



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2013 Volume II: Interpreting Texts, Making Meaning: Starting Small

Moving Beyond "Huh?": Ambiguity in Heart of Darkness

Curriculum Unit 13.02.01, published September 2013

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Introduction

One week before we begin reading it, I pull out a copy of the Norton Critical Edition of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. "This is our next project, *Heart of Darkness*," I say to 32-37 (sometimes) attentive faces. I flip through the book, pinch pages 3-77 of the 500-plus-page book between my thumb and index finger, and hold it up. "These pages here are the text of the novella. That's it." My students look at me and at each other, confused. Then the chorus of voices ensues: "What do you mean?" "That's it?" "Yay!" "You're lying. Um, I mean, are you lying to us?"

Then my favorite question: "Wait. Then how come the book is so big?" I smile slyly. "It's stuff *about* the novella," I answer. And they're hooked, as if anticipating initiation into some clandestine society for *Heart of Darkness* aficionados—but then they begin reading it, and their excitement fades and frustration takes its place.

That students find the text difficult to understand is an understatement. Not only do they struggle with the syntax, they are perplexed, among other things, as to what is the "right" interpretation of Marlow's journey up the Congo or what Kurtz's character or the cannibals represent or what those "stupid black hens" symbolize. As a result, they become reluctant readers of a piece of literature that critics continue to write about and debate today. Such reluctance on their part raises the question: *Why teach Heart of Darkness?* Good question.

Rationale

Heart of Darkness is a text that my students, even the best ones, struggle with each year. It makes them doubt themselves, their intelligence, and for some, even their potential success in college. Many of them are the best and the brightest at Overfelt and so fearless in many other ways, and yet this work makes them afraid to take chances, to explore possible meanings because they do not want to be wrong. They want concrete answers and are unable to accept/maneuver the gray areas, but it is in that gray area that literature comes alive.

Located in the heart of Silicon Valley and the third-largest city in California (and the 10th largest in the U.S.), William C. Overfelt High School serves East San Jose, or colloquially the "East Side." The student body of approximately 1,470 students (9-12) is working class and predominantly low-income. The community faces tremendous poverty and high crime rates; in fact, the City of San Jose has identified Overfelt's attendance area as a "gang hot spot." The significant economic and social hardships facing the community have a major impact on student achievement as measured by mandated testing.(1) Though our API has steadily increased since 2004, less than a third of our students score proficient or advanced on the English Language portion of the STAR tests.(2) Yet, on the standardized tests given every year in California(3) in April, the month I think of as the harbinger of "testing season," the scores of some of my students rival those of students from schools that consistently score—on a scale that tops out at 900—in the high 800s or better. Their scores, however, are not enough to erase the stigma of a low-performing school and nor lift it above the rising tide of emphasis placed on achievement tests to determine the quality of instruction in the classroom and teacher effectiveness.

Hoping to raise test scores, Overfelt recently adopted a small learning community model school-wide. I belong to *Fiat Lux*,(4) the "honors" academy. I am one of the lucky few at the school to have a resource period to co-lead a team of six teachers, including myself. We are cognizant that due to the make-up of Overfelt's student body, school-wide resources have focused on improving the achievement of our middle- and lowest-achieving students. *Fiat Lux* agrees the school must do this, but we also know we cannot ignore the needs of our highest achieving students, often overlooked because "they will do well no matter what." That is neither the case nor is it just. So, our goal is to develop curriculum that engages and challenges students, and to create community among our students who, unlike others, are placed in the academy mostly owing to their test scores and grades rather than their own choice. We want to ensure they are not forgotten in the push to improve instruction among the less gifted students and close the achievement gap. But of course, these are not the only students who take Advanced Placement classes.

In the hopes of shrinking that gap and to ensure no student who wants to take AP is denied access to its challenging curriculum, Overfelt has maintained an open-door policy in regards to AP classes. That means that enrollment in the course is not predicated on any kind of prerequisite with the exception that students must have taken (but need not have passed) AP English Language in the 11th grade. Received an F in English 3 (college-prep junior English)? Go ahead and take AP. D's in freshman and sophomore English classes? Not a problem. Sign up for AP. Counselor strongly advised against AP? Disregard that. Take AP. I am, however, by no means advocating that students who do not have the "proper credentials" be excluded from enrolling in AP. There are too many factors accounting for why students do not do well in their classes before enrolling in AP English Literature. For example, it is all too common that students must work to help support their families, to care for younger siblings (and/or cousins in multi-family households) while parents (or aunts and uncles) work, or do both. So, while every parent or guardian I have met wants their child to do well in school, often something has to give in order that basic needs are met first; unfortunately, that something is often schoolwork. Another reason some students did not do well in English 3 is because they did not find the course engaging or challenging, and so they did not work for the grade they easily could have earned. These students often thrive in the AP classroom. And then there are those students who know they have not acquired many of the skills students normally have in order to be successful in an AP classroom but are nevertheless willing to challenge themselves; these students are often my most diligent and hard working. Regardless of how my students come to me, I strongly believe that with the right support, with instruction that engages them, they can be successful in my classroom, even with the most challenging of texts, such as *Heart of Darkness*.

So, again the question: why teach a text as difficult as *Heart of Darkness* to a class of students, the bulk of

whom will struggle even with scaffolding? Simple: There is value in that struggle. This is one of those times when the journey is just as important as the destination.

First, it would not be surprising if *Heart of Darkness* were one of the required readings they encounter in college. It is what some critics believe to be "among the half-dozen greatest short novels in the English language."⁽⁵⁾ That students have a working familiarity with it and have previously spent time analyzing it will work in their favor. They can use the skills they learn analyzing *Heart of Darkness* to access independently other texts that are just as difficult. They will learn that different types of texts require different approaches, that as readers, they must read *Heart of Darkness* (and other texts like it) with intent.

Secondly, *Heart of Darkness* is especially fertile ground for interpretation. One theme students will see immediately has to do with race and the character of Marlow. Several questions arise. Can—as W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley argue in "The Intentional Fallacy"⁽⁶⁾—we ignore Conrad's intent when we judge *Heart of Darkness*' success as a literary work? If one believes that Conrad and/or the text is racist, does that negate any value it has as literary art? Or can the work be judged on its own merits, regardless of what Conrad intended? If students come to the conclusion that Conrad and/or Marlow is racist, can the text still be read as an indictment of imperialism, or must it be read as Chinua Achebe did, a warning against the dangers of allowing darkness to overwhelm civilization? These are the text-specific questions students will deal with in their discussions in class, conversations I hope they will continue outside the confines of our classroom walls.

Finally, my students are on the verge of new lives. Many will be on their own for the first time, away at college and making adult decisions for themselves, from the mundane to the serious. They are coming of age in a world in which the use of social media connects us to people on the other side of the globe by simply clicking "Accept Friend Request," where it is more commonplace to text than to call, where we have over a thousand "friends" we've never met and whose voices we've never heard, where strangers follow our 140-character thoughts on issues big and small. This begs the following question: Have we become merely observers of life rather than participants, posting pictures of our lives rather than being actively engaged in them? *Heart of Darkness* is a work fraught with such questions about the nature of humanity, about our responsibilities and obligations to ourselves and to others to act in ways that are humane, and what the consequences are for us as a people when we act in inhumane ways or fail to stop others from doing so.

Content Objectives

The goal of my unit is to teach my students interpretation skills specifically using Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. And as I write this unit, I keep coming back to the question, *Why Heart of Darkness?* It is the question I go back to every year as I plan the readings and works we will study during the course of the school year. While I am cognizant of the fact that it is the one work that students either love or hate; that there seems to be no middle ground; that those who hate *Heart of Darkness* are the ones who "just don't get it" and struggle mightily with not just vocabulary (which can certainly be daunting but not insurmountable) but with the enormous amount of symbolism and ambiguity in Conrad's work, they need not stay lost in the murkiness of the landscape, unable to glean meaning from the actions of the novel's characters. I would like to provide them a way to navigate all this by guiding them through close readings of particular passages (which we will do as a class, then they will do in pairs or small groups, and finally individually), and allowing them to process information both verbally through class discussions and in writing via journals and essays. (*Enduring*

Understanding 1, below)

By the end of this unit, it is my hope that students will have (further) developed their skills in the art (or science) of interpretation through close reading and analysis of the text, and learned the importance of supporting their opinions with appropriate evidence from the text. (Enduring Understanding 3, below) With these skills, they will be able to access other complex texts—whether they be novels, poems, or expository texts—with confidence.

Essential Questions

During the last week of classes before Overfelt tore down the wing in which my first classroom was located in order to replace it with a new, state-of-the-art science wing, my colleagues and I, who were being relocated to the new C-wing designed for 21st century collaborative learning communities, invited students both current and former to leave messages on the walls, their good-byes to the place where they had been nurtured as scholars, where many of them had laughed, cried, fought, made up, made friends, and, for some, likely made a few enemies. Word spread, and they came—before school, between classes, at break, during lunch, and after school. They took up permanent markers to leave impermanent messages bold and tender and cryptic and funny on walls that would soon be a pile of rubble to be hauled away, leaving no physical evidence of the sometimes life-changing events that had taken place within them. But, of the over two hundreds epitaphs scrawled on my walls and doors and windows, only one brought tears to my eyes, a simple eight-word statement by a 2006 graduate:

I became a better person in this classroom.

That epitaph sums up why I believe the essential questions below are integral to the teaching of *Heart of Darkness*.

I do not see my job as simply to teach English literature and writing. I believe that as an educator, I have an obligation to help my students become better people, responsible and informed citizens of the communities they (will) live and work in, which, in this age of Facebook, Twitter, FourSquare, Tumblr, and Instagram, are becoming more than ever interconnected and increasingly interdependent. They are inhabiting a global community, and the essential questions below will get them thinking about their place in society and how their actions or inaction may have consequences far beyond their ken.

Essential Question 1 (below) is the foundation question. In determining whether *Heart of Darkness* is a racist text, students must examine the very current argument about whether we are living in a "post-racial" society. But even before they can begin discussing that question, they must come to some answer about what that phrase even means. They can then explore whether there is value in reading literature that engenders such strong reactions in readers that there is still debate over whether or not it should be taught. My hope is that they will come to the conclusion J. Hillis Miller reaches in his essay entitled "Should We Read *Heart of Darkness*?": not only should the novella be read, but we have "an obligation to do so,"(7) and that if we do not, we have abdicated our authority to come to an informed decision about whether the text should be read. Rather than depend on someone else's opinion, we need to

perform a reading in the strong sense, an active responsible response that renders justice to a book by generating more language in its turn, the language of attestation, even though that language may remain silent or implicit.(8)

My hope is that this examination will lead naturally to the questions that follow, that they will eventually come to the conclusion of the old adage, "Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it."

1. Is *Heart of Darkness* a racist text?
2. Does man control his own destiny?
3. How do the characters reflect the society in which they live?
4. What do these characters' decisions and actions say about human nature and how we respond to our environment?
5. What makes us human?
6. What does it mean to act humanely?
7. Are we required to act when we see other human beings treated inhumanely, and if so, do the times and culture we live in negate that obligation or excuse our failure to do so?

Enduring Understandings

1. Interpreting difficult text is a skill that can be mastered.
2. Knowledge of an author's background, and the historical and cultural context of a piece of literature lead to a better understanding of the work.
3. Literary interpretation must be substantiated by evidence in the work itself.

Background

Modernism and the Modernist Novel

Though there is no exact date when the Modernist period in English literature began, it is generally accepted that the seeds of its inception began to be seen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its emphasis on the inner self and consciousness, its view of society in decay or decline, and the sense of loss, alienation, and disillusionment, is often described as a reaction to world events that called into question Victorian ideals and sensibilities and to the Romantic world-view in which the focus was on nature and the individual. It eschewed the conventional characteristics of literature; the omniscient third-person narrator was replaced by the first-person or multiple narrators, and stream-of-consciousness style narration made its appearance. *Heart of Darkness* fits this description.

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924)

Joseph Conrad was a Polish-born writer who did not begin learning English, his third language, until he was in his 20s. He lost his mother when he was eight, his father when he was twelve, and was raised by his uncle thereafter. From a very young age, he was fascinated with the sea, recounting that when he was nine years old, he pointed to the blank part of a map of Africa and announced emphatically, "When I grow up I shall go *there*."⁽⁹⁾ In 1874 at sixteen years of age, Conrad left Poland to Marseilles, France, to work with the French shipping company, C. Delestang et Fils. In 1878, he joined the British Merchant Service, in which he served fifteen years. He became a British citizen in 1886. He travelled the world as a seaman, sailing to places such as the Caribbean, the West Indies, South America, Bangkok, and Singapore, before signing with a Belgian company to command a steamboat in the Congo,⁽¹⁰⁾ this experience being the basis of *Heart of Darkness*. He authored several books, including his first, *Almayer's Folly* in 1895, and *Heart of Darkness*, which was published in serial form in 1899.⁽¹¹⁾ He died in 1924 and is buried in Canterbury Cemetery.⁽¹²⁾

Belgium and the Congo Free State

In *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, Adam Hochschild recounts Belgium's King Leopold II's policies that resulted in "killing in the Congo [that] was of genocidal proportions, [but] was not, strictly speaking, genocide," in that "the Congo state was not deliberately trying to eliminate one particular ethnic group from the face of the Earth."(13) Rather, "Leopold's men were looking for labor."(14) The millions of lives lost in their search for and use of labor was "to them [] incidental."(15)

In 1885, after several years of negotiation with the United States and other European powers, King Leopold was granted sovereignty over the Congo Free State by the International Association of the Congo.(16) The guise under which he secured power over the Congo, that of a humanitarian mission, was vastly different from the reality of what occurred. Hochschild details the "four closely connected sources" that resulted in a tremendous population loss during 1885 and 1910, with the greatest loss of life in the 1890's: "1) murder; 2) starvation, exhaustion, and exposure; 3) disease; and 4) a plummeting birth rate."(17) The population from 1885 to 1919 was estimated to be "reduced by half," according to a 1919 Belgian commission.(18) Based on a census conducted in 1924, the population during that year was estimated to be ten million, which means that "during Leopold's period and its immediate aftermath the population of the territory dropped by approximately ten million people.(19)

Articles and Essays for Discussion

Students will read the following texts because all address the question of whether Conrad and, thus, the novella are racist. Because I want students to interpret *Heart of Darkness* and, individually and as a class, come to their own conclusions about it, they will read these articles *after* reading *Heart of Darkness*. I want these pieces to serve as a starting point for the less text-specific inquiries of the Essential Questions above. These essays will encourage them to consider other interpretations, to analyze how those interpretations differ from their own, and to evaluate not only the validity of the conclusions and the evidence used for others' interpretations but also to re-examine the evidence they use to support their own interpretations and conclusions.

Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness"

Chinua Achebe (1930-2013), the Nigerian-born poet, novelist, and professor at Brown University, details several instances in the novella that he believes prove that "Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist."(20) His essay is a revised lecture he originally delivered at University of Massachusetts, Amherst in 1975. In it, he writes that from a Western perspective, Africa is viewed as "a foil to Europe, a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest."(21) He seems to argue that the novella warns that "[t]ragedy begins when things leave their accustomed place."(22) He disputes the argument that "the attitude to the African in *Heart of Darkness* is not Conrad's but that of his fictional narrator, Marlow, and that far from endorsing it Conrad might indeed be holding it up to irony and criticism"(23) and contends instead that if Conrad had meant to distinguish Marlow from himself, he failed miserably. To Achebe, it was an effort "totally wasted" because Conrad provided no "alternative frame of reference by which [readers] may judge the actions and opinions of his characters."(24) He concludes by conceding that Conrad did indeed "condemn[] the evil of imperial exploitation"(25); nevertheless, Conrad was "strangely unaware"(26) of the racism on which such practices were predicated and that inability to see or recognize it is why he believed Conrad was a racist.

Hunt Hawkins, "Heart of Darkness and Racism"

In his essay, *Heart of Darkness and Racism*, Hunt Hawkins, professor of English at University of South Florida,

takes issue with Achebe's reading of the novella. Although he agrees with Achebe that "much of *Heart of Darkness* dehumanizes Africans" and that "the image Conrad projects of African life can hardly be called flattering,"(27) Hawkins asserts that Conrad's depiction of the Congo cannot and should not be read as representative of "all the cultures and situations" in Africa.(28) Moreover, he claims that Conrad was a critic of imperialism:

Conrad became a staunch, if complicated opponent of European Expansion. *Heart of Darkness* offers a powerful indictment of imperialism, both explicitly for the case of King Leopold and implicitly (despite Marlow's comments on the patches of red) for all other European powers.(29)

He believes that Conrad's "comparative reduction and neglect of Africans" in the novella was intentional.(30) He seems to argue that Achebe's observation that Africans are rarely seen in the novella is an intentional omission on Conrad's part. He interprets the passage in which Marlow journey's up the Congo, describing it as "traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world"(31) not as evidence that Conrad supported imperialism because of an inherent sense of superiority of European culture but rather as a way to focus readers on the idea on European hypocrisy, that those who purported to desire bringing civilization to Africa "[did not] live up to their own ideals as civilizers"(32) and in fact may have called into question the "validity" of those very ideals. Conrad's marginalization of Africans in the novella was a deliberate decision to have the narrative structure mimic societal structure.

He ends by saying that the value of *Heart of Darkness* is clearly evident in the fact that the title has become synonymous with the atrocities perpetrated in cases of human rights abuse and that "[f]ar from condoning genocide, Conrad clearly saw humanity's horrific capacity and gave it a name."(33)

Paul B. Armstrong, "[Reading, Race, and Representing Others]"

Of the critical essays to accompany our study of *Heart of Darkness*, the most difficult and most likely in need of scaffolding is Armstrong's.

Armstrong acknowledges the different ways in which *Heart of Darkness* has been interpreted, on the one hand as a text perpetuating racist stereotypes (as advocated by Achebe) and on the other as "a model of...the most promising practices in representing other peoples and cultures."(34) He then posits that it is neither. Rather, "*Heart of Darkness* is a calculated failure to depict achieved cross-cultural understanding."(35) In other words, Marlow fails to participate in "truly reciprocal"(36) dialogue with the Africans that is required for a true appreciation and respect and understanding of cultures and people different from our own. Though he has many opportunities to engage in such "[]dialogical encounters," he does not take advantage of them but rather remains an aloof observer of the people and the landscape and activities going on around him,

... a tourist who sees the passing landscape through a window which separates him from it, and he consequently commits the crimes of touristic misappropriation of otherness even as he is aware of and points out the limitations of that position.(37)

Marlow's inability to bridge the power gap that separates him from the native Africans becomes representative of the text's inability to engage in the type of dialogue necessary to begin understanding. Armstrong sees Achebe's accusations similarly, as a failure to recognize *Heart of Darkness* as an opening salvo exploring the possibility of connecting with the "Other"; yet the charges Achebe makes in his response are valuable because "they break the aura of the text and reestablish reciprocity between it and its

interpreters by putting them on equal terms" and that acknowledging "how unsettlingly ambiguous this text is about the ideals of reciprocity and mutual understanding" allows us to begin to "engage in the sort of dialogue with it which Marlow never achieves with Africans or anyone else."(38)

Teaching Strategies

Before we begin, I will provide 1) a very short overview of Modernism and the Modernist movement in literature, 2) a brief biography of Conrad, and 3) introduce them to the historical and geo-political context of the novella. (*Enduring Understanding 2, above*) This is necessary because many of my students will have some general knowledge of European and American imperialism but not the specific history of Belgian encroachments on the Congo and the devastating effects of the Belgian government's policies and practices on the native African population. This will be the starting point for students to explore the broader issue of the effects of imperialism on both the perpetrators and its victims. Finally, using *Heart of Darkness*, students will learn to look closely at the literary devices used by Conrad to arrive at some understanding of the questions raised by the work, themes that they may encounter on the Advanced Placement English Literature Examination, which they are all required to take in May.

Class Discussions: Whole Class, Socratic Seminar, Fishbowl

I love having my students engage in class discussions. They are a wonderful way to get students thinking and to practice putting their thoughts together in words coherently and logically, and to do it more quickly than they thought they could. They learn to articulate their opinions in academic language and to support their ideas with evidence from the text, which they must read closely and deliberately in order to participate cogently and thoughtfully.

At the beginning of the school year, I provide students a list of phrases that they use to help them converse like literary critics. At first they make a big show of using the phrases and we all laugh, but it quickly becomes part of their discussion lexicon. These phrases become an integral and necessary part of maintaining a college-level classroom culture, one in which students own the language of literary criticism.

At the very least, students will have engaged in whole-class discussion by the time we begin our study of *Heart of Darkness*. Usually, I lead the first formal, graded one. Sometimes, however, I will have a student whose behavior in informal discussions makes me think he or she will be particularly adept at running a discussion with minimal guidance and participation from me—and very rarely will that student disappoint. I use whole class discussion at the beginning of the school year to gauge students' comfort level with participation and to begin getting them comfortable with participating verbally since they are required to do so quite often in class.

In a fishbowl discussion, I choose ten students to begin in a circle discussion. They will need to bring discussion questions and their text(s) in order to participate. In order for a student on the outside to enter the discussion, he or she must "tap out" a student in the circle. This teaches students not just manners but also how to listen closely to argument and how to segue smoothly, with as minimal disruption as possible to the flow of conversation.

Of the three discussion formats,(39) the Socratic seminar is perhaps my favorite method. Because of the size

of my classes (it is not unusual to have 35 students in a class), the seminars are conducted over two days, with one group (the quiet ones) going on the first day and "the talkers" on the second day. Neither group is immutable; students may, based on their performances in prior seminar and discussions, be moved (or ask to be moved) from one group to another.

In general, before they come to me in AP English, students have not had much opportunity for formal class discussions, and few students have even participated in informal class discussions. Because of this lack of experience, I spend 15-20 minutes detailing for them the procedures and my expectations.(40) More importantly, it is an excellent method to get students accustomed to college-level dialogue about books. The Socratic seminar also addresses many of the impending Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English-Language Arts, especially when used in conjunction with *Heart of Darkness* and the essays above. Requiring them to support their interpretations with evidence from the text helps them learn to synthesize ideas to come to perhaps a new or better understanding of the text.

Oral Reading

Because of the difficult nature of the text, I will read much of chapter one aloud while students follow along in their books (although, if I have particularly strong readers, I may call on them periodically to read part of a paragraph or short section), stopping often to ask comprehension questions. This oral reading is a crucial step, necessary before students are assigned to small groups of no more than four to work through chapters two and three together. I do this to model for them how to handle Conrad's long, syntactically complex sentences, and to demonstrate the importance of slowing down and attending to punctuation, something they often ignore in their attempt to "just get through the chapter," and so they will know *how* to read when they are working together. Though group readings may seem to slow down the process, students benefit from their discussion about how they see the text and what they see in it to help them in interpreting what they see.

Dialectical Journal

"Dialectic" is defined by Merriam-Webster as "discussion and reasoning by dialogue as a method of intellectual investigation," or, more simply, "an intellectual exchange of ideas."(41) Dialectical journals are an excellent way for students to write succinct responses to short passages. They may make connections to the text (text to text, text to self, text to world), or they may analyze a particular literary device or technique. Dialectical journals are also useful in preparing students for class discussions. It focuses them on a specific text and requires them to read closely. Students are allowed to use their journals during discussions to help them pinpoint where in the text a particular idea and supporting quote can be found, allowing their conversations to be organic and academic at the same time.

In-class essays (i.e., "timed writes")

For each of the Advanced Placement subjects, the College Board administers examinations that purport to evaluate a student's mastery of the subject matter. For English Literature, the examination includes a multiple-choice section and an essay section that requires students to respond to specific prompts on a poem or pair of poems, a short prose passage, and a thematic question (often referred to as "Question 3") for which they choose an appropriate piece of literature. So, every year, before I return students' first in-class essays to them, I ask them what "AP" stands for, and every year the first *verbal* response (because their first response is to look at me like I have lost my mind) is "Advanced Placement." That is when I tell them they are both right and wrong.

For our purposes, I tell them, they need to add a second definition of what "AP" stands for: "Answer the Prompt." They laugh when I tell them this, and so do I. But when I pass back their essays with both a letter grade and number score based on the AP scoring guide, their laughter quickly dies out; some quietly share their scores with the person next to them; others shrug and shake their heads in response to silent inquiries about how they did. I introduce the essay this way not to discourage them as much as it is to humble them a bit, to break them of their preconceived notions that the way they have "always" written in their past English classes, that the process that has gotten them the "As" they so covet will be "good enough" in AP. They quickly learn that 1) even the highest achieving of them need lots of practice in writing responses that adequately address the prompt, 2) grammar and mechanics count even on timed essays, and 3) 40 minutes to write an essay on a prompt as complex and involved as the AP prompts is not an easy task but is a doable one. Students, therefore, will write several in-class essays to prepare them for the AP exam essays.

The timed essays, however, are more than just preparing for the Advanced Placement exam. Like discussions, the timed essays are a way for students to practice expressing cogently and thoughtfully their interpretations of the text.

Classroom Activities

Week One

This first week will be dedicated to "getting our feet wet." I will conduct a short lecture to provide background knowledge of the text: biographical information about Conrad and the geographical setting and historical and political context of the novella. We will then begin chapter one. They will use reading questions developed by Kris Tully and Robert Litchfield(42) to work through this and the other two chapters. I will read some of chapter one, stopping often to check for understanding and to allow students to ask for clarification and write answers to the reading questions, and to identify and define vocabulary words. I will also have students read along with an audio recording of the novella(43) so that they can hear how different readers emphasize different words in the same text. This should lead to a brief discussion of whether and how that affects their own understanding and interpretation of text.

Students will then assemble in their assigned groups to complete chapter one and begin chapter two. As they read, I will be circling among them, answering questions and asking them some of *my* own in order to push them to come to some understanding on *their* own. If a particular group seems to be having particular difficulty, I may sit with them for an extended period of time (as I will do throughout the unit). In addition to answering the reading questions, as they read students will annotate directly in their texts, noting any questions they may have, examples of figurative language, and/or words or phrases that have a special resonance for them. At the end of each class, each group will assign nightly homework to its own members so that they stay on schedule. Groups are encouraged to spend time outside of class working together, although this is not always possible when students have sports or familial obligations.

Week Two

The first part of week two will be dedicated to students completing group readings of chapter two. We will spend class time identifying and defining problematic words in the chapter. This will also be time for students to ask clarifying questions about characters and plot before they take a test on chapter one so that I can

assess whether they understand the text on the most basic level. If they do not, we will spend time reviewing.

We will conduct a whole-class close reading of what I call the "maps" passage in which Marlowe relates his childhood fascination with maps ("Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps" to "The snake had charmed me.") and the allure of the "mighty big river" which "resembl[ed] an immense snake uncoiled...."(44) I will use the document camera to project the passage onto the screen while they annotate indirectly their texts.

We will end the week with a whole-class discussion led by me or by a student volunteer. Each student will come to class with five questions that fall on the higher end of Bloom's Taxonomy, which we will have discussed earlier in the school year. They must also have their text in order to participate. At this point in their reading, students will have developed a preliminary opinion about whether *Heart of Darkness* is a racist text. Students will explore this issue, citing specific evidence from the novella to bolster their arguments. Depending on the quality of the discussion, the issues raised, and student interest, the discussion may go a second day.

Week Three

Students will start the week by taking a test on chapter two. They will also begin their group readings of chapter three. The major assignments for this week are the close-readings students will do in pairs. The passage is about Marlowe's description of his initial visit to the Company offices.(45) They may begin in class and, if they do not finish, will complete the analysis for homework. The next day we will debrief as a class and discuss their interpretations of the passage.

For the fishbowl discussion, students will come to class with five discussion questions. I will have placed ten chairs in the middle of the classroom. I will choose the initial ten participants, who take their places in the circle, with one student to open the discussion. Those not in the fishbowl may enter the discussion after ten minutes have elapsed. A student who wishes to participate in the discussion taps the shoulder of the student whose place he wishes to take. Once in the circle, a student must remain for at least five minutes and may not leave until "tapped out" by another. As always, depending on the quality of discussion, the issues raised, and student interest, the fishbowl may go on to a second day.

Week Four

To begin our final week, students will complete chapter three in their groups. We will, as we have done for each of the first two, identify and define problematic words and review the chapter prior to the chapter three test.

Once students have completed chapter three, I will assign the essays by Achebe and Hawkins to read and journal, using the dialectical method for the upcoming Socratic seminar. For the dialectical journal, students will use a spiral-bound notebook. For each entry, students will fold the page in half lengthwise. On the left, they write quotes (one per entry) they would like to analyze, citing the page number on which the quote can be found. On the right-hand side of the page, they will record their responses. They may explore the effect or possible meanings of figurative turns of phrase; they may write about personal connections they have made, or how a particular situation is relevant to the world today. Entries may *not*, however, be solely of the personal connection type, e.g., "This reminds me of a time in my life when...." Students will write a total of ten entries for both essays combined. As they are reading Achebe's and Hawkins' essays outside of class, in class we will read, annotate, and discuss Armstrong's essay. Because of its complexity, we will spend the whole class

period for this.

At the end of the week, we will hold the Socratic seminar, which will span two days. The classroom will be arranged with enough chairs in the center of the room for half the students to discuss. There will also be in the circle a "hot seat," which will allow a student outside the circle to ask a question or make a comment of the current seminar participants. The "hot seat" is only for asking a question or making a comment; a student in the seat may not remain to participate in the discussion. Students will each receive a seminar check sheet with rubric (see Appendix B, below). Each student will write their names on the "Outer Circle" line and the name of their partner on the "Inner Circle" line (partners are chosen by me). Again, students will come with five questions for discussion. I will write the essential questions on the board. Students are required to bring their text and may use their notes on Armstrong's essay and journal of Achebe's and Hawkins' essays. The quiet students will discuss on the first day, the "talkers" on the second day. On both days, I will choose a student to open the discussion. A student may begin the discussion with one of the essential questions or with one of her own. Because of the nature of discussion as it often develops and the different viewpoints and experiences of students, students may turn out not to stay focused on the essential questions. If this happens, I will only intervene if the discussion strays very far afield.

The culminating activity will be the timed write using the AP English Literature Exam 2004 released prompt.(46) Students will have the class period to write the essay.

Appendix A: Implementing District Standards

Common Core State Standards (CCSS or Standards) for English-Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects

Although there are at least ten standards that apply, for purposes of the unit, the three standards most pertinent are:

Reading 1: During discussions and in dialectical journals and essays, students will be required to "[c]ite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain." This requires that prior to discussion or to the writing of their essays, they must have read and evaluated the texts to be discussed. It is in their dialectical journals that they may note questions that become the basis for discussion.

Writing 2(a), (e), and (f): In their essays, students are required "to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content." A well-written essay will—in cogent, formal prose throughout—introduce the topic at issue, organize arguments logically, and provide a concluding section that pulls together their arguments succinctly but not perfunctorily.

Speaking and Listening 1(a), (c), (d): Essential to understanding literature is the free exchange of ideas. The expectation is that students will have read the assigned readings, thought about them, and will come to class willing to share their thoughts and ideas and any questions they may have. They are evaluated not only on the quantity of the comments they make but, more importantly, on the quality of their comments, including

but not limited to whether: 1) their comments move the discussion forward; 2) they are listening to others' comments and observations, and responding thoughtfully; inviting more reticent members of the class to participate; 3) they are not simply agreeing with another's comment but providing further explanation as to why, as well as not simply disagreeing with another's comment but explaining why their view differs. Students must also cite specific evidence from texts in order to receive credit. Comments that are particularly insightful, that synthesize several points of view or opinions, are rewarded; comments that do not move discussion forward, are not. Comments made in side conversations do not receive credit.

Appendix B

SOCRATIC SEMINAR CHECK SHEET

Outer Circle (Name) _____ Period _____

Inner Circle (Name) _____ Date _____

Topic: _____

Behavior	Tally the number of times behavior is shown by your partner	Comments
1. Speaks		1. What went well in the discussion process?
2. Comments on other person's comment		
3. Contributes new idea		
4. Makes connection to text / literature OTHER THAN assigned text(s)		2. How could we improve the discussion process?
5. Makes connection to real world		
6. Asks for clarification		
7. Invites someone into the discussion		
8. Paraphrases others' comments		3. What were the two most insightful comments?
9. Compliments or encourages others		
10. Makes explicit reference to ASSIGNED text(s)		

Socratic Seminar Rubric

A+—50 points: Participated in 9 categories and spoke at least 15 times.

A—47.5 points: Participated in at least 7 categories and spoke at least 10 times.

B—42.5 points: Participated in at least 4 categories and spoke at least 6 times.

C—37.5 points: Participated in at least 2 categories and spoke at least 3 times.

D—32.5 points: Participated in 1 category and spoke at least once.

F—25 points: Present but no verbal participation.

Comments Grading Scale:

1. What went well: To get the full three points for this section, you must list at least three (3) things your group did well during the discussion. You are evaluating the group's performance, not merely your own.

2. Improving the process: You are evaluating BOTH sessions. Here is your chance to state what should be changed when planning our next discussion. Your suggestion might be about the way the discussion is structured—for instance, how much time we spend on one topic before going to another. You might offer a very specific critique of class behavior in the discussion—for instance that people are interrupting one another too often. Or, you might suggest a change in which group members are chosen. In something as complex as a seminar, I cannot envision a time when it will be truthful to state, "No changes are necessary," so I will give you zero (0) points for this [last] response.

Insightful comments: To get the full four (4) points for this section, you must record or summarize at least two insightful comments, which may be made by someone in your group or in the other group, or one from each session. To be truly insightful, a comment must show original thought (the speaker has been thinking on his or her own here) and cannot be merely a fact that anyone who opens the text can read for him- or herself. In other words, it cannot be a statement such as "Jocasta hanged herself," "Oedipus used Jocasta's brooches to blind himself," or "*Oedipus the King* was a tragic play."

Annotated Bibliography

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Unrau, Norman J., and Robert B. Ruddell. "Interpreting Texts in Classroom Contexts." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 39, no. 1 (1995): 16-27. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40016717> (accessed July 6, 2013).

Wimsatt, William K., and Monroe C. Beardsley. "The Intentional Fallacy." In *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 1954. 2-18. This essay explores the place that authorial intent plays in the interpretation of poetry. Although the focus of the essay is on the interpretation of poetry, the discussion is certainly applicable to something such as *Heart of Darkness*.

Notes

1. Chapter 1 "School Profile," William C. Overfelt Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) Report 2012-2013. WASC is the organization that provides accreditation for public and private schools, colleges, and universities. The states of California and Hawaii, as well as U.S. territories including, but not limited to Guam and American Samoa, fall under its jurisdiction. Last year, after a year of self-study, Overfelt was granted by WASC six more years of accreditation, with a third-year mid-term report. This is the longest period that WASC grants to any institution. More information about the organization can be found at: <http://www.acswasc.org>.
2. On the 2012 STAR tests, the last year for which we have data, 37% of freshmen, 32% of sophomores, and 25% of juniors scored proficient or advanced.
3. For several decades, California has measured student achievement in 1st through 12th grades based on results from a variety of annual tests, most recently the California Standardized Testing and Reporting Tests (STAR Tests) and California Standards Tests (CSTs); however, the state will be joining a growing number that utilize tests based on the Common Core State Standards, colloquially known as Common Core. During the 2013-2014 school year, Overfelt will be preparing for implementation beginning with the 2014-2015 academic year.
4. Latin: "Let there be light."
5. Chinua Achebe, "Image of Africa," quoting Albert J. Gerard, 337.
6. Though Wimsatt and Beardsley wrote specifically of poetry, I believe that the same general issues they discuss can be applied to fiction.
7. J. Hillis Miller, "Should We Read *Heart of Darkness*?" in *Heart of Darkness*, 474.
8. *Ibid.*, 463.

9. Joseph Conrad, "Conrad in the Congo," in *Heart of Darkness*, 242.
10. Gary Adelman, *Heart of Darkness*, xii-xiii.
11. *Ibid.*, xiv-xv.
12. Allan Simmons, *Conrad's Heart of Darkness*, 8.
13. Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 225.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, 225-26.
16. "Imperialism and the Congo," in *Heart of Darkness*, 99.
17. Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 226.
18. *Ibid.*, 233.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Achebe, "Image of Africa," in *Heart of Darkness*, 343.
21. *Ibid.*, 337.
22. *Ibid.*, 340.
23. *Ibid.*, 342.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, 346
26. *Ibid.*
27. Hunt Hawkins, "*Heart of Darkness* and Racism," in *Heart of Darkness*, 366.
28. *Ibid.*, 367.
29. *Ibid.*, 368.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 33.
32. Hawkins, "*Heart of Darkness* and Racism," in *Heart of Darkness*, 369.
33. *Ibid.*, 375.
34. Paul B. Armstrong, *Reading, Race*, 430.

35. Ibid., 431.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid., 432

38. Ibid., 444.

39. For all three formats, I require students to come to class with five discussion questions on the upper-end of Bloom's Taxonomy and having read the assigned text. Whole-class discussions require a discussion leader whose job it is to make sure that discussion flows freely and to maintain order should conversation become quite animated.

40. A few days prior to the seminar, students are asked to rate themselves on a scale of 1-5, "1" for those who almost never say anything to "5" for those who proudly claim, "Just *try* and shut me up!" I then place them into one of two groups: the talkers and the quiet ones, with those students who rated themselves 3 (+/-) interspersed in the two groups.

41. dialectic. Merriam-Webster. *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. Encyclopaedia Britannica Company.
<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dialectic> (accessed July 12, 2013).

42. The original questions were developed by the late Robert Litchfield, College Board consultant and teacher at Point Loma High School in San Diego. Kris Tully, English teacher at University High School in Tucson, Arizona, revised the questions into their current form. The questions can be found and downloaded at:
<http://teacherweb.com/CA/PalisadesCharterHighSchool/StephenBerger/Heart-of-Darkness-Reading-Questions.doc>

43. The audio recording I will use can be accessed in iTunes and is provided by LoudLit.org, a site "committed to delivering public domain literature paired with high quality audio performances." *Heart of Darkness*, read by David Kirkwood and narrated by Tom Franks, is one of several novels, short stories, poems, and historical documents. Their limited library can be accessed at
<http://www.loudlit.org/collection.htm>.

44. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 7-8.

45. Ibid., 10 (The paragraph beginning with "A narrow and deserted street in deep shadow,..." and ending at "*Bon Voyage*").

46. A pdf of the exam can be viewed and downloaded at the College Board's website:
http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/repository/ap04_frq_english_lit_36149.pdf. There are also examples of student responses to the prompt.

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

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