

UNIT 4 | ACTIVITY 4.5 (A)

WRITING A TREATMENT

Instructions: The excerpts below come from a treatment written by Marty Koughan for the *Great Books Heart of Darkness* documentary. The treatment is not reproduced here in its entirety. Knowing what you know now about *Heart of Darkness* and the history of the times, answer the questions in the pull-outs.

TEASER

The sound of drums. The rhythmic chants of a Central African tribe. Suddenly, the witch doctor emerges from his grass hut and approaches those who have come to be healed. He takes out a knife and thrusts it into the chest of one kneeling believer. The blood is drained into a bowl—to remove the evil spirits that are afflicting him.

Begins with a dramatic scene set in the present day. What dramatic scene would you suggest as a teaser? Why?

We are witnessing a tribal ritual happening today. The rite being performed is centuries old. When the first European explorers witnessed such ceremonies, they were aghast. This was primitive, savage, unchristian. The only hope for the souls of these barbarians was to impose Western civilization and Christian beliefs. It became the mantra of colonialism.

Sums up in a sentence the theme of the novel that will be the focus of the film. But is this an accurate interpretation?

The rituals have endured. Western thoughts and beliefs did not turn out to be salvation for “these savages.” In fact, the Western “pilgrims” turned out in many ways to be more primitive, more brutal, more savage than the Africans they came to enlighten.

In the last year of the 19th century, Joseph Conrad wrote of this cruelty and hypocrisy in *Heart of Darkness*. It is a vivid tale of man’s worst instinct brought to the service of man’s best intentions. Its message is as relevant today as ever.

Uses heading. To what does this refer?

ACT I: The End of Innocence

Opens with quoted lines from novella. What other quote—literary or journalistic—could open this first section?

“They trespassed upon my thoughts. They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretense, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew . . .”

Our story opens with a montage of sounds and images from turn-of-the-century Europe. Victorian England. A world that was orderly, stable, serene. Mannered gentlemen with top hats. Proper ladies with long dresses and parasols. It was a time of a self-satisfaction, guided by the belief that their society and culture were destined to dominate the world.

Description suggests visuals. How would you as filmmaker capture this on camera?

Heart of Darkness, written in the last year of the 19th century by Joseph Conrad, has been called by critics the best short novel in the English language. Conrad would become one of the best known novelists of his time.

Uses quote from historian for credibility. Does quote fit the section heading? Does it or does it not mirror the opening scene to this section?

“The 1890s were a very anxious time,” observes Dr. Laurence Davies of Dartmouth. “It was outwardly stable, yet artists of the period were picking up on all sorts of anxiety, reflecting a brutal time coming. There was a disease, a malaise, a fretting and worrying.”

Heart of Darkness is the story of a seaman named Marlow who captained a steamboat on the Congo River during the height of the Belgian colonization. Marlow tells of the one trip to relieve the chief of the most distant outpost, one Mr. Kurtz, the most successful ivory trader and a man of considerable reputation. Marlow ultimately finds that the enlightened civilizer has become a vicious, power-hungry tyrant.

Each section opens in the same manner, with quoted lines from the novella. While these lines are spoken, what images would you show?

Act III: A Man Called Kurtz

“You should have heard him say, ‘My ivory.’ Oh, yes, I heard him. ‘My intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my—’ Everything belonged to him. It made me hold my breath . . .”

Nearly a century later, Conrad’s Mr. Kurtz remains one of the enduring enigmas of modern fiction. In the third act, we will explore the character of Kurtz from the inside—through the eyes of actor John Malkovich, who played Kurtz in a recent TV movie. Malkovich, known for his skill portraying dark, brooding characters, recalls Kurtz as one of his most challenging roles. . . . Kurtz was both the scholar who wrote reports for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs—and the savage who decorated his station with the skulls of his enemies.

Mentions big-name actor. Explain why this is or is not a clever construction strategy for the film.

Mentions famous scientific publication. Why?

Conrad wrote his novel at a time when 19th-century Europe was still trying to digest the meaning of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. Did it apply to humans? The issue at the time was not merely the evolutionary process. Victorian scholars feared the process might work in reverse. What if modern life makes people degenerate? Could we embrace the habits of a more savage humanity—or even those of our primate ancestors? Conrad’s Mr. Kurtz was the Victorian intellectual’s worst nightmare.

Who is the audience for this *Heart of Darkness* film? And what does audience have to do with the filmmaker’s decision to devote a whole section to the Vietnam War?

Act IV: America’s Descent into Hell

“Droll thing life is—that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose.”

The most famous adaptation of Conrad’s story is the movie *Apocalypse Now*, in which American involvement in Vietnam, like the colonization of Africa, becomes a painful descent into hell—and a vivid lesson on the limits of power in the modern age.

What does this paragraph suggest about the long-range effects of Conrad’s novella? From what you’ve read of the treatment, what information is missing from this story?

Act V: Wrap and Epilogue

“They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force. . . .”

Marlow’s tale was a rude shock to 19th century audiences. It forced them to look into the shadows and confront the forces that would ultimately destroy their perfect world. Europe would never be the same—and neither would its literature.