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Study Guide

for

**Heart of
Darkness**

and

**“The Secret
Sharer”**

by Joseph Conrad



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New York, New York Columbus, Ohio Woodland Hills, California Peoria, Illinois

Meet Joseph Conrad



The artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on Wisdom. . . . He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to that sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain.

—Joseph Conrad

As a child, Joseph Conrad dreamed of sailing the high seas. His fascination with the unknown reportedly led him to put his finger on a blank spot in the middle of a map of Africa and declare, “When I grow up, I will go there.” When he grew up, he did go “there.” He lived his childhood dream and became a mariner, visiting such distant places as the Congo, Constantinople, Bangkok, Java, Singapore, and Madras.

A Difficult Childhood Conrad, whose birth name was Jozef Teodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski, was born in 1857 in Russian-controlled Poland. When he was three, the family moved to Warsaw but did not live there long. Conrad’s father, a Polish patriot and political activist, took part in a movement to free Poland from Russian control and was arrested and imprisoned soon after the family arrived.

When Conrad was four, the family was deported to Vologda, in northern Russia, far from the center of political activity. Soon after, Conrad’s mother died from tuberculosis. Later,

Conrad and his father were allowed to move back to Poland, where, before Conrad was twelve years old, his father also died of the disease. Thereafter, Conrad lived with relatives. He had never given up his dream of going to sea, though his uncle tried to dissuade him from pursuing it. At the age of sixteen, Conrad left for Marseilles, France, where he had distant relatives, and joined the French merchant marine. Over the next few years, he sailed several times to the West Indies.

From Sailor to Author As a young adult, Conrad became a seaman in the British merchant marine. Though he knew only a few words of English when he entered the service, he began picking up the language by listening and talking to his British shipmates. Gifted with a natural facility for languages, he quickly learned English. By his late twenties, he had become a British citizen and had risen to the rank of captain. A few years later, he began writing his first novel, *Almayer’s Folly*, but he worked on it only sporadically because of the demands of his career. When he was in his late thirties, he finally finished the novel and began to devote himself primarily to writing.

Heart of Darkness, which was first published in 1898, established Conrad as a master of psychological fiction and a brilliant prose stylist. It was soon followed by several other tales of the sea, including “The Secret Sharer,” published in 1910.

Conrad’s Art Conrad’s fiction is characterized by a narrative technique that involves time shifts, stories within stories, and the use of symbol and myth. To a reader who had asked about the meaning of one of his stories, he replied:

A work of art is very seldom limited to one exclusive meaning and not necessarily tending to a definite conclusion. And this for the reason that the nearer it approaches art, the more it acquires a symbolic character.

During his lifetime, Conrad’s close friends were authors Stephen Crane, John Galsworthy, Ford Madox Ford, and Henry James. He continued to write until his death, in 1924, at age sixty-six.

Introducing the Novella

[*Heart of Darkness* is a] dreadful and fascinating tale, full as any of [Edgar Allan] Poe's mystery and haunting terrors, yet with a substantial basis of reality that no man who had not lived as well as dreamed could conjure into existence.

—from a review in *The Nation*, 1906

BACKGROUND

Like many authors, Joseph Conrad drew on his experiences when he wrote. He often incorporated details about people he had known, places he had visited, and events he had witnessed. This technique gives *Heart of Darkness* a sense of authenticity and immediacy that moved critic F. R. Leavis to write,

The details and circumstances of the voyage to and up the Congo are present to us as if we were making the journey ourselves.

Conrad himself referred to the work as “experience pushed a little (and very little) beyond the facts of the case.”

The novella is based on a four-month stint Conrad spent in the Congo. Out of work, broke, and eager for a chance to realize his boyhood dream of exploring central Africa, he had accepted an assignment to command a steamboat up the Congo River for the Belgian Company for Upper-Congo Commerce. This company ranked as one of late-nineteenth-century Europe's most

successful—and greedy—traders in ivory. Steaming a thousand miles upriver from Kinshasa, Conrad reached the company's inner station. There he met an ailing agent named Georges Antoine Klein, who may have been a model for the character Kurtz.

Since its publication, *Heart of Darkness* has become one of the most read and debated works of fiction in the English language. Why? Perhaps it is because Conrad plumbs the depths of human consciousness to explore the dark side of the personality. Perhaps it is because his sophisticated narrative technique helped paved the way for modern fiction. Or perhaps it is because of his elegant prose style. Whatever the reasons, it is likely that *Heart of Darkness* will continue to be read, discussed, and analyzed for many years to come.

THE TIME AND PLACE

The novella takes place in the Congo River basin in the summer of 1890, during a period when the colonization of Africa was at its peak and Belgium's King Leopold II was ruthlessly exploiting the land and its people. European countries rushed to claim territory in Africa and to establish strongholds that would secure their status as world powers. Before that period, few Europeans had explored the “Dark Continent.”

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Did You Know?

The unnamed ivory trading company referred to throughout *Heart of Darkness* may have been based on companies such as the Anglo-Belgian India Rubber Company. During the twenty years that King Leopold controlled the company, in which he owned half the stock, an estimated five million people in the Congo died at the

hands of company agents, who terrorized and killed Africans who failed to meet their rubber quotas. King Leopold cleared a substantial profit before he lost his monopolistic control of the rubber trade. A reform movement sparked by *Heart of Darkness* and eyewitness reports helped break his power in the region.

Introducing the Short Story

“The Secret Sharer” remains one of Conrad’s most characteristic stories, and it contains passages of language as beautifully evocative as the most celebrated passages in Heart of Darkness.

—Joyce Carol Oates

BACKGROUND

Like the central characters in *Heart of Darkness*, the characters at the center of “The Secret Sharer” are based on people that Joseph Conrad met during his seafaring career. In particular, the fugitive Leggatt is based on a first mate named Sidney Smith, who, in an incident widely known in East Asia, had killed a combative seaman and

was given a chance to escape by his captain. Conrad chose to make Leggatt a more sympathetic character than Smith, who was known as a tyrant and whose crime was more savage than that portrayed in the short story. Conrad is said to have considered “The Secret Sharer” a favorite among his own stories. He wrote it based on the experience of commanding the ship *Otago* in Bangkok, Thailand, after the death of its captain. It was Conrad’s first and only sea command.

THE TIME AND PLACE

“The Secret Sharer” takes place on a ship in the Gulf of Siam (now Gulf of Thailand) sometime during the 1890s.

Did You Know?

According to German folklore, every living being has a doppelgänger—an exact, but usually invisible, spirit double. Legend has it that seeing one’s doppelgänger is a sign of approaching death. In literature, the

doppelgänger is often a device for revealing a character’s unconscious desires or conflicts. In “The Secret Sharer,” the murderer Leggatt is the captain’s very real doppelgänger.

CRITIC’S CORNER

[Conrad shows] *that a hidden part of man committed to order and the rules of society might suddenly embrace and identify itself with a being, a presence, an apparition which seems most antithetic to his own conscious self, a walking reminder of all that inner darkness and weakness which civilized man has suppressed in order to make group life possible.*

—Tony Tanner

Before You Read

Heart of Darkness Part 1

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Imagine that you are about to leave on a long journey to a distant country where everyone is a stranger to you. How do you feel?

Quickwrite

Jot down your feelings, explaining why you feel as you do.

Setting a Purpose

Read to discover how Charlie Marlow feels about embarking on a trip to Africa.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

In A.D. 43, Roman armies invaded and conquered most of the area that was later known as England. The area remained under Roman control until about 400. The Romans, who had already built a vast empire, considered themselves superior to the “uncivilized” Celts who inhabited the region. Among the remnants of the Roman occupation is Hadrian’s Wall, a long stone barricade in northern England that Emperor Hadrian ordered built to discourage invaders from entering Roman-occupied territory.

Story Within a Story

Heart of Darkness comprises two stories. In the frame, or “outer” story, an unnamed narrator and four companions aboard the yawl *Nellie* are sailing on the Thames River. The narrator introduces Charlie Marlow, one of his companions on the vessel, who proceeds to tell the story of his experiences in the Congo. The unnamed narrator and the other men on board occasionally comment on Marlow’s narrative. Marlow’s speech is set off by quotation marks; the unnamed narrator’s speech is not.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

ascetic [ə se’ tik] *adj.* practicing strict self-denial (p. 1)

emissary [e’ mə ser ē] *n.* agent as of a government, in an official or secret mission (p. 21)

rapacious [rə pā’ shəs] *adj.* grasping; greedy (p. 13)

sententiously [sen tent’ shəs lē] *adv.* tersely or moralistically expressed (p. 8)

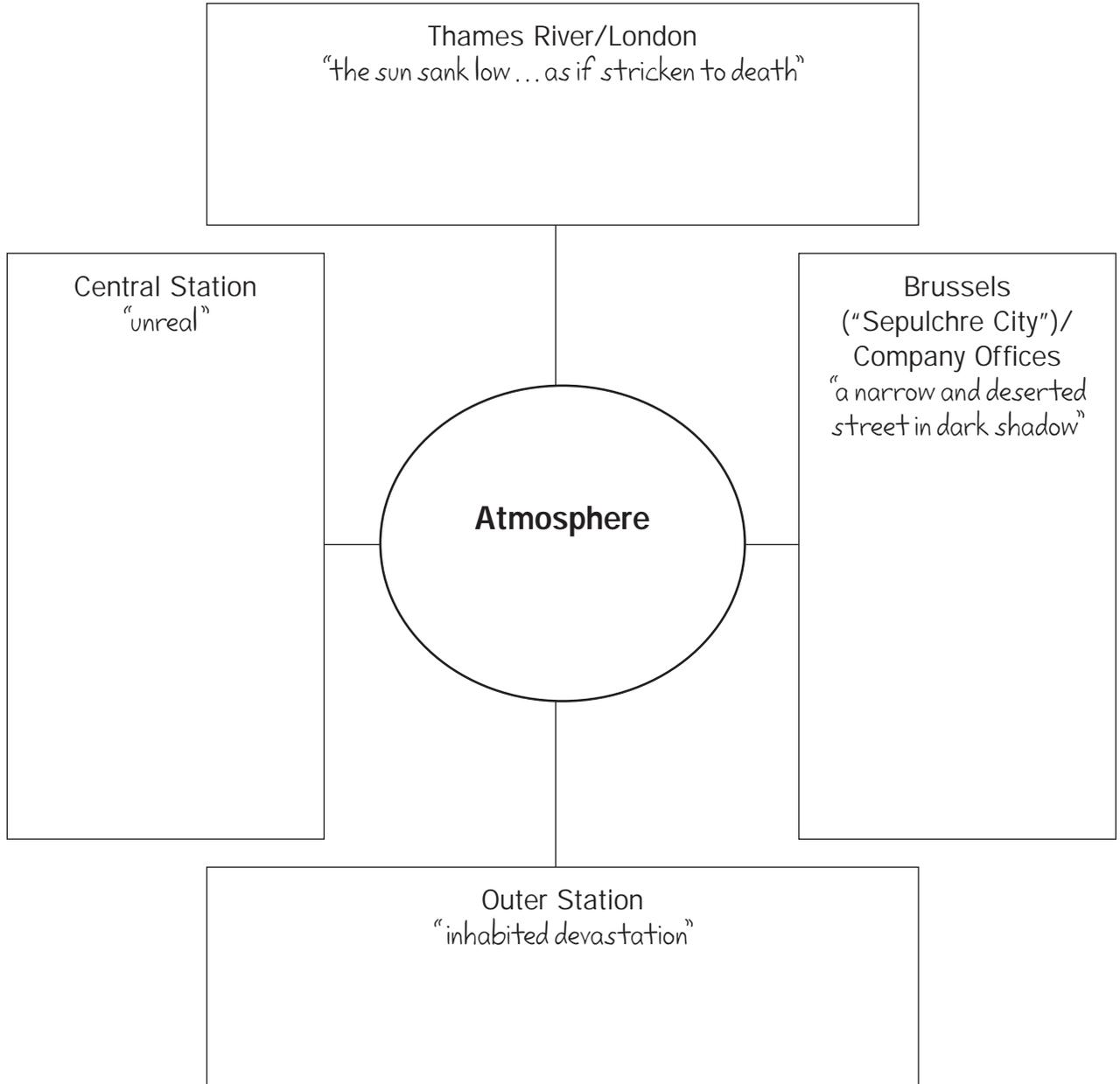
sepulchre [sep’ əl kər] *n.* burial place, esp. a vault or tomb (p. 7)

volubility [vəl’ yə bi’ lə tē] *n.* fluency (p. 17)

Active Reading

Heart of Darkness Part 1

The descriptions of the various settings in part 1 create a certain atmosphere, or mood. As you read, use the cluster diagram below to take notes on words and images that create atmosphere. Then sum up the atmosphere as a whole in the center circle.



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Responding

Heart of Darkness Part 1

Personal Response

What are your first impressions of the trading company? Of the people who work for it?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. Why does Marlow seek to pilot a steamboat up the Congo River? Describe the conflict that created an opening in the company for a captain. What future conflicts might this incident hint at, or foreshadow?

2. What does Marlow's aunt believe should be the mission of Europeans going to the Congo? What does that mission suggest about her view of Europeans? Of the inhabitants of the Congo?

3. What is the company accountant's opinion of Kurtz? How does it differ from the manager's opinion? Why do their opinions differ?

4. What assumption does the brickmaker make about Kurtz and Marlow? Why doesn't Marlow set the record straight?

5. What is the Eldorado Exploring Expedition? To what does Marlow compare the men in the expedition? What do you think the men symbolize, or represent?

Responding

Heart of Darkness Part 1

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

6. Conrad's portrayal of women has been criticized as sexist. Do you agree with this criticism? Explain.

7. Review your response to the **Focus Activity** on page 16. Are Marlow's feelings similar to the ones you expressed? Why might this be so?

Literature and Writing

Character Sketch

What is Marlow like? Review part 1, taking notes on Marlow's opinions, actions, and motives. Then, in a few paragraphs, describe his most important traits and beliefs. Support your description with specific details from the novella.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

With a group of classmates, review the frame story at the beginning of *Heart of Darkness*. Then discuss the following questions: How does the unnamed narrator's view of the "conquest of the earth" differ from Marlow's? How do their contrasting views help prepare readers for the story that follows? Share your conclusions with the class.

Learning for Life

Using details from part 1, create an itinerary for Marlow. Trace his whereabouts from the point at which he seeks to command a boat scheduled to travel on the Congo River to the point at which part 1 ends.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

Heart of Darkness Part 2

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Recall a time when other people's opinions of someone you did not know influenced your impression of the person. When you got to know the person, was your impression accurate?

Journal

In your journal, describe the opinions on which your impression was based and explain whether it proved to be accurate.

Setting a Purpose

Read to discover how other people's opinions of Kurtz influence Marlow's impression of him.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

When *Heart of Darkness* was written, ivory was much in demand. That demand continued well into the twentieth century. In fact, during the 1980s the demand for elephant tusks reached its highest level ever. More recently, the demand for ivory caused the elephant population to fall to dangerously low levels. In response, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) banned the international sale of ivory in 1990. In 1997, when the number of elephants rebounded, the ban was partially lifted.

Simile and Metaphor

A simile is a comparison of two unlike things signaled by the word like, than, or as. A metaphor is a comparison in which a likeness is suggested. In the following description, Conrad uses both a simile and a metaphor: "Going up that river was like traveling back to the beginnings of the world, when . . . trees were kings." As you read part 2 of *Heart of Darkness*, be alert to similes and metaphors, and think about what each one means.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

cipher [sɪˈfər] *n.* code (p. 33)

evanescent [e vəˈne sənt] *adj.* tending to fade away or pass away (p. 40)

implacable [im pləˈkə bəl] *adj.* that cannot be placated or appeased (p. 29)

recondite [rəˈkən dīt] *adj.* difficult to understand (p. 36)

sagacious [sə gāˈshəs] *adj.* having or showing wisdom, sound judgment, and keen perception or discernment (p. 28)

Active Reading

Heart of Darkness Part 2

The mysterious Kurtz is described further in part 2. As you read, fill in the boxes below with quotations from the various characters who describe him, as well as from Kurtz's own written messages.

| | |
|--|----------------------------|
| The Manager and His Uncle | Marlow |
| <p>"Look at the influence that man must have."</p> | <p>"a gifted creature"</p> |
| Kurtz's Letters and Papers | The Russian |
| | |

Responding

Heart of Darkness Part 2

Personal Response

What images from part 2 linger in your mind?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. How does Marlow feel when he hears the tribesmen howl and watches them dance? How does he explain that feeling? What keeps him from joining the tribesmen?

2. What book does Marlow find in the reed hut in the jungle? How does he feel when he puts the book away? Why?

3. Describe the fog that descends as Marlow and his passengers near Kurtz's station. What might the color of the fog symbolize, or represent? What mental state might the fog symbolize?

4. For what society does Kurtz write a report? What attitude toward the inhabitants of the Congo does he display in the report? What change in attitude is indicated by the handwritten note at the end of the report?

5. Who attacks the steamboat as it approaches the Inner Station? Why?

Responding

Heart of Darkness Part 2

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

6. In part 2 Marlow reaches the Inner Station, but he does not meet Kurtz. What effect does Conrad create by withholding the meeting until part 3?

7. Review your response to the **Focus Activity** on page 20. When Marlow and Kurtz finally meet, do you think Marlow's impression of him will prove to be accurate? Explain.

Literature and Writing

Supporting a Position

Author Joyce Carol Oates has asserted that “Marlow, for all his condescension [toward people of color], represents a degree of humanity not found in the other Caucasian Europeans.” Do you agree? In a paragraph or two, explain why or why not, supporting your position with specific evidence from the novella.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Heart of Darkness has been variously described as an adventure tale, a political story, and a psychological mystery. With a group of classmates, discuss which of the descriptions best fits the novella. Try to come to a consensus of opinion based on evidence from the novella; then share your opinion with the class.

Learning for Life

Imagine that you are a journalist who has been assigned to interview Kurtz in preparation for a story about him. Formulate a list of questions that you would ask him. (You may find it helpful to review the quotations you recorded for the **Active Reading** activity on page 21.)



Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

Heart of Darkness Part 3

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Recall a time when you hesitated to tell someone the truth for fear of hurting the person's feelings. What did you decide to do? Why?

Journal

In your journal, describe the situation and explain whether you decided to tell the truth and why. Were you satisfied with your decision?

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out why Marlow hesitates to tell Kurtz's fiancée the truth.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

For many of the first readers of *Heart of Darkness*, the theories of the English naturalist Charles Darwin (1809–1882) were relatively new—and disturbing. Darwin hypothesized that human beings and the great apes evolved from a common ancestor and that moral and spiritual traits widely considered to be divinely created were actually the products of biological evolution. Thus, in Darwin's view, human beings are part of a continuum with the rest of the animal world. As you read part 3 of *Heart of Darkness*, consider the impact that Darwin's theory of evolution may have had on Victorian readers' notions of civilization.

Symbolism and Theme

Heart of Darkness is rich with symbolism—people, places, and things that have significance beyond their surface, or literal, meanings. Symbols are often a clue to the theme, or central message, of a work. As you finish reading *Heart of Darkness*, ask yourself what Marlow's journey up the Congo River symbolizes and what Marlow learns as a result of the journey.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

abscond [ab skänd] *v.* to flee secretly and conceal oneself (p. 49)

inexorable [i neks' rə bəl] *adj.* that does not change or relent, no matter what anyone does or says (p. 61)

fatalism [fā' təl izm] *n.* doctrine that all events and conditions are predetermined by fate and cannot be altered by human beings (p. 61)

litany [lit' ə nē] *n.* form of prayer consisting of a series of petitions spoken by the minister to which the choir or congregation makes fixed responses (p. 60)

odious [ō' de əs] *adj.* causing hate, disgust, or repugnance (p. 58)

primeval [prī mē' vəl] *adj.* of, relating to, or belonging to the first or earliest ages, esp. of the world (p. 62)

Active Reading

Heart of Darkness Part 3

In part 3, Marlow describes the two women in Kurtz's life: an African and Kurtz's European "intended," or fiancée. On the chart below, record the words that Marlow uses to describe each of the women. What image of each emerges? What does the contrast between them reveal about Kurtz's personality?

| African Woman | Kurtz's Intended |
|---|---|
| <p style="text-align: center;"><i>"wild-eyed and magnificent"</i></p> | <p style="text-align: center;"><i>"surrounded by ashy halo"</i></p> |

Responding

Heart of Darkness Part 3

Personal Response

Did the ending of Marlow's story surprise you? Why or why not?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. Why does Marlow admire and envy the Russian? Do you think his admiration and envy are justified? Explain.

2. What does Marlow mean when he says that “[Kurtz’s] appetite for more ivory had got the better of—what shall I say?—less material aspirations?” To what aspirations is he referring?

3. What “things” about Kurtz had the wilderness whispered to him that he did not know?

4. Why does Marlow judge Kurtz to have been a “remarkable man” in spite of the terrible acts Kurtz committed?

5. Marlow asks the question “Did he [Kurtz] live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge?” To what moment is Marlow referring? To what complete knowledge?

Responding

Heart of Darkness Part 3

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

6. Sum up Marlow's views about the meaning of life. Do you agree with them? Why or why not?

7. Review your response to the **Focus Activity** on page 24. Why does Marlow lie to Kurtz's fiancée? Do you think he did the right thing? Why or why not?

Literature and Writing

Analyze a Title

Critics have pointed out several possible meanings for the title *Heart of Darkness*. In a paragraph or two, explain what you think the title refers to and why. Support your ideas with specific evidence from the work.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

With a group of classmates, debate the following questions: Was Marlow's journey into the heart of darkness really an "inconclusive experience"? What lessons did he learn? Why might he have judged the experience to be inconclusive? Try to come to a consensus of opinions. Then share your opinions with the class.

Interdisciplinary Activity: History

With a partner, use library resources or the Internet to research the African ivory trade from the 1800s to the present. Take notes on your findings; then use your notes to present a brief oral report to your class.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

“The Secret Sharer”

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Recall a time when you reached out to a stranger. What were the circumstances, and how did the person respond?

Think-Pair-Share

With a partner, discuss the situation. What made you extend yourself?

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out how and why a sea captain reaches out to a stranger.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

The Gulf of Siam, where “The Secret Sharer” is set, is now known as the Gulf of Thailand, after the Southeast Asian country that it borders. Thailand is one of the world’s twenty most populous countries, with about 60 million inhabitants (in 1997). The country was known as Siam until its name was officially changed to Thailand in 1939.

Conflict

In literature, conflict is the struggle between two opposing forces. Conflict can be external, as when a character clashes with another character or a force of nature, or internal, as when a character struggles with a difficult decision or moral dilemma. As you read “The Secret Sharer,” look for instances of both types of conflict.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

compunction [kəm pənkʻshən] *n.* uneasiness of mind due to feelings of remorse or guilt (p. 76)

edification [e də fə kāʻshən] *n.* act of edifying; being edified; intellectual or moral enlightenment or improvement (p. 87)

insolence [in sə lənts] *n.* insulting contemptuousness in speech or conduct (p. 80)

peremptorily [pə ɛmpʻtə rə lē] *adv.* performed with self-assurance or arrogance (p. 76)

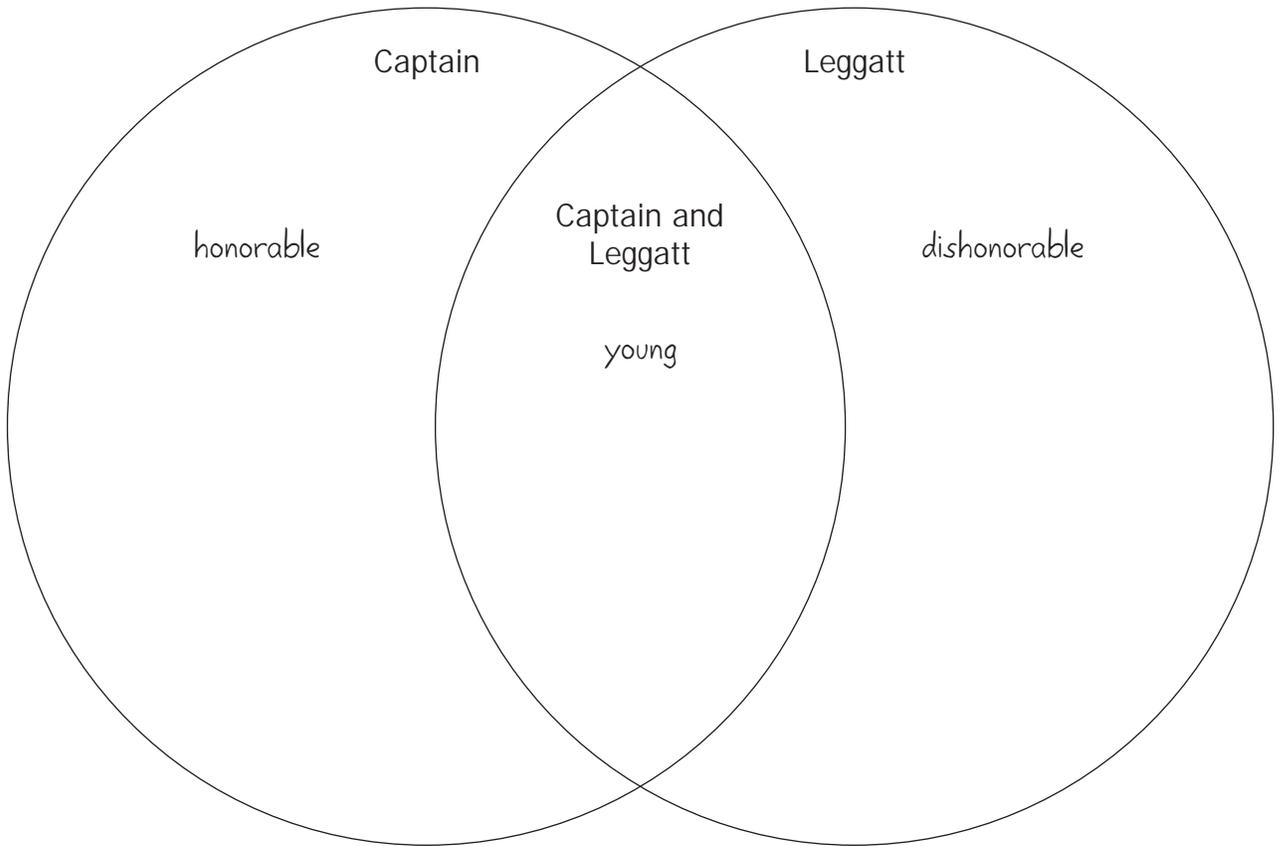
punctilious [pənk tiʻlē əs] *adj.* strictly attentive to the fine points of proper or polite behavior (p. 91)

tenacious [tə nāʻshəs] *adj.* holding or inclined to hold firmly (p. 92)

Active Reading

"The Secret Sharer"

The captain and his double, Leggatt, are similar in many ways and different in others. As you read "The Secret Sharer," fill in the Venn diagram below with descriptive words and phrases that show how the two characters are alike and how they are different.



Responding

“The Secret Sharer”

Personal Response

What did you think of the “doubles” theme? Why?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. Why did the captain uncharacteristically take the five-hour anchor watch rather than having his subordinates do so?

2. Why did Leggatt kill the sailor? Was he justified in doing so?

3. What does the chief mate’s gesture of tapping his forefinger against his forehead in conversation with another mate suggest about the captain?

4. Why does the captain pretend to be hard of hearing when talking with the skipper from the *Sephora*?

5. What purpose does the captain’s floating hat serve?

Responding

“The Secret Sharer”

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

6. What effect does the fugitive’s safe escape from the captain’s ship have on the captain? How does his relationship with his crew change?

7. Review your response to the **Focus Activity** on page 28. Do you think that the captain was wrong to extend himself to a fugitive? Would you have done the same? Why or why not?

Literature and Writing

Analyzing Conflict

In a paragraph or two, describe the nature of the captain’s conflict—internal, external, or both—and how he finally resolves it. What role does the fugitive Leggatt play in this conflict?

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

With a group of classmates, dramatize a trial scene in which the captain is charged with aiding and abetting a crime by harboring a fugitive. One student should act as prosecutor and another should act as defense attorney. Each should use evidence from the story to support his position and may call on other students to serve as jurors to render a verdict.

Learning for Life

Write an incident report describing Leggatt’s murder of a shipmate. Based on the facts provided in the story, describe the incident and the means by which he is suspected of having escaped from the ship. Include a description of the fugitive and any other pertinent information that might lead to his capture.



Save your work for your portfolio.

T. S. Eliot

The Hollow Men

Before You Read

Focus Question

What makes a person “hollow”?

Background

T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), winner of a Nobel Prize for Literature, wrote some of the most influential poetry of the twentieth century. Many of his poems examine the trivialization of spirituality in the modern world. The quotation that introduces the poem, “Mistah Kurtz—he dead,” is from Conrad’s novella *Heart of Darkness*, as is the phrase “hollow man,” which is used to describe Kurtz, a character in the novella.

Responding to the Reading

1. Briefly sum up the descriptions of the men. Based on the descriptions, what conclusions can you draw about the lives of hollow men?

2. Which images did you find the most striking in the poem, and why?

3. What might Eliot mean when he describes the men as being both “hollow” and “stuffed”? What is the effect of this contrast?

4. What does the poet imply about the human will when he says that the “shadow” falls between the idea and the reality, the motion and the act, the conception and the creation? How do these pairings help to reinforce the hollowness of men?

5. **Making Connections** What lines in the poem would you use to characterize Kurtz? In what ways is Kurtz a hollow man?

Art Connection

Make a drawing to accompany the poem or find images from the Internet or magazines and create a collage that illustrates this poem. Share your work with your class.

Langston
Hughes

The Negro Speaks of Rivers

Before You Read

Focus Question

Does your natural environment ever inspire you to reflect on the past? What thoughts come to mind?

Background

Langston Hughes (1902–1967) is one of America’s best-known African American writers. Much of his work focuses on people’s struggle to pursue their dreams despite hardships and oppression.

Responding to the Reading

1. What is the relationship between the poem’s ancient rivers and the lives of African Americans?

2. What human traits does the poet give the Mississippi River?

3. Who is the “I” that is repeated throughout the poem, and why is its use effective?

4. What do you think the speaker means when he says “my soul has grown deep like the rivers?”

5. **Making Connections** How is the speaker’s brief description of the Congo different from Marlow’s depiction of the Congo in the novella?

Listening and Speaking

Interview someone from an older generation. Ask the person whether the environment in which he or she grew up shaped his or her outlook on life. Have the person explain why or why not. Use the response to determine how important a physical environment is to the development of a person’s character and outlook on life.

Jeffrey Tayler

Vessel of Last Resort

Before You Read

Focus Question

Recall a time when a place that you longed to visit didn't live up to your expectations when you got there. What was the place, and why were you disappointed?

Background

In this travelogue, Jeffrey Tayler uses vivid descriptions, usually based on sight and sound, to make the reader experience the immediacy of the events described. He begins his trip by remembering Conrad's journey up the Congo River.

Responding to the Reading

1. What does Tayler cite as his motive for traveling the Congo? Do you think he was prepared for what he encountered?

2. What were some of the perils of Tayler's voyage up the Congo River? Which do you think were the most dangerous?

3. Which description of the writer's observations affected you the most? Why?

4. Do you think that Tayler felt his trip down the Congo River was worth the risk? Explain why or why not.

5. **Making Connections** How does Marlow's description of his journey compare with Tayler's account? What are some similarities and differences between the two?

Creative Writing

Think of an interesting place you have visited recently. Using vivid imagery, describe the most striking images of the place, capturing the sights and sounds as you experienced them.

Truman
Capote

Miriam

Before You Read

Focus Question

Recall a time when you had an unwelcome visitor. How did you respond to the person?

Background

Truman Capote (1924–1984) is probably best remembered for his novella *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and his pioneering “nonfiction novel” *In Cold Blood*. Capote also wrote a number of distinguished short stories and collaborated on screenplays.

Responding to the Reading

1. Why, do you think, did the author name the little girl after Mrs. Miller?

2. Do you think Miriam is real, or is she a figment of Mrs. Miller’s imagination? Explain your answer.

3. How do the weather conditions described in the story reflect Mrs. Miller’s state of mind?

4. Why is Mrs. Miller afraid of Miriam?

5. **Making Connections** In both “Miriam” and “The Secret Sharer,” the presence of a double influences certain characters’ behavior. Contrast Mrs. Miller’s reaction toward Miriam with the young captain’s reaction toward Leggatt. In what way are their reactions different?

Creative Writing

The end of the story leaves the reader hanging. Write a different ending describing what happens to Mrs. Miller when she sees Miriam reappear. Try to remain faithful to the author’s style.

Octavio Paz | **The Street**

Before You Read

Focus Question

Recall a time when you experienced the sensation of being followed. What was the situation, and how did it make you feel?

Background

Octavio Paz (1914–1998) was considered by many to be Mexico’s greatest poet. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1990 “for impassioned writing with wide horizons, characterized by sensuous intelligence and humanistic integrity.” In this poem, Paz describes the sensation of being followed.

Responding to the Reading

1. Where does the poem take place? Support your answer with details from the poem.

2. Whom do you think the “he” in the poem represents? What is the relationship between the speaker and the unnamed person in the poem?

3. What do the words silent, blackness, blind, and dark suggest about the poem’s theme? What do you think the speaker’s stumbling and falling symbolize?

4. Are the speaker’s experiences real or imagined? Explain.

5. **Making Connections** Compare the speaker’s feelings toward his double with the captain’s feelings toward Leggatt. What emotions characterize each man’s attitude toward his double?

Performing

Perform a dramatic reading of “The Street,” using pantomime to capture the feeling of being followed. Ask your classmates to evaluate the effectiveness of your interpretation.