1. Savages live there.
 2. Dense jungle shades the land.
 3. It is separated from the civilized world.
 - B. Inequalities of power
 1. Whites control the natives.
 2. Abuse of power for ivory and wealth.
 3. Marlow despises the whites and empathizes with the natives.
- III. **It is a psychological reference**
 - A. Suggests man's dark side
 1. Kurtz's irrational acts.
 2. Marlow's illness after meeting Kurtz in Africa.
 3. Natives' extreme devotion to Kurtz, a mad god.
- IV. Conclusion: *Heart of Darkness* refers to both physical and mental aspects of the novella. These external and internal worlds influence each other.

TOPIC #5

Women play a prominent role in Marlow's experience in Africa. Without them, his story is incomplete.

Outline

- I. Thesis Statement: *Though in the background, the three women who appear in Heart of Darkness play an important role in Marlow's journey to and from Africa.*
- II. **Marlow's aunt**
 - A. She is the only "family" Marlow mentions
 - B. She helps him secure his position in the company
 - C. He visits her before he leaves for Africa
 - D. She refers to him as an "emissary of light"
 - E. She nurses him through his illness when he returns
- III. **Kurtz's black mistress**
 - A. She is Kurtz's love in the jungle
 - B. Marlow admires her physical beauty
 - C. She never speaks, unlike Kurtz, who Marlow says is a "voice"
 - D. She follows Kurtz when they take him to the boat
 - E. The pilgrims shoot her as they leave

IV. Kurtz's Intended

- A. She contrasts Kurtz's black mistress
 - 1. She lives in Europe.
 - 2. She talks.
 - 3. She shows her emotions.
 - B. Marlow visits her after meeting Kurtz
 - 1. Marlow gives her Kurtz's important papers.
 - 2. Marlow lies to protect her from the truth.
- V. Conclusion: In a predominantly male world, Marlow's aunt, Kurtz's black mistress, and Kurtz's Intended affect him before, during, and after his experience in Africa.

TOPIC #6

The three sections in *Heart of Darkness* serve as borders around Marlow's journey from London to Africa and back.

Outline

- I. Thesis Statement: *Though Conrad uses a non-chronological narration, he separates Heart of Darkness into three sections to show Marlow's emotional and literal progression as he journeys to Africa to meet Kurtz.*
- II. Section I establishes Marlow's introduction to Kurtz
- A. Marlow joins the company and undergoes a physical
 - B. He works his way from the Outer to the Inner Station
 - C. He hears about Kurtz for the first time from the manager and accountant
- III. Section II develops Marlow's interest in meeting Kurtz
- A. Marlow thinks of his journey in terms of speaking to Kurtz
 - B. He gets closer to Kurtz's station
 - C. The natives attack Marlow's boat from their proximity
 - D. Marlow meets the Russian at Kurtz's station
- IV. Section III culminates in Marlow finally meeting Kurtz
- A. The Russian speaks of Kurtz's greatness
 - B. Marlow meets Kurtz and speaks with him privately
 - C. Marlow shares in Kurtz's death
 - D. Marlow preserves Kurtz's memory when he meets Kurtz's Intended
- V. Conclusion: Each section of *Heart of Darkness* establishes a deeper relationship between Marlow and Kurtz.

TOPIC #7

Conrad incorporates many symbols. As with most symbols, their meanings vary with different interpretations or approaches.

Outline

- I. Thesis Statement: *Through the use and frequency of symbols in Heart of Darkness, Conrad deepens the meaning of the story. Taken separately or in pairs, they add another level of analysis beneath the surface narrative.*

II. Objects as symbols

- A. Kurtz's painting of the blindfolded woman
- B. Heads on poles outside of Kurtz's hut
- C. Shoes
 - 1. Marlow's shoes.
 - 2. The Russian's shoes.
- D. Books
 - 1. *An inquiry into Points of Seamanship*.
 - 2. Kurtz's writings.

III. Animals (non-humans) as symbols

- A. Black hens at Fresleven's death
- B. Snake in reference to the river on the map
- C. Hippos/hippo meat
- D. Flies over the dying agent, then over Kurtz

IV. Places as symbols

- A. Europe
- B. Africa
- C. Thames River
- D. Jungle River

- V. Conclusion: Conrad's symbols embody more meanings other than their actual reference. By interpreting them in different ways, we expand the profundity of *Heart of Darkness*.