

How to Read Heart of Darkness

1. Understand the novel's frame. A frame story is a story told within a story. The story begins with 5 men on board a ship (The Nellie). They are stuck waiting for the tide to go down, so they pass the time by listening to a story by the only named person—Marlow. Realize the narrator of the beginning is not Marlow, but another member of the 5 on the ship. The actual real “meat” of the novel is the story Marlow tells about his experiences going into the Congo. By using a frame, Conrad can break the narrative at certain points and indirectly characterize Marlow by the reaction of the people on the ship to his story.
2. Use a dictionary. College dictionary is best but you can use an online app versus not using anything. Conrad has a fantastic vocabulary. Don't be put off by the first few pages—he uses a lot of nautical terms in the beginning, but he stops doing that after the first few pages.
3. Relate the events of the story to the background notes. Much of this story was inspired by Conrad's own adventure into the Congo, where he witnessed some unbelievable atrocities being committed upon the natives by the Belgians.
4. Keep track of what few characters there are. Not all are identified by name either: there's Marlow, his Aunt, the Company's chief accountant, the bricklayer, Kurtz, the Russian, and the Intended. The Outer and Central Station Managers too.
5. Like all of our novels, look for themes. Conrad is writing about what he witnessed first hand, about the nature of mankind, colonization, the corrupt nature of power, greed, etc. Expand these topics into themes in your journal. This novel appears on the AP Open question nearly every year as a possible choice.
6. Use your journal to ask questions, note down difficult passages to go over in class, remember impressively written sentences, themes, etc. Include page numbers.
7. If you can handle this book, there is nothing the AP exam can throw at you that is beyond your ability to read. Take your time and give it your best.