Heart of Darkness Reading Notes – Pages 1-15

PAGE 1

What is setting? Name of ship – located on what river? In what city? Why is this significant?

Who is narrator?

Notice the city name – Gravesend

Symbolism of the river – “the luminous estuary”

“brooding gloom”

Notice the companions and their occupation(s).

Highlight the description of Marlow – what color is he? (Compare to bottom of page 7 when you get that far.)

PAGE 2

KEY QUOTE: “The old river in its broad reach rested unruffled at the decline of day, after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks, spread out in the tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth. We looked at the venerable stream not in the vivid flush of a short day that comes and departs for ever, but in the august light of abiding memories.”

KEY QUOTE: Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth! . . . The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires.

PAGE 3

KEY QUOTE: "And this also," said Marlow suddenly, "has been one of the dark places of the earth." What does he mean?

“as inscrutable as destiny”

KEY QUOTE: “But Marlow was not typical . . . and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.”
**KEY QUOTE:** “We live in the flicker -- may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday.”

What parallel is Marlow drawing by discussing the Roman civilization? (How are the Romans and the English/Europeans similar?)

**PAGE 4**

"nothing but Thames water to drink."

“They were men enough to face the darkness”

**KEY QUOTE:** Land in a swamp, march through the woods, and in some inland post feel the savagery, the utter savagery, had closed round him -- all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men. There's no initiation either into such mysteries. He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable. And it has a fascination, too, that goes to work upon him. The fascination of the abomination -- you know, imagine the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate."

“He had the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus-flower”

“It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind -- as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness.”

**PAGE 5**

"we knew we were fated, before the ebb began to run, to hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences.” This is the opinion of ___________________.

"I don't want to bother you much with what happened to me personally," he began, showing in this remark the weakness of many tellers of tales who seem so often unaware of what their audience would like best to hear;

“It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me -- and into my thoughts. It was sombre enough, too -- and pitiful -- not extraordinary in any way -- not very clear either. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light.”

“invading your homes, just as though I had got a heavenly mission to civilize you.”

“It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery -- a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness.”

Notice snake & river symbolism.
Note Marlow’s full name. Notice the name of the name he is replacing. What does this man’s name sound like orally? Notice the fate of this man. Foreshadowing?

How is Marlow able to “secure his post” (get his job)?

"The supernatural being had not been touched after he fell."

IRONY -- "this glorious affair"

**KEY QUOTE**: "In a very few hours I arrived in a city that always makes me think of a whited sepulchre. Prejudice no doubt. I had no difficulty in finding the Company's offices. It was the biggest thing in the town, and everybody I met was full of it. They were going to run an over-sea empire, and make no end of coin by trade.”

whited sepulcher – Bible allusion – Jesus called Pharisees this epithet. What does it mean?

“knitting black wool”

Notice description of two knitting ladies – “somnambulist”???

Notice color symbolism of the map – “There was a vast amount of red — good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there” RED = BLOOD

PURPLE: the color of ________________. What were the purple people preoccupied with?

YELLOW = ____________; “Dead in the center. And the river was there—fascinating—deadly—like a snake” SNAKE: universal symbol of ________________.

"In the outer room the two women knitted black wool feverishly."

**KEY QUOTE**: “She seemed to know all about them and about me, too. An eerie feeling came over me. She seemed uncanny and fateful. Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. AVE! Old knitter of black wool. MORITURI TE SALUTANT. Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again — not half, by a long way.”

MORITURI TE SALUTANT -- We who are about to die salute you!

“though the house was as still as a house in a city of the dead”
What’s up with the "head measuring"?
"the changes take place inside, you know"

Notice Marlow’s “excellent aunt” & her fireside chat. “Workers, with a capital…”

**PAGE 10**

**KEY QUOTE:** Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle. There had been a lot of such rot let loose in print and talk just about that time, and the excellent woman, living right in the rush of all that humbug, got carried off her feet. She talked about 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways,' till, upon my word, she made me quite uncomfortable. I ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit.

Notice Bible allusion in aunt’s reply.

“It's queer how out of touch with truth women are.” Watch for Conrad’s opinion of women.

Watch how much of Europe is included in the coming section – Marlow is working for a _______ company, he is on a _________ steamer, his nationality is _________; Fresleven was from ____________.

**PAGE 11**

" seemed to keep me away from the truth of things, within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion. The voice of the surf heard now and then was a positive pleasure, like the speech of a brother. It was something natural, that had its reason, that had a meaning."

" there was a camp of natives -- he called them enemies!”

" We called at some more places with farcical names, where the merry dance of death and trade goes on in a still and earthy atmosphere as of an overheated catacomb;

“It was like a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares.”

**PAGE 12**

“captain was a __________”

“three wooden barrack-like structures on the rocky slope” -- allusions to crucifixion?

**KEY QUOTE:** “Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind waggled to and fro like tails. I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an
iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking.

PAGE 13

“but these men could by no stretch of imagination be called enemies. They were called criminals, and the outraged law, like the bursting shells, had come to them, an insoluble mystery from the sea.”

“with a large, white, rascally grin, and a glance at his charge, seemed to take me into partnership in his exalted trust. After all, I also was a part of the great cause of these high and just proceedings.”

“Instead of going up, I turned and descended to the left.” -- descent to hell???

“I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly. How insidious he could be, too, I was only to find out several months later and a thousand miles farther. For a moment I stood appalled, as though by a warning.”

“the philanthropic desire of giving the criminals something to do.”

PAGE 14

**KEY QUOTE**: “Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.”

**KEY QUOTE**: These moribund shapes were free as air -- and nearly as thin. …The man seemed young -- almost a boy -- but you know with them it's hard to tell. I found nothing else to do but to offer him one of my good Swede's ship's biscuits I had in my pocket. The fingers closed slowly on it and held -- there was no other movement and no other glance. He had tied a bit of white worsted round his neck -- Why? Where did he get it? Was it a badge -- an ornament -- a charm -- a propitiatory act? Was there any idea at all connected with it? It looked startling round his black neck, this bit of white thread from beyond the seas.

Symbol of the white cloth around his neck?

PAGE 15

Notice Conrad’s juxtaposition of the “grove of death” immediately before his introduction of the “white man.”
"a white man, in such an unexpected elegance of get-up that in the first moment I took him for a sort of vision. I saw a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clean necktie, and varnished boots. No hat. Hair parted, brushed, oiled, under a green-lined parasol held in a big white hand. He was amazing, and had a penholder behind his ear.

"I shook hands with this miracle, and I learned he was the Company's chief accountant, and that all the book-keeping was done at this station. He had come out for a moment, he said, 'to get a breath of fresh air.' The expression sounded wonderfully odd, with its suggestion of sedentary desk-life. I wouldn't have mentioned the fellow to you at all, only it was from his lips that I first heard the name of the man who is so indissolubly connected with the memories of that time. Moreover, I respected the fellow. Yes; I respected his collars, his vast cuffs, his brushed hair. His appearance was certainly that of a hairdresser's dummy; but in the great demoralization of the land he kept up his appearance. That's backbone. His starched collars and got-up shirt-fronts were achievements of character. He had been out nearly three years; and, later, I could not help asking him how he managed to sport such linen. He had just the faintest blush, and said modestly, 'I've been teaching one of the native women about the station. It was difficult. She had a distaste for the work.' Thus this man had verily accomplished something. And he was devoted to his books, which were in apple-pie order.

Notice emphasis that he is considered about his personal looks while everything around him is death and destruction.

Notice introduction of “Mr. Kurtz” at the bottom of the page.