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Lesson 1

Introducing *Heart of Darkness*

Objectives

- To become acquainted with basic information about Joseph Conrad
- To appreciate the accomplishment of writing well in a language other than one's native tongue
- To analyze the opening pages of the novel

Notes to the Teacher

One of the truly remarkable facts about Joseph Conrad is that he wrote in English, a language that he did not learn until he was an adult. Anyone who has struggled to learn a second or third language will recognize the challenges involved—the sheer difficulty of becoming reasonably fluent. Conrad did not just become proficient; he was a master stylist, a fact that is amply evidenced in *Heart of Darkness*. Like his other works, this short novel reflects his personal experiences with life on shipboard. Although it has elements of an adventure story, it goes far beyond to encompass profound symbolic, sociological, and psychological dimensions.

The opening pages of the first chapter set the scene of the novel's time present—a tranquil gathering of five old friends on a boat on the Thames River. Conrad introduces Marlow, prepares us for his enigmatic story, and suggests several themes that permeate the work as a whole.

This lesson begins with an entertaining activity of having students attempt to write a short story in a language other than English. Often this will be French, Spanish, Latin, or German—a language which they have studied for several years in high school. If there are students whose native language is not English, their perspectives on the ease with which they can write in another language will enhance class discussion. Students then examine basic facts about the life of Joseph Conrad, whose accomplishments in the English language are legendary. Finally, students orient themselves to *Heart of Darkness* by examining the first few pages of the novel.

If you wish to emphasize vocabulary study, you may want to distribute handouts of materials in the supplementary section at the back of this curriculum unit.

Procedure

1. Ask students to identify languages other than English with which they have had some experience. Encourage the class to share experiences. Then ask students to take ten or fifteen minutes to begin a short story in a language other than English.
2. Have volunteers read stories aloud, and invite them to provide brief translations.
3. Conduct a discussion about factors that make writing in a language other than one's native tongue challenging, even if one has studied that language for two or three years (*limited diction and syntax; inability to think in the other language*).
4. Distribute **Handout 1**, and have students read the information about Joseph Conrad. Then discuss the questions.

Suggested Responses:

1. *He wrote not in Polish, his native language, but in English, a language he learned as an adult.*
2. *He might write about the dangers of gun-running, about sea adventures, or about the difficulty of life as an immigrant.*
5. Point out that writers' choices of titles often have great significance. Cite examples from students' shared experience.
6. Distribute **Handout 2**, and have students complete the web.
7. Ask each student to call out one or two words or phrases he or she included in the web, and record responses on the board. (*Responses may include center, love, blood, gloom, evil, confusion, and death.*)
8. Conduct a brief discussion of what the title suggests about the story to come. Lead students to see that Conrad is probably not presenting a cheerful, upbeat view of life.

9. Direct students to read the first few pages of the novel, stopping right after the narrator's complicated metaphor/simile contrasting Marlow's stories with ordinary sailor stories.

10. Have small groups complete **Handout 3**.

Suggested Responses:

Part A.

1. *a boat on the Thames River near the ocean; late afternoon and evening; peaceful, thoughtful, but also somewhat ominous*
2. *five men (the narrator, the Director of Companies, the Lawyer, the Accountant, and Marlow) who have been friends for many years; at one time all seamen*
3. *The description seems to compare Marlow to the Buddha, an icon of serenity and wisdom in the face of suffering and death.*
4. *The history of seamanship is inextricably linked to the desire for adventure, treasure, and fame. The narrator also links it to empire building.*
5. *Most sailors are usually at home and settled, both mentally and physically, on a ship. Marlow, on the other hand, seems to have a questing spirit.*
6. *Most sea stories are the simple, "what you see is what you get" type.*
7. *Marlow's stories are complicated, enigmatic, impossible to pin down to simple summary.*

Part B.

Darkness—*haze, dark, gloom, brooding, dull, death, dusk, monstrous, ominously, spectral*

Light—*luminous, sun, light, gleams, shone, brilliance, radiant, diaphanous, glowing, torch, spark, fire, glow, halos, illumination*

11. Point out that Conrad has already established one of the motifs of the novel—patterns of light and darkness. Encourage students to watch for continuations of this image pattern as they proceed through the novel.
12. Also point out Conrad's diction and syntax, and emphasize that this Polish-born writer has much to teach us about writing elegant English.
13. Assign the reading of the rest of the first chapter, which is the basis of Lessons 3 and 4.

Meet Joseph Conrad

Directions: Read the following information about Joseph Conrad, and answer the questions that follow.

Josef Konrad Korzeniowski was born December 3, 1857, in the Ukraine to an upper-class Polish family. His father was arrested in Warsaw by Russian police after an abortive rebellion and was sentenced to exile in Siberia. In 1865, his mother died of tuberculosis, and his father died in 1869. Josef was thus orphaned at an early age, and an uncle became his guardian.

As a young man, he went to France and became a gunrunner. He joined his first English ship in 1878, and he became a British citizen in 1886. He also passed his examination for the British Merchant Marine. One of the conditions for passing this examination was that foreigners had to prove that they could read and write the English language sufficiently well to perform the duties required on a British vessel. He served as a seaman sailing to Asia, South America, and Africa, including time in the Belgian Congo, an experience that was the basis for his short novel, *Heart of Darkness*.

In 1894, he went to England, where he began his career as a writer and adopted the pen name Joseph Conrad. He had a long struggle as an author, often living in poverty. Late in his career, he finally experienced some years of success and recognition.

On a personal level, he married an English woman and had a family. He seems to have been a dour and difficult individual. He died of a heart attack in 1924 and was buried in Canterbury, England.

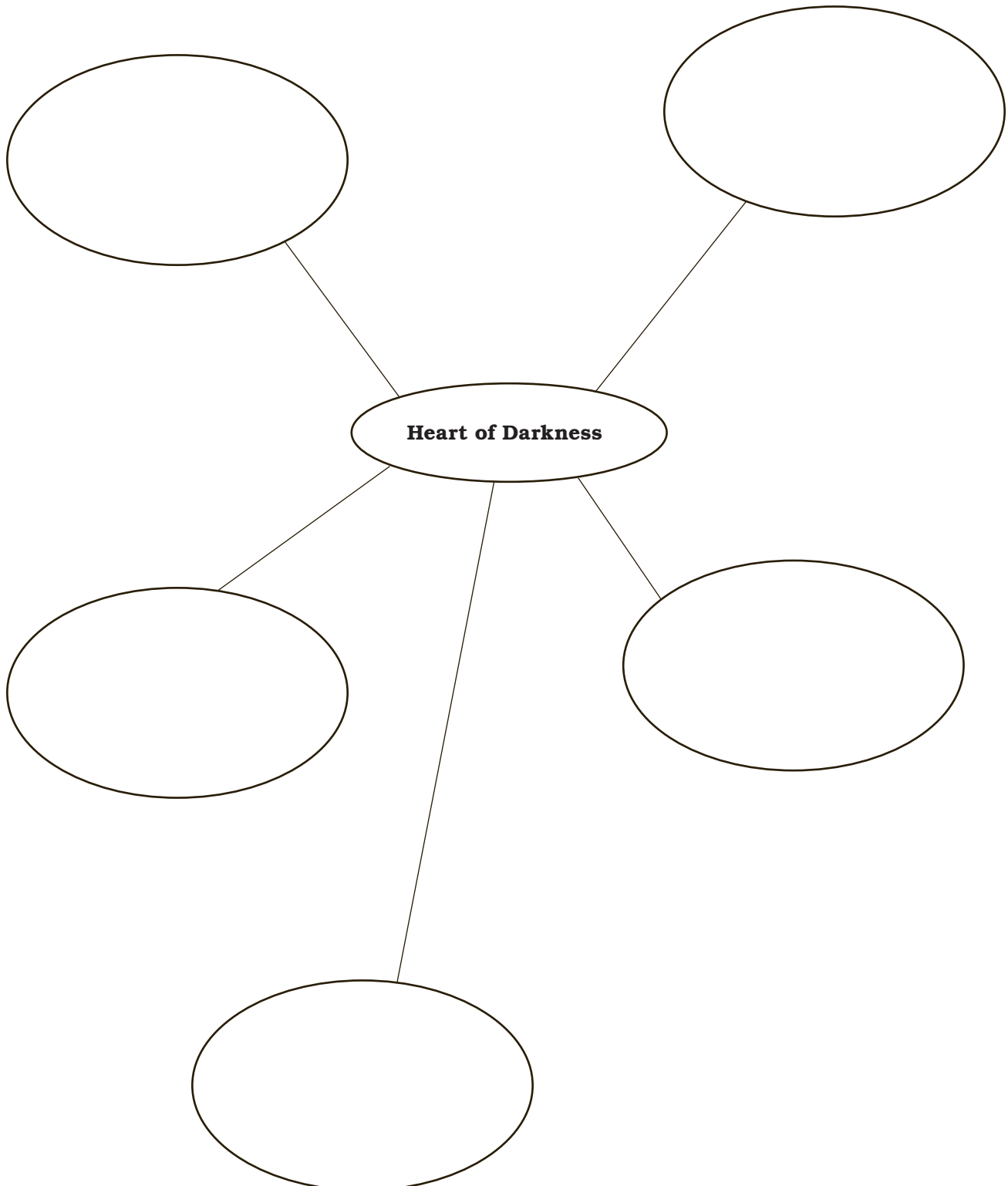
Conrad's first language was Polish, and his second was French, so his accomplishments as an English novelist are amazing. Critics praise him as an impeccable stylist—something most native English speakers cannot claim! Some of his best known works include the novels *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *Lord Jim* (1900) and the long story "The Secret Sharer" (1912).

1. What is truly remarkable about Joseph Conrad's stature as an English novelist?

2. What elements from his personal experience would you expect to see in his writings?

What Is a “Heart of Darkness”?

Directions: Use the following web diagram to consider possible associations and implications of the title of Conrad’s novel.



Introducing *Heart of Darkness*

Part A.

Directions: Use the following questions to analyze Conrad's introduction to the novel.

1. Identify the place and time setting. What is the mood?
2. What characters are present? How would you describe their relationship?
3. Reexamine the narrator's first description of Marlow. What does it suggest?
4. What does the narrator suggest in his lengthy commentary on the history of men and ships?
5. In what sense do most sailors lead sedentary lives? How is Marlow different?
6. Unpack the metaphor describing most sea stories.
7. Explain the figurative language used to describe Marlow's stories.

