

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

## Excerpt from Heart of Darkness

By Joseph Conrad  
1899

*Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) was a Polish-British writer and is considered one of the greatest novelists in the English language. Conrad's novella Heart of Darkness tells the story of Charles Marlow's voyage to Africa and explores themes of imperialism and racism. In this excerpt, the narrator describes Marlow, who then imagines what it must have been like for Romans when they first came to England. As you read, take notes about how the narrator characterizes Marlow, especially as compared to other seamen.*

- [1] The sun set; the dusk fell on the stream, and lights began to appear along the shore. The Chapman lighthouse, a three-legged thing erect on a mud-flat, shone strongly. Lights of ships moved in the fairway — a great stir of lights going up and going down. And farther west on the upper reaches the place of the monstrous town was still marked ominously on the sky, a brooding gloom in sunshine, a lurid<sup>1</sup> glare under the stars.

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



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He was the only man of us 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<sup>2</sup> life. Their minds are of the stay-at-home order, and their home is always with them — the ship; and so is their country — the sea. One ship is very much like another, and the sea is always the same. In the immutability<sup>3</sup> of their surroundings the foreign shores, the foreign faces, the changing immensity of life, glide past, veiled not by a sense of mystery but by a slightly disdainful ignorance; for there is nothing mysterious to a seaman unless it be the sea itself, which is the mistress of his existence and as inscrutable<sup>4</sup> as Destiny. For the rest, after his hours of work, a casual stroll or a casual spree on shore suffices to unfold for him the secret of a whole continent, and generally he finds the secret not worth knowing. The yarns<sup>5</sup> 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<sup>6</sup> 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 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.

1. **Lurid (adjective):** shining with a bright and unpleasant color
2. **Sedentary (adjective):** somewhat inactive
3. **Immutable (adjective):** unchanging over time or unable to be changed
4. **Inscrutable (adjective):** impossible to understand or interpret
5. a long or rambling story
6. tell stories

His remark did not seem at all surprising. It was just like Marlow. It was accepted in silence. No one took the trouble to grunt even; and presently he said, very slow —

- [5] “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<sup>7</sup> in the Mediterranean, ordered suddenly to the north; run overland across the Gauls<sup>8</sup> 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 color of lead, a sky the color of smoke, a kind of ship about as rigid as a concertina<sup>9</sup> — and going up this river with stores, or orders, or what you like. Sandbanks, 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.”

*Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad (1899) is in the public domain.*

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7. an ancient type of vessel  
8. a region of Western Europe  
9. a musical instrument resembling an accordion

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: In the passage from Heart of Darkness, the narrator and his companions are sailing on the River Thames near London, England. What does Marlow mean when he says in paragraph 2 that England “has been one of the dark places of earth”?
  - A. It was formerly corrupt and full of criminals.
  - B. It was once a place beyond the limits of civilization.
  - C. It has been the location of many violent confrontations.
  - D. It has been less technologically developed than other countries.
2. PART B: Which quotation from Marlow’s speech in paragraph 5 best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. “you say Knights? Yes”
  - B. “a wonderful lot of handy men they have been too”
  - C. “Imagine him here — the very end of the world”
  - D. “Did it very well, too, no doubt”
3. PART A: How does the author’s comparison of Marlow to other sailors impact the reader’s understanding of Marlow?
  - A. It shows that he is of a different social class than other sailors.
  - B. It shows that he is more intelligent than most sailors.
  - C. It shows that he is interested in the deeper significance of events.
  - D. It shows that he is quiet and leads a solitary existence.
4. PART B: Which quotation from Heart of Darkness best supports that answer to Part A?
  - A. “The worst that could be said of him was that he did not represent his class.” (Paragraph 3)
  - B. “generally he finds the secret not worth knowing.” (Paragraph 3)
  - C. “to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale” (Paragraph 3)
  - D. “It was just like Marlow. It was accepted in silence.” (Paragraph 4)

## Discussion Questions

**Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.**

1. How can traveling the world further our understanding of it? How do you think a sailor's understanding or appreciation of the world might be different from that of someone who stays on land? In the context of the text, how do most seamen approach their travels to other places? How does that compare to what you think travelers should do when they visit other places?
2. How does Marlow portray the Romans who first came to England? Why did they embark on these dangerous journeys to largely unknown territories? What traits do you think it's important for travelers, such as the Romans and Marlow, to have?