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Course Title: *Heart of Darkness* First Tutorial

From **Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness**

...And at last, in its curved and imperceptible fall, the sun sank low, and from glowing white changed to a dull red without rays and without heat, as if about to go out suddenly, stricken to death by the touch of that gloom brooding over a crowd of men... 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. And indeed nothing is easier for a man who has, as the phrase goes, "followed the sea" with reverence and affection, than to evoke the great spirit of the past upon the lower reaches of Thames. The tidal current runs to and fro in its unceasing service, crowded with memories of men and ships it had borne to the rest of home or to the battles of the sea. It had known and served all the men of whom the nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin, knights all, titled and untitled – the great knights-errant of the sea. It had borne all the ships whose names are like jewels flashing in the night of time... They had sailed from Deptford, from Greenwich, from Erith – the adventurers and the settlers; king's ships and the ships of men on 'Change; captains, admirals, the dark "interlopers" of the Eastern trade, and the commissioned "generals" of East India fleet. Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they had all 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 commonwealth, the germs of empire.

..."And this also," said Marlow suddenly, "has been one of the dark places on the earth."

He was the only man who still "followed the sea". The worst that could be said of him was that he did not represent his class. He was a seaman, but he was a wanderer, too, while most seamen lead, if one may so express it, a sedentary life. Their minds are of the stay-at-home order, and their home is always with them; and so is their country – the sea. One ship is very much like another, and the sea is always the same... The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), 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 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.

His remark did not seem at all surprising. It was just like Marlow... and presently he said, very slow – "I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago – the other day Light came out of this river since – you say Knights? Yes; but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker – may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday. Imagine the feelings of a commander of a fine – what d'ye call 'em? – trireme in the Mediterranean, ordered suddenly to the north; run overland across the Gauls in a hurry; put in charge of one of these craft the legionaries – a wonderful lot of handy men they must have been, too – used to build, apparently by the hundred, in a month or two, if we may believe what we read. Imagine him here – the very end of the world, a sea the colour of lead, a sky the colour of smoke, a kind of ship about as rigid as a concertina – and going up this river with stores, or orders, or what you like. Sand-banks, marshes, forests, savages, – precious little to eat fit for a civilized man, nothing but Thames water to drink. No Falernian wine here, no going ashore. Here and there a military camp lost in a wilderness, like a needle in a bundle

of hay – cold, fog, tempests, disease, exile, and death, – death skulking in the air, in the water, in the bush. They must have been dying like flies here. Oh, yes – he did it. Did it very well, too, no doubt, and without thinking much about it either, except afterwards to brag of what he had gone through in his time perhaps. They were men enough to face the darkness. And perhaps he was cheered by keeping his eye on a chance of promotion to a fleet at Ravenna by and by, if he had good friends in Rome and survived the climate. Or think of a decent young citizen in a toga – perhaps too much dice, you know – coming out here in the train of some prefect, or tax-gatherer, or trader even, to mend his fortunes. 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."

The first episode of the novel presents in a nutshell the main themes of the whole novel and hints at the way symbols are used throughout *Heart of Darkness*.

Setting: The *Nellie*, a cruising yawl, on the Thames River, London.
sun sank low, dusk

Characters:

- The unnamed narrator
- The Director of Companies “was our captain and our host. We four affectionately watched his back as he stood in the bows looking to seaward. On the whole river there was nothing that looked half so nautical. He resembled a pilot, which to a seaman is trust- worthiness personified. It was difficult to realize his work was not out there in the luminous estuary, but behind him, within the brooding gloom.”
- The Lawyer – “the best of old fellows -- had, because of his many years and many virtues, the only cushion on deck, and was lying on the only rug”.
- The Accountant “had brought out already a box of dominoes, and was toying architecturally with the bones”. Dominoes which were made of ivory, introduce an important symbol of the novel. They are white and black, which refers to the two main symbols of light and darkness.
- Marlow “sat cross-legged right aft, leaning against the mizzenmast. He had sunken cheeks, a yellow complexion, a straight back, an ascetic aspect, and, with his arms dropped, the palms of hands out-wards, resembled an idol.”

These characters are not named but called after their function, referring to the main functions in any colonial enterprise and introducing the characters to be found later in the Congo.

The excerpt introduces the contrast between **light** and **darkness** in the setting first: **the sun** which is a symbol of light and of nature is “stricken to death by the touch of that gloom brooding over a crowd of men”, alluding to London which normally stands for light and civilization but which is symbolized by “gloom” and darkness and even kills the sun

(gloom is an allusion to fog and the negative consequences of industry associated with Britain that kill nature)

The contrast between light and darkness and even the reversal of their conventional meanings are symbolic throughout the novel in men, in their actions

- light: civilization, religion, knowledge, enlightenment, consciousness
- darkness: savagery, ignorance, evil, unknown, sub-consciousness

At first, Conrad conveys the traditional, conventional distinction but soon undermines it, swings it, twists it.

The first narrator thinks of British conquerors and their heroic deeds. Marlow sees the Roman invaders as civilized men of old times, and Britain as a dark and wild place. But the Romans are violent men robbing what they could from the invaded country.

Theme: the so-called bringers of light, who faced the darkness of the wilderness, were themselves agents of darkness.

The aim of the first episode is to:

1. meditate the nature of colonialism through the novel
2. suggest that colonial expedition besides being a national enterprise, is also an ordeal testing individual man and revealing to him that he can succumb to "the abomination of the wilderness" and of his violent instincts.

multi-levelled theme: colonialism and the nature of the human heart
rise and fall of civilization.