**UB Seminar COL 199: "Art and Madness"**

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The following website from Cornell University contains **tips for developing close reading skills and note-taking**; it helps orient the students as to what they should be looking for and taking notes on as they read a text. The website provides six rubrics under which students can start taking notes for their comprehension: Description, Imagery, Interpretations by the author, Syntax, Semantics, and Foreshadowing.

<https://www.cornellcollege.edu/academic-support-and-advising/academic-support/study-tips/reading-closely.shtml>

I use those rubrics in an in-class exercise with the first 2 pages of *Heart of Darkness*, which is one of the texts for my UB Seminar. We read the pages in class, and try to find examples that fall under each of these 6 categories. Below is the exercise, which I then upload on UBLearns for the students to have as a reference throughout the semester.

**Our class exercise:**

I color-coded each of the 6 categories of examples and provided a short justification for each. Instead of different-color markers, you could also substitute different note cards—one note card could have examples of repetitive motifs, another note card examples of character description, and so on.

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

**I**

The Nellie, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river, the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide.

The sea-reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway. In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint, and in the luminous space the tanned sails of the barges drifting up with the tide seemed to stand still in red clusters of canvas sharply peaked, with gleams of varnished sprits. A haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea in vanishing flatness. The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth.

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 trustworthiness personified. It was difficult to realize his work was not out there in the luminous estuary, but behind him, within the brooding gloom.

Between us there was, as I have already said somewhere, the bond of the sea. Besides holding our hearts together through long periods of separation, it had the effect of making us tolerant of each other's yarns—and even convictions. 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. Marlow sat cross-legged right aft, leaning against the mizzen-mast. He had sunken cheeks, a yellow complexion, a straight back, an ascetic aspect, and, with his arms dropped, the palms of hands outwards, resembled an idol. The director, satisfied the anchor had good hold, made his way aft and sat down amongst us. We exchanged a few words lazily. Afterwards there was silence on board the yacht. For some reason or other we did not begin that game of dominoes. We felt meditative, and fit for nothing but placid staring. The day was ending in a serenity of still and exquisite brilliance. The water shone pacifically; the sky, without a speck, was a benign immensity of unstained light; the very mist on the Essex marsh was like a gauzy and radiant fabric, hung from the wooded rises inland, and draping the low shores in diaphanous folds. Only the gloom to the west, brooding over the upper reaches, became more sombre every minute, as if angered by the approach of the sun.

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.

Forthwith a change came over the waters, and the serenity became less brilliant but more profound. 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. 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 the 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, from the *Golden Hind* returning with her rotund flanks full of treasure, to be visited by the Queen's Highness and thus pass out of the gigantic tale, to the *Erebus* and *Terror*, bound on other conquests—and that never returned. It had known the ships and the men. They had sailed from Deptford, from Greenwich, from Erith—the adventurers and the settlers; kings' ships and the ships of men on 'Change; captains, admirals, the dark "interlopers" of the Eastern trade, and the commissioned "generals" of East India fleets. 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.

The sun set; the dusk fell on the stream, and lights began to appear along the shore. The Chapman light-house, 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 glare under the stars.

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

**Color chart for the 6 points of close reading in Cornell handout**

\_\_\_ (#1 Description): cross-legged, like an idol, foreshadowing of the depiction of Marlow as Buddha, perhaps a hint to his tranquil, measured character

\_\_\_ (#2 Repetition of motif/imagery): brooding gloom (natural sunset) foreshadowing the metaphorical human darkness of the West

\_\_\_ (#3 Interpretations by the author): "the monstrous town" is Conrad's speculation that London/Europe are the real darkness (not Africa)

\_\_\_ (#4 Syntax): paratactic sentences (serial commas building up to a climax, expressing the grandeur and risk of exploration)

\_\_\_ (#5 Semantics): "germs" means "sprout," "birth" (germination); but it also relates to the agents of disease and decay; metaphorically, great imperial cultures are also full of ills

\_\_\_ (#6 Foreshadowing): the domino bones allude to the ivory, which is the reason for the colonial presence in Africa (Kurtz is the greatest collector of ivory); Sir Francis Drake and John Franklin are ironic anticipations on the discussion of native cannibalism, since both these Englishmen committed cannibalism once their mission shipwrecked