Heart of Darkness Reading Guide Part I

1. Narrative Structure. In Heart of Darkness, we encounter a “frame narrative,” as some of you may know from works like Frankenstein. That is, the initial narrative frame-story, told by a first narrator (never named) establishes the situation for and “frames” the telling of a second embedded (and the main) story, told by a second and main narrator, Marlow. Who are the two narrators of the novel? Describe the situation and characters on board the Nellie. How does Marlow differ from the other men, his audience, on board the Nellie? What does the first unnamed narrator and the frame-story contribute to Heart of Darkness?

2. Parallels & Foreshadowing. The unnamed first-person narrator prepares the way for Marlow's initial meditation “evok[ing] the great spirit of the past upon the lower reaches of the Thames” river. Marlow begins his story suddenly: “And [England] also . . . has been one of the dark places of the earth'...when the Romans first came here nineteen hundred years ago--the other day...” In describing the Roman conquest of England, Marlow suggests parallels to the main story of Heart of Darkness: what seems to be foreshadowed? How does Marlow define “conquerors” and what kind of “idea” might redeem such conquest?

3. More Foreshadowing. Consider Marlow's account of what drew him out to Africa. What is suggested by his likening the Congo River to a “snake” and himself to a foolish, charmed “bird”? Note the case of Fresleven, the river captain whom Marlow is to replace; Marlow's comparison of the city of his employers to “a whited sepulchre” the ominous atmosphere of the Company's office with the two women knitting black wool and “guarding the door of Darkness;” the doctor [“alienist” = early psychologist] who measures Marlow's head because he has a scientific interest in measuring “the mental changes of individuals” who venture out to Africa in the Company's employ. What type of experience, what type of journey, do these signs seem to predict?

4. Europeans in Africa. Describe Marlow's first impressions of the European presence in Africa, captured in his observations regarding the French steamer firing into the coast and regarding the Company's lower station. Contrast the Europeans' naming of the Africans as “enemies” to Marlow's view of the Africans.

5. Marlow’s Devils. Consider Marlow's description of the “devils” he has seen. What are the
different types of “devils” he describes? Why is he so appalled by the “flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly” that he sees in most Europeans in Africa? What does he mean?

6. Europeans in the Congo. Consider the Europeans that Marlow meets at the Company's stations: (a) the Company's chief accountant (why does Marlow respect him?), (b) the manager (why is such a man in command?), (c) the “faithless pilgrims” (why does Marlow call them that?), (d) the “manager's spy” (what kind of “devil” is this “papier-mache Mephistopheles”?), (e) the “sordid buccaneers” of the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, (how does Marlow assess these men and their motives for coming to and remaining in Africa?)

7. African Wilderness as Setting & Character. How does Marlow describe the setting: the Congo jungle — the “wilderness”?

8. Marlow & Kurtz. Long before he meets Kurtz, Marlow hears from others that Kurtz is extraordinary, “remarkable.” On what evidence do these claims seem to be based?

Heart of Darkness Reading Guide Part II

1. Marlow & Kurtz. Marlow, unobserved, overhears a conversation about Kurtz between the manager and his nephew, and states, “…I seemed to see Kurtz for the first time,” turning his [Kurtz's] back on headquarters and home, “setting his face towards the depths of the wilderness…” Marlow wonders at Kurtz's motive in turning back to the Inner Station instead of returning home as he had intended. A bit later Marlow begins to supply an answer: “Everything belonged to him—but that was a trifle. The thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own.” What do you think had called Kurtz back to his Inner Station in the “heart of darkness”?

2. Marlow & Kurtz. As Marlow progresses on his journey upriver, he grows increasingly “excited at the prospect of meeting Kurtz;” and when he thinks Kurtz might die before Marlow gets to him, Marlow confesses “extreme disappointment”: he had looked forward to “a talk with Kurtz”—why? What do you think is the source of Marlow's fascination with Kurtz? Why does Marlow feel that to miss Kurtz would be to miss “my destiny in life”?
3. **African Wilderness as Setting & Character.** Marlow observes: “Going up the river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world,” a past remembered “in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream,” amid this “strange” African “silence, a “stillness” without “peace”—the “stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect.” They “crawled toward Kurtz” and “penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness” (note this title allusion). “We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth”—an atavistic journey into the human past—“We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil.” What is this “accursed inheritance” that Marlow envisions? Kurtz has travelled up this river before Marlow—what has happened to Kurtz?

4. **Attitude toward Africans.** Describe Marlow's attitude toward black Africans. In particular, consider the attitudes expressed around p110. Why does he say that “the worst of it” is suspecting “their not being inhuman”? Why is the thought of “remote kinship” judged “Ugly” by Marlow? What is their “terrible frankness”—“truth stripped of its cloak of time”? What does Marlow mean when he says: “The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future”? What does it take to prove that one is “as much of a man as these [Africans] on shore”?

5. **Self-Awareness.** Marlow admits that there is “an appeal to me in this fiendish row [the “wild and passionate uproar” of the Africans onshore]...Very well; I hear;...but I have a voice, too, and for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced.” A bit later Marlow argues with himself about “whether or no I would talk openly with Kurtz,” but doubts seriously whether it would matter: “my speech or my silence ...would be a mere futility,” for “The essentials of this affair lay deep under the surface, beyond my reach, and beyond my power of meddling.” Still, Marlow wants to talk to Kurtz and he must tell his [Marlow's own? Kurtz's] story of *Heart of Darkness*. Consider the theme of voice(s) : Marlow makes what he calls “the strange discovery” that Kurtz “presented himself as a voice.” The Russian says, “You don't talk with that man--you listen to him.” Consider Kurtz's pamphlet for the “International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs”—Kurtz's 17-pages of “eloquence” and its “luminous and terrifying” postcription: “Exterminate the brutes!”—as examples of what Kurtz has to say.

6. **Motif.** There is a dominant motif of perception that becomes particularly clear in this section (no pun intended). For example, the section starts with Marlow believing that he could
“see Kurtz [clearly] for the first time.” The attack on the boat is filled with references to
sight and blindness and Kurtz is even referred to as a “shade” [pun intended this time].
Why is this motif so central to this section? How does it influence the reader’s opinion of
Marlow? of Kurtz?

Heart of Darkness Reading Guide Part III

1. The Russian. What is the function of the Russian in the novel? What motivates him? What is
his relationship to Kurtz? Why does Marlow consider the Russian “bewildering” and “an
insoluble problem”? What do we and Marlow learn about Kurtz from the Russian? What
was Kurtz doing in the “heart of darkness”?

2. Kurtz. When Kurtz finally appears in the story, does he confirm the advance accounts that we
have had of him? Marlow describes Kurtz repeatedly as “a voice”—again; what is the
significance of this description? What other terms used to describe Kurtz seem to you
particularly important?

3. Marlow & Kurtz. What is the source of Marlow's feeling of kinship with Kurtz? What leads
him to call himself “Mr Kurtz's friend—in a way,” to confess that “I did not betray Mr.
Kurtz—it was ordered I should never betray him,” to take into his keeping Kurtz's
personal papers and his fiancée’s photograph, and to remain “loyal” to Kurtz to the end?

4. Marlow & Kurtz. When Marlow finds Kurtz after he disappeared from the ship, it is the
“moment, when the foundations of our intimacy were being laid.” Marlow tries “to break
the spell—the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness—that seemed to draw [Kurtz] to its
pitiless breast”—and understands what “had driven him out to the edge of the
forest...towards...the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations;...beguiled his
unlawful soul...beyond the bounds of permitted aspiration.” What is driving Marlow into
this terrible “intimacy” with Kurtz? Here, in the heart of darkness, Marlow proclaims:
“Soul! If anybody had ever struggled with a soul, I am the man.” Kurtz's soul, “Being
along in the wilderness,...had looked into itself, and by heavens! I tell you, it had gone
mad. I had—for my sins, I suppose—to go through the ordeal of looking into it myself.”
Interpret this moment of crisis—for Kurtz and for Marlow.

5. Kurtz. To what do Kurtz's final words, “The horror! The horror!” refer? It is because of
Kurtz's last words, finally, that Marlow affirms, “Kurtz was a remarkable man.” Why does Marlow call these words “an affirmation, a moral victory”? and why does Marlow later lie to the Intended when she asks for Kurtz's final words?

6. The Lie. The final scene between Marlow and Kurtz's fiancée is charged throughout with verbal and dramatic irony: that is, when the speaker's implicit meanings differ from what he says, and/or the readers share with the author or character knowledge of which another character (i.e. the Intended) is ignorant. Identify some instances of such ironies in this final scene.

7. Foreshadowing. Revisit the opening section of Part I, from “when the Romans first came here” to “What redeems it is the idea only...an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to...” Consider the parallels foreshadowing what you now know happens to Kurtz, and to Marlow, in the heart of darkness. Reconsider also Marlow's allusion to a redeeming “idea” in relation to the Intended's “mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering....the faith that was in her,...that great and saving illusion” before which Marlow bows his head—and which Marlow preserves by telling a lie.

8. Narrative Structure. The novel concludes by returning to the narrative frame, set aboard the Nellie: the tide is now turning; the unnamed narrator observes that “the tranquil waterway [the Thames]” seems now “to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.” Marlow is described as sitting “apart...in the pose of a meditating Buddha”: do you think Marlow has achieved some sort of enlightenment? Have you? Now that you, too, have experienced Marlow's story, revisit and reinterpret the unnamed narrator's description of where the meaning lies of one of Marlow's tales. What, for you, seem to be the meaning(s) of Heart of Darkness ?

Things Fall Apart – Study Guide Questions

Chapter One:

1. Identify the character Okonkwo. Select at least three quotes from chapter one which depict various aspects of his character (physical traits, personality, attitudes or ideas).

2. Identify the character Unoka. Cite three examples which demonstrate his character through his actions.

3. Describe Okonkwo’s relationship with his father.

4. What is Okonkwo’s greatest achievement so far in life?

Chapter Two:

5. Who/what is the Oracle of the Hills and Caves? Why is the Oracle important?

6. What important announcement does Ogbuefi Ezeugo make? What are the two ways her death could be avenged?

7. How many wives and children does Okonkwo have?

8. Who is Ikemefuna and where is he to live while he’s in Umuofia?

Chapter Three:

9. What occurs when Okonkwo and Unoka visit the Oracle of the Hills and Caves?

10. Explain the concept of chi. Is Okonkwo’s chi a good one or not? Explain.

11. Discuss what is revealed about Okonkwo’s earlier years. To whom is he particularly indebted?

Chapter Four:

12. Cite an incident which shows Okonkwo is not sympathetic to those whom he considers weak.

13. Who is Ojiugo? What incident involving her causes Okonkwo to have to pay an enormous sacrifice? What exactly is the sacrifice he must pay? Why is his offense particularly serious at this time?
Chapter Five:

14. List evidence which shows the importance of the yam to Ibo culture. What is the purpose of the Feast of the New Yam?

15. Who is Ekwefi? What incident involving Ekwefi and Okonkwo occurs? What does this incident demonstrate about Okonkwo?

Chapter Six:

16. Who is Ezinma? Why does Ekwefi say Ezinma is likely to have “come to stay”?

17. Who is Chielo and why is she important to the tribe?

18. What does the wrestling match and the rhythmic drumming show about the Ibo?

Chapter Seven:

19. Describe the coming of the locusts. What could these locusts foreshadow?

20. According to Ezeudu, what is it that “Umuofia has decided?”

21. Retell the incident involving Ikemefuna. Who delivers the final death blow? What fear does this character have which would motivate him to do this?

22. How does Nwoye react toward this event?

Chapter Eight:

23. Who is Obierika? Describe his reaction to Okonkwo’s involvement in the killing.

24. Find out about the disease leprosy. What is it? How could mentioning leprosy in connection with the white men be a foreshadowing?

25. Who is Akueke and why do a group of men visit her father?

Chapters Nine and Ten:

26. Identify these terms and character – iba, ogbanje children, iyi-uwa, and Okabue.

27. What/who are egwugwu and what do they represent?

28. What function do the egwugwu serve in the ceremony presented in this chapter?
Chapter Eleven:

29. Retell the folk tale Ekwefi tells about the Tortoise. What role does the Tortoise traditionally play in African folklore?

30. What does the incident involving Ezinma and Chielo show about Ekwefi and Okonkwo?

Chapter Twelve:

31. What is an uri? Describe the ceremony that takes places involving Akueke.

32. Describe Okonkwo’s actions the night Chielo takes Ezinma. What do these actions demonstrate about his character?

Chapter Thirteen:

33. What tragedy occurs during Ezeudu’s funeral? Who is responsible? How is this crime categorized?

34. What is the punishment for Ezeudu’s accidental death? Where does the guilty man go? How does he feel about this?

Chapter Fourteen – Part Two:

35. What kind of reception does Okonkwo receive from his mother’s people? Identify these main characters.

36. What is Uchendu’s lesson for Okonkwo? According to Uchendu, what is Okonkwo’s duty?

37. Copy the two lines of the mourning song for women on p. 125. What can you infer about women in the Ibo culture from these lines?

Chapter Fifteen:

38. In Okonkwo’s second year of exile, Obierika visits him. What news about the village of Abame does he bring?

39. What incident initiated the downfall of Abame? What role did the Oracle play in this incident?

40. What (besides news) does Obierika bring to Okonkwo? Why is this important to Okonkwo?
Chapter Sixteen:

41. In Okonkwo’s fourth year of exile, Obierika visits Okonkwo a second time and tells him that Christian missionaries have arrived in Umuofia. Which important character is among the converts?

42. What word do they use to describe the converts and what does it mean?

43. Although “it was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him,” three tribal traditions or incidents are sufficient to persuade Nwoye to follow the missionaries. What are these three things?

Chapter Seventeen:

44. What is the “evil forest” plan? What is the outcome of this plan?

45. What is Okonkwo’s reaction to Nwoye when he enters his father’s compound? In what way does Nwoye plot a “revenge.”

46. What fear does Okonkwo express as he stares into the fire? Refer to p. 142.

Chapter Eighteen:

47. Who/what are osu? Discuss the conflict surrounding their admission to the church.

48. Retell the “holy python” incident. What does this incident show about the unity of the tribe?

49. What happens during the Easter week? What happens to Okoli? Why is the clan reassured by this?

Chapter Nineteen:

50. What things does Uchendu pray for as he breaks the kola nut?

51. What is the name of Okonkwo’s first son born to him while in exile? What is the significance of his name?

52. What important concepts are illustrated by the farewell feast?

Chapter Twenty – Part Three:

53. Who is the first titled man to convert to Christianity?
54. What reason do the villagers give for not just “kicking out” the white men?

55. What does the land dispute and the subsequent hanging of Aneto show about the new government?

56. What is the function of Obierika’s statement that the white man “has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart”?

Chapter Twenty-One:

57. Identify the following characters – Enoch, Mr. Brown, Akunna, Chukwu, and Isaac.

58. Does Okonkwo’s return to Ibo society go as he planned? Why/why not?

Chapter Twenty-Two:

59. Who is the Reverend James Smith?

60. Who publicly unmasks as ugwugwu? Why is this such a serious offense? Name two results of this incident.

Chapter Twenty-Three:

61. What occurs when the District Commissioner calls a meeting with the village’s six leaders? What must the tribe do to secure the release of the prisoners?

62. Describe how the tribal leaders are treated while they are held prisoner. What is the worst insult to Okonkwo?

63. How do the messengers continue to deceive the village?

Chapter Twenty-Four:

64. Describe the debate at the town meeting. What are the two sides of the debate? Which characters seem to represent each viewpoint?

65. What is the fate of the head messenger who delivers the message to stop the meeting? Who is responsible? How do the other members of the tribe react?

Chapter Twenty-Five:

66. With what tragedy does the chapter open?
67. What does Obierika request of the District Commissioner and his band of soldiers? Why won’t the tribe take care of this?

68. What is so ironic about this incident?

69. What is the title of the District Commissioner’s book? Why is the inclusion of Okonkwo in his book ironic?

70. The life of Okonkwo ultimately ends in tragedy. However, Okonkwo’s life can be viewed in a larger sense. What possibly could Okonkwo and his life stand for, represent, or symbolize in this larger sense?