



# Heart of Darkness

by Joseph Conrad

A Lively Learning Guide  
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## Heart of Darkness

### Shmoop Literature Guide

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## Introduction

Published in 1902, ***Heart of Darkness*** has become one of the most celebrated and effective novels to combine a psychological journey with a horrifyingly stark account of imperialism, or specifically of European colonies in Africa. Based on Joseph Conrad's own experience traveling up the Congo River into the African interior, *Heart of Darkness* follows the disturbing journey of English ivory-trading agent Marlow into the jungles of Africa in search of a mysterious man named Kurtz. The novel sparked controversy in 1975 when famed Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe condemned it, accusing it of dehumanizing Africans and reducing them to extensions of the hostile and primal jungle environment. Since then, writers have heatedly debated this topic. Scholars can't quite seem to conclude whether the novel is racist or anti-racist.

## Why Should I Care

Let's just get it out here. We didn't want to be the first ones to say it, but it's kind of the elephant in the room at this point: *Heart of Darkness* is the original *Star Wars*. No, seriously – you've got the light side and the dark side, the delicate balance between the two, and best of all, the commingling of those who are good with those who are evil. Friendly, upstanding Marlow realizing that he's not so unlike heads-on-sticks Kurtz is the "Luke, I am your Father" moment of the novel.

To any of you who have ever rooted for the bad guy, picked on someone smaller than you in elementary school, or wanted that annoying kid behind you in home economics to get destroyed in dodge ball, you know what it's like to encounter your own heart of darkness – it's scary. People can be pretty horrible. The human race has been guilty of murder, brutality, torture, rape, and mass exterminations of its own kind.

Now that we've lured you into a Marlow-esque feeling of safety, everyone take a look at that finger you're pointing and turn it 180 degrees. Yes, you. *Heart of Darkness* makes the point that we may all be a shrunken head away from becoming our own worst enemies.

But before giving up on humanity, consider the ending to *Heart of Darkness*. What do you think about its message? Is it hopeful in the end?

## Summary

### Brief Summary

*Heart of Darkness* follows one man's nightmarish journey into the interior of Africa. Aboard a British ship called the *Nellie*, three men listen to a man named Marlow recount his journey into Africa as an agent for the Company, an ivory trading firm. Along the way, he witnesses brutality and hate between colonizers and the native African people, becomes entangled in a power struggle within the Company, and finally learns the truth about the mysterious Kurtz, a mad agent who has become both a god and a prisoner of the "native Africans." After "rescuing" Kurtz from the native African people, Marlow watches in horror as Kurtz succumbs to madness, disease, and finally death. Marlow's decision to support Kurtz over his company leaves readers wondering about his moral integrity, and possibly asking the question: "He did WHAT?!" The novel closes with Marlow's guilt-ridden visit to Kurtz's fiancée to return the man's personal letters.

## Chapter 1

- During a flood on the river Thames (that's in England, by the way), the *Nellie*, a British ship, anchors near London and waits for the flood to recede. On board are four seamen – the unnamed narrator, a lawyer, an accountant, and Marlow. Notice how only one is named. That's important.
- The environment and mood are serene, though there are constant references to an ominous gloom in the west. (Ominous gloom = darkness. Hmm...)
- The narrator, pondering the river, thinks of its illustrious history – playing host to countless British heroes who went forth to bring trade and civilization to less fortunate nations.
- The sun sets and Marlow begins talking. He starts with a seemingly unrelated hypothetical situation about an ancient Roman seaman first coming to Britain. He imagines this Roman encountering horror upon horror in this unfamiliar and savage land. He speaks of them conquering the "natives."
- Then Marlow begins to recount his story as a "fresh-water sailor" and the three listeners resign themselves to hearing his tale.
- (Begin use of historical present now.)
- Welcome to Marlow's story.
- As a child, Marlow loves looking at maps. He dreams about exploring the blank spaces on maps, especially Africa, which (on his map) big shape somewhere south of Europe. The Congo River particularly fascinates Marlow like a snake hypnotizing a bird, which is a rather relevant image.
- He is so fascinated that he applies to "the Company" – an ivory trade firm whose real name is probably not just "the Company" – and tries to appropriate a steamboat.
- Marlow finally gets his chance when another commissioned captain, the Danish Fresleven, dies at the hands of the native Africans over an argument about two hens. When a native African accidentally kills Fresleven, both parties freak out. The English freak out because one of their own just got killed. The native Africans fear that they have killed a god – for that's how they view white men – and last time they checked killing a god resulted in getting smote down and punished. Since no one in their right mind would take over for Fresleven, the opportunity is open for Marlow.
- When Marlow goes to the office in Brussels, the city reminds him of white sepulchers (burial vaults).
- There are also two women knitting at the door freaking him out a bit with their placidity. Not a good sign. Kind of ominous, actually, or possibly even dark, despite all the whiteness all over the place.
- The actual signing goes surprisingly easily; the head of the Company speaks French (Marlow felt compelled to include this detail in his story) and simply has Marlow sign a document.
- However, Marlow cannot shake off an inexplicable, ominous feeling about heading into the African continent where the guy that used to have his job was just murdered.

- The two knitting women and the doctor who refuses to travel with the sailors only add to his queasy insides. Right before he leaves, Marlow gets the distinct feeling that he is an imposter on this dangerous journey.
- A French steamer takes him to Africa. Marlow watches the passing shoreline in fascination. Along the way, he sees a group of black men rowing a boat and is struck by their naturalness and their intense energy. In other words, he likes them.
- In an instant of foreshadowing, Marlow sees these guys running across this little boat that's shooting little cannonballs onto the empty shore. The people shooting the cannonballs think they are attacking native Africans on the shore, but, as often is the case with empty shores, there's nobody there. Bizarre.
- It takes thirty days to reach the Outer (coastal) station in the continent. When Marlow arrives there, he gets his first glimpses of black slaves. The healthy ones are chained together and set to physical work, trying to dynamite through a stubborn cliff to build a railroad. Many, however, are sick, starving, and slowly dying in a grove of trees.
- Marlow, moved by one famished man at his feet, attempts to give him a biscuit, but the man dies right before his eyes. Marlow feels sorry for them.
- The Company accountant is dressed in British finery. You know, starched collars and silk ties and all that jazz. It is quite a contrast to the sick and dying slaves.
- For the ten days he is forced to stay at this station, Marlow hears rumors about the mysterious Mr. Kurtz from the accountant. We learn that Kurtz is a top agent working right in the heart of the continent and that he obtains more ivory than all the other posts combined (which makes us wonder if he's operating a shady business). Everyone agrees he is destined for great things within the Company.
- At last, Marlow leaves with a caravan of sixty men for a two-hundred mile journey.
- When they arrive at the Central Station, Marlow encounters another delay. The steamboat intended for him has sunk. Marlow suspects foul play.
- Marlow begins repairs immediately, but is still delayed for three months.
- Marlow meets the manager. The man is creepy (a common theme around these parts). By all accounts, he does a mediocre job at being a manager, and seems to have no talents. He babbles constantly in a way Marlow finds irritating. He has this vacant smile which makes Marlow feel like there's nothing inside him, as if the manager is a hollowed-out man.
- Nonetheless, Marlow gets some information about Kurtz from the manager. Apparently, Kurtz is ill in the Interior. He has designs on becoming a manager within the Company. Cue the conspiracy theory plotline.
- One night, a shed burns down. In the commotion, Marlow overhears some unknown agent talking about Kurtz. We also hear (out of context) the words "take advantage of this unfortunate accident." Suspicious much? The speaker turns out to be a brickmaker of a shady nature – one called the "manager's spy" – who does not actually make any bricks.
- This brickmaker pumps a clueless Marlow for information. Marlow plays along simply to see what he wants. And he needs to add fuel to his conspiracy theory fire. Eventually he learns that the brickmaker wants to get in with Marlow's aunt's connections, who recommended Marlow for the job (and apparently did the same for Kurtz). Marlow realizes

the brickmaker cannot know this information without having read some supposedly confidential mail. When accused of this, the spineless brickmaker backs down.

- After he's recovered, the brickmaker comes back and sucks up to Marlow, explaining everything. He wants to be assistant manager and Kurtz's presence has messed it up. He wants Marlow and his connections to help him out.
- Marlow allows the brickmaker to think that he actually has influence in Europe just to get more information about Kurtz. Slick.
- While the brickmaker chatters on, Marlow stops listening and becomes fascinated by the eerily silent forest before him. He feels small against its vastness.
- Marlow makes a HUGE deal out of telling his audience that he hates lies. Really, *really* hates lies. (You are definitely going to want to remember that.)
- At this point, Marlow stops the narrative to the men aboard the *Nellie* to remark on how unreal and dreamlike it all felt at the time. He says the listeners are lucky because they can "see" more of the story than he could when he was experiencing it all. They can see him (Marlow), which was more than Marlow could see. Confusing? Yes, and also heavily ironic, since it has now fallen dark aboard the *Nellie* and the listeners cannot actually see Marlow, each other, or themselves. Marlow even questions whether they are awake.
- So, of course, he does what all storytellers do when they think they are losing their audience: he gets back to the story. Resume historical present inside Marlow's story.
- Marlow spaces out while the brickmaker is talking to him. His sole goal in life is to repair the steamboat, which requires rivets, and get on his way.
- When Marlow finally tells this to the brickmaker, the guy stops sucking up and changes the topic – something about a troublesome hippo that terrorizes the men at night (!).
- After this, Marlow runs into the foreman sitting on the deck. They dance madly because they think rivets are coming in three weeks.
- But it turns out no rivets are coming after all.
- Instead of rivets, the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, a renegade raiding group, arrives. They are led by the manager's uncle, who conspires with his nephew. Marlow loathes them both.
- Marlow thinks Kurtz is better than both of them; at least Kurtz has some morals. Or does he?

## Chapter 2

- One lazy day, Marlow is napping out on deck when he hears the manager and his uncle talking about something faintly interesting. Make that *extremely* interesting: Kurtz. So Marlow eavesdrops.
- The manager and his uncle are unhappy with Kurtz. He's too influential with the powers that be. They think he's stealing ivory. They oh-so-nicely hope the climate will kill him.
- Apparently, Kurtz once came down the river to send the ivory to the Company but then decided to turn back. No one knows why.
- All the Englishmen, and we the readers, think this is odd and confusing. Marlow, however, who has developed something of an obsession with this guy he's never met, thinks it is admirable.
- The men keep jabbering until the uncle tells the manager not to worry, but instead to trust "this," which we assume involves a gesture to the surroundings since "this" means the scary African wilderness.
- Marlow is so scared by "this" that he jumps out of his hiding place, which in turn scares the living bejeebus out of manager and uncle. To cover up their screams of fright, they pretend to ignore him and go back up to the station.
- Soon afterward, the Eldorado Exploring Expedition leaves. Marlow learns later that all their donkeys die. This implies that the men died too. It also means they were killed by [gesture to surroundings] "this."
- It takes two months of going upriver through the scary forest to reach Kurtz's station. The trip is seriously scary. So much so that Marlow describes it as traveling back to the beginning of time, before the dawn of mankind. There are huge forests, aggressive animals, and an unnerving stillness in the air. Marlow feels tiny next to this immense wilderness. So small that he compares his steamboat to a beetle.
- One of the listeners interrupts Marlow's narratives. (This proves that they haven't all fallen asleep, in case you were still wondering about that.) Everyone is entranced by Marlow's story.
- Back to the tale. They have cannibals on board. Yeah, people who eat one another. Except they don't eat one another now, out of respect for their employers. Instead they eat rotten hippo meat.
- By now, Marlow really has become obsessed with Kurtz. He considers his journey into the interior purely a trip to visit Kurtz.
- The journey becomes so trippy that Marlow feels as if he's in a dream. Again. He's cut off from all understanding of the world around him and feels like he has no memories.
- In fact, he finds himself *identifying* with the native Africans hiding out in the bush. He recognizes a "remote kinship." The only reason he doesn't go ashore "for a howl and a dance" is because he's a busy man. (Pay close attention to this passage in your book – it's extremely important.)
- Marlow tells us all about the cannibal fireman on board. He is the kind of fireman that

starts fires (in the boiler), not the kind that puts them out. The fireman has been told that if the water in the boiler ever disappears, the evil spirit inside will take revenge. That's how they make him work.

- Fifty miles before they arrive at the Inner Station, they run across a pile of firewood and a warning message: "Approach cautiously," which might be translated as "RUN AWAY NOW." But Marlow and Co. steam onward.
- They find an abandoned hut with a book inside. It's entitled "An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship" and is full of sailor shop-talk. Even though Marlow doesn't understand it, it comforts him. It gives him a touchstone to reality.
- At sundown of the second day, they decide to stop and rest. The night is eerily still. At dawn, a thick fog falls and prevents everyone from seeing anything. The men anchor.
- Naturally, trouble ensues. They hear a very loud and sad-sounding shouting somewhere in the mist. They're freaked out.
- The cannibals, however, are calm and alert. In fact, one wants to find whoever is shouting and eat them.
- Marlow wonders why the cannibals, being cannibals and all, haven't tried to eat one of the white pilgrims yet. We wonder, too. We're also very nervous about this whole situation.
- It takes two hours for the fog to lift. When it does, they continue.
- As they're crossing, they're attacked. The cannibals anticipate this and dive for the deck a split second before the arrows fall.
- The cannibal helmsman is the most freaked out. He abandons his position steering the boat, grabs a big gun, and shoots into the bush. A disgruntled Marlow is forced to do some energetic emergency steering.
- In the meantime, the helmsman gets himself killed. By a spear. In the chest. He falls and a pool of blood oozes around Marlow's shoes. Marlow, horrified, watches the man die at his feet.
- Marlow blows the steam-whistle to scare off the attackers. It works (better than the gun, at least).
- He ponders the dead helmsman and thinks that Kurtz must be dead too. The thought is profoundly depressing to him. He can't get over how much he wanted to hear Kurtz speak. This is interesting. He didn't want to meet Kurtz or shake his hand. Just wanted to hear his voice. We find out that Marlow is obsessed with voices. (So much so that we feel obligated to dog-ear all the pages in our text that have to do with voices. You also might want to take note of them in your book...)
- At this point, Marlow breaks the narrative again, saying his listeners cannot possibly understand without being there. There's also a lot of confusing mention of matters in his story that we haven't gotten to yet – that he will, in fact, get to see Kurtz, that Kurtz is, in fact, little more than a voice, that there's something to do with a girl and the phrase "My Intended." Either Marlow is a bad story teller or this is an intentional authorial use of "prolepsis," or giving away pieces of the ending before it's time to do so. We'll let you decide.
- Marlow now skips ahead in his story and tells us about a report Kurtz wrote for the

International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. It says that white men must approach the native Africans as though the white men are "supernatural beings" so that "we can exert a power for good practically unbounded." In other words, he says, make the Africans think of us as gods and they'll do whatever we say.

- Marlow is struck by the expressive power of the words. Kurtz, whatever his faults, is an incredible writer. But Kurtz sort of lost it at the end, and scrawled a handwritten "p.s." that said "Exterminate all the brutes!"
- Back to Marlow's story. Marlow throws the helmsman's corpse overboard so that cannibals will not fight over his body.
- They arrive at the Inner Station. There, they meet a boyish man (Kurtz's disciple) dressed like a harlequin – his clothes are all colorful with different patches. He doesn't get a name, either, so we just call him the harlequin.
- He insists that the Africans who attacked Marlow and Co. didn't mean any harm. (OK, so the poison arrows were what, a welcome ritual?) Marlow is struck by his rapid babbling. The harlequin justifies this by saying that one doesn't talk with Kurtz; one only listens to him. So he's making up for lost babbling by talking a million miles an hour with Marlow.
- Marlow lets him smoke his pipe so that the tobacco calms him down. Good call. Only then do we learn about the man's history. The harlequin is a son of a Russian arch-priest who went looking for adventure on the English ships. He's been in the interior for two years, which is about three years longer than a normal person can handle.
- Marlow discovers that the little abandoned hut was the harlequin's. So Marlow returns the sailor's book. He discovers that the "cipher" language he couldn't read before is Russian.
- At this point, the harlequin confesses why the native Africans attacked. The truth is shocking: they don't want Kurtz to leave.

## Chapter 3

- We learn of the harlequin's history with Kurtz; Kurtz keeps him around so he has someone to listen to him. But for the most part, Kurtz wanders alone among the Africans.
- In his expeditions, Kurtz raids various villages for ivory. He even gets the native Africans – who adore him – to help raid the neighbors for things like ivory.
- Kurtz is so obsessive about ivory that he even threatened to shoot the harlequin one day unless he handed over his own personal supply of ivory. The harlequin, being a clever (or possibly cowardly) man, gave it up.
- We discover that the harlequin nursed Kurtz through two bouts of sickness and is rather proud of himself for doing so.
- At this point, Marlow's eyes are wandering over Kurtz's compound. He makes a gruesome discovery. The "knobs" on the ends of the stakes he noticed from a distance are not ornamental. They're skulls of dead Africans.
- To Marlow, these skulls show that Kurtz "lacked restraint," a fault that Marlow seems to despise. In fact, he despises it so much that he'll make reference to this "lack of restraint" at least two more times before the end of the book. So keep an eye out.
- Marlow begins to reflect that Kurtz, whose reputation is larger than life, has violent, ruthless, "savage" qualities – and a "hollow core" – that even Kurtz himself may not realize consciously until the end of his life. In this light, Kurtz is an obsessed, lustful, maniacal imperialist who would stop at nothing for ivory and other treasures he found in the African land. Horrific cruelties against humanity were par for the course in his quest for material gain.
- The harlequin sees Marlow's disgust and tries to justify Kurtz's actions by saying those skulls "were the heads of rebels." Marlow's response is to inwardly scoff at the use of the word "rebel."
- Suddenly, a party of native Africans arrives carrying Kurtz on a stretcher. At last, we get to see the man.
- Marlow describes Kurtz as grotesquely thin and ghostly, like Death personified. Marlow calls him "that atrocious phantom." The man is obviously sick. The only substantial thing about him is his voice.
- "Kurtz" means "short" in German, Marlow notes, but Kurtz isn't remotely short. In fact, he's rather tall.
- Kurtz has heard of Marlow through some letters. He's glad Marlow has come.
- Before they engage in conversation, the manager appears. Marlow leaves the two alone in the tent to chat.
- In the meantime, a group of native Africans has gathered outside. For the first time, we see a woman. Now, it could be that Marlow hasn't seen a woman in several months, but he describes her as wild and gorgeous, a warrior woman, with brass trappings to boot. She looks at Marlow and his pilgrims on the steamer with incredible sadness. She never speaks, but gestures at the sky and then disappears into the wood.

- The harlequin is unnerved by her. He wants to shoot her because he feels she's too close to Kurtz. It's implied that she is Kurtz's lover. The plot thickens.
- The manager and Kurtz argue. The manager loses. After leaving Kurtz, he confers with Marlow. The manager, obviously jealous of Kurtz, calls his method of collecting ivory "unsound." He wants to remove Kurtz from the interior (because he's a threat).
- Marlow, realizing how ridiculous the manager is, takes Kurtz's side, saying he is Kurtz's friend. He alienates the manager for good.
- At this point, the harlequin gets spooked by the manager's threats of hanging and decides to peace out. Before he does, he reveals that Kurtz ordered the earlier attack on Marlow's steamer. Which, we think, is the third explanation we've heard for the poison arrows, so we really don't trust this guy now.
- Despite the mistrust, Marlow very helpfully provides him with a few spare items (shoes, cartridges, etc.) before the harlequin leaves. Marlow again remarks on the remarkability of the man. (Pun intended.)
- Hours later, Marlow wakes up around midnight and goes to check on Kurtz who, in a dramatic and suspenseful moment, is not there.
- Marlow becomes really scared.
- Instead of raising the alarm, Marlow goes after Kurtz himself. After all, he figures, the sick man is probably *crawling* through the jungle and can't have gone that far.
- Marlow's confidence is validated; he does indeed find Kurtz.
- Kurtz tells Marlow to hide himself. He is very bitter about his fight with the manager. He had dreams of greatness. Now they've been all smashed to pieces.
- Marlow is drawn in by the hypnotic spell of night while he ignores Kurtz. He watches some native Africans dancing and confuses the drums with his own heartbeat.
- Finally, after threatening to kill Kurtz if he calls out to the Africans, Marlow takes the man in his arms like a child and brings him back out of the jungle.
- The next day, they all leave aboard the steamer. A group of Africans gathers on the shore.
- Suddenly the warrior woman breaks through and shouts to the departing steamer. This riles up the native Africans and the pilgrims. The pilgrims want to shoot. They almost do except Marlow prevents disaster by blowing the steam-whistle and scaring everyone away. Everyone except the woman who, unlike the men, is unperturbed by the whistle.
- Kurtz seems to understand what is going on, but does not tell.
- Kurtz is on the edge of death. He has mood swings and raves incomprehensibly.
- The pilgrims have turned against Marlow because he sides with Kurtz.
- The steamboat breaks down and they have to lay up for a few days to fix it. During this time, Kurtz loses his sight, saying that he lies in the dark when he is actually in sunlight.
- In his dying moments, Marlow sees a change comes over Kurtz's face, a mask of despair. His last words are the most famous of the book: "The horror! The horror!" Marlow may have been referring to this moment in an earlier passage in the book, when Marlow says "Whether [Kurtz] knew of this deficiency [lacking restraint in gratification of his lusts] I can't say. I think the knowledge came to him at last – only at the very last."
- When news hits that Kurtz has died, everyone rushes to see the dead body. Marlow, on

the other hand, seems to have no desire to stop eating dinner. This almost causes his men to mutiny against him. But they don't.

- The next day, the men bury Kurtz. Marlow becomes ill himself, but survives and makes it back to Europe safely.
- Back in England, Marlow finds that he cannot identify with normal folk anymore. They are petty and extremely irritating.
- Marlow tries to figure out what to do with Kurtz's papers, which the late Kurtz entrusted to him. The Company is jonesing to see those papers, thinking that they may say something along the lines of "all of the ivory on the entire world is buried at X" followed by a map with a large red X. Marlow refuses to give them the papers, saying they are personal and none of their business. He holds firm his stance, even when the Company threatens legal action.
- A man visits Marlow, claiming to be Kurtz's cousin. He leaves with some worthless private letters. We're suspicious.
- Marlow decides to return the rest of the papers to Kurtz's "Intended," which is nineteenth century British for a fiancée.
- When he calls upon her, we discover she is a beautiful woman with a distinctive golden hair. Despite the fact that she is wearing all black, Marlow associates her with light as opposed to Kurtz's darkness.
- Her adoration for Kurtz is obvious and exaggerated. She claims no man could know Kurtz or hear him speak without then loving him.
- It becomes increasingly apparent that she has no idea who Kurtz really was.
- This woman (who, by the way, is also nameless), begs for Marlow to repeat Kurtz's last words to her.
- Marlow deliberately lies. (At this point you might consider flipping to Chapter One and finding that bit about lying.) Anyway, his lie is that Kurtz's last words were her name.
- She gobbles it up, claiming she "knew it."
- Marlow justifies his lie by claiming "it would have been too dark" to tell her the truth.
- Aboard the *Nellie*, Marlow wraps things up. He's done. The Director remarks that the tide has come and this stirs our unnamed narrator who was telling us about Marlow who was telling us about Kurtz. He looks off at the horizon and seems to see the "heart of an immense darkness." On that note, we end.

## Themes

### Good vs. Evil

Much of *Heart of Darkness* is concerned with Marlow's struggle to maintain his sense of morality as power conspiracies rage all around him and the mysterious figure of Kurtz piques his curiosity. Marlow's desire to do good grows increasingly futile as he is plunged into a world where no absolute goodness exists and the best he can do is choose between a selection of nightmares. Eventually, we see that the characters become unable to distinguish between good and evil. Conrad illustrates this moral ambiguity with light and darkness imagery that often blends together, yet is imbued with an overall inevitably sinister shade.

### Questions About Women and Femininity

1. Does Conrad seem to have clear definitions of what constitutes good and evil? What actions does he portray as good or evil?
2. Light and dark imagery pervade *Heart of Darkness*. On what different levels do you see this imagery working?
3. What abstract concepts might light represent? How about darkness? Do light and dark follow the convention of light representing goodness and dark representing evil?
4. What is the "heart of darkness" of the novel's title? Think in terms of abstract concepts as well as of places and characters.

### Chew On This

Conrad's use of light and dark imagery works on several different levels – the physical, the psychological, the racial, and the moral.

Conrad often uses light, not as a symbol for goodness or enlightenment, but as a foil to a darkness that it eventually collapses into and is tainted by.

## Man and the Natural World

Nature and civilization rather decisively represent the dichotomy of "primitive" non-Europeans and "cultured" Europeans. "Civilization" comes to refer to the supposed enlightenment and refinement of the Western world. The British imperialists feel their conceptions of black "savagery" are confirmed when the native Africans attack the pilgrims and reveal their cannibalism. The white Europeans seek to tame these Africans with "civilization," but the notion becomes problematic when "noble altruism" acts as a shield for blind imperialism. The white men who call their actions altruistic are quickly recognized by the readers as hypocrites.

## Questions About Women and Femininity

1. At first glance, what does civilization represent? What does nature represent? Does this distinction hold true as the novel progresses?
2. How does the concept of civilization become problematic as the novel progresses? How are the Company's attempts to 'civilize' the Africans hypocritical?
3. If nature is madness-inducing, what does this say about human nature, especially the native Africans?
4. How do different aspects of nature, especially the river and the jungle, become characters in their own right? What is nature's attitude towards man?

## Chew On This

In *Heart of Darkness*, natural forces have a will of their own and prove themselves hostile towards the white pilgrims.

## Race

The divide of the races into black and white adds complexity to Conrad's theme of light versus darkness and good versus evil. The conventional use of white as good and black as evil is clearly challenged when we view it through the lens of race, particularly when we see white men brutally subjugating and forcing black Africans into hard labor simply for profit. The Europeans justify their mistreatment of the Africans with claims of "spreading civilization," of helping Africans become "enlightened." This, in itself, is a form of prejudice – a denial of the Africans' traditional lifestyle and culture.

## Questions About Women and Femininity

1. How are the differences between white and black people depicted in *Heart of Darkness*? What kinds of activities does each group participate in?
2. How does light and dark imagery apply racially? What does this say morally about each group of people as portrayed in *Heart of Darkness*?
3. What kinds of white European expectations does Marlow bring into his journey up the Congo? How are they dispelled? Look specifically at the examples of the accountant, manager, brickmaker, and Kurtz. What is Marlow's attitude towards the native Africans?
4. How is Kurtz's attitude towards the black Africans ambiguous? How might he be viewed as the ultimate symbol of imperialism and black subjugation? Alternatively, how might he be read as the exact opposite?

## Chew On This

Despite white Europe's good intentions towards the Africans and their desire to "civilize" the black man, imperialism proves to be a brutal and callous victimization of the native Africans for the sole purpose of maximizing profits.

Despite Kurtz's brutality, he treats the Africans more civilly and more as equals than the majority of the other white European characters (like the accountant, the manager, and even Marlow). This is why Marlow sees him as the lesser of two evils.

## Identity

Perhaps one of the most terrifying aspects of *Heart of Darkness* is the dehumanization of its characters. Conrad shows this by sucking the humanity out of his villains – the manager, the accountant, the brickmaker, and Kurtz. At some point in the text, each character lacks some fundamental human characteristic – whether it is compassion, understanding, or (Marlow’s favorite) restraint. This suggests that at some level, these characters have been so degenerated by their own greed and their time in the interior that they have become less than human. They are shells of their former selves, hollow within.

## Questions About Women and Femininity

1. How is Africa a place of emptiness from the perspective of a white European man? How are even places of civilization – cities and trading stations – void of European amenities and values?
2. What characters lack essential human characteristics? How do they show their fundamental emptiness?
3. How are the white pilgrims deprived of their senses and reason as they descend deeper and deeper into the interior?
4. What essential characteristics or understanding do both Marlow and Kurtz lack? How does this affect their interpretation of the events toward the end? It may be helpful to look at their comments about language here.

## Chew On This

Men go into the interior whole and unscathed, but while living there, the hostile wilderness drains them of their humanity.

## Power

Many of Marlow's crew have ambitions of moving up the corporate ladder of the Company. Insatiable greed for wealth and power defines their characters. This greed quickly demolishes any sense of morality they may hold and we find a handful of them attempting to get in Marlow's good graces for the sake of his aunt's influences. Kurtz's ambitions do not stop at merely moving up in the Company; he desires to prove himself superior to all Africans. Even Marlow is sucked in; he tries obsessively to get as close to Kurtz as he can – both physically and emotionally. Marlow proves as attracted to power as any of his corrupt colleagues.

## Questions About Women and Femininity

1. How do white men overpower the black native Africans? Where do the Africans seem most powerless? Most powerful?
2. Which characters are concerned with gaining more power and rank within the Company? What does their obsession for power cost them?
3. How is Kurtz's power more absolute than any other characters'? Conversely, how is his control over himself especially weak? How does this tie into Marlow's comments about his "lack of restraint"?

## Chew On This

Kurtz is among the most powerful characters in the novel because he has a profound understanding and control over the minds of the native Africans and access to a large stash of ivory, which gives him leverage within the Company.

Kurtz is among the weakest of the characters in the novel because he shows little self-restraint in his greed for ivory and eventually dies after succumbing to the madness of the interior.

## Women and Femininity

Marlow has a very specific and sexist attitude towards women. They play only minor roles in the novel and often live vicariously through their male counterparts. They are rarely given voices of their own and are more often seen than heard. The few exceptions – Marlow's aunt and the Intended – often confirm Marlow's assumption that women are naïve and idealistic. That they blind themselves to truths become Marlow's sole belief, yet he seeks to keep them in their beautiful and idealized world.

## Questions About Women and Femininity

1. What is Marlow's opinion of women's position in society? Does Conrad seem to agree with this? Which characters demonstrate Marlow's claim and which dispute it?
2. What characteristics does Marlow associate with women?
3. Compare and contrast the wild warrior woman to the Intended. Both are potential love interests for Kurtz. If the Intended is an embodiment of purity and idealism, what does the warrior woman represent? How do these characteristics reflect on Kurtz?
4. Although men make up the majority of the authority figures in the book, powerful women are not utterly absent. Name at least two powerful women and state how they exercise their power.

## Chew On This

Despite Marlow's disparaging comments about women, a number of women display or exercise a substantial amount of power in *Heart of Darkness*.

All the women within *Heart of Darkness* reflect the values of their society and are viewed as nothing more than trophies for men. Even the women who seem at first to have power are in fact powerless upon closer inspection.

## Exploration

Curiosity is Marlow's defining characteristic. It is his desire to explore and fill in the empty spaces on maps that first brings him into the interior. Then, his interest is piqued by multiple mentions and rumors about Kurtz. It urges Marlow to transgress some of his moral boundaries to satisfy his curiosity. His discoveries and contemplation about Kurtz force him to explore his own sense of right and wrong, and expand his tolerance for evil. He brings readers along for the ride when he begins questioning the nature of good and evil by doubting his crew's decency and entertaining ideas of Kurtz's integrity.

## Questions About Women and Femininity

1. What captures Marlow's curiosity about Africa? About Kurtz? What is similar about these two obsessions?
2. Why does Marlow claim for some time that he is not interested in Kurtz? Is he telling the truth at the time?
3. How does Marlow's curiosity compromise his integrity and bring about dire consequences? Or is his curiosity actually harmless?
4. How does Marlow explore and judge Kurtz's actions? How does this make his sense of right and wrong more flexible?

## Chew On This

Marlow's journey up the Congo River parallels his exploration of the human psyche; as he plunges deeper into the African interior, he similarly plunges deeper into the human psyche and the nature of good and evil.

Marlow's insatiable curiosity is one representation of his lack of restraint, the flaw he hates so much; thus, Marlow is a hypocrite in accusing Kurtz of such a fault.

## Madness

The question of how and why one goes mad in the interior pervades the novel. Conrad suggests that the white man's fear of Africa's unexplored heart, her 'savage' people, and the crew's greedy internal power struggle thrust Marlow (and before him, Kurtz) towards madness. When one becomes so far removed from society's mores and restrictions, good and evil become relative terms. When these moral boundaries begin fading, Conrad suggests, man loses the sense of where he stands in the great moral struggle. Having lost this foundation, it is a short step to losing one's mind.

## Questions About Women and Femininity

1. How does Conrad define madness? How is Kurtz the ultimate embodiment of madness?
2. What symptoms accompany the onset of madness in *Heart of Darkness*? What human faculties begin to break down? Describe Marlow's slow succumbing to madness. You could also argue that he doesn't succumb to madness – whatever floats your boat.
3. Is madness caused by the trip up the Congo River and into the interior? Or is it something that is born into man, regardless of his environment? In other words, is madness caused by inherent nature or environment and experience?
4. Can the harlequin be seen as a bridge between madness and sanity? How do his words make sense yet seem like folly to Marlow? How does Marlow relate to the harlequin? What does this say about Marlow's state of sanity?

## Chew On This

Isolation and life in the wilderness is the sole cause of Kurtz's madness; in other words, there is something inherently madness-inducing about the African interior.

One of Conrad's main messages is that madness is not caused specifically by living in the wilderness, but that the seeds of madness – ambition, obsession, and greed – are already extant in a man before he journeys into the interior.

## Language and Communication

The articulateness and effectiveness of speech plays a large role in the novel. Good articulation and expression ensures understanding between two individuals. However, many of the characters suffer from poor communication. They speak too much, too little, or even in different languages. There is almost a total lack of communication between white men and the black Africans, even Marlow's cannibals that are effectively part of his crew. For Kurtz, language is a way to justify white man's superiority over the Africans. For Marlow, language represents a way out of madness – a way to establish contact with other human beings and thus break the isolation and lack of understanding that brings on insanity.

## Questions About Women and Femininity

1. What is significant about the manager's and the brickmaker's characteristic blabbering? What does it say about their characters?
2. How does Marlow receive information about Kurtz? Are these sources reliable? What expectations does Marlow form about Kurtz based on this hearsay?
3. What is Kurtz's relationship to language? How does his troubled psyche manifest itself in his words? What is Marlow's opinion of all this and how does it affect his own relationship to language? Does he see it as a cure for madness?
4. What is Marlow's style of narration? Does the fact that he is telling the story compromise our belief in its validity? Is he a reliable narrator? What might be his goal in relating the story to his fellow passengers?

## Chew On This

Linguistic expression – through either speech or text – represents one way out of madness, according to Marlow. On the flip side, those who do not express themselves well are condemned to remain stuck in the madness of the interior.

In *Heart of Darkness*, problems with linguistic expression – either orally or in writing – signals some fundamental lack of understanding in a character's grasp of the situation.

## Fear

The white pilgrims go into the interior in constant fear of their surroundings. Their trepidation is so strong that they develop a paranoia of the wilderness – its eerie silences and sudden blinding fogs, its impenetrable darkness and shadowy savages. Being so far removed from any vestige of civilization as they know it only adds to their sense of helplessness. Their fear makes them do foolish things on impulse. Fear also contributes to their eventual madness. It pervades the entire novel and seems to seep into the environment itself so that everything is not only terror-inducing, but morally disturbing as well.

## Questions About Women and Femininity

1. What exactly do the white men fear about the black native Africans? How is this enhanced by the jungle environment?
2. What do the men fear about Kurtz? What makes them go after him anyways? Why does Kurtz pose such a big threat to them?
3. How does Conrad enhance our fear and awe of Kurtz? What physical and mental characteristics does Kurtz display that render this man particularly disturbing to our sense of normality and morality?
4. What does Kurtz fear? What exactly is "The horror! The horror!" that he dies fighting?

## Chew On This

Conrad stokes readers' fear of the interior by narrating the death of Fresleven, imposing Marlow's discomfort, and rendering nature a hostile force to the white pilgrims.

Kurtz strikes readers as particularly frightening because of his eerie combination of human and ghostly features and his strangely logical, yet brutal, flow of thought.

## Fate and Free Will

Marlow's journey towards the interior and towards Kurtz seems inevitable, as if Marlow is drawn nearer and nearer to the heart of darkness by his own morbid curiosity and by his childhood drive to explore. Indeed, the two women knitting in Brussels represent the Fates of ancient Greek mythology. With their appearance, Marlow begins to feel as if his journey is ill-starred – yet he forges on anyway. The interplay between fate and free will informs the action of the plot, bringing into question whether Marlow could have avoided his descent into madness, his corruption, and his subsequent revelations as to human nature.

## Questions About Women and Femininity

1. How are the two old knitting women embodiments of Fate? Why does Marlow envision them at the end?
2. Are all the accidents that keep delaying Marlow's journey into the interior truly incidental?
3. How is Kurtz a product of fate? To what extent do his personal choices affect his descent into madness? Could his demise have been prevented?
4. Is Marlow destined to meet Kurtz? How do his personal choices towards the end of the novel affect Kurtz, himself, and the Intended?

## Chew On This

Marlow cannot help but meet Kurtz; he is destined to go into the interior, experience it much as Kurtz did, and eventually meet the man himself. If we accept Kurtz as Marlow's foil, this means that Kurtz was fated to go mad in the interior and could not stop it by any conscious decision.

Marlow's meeting and renunciation of Kurtz is a result of personal choice; in other words, he could have glorified Kurtz as the others did, but made the choice not to.

## Time

Conrad plays with readers' sense of time to emphasize certain points in the plot. Marlow tells his story aboard the *Nellie* so readers go with him (as well as his listeners) into the past. Simultaneously, we readers in real time watch the reactions of Marlow's listeners as they respond to Marlow's story. Marlow's journey into the interior is also described as a journey back in time, to a prehistoric age during which the untouched wilderness proves primal and merciless. The river itself comes to represent the linear flow of time, on which Marlow travels forwards and backwards.

## Questions About Women and Femininity

1. How does Conrad maintain the aura of suspense in the first two chapters of the novel? What techniques does he use to prolong time?
2. How do the numerous delays in Marlow's journey affect the pacing of the story?
3. How does Conrad make the last part of the journey (to the Inner Station) seem timeless? Why does Marlow feel like he is going backwards in time?
4. How do the two separate time sequences (that of Marlow's journey and that of Marlow's telling the story to his fellow passengers) complement each other? In other words, when Marlow interrupts his narrative, how does that interruption emphasize, parallel, or render ironic the action in the narrative?

## Chew On This

Conrad uses well-placed delays in Marlow's journey, long descriptive passages, and incompetent members of the Company to prolong time and induce a suspenseful atmosphere.

The river is a symbol of linear time that Marlow and his crew traverse; as they go further and further up the river, they feel as if they are receding further back in time.

## Quotes

### Good vs. Evil Quotes

Quote:

*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. (1.2)*

Thought:

From the very beginning, Conrad throws doubt over the moral purity of London – the so-called greatest town on earth – by casting a dark and "mournful gloom" over it.

Quote:

*It was difficult to realize that his (the Director of Companies) work was not out there in the luminous estuary, but behind him, within the brooding gloom. (1.3)*

Thought:

The Company's work is done in the darkness and gloom, not on the lit water. This suggests the Company's work is somewhat shady or evil.

Quote:

*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 marshes 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 somber 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. (1.4-6)*

Thought:

This magnificent sunset is described in stunning light and color imagery. Everything is bathed in heavenly white light except the western horizon, which hints that the West (as in Europe) may not be as enlightened as it is conventionally seen. And indeed, the sunlight grows more sinister as it falls towards the western horizon, turning from a benign white to a "dull red" as if about to be overwhelmed by the darkness already there. Conrad suggests that darkness, unlike light, has greater layers of depth, and thus is more profound than light. So even as darkness falls upon the river, Marlow falls into deeper thought about it. The "august light" describes not necessarily the fading sunlight, but illumination from the mind, through "abiding memories."

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! (1.6)*

Thought:

Here is an example of conventional light imagery. The European pioneers head into the darkness of unknown territory bearing little flares of light like torches or glittering swords that represent their vigor and their enlightenment.

Quote:

*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 mudflat, 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. (1.7)*

Thought:

Darkness has finally fallen after the prolonged sunset and the only natural source of light now comes from the stars. All other light comes from manmade sources – lighthouses and ships. But not all of this light is beautiful; on the west, where the last vestiges of sunlight illuminate the town, it only comes diluted through the "brooding gloom" and is transformed by that gloom into an infernal "lurid glare."

Quote:

*"And this also," said Marlow suddenly, "has been one of the dark places of the earth." (1.8)*

Thought:

Marlow pronounces a hallmark Western city, London, as dark as the interior of Africa where he has recently traveled. This suggests that the English and all of Europe, by extension, are as morally corrupt as they claim the native Africans are.

Quote:

*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 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. (1.9)*

Thought:

In this stunning metaphor, Conrad reverses the typical light and darkness imagery. Where light is generally associated with understanding and meaning and darkness with ignorance, Conrad inverts the two. Marlow believes that meaning can only be brought about by comparison; only when light shines can the human eye discern shadow. There is also a play between the internal and external here with the seed metaphor. Only when one understands the outside environment can he begin to understand the dark depths of himself.

Quote:

*(Marlow): "Light came out of this river (the Thames) 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." (1.11)*

Thought:

Light is associated with mankind's vitality, particularly with the Knights who were sent out by the crown to discover (and plunder) new lands. However, Marlow says, man and thus light have only existed for a moment compared to how long darkness has been around. Thus, darkness is equated with nature here, and this foreshadows the hostility of the African wilderness.

Quote:

*(Marlow): "They were men enough to face the darkness." (1.11)*

Thought:

Conventionally, darkness here represents the unknown and potentially hostile land.

Quote:

*"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." (1.11)*

Thought:

Marlow describes man's hate of the unknown and the incomprehensible. However, this unknown world has a certain dark attraction, the "fascination of the abomination" as Marlow calls it. Man, Marlow claims, is drawn like a magnet to that which he does not understand and may grow to hate.

Quote:

*"Mind," he began again, lifting one arm from the elbow, the palm of the hand outwards, so that, with his legs folded before him, he had the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus-flower [...] (1.13)*

Thought:

Marlow is described in positive imagery, as the Buddha, a figure that has come to represent enlightenment, truth, and reconciliation with the world. Yet, despite this supposed knowledge, his tale is "inconclusive."

Quote:

*[Marlow]: "Mind, none of us would feel exactly like this. What saves us is efficiency--the devotion to efficiency. But these chaps were not much account, really. They were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force--nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. 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. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea." (1.13)*

Thought:

Marlow undermines everything he just said about the nobility and good intentions of the explorers and condemns colonization as an evil exploitation of the weak. He dismisses the explorers as mere robbers and murderers, men who were going about their business blindly. This evil is masked, he claims, under the strength and conviction of a good, pure idea. But the reality, he finds, is very different from the supposed intention.

Quote:

*Flames glided in the river, small green flames, red flames, white flames, pursuing, overtaking, joining, crossing each other – then separating slowly or hastily. The traffic of the great city went on in the deepening night upon the sleepless river. (1.14)*

Thought:

The "traffic of the great city" seems somewhat hellish in its depiction through unnaturally colored flames. This contrasts sharply with the darkness of the river.

Quote:

*[Marlow]: "It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me – and into my thoughts. It was somber 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." (1.15)*

Thought:

Marlow describes meeting Kurtz as an experience that "throw[s] a kind of light [...] into my thoughts." Though readers may expect that light to help Marlow understand and clarify his experience, Marlow surprises us by saying that it was "not very clear." This makes the distinction between light and darkness again ambiguous.

Quote:

*"It [Africa] 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." (1.18)*

Thought:

Marlow associates the blank white spaces of a map with childhood innocence and a yearning to explore. As he grew up, the space darkened as the unknown was filled in – a reversal of the typical black representing unknown imagery.

Quote:

*"But there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land. And as I looked at the map of it in a shop-window, it fascinated me as a snake would a bird - a silly little bird." (1.18)*

Thought:

The Congo River resembles a snake, one of the most primal symbols of evil and deception. Yet Marlow is fascinated by the snake, hypnotized like an innocent bird. This is another instance of man's helpless, almost instinctive fascination with evil.

Quote:

*"I got my appointment - of course; and I got it very quick. It appears the Company had received news that one of their captains had been killed in a scuffle with the natives. This was my chance, and it made me the more anxious to go... through this glorious affair I got my appointment, before I had fairly begun to hope for it." (1.21)*

Thought:

Marlow shows a streak of vice by rejoicing in another man's death simply because it frees up a position for him to carry out his dream. He shows little sympathy for this murder and does not seem to care that it cost a man his life to get him into the Company. It does not occur to Marlow that this man's death may spell both physical and moral danger for him if he goes ahead with his plan.

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." (1.22)*

Thought:

White, usually a sign of purity, here is inverted to mean the exact opposite. In the Biblical phrase alluded to by "whited sepulchre," people who are outwardly pure are inwardly filthy with deceit. This suggests that the Company is inwardly corrupt.

Quote:

*"Good heavens! and I was going to take charge of a twopenny-half-penny river-steamboat with a penny whistle attached! It appeared, however, I was also one of the Workers, with a capital – you know. 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 [Marlow's aunt], 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." (1.28)*

Thought:

Marlow's aunt considers Marlow some altruistic "emissary of light" that brings knowledge to "those ignorant millions." But Marlow is quick to discredit it, calling such goals "rot" and "humbug." We understand that Marlow is not going to Africa out of the goodness of his heart, but rather to explore and help the Company profit. Marlow's aunt thinks Marlow more noble than he actually is, a notion strangely similar to Kurtz's fiancée at the end of the text.

Quote:

*"Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks – these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at." (1.30)*

Thought:

Marlow describes the black native Africans as "natural and true," absolutely invigorating in their "wild vitality." They seem happy just to live and, to Marlow, who feels stuck in a dream, they are refreshingly real to look at, providing him with a great deal of comfort.

Quote:

*[At the Outer Station]: "A continuous noise of the rapids above hovered over this scene of inhabited devastation. A lot of people, mostly black and naked, moved about like ants. A jetty projected into the river. A blinding sunlight drowned all this at times in a sudden recrudescence of glare." (1.34)*

Thought:

Here, light does not reveal the truth but repeatedly "drown[s]" the true horror of the "inhabited devastation" in a "recrudescence of glare."

Quote:

*"I've seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but, by all the stars! these were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men - men, I tell you. But as I stood on this hillside, 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." (1.37)*

Thought:

Marlow describes the white men who have enslaved the Africans as devils, traditional figureheads of evil. This contrasts with all the good that these same men think they are doing for the native Africans.

Quote:

*"My purpose was to stroll into the shade for a moment; but no sooner within than it seemed to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno." (1.38)*

Thought:

The shade that initially seems like a cooling respite from the sun quickly turns hellish.

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." (1.39)*

Thought:

The black Africans suffer at the hands of their callous white masters and seek comfort in the natural sanctuary of a grove.

Quote:

*"They [the slaves] were dying slowly – it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, - nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. These moribund shapes were free as air – and nearly as thin. I began to distinguish the gleam of eyes under*

*the trees. Then, glancing down, I saw a face near my hand. The black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree, and slowly the eyelids rose and the sunken eyes looked up at me, enormous and vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs, which died out slowly." (1.40)*

Thought:

This scene shows the evil of the white colonists who remove Africans from their homes, take them to alien places, feed them unfamiliar food, and generally work them to death. Here, white does not represent purity or truth, but the last gasp of miserable life before succumbing to death.

Quote:

*"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." (1.40)*

Thought:

Marlow shows his compassion by offering the dying slave some food. However, his well-intentioned gesture is futile as the young man dies anyway. Marlow, it seems, is powerless to change the circumstances of his surroundings.

Quote:

*"When a truckle-bed with a sick man (some invalid agent from upcountry) was put in there, he exhibited a gentle annoyance. 'The groans of this sick person,' he said, 'distract my attention. And without that it is extremely difficult to guard against clerical errors in this climate.'" (1.45)*

Thought:

The accountant shows the evil of neglect by having little compassion for the sick slave in his care. The painful groans fail to move him, but rather merely irritate him.

Quote:

*[The accountant]: "What a frightful row," he said. He crossed the room gently to look at the sick man, and returning, said to me, "He does not hear." "What! Dead?" I asked, startled. "No, not yet," he answered, with great composure. Then alluding with a toss of the head to the tumult in the station-yard, "When one has got to make correct entries, one comes to hate those savages – hate them to the death." (1.47)*

Thought:

The accountant cares about his work so much that he cannot spare a drop of compassion for the dying slaves. In fact, he finds their dying groans an annoyance simply because they sometimes make him make mistakes in his bookkeeping.

Quote:

*"The shed was already a heap of embers glowing fiercely." (1.56)*

Thought:

Here, light becomes ruinous in the form of fire, destroying the pilgrims' shed. It seems as if nature, in the form of fire, is driving the pilgrims out of the land.

Quote:

*"He [the brickmaker] was a first-class agent, young, gentlemanly, a bit reserved, with a forked little beard and a hooked nose. He was stand-offish with the other agents, and they on their side said he was the manager's spy upon them." (1.56)*

Thought:

The fact that the brickmaker has a "forked little beard" and is called the "manager's spy" immediately throws his moral purity into doubt. His face has devilish aspects and his loyalty to the pilgrims is brought into question.

Quote:

*"He struck a match, and I perceived that this young aristocrat had not only a silver-mounted dressing-case but also a whole candle all to himself. Just at that time the manager was the only man supposed to have any right to candles... The business intrusted to this fellow was the making of bricks - so I had been informed; but there wasn't a fragment of a brick anywhere in the station, and he had been there more than a year - waiting." (1.56)*

Thought:

Here Conrad presents several hints at the brickmaker's moral depravity. He is in possession of objects of obvious wealth – silver-mounted canes and whole candles. His close ties to the manager – who is the only man allowed whole candles – gives us an idea of how he got such prized items. Like the devil, the brickmaker is idle, not doing the work he was hired to do (make bricks).

Quote:

*"It was as unreal as everything else - as the philanthropic pretence of the whole concern, as their talk, as their government, as their show of work. The only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading-post where ivory was to be had, so that they could earn percentages. They intrigued and slandered and hated each other only on that account - but as to effectually lifting a little finger - oh, no." (1.56)*

Thought:

Conrad finally says straight out that the men are hypocrites. They pretend that their mission is to philanthropically help the black Africans, but they exploit them instead. They want to make money for their governments, but even here, they will not lift a finger to do an hour of honest work.

Quote:

*[Marlow on Kurtz's painting]: "Then I noticed a small sketch in oils, on a panel, representing a woman, draped and blind-folded, carrying a lighted torch. The background was somber – almost black. The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the torchlight on the face was sinister." (1.57)*

Thought:

This painting represents the goddess of Liberty (symbolized by the torch) and Justice (symbolized by the blindfold) but Kurtz has put a sinister twist on it. He renders the background a bleak black and makes the flame from the torch baleful. The goddess is not as welcoming as one would hope.

Quote:

*[The brickmaker]: "'He [Kurtz] is an emissary of pity and science and progress, and devil knows what else. We want,' he began to declaim suddenly, 'for the guidance of the cause intrusted to us by Europe, so to speak, higher intelligence, wide sympathies, a singleness of purpose.'" (1.59)*

Thought:

The brickmaker presents Kurtz to Marlow as a do-gooder, something of a missionary as well as a Company agent, who wants to bring all the 'civilized' European qualities like "pity and science and progress" to Africa. However, this information comes from an undoubtedly corrupt character, so its reliability is questionable.

Quote:

[The brickmaker to Marlow]: "'You are of the new gang - the gang of virtue.'" (1.59)

Thought:

This is a sarcastic remark. The brickmaker is obviously scornful but somewhat envious of this "new gang." However, as we will find out, the "virtue" of this gang is doubtful.

Quote:

"I let him run on, this papier-mâché Mephistopheles [the brickmaker] [...]." (1.61)

Thought:

Marlow calls the brickmaker Mephistopheles, the devil figure in Goethe's *Faust*, to whom the protagonist sells his soul. This furthers the devil imagery already associated with the brickmaker.

Quote:

"You know I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appalls me. There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies - which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world - what I want to forget. It makes me miserable and sick, like biting something rotten would do. Temperament, I suppose. Well, I went near enough to it by letting the young fool there believe anything he liked to imagine as to my influence in Europe. I became in an instant as much of a pretence as the rest of the bewitched pilgrims." (1.61)

Thought:

Marlow gives us a taste of his morals. He hates lies, not because they are false, but because he associates them with death and decay. However, he comes as close to lying as he can by allowing the brickmaker to believe him quite influential in Europe. Thus, he must feel himself somehow tainted by death. Indeed, he knows he has become "as much of a pretence as the rest of the bewitched pilgrims" for he has sinned and allowed himself to lie.

Quote:

"This devoted band called itself the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, and I believe they were sworn to secrecy. Their talk, however, was the talk of sordid buccaneers: it was reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity, and cruel without courage; there was not an atom of foresight or of serious intention in the whole batch of them, and they did not seem aware

*these things are wanted for the work of the world. To tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe." (1.72)*

Thought:

The Eldorado Exploring Expedition is evil embodied. Their sole intention is to rob and rape the earth of its treasures purely for profit, with not even the pretense of moral justification.

Quote:

*"The other explained that it [the ivory] had come with a fleet of canoes in charge of an English half-caste clerk Kurtz had with him; that Kurtz had apparently intended to return himself, the station being by that time bare of goods and stores, but after coming three hundred miles, had suddenly decided to go back, which he started to do alone in a small dugout with four paddlers, leaving the half-caste to continue down the river with the ivory. The two fellows there seemed astounded at anybody attempting such a thing. They were at a loss for an adequate motive. As to me, I seemed to see Kurtz for the first time. It was a distinct glimpse: the dug-out, four paddling savages, and the lone white man turning his back suddenly on the headquarters, on relief, on thoughts of home – perhaps; setting his face towards the depths of the wilderness, towards his empty and desolate station. Perhaps he was just simply a fine fellow who stuck to his work for its own sake." (2.2)*

Thought:

The image of Kurtz here is one of moral ambiguity. One could read his turning back and returning to the interior as a sign of courage – usually a positive trait. This is how Marlow reads it. It could, however, also be read more pessimistically. Kurtz could be going back for more ivory, out of an incorrigible and insatiable greed for wealth. Conrad allows both such readings at this stage of the game.

Quote:

*"'We will not be free from unfair competition till one of these fellows is hanged for an example,' he said. 'Certainly,' grunted the other; 'get him hanged! Why not? Anything - anything can be done in this country.'" (2.2)*

Thought:

The manager and his uncle are evil, willing to kill a man just to get at Kurtz.

Quote:

*"Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing." Conceive you - that ass!" (2.2)*

Thought:

The manager is a hypocrite. Nothing he does helps the stations improve. In fact, under his authority, everything has decayed.

Quote:

*[The manager's uncle]: "Ah! my boy, trust to this – I say, trust to this." I saw him extend his short flipper of an arm for a gesture that took in the forest, the creek the mud, the river – seemed to beckon with a dishonouring flourish before the sunlit face of the land a treacherous appeal to the lurking death, to the hidden evil, to the profound darkness of its heart. It was so startling that I leaped to my feet and looked back at the edge of the forest, as though I had expected an answer of some sort to that black display of confidence." (2.2)*

Thought:

The manager's uncle assumes that Nature is evil. Marlow obviously agrees.

Quote:

*There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. (2.5)*

Thought:

Sunlight, often a symbol of truth or a blessing from God, is stripped of such meaning here. In the wilderness, there is "no joy" in its brilliance or heat. Here, it is as oppressive as the rest of the environment.

Quote:

*"It was unearthly, and the men were - No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it - this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity - like yours - the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you - you so remote from the night of first ages - could comprehend." (2.8)*

Thought:

Marlow questions the very essence of humanity. He is beginning to consider the wild screaming Africans to be human. This requires him to reformulate what falls in the boundaries of humanness. What he once considered savage he now begins to accept as a manifestation of humanness, what he considers good and decent.

Quote:

*"Let the fool gape and shudder - the man knows, and can look on without a wink. But he must at least be as much of a man as these on the shore. He must meet that truth with his own true stuff - with his own inborn strength. Principles won't do. Acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags - rags that would fly off at the first good shake. No; you want a deliberate belief." (2.8)*

Thought:

Marlow does away with principles – those foundations of goodness that we so adore – because he knows they won't survive in the wilderness. Instead, he finds strength in simple, unwavering beliefs.

Quote:

*"The dusk came gliding into it long before the sun had set." (2.13)*

Thought:

Darkness comes early to the interior, a place so deep in the heart of darkness that the sun cannot shine for the full twelve hours of daylight. This suggests that evil has a greater hold in the interior than outside.

Quote:

*"Their headman, a young, broad-chested black, severely draped in dark-blue fringed cloths, with fierce nostrils and his hair all done up artfully in oily ringlets, stood near me. 'Aha!' I said, just for good fellowship's sake. 'Catch 'im,' he snapped, with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp teeth - 'catch 'im. Give 'im to us.' 'To you, eh?' I asked; 'what would you do with them?' 'Eat 'im!' he said curtly, and, leaning his elbow on the rail, looked out into the fog in a dignified and profoundly pensive attitude. I would no doubt have been properly horrified, had it not occurred to me that he and his chaps must be very hungry: that they must have been growing increasingly hungry for at least this month past." (2.14)*

Thought:

Marlow, despite himself, feels sympathy for the native Africans. He pities them for having not been able to indulge in their natural diet for so long. He knows the excruciating pain of

prolonged hunger and feels pity for them even though they are so different from him.

Quote:

*[Marlow describing Kurtz's speech]: "The point was in his being a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts the one that stood out pre-eminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words – the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness." (2.24)*

Thought:

Language can be used for good or evil.

Quote:

*"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 in expectation of hearing the wilderness burst into a prodigious peal of laughter that would shake the fixed stars in their places. Everything belonged to him - but that was a trifle. The thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own. That was the reflection that made you creepy all over. It was impossible — it was not good for one either - trying to imagine. He had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land - I mean literally." (2.29)*

Thought:

Kurtz, in his madness, is being taken over by the "powers of darkness." He no longer belongs to himself, but to the evil wilderness because he has accepted worship from the native Africans, who are described as "devils" and willingly taking his place among them. In essence, Marlow claims, Kurtz has accepted a seat in hell and thus belongs to the darkness.

Quote:

*"No; I can't forget him [Kurtz], though I am not prepared to affirm the fellow was exactly worth the life we lost in getting to him. I missed my late helmsman awfully - I missed him even while his body was still lying in the pilot-house...It was a kind of partnership. He steered for me - I had to look after him, I worried about his deficiencies, and thus a subtle bond had been created, of which I only became aware when it was suddenly broken. And the intimate profundity of that look he gave me when he received his hurt remains to this day in my memory - like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment." (2.29)*

Thought:

Marlow has not been completely corrupted; his compassion for his lost helmsman shows that he still has human emotion, unlike Kurtz. He is touched by death and honestly grieves at the loss of a man that he considers his partner.

Quote:

*[Marlow on Kurtz's writing]: "...the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs had intrusted him [Kurtz] with the make of a report, for its future guidance...it was a beautiful piece of writing. The opening paragraph, however, in the light of later information, strikes me now as ominous. He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, 'must necessarily appear to them (savages) in the nature of supernatural beings – we approach them with the might as of a deity,' and so on, and so on. 'By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded,' etc., etc. From that point he soared and took me with him. The peroration was magnificent, though difficult to remember, you know. It gave me the notion of an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence. It made me tingle with enthusiasm. This was the unbounded power of eloquence - of words - of burning noble words. There were no practical hints to interrupt the magic current of phrases, unless a kind of note at the foot on the last page, scrawled evidently much later, in an unsteady hand, may be regarded as the exposition of a method. It was very simple, and at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you, luminous and terrifying, like a flash of lightning in a serene sky: 'Exterminate all the brutes!'" (2.29).*

Thought:

Kurtz shows a sudden and surprising switch from altruistic benevolence to a brutal condemnation of the black Africans. This suggests that his time spent in the wild corrupted his mind and made him evil.

Quote:

*"No; I can't forget him [Kurtz], though I am not prepared to affirm the fellow was exactly worth the life we lost in getting to him. I missed my late helmsman awfully - I missed him even while his body was still lying in the pilot-house. Perhaps you will think it passing strange this regret for a savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara. Well, don't you see, he had done something, he had steered; for months I had him at my back - a help - an instrument. It was a kind of partnership. He steered for me - I had to look after him, I worried about his deficiencies, and thus a subtle bond had been created, of which I only became aware when it was suddenly broken. And the intimate profundity of that look he gave me when he received his hurt remains to this day in my memory - like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment." (2.29)*

Thought:

Marlow shows a surprising amount of compassion for his dead helmsman. During his life, Marlow considered him almost an equal, a partner, almost a true friend. He even claims "kinship" to him at his death. However, he still looks upon his helmsman (and the native Africans) as primarily "an instrument" to help him get where he wants to go.

Quote:

*"The red-haired pilgrim was beside himself with the thought that at least this poor Kurtz had been properly avenged. 'Say! We must have made a glorious slaughter of them in the bush. Eh? What do you think? Say?' He positively danced, the bloodthirsty little gingery beggar. And he had nearly fainted when he saw the wounded man! I could not help saying, 'You made a glorious lot of smoke, anyhow.' I had seen, from the way the tops of the bushes rustled and flew, that almost all the shots had gone too high." (2.31)*

Thought:

The red-haired pilgrim shows his evil side by rejoicing at the thought of killing the native Africans who attacked them. He is not only "bloodthirsty" but also a hypocrite, since he "nearly fainted" at the sight of the wounded helmsman. Marlow despises him.

Quote:

*"I looked around, and I don't know why, but I assure you that never, never before, did this land, this river, this jungle, the very arch of this blazing sky, appear to me so hopeless and so dark, so impenetrable to human thought, so pitiless to human weakness." (3.3)*

Thought:

Nature seems to Marlow completely "hopeless" and "dark," entirely inaccessible to the human mind, incomprehensible and merciless to human weakness. In other words, nature seems evil.

Quote:

*"Evidently the appetite for more ivory had got the better of the - what shall I say? - less material aspirations. However he had got much worse suddenly. 'I heard he was lying helpless, and so I came up - took my chance,' said the Russian. 'Oh, he is bad, very bad.'" (3.4)*

Thought:

Kurtz's greed and corruption manifest themselves physically, in the form of illness.

Quote:

*"These round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic; they were expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing - food for thought and also for vultures if there had been any looking down from the sky; but at all events for such ants as were industrious enough to ascend the pole. They would have been even more impressive, those heads on the stakes, if their faces had not been turned to the house. Only one, the first I had made out, was facing my way. I was not so shocked as you may think. The start back I had given was really nothing but a movement of surprise. I had expected to see a knob of wood there, you know. I returned deliberately to the first I had seen - and there it was, black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids - a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and, with the shrunk dry lips showing a narrow white line of the teeth, was smiling, too, smiling continuously at some endless and jocose dream of that eternal slumber." (3.4)*

Thought:

In a horrifying moment of revelation, Marlow discovers that the balls at the top of the poles (which he took to be ornamental wooden knobs) are actually skulls. Kurtz is so depraved that he can kill Africans and ostentatiously display their heads to the world, perhaps in pride and perhaps to inspire fear in them.

Quote:

*[Marlow reacting to the realization that Kurtz has staked up skulls outside his hut]: After all, that was only a savage sight, while I seemed at one bound to have been transported into some lightless region of subtle horrors, where pure, uncomplicated savagery was a positive relief, being something that had a right to exist – obviously – in the sunshine. (3.6)*

*"He [Kurtz] hated all this, and somehow he couldn't get away. When I had a chance I begged him to try and leave while there was time; I offered to go back with him. And he would say yes, and then he would remain; go off on another ivory hunt; disappear for weeks; forget himself amongst these people – forget himself – you know." (3.4)*

Thought:

Kurtz demonstrates the hypnotizing power of evil. Even though he despises the whole affair, Kurtz stays in the interior, drawn by the act of killing, of obtaining more ivory, of forgetting his identity amongst the native Africans. The evil wilderness has claimed him and will not allow him to leave of his own free will.

Quote:

*"But the wilderness had found him (Kurtz) out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude - and*

*the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating." (3.5)*

Thought:

The distinction between the wilderness and evil has collapsed. The wilderness is a live, evil thing. It uses men's faults against them, exploiting them and driving the men mad. This also speaks to man's irresistible fascination with evil.

Quote:

*"His [Kurtz's] ascendancy was extraordinary. The camps of these people surrounded the place, and the chiefs came every day to see him. They would crawl. '[...] I don't want to know anything of the ceremonies used when approaching Mr. Kurtz,' I shouted. Curious, this feeling that came over me that such details would be more intolerable than those heads drying on the stakes under Mr. Kurtz's windows. After all, that was only a savage sight, while I seemed at one bound to have been transported into some lightless region of subtle horrors, where pure, uncomplicated savagery was a positive relief, being something that had a right to exist – obviously - in the sunshine." (3.6)*

Thought:

Marlow fears that, if he were to learn about Kurtz's control over the Africans, it would "transport" him "into some lightless region of subtle horrors, where pure uncomplicated savagery was a positive relief." Marlow is still clinging to his morals, if only by a thread. He is no longer horrified at the thought of living in a world where evil can exist openly. He is, however, scared by the thought of people (like the native Africans) openly worshipping evil – as symbolized by Kurtz.

Quote:

*[The manager]: "'He [Kurtz] is very low, very low,' he said. He considered it necessary to sigh, but neglected to be consistently sorrowful. 'We have done all we could for him - haven't we? But there is no disguising the fact, Mr. Kurtz has done more harm than good to the Company. He did not see the time was not ripe for vigorous action. Cautiously, cautiously - that's my principle. We must be cautious yet. The district is closed to us for a time. Deplorable! Upon the whole, the trade will suffer. I don't deny there is a remarkable quantity of ivory — mostly fossil. We must save it, at all events - but look how precarious the position is - and why? Because the method is unsound.'" (3.19)*

Thought:

The manager is depraved in a multitude of ways. First, he misrepresents Kurtz's condition and twists his words. Because he knows he is not as competent as Kurtz, he tries to attack Kurtz's

"method" by calling it "unsound." Above all, his words are as meaningless as before and this is the turning point for Marlow. The manager is so despicable that Marlow cannot remain on his side.

Quote:

*"It seemed to me I had never breathed an atmosphere so vile, and I turned mentally to Kurtz for relief - positively for relief." (3.19)*

Thought:

Marlow realizes that the entire environment is evil, so evil that he turns to the somewhat less corrupted Kurtz for relief.

Quote:

*"My hour of favour was over; I found myself lumped along with Kurtz as a partisan of methods for which the time was not ripe: I was unsound! Ah! but it was something to have at least a choice of nightmares." (3.19)*

Thought:

Marlow is forced to choose between two evils because there is no goodness in the interior. This tells readers just how corrupt the manager is for Marlow to side with Kurtz.

Quote:

*"I had turned to the wilderness really, not to Mr. Kurtz, who, I was ready to admit, was as good as buried." (3.20)*

Thought:

Marlow sides himself with the wilderness, but only because Kurtz is as good as dead.

Quote:

*"I felt an intolerable weight oppressing my breast, the smell of the damp earth, the unseen presence of victorious corruption, and the darkness of an impenetrable night..." (3.20)*

Thought:

Marlow feels the triumphant celebration of evil – now that he has allied himself with it.

Quote:

*"He [the harlequin] informed me, lowering his voice, that it was Kurtz who had ordered the attack to be made on the steamer. 'He hated sometimes the idea of being taken away - and then again. . . .'" (3.22)*

Thought:

Kurtz is so evil that he would order an attack on the men sent to rescue him. This is how deeply he is addicted to his search for ivory and his place in the wilderness.

Quote:

*[The harlequin]: "'I have a canoe and three black fellows waiting not very far. I am off. Could you give me a few Martini-Henry cartridges?' I could, and did, with proper secrecy. He helped himself, with a wink at me, to a handful of my tobacco. 'Between sailors - you know - good English tobacco.' At the door of the pilot-house he turned round - 'I say, haven't you a pair of shoes you could spare?' He raised one leg. 'Look.' The soles were tied with knotted strings sandalwise under his bare feet. I rooted out an old pair, at which he looked with admiration before tucking it under his left arm.'" (3.22)*

Thought:

Marlow shows his last vestiges of goodness by generously giving the harlequin some cartridges, tobacco, and spare shoes to help him escape the deadly intentions of the manager.

Quote:

*"The fact is I was completely unnerved by a sheer blank fright, pure abstract terror, unconnected with any distinct shape of physical danger. What made this emotion so overpowering was - how shall I define it? — the moral shock I received, as if something altogether monstrous, intolerable to thought and odious to the soul, had been thrust upon me unexpectedly." (3.24)*

Thought:

The "moral shock" that Marlow feels upon realizing Kurtz is gone is probably a severing of the connection he felt for Kurtz for, after all, the two have had remarkably similar experiences. The fact that Marlow just recently chose Kurtz over the manager and the Company also contributes to his reaction.

Quote:

*"I did not betray Mr. Kurtz - it was ordered I should never betray him—it was written I should be loyal to the nightmare of my choice." (3.25)*

Thought:

Marlow considers Kurtz the "nightmare of [his] choice." He knows that Kurtz is corrupt, but he adheres loyally to him. Thus Marlow sides with a lesser evil than the Company and the manager.

Quote:

*"A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms, across the glow. It had horns - antelope horns, I think - on its head. Some sorcerer, some witch-man, no doubt: it looked fiendlike enough." (3.28)*

Thought:

Readers implicitly regard this figure with fear and revulsion because it is steeped in devil imagery – blackness, horns, and a silhouette against a fire.

Quote:

*"This clearly was not a case for fisticuffs, even apart from the very natural aversion I had to beat that Shadow - this wandering and tormented thing. 'You will be lost,' I said - 'utterly lost.' One gets sometimes such a flash of inspiration, you know." (3.28)*

Thought:

Kurtz is likened to a damned soul, a "Shadow" that is "wandering and tormented." Marlow warns that he will be "lost" if escapes into the wilderness. We can interpret this as his being lost physically, psychologically, and morally.

Quote:

*[Kurtz]: "'I was on the threshold of great things,' he pleaded, in a voice of longing, with a wistfulness of tone that made my blood run cold. 'And now for this stupid scoundrel –'" (3.29)*

Thought:

Kurtz thinks himself a force of good while he paints the manager, "this stupid scoundrel," as a force of evil who thwarts his glorious plans. Of course, the reality is much darker, with both sides depraved and steeped in evil.

Quote:

*"I steamed up a bit, then swung down stream, and two thousand eyes followed the evolutions of the splashing, thumping, fierce river-demon beating the water with its terrible tail and breathing black smoke into the air. In front of the first rank, along the river, three men, plastered with bright red earth from head to foot, strutted to and fro restlessly. When we came abreast again, they faced the river, stamped their feet, nodded their horned heads, swayed their scarlet bodies; they shook towards the fierce river-demon a bunch of black feathers, a mangy skin with a pendent tail - something that looked a dried gourd; they shouted periodically together strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language; and the deep murmurs of the crowd, interrupted suddenly, were like the responses of some satanic litany."* (3.30)

Thought:

Now both groups – the white men and black men – are painted in hellish imagery. Marlow's steamboat is described as a "fierce river-demon" while the native Africans waiting onshore are painted scarlet and shout in an unrecognizable language deemed a "satanic litany." Both sides, then, have committed evil acts.

Quote:

*"And then that imbecile crowd down on the deck started their little fun, and I could see nothing more for smoke."* (3.35)

Thought:

The "imbecile crowd" of white pilgrims are evil because they want to shoot and kill the native Africans simply for a "little fun."

Quote:

*"But both the diabolic love and the unearthly hate of the mysteries it had penetrated fought for the possession of that soul satiated with primitive emotions, avid of lying fame, of sham distinction, of all the appearances of success and power."* (3.37)

Thought:

Kurtz is ruled by evil, but even in its reign, it will not leave him in peace. Two evils fight for Kurtz's soul and both fill his mind with greedy, if unrealistic, thoughts.

Quote:

## Heart of Darkness

### Shmoop Literature Guide

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*"His [Kurtz's] was an impenetrable darkness. I looked at him as you peer down at a man who is lying at the bottom of a precipice where the sun never shines." (3.40)*

Thought:

Kurtz is so claimed by evil that, metaphorically, light cannot touch him anymore.

Quote:

*"I was fascinated. It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror - of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge?" (3.42)*

Thought:

Marlow is hypnotized by Kurtz's slow and painful death. He sees all the negative emotions pass over Kurtz's face as he dies – pride, ruthlessness, terror, and despair. Kurtz's entire being is claimed by evil, and yet he still fights death.

Quote:

*"I know that the sunlight can be made to lie too, yet one felt that no manipulation of light and pose could have conveyed the delicate shade of truthfulness upon those features." (3.48)*

Thought:

Marlow does not trust the sunlight anymore because he has learned from his experience in the interior that light can be deceitful or hellish. However, he trusts the Intended because he believes women are naïve.

Quote:

*"A grand piano stood massively in a corner, with dark gleams on the flat surfaces like a somber and polished sarcophagus." (3.52)*

Thought:

The light imagery here is rather paradoxical, coming in "dark gleams" on the surface of the grand piano. Though undoubtedly beautiful, the "gleams" have a sinister quality to them, reminding Marlow of a "polished sarcophagus," a repository for the dead. He still has not let go of the memory of Kurtz's horrible death.

Quote:

*"She [the Intended] came forward, all in black, with a pale head, floating towards me in the dusk. She was in mourning... The room seemed to have grown darker, as if all the sad light of the cloudy evening had taken refuge on her forehead. This fair hair, this pale visage, this pure brow, seemed surrounded by an ashy halo from which the dark eyes looked out at me. Their glance was guileless, profound, confident, and trustful." (3.52)*

Thought:

For once, the light and dark imagery seems to be conventional. The shining brow and hair of the fair girl indicate her goodness and purity while the darkness represents her sorrow.

Quote:

*"'You knew him best,' I repeated. And perhaps she did. But with every word spoken the room was growing darker, and only her forehead, smooth and white, remained illumined by the unextinguishable light of belief and love." (3.56)*

Thought:

As the Intended sinks deeper and deeper into the certainty of her own lie and as Marlow ceases to correct her, the darkness grows. In her ignorance, however, she remains illuminated.

Quote:

*"I said with something like despair in my heart, but bowing my head before the faith that was in her [the Intended], before that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness, in the triumphant darkness from which I could not have defended her – from which I could not even defend myself." (3.62)*

Thought:

The Intended believes unwaveringly in the goodness of Kurtz. However, her image of him is rendered somewhat dark because of its falseness.

Quote:

*"She [the Intended] said suddenly very low, 'He died as he lived.'*

*'His end,' said I, with dull anger stirring in me, 'was in every way worthy of his life.'" (3.73-74)*

Thought:

Marlow frames his answer so that he can privately condemn Kurtz for his flaws as well as appease the Intended. In his statement, Marlow recognizes the deep corruption of Kurtz's soul.

Quote:

*[Marlow to the Intended]: "The last word he pronounced was - your name." (3.85)*

Thought:

The morality of this last act is ambiguous. Although Marlow does tell a blatant lie – which we have been conditioned in the text to condemn as normatively wrong – he does it to preserve the Intended's lovely illusion of Kurtz. It could be a commendable act of mercy.

Quote:

*"It seemed to me that the house would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head. But nothing happened. The heavens do not fall for such a trifle." (3.86)*

Thought:

Marlow decides that the world is ultimately indifferent to good and evil. There are no gods that give judgment on men's actions and the heavens do not, indeed, fall for trifles such as small lies. This could be seen as a rather pessimistic worldview.

Quote:

*Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha. (3.87)*

Thought:

By comparing Marlow to the Buddha, Conrad implies that there still is a core of goodness in him. Like the Buddha, he has been undoubtedly enlightened, but his knowledge is not a comforting one.

Quote:

*"The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky – seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness." (3.87)*

Thought:

Conrad closes the novel with the scene overshadowed by darkness, suggesting quite heavy-handedly that evil exists prominently in the world, and that the world is indifferent to its existence.

## Man and the Natural World Quotes

### Quote:

*"A narrow and deserted street in deep shadow, high houses, innumerable windows with venetian blinds, a dead silence, grass sprouting right and left, immense double doors standing ponderously ajar. I slipped through one of these cracks, went up a swept and ungarnished staircase, as arid as a desert, and opened the first door I came to." (1.23)*

### Thought:

This is a rather unflattering view of civilization as Marlow knows it. The depiction of the Company's office in Brussels highlights its narrowness, its filth, its tense silence, and its conspicuous lack of people.

### Quote:

*"I had a cup of tea – the last decent cup of tea for many days – and in a room that most soothingly looked just as you would expect a lady's drawing-room to look, we had a long quiet chat by the fireside." (1.27)*

### Thought:

This is what Marlow associates English civilization with – good food, familiar architecture, and idle refined talks in a cozy house. It is this type of soft life and familiarity that he will miss when he goes into the wilderness.

### Quote:

*"After this I got embraced, told to wear flannel, be sure to write often, and so on - and I left." (1.29)*

### Thought:

To some extent, Marlow also associates civilization with trivialities like wearing flannel or writing letters. The wilderness he encounters later concerns itself with much more primal and profound ideas.

### Quote:

*"This one [coast] was almost featureless, as if still in the making, with an aspect of monotonous grimness. The edge of a colossal jungle, so dark-green as to be almost black, fringed with white surf, ran straight, like a ruled line, far, far away along a blue sea whose glitter was*

*blurred by a creeping mist. The sun was fierce, the land seemed to glisten and drip with steam. Here and there greyish-whitish specks showed up clustered inside the white surf, with a flag flying above them perhaps. Settlements some centuries old, and still no bigger than pinheads on the untouched expanse of their background. We pounded along, stopped, landed soldiers; went on, landed custom-house clerks to levy toll in what looked like a God-forsaken wilderness, with a tin shed and a flag-pole lost in it; landed more soldiers - to take care of the custom-house clerks, presumably. Some, I heard, got drowned in the surf; but whether they did or not, nobody seemed particularly to care. They were just flung out there, and on we went. Every day the coast looked the same, as though we had not moved; but we passed various places - trading places - with names like Gran' Bassam, Little Popo; names that seemed to belong to some sordid farce acted in front of a sinister back-cloth." (1.30)*

Thought:

At the onset of his journey, Marlow describes the wilderness as somewhat ominous, but mostly overwhelming in its vastness. Man seems puny beside it – his settlements "no bigger than pinheads." Men's lives, too, seem inconsequential in the midst of such immensity.

Quote:

*"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; all along the formless coast bordered by dangerous surf, as if Nature herself had tried to ward off intruders; in and out of rivers, streams of death in life, whose banks were rotting into mud, whose waters, thickened into slime, invaded the contorted mangroves, that seemed to writhe at us in the extremity of an impotent despair." (1.31)*

Thought:

Nature itself seems hostile to the intrusion of the white man.

Quote:

*"At last we opened a reach. A rocky cliff appeared, mounds of turned-up earth by the shore, houses on a hill, others with iron roofs, amongst a waste of excavations, or hanging to the declivity. A continuous noise of the rapids above hovered over this scene of inhabited devastation. A lot of people, mostly black and naked, moved about like ants. A jetty projected into the river. A blinding sunlight drowned all this at times in a sudden recrudescence of glare. 'There's your Company's station,' said the Swede, pointing to three wooden barrack-like structures on the rocky slope." (1.34)*

Thought:

Man's petty attempts at building a civilization only highlight his smallness and helplessness in the face of an implacable wilderness.

Quote:

*"I came upon a boiler wallowing in the grass, then found a path leading up the hill. It turned aside for the boulders, and also for an undersized railway-truck lying there on its back with its wheels in the air. One was off. The thing looked as dead as the carcass of some animal. I came upon more pieces of decaying machinery, a stack of rusty rails. To the left a clump of trees made a shady spot, where dark things seemed to stir feebly." (1.35)*

Thought:

Anything manmade seems inadequate or takes on a tone of mortality here in the wilderness; the railway-truck lying on its back resembles the carcass of some dead animal. This is foreshadowing of upcoming human death.

Quote:

*"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." (1.43)*

Thought:

Marlow makes fun of European concepts of civilization. Dressing elegantly in town might earn a gentleman respect, but here in no man's land, it is downright pretentious. Thus, Marlow describes the accountant as being a "hairdresser's dummy" and sarcastically claims that "starched collars and got-up shirt-fronts" are "achievements of character" when, in actuality, they mean quite the opposite to him.

Quote:

*"And outside, the silent wilderness surrounding this cleared speck on the earth struck me as something great and invincible, like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion." (1.53)*

Thought:

Nature is described as a gigantic living thing that puts up with man's trivial attempts to conquer it. It is so vastly bigger and more powerful than anything the humans have that it is "invincible" like absolute concepts of "evil or truth" and, it is implied, will survive long past any

petty human invasion.

Quote:

*"One evening a grass shed full of calico, cotton prints, beads, and I don't know what else, burst into a blaze so suddenly that you would have thought the earth had opened to let an avenging fire consume all that trash." (1.55)*

Thought:

Nature seems like a sentient and malevolent force that wants nothing more than to oust these white invaders.

Quote:

*"[...] afterwards he arose and went out – and the wilderness without a sound took him into its bosom again." (1.56)*

Thought:

The black man blamed for the fire eventually abandons the Central Station and heads back into the wilderness. Being a native African, nature willingly accepts him back into its fold. Or, one could read this as a suggestion that he is killed in the wilderness. The line is ambiguous.

Quote:

*"The smell of mud, of primeval mud, by Jove! was in my nostrils, the high stillness of primeval forest was before my eyes; there were shiny patches on the black creek. The moon had spread over everything a thin layer of silver – over the rank grass, over the mud, upon the wall of matted vegetation standing higher than the wall of a temple, over the great river I could see through a sombre gap glittering, glittering, as it flowed broadly by without a murmur. All this was great, expectant, mute, while the man jabbered about himself. I wondered whether the stillness on the face of the immensity looking at us two were meant as an appeal or as a menace. What were we who had strayed in here? Could we handle that dumb thing, or would it handle us? I felt how big, how confoundedly big, was that thing that couldn't talk, and perhaps was deaf as well. What was in there?" (1.61)*

Thought:

Marlow begins to regard Nature itself as a living being, much too big and too eerily silent for human comprehension. He considers whether the stillness and silence (much more threatening than the brickmaker's incessant jabbering) is Nature's "appeal or menace" to man. Interestingly, he paints Nature as dumb and deaf – traits that usually hinder – but here

these qualities only seem to enhance the alien power of Nature.

Quote:

*[The brickmaker to Marlow]: "There was an old hippo that had the bad habit of getting out on the bank and roaming at night over the station grounds. The pilgrims used to turn out in a body and empty every rifle they could lay hands on at him. Some even had sat up o' nights for him. All this energy was wasted, though. 'That animal has a charmed life,' he said; 'but you can say this only of brutes in this country. No man - you apprehend me? – no man here bears a charmed life.'" (1.68)*

Thought:

The brickmaker makes certain that men do not survive out here in the wilderness. Only the animals – like this hippo – seem to have any luck or mercy from Nature. This propagates the notion that Nature is a hostile force against the men.

Quote:

*"The great wall of vegetation, an exuberant and entangled mass of trunks, branches, leaves, boughs, festoons, motionless in the moonlight, was like a rioting invasion of soundless life, a rolling wave of plants, piled up, crested, ready to topple over the creek, to sweep every little man of us out of his little existence. And it moved not." (1.70)*

Thought:

Nature is live, but a silent and immobile mass. This is what makes it so eerie – its unnatural silence and immobility. Yet, Marlow feels a distinct sense of menace from it, as though it were a living, hating entity.

Quote:

*"[...] the uncle said, 'The climate may do away with this difficulty for you. Is he alone there?'" (2.1)*

Thought:

The uncle tries to use nature to his advantage by praying that it will "do away" with Kurtz, leaving him and his nephew unimpeded in their climb up the corporate ladder. The "climate" may mean simply the hostile environment – heat, darkness, wild animals, and savages of the interior – but it might also refer to its madness-inducing quality.

Quote:

*[The manager's uncle]: "Ah! my boy, trust to this – I say, trust to this.' I saw him extend his short flipper of an arm for a gesture that took in the forest, the creek the mud, the river – seemed to beckon with a dishonouring flourish before the sunlit face of the land a treacherous appeal to the lurking death, to the hidden evil, to the profound darkness of its heart. It was so startling that I leaped to my feet and looked back at the edge of the forest, as though I had expected an answer of some sort to that black display of confidence." (2.2)*

Thought:

Nature is referred to as a malevolent entity that kills people; the manager's uncle hopes that it will kill Kurtz.

Quote:

*"Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish [...]. On silvery sand-banks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once – somewhere – far away – in another existence perhaps." (2.5)*

Thought:

The wilderness takes over as the pilgrims travel further upriver. It spawns so thickly and with such abandon that the men feel as if they have traveled back to the prehistoric ages when wild beasts ruled the world and man did not yet exist. The men feel lost in such a foreign environment, so far removed from the least sign of civilization.

Quote:

*"Trees, trees, millions of trees, massive, immense, running up high; and at their foot, hugging the bank against the stream, crept the little begrimed steamboat, like a sluggish beetle crawling on the floor of a lofty portico. It made you feel very small, very lost, and yet it was not altogether depressing, that feeling. After all, if you were small, the grimy beetle crawled on – which was just what you wanted it to do." (2.7)*

Thought:

When set against this backdrop of immense wilderness, man seems very small indeed, as small as a "beetle crawling on the floor of a lofty portico." Though it would be understandable for Marlow to feel overwhelmed by his smallness, he twists his situation rather optimistically,

saying that while a beetle is small, it still crawls towards its destination.

Quote:

*"The reaches opened before us and closed behind, as if the forest had stepped leisurely across the water to bar the way for our return. We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness." (2.7)*

Thought:

Nature itself seems to be cutting the pilgrims off from returning to civilization and condemning them to live forever in its nightmarish jungle. It almost holds a grudge against them for invading its territory, that heart of darkness of the novel's title.

Quote:

*"The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there - there you could look at a thing monstrous and free." (2.8)*

Thought:

The earth is compared to an unchained monster, giving it the feel of an alien evil.

Quote:

*"Perhaps I had a little fever, too. One can't live with one's finger everlastingly on one's pulse. I had often 'a little fever,' or a little touch of other things – the playful paw-strokes of the wilderness, the preliminary trifling before the more serious onslaught which came in due course." (2.14)*

Thought:

Nature is depicted as wickedly playing with Marlow's health for its own amusement before hitting him with a real assault.

Quote:

*"We had just floundered and flopped round a bend, when I saw an islet, a mere grassy hummock of bright green, in the middle of the stream. It was the only thing of the kind; but as we opened the reach more, I perceived it was the head of a long sand-bank, or rather of a chain of shallow patches stretching down the middle of the river. They were discoloured, just awash, and the whole lot was seen just under the water, exactly as a man's backbone is seen running down the middle of his back under the skin." (2.18)*

Thought:

The riverbank, a manifestation of nature, is compared to a man's backbone. This is another instance of Marlow considering the wilderness a live thing.

Quote:

*"I had to lean right out to swing the heavy shutter, and I saw a face amongst the leaves on the level with my own, looking at me very fierce and steady; and then suddenly, as though a veil had been removed from my eyes, I made out, deep in the tangled gloom, naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eyes – the bush was swarming with human limbs in movement, glistening of bronze colour." (2.21)*

Thought:

Here, the forest swarms with human activity – furthering the association of Nature with the living. Nature's ill will towards the pilgrims is now manifested in the native Africans' surprise attack on Marlow's steamboat. The Africans are depicted as an extension of Nature and minions of her will.

Quote:

*"I looked around, and I don't know why, but I assure you that never, never before, did this land, this river, this jungle, the very arch of this blazing sky, appear to me so hopeless and so dark, so impenetrable to human thought, so pitiless to human weakness." (3.3)*

Thought:

Nature seems to Marlow completely "hopeless" and "dark," completely inaccessible to the human mind, incomprehensible and merciless to human weakness.

Quote:

*"The woods were unmoved, like a mask – heavy, like the closed door of a prison - they looked with their air of hidden knowledge, of patient expectation, of unapproachable silence." (3.4)*

Thought:

The wilderness is compared to a prison, trapping the men inside. It is enclosed, silent, and menacing.

Quote:

*"But the wilderness had found him [Kurtz] out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude - and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating." (3.5)*

Thought:

The wilderness is described as a live, evil thing which is able to sound out men's faults and use them against their owners to drive them mad.

Quote:

*"I noticed that the crowd of savages was vanishing without any perceptible movement of retreat, as if the forest that had ejected these beings so suddenly had drawn them in again as the breath is drawn in a long aspiration." (3.9)*

Thought:

The native Africans are described as merely an extension of the wilderness – a living, breathing wilderness that is drawing its minions back in as it inhales.

Quote:

*"She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul." (3.14)*

Thought:

The warrior woman reflects many of the traits of the wilderness – its savagery, wildness, magnificence, and ominousness. Everyone falls back in respect for her and it seems as if the wilderness itself looks and is reflected back by her image. She is, in effect, the soul of the wilderness.

Quote:

*"Her face had a tragic and fierce aspect of wild sorrow and of dumb pain mingled with the fear of some struggling, half-shaped resolve. She stood looking at us without a stir, and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose." (3.15)*

Thought:

Like the wilderness, this warrior woman is "fierce" but also "dumb" or silent. Her purpose is uncertain and only "half-shaped" as if the wilderness has not yet decided what to do about its invaders.

Quote:

*"She turned away slowly, walked on, following the bank, and passed into the bushes to the left. Once only her eyes gleamed back at us in the dusk of the thickets before she disappeared."*  
(3.16)

Thought:

Like the wilderness, the warrior woman seems content only to show off her power, not to actually harm the pilgrims...yet.

Quote:

*"One of the agents with a picket of a few of our blacks, armed for the purpose, was keeping guard over the ivory; but deep within the forest, red gleams that wavered, that seemed to sink and rise from the ground amongst confused columnar shapes of intense blackness, showed the exact position of the camp where Mr. Kurtz's adorers were keeping their uneasy vigil. The monotonous beating of a big drum filled the air with muffled shocks and a lingering vibration. A steady droning sound of many men chanting each to himself some weird incantation came out from the black, flat wall of the woods as the humming of bees comes out of a hive, and had a strange narcotic effect upon my half-awake senses."* (3.23)

Thought:

The wilderness is painted in imagery of hell. The eerie colors of fiery red and "intense blackness" mirror the fire and darkness of hell. The fact that Kurtz's "adorers" are beating drums and chanting weird incantations makes the incomprehensible ceremony seem necessarily evil and spellbinding to Marlow.

Quote:

*"I tried to break the spell – the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness – that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions. This alone, I was convinced, had driven him out to the edge of the forest, to the bush, towards the gleam of fires, the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations."* (3.29)

Thought:

Marlow feels the spell of the wilderness, the dark magic which drew him to Africa and which, he now knows, also drew Kurtz into the interior. This alone brings Kurtz to his present corruption and gives Marlow a glimpse of what he could become if he stays.

Quote:

*"The long reaches that were like one and the same reach, monotonous bends that were exactly alike, slipped past the steamer with their multitude of secular trees looking patiently after this grimy fragment of another world, the forerunner of change, of conquest, of trade, of massacres, of blessings." (3.38)*

Thought:

The terrain of the river and its banks is monotonous; it all looks the same, giving the impression of a timeless and primitive place.

Quote:

*"We broke down – as I had expected – and had to lie up for repairs at the head of an island. This delay was the first thing that shook Kurtz's confidence." (3.39)*

Thought:

As happened when they were going upriver, Marlow's steamboat breaks down and they must delay to repair it. This useless lapse of time frightens Kurtz, for he senses his impending death. It is for this reason that he entrusts his papers to Marlow.

Quote:

*"It was a moment of triumph for the wilderness, an invading and vengeful rush which, it seemed to me, I would have to keep back alone for the salvation of another soul." (3.51)*

Thought:

Marlow remembers feeling keenly threatened by the wilderness.

Quote:

*"[...] she [the Intended] went on, and the sound of her low voice seemed to have the accompaniment of all the other sounds, full of mystery, desolation, and sorrow, I had ever heard - the ripple of the river, the sighing of the trees swayed by the wind, the murmurs of the crowds, the faint ring of incomprehensible words cried from afar, the whisper of a voice speaking from beyond the threshold of an eternal darkness." (3.61)*

Thought:

Marlow associates the Intended's low voice with sounds of the wilderness.

## Race Quotes

### Quote:

*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 has 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 round 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. (1.6)*

### Thought:

The colonists are described in positive light imagery, as altruistic pioneers sallying forth into the dark uncivilized world to bring salvation and civilization to the ignorant races.

### Quote:

*[Marlow]: "Mind, none of us would feel exactly like this. What saves us is efficiency--the devotion to efficiency. But these chaps were not much account, really. They were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force--nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. 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. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea." (1.13)*

### Thought:

Marlow undermines everything he just said about the nobility and good intentions of the explorers. Instead, he has seen the brutal truth of colonization and knows that the colonizing countries care only about efficiency and profit; they go about their work with "brute force" which is "nothing to boast of...since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others." He condemns the explorers as mere robbers and murderers, men who were going about their business blindly. The only thing that might justify this brutality is one's unwavering belief in an unselfish idea that the ends justify the means.

Quote:

*"I had then, as you remember, just returned to London after a lot of Indian Ocean, Pacific, China Seas - a regular dose of the East - six years or so, and I was loafing about, hindering you fellows in your work and invading your homes, just as though I had got a heavenly mission to civilize you." (1.16)*

Thought:

Marlow makes fun of the colonist's motto – to civilize savages – by comparing it to an idle traveler imposing himself on hosts too generous to make him leave. The implication is that the colonists' arrival with all their rhetoric of civilization is ultimately undesired by the native African inhabitants.

Quote:

*"I got my appointment - of course; and I got it very quick. It appears the Company had received news that one of their captains had been killed in a scuffle with the natives. This was my chance, and it made me the more anxious to go. It was only months and months afterwards, when I made the attempt to recover what was left of the body, that I heard the original quarrel arose from a misunderstanding about some hens. Yes, two black hens. Fresleven – that was the fellow's name, a Dane – thought himself wronged somehow in the bargain so he went ashore and started to hammer the chief of the village with a stick. Oh, it didn't surprise me in the least to hear this, and at the same time to be told that Fresleven was the gentlest, quietest creature that ever walked on two legs. No doubt he was; but he had been a couple of years already out there engaged in the noble cause, you know, and he probably felt the need at last of asserting his self-respect in some way. Therefore he whacked the old nigger mercilessly, while a big crowd of his people watched him, thunderstruck, till some man, - I was told the chief's son, - in desperation at hearing the old chap yell, made a tentative jab with a spear at the white man – and of course it went quite easy between the shoulder-blades. Then the whole population cleared into the forest expecting all kinds of calamities to happen, while, on the other hand, the steamer Fresleven commanded left also in a bad panic, in charge of the engineer, I believe. Afterwards, nobody seemed to trouble much about Fresleven's remains, till I got out and stepped into his shoes. I couldn't let it rest, though; but when an opportunity offered at last to meet my predecessor, the grass growing through his ribs was tall enough to*

*hide his bones. They were all there. The supernatural being had not been touched after he fell. And the village was deserted, the huts gaped black, rotting, all askew within the fallen enclosures. A calamity had come to it, sure enough. The people had vanished. Mad terror had scattered them, men, women, and children, through the bush, and they had never returned. What became of the hens I don't know either. I should think the cause of progress got them, anyhow." (1.21)*

Thought:

Marlow's recounting of Fresleven's death shows the brutality and resultant atrocity forced on the Africans. Fresleven wants to assert his self-respect over the native Africans and does so violently. This provokes the Africans to retaliate in defense of their threatened and demeaned chief. However, the Africans live in such fear of their conquerors that they scatter when Fresleven dies, thinking they have just killed a god and will be duly punished.

Quote:

*"Good heavens! and I was going to take charge of a twopenny-half-penny river-steamboat with a penny whistle attached! It appeared, however, I was also one of the Workers, with a capital – you know. 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 [Marlow's aunt], 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." (1.27)*

Thought:

Marlow finds that his aunt expects him to be something of a missionary – a man on the way to Africa to teach the native Africans – but all this talk makes Marlow uncomfortable. He knows that he is not traveling for altruistic ends.

Quote:

*"It was like a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares." (1.31)*

Thought:

The fact that Marlow refers to his journey as a "pilgrimage" implies that his mission is one so pure as to be blessed by God. In reality, his motivation is far less noble, but he deludes himself into this comforting lie.

Quote:

*[On the black slaves at the first station]: "[...] 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 over the sea. All their meager breasts panted together, the violently dilated nostrils quivered, the eyes stared stonily up-hill. They passed me within six inches, without a glance, with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages." (1.36)*

Thought:

The slaves, chained together and indifferent to their surroundings, know nothing but their labor. This passage underscores the absurdity of colonization for Marlow; in his view, such beings could hardly be considered dangerous enemies.

Quote:

*"[...] 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." (1.36)*

Thought:

Conrad mocks the idea of imperialism as a humane process by contrasting adjectives like "exalted," "high," and "just" with the brutal reality of the chained slaves. We know, in truth, that the Company is merely exploiting cheap black labor. There is nothing high or just about it.

Quote:

*"They [the slaves] were dying slowly – it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, - nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. These moribund shapes were free as air – and nearly as thin. I began to distinguish the gleam of eyes under the trees. Then, glancing down, I saw a face bear my hand. The black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree, and slowly the eyelids rose and the sunken eyes looked up at me, enormous and vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs, which died out slowly. 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.*

*Near the same tree two more bundles of acute angles sat with their legs drawn up. One, with his chin propped on his knees, stared at nothing, in an intolerable and appalling manner, his brother phantom rested its forehead, as if overcome with a great weariness; and all about others were scattered in every pose of contorted collapse, as in some picture of a massacre of a pestilence. While I stood horror-struck, one of these creatures rose to his hands and knees, and went off on all-fours towards the river to drink. He lapped out of his hand, then sat up in the sunlight, crossing his shins in front of him, and after a time let his woolly head fall on his breastbone." (1.39-41)*

Thought:

Here we see the true consequences of imperialism – mistreated and overworked slaves who are left to die on their own. They are given no food, care, or medicine, and are left to die outdoors. They are treated inhumanely, and because of this, Marlow sees them as less-than-human.

Quote:

*[The accountant]: "'What a frightful row,' he said. He crossed the room gently to look at the sick man, and returning, said to me, 'he does not hear. 'What! Dead?' I asked, startled. 'No, not yet,' he answered, with great composure. Then, alluding with a toss of the head to the tumult in the station-yard, 'When one has got to make correct entries, one comes to hate those savages – hate them to death.'" (1.47)*

Thought:

The death of the slaves means nothing to the accountant. He has become insensitive to the loss of human life.

Quote:

*[After the shed fire]: "'What a row the brute makes!' said the indefatigable man with the moustaches, appearing near us. 'Serve him right. Transgression – punishment – bang! Pitiless, pitiless. That's the only way. This will prevent all conflagrations for the future. I was just telling the manager...'" (1.60)*

Thought:

The so-called pilgrims' goodness comes into question here as they pitilessly beat the black man blamed for the fire. They have no compassion for his suffering; his whimpers are registered only as a "row" made by "the brute." They treat the man like an animal, as if he will only learn his lesson from repeated beatings.

Quote:

*"More than once she [the steamboat] had to wade for it, with twenty cannibals splashing around and pushing. We had enlisted some of these chaps on the way for a crew. Fine fellows – cannibals – in their place. They were men one could work with, and I am grateful to them. And, after all, they did not eat each other before my face: they had brought along a provision of hippo-meat which went rotten, and made the mystery of the wilderness stink in my nostrils. Phoo! I can sniff it now." (2.7)*

Thought:

Marlow treats the cannibals well, commenting on their hard work which stands in contrast to the activities of the lazy pilgrims. However, Marlow has reservations about the cannibals. He calls them "fine fellows" but only if they are "in their place." In other words, they are workers only and had best not forget that. They are also forced to give up their habit of cannibalism to put their employers at ease. Thus, native Africans lose a great deal of their culture and dignity when put under the chains of imperialism.

Quote:

*"It was unearthly, and the men were – No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it – this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled, and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yours – the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to your self that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you – you so remote from the night of first ages – could comprehend." (2.8)*

Thought:

Marlow begins to feel the faintest trace of kinship with the native Africans, those wild men who "howled, and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces." The horrible and alienating nature of the wilderness forces Marlow to see humanity even in those very different from himself. He even claims he is beginning to understand the meaning of the Africans' screams. At this point, Marlow is turning away from the traditional views of imperialists, who do not see the conquered native Africans as human.

Quote:

*"And between whiles I had to look after the savage who was fireman. He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking*

*on his hind-legs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap. He squinted at the steam-gauge and at the water-gauge with an evident effort of intrepidity – and he had filed teeth too, the poor devil, and the wool of his pate shaved into queer patterns, and three ornamental scars on each of his cheeks. He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrall to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge. He was useful because he had been instructed; and what he knew was this – that should the water in that transparent thing disappear, the evil spirit inside the boiler would get angry through the greatness of his thirst, and take a terrible vengeance. So he sweated and fired up and watched the glass fearfully (with an impromptu charm, made of rags, tied to his arm, and a piece of polished bone, as big as a watch stuck flatways through his lower lip), while the wooded banks slipped past us slowly...." (2.8)*

Thought:

This passage throws some doubt on what Marlow just said about savages being human. He still does not consider the native Africans his equal. He sees them instead as animals, calling this fireman "a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind-legs." Because the man has no knowledge of engineering or hydraulics, the white men train him on his lower level. By telling him there is an evil spirit who will take revenge if the boiler ever becomes empty, they scare him into keeping it full (and keeping the steamboat running). Thus, Marlow does not consider him enough of a man to try to make him understand the science behind the boiler.

Quote:

*[On the cannibals]: "Why in the name of all the gnawing devils of hunger they didn't go for us – they were thirty to five – and have a good tuck-in for once, amazes me now when I think of it. They were big powerful men, with not much capacity to weigh the consequences, with courage, with strength, even yet, though their skins were no longer glossy and their muscles no longer hard. And I saw that something restraining, one of those human secrets that baffle probability, had come into play there. I looked at them with a swift quickening of interest – not because it occurred to me I might be eaten by them before very long, though I own to you that just then I perceived – in a new light, as it were – how unwholesome the pilgrims looked... Yes; I looked at them as you would on any human being, with a curiosity of their impulses, motives, capacities, weaknesses, when brought to the test of an inexorable physical necessity. Restraint! What possible restraint? Was it superstition, disgust, patience, fear – or some kind of primitive honour? No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out, disgust simply does not exist where hunger is; and as to superstition, beliefs, and what you may call principles, they are less than chaff in a breeze... Restraint! I would just as soon have expected restraint from a hyena prowling amongst the corpses of a battlefield. But there was the fact facing me..." (2.14)*

Thought:

Marlow discovers what to him is an unexpected morality in the cannibals. Despite being desperately hungry, they do not break their word to the pilgrims. They show a surprising amount of restraint, even when constantly tempted by human flesh. Marlow admires them for their restraint, which certain (white) men like Kurtz do not possess.

Quote:

*"He [Kurtz] began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, 'must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings - we approach them with the might of a deity,' and so on, and so on. 'By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded,' etc., etc. From that point he soared and took me with him. The peroration was magnificent, though difficult to remember, you know. It gave me the notion of an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence. It made me tingle with enthusiasm." (2.29)*

Thought:

Kurtz honestly believes, or used to believe, in the goodness of imperialism. He believed that the white man could bring goodness and enlightenment to the black Africans. But to Kurtz, this is only possible if the white man plays the part of a god. Kurtz envisions a utopia not of equality between the two races, but of a peaceful and benevolent reign of the white man over the black. Marlow, hypnotized by Kurtz's eloquence, becomes excited at this prospect.

Quote:

*"I had no idea of the conditions, he [the harlequin] said: these heads were the heads of rebels. I shocked him excessively by laughing. Rebels! What would be the next definition I was to hear? There had been enemies, criminals, workers – and these were rebels. Those rebellious heads looked very subdued to me on their sticks." (3.6)*

Thought:

Marlow shows surprising sympathy for the native Africans, whom he sees now have borne terrible misnomers by the Europeans. The white men have called them "enemies, criminals, workers" and now "rebels" when the black Africans have merited no such titles. They have not been allowed enough power or freedom of choice to be justifiably called such things. Marlow hints this to the harlequin by commenting on how "subdued" the so-called "rebellious heads" look "on their sticks."

Quote:

*"He [the harlequin] suspected there was an active ill-will towards him on the part of these white men that –." "You are right," I said, remembering a certain conversation I had overheard. "The*

*manager thinks you ought to be hanged."* (3.21)

Thought:

The manager's racism extends towards Russians as well. He wants to kill the harlequin simply because he is different from the others.

Quote:

*[When leaving the Inner Station with Kurtz]: "In front of the first rank, along the river, three men, plastered with bright red earth from head to foot, strutted to and fro restlessly. When we came abreast again, they faced the river, stamped their feet, nodded their horned heads, swayed their scarlet bodies; they shook towards the fierce river-demon a bunch of black feathers, a mangy skin with a pendant tail – something that looked like a dried gourd; they shouted periodically together strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language; and the deep murmurs of the crowd, interrupted suddenly, were like the responses of some satanic litany."* (3.30)

Thought:

White men view the native Africans as "savages" in their paint and armed with their strange weapons. Their language is wholly alien to the Europeans and thus they consider it evil – a "satanic litany."

## Identity Quotes

### Quote:

*America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, 'When I grow up I will go there.'...But there was one yet - the biggest, the most blank, so to speak - that I had a hankering after." (1.17)*

### Thought:

Marlow has a fascination for blank spaces. He has the desire to fill them with all his discoveries. And so he is drawn to the "most blank" of them all – Africa.

### Quote:

*"A door opened, a white-haired secretarial head, but wearing a compassionate expression, appeared, and a skinny forefinger beckoned me into the sanctuary. Its light was dim, and a heavy writing-desk squatted in the middle. From behind that structure came out an impression of pale plumpness in a frock-coat. The great man himself. He was five feet six, I should judge, and had his grip on the handle-end of ever so many millions." (1.23)*

### Thought:

The Dutch head of the Company is never described as a whole human being. Instead, we see him only in parts – a head, a forefinger – and when we finally see him in person, he is described only as "an impression" like a ghost of a man. In the last sentence here, Conrad suggests that this man's greed – his "grip on the handle-end of ever so many millions" – has dehumanized him.

### Quote:

*"Near the same tree two more bundles of acute angles sat with their legs drawn up. One, with his chin propped on his knees, stared at nothing, in an intolerable and appalling manner: his brother phantom rested its forehead, as if overcome with a great weariness; and all about others were scattered in every pose of contorted collapse, as in some picture of a massacre or a pestilence. While I stood horror-struck, one of these creatures rose to his hands and knees, and went off on all-fours towards the river to drink. He lapped out of his hand, then sat up in the sunlight, crossing his shins in front of him, and after a time let his woolly head fall on his breastbone." (1.41)*

### Thought:

Marlow, like most of the white men, does not see the black Africans as complete human beings. His language here proves that. He describes the slaves as objects, ghosts, or through animal imagery: "acute angles," "phantom," "creature," "woolly head."

Quote:

*[Marlow on the manager]: "He inspired uneasiness. That was it! Uneasiness. Not a definite mistrust – just uneasiness – nothing more. You have no idea how effective such a ... a ... faculty can be. He had no genius for organizing, for initiative, or for order even. That was evident in such things as the deplorable state of the station. He had no learning, and no intelligence. His position had come to him – why? Perhaps because he was never ill...He had served three terms of three years out there...Because triumphant health in the general rout of constitutions is a kind of power in itself. When he went home on leave he rioted on a large scale – pompously. Jack ashore – with a difference – in externals only. This one could gather from his causal talk. He originated nothing, he could keep the routine going – that's all. But he was great. He was great by this little thing that it was impossible to tell what could control such a man. He never gave that secret away. Perhaps there was nothing within him. Such a suspicion made one pause – for out there there were no external checks. Once when various tropical diseases had laid low almost every "agent" in the station, he was heard to say, "Men who come out here should have no entrails." He sealed the utterance with that smile of his, as though it had been a door opening into a darkness he had in his keeping. You fancied you had seen things – but the seal was on." (1.52)*

Thought:

The manager is basically as empty of distinction as a human being can be. He has no genius, no initiative, and no talent for organizing things. Even more disturbing, he seems to have no insides – nothing for diseases to infect. This is the only way he keeps his job – his amazing good health has allowed him to never miss a day of work. Marlow reminds us that just how hollow the manager is by finishing the paragraph with another mention of the seal.

Quote:

*[Marlow on the brickmaker]: "I let him run on, this papier-mâché Mephistopheles, and it seemed to me that if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him, and would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt, maybe." (1.61)*

Thought:

Not only do we know that the brickmaker's words are empty, but Marlow describes him as a "papier-mâché" figure, implying that he is hollow inside.

Quote:

*"I had heard Mr. Kurtz was in there. I had heard enough about it, too – God knows! Yet somehow it didn't bring any image with it - no more than if I had been told an angel or a fiend was in there. I believed it in the same way one of you might believe there are inhabitants in the planet Mars." (1.61)*

Thought:

To Marlow, the name of Kurtz does not bring with it any image or face. He has not conjured up a fictional face to associate with the man, so the name is a visually empty one.

Quote:

*"Not the faintest sound of any kind could be heard. You looked on amazed, and began to suspect yourself of being deaf – then the night came suddenly, and struck you blind as well. About three in the morning some large fish leaped, and the loud splash made me jump as though a gun had been fired. When the sun rose there was a white fog, very warm and clammy, and more blinding than the night. It did not shift or drive; it was just there, standing all around you like something solid." (2.13)*

Thought:

The interior deprives men of their senses, stokes their fear, and drives them slowly into madness. Here, the eerie stillness of the wilderness and the darkness of night render the men both deaf and blind. Any noise – even the mundane splashing of leaping fish – startles them and makes them fear immediately for their lives. When daylight comes, the fog still blinds them.

Quote:

*"It takes a man all his inborn strength to fight hunger properly. It's really easier to face bereavement, dishonour, and the perdition of one's soul - than this kind of prolonged hunger. Sad, but true. And these chaps [the cannibals], too, had no earthly reason for any kind of scruple." (2.14)*

Thought:

This is typical of how Europeans of the time might have viewed the native Africans. They think that they had "no earthly reason for any kind of scruple," never taking into account that perhaps their scruples differ quite drastically from any Western notions of good and evil.

Quote:

*"The lustre of inquiring glance faded swiftly into vacant glassiness." (2.23)*

Thought:

Marlow associates death with emptiness since he describes the dead foreman's eyes as "vacant" as opposed to a once living "luster."

Quote:

*"Mind, I am not trying to excuse or even explain - I am trying to account to myself for – for – Mr. Kurtz – for the shade of Mr. Kurtz. This initiated wraith from the back of Nowhere honoured me with its amazing confidence before it vanished altogether." (2.29)*

Thought:

Kurtz is described not as a whole human being, but as a "shade" or "wraith," something insubstantial that is literally a ghost of its former self and on the verge of vanishing into nothingness.

Quote:

*"And the lofty frontal bone of Mr. Kurtz! They say the hair goes on growing sometimes, but this – ah – specimen, was impressively bald. The wilderness had patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a ball – an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and – lo! – he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation." (2.29)*

Thought:

The wilderness deprives Kurtz of his hair, demonstrating another one of its dehumanizing powers. Like his hair, Kurtz's flesh has been "consumed" and his soul has been "sealed" – cut off from the rest of humanity. Mr. Kurtz has lost both physical and spiritual aspects of a human being; he is no longer whole.

Quote:

*"[...] how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammelled feet may take him into the way of solitude – utter solitude without a policeman – by the way of silence – utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbour can be heard by the whispering of public opinion?" (2.29)*

Thought:

In the interior, men are deprived of the company of fellow men and the isolation warps one's mind. The silence around them and the lack of others' opinions render them unable to judge

things soundly.

Quote:

*"Glamour urged him on, glamour kept him unscathed. He surely wanted nothing from the wilderness but space to breathe in and to push on through. His need was to exist, and to move onwards at the greatest possible risk, and with a maximum of privation. If the absolutely pure, uncalculating, unpractical spirit of adventure had ever ruled a human being, it ruled this bepatched youth. I almost envied him the possession of this modest and clear flame. It seemed to have consumed all thought of self so completely, that even while he was talking to you, you forgot that it was he – the man before your eyes – who had gone through these things." (3.1)*

Thought:

The harlequin is depicted as a shell of a man driven on only by "glamour" or the "pure...spirit of adventure."

Quote:

*"But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude – and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core [...]." (3.5)*

Thought:

The evil wilderness drains Kurtz of his heart and his humanity, leaving him "hollow at the core."

Quote:

*"I was struck by the fire of his eyes and the composed languor of his expression. It was not so much the exhaustion of disease. He did not seem in pain. This shadow looked satiated and calm, as though for the moment it had had its fill of all the emotions." (3.10)*

Thought:

Kurtz is not a whole human being anymore. He is a "shadow" that cannot handle human emotion at all times. Because he is no longer fully human, Kurtz does not feel the pain of his disease as his body wastes away; he seems calm in a wholly inhuman way.

Quote:

*"And from right to left along the lighted shore moved a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman." (3.13)*

Thought:

The fact that this woman is described as an "apparition" suggests that Marlow does not consider women, especially this native African one, to be as fully human or as capable as men.

Quote:

*"He [Kurtz] rose, unsteady, long, pale, indistinct, like a vapour exhaled by the earth, and swayed slightly, misty and silent before me [...]." (3.27)*

Thought:

Kurtz is not a whole man; he is described only as a "vapour," "misty" and insubstantial before the wholly human form of Marlow.

Quote:

*"He [the manager] leaned back, serene, with that peculiar smile of his sealing the unexpressed depths of his meanness." (3.44)*

Thought:

The manager is described with emptiness imagery again; his hollow depths of "meanness" are sealed uselessly by his vacant smile upon learning about Kurtz's death. As expected, he shows no real emotion at the news.

Quote:

*"I have wrestled with death. It is the most unexciting contest you can imagine. It takes place in an impalpable greyness, with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, without spectators, without clamour, without glory, without the great desire of victory, without the great fear of defeat, in a sickly atmosphere of tepid skepticism, without much belief in your own right, and still less in that of your adversary." (3.48)*

Thought:

The dominant feature of Marlow's struggle with death is its emptiness. It takes place without anything underneath or around it, without the possibility of human contact, without noise or glory, without the desire to win or fear of losing. Most tragically, it is fought without conviction in one's own beliefs. It is as empty and meaningless a struggle as can be.

Quote:

*"I was within a hair's breadth of the last opportunity for pronouncement, and I found with humiliation that probably I would have nothing to say. This is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it. [...] True, he had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot. And perhaps in this is the whole difference; perhaps all the wisdom, and all truth, and all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible." (3.48)*

Thought:

Marlow believes that ultimately, he is as empty as the rest of them, and that it was really Kurtz who held on to something real. Kurtz had something to say, something of importance and meaning, while he and the rest of the crew spoke meaninglessly. Marlow believes that the only way to not completely lose one's humanity in the interior is to "step over the edge." Only in that moment of seeing the truth can one judge it with any measure of certainty. Otherwise, life is meaningless.

Quote:

*"'No!' she [the Intended] cried. 'It is impossible that all this should be lost — that such a life should be sacrificed to leave nothing — but sorrow. You know what vast plans he had. I knew of them, too - I could not perhaps understand - but others knew of them. Something must remain. His words, at least, have not died.'" (3.68)*

Thought:

The Intended rebels at the thought of Kurtz's death leaving only emptiness behind. She loathes the thought of his utter absence from the world.

Quote:

*"I shall see this eloquent phantom [Kurtz] as long as I live, and I shall see her (the Intended), too, a tragic and familiar Shade, resembling in this gesture another one (the warrior woman), tragic also..." (3.73)*

Thought:

Marlow describes Kurtz, the Intended, and the warrior woman all as incomplete humans, as mere phantoms or shades. The Intended lacks the skepticism and jadedness necessary to understand Kurtz fully.



## Power Quotes

### Quote:

*"I am sorry to own I began to worry them. This was already a fresh departure for me. I was not used to get things that way, you know. I always went my own road and on my own legs where I had a mind to go. I wouldn't have believed it of myself; but, then – you see – I felt somehow I must get there by hook or by crook. So I worried them. The men said 'My dear fellow,' and did nothing. Then – would you believe it? – I tried the women. I, Charlie Marlow, set the women to work – to get a job. Heavens! Well, you see, the notion drove me. I had an aunt, a dear enthusiastic soul. She wrote: 'It will be delightful. I am ready to do anything, anything for you. It is a glorious idea. I know the wife of a very high personage in the Administration, and also a man who has lots of influence with,' etc. She was determined to make no end of fuss to get me appointed skipper of a river steamboat, if such was my fancy." (1.20)*

### Thought:

Marlow's desire to travel to Africa makes him seem greedy. He bothers his family and friends with his requests and eventually is rewarded by an aunt with powerful connections.

### Quote:

*"I got my appointment – of course; and I got it very quick. It appears the Company had received news that one of their captains had been killed in a scuffle with the natives. This was my chance, and it made me the more anxious to go [...] through this glorious affair I got my appointment, before I had fairly begun to hope for it." (1.21)*

### Thought:

Marlow shows a heartless greed by rejoicing in another man's death simply because it frees up a position for him to carry out his dream. It is not until months later that he even bothers to find out the dead man's name or to try to pay respects to his passing.

### Quote:

*"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." (1.22)*

### Thought:

It is obvious that the Company values profits over everything else. Its greed has already made its offices "the biggest thing in town" and has swelled the heads of its employees so that they

are "full of it." They have great plans for the future, envisioning themselves colonizing overseas and building a huge trading empire to make further profits.

Quote:

*"When near the buildings I met 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." (1.42)*

Thought:

Attire is the accountant's way of showing his power and superiority over the black slaves that surround him. It is his wealth and freedom – two things denied to the slaves – that allow him such extravagance.

Quote:

*"Strings of dusty niggers with splay feet arrived and departed; a stream of manufactured goods, rubbishy cottons, beads, and brass-wire set into the depths of darkness, and in return came a precious trickle of ivory." (1.44)*

Thought:

Everyone cares only for the ivory; almost anything will be given up in exchange for it – manufactured goods like cotton, beads, brass-wire, and even human slaves.

Quote:

*"When annoyed at meal-times by the constant quarrels of the white men about precedence, he ordered an immense round table to be made, for which a special house had to be built. This was the station's mess-room. Where he sat was the first place – the rest were nowhere. One felt this to be his unalterable conviction." (1.52)*

Thought:

The manager shows his power by placing himself always in the first spot at the round table. Curiously, he uses the round table – a device used to make everyone equal during a debate – as a tool for confusion. Now, no man knows where he stands in terms of rank, only that the manager is the head. This power play keeps the manager on top and his underlings decidedly beneath him.

Quote:

*[At the Central Station]: "The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it. A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse. By Jove!" (1.53)*

Thought:

Everyone at the Central Station wants to get their hands on ivory so badly that the very word is spoken like a prayer (to replace these so-called "pilgrims" lost god). Indeed more images of worshipping ivory like a god comes later in the novel. And Marlow remarks that this greed is so overwhelming and blind that it is "imbecile." The whole "affair" feels as dirty to him as the stench of a corpse.

Quote:

*"He alluded constantly to Europe, to the people I was supposed to know there - putting leading questions as to my acquaintances in the sepulchral city, and so on. His little eyes glittered like mica discs – with curiosity – though he tried to keep up a bit of superciliousness." (1.57)*

Thought:

The brickmaker has no morals when it comes to his ambition. He tries to pump information out of Marlow without telling him why, though his questions are obvious enough that Marlow can divine what he is doing.

Quote:

*[The brickmaker]: "The same people who sent him [Kurtz] specially also recommended you. Oh, don't say no. I've my own eyes to trust.' Light dawned upon me. My dear aunt's influential acquaintances were producing an unexpected effect upon that young man." (1.59)*

Thought:

Here, we find out that the brickmaker is trying to get in the good graces of the powers that be (whom Marlow's aunt knows). He wants their approval so he can realize his ambitions. However, we also find out that Kurtz was recommended by the same people as Marlow, the same sources of power. Thus begins a multitude of parallels between Marlow and Kurtz.

Quote:

*"He, don't you see, had been planning to be assistant-manager by and by under the present man, and I could see that the coming of that Kurtz had upset them both not a little." (1.61)*

Thought:

The brickmaker reveals his desire to become the assistant-manager and tells that Kurtz has put a kink in his plans. It is implied that he wants Marlow's help or the help of his powerful recommenders to help him overcome this problem.

Quote:

*"'Yes,' answered the manager; 'he sent his assistant down the river with a note to me in these terms: 'Clear this poor devil out of the country, and don't bother sending more of that sort. I had rather be alone than have the kind of men you can dispose of with me.'" (2.1)*

Thought:

Kurtz demonstrates his formidable power and courage when he ousts a man (whom we can assume is too cowardly to bear the horrors of the interior) and authoritatively tells the Company not to send him any more "of that sort." Kurtz seems to revel in his superiority over less courageous men.

Quote:

*"Besides that, they had given them every week three pieces of brass wire, each about nine inches long; and the theory was they were to buy their provisions with that currency in riverside villages. You can see how that worked. There were either no villages, or the people were hostile, or the director, who like the rest of us fed out of tins, with an occasional old he-goat thrown in, didn't want to stop the steamer for some more or less recondite reason. So, unless they swallowed the wire itself, or made loops of it to snare the fishes with, I don't see what good their extravagant salary could be to them. I must say it was paid with a regularity worthy of a large and honourable trading company." (2.14)*

Thought:

Because the Company is so greedy and the pilgrims see greed as the only true motivation to do anything, they impose that viewpoint on the native Africans. Marlow makes fun of this attitude in the last sentence. When the pilgrims cannot offer suitable food to the Africans, they offer payment, though in the form of rather useless brass wire. They do not care that brass wire is not edible, nor that the steamboat doesn't pass any villages where the Africans can step off and barter it for food. Thus, it is due to the pilgrims' greed and intolerance (they threw away the cannibals' supply of hippo meat) that the cannibals are now so eager for human flesh.

Quote:

*"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." (2.29)*

Thought:

Kurtz's sense of ownership has been warped by his status as a "god" amongst the native Africans. He thinks everything, including the wilderness he inhabits, belongs to him. His sense of himself has expanded to include everything around him, in sharp contrast to the other men's (i.e., Marlow's crew's) sense of getting smaller in deference to the overwhelmingly huge wilderness.

Quote:

*"He [Kurtz] won't be forgotten. Whatever he was, he was not common. He had the power to charm or frighten rudimentary souls into an aggravated witch-dance in his honour; he could also fill the small souls of the pilgrims with bitter misgivings: he had one devoted friend at least, and he had conquered one soul in the world that was neither rudimentary nor tainted with self-seeking. No; I can't forget him, though I am not prepared to affirm the fellow was exactly worth the life we lost in getting to him." (2.29)*

Thought:

Marlow describes Kurtz's ability to influence as the quality that ensures him a place in history. He admires Kurtz's power, but is not blindly attracted to it as the harlequin is. Marlow seems to know, at some level, that Kurtz is corrupt.

Quote:

*"'Kurtz got the tribe to follow him, did he?' I suggested. He fidgeted a little. 'They adored him,' he said. The tone of these words was so extraordinary that I looked at him searchingly. It was curious to see his mingled eagerness and reluctance to speak of Kurtz. The man filled his life, occupied his thoughts, swayed his emotions. 'What can you expect?' he burst out; 'he came to them with thunder and lightning, you know – and they had never seen anything like it – and very terrible. He could be very terrible.'" (3.4)*

Thought:

So great is Kurtz's power to influence people that he gets the native Africans to join with him in stealing the ivory from their fellow tribes. It is also obvious that Kurtz holds great sway over the harlequin's mind, who is brainwashed into worshipping Kurtz with great admiration and fear.

Quote:

*"I am not disclosing any trade secrets. In fact, the manager said afterwards that Mr. Kurtz's methods had ruined the district. I have no opinion on that point, but I want you clearly to understand that there was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there." (3.5)*

Thought:

Marlow suddenly becomes concerned with the profits of the Company. He looks at the heads on the poles in a purely mercenary light. Like the manager, he disagrees with Kurtz's judgment here, saying that such an action did not benefit him in terms of money. This may be the only way that Marlow can deal with such an atrocity.

Quote:

*"They [the heads] only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him - some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence." (3.5)*

Thought:

Marlow comments on Kurtz's lust and on his inability to control his greed. This "lack of restraint" ultimately brings about Kurtz's downfall.

Quote:

*"A voice! a voice! It was grave, profound, vibrating, while the man did not seem capable of a whisper. However, he had enough strength in him – factitious no doubt – to very nearly make an end of us, as you shall hear directly." (3.11)*

Thought:

Despite Kurtz's weak appearance, he still has enough power in him to almost do away with Marlow and his crew.

Quote:

*"At this moment I heard Kurtz's deep voice behind the curtain: 'Save me! – save the ivory, you mean. Don't tell me. Save me!'" (3.18)*

Thought:

Kurtz is so debauched by greed that he cannot help but impose such a greedy viewpoint on others. He believes that the manager does not actually want to save *him*, but to save the *ivory* in order to look good to the Company. He is, of course, correct.

Quote:

[Kurtz]: "'Sick! Sick! Not so sick as you would like to believe. Never mind. I'll carry my ideas out yet – I will return. I'll show you what can be done. You with your little peddling notions - you are interfering with me. I will return.'" (3.18)

Thought:

Kurtz is confident in his power and fully expects to defeat the manager. He considers not only that the manager himself is less powerful than he, but that the manager's ideas are merely "little peddling notions" beside his own great ambitions.

Quote:

*"A clean-shaved man, with an official manner and wearing gold-rimmed spectacles, called on me one day and made inquiries, at first circuitous, afterwards suavely pressing, about what he was pleased to denominate certain 'documents.' I was not surprised, because I had had two rows with the manager on the subject out there. I had refused to give up the smallest scrap out of that package, and I took the same attitude with the spectacled man. He became darkly menacing at last, and with much heat argued that the Company had the right to every bit of information about its 'territories.' And said he, 'Mr. Kurtz's knowledge of unexplored regions must have been necessarily extensive and peculiar - owing to his great abilities and to the deplorable circumstances in which he had been placed: therefore - ' I assured him Mr. Kurtz's knowledge, however extensive, did not bear upon the problems of commerce or administration. He invoked then the name of science. 'It would be an incalculable loss if,' etc., etc. I offered him the report on the 'Suppression of Savage Customs,' with the postscriptum torn off. He took it up eagerly, but ended by sniffing at it with an air of contempt. 'This is not what we had a right to expect,' he remarked. 'Expect nothing else,' I said. 'There are only private letters.' He withdrew upon some threat of legal proceedings [...]."* (3.49)

Thought:

The Company's avid greed leads them to claim possession of Kurtz's documents is rather laughable. The clean-shaven and gold-rimmed bespectacled man uses several different approaches to get the papers: first trying polite persuasion, then threatening Marlow, then invoking the Company's devotion to science which Kurtz's papers would be invaluable in assisting, and finally threatening legal action if Marlow does not hand the papers over. It is obvious the Company wants the papers purely out of the greedy desire to increase profits.

## Women and Femininity Quotes

### Quote:

*"Then – would you believe it? – I tried the women. I, Charlie Marlow, set the women to work – to get a job. Heavens! Well, you see, the notion drove me. I had an aunt, a dear enthusiastic soul. She wrote: 'It will be delightful. I am ready to do anything, anything for you. It is a glorious idea. I know the wife of a very high personage in the Administration, and also a man who has lots of influence with,' etc. She was determined to make no end of fuss to get me appointed skipper of a river steamboat, if such was my fancy." (1.20)*

### Thought:

Marlow's aunt is one of the few women with power, but only because she knows powerful men.

### Quote:

*"It's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there has never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset. Some confounded fact we men have been living contentedly with ever since the day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over." (1.28)*

### Thought:

Marlow thinks that women are naïve and idealistic, believing in fantastic and utopian worlds that would never work in the reality he knows. Though he scorns them for their dreaming, he also admires the purity of their hopes and dreams.

### Quote:

*"Girl! What? Did I mention a girl? Oh, she is out of it - completely. They - the women, I mean - are out of it - should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse." (2.29)*

### Thought:

At the first mention of the Intended, Marlow reverts back to his opinion of women as completely out of touch with reality. However, he finds their fantastic visions of world peace so touching and beautiful that he does not want to disillusion them with the ugly truth. Instead, he claims that men should help keep women dreaming their beautiful dreams.

Quote:

*"And from right to left along the lighted shore moved a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman." (3.13)*

Thought:

The fact that the woman is described as an "apparition" suggests that Marlow does not consider women, especially this native African woman, as fully human or as capable as men.

Quote:

*"She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high; her hair was done in the shape of a helmet; she had brass leggings to the knee, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, a crimson spot on her tawny cheek, innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck; bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch-men, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step." (3.14)*

Thought:

This seductive native African woman has the air of a warrior. She walks regally and without fear, her hair is "done in the shape of a helmet," and she wears protective brass coverings on her limbs.

Quote:

*"She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high; her hair was done in the shape of a helmet; she had brass leggings to the knee, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, a crimson spot on her tawny cheek, innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck; bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch-men, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step. She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her." (3.14)*

Thought:

In another interpretation, Marlow describes this warrior woman's magnificent brass ornaments only to put a price on her. In the last sentence here, she is valued at "several elephant tusks." This dehumanizes her and renders her an object to be bought at the market with ivory.

Quote:

*"She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul." (3.14)*

Thought:

The warrior woman reflects many of the traits of the wilderness – its savagery, wildness, magnificence, and ominousness. Everyone falls back in respect for her and it seems as if the wilderness itself looks and is reflected back by her image. She is, in effect, the soul of the wilderness.

Quote:

*"Her face had a tragic and fierce aspect of wild sorrow and of dumb pain mingled with the fear of some struggling, half-shaped resolve. She stood looking at us without a stir, and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose." (3.15)*

Thought:

Like the wilderness, this warrior woman is "fierce" but also "dumb" or silent. Her purpose is uncertain and only "half-shaped," as if the wilderness has not yet decided what to do about its invaders. Read in another light, however, this "wild sorrow" and "dumb pain" may have something to do with her affection for Kurtz and her worry over him now that the white men have arrived.

Quote:

*"Suddenly she opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid above her head, as though in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky, and at the same time the swift shadows darted out on the earth, swept around on the river, gathering the steamer into a shadowy embrace. A formidable silence hung over the scene." (3.15)*

Thought:

Here, the warrior woman is an embodiment of lust, an "uncontrollable desire." Her movements also command the native Africans, who dart out seemingly at her command to surround the threatening steamboat. Again, she seems like an extension of the wilderness. But, read in another light, the woman is steeped in sexual imagery. Notice words like "desire" and "embrace." Conrad depicts her sexuality as dangerous as well as seductive.

Quote:

*"She turned away slowly, walked on, following the bank, and passed into the bushes to the left. Once only her eyes gleamed back at us in the dusk of the thickets before she disappeared."*  
(3.16)

Thought:

Like the wilderness, the warrior woman seems content only to show off her power, not to actually harm the pilgrims...yet.

Quote:

*"'If she had offered to come aboard I really think I would have tried to shoot her,' said the man of patches, nervously. 'I have been risking my life every day for the last fortnight to keep her out of the house.'" (3.17)*

Thought:

The harlequin feels threatened by the warrior woman, so much so that he works to keep her away from Kurtz.

Quote:

*"There was an eddy in the mass of human bodies, and the woman with helmeted head and tawny cheeks rushed out to the very brink of the stream. She put out her hands, shouted something, and all that wild mob took up the shout in a roaring chorus of articulated, rapid, breathless utterance."* (3.31)

Thought:

The warrior woman represents all the native Africans; when she speaks, she speaks for everyone.

Quote:

*"She struck me as beautiful – I mean she had a beautiful expression. I know that the sunlight can be made to lie, too, yet one felt that no manipulation of light and pose could have conveyed the delicate shade of truthfulness upon those features. She seemed ready to listen without mental reservation, without suspicion, without a thought for herself."* (3.50)

Thought:

Marlow is attracted to Kurtz's Intended not only because of her feminine beauty, but for her seemingly open expression and innocence.

Quote:

*"Their [the Intended's eyes'] glance was guileless, profound, confident, and trustful. She carried her sorrowful head as though she were proud of that sorrow, as though she would say, 'I - I alone know how to mourn for him as he deserves.'" (3.53)*

Thought:

Marlow imposes his opinion of women as naïve creatures on Kurtz's Intended, describing her as pure and "guileless," especially noting the honest expression of pain in her eyes.

Quote:

*[Marlow]: "'It was impossible not to--'*

*'Love him,' she [the Intended] finished eagerly, silencing me into an appalled dumbness. 'How true! how true! But when you think that no one knew him so well as I! I had all his noble confidence. I knew him best.'" (3.56-57)*

Thought:

The Intended speaks as Marlow envisions a naïve bereft young girl would – with an assurance of the unquestionable goodness of her lover and a certainty that everyone viewed him as she did.

Quote:

*"And the girl talked, easing her pain in the certitude of my sympathy; she talked as thirsty men drink." (3.60)*

Thought:

Marlow confirms his opinion that women are naïve by conversing with the Intended.

Quote:

*"'. . . Who was not his friend who had heard him speak once?' she [the Intended] was saying. 'He drew men towards him by what was best in them.' She looked at me with intensity. 'It is the gift of the great,' she went on..." (3.61)*

Thought:

The Intended puts great store by Kurtz's words, believing that they lured men to him and

earned him his admiration from all mankind. She is naïve about the true motivations of men, which we have seen to be far darker and more self-serving.

Quote:

*"'Yes, I know,' I said with something like despair in my heart, but bowing my head before the faith that was in her, before that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness, in the triumphant darkness from which I could not have defended her – from which I could not even defend myself.*

*'What a loss to me – to us!'– she corrected herself with beautiful generosity; then added in a murmur, 'To the world.' By the last gleams of twilight I could see the glitter of her eyes, full of tears – of tears that would not fall."* (3.62-63)

Thought:

The Intended is so blinded by her love for Kurtz and her idealism that she immerses herself in the lie she created and does not even consider questioning its veracity. Marlow does not dare destroy her beautiful illusion, even when she goes so far as to call his death a tragedy of global scale.

Quote:

*"She put out her arms as if after a retreating figure, stretching them back and with clasped pale hands across the fading and narrow sheen of the window. Never see him! I saw him clearly enough then. I shall see this eloquent phantom as long as I live, and I shall see her, too, a tragic and familiar Shade, resembling in this gesture another one, tragic also, and bedecked with powerless charms, stretching bare brown arms over the glitter of the infernal stream, the stream of darkness."* (3.73)

Thought:

Marlow sees in the Intended parallels to Kurtz's other lover, the warrior woman. Both of them are unable to let go of an imagined conception of their true love. They both want to believe that Kurtz reciprocated their love absolutely. It is interesting that they both want the same thing when they live in such different worlds.

Quote:

*[Marlow to the Intended]: "'The last word he pronounced was – your name.'"*

*"I heard a light sigh and then my heart stood still, stopped dead short by an exulting and terrible cry, by the cry of inconceivable triumph and of unspeakable pain. 'I knew it – I was*

*sure!' [...] She knew. She was sure. (3.85-86)*

Thought:

To Marlow, the Intended's delusion epitomizes women's naiveté.

## Exploration Quotes

### Quote:

*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. (1.4)*

### Thought:

These four friends now explore not only the sea, but the inward beliefs of themselves and one another.

### Quote:

*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. (1.6)*

### Thought:

Marlow details a glorious list of historical figures who explored the Thames River and the sea. The first half of his list catalog royally commissioned explorers and plunderers while the latter half are businessmen who developed trade with foreign countries. Marlow views all of them as pioneers who struck out to bring civilization to dark unknown lands.

### Quote:

*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 – 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 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 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 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 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. (1.9)*

Thought:

Contrary to common belief, Conrad does not see seamen as explorers. He describes their lifestyles as somewhat sedentary, sitting aboard their ship wherever it takes them. They have become jaded to the constant changes of life and take them for granted. Marlow, on the other hand, is an explorer in the truest sense of the word. He has not come to impose assumptions, but to find meaning and truth.

Quote:

*[Marlow]: "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." (1.11)*

Thought:

Marlow readily recognizes the dangers of an exploratory lifestyle.

Quote:

*[Marlow]: "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. (1.11)*

Thought:

Marlow speaks about exploration as a way of starting a new life. However, what one finds in the unknown wilderness is an alien and totally incomprehensible world.

Quote:

*"Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, 'When I grow up I will go there.' [...] But there was one yet – the biggest, the most blank, so to speak – that I had a hankering after." (1.17)*

Thought:

Marlow's desire to explore is fueled by his obsession for blank spaces. He is drawn to them and longs to fill them with his own discoveries. This is why he wants so badly to explore the biggest blank space of Africa.

Quote:

*"[...] on one end a large shining map, marked with all the colours of a rainbow. There was a vast amount of red - good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there, a deuce of a lot of blue, a little green, smears of orange, and, on the East Coast, a purple patch, to show where the jolly pioneers of progress drink the jolly lager-beer. However, I wasn't going into any of these. I was going into the yellow. Dead in the centre. And the river was there – fascinating – deadly – like a snake." (1.23)*

Thought:

Marlow considers all the colors on the map a sign of the Company's real devotion to progress. That each of the colors represents a different country's territory contrasts sharply with the blank space Marlow saw as a young boy. This means Africa has been explored a great deal since Marlow's first fascination with it. However, he is beckoned forward by the sight of the snake-like Congo River.

Quote:

*"Watching a coast as it slips by the ship is like thinking about an enigma. There it is before you - smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering, 'Come and find out.'" (1.30)*

Thought:

Marlow is drawn in by the "enigma" of the coast. His desire to explore is so intense that he imagines the coasts whispering for him to "come and find out."

Quote:

*"One day he [the accountant] remarked, without lifting his head, 'In the interior you will no doubt meet Mr. Kurtz.' On my asking who Mr. Kurtz was, he said he was a first-class agent; and seeing my disappointment at this information, he added slowly, laying down his pen, 'He is a very remarkable person.' Further questions elicited from him that Mr. Kurtz was at present in charge of a trading-post, a very important one, in the true ivory-country, at 'the very bottom of there. Sends in as much ivory as all the others put together [...].'" (1.46)*

Thought:

Curiosity impels Marlow to ask further questions of the accountant about Kurtz. Though Marlow does not seem particularly interested at first, the seed has been planted. He grows far more inquisitive about Kurtz later.

Quote:

*"I had plenty of time for meditation, and now and then I would give some thought to Kurtz. I wasn't very interested in him. No. Still, I was curious to see whether this man, who had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort, would climb to the top after all and how he would set about his work when there." (1.74)*

Thought:

Despite himself, Marlow becomes more and more curious about this faceless figure of Kurtz. From the brickmaker's description of him, Marlow assumes that Kurtz came out "equipped with moral ideas of some sort," probably the sort that try to justify imperialism. When compared to the godlessness of the crew surrounding Marlow, Kurtz seems like a good alternative.

Quote:

*"Where the pilgrims imagined it crawled to I don't know. To some place where they expected to get something. I bet! For me it crawled towards Kurtz – exclusively [...]."* (2.7)

Thought:

Marlow's curiosity about Kurtz is growing into an obsession. He no longer sees the wondrous, if perilous, African wilderness around him as his destination, but fixates on Kurtz. He sees him

as the sole reason for continuing on his journey.

Quote:

*"And by the way, I suppose Mr. Kurtz is dead as well by this time."*

*"For the moment that was the dominant thought. There was a sense of extreme disappointment, as though I had found out I had been striving after something altogether without a substance. I couldn't have been more disgusted if I had travelled all this way for the sole purpose of talking with Mr. Kurtz." (2.23-24)*

Thought:

Marlow's curiosity leads him to visit the Intended and leave all of Kurtz's letters with her.

## Madness Quotes

### Quote:

*[Marlow with the doctor]: "As we sat over our vermouths he glorified the Company's business, and by-and-by I expressed casually my surprise at him not going out there. He became very cool and collected all at once. "I am not such a fool as I look, quoth Plato to his disciples," he said sententiously, emptied his glass with great resolution, and we rose." (1.25)*

### Thought:

The doctor implies that going into the interior is something only a "fool" would do and suggests that the journey can only end badly. Anyone who starts it is only setting himself up for madness and defeat.

### Quote:

*"The old doctor felt my pulse, evidently thinking of something else the while. "Good, good for there," he mumbled, and then with a certain eagerness asked me whether I would let him measure my head. Rather surprised, I said Yes, when he produced a thing like calipers and got the dimensions back and front and every way, talking notes carefully. He was an unshaven little man in a threadbare coat like a gaberdine, with his feet in slippers, and I thought him a harmless fool. "I always ask leave, in the interests of science, to measure the crania of those going out there," he said. "And when they come back too?" I asked. "Oh, I never see them, " he remarked; "and, moreover, the changes take place inside, you know." He smiled, as if at some quiet joke. "So you are going out there. Famous. Interesting too." He gave me a searching glance and made another note. "Ever any madness in your family?" he asked, in a matter-of-fact tone. I felt very annoyed. "Is that question in the interests of science too?" "It would be," he said, without taking notice of my irritation, "interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals, on the spot, but [...]." (1.26)*

### Thought:

The doctor implies that going into the interior changes men's psyches and he tries, in vain, to measure their skulls before they leave. He eventually suggests that men have a tendency to go mad in the African interior. Marlow thinks this is all lunacy.

### Quote:

*"The idleness of a passenger, my isolation amongst all these men with whom I had no point of contact, the oily and languid sea, the uniform sombreness of the coast, 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."* (1.30)

Thought:

Marlow's isolation from other men and the unchanging scenery of the coast lulls him into a comforting and false sense of security. In retrospect, he knows that he was living a "senseless delusion" in which nature is "a positive pleasure" and even makes sense. The further he gets into the interior, the more he becomes disillusioned.

Quote:

*"For a time I would feel I belonged still to a world of straightforward facts; but the feeling would not last long. Something would turn up to scare it away. Once, I remember, we came upon a man-of-war anchored off the coast. There wasn't even a shed there, and she was shelling the bush. It appears the French had one of their wars going on thereabouts. Her ensign dropped limp like a rag; the muzzles of the long six-inch guns stuck out all over the low hull; the greasy, slimy swell swung her up lazily and let her down, swaying her thin masts. In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech—and nothing happened. Nothing could happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight; and it was not dissipated by somebody on board assuring me earnestly there was a camp of natives—he called them enemies!—hidden out of sight somewhere." (1.30)*

Thought:

Marlow feels as if he is entering a world in which nothing makes sense. The absurdity begins when he comes across a man-of-war firing at the empty coastline. There is no sign of life in the underbrush into which it is shooting. This is but the beginning of the insanity.

Quote:

*[The Swede]: "'The other day I took up a man who hanged himself on the road. He was a Swede, too.' 'Hanged himself! Why, in God's name?' I cried. He kept on looking out watchfully. 'Who knows? The sun too much for him, or the country perhaps.'" (1.33)*

Thought:

Marlow gets his first taste of the real peril of insanity. The surroundings, it is implied, are so bad that men would rather die than endure life in them.

Quote:

*"Another report from the cliff made me think suddenly of that ship of war I had seen firing into a continent. It was the same kind of ominous voice; 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 over the sea. All their meager breasts panted together, the violently dilated nostrils quivered, the eyes stared stonily up-hill. They passed me within six inches, without a glance, with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages." (1.36)*

Thought:

The slaves, chained together and indifferent to their surroundings, know nothing but their labor. This passage underscores the absurdity of colonization; such beings could hardly be considered dangerous enemies. The designation by the law of them as such simply makes no sense to Marlow.

Quote:

*"I avoided a vast artificial hole somebody had been digging on the slope, the purpose of which I found it impossible to divine. It wasn't a quarry or a sandpit, anyhow. It was just a hole. It might have been connected with the philanthropic desire of giving the criminals something to do. I don't know. Then I nearly fell into a very narrow ravine, almost no more than a scar in the hillside." (1.38)*

Thought:

This random hole seems to have no purpose and is another sign of the increasing absurdity and incomprehensibility of the wilderness. However, this absurdity is no longer harmless. Indeed, Marlow almost falls into the "silly" hole and matters no longer seem so amusing.

Quote:

*"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." (1.43)*

Thought:

The notion of getting a breath of fresh air is so odd because the whole station is outdoors. Getting inside, into some semblance of civilization, is much more difficult than coming outside. This shows the inverted ideas of the accountant.

Quote:

*"In the steady buzz of flies the homeward-bound agent was lying finished and insensible; the*

*other, bent over his books, was making correct entries of perfectly correct transactions; and fifty feet below the doorstep I could see the still tree-tops of the grove of death."* (1.48)

Thought:

Marlow draws our attention to the madness of the situation by juxtaposing two very different images together – one of a man lying dead on his deathbed, and another of the accountant quietly going about his business as if nothing were wrong.

Quote:

*"He [Marlow's white companion] was very anxious for me to kill somebody, but there wasn't the shadow of a carrier near. I remembered the old doctor – 'It would be interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals, on the spot.' I felt I was becoming scientifically interesting."* (1.50)

Thought:

Both Marlow's companion and Marlow himself find themselves going mad because the white friend has obviously been attacked. He wants Marlow to kill the assaulters, but there is nobody around. Marlow jokes that because his world no longer makes sense, he is becoming "scientifically interesting."

Quote:

*"I went to work the next day, turning, so to speak, my back on that station. In that way only it seemed to me I could keep my hold on the redeeming facts of life. Still, one must look about sometimes; and then I saw this station, these men strolling aimlessly about in the sunshine of the yard. I asked myself sometimes what it all meant. They wandered here and there with their absurd long staves in their hands, like a lot of faithless pilgrims bewitched inside a rotten fence [...] I've never seen anything so unreal in my life."* (1.54)

Thought:

Marlow convinces himself that the only way he can remain sane is to work by himself, obsessing about fixing the steamboat. However, he finds himself sneaking peeks at his fellow men and discovering that everything is as absurd as he'd feared. The men are so aimless that Marlow compares them to pilgrims who have lost their faith or been bewitched. He seems to hate their aimlessness because it contradicts so sharply with his keen sense of purpose.

Quote:

*"I was smoking my pipe quietly by my dismantled steamer, and saw them all cutting capers in*

*the light, with their arms lifted high, when the stout man with moustaches came tearing down to the river, a tin pail in his hand, assured me that everybody was 'behaving splendidly, splendidly,' dipped about a quart of water and tore back again. I noticed there was a hole in the bottom of his pail." (1.55)*

Thought:

This whole scene is absurd. The shed is on fire yet pilgrims are playing in front of it. Marlow is so alarmed that he's sitting and smoking. The only one who seems concerned is the stout pilgrim with moustaches, yet his attempts to put out the fire are laughable. His pail has a hole in it and is useless for drawing water. Marlow thinks the whole situation is ridiculous.

Quote:

*"It was as unreal as everything else - as the philanthropic pretence of the whole concern, as their talk, as their government, as their show of work. The only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading-post where ivory was to be had, so that they could earn percentages. They intrigued and slandered and hated each other only on that account – but as to effectually lifting a little finger - oh, no." (1.56)*

Thought:

Marlow is appalled by these pilgrims' depth of corruption. It seems utterly "unreal" to him that men could be so hypocritical. The unifying trait between them seems to be greed.

Quote:

*"No, I don't like work. I had rather laze about and think of all the fine things that can be done. I don't like work - no man does - but I like what is in the work - the chance to find yourself. Your own reality - for yourself, not for others - what no other man can ever know. They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means." (1.68)*

Thought:

Marlow values work for a rather unconventional reason – because he can find his own version of reality in it. Nobody else, he claims, can see what a worker sees when he does his duty and claims the work as his own. Another can only see the external – the least true – account of reality. That Marlow sees different versions of reality may hint that he is going slightly mad.

Quote:

*"There were moments when one's past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare for yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream,*

*remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect."* (2.5)

Thought:

Marlow's very own memories – which should be a source of familiarity and comfort to him – take on the same alien aspect as the wilderness. They seem unfamiliar – wrapped in an "unrestful and noisy dream" – and as unreal as this "strange world." This surrealism makes Marlow feel as though the jungle around them is alive and looking at him "with a vengeful aspect."

Quote:

*"The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us – who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign – and no memories."* (2.7)

Thought:

Catching sight of wild native Africans in their homeland rouses fear in the pilgrims. They feel as if they have traveled to a place where nothing is comprehensible. They cannot read the attitude of the Africans towards them. Marlow compares their mental state to that of inmates in an insane asylum right before an outbreak – teetering on the edge of insanity.

Quote:

*"The current ran smooth and swift, but a dumb immobility sat on the banks. The living trees, lashed together by the creepers and every living bush of the undergrowth, might have been changed into stone, even to the slenderest twig, to the lightest leaf. It was not sleep — it seemed unnatural, like a state of trance. Not the faintest sound of any kind could be heard."* (2.13)

Thought:

In this scene of madness, every aspect of the wilderness seems struck dumb, as if all of nature has turned to stone.

Quote:

*[During the fog]: What we could see was just the steamer we were on, her outlines blurred as though she had been on the point of dissolving, and a misty strip of water, perhaps two feet broad, around her – and that was all. The rest of the world was nowhere, as far as our eyes and ears were concerned. Just nowhere. Gone, disappeared; swept off without leaving a whisper or a shadow behind. (2.13)*

Thought:

The men have lost their minds because the fog makes them think that they are the only humans left on earth; everything else is completely alien and thus frightening to them. They feel as if, beyond the confines of the steamboat, the rest of the world has simply disappeared, leaving them alone and stranded in a strange and hostile place.

Quote:

*"You can't breathe dead hippo waking, sleeping, and eating, and at the same time keep your precarious grip on existence." (2.14)*

Thought:

In an attempt at comedic relief, Marlow comments on the madness-inducing stink of rotting hippo meat.

Quote:

*"I own to you that just then I perceived - in a new light, as it were—how unwholesome the pilgrims looked, and I hoped, yes, I positively hoped, that my aspect was not so - what shall I say? – so – unappetizing: a touch of fantastic vanity which fitted well with the dream-sensation that pervaded all my days at that time." (2.14)*

Thought:

Marlow hopes his appearance is more attractive than that of the pilgrims, even though his better looks might get him eaten by his own cannibal aides. This displays his newly-forming madness. His vanity, as he puts it, is "fantastic" given the distressing situation.

Quote:

*"Were we to let go our hold of the bottom, we would be absolutely in the air - in space. We wouldn't be able to tell where we were going to - whether up or down stream, or across - till we fetched against one bank or the other - and then we wouldn't know at first which it was." (2.15)*

Thought:

Marlow knows that the world is going crazy around them. He knows that if he follows the manager's orders and begins sailing again, everyone will lose their bearings in this devil of a fog. Up will become down, upstream will become downstream, and they will probably die. Here we see that, despite his surroundings, Marlow has maintained a certain degree of sanity.

Quote:

*"You should have seen the pilgrims stare! They had no heart to grin, or even to revile me: but I believe they thought me gone mad - with fright, maybe. I delivered a regular lecture." (2.17)*

Thought:

The pilgrims think their captain Marlow has gone mad with fear when he does something as mundane as giving a lecture while everyone else is freaking out from paranoia.

Quote:

*"The original Kurtz had been educated partly in England, and - as he was good enough to say himself — his sympathies were in the right place. His mother was half-English, his father was half-French. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz [...]." (2.29)*

Thought:

The fact that "all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" and the subsequent fact that Kurtz went mad in the wilderness suggests that all of Europe contributes something to mankind that makes them susceptible to madness. To look at it normatively, something is wrong with the way Europe is conditioning and educating and raising its citizens. Or perhaps man is naturally born with the seed of madness in him; perhaps everyone can be driven mad.

Quote:

*"There were no practical hints to interrupt the magic current of phrases, unless a kind of note at the foot of the last page, scrawled evidently much later, in an unsteady hand, may be regarded as the exposition of a method. It was very simple, and at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you, luminous and terrifying, like a flash of lightning in a serene sky: 'Exterminate all the brutes!' The curious part was that he had apparently forgotten all about that valuable postscriptum, because, later on, when he in a sense came to himself, he repeatedly entreated me to take good care of 'my pamphlet'(he called it), as it was sure to have in the future a good influence upon his career." (2.29)*

Thought:

Here is one of the first signs of Kurtz's madness: the fact that the tone of his postscriptum differs so sharply from the rest of the manuscript. This suggests that a different and rather desperate Kurtz scrawled that little message, not the rational and idealistic Kurtz that earlier wrote the report. That Kurtz seems to have forgotten about that little phrase suggests that he might be so depraved by the time spent in Africa that he could, later on, add such a condemning message.

Quote:

*"You can't understand. How could you? - with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbours ready to cheer you or to fall on you, stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman, in the holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums - how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of solitude - utter solitude without a policeman - by the way of silence - utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbour can be heard whispering of public opinion? These little things make all the great difference. When they are gone you must fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness... The earth for us is a place to live in, where we must put up with sights, with sounds, with smells, too, by Jove! - breathe dead hippo, so to speak, and not be contaminated." (2.29)*

Thought:

Marlow claims that his audience cannot understand his feeling of utter loneliness and the ensuing madness without being there. He describes how isolation from one's fellow man can mess with one's sense of reality, that without public opinion, one cannot judge the morality of one's actions.

Quote:

*[The harlequin]: "He [Kurtz] made me see things – things." (3.2)*

Thought:

This is disturbing because it suggests that Kurtz passed his madness and insane visions on to the harlequin merely through speech. The fact that the harlequin is reluctant to elaborate on exactly what Kurtz made him see also hints at the mad nature of their relationship.

Quote:

*"[...] as a rule Kurtz wandered alone, far in the depths of the forest." (3.4)*

Thought:

Kurtz willingly isolates himself from his friend, the harlequin. By now, the text has established that isolation often leads to madness in the interior.

Quote:

*[The harlequin]: "You can't judge Mr. Kurtz as you would an ordinary man. No, no, no! Now - just to give you an idea - I don't mind telling you, he wanted to shoot me, too, one day - but I don't judge him." 'Shoot you!' I cried 'What for?' 'Well, I had a small lot of ivory the chief of that village near my house gave me. You see I used to shoot game for them. Well, he wanted it, and wouldn't hear reason. He declared he would shoot me unless I gave him the ivory and then cleared out of the country, because he could do so, and had a fancy for it, and there was nothing on earth to prevent him killing whom he jolly well pleased. And it was true, too. I gave him the ivory. What did I care! But I didn't clear out. No, no. I couldn't leave him. I had to be careful, of course, till we got friendly again for a time.'" (3.4)*

Thought:

The harlequin has gone mad, sticking to Kurtz even though Kurtz threatened to kill him for ivory. The harlequin stays until Kurtz becomes friendly to him again. This, of course, suggests madness on the part of both the harlequin and Kurtz.

Quote:

*"He [Kurtz] hated all this, and somehow he couldn't get away. When I had a chance I begged him to try and leave while there was time; I offered to go back with him. And he would say yes, and then he would remain; go off on another ivory hunt; disappear for weeks; forget himself amongst these people - forget himself - you know. 'Why! he's mad,' I said." (3.4)*

Thought:

Even though Kurtz "hates all this," he will not leave it willingly. Marlow finally recognizes his insanity.

Quote:

*"Kurtz – Kurtz – that means short in German – don't it? Well, the name was as true as everything else in his life - and death. He looked at least seven feet long." (3.9)*

Thought:

The meaning of the German word "kurtz" is denied in reality. Kurtz is not short but "at least seven feet long." This demonstrates the divorce between language and meaning here in the mad interior.

Quote:

*"Sometimes I ask myself whether I had ever really seen him – whether it was possible to meet such a phenomenon! [...]."* (3.22)

Thought:

The harlequin is so quaint that he seems like a dream to Marlow, who often wonders whether or not he actually met such a strange figure.

Quote:

*"I fancy I had some vague notion of falling upon him and giving him a drubbing. I don't know. I had some imbecile thoughts. The knitting old woman with the cat obtruded herself upon my memory as a most improper person to be sitting at the other end of such an affair. I saw a row of pilgrims squirting lead in the air out of Winchesters held to the hip. I thought I would never get back to the steamer, and imagined myself living alone and unarmed in the woods to an advanced age. Such silly things – you know."* (3.26)

Thought:

When Marlow goes chasing after Kurtz, he is confused and has evil thoughts like beating him or "giving him a drubbing" when he finds him. He is confused and certain images burst into his mind. Marlow is concerned mainly with an inevitable sense of catastrophe (which is why he thinks of the old woman who represents Fate) and fear (represented by the pilgrims shooting blindly from their hips).

Quote:

*"There was nothing either above or below him, and I knew it. He [Kurtz] had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! He had kicked the very earth to pieces. He was alone, and I before him did not know whether I stood on the ground or floated in the air."* (3.29)

Thought:

Marlow realizes that Kurtz is accountable to nothing, that he has "kicked himself loose" of all things that humans know. Kurtz recognizes no set of morals and no definitions of good or evil anymore. He does not stand relatively in any known human space. And, because he floats free, he evokes a sense of being lost.

Quote:

*"I've been telling you what we said - repeating the phrases we pronounced – but what's the*

*good? They were common everyday words - the familiar, vague sounds exchanged on every waking day of life. But what of that? They had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares."* (3.29)

Thought:

The atmosphere of speaking to Kurtz that night cannot be evoked merely through words, Marlow claims. It had the slow, absurd, and dreamlike quality of a nightmare.

Quote:

*"But his soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself, and by heavens! I tell you, it had gone mad. I had – for my sins, I suppose – to go through the ordeal of looking into it myself. No eloquence could have been so withering to one's belief in mankind as his final burst of sincerity. He struggled with himself, too. I saw it – I heard it. I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself."* (3.29)

Thought:

Marlow claims that being alone in the wilderness has driven Kurtz's soul mad. The most tragic thing is that Kurtz knows it and he struggles sincerely with himself. However, he cannot win for he is blind to what has trapped him.

Quote:

*"[...] I heard him mutter, 'Live rightly, die, die...' I listened. There was nothing more. Was he rehearsing some speech in his sleep, or was it a fragment of a phrase from some newspaper article? He had been writing for the papers and meant to do so against, 'for the furthering of my ideas. It's a duty.'" (3.39)*

Thought:

In his dying days, Kurtz's words become more and more incomprehensible. He begins to rave.

Quote:

*"One evening coming in with a candle I was startled to hear him [Kurtz] say a little tremulously, 'I am lying here in the dark waiting for death.' The light was within a foot of his eyes. I forced myself to murmur, 'Oh, nonsense!' and stood over him as if transfixed."* (3.41)

Thought:

Kurtz's madness is causing him to go blind; he cannot see the sunlight. He is completely immersed in the darkness and evil of his soul.

Quote:

*"He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision – he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath:*

*'The horror! The horror!'" (3.42-43)*

Thought:

Kurtz is having death visions and is raving. It is all fantastically and madly horrible.

## Language and Communication Quotes

### Quote:

*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. (1.4)*

### Thought:

Even early in the book, the breakdown of language begins. The men are too lazy even to speak.

### Quote:

*"He shook hands, I fancy, murmured vaguely, was satisfied with my French. Bon Voyage." (1.23)*

### Thought:

The Dutch head of the Company does not speak English with Marlow and obviously does not try very hard to understand – or confer understanding upon – Marlow. He hears so little of Marlow's French – a mere well-known phrase – that he cannot possibly judge his French adequately. But it is obvious he does not care about meaningful communication; he sees Marlow as only another opportunity to increase his profits.

### Quote:

*"Otherwise there was only an indefinable, faint expression of his lips, something stealthy - a smile - not a smile - I remember it, but I can't explain. It was unconscious, this smile was, though just after he had said something it got intensified for an instant. It came at the end of his speeches like a seal applied on the words to make the meaning of the commonest phrase appear absolutely inscrutable." (1.52)*

### Thought:

The manager's talk is as meaningless as his expressions and only this mysterious (but empty) smile gives his words any semblance of profundity.

### Quote:

*"He [the manager] began to speak as soon as he saw me. I had been very long on the road. He could not wait. Had to start without me. The up-river stations had to be relieved. There had*

*been so many delays already that he did not know who was dead and who was alive, and how they got on--and so on, and so on. He paid no attention to my explanations, and, playing with a stick of sealing-wax, repeated several times that the situation was 'very grave, very grave.' [...] All this talk seemed to me so futile." (1.53)*

Thought:

The manager's bumbling and useless talk tells Marlow very little about the situation. He only makes excuses for his incompetence. His talk is so meaningless it is like background babble. To emphasize this fact, Conrad does not even put quotation marks around his speech. Whenever the manager wants to underscore the importance of something, he stupidly repeats it, as in the situation being "very grave, very grave." It is no wonder that Marlow finds this talk a waste of time.

Quote:

*"I had heard Mr. Kurtz was in there. I had heard enough about it, too – God knows! Yet somehow it didn't bring any image with it - no more than if I had been told an angel or a fiend was in there...He was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story?" (1.61)*

Thought:

To Marlow, "Kurtz" is "just a word." Any rumors and words about Kurtz are empty for Marlow. He believes in Kurtz only as one would believe in a fairy tale.

Quote:

*[Unnamed narrator]: For a long time already he [Marlow], sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice. There was not a word from anybody. The others might have been asleep, but I was awake. I listened, I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river. (1.66)*

Thought:

Like Kurtz will be later, Marlow has become just a voice to his listeners. The darkness and stillness have rendered them blind to each other and to Marlow; they can use only their sense of hearing.

Quote:

*"There was nothing but that wretched, old, mangled steamboat I was leaning against, while he*

*[the brickmaker] talked fluently about 'the necessity for every man to get on.' 'And when one comes out here, you conceive, it is not to gaze at the moon.' Mr. Kurtz was a 'universal genius,' but even a genius would find it easier to work with 'adequate tools – intelligent men.' He did not make bricks – why, there was a physical impossibility in the way – as I was well aware; and if he did secretarial work for the manager, it was because 'no sensible man rejects wantonly the confidence of his superiors.'"* (1.67)

Thought:

The brickmaker goes all over the place with his speech, flitting from random topic to random topic and trying to make each one sound profound. He does not even notice when Marlow stops listening to him.

Quote:

*"Now letters went to the coast every week. . . . 'My dear sir,' he cried, 'I write from dictation.' I demanded rivets. There was a way – for an intelligent man."* (1.68)

Thought:

The brickmaker's role as the manager's puppet is furthered when we find out that he writes all the letters asking for supplies word-for-word (or by "dictation") from the manager. Not even his written words are his own – they originate from another's mouth. Marlow insults his intelligence for being such a mindless automaton.

Quote:

*"His [Kurtz's] name, you understand, had not been pronounced once. He was 'that man.'"* (2.2)

Thought:

The manager and his uncle refuse to pronounce Kurtz's name, perhaps in a gesture of awe and fear-inspired respect or simply because they do not want any eavesdroppers (like Marlow) to know whom they are talking about.

Quote:

*"[...] but I have a voice, too, and for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced."* (2.8)

Thought:

In making his claim that the native Africans are human like white men, Marlow is regarded incredulously by his traveling companions; he feels the need to justify himself. He uses his voice as a vehicle of (what he hopes is) truth. He understands how important it is to have a say, especially after living in the oppressive silence of in the interior and hearing Kurtz's harsh and merciless voice.

Quote:

*"When deciphered it said: 'Wood for you. Hurry up. Approach cautiously.' There was a signature, but it was illegible – not Kurtz – a much longer word. 'Hurry up.' Where? Up the river? 'Approach cautiously.' We had not done so. But the warning could not have been meant for the place where it could be only found after approach. Something was wrong above. But what – and how much? That was the question. We commented adversely upon the imbecility of that telegraphic style." (2.9)*

Thought:

Language breaks down in the interior, making any written signs difficult to decipher and harder to interpret.

Quote:

*"[...] I picked up a book. It had lost its covers, and the pages had been thumbed into a state of extremely dirty softness; but the back had been lovingly stitched afresh with white cotton thread, which looked clean yet. It was an extraordinary find. Its title was, "An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship", by a man Towser, Towson – some such name - Master in his Majesty's Navy. The matter looked dreary reading enough, with illustrative diagrams and repulsive tables of figures, and the copy was sixty years old. I handled this amazing antiquity with the greatest possible tenderness, lest it should dissolve in my hands. Within, Towson or Towser was inquiring earnestly into the breaking strain of ships' chains and tackle, and other such matters. Not a very enthralling book; but at the first glance you could see there a singleness of intention, an honest concern for the right way of going to work, which made these humble pages, thought out so many years ago, luminous with another than a professional light. The simple old sailor, with his talk of chains and purchases, made me forget the jungle and the pilgrims in a delicious sensation of having come upon something unmistakably real. Such a book being there was wonderful enough; but still more astounding were the notes penciled in the margin, and plainly referring to the text. I couldn't believe my eyes! They were in cipher! Yes, it looked like cipher." (2.9)*

Thought:

Marlow rejoices at the discovery of a book because it gives him a sense of contact with the civilized human world, from which he has been absent from for so long. Despite its boring

content, Marlow treasures the book for its attention to how things should be done, its care for correctness – something distinct from Marlow's activities in the last few months. In this world of strange surrealism, Marlow feels the book is a touchstone to reality, especially when he sees handwritten notes in the margin – proof that other men have existed in this place.

Quote:

*"I slipped the book into my pocket. I assure you to leave off reading was like tearing myself away from the shelter of an old and solid friendship." (2.10)*

Thought:

Marlow, through the connecting medium of language, feels as though the author of the book is a close friend. It helps stave off some of his loneliness.

Quote:

*"I fretted and fumed and took to arguing with myself whether or no I would talk openly with Kurtz; but before I could come to any conclusion it occurred to me that my speech or my silence, indeed any action of mine, would be a mere futility." (2.12)*

Thought:

At the thought of speaking with Kurtz, of perhaps sharing some of his own ideas with this man who has earned his awe, Marlow quickly begins to doubt himself. He feels as if his speech would make no difference to Kurtz or their awful situation. He feels as if words are futile in the interior and carry no power.

Quote:

*"Before it stopped running with a muffled rattle, a cry, a very loud cry, as of infinite desolation, soared slowly in the opaque air. It ceased. A complaining clamour, modulated in savage discords, filled our ears. The sheer unexpectedness of it made my hair stir under my cap. I don't know how it struck the others: to me it seemed as though the mist itself had screamed, so suddenly, and apparently from all sides at once, did this tumultuous and mournful uproar arise. It culminated in a hurried outbreak of almost intolerably excessive shrieking, which stopped short, leaving us stiffened in a variety of silly attitudes, and obstinately listening to the nearly as appalling and excessive silence. 'Good God! What is the meaning –' stammered at my elbow one of the pilgrims." (2.13)*

Thought:

None of the men understand the wordless cries of the native Africans onshore. Their inability to

communicate linguistically reflects a larger disconnect between the two groups of people.

Quote:

*"But what made the idea of attack inconceivable to me was the nature of the noise – of the cries we had heard. They had not the fierce character boding immediate hostile intention. Unexpected, wild, and violent as they had been, they had given me an irresistible impression of sorrow. The glimpse of the steamboat had for some reason filled those savages with unrestrained grief." (2.16)*

Thought:

Despite the fact that the native Africans' cries had no comprehensible words, Marlow still understood one of the emotions communicated: sadness. While language is not universal, emotions, it seems, are.

Quote:

*""We two whites stood over him, and his lustrous and inquiring glance enveloped us both. I declare it looked as though he would presently put to us some questions in an understandable language; but he died without uttering a sound, without moving a limb, without twitching a muscle." (2.23)*

Thought:

In his dying moments, the black helmsman communicates without words, through a simple gaze. Marlow feels as if he could understand the man if he tried to speak. Again, this understanding is achieved not with language, but with emotion.

Quote:

*"Can you steer?" I asked the agent eagerly. He looked very dubious; but I made a grab at his arm, and he understood at once I meant him to steer whether or no." (2.23)*

Thought:

It is not the words "can you steer" but the gesture of grabbing the pilgrim's arm that make him understand that Marlow wants him to steer. Language is ineffective in the interior, but gestures and human contact are not.

Quote:

*"I made the strange discovery that I had never imagined him [Kurtz] as doing, you know, but as*

*discoursing. I didn't say to myself, 'Now I will never see him,' or 'Now I will never shake him by the hand,' but, 'Now I will never hear him.' The man presented himself as a voice... The point was in his being a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts the one that stood out pre-eminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words – the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness." (2.24)*

Thought:

Marlow realizes he has imagined Kurtz this whole time not as a man, but only as a voice. Kurtz's reality – for Marlow, at least – occurs primarily in language. Marlow admires him most for his "gift of expression" which he can use both for good (for making contact with mankind, for making things understood) or for evil (for deceit).

Quote:

*"This initiated wraith from the back of Nowhere honoured me with its amazing confidence before it vanished altogether. This was because it could speak English to me. The original Kurtz had been educated partly in England, and – as he was good enough to say himself – his sympathies were in the right place." (2.29)*

Thought:

Kurtz can communicate to Marlow because he speaks English, though English is not his first language. However, Marlow identifies with him because "his sympathies were in the right place;" in other words, Kurtz sympathizes with the English.

Quote:

*[Marlow on Kurtz's writing]: "But it was a beautiful piece of writing. The opening paragraph, however, in the light of later information, strikes me now as ominous. He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, 'must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings - we approach them with the might of a deity,' and so on, and so on. 'By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded,' etc., etc. From that point he soared and took me with him. The peroration was magnificent, though difficult to remember, you know. It gave me the notion of an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence. It made me tingle with enthusiasm. This was the unbounded power of eloquence - of words - of burning noble words. There were no practical hints to interrupt the magic current of phrases [...]" (2.29)*

Thought:

Marlow admires Kurtz's eloquence even though the content of the words is frightening. Kurtz tells the white men to approach the black native Africans as gods, to incite their worship so they can "exert a power for good practically unbounded." Marlow is carried away by Kurtz's idealism and his "unbounded power of eloquence." It is Kurtz's words that deeply move him.

Quote:

*"There were no practical hints to interrupt the magic current of phrases, unless a kind of note at the foot on the last page, scrawled evidently much later, in an unsteady hand, may be regarded as the exposition of a method. It was very simple, and at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you, luminous and terrifying, like a flash of lightning in a serene sky: 'Exterminate all the brutes!'" (2.29)*

Thought:

Kurtz's idealistic and moving words change suddenly with this postscriptum. His condemnatory tone here blazes "like a flash of lightning in a serene sky" and sends a message far different from the rest of his report.

Quote:

*[The harlequin]: "'At first old Van Shuyten would tell me to go to the devil,' he narrated with keen enjoyment; 'but I stuck to him, and talked and talked, till at last he got afraid I would talk the hind-leg off his favourite dog, so he gave me some cheap things and a few guns, and told me he hoped he would never see my face again.'" (2.36)*

Thought:

The harlequin uses language to wear down the Dutchman's patience. The Dutchman eventually gives into the harlequin, providing him with some supplies to face the interior. Thus, the harlequin has found that his tongue opens doors for him.

Quote:

*"'You made notes in Russian?' I asked. He nodded. 'I thought they were written in cipher,' I said." (2.37)*

Thought:

Language does not function well in the interior. For example, Marlow mistakes the harlequin's Russian notes for cipher simply because he cannot read them.

Quote:

*"There was no sign on the face of nature of this amazing tale that was not so much told as suggested to me in desolate exclamations, completed by shrugs, in interrupted phrases, in hints ending in deep sighs." (3.4)*

Thought:

Nature is depicted in terms of nonverbal communication: "exclamations," "shrugs," "phrases," and "sighs." Each one suggests that Marlow's tale is "desolate" or "interrupted," incomplete and perhaps unreliable.

Quote:

*"His [the harlequin's] voice lost itself in the calm of the evening." (3.7)*

Thought:

Language is swallowed up and rendered meaningless by the African wilderness.

Quote:

*"Kurtz – Kurtz – that means short in German – don't it? Well, the name was as true as everything else in his life - and death. He looked at least seven feet long." (3.9)*

Thought:

The meaning of the German word "kurtz" is denied in reality. Kurtz is not short but "at least seven feet long." This demonstrates the divorce between language and meaning here in the interior.

Quote:

*[The harlequin]: "She got in one day and kicked up a row about those miserable rags I picked up in the storeroom to mend my clothes with. I wasn't decent. At least it must have been that, for she talked like a fury to Kurtz for an hour, pointing at me now and then. I don't understand the dialect of this tribe." (3.17)*

Thought:

The harlequin does not understand the warrior woman's speech. He assumes that she is talking about his clothing with no hard proof. She could very well have been blaming him for the coming of Marlow's crew. Readers are as clueless about her tirade as the harlequin is.

This is another example of language breaking down in the interior.

Quote:

*[The manager]: "He [Kurtz] is very low, very low,' he said. He considered it necessary to sigh, but neglected to be consistently sorrowful. 'We have done all we could for him - haven't we? But there is no disguising the fact, Mr. Kurtz has done more harm than good to the Company. He did not see the time was not ripe for vigorous action. Cautiously, cautiously - that's my principle. We must be cautious yet. The district is closed to us for a time. Deplorable! Upon the whole, the trade will suffer. I don't deny there is a remarkable quantity of ivory – mostly fossil. We must save it, at all events – but look how precarious the position is – and why? Because the method is unsound.'" (3.19)*

Thought:

The manager's words mean nothing. They cannot even get near the heart of the situation because his thoughts are so warped by his own greed and jealousy.

Quote:

*"Suppose he [Kurtz] began to shout? Though he could hardly stand, there was still plenty of vigour in his voice." (3.28)*

Thought:

Marlow recognizes that Kurtz's voice, the only strong thing about him, can still be a vehicle of communication. Thus, it poses a danger to him.

Quote:

*"Kurtz discoursed. A voice! a voice! It rang deep to the very last. It survived his strength to hide in the magnificent folds of eloquence the barren darkness of his heart. Oh, he struggled! he struggled! The wastes of his weary brain were haunted by shadowy images now – images of wealth and fame revolving obsequiously round his unextinguishable gift of noble and lofty expression. My Intended, my station, my career, my ideas – these were the subjects for the occasional utterances of elevated sentiments." (3.37)*

Thought:

Even when deprived of his potential kingdom, Kurtz speaks with moving eloquence. But now Marlow realizes just how "barren" and empty his words are. His words are now just hollow reflections of his dreams "of wealth and fame" and his favorite adjective, "my," is meaningless. Kurtz owns nothing now that he has been removed from the interior.

Quote:

*"[...] I heard him [Kurtz] mutter, 'Live rightly, die, die . . .' I listened. There was nothing more. Was he rehearsing some speech in his sleep, or was it a fragment of a phrase from some newspaper article? He had been writing for the papers and meant to do so again, 'for the furthering of my ideas. It's a duty.'" (3.39)*

Thought:

In his dying stages, Kurtz's words become incomprehensible to Marlow. He does not know whether Kurtz's meditations on life and death are meant for himself or for the public.

Quote:

*"The voice was gone. What else had been there?" (3.46)*

Thought:

Kurtz is referred to as simply a voice. Now that that is gone, he is truly dead. Marlow does not make any references to Kurtz's soul as he believes it is lost to perdition. Only emptiness remains in Kurtz's wake.

Quote:

*"I like to think my summing-up would not have been a word of careless contempt. Better his cry – much better. It was an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, but abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory! That is why I have remained loyal to Kurtz to the last, and even beyond, when a long time after I heard once more, not his own voice, but the echo of his magnificent eloquence thrown to me from a soul as translucently pure as a cliff of crystal." (3.48)*

Thought:

Marlow suspects that, had he faced such a challenge, he would not have had Kurtz's courage to judge, to hang on to a true belief. His judgment would have been "a word of careless contempt," perhaps a meaningless one. This is why, he claims, he remains loyal to Kurtz – he wants something to believe in firmly and resolutely and unwaveringly, just as Kurtz did.

Quote:

*"And the memory of what I had heard him say afar there, with the horned shapes stirring at my back, in the glow of fires, within the patient woods, those broken phrases came back to me, were heard again in their ominous and terrifying simplicity. I remembered his abject pleading,*

*his abject threats, the colossal scale of his vile desires, the meanness, the torment, the tempestuous anguish of his soul. And later on I seemed to see his collected languid manner, when he said one day, 'This lot of ivory now is really mine. The Company did not pay for it. I collected it myself at a very great personal risk. I am afraid they will try to claim it as theirs though. H'm. It is a difficult case. What do you think I ought to do – resist? Eh? I want no more than justice.' [...]." (3.51)*

Thought:

When having flashbacks, Marlow primarily remembers Kurtz's words, emphasizing his conviction that Kurtz has only a voice, not a true presence.

Quote:

*[The Intended]: "I feel I can speak to you - and oh! I must speak. I want you – you who have heard his last words – to know I have been worthy of him. [...] It is not pride. [...] Yes! I am proud to know I understood him better than any one on earth – he told me so himself." (3.59)*

Thought:

The Intended equates speaking with understanding, begging Marlow to speak to her of Kurtz because he was one of the few who understood him as she did.

Quote:

*"[...] Who was not his friend who had heard him speak once?' she (the Intended) was saying. 'He drew men towards him by what was best in them.' She looked at me with intensity. 'It is the gift of the great,' she went on [...]." (3.61)*

Thought:

The Intended puts great store by Kurtz's words, believing that they lured men to him and earned him his admiration from all mankind. She is naïve about the true motivations of men which are often far darker and more self-serving.

Quote:

*"'No!' she [the Intended] cried. 'It is impossible that all this should be lost – that such a life should be sacrificed to leave nothing - but sorrow. You know what vast plans he had. I knew of them, too – I could not perhaps understand - but others knew of them. Something must remain. His words, at least, have not died.'*

*'His words will remain,' I said." (3.68-69)*

Thought:

Words, it is suggested, are the only things that remain forever, that can capture memory and not fade away into nothingness.

Quote:

*"To the very end," I said, shakily. "I heard his very last words. . . ." I stopped in a fright.*

*'Repeat them,' she murmured in a heart-broken tone. 'I want—I want—something – something – to – to live with.'*

*I was on the point of crying at her, 'Don't you hear them?' The dusk was repeating them in a persistent whisper all around us, in a whisper that seemed to swell menacingly like the first whisper of a rising wind. 'The horror! The horror!'" (3.80-82)*

Thought:

That Kurtz's last words drum repeatedly in Marlow's mind reinforces the idea that words last forever.

Quote:

*[Marlow to the Intended]: "The last word he pronounced was - your name." (3.85)*

Thought:

The fact that Marlow says this and the Intended believes him is partially due to the fact that names constitute a very important part of language. They are an indication of identity.

## Fear Quotes

### Quote:

*"I began to feel slightly uneasy. You know I am not used to such ceremonies, and there was something ominous in the atmosphere. It was just as though I had been let into some conspiracy – I don't know – something not quite right; and I was glad to get out. In the outer room the two women knitted black wool feverishly. People were arriving, and the younger one was walking back and forth introducing them. The old one sat on her chair [...]. She wore a starched white affair on her head, had a wart on one cheek, and silver-rimmed spectacles hung on the tip of her nose. She glanced at me above the glasses. The swift and indifferent placidity of that look troubled me. Two youths with foolish and cheery countenances were being piloted over, and she threw at them the same quick glance of unconcerned wisdom. 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 scrutinising 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." (1.25)*

### Thought:

Marlow begins feeling nervous about his trip right after he signs his papers. The two knitting women increase his anxiety by gazing at him and all the other sailors with knowing unconcern. Their eerie looks suggest that they know what will happen (the men dying), yet don't care. This is the first time Marlow feels as if his trip might be ill-omened, but he quickly shakes it off.

### Quote:

*"In the street – I don't know why – a queer feeling came to me that I was an imposter. Odd thing that I, who used to clear out for any part of the world at twenty-four hours' notice, with less thought than most men give to the crossing of a street, had a moment – I won't say of hesitation, but of startled pause, before this commonplace affair. The best way I can explain it to you is by saying that, for a second or two, I felt as though, instead of going to the centre of a continent, I were about to set off for the centre of the earth." (1.29)*

### Thought:

Here, Marlow's earlier sense of unease deepens. He feels inexplicably that he is an imposter on this journey. Instead of taking this trip in stride – as he is accustomed to doing – he feels suddenly a stab of nervous anticipation, as if he is headed on a perilous journey towards the center of the earth, from which he may not come back alive.

Quote:

*"We capered on the iron deck. A frightful clatter came out of that hulk, and the virgin forest on the other bank of the creek sent it back in a thundering roll upon the sleeping station. It must have made some of the pilgrims sit up in their hovels." (1.70)*

Thought:

The pilgrims, sitting up fearful in bed, are ironically hearing only the wild celebration of their fellow men, not something frightful coming from the wilderness.

Quote:

*"'It is unpleasant,' grunted the uncle. 'He has asked the Administration to be sent there,' said the other, 'with the idea of showing what he could do; and I was instructed accordingly. Look at the influence that man must have. Is it not frightful?'" (2.1)*

Thought:

The manager and his uncle fear Kurtz for his ability to survive in the interior; therefore, they fear having to survive the interior themselves.

Quote:

*"They swore aloud together – out of sheer fright, I believe – then pretending not to know anything of my existence, turned back to the station." (2.3)*

Thought:

The manager and his uncle exemplify the constant fear induced by the wilderness.

Quote:

*"I had to keep guessing at the channel; I had to discern, mostly by inspiration, the signs of hidden banks; I watched for sunken stones; I was learning to clap my teeth smartly before my heart flew out, when I shaved by a fluke some infernal sly old snag that would have ripped the life out of the tin-pot steamboat and drowned all the pilgrims; I had to keep a lookout for the signs of dead wood we could cut up in the night for next day's steaming." (2.5)*

Thought:

Marlow lives in constant fear for the well-being of his steamboat, which is the pilgrims' one means of survival. He learns a healthy respect and fear for his hostile and vengeful beast that

is the wilderness.

Quote:

*"Not the faintest sound of any kind could be heard. You looked on amazed, and began to suspect yourself of being deaf – then the night came suddenly, and struck you blind as well. About three in the morning some large fish leaped, and the loud splash made me jump as though a gun had been fired. When the sun rose there was a white fog, very warm and clammy, and more blinding than the night. It did not shift or drive; it was just there, standing all around you like something solid." (2.13)*

Thought:

The interior deprives men of their senses and drives them slowly into madness. Here, the eerie stillness of the wilderness and the darkness of night render the men both deaf and blind. Any noise – even the mundane splashing of leaping fish – startles them and makes them fear immediately for their lives. When daylight comes, the fog still blinds them, seeming even more sinister than the night.

Quote:

*"Before it stopped running with a muffled rattle, a cry, a very loud cry, as of infinite desolation, soared slowly in the opaque air. It ceased. A complaining clamour, modulated in savage discords, filled our ears. The sheer unexpectedness of it made my hair stir under my cap. I don't know how it struck the others: to me it seemed as though the mist itself had screamed, so suddenly, and apparently from all sides at once, did this tumultuous and mournful uproar arise. It culminated in a hurried outbreak of almost intolerably excessive shrieking, which stopped short, leaving us stiffened in a variety of silly attitudes, and obstinately listening to the nearly as appalling and excessive silence. 'Good God! What is the meaning – ' stammered at my elbow one of the pilgrims - a little fat man, with sandy hair and red whiskers, who wore side-spring boots, and pink pyjamas tucked into his socks. Two others remained open-mouthed a while minute, then dashed into the little cabin, to rush out incontinently and stand darting scared glances, with Winchesters at 'ready' in their hands." (2.13)*

Thought:

The bloodcurdling cries of the native Africans, hiding somewhere in the underbrush on the riverbank, scare the men badly. Their fear is exacerbated by the former eerie silence and their inability to understand what is being communicated by the screeches. Though sensible Marlow does not panic, the pilgrims are either rendered speechless or run to grab their guns.

Quote:

*"'Will they attack?' whispered an awed voice. 'We will be all butchered in this fog,' murmured another. The faces twitched with the strain, the hands trembled slightly, the eyes forgot to wink." (2.14)*

Thought:

The pilgrims fear attack from the native Africans, who've just screamed somewhere beyond the blinding fog. Their fear is so potent that it has physical effects; their faces twitch involuntarily, their hands tremble, and their eyes watch the perimeter unblinkingly.

Quote:

*"You should have seen the pilgrims stare! They had no heart to grin, or even to revile me: but I believe they thought me gone mad - with fright, maybe. I delivered a regular lecture." (2.17)*

Thought:

The pilgrims think their captain Marlow has gone mad with fear when he does something as mundane as giving a lecture while everyone else is freaking out from paranoia.

Quote:

*"The man had rolled on his back and stared straight up at me; both his hands clutched that cane. It was the shaft of a spear that, either thrown or lunged through the opening, had caught him in the side, just below the ribs; the blade had gone in out of sight, after making a frightful gash; my shoes were full; a pool of blood lay very still, gleaming dark-red under the wheel; his eyes shone with an amazing lustre. The fusillade burst out again. He looked at me anxiously, gripping the spear like something precious, with an air of being afraid I would try to take it away from him. I had to make an effort to free my eyes from his gaze and attend to the steering. With one hand I felt above my head for the line of the steam whistle, and jerked out screech after screech hurriedly. The tumult of angry and warlike yells was checked instantly, and then from the depths of the woods went out such a tremulous and prolonged wail of mournful fear and utter despair as may be imagined to follow the flight of the last hope from the earth." (2.22)*

Thought:

At the sight of his foreman dying at his feet, Marlow feels a stab of fear and a weird fascination with death that forces him to "make an effort to free my eyes from his gaze." After the Africans evoke his fear, Marlow returns the favor. He blows the steam whistle loudly and repeatedly, scaring the attacking Africans away.

Quote:

*"I had put on a dry pair of slippers, I dragged him out, after first jerking the spear out of his side, which operation I confess I performed with my eyes shut tight." (2.30)*

Thought:

Marlow has an irrational fear of touching the dead helmsman.

Quote:

*"These round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic; they were expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing - food for thought and also for vultures if there had been any looking down from the sky; but at all events for such ants as were industrious enough to ascend the pole. They would have been even more impressive, those heads on the stakes, if their faces had not been turned to the house. Only one, the first I had made out, was facing my way. I was not so shocked as you may think. The start back I had given was really nothing but a movement of surprise. I had expected to see a knob of wood there, you know. I returned deliberately to the first I had seen - and there it was, black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids - a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and, with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of the teeth, was smiling, too, smiling continuously at some endless and jocose dream of that eternal slumber." (3.4)*

Thought:

Marlow's lack of fear at this horrifying discovery is telling. He has become jaded to the horrors of the interior.

Quote:

*"His [Kurtz's] ascendancy was extraordinary. The camps of these people surrounded the place, and the chiefs came every day to see him. They would crawl. [...] 'I don't want to know anything of the ceremonies used when approaching Mr. Kurtz,' I shouted. Curious, this feeling that came over me that such details would be more intolerable than those heads drying on the stakes under Mr. Kurtz's windows. After all, that was only a savage sight, while I seemed at one bound to have been transported into some lightless region of subtle horrors, where pure, uncomplicated savagery was a positive relief, being something that had a right to exist - obviously - in the sunshine." (3.6)*

Thought:

Marlow is still clinging to his morals, if only by a thread. He is no longer horrified at the thought of living in a world where evil can exist openly. He is, however, scared badly by the thought of people (like the native Africans) openly worshipping evil - as symbolized by Kurtz.

Quote:

*"The fact is I was completely unnerved by a sheer blank fright, pure abstract terror, unconnected with any distinct shape of physical danger. What made this emotion so overpowering was – how shall I define it? – the moral shock I received, as if something altogether monstrous, intolerable to thought and odious to the soul, had been thrust upon me unexpectedly. This lasted of course the merest fraction of a second, and then the usual sense of commonplace, deadly danger, the possibility of a sudden onslaught and massacre, or something of the kind, which I saw impending, was positively welcome and composing. It pacified me, in fact, so much that I did not raise an alarm." (3.24)*

Thought:

Marlow is struck senseless with fear, an absolutely pure terror, at the realization that Kurtz is gone. He describes this as a "moral shock" that quickly subsides into a more rational and less bleak fear of commonplace danger. It is disconcerting that "commonplace, deadly dangers, the possibility of a sudden onslaught and massacre" are "positively welcome and composing."

Quote:

*"Only the barbarous and superb woman did not so much as flinch, and stretched tragically her bare arms after us over the sombre and glittering river." (3.34)*

Thought:

The warrior woman is the only one of the native Africans who doesn't fear the noise of the steam whistle. She doesn't budge. Perhaps this is because she represents the wilderness, who does not fear the men, but is only amused by their antics.

Quote:

*[Kurtz]: "The horror! The horror!" (3.43)*

Thought:

Kurtz's final judgment on his life, his actions, mankind in general, imperialism, or his fate is one of deep and profound fear.

## Fate and Free Will Quotes

### Quote:

*"I felt somehow I must get there [to the Congo] by hook or by crook. So I worried them. The men said, 'My dear fellow,' and did nothing. Then – would you believe it? – I tried the women. I, Charlie Marlow, set the women to work – to get a job. Heavens! Well, you see the notion drove me. I had an aunt, a dear enthusiastic soul. She wrote: 'It will be delightful. I am ready to do anything, anything for you. It is a glorious idea. I know the wife of a very high personage in the Administration, and also a man who has lots of influence [...].'" (1.19)*

### Thought:

Marlow feels inevitably drawn to Africa, as if by destiny, and thus makes the choice to begin hounding his relatives to help him procure a steamboat. This leads to a chance meeting with his aunt in which she uses her influence with the Company to help him get exactly what he wants. Therefore, both chance and choice bring Marlow to Kurtz.

### Quote:

*(At Brussels): "Two women, one fat and the other slim, sat on straw-bottomed chairs, knitting black wool. The slim one got up and walked straight at me – still knitting with downcast eyes – and only just as I began to think of getting out of her way, as you would for a somnambulist, stood still, and looked up. Her dress was as plain as an umbrella-cover, and she turned round without a word and preceded me into a waiting-room." (1.23)*

### Thought:

These two women represent the Greek *Moirae*, or Fates, who spin and cut every human being's thread of life. The slim one who gets up is described as a somnambulist (or sleep-walker) who is so engrossed in her spinning (of men's destinies) that she does not really see Marlow.

### Quote:

*"I began to feel slightly uneasy. You know I am not used to such ceremonies, and there was something ominous in the atmosphere. It was just as though I had been let into some conspiracy – I don't know – something not quite right; and I was glad to get out. In the outer room the two women knitted black wool feverishly. People were arriving, and the younger one was walking back and forth introducing them. The old one sat on her chair...She wore a starched white affair on her head, had a wart on one cheek, and silver-rimmed spectacles hung on the tip of her nose. She glanced at me above the glasses. The swift and indifferent placidity of that look troubled me. Two youths with*

*foolish and cheer countenances were being piloted over, and she threw at them the same quick glance of unconcerned wisdom. 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 scrutinising 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." (1.25)*

Thought:

After signing his papers, Marlow gets an inexplicable feeling of uneasiness, as if he has just entered into some unclean conspiracy. The old knitting women do nothing to calm him, but only increase his discomfort with their placid, knowing looks. They seem to know each man's fate and acknowledge visions of their upcoming deaths with careless acceptance.

Quote:

*"In the street – I don't know why – a queer feeling came to me that I was an imposter. Odd thing that I, who used to clear out for any part of the world at a twenty-four hours' notice, with less thought than most men give to the crossing of a street, had a moment – I won't say of hesitation, but of startled pause, before this commonplace affair. The best way I can explain it to you is by saying that, for a second or two, I felt as though, instead of going to the centre of a continent, I were about to set off for the centre of the earth." (1.30)*

Thought:

Marlow feels a nervous anticipation about starting his journey, as though Fate believes he is not capable.

Quote:

*"But as I stood on this hillside, 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." (1.37)*

Thought:

Fate allows Marlow to see what horrors lay in store for him, specifically a new kind of devil which Marlow is not familiar with. For one brief spasm of a moment, he has doubts about whether or not he should go on after perceiving Fate's warning. But he allows this doubt to rule him only for an instant.

Quote:

*[The accountant]: "Oh, he [Kurtz] will go far, very far," he began again. 'He will be a somebody in the Administration before long. They, above – the Council in Europe, you know - mean him to be.'" (1.47)*

Thought:

Kurtz is presented as a man destined for great things.

Quote:

*[At the Central Station]: "One of them, a stout, excitable chap [...] informed me [...] that my steamer was at the bottom of the river. I was thunderstruck. What, how, why? Oh, it was "all right." The "manager himself" was there. All quite correct [...]*

*I did not see the real significance of that wreck at once. I fancy I see it now, but I am not sure – not at all. Certainly the affair was too stupid – when I think of it – to be altogether natural. Still...but at the moment it presented itself simply as a confounded nuisance. The steamer was sunk. They had started two days before in a sudden hurry up the river with the manager on board, in charge of some volunteer skipper, and before they had been out three hours they tore the bottom out of her on stones, and she sank near the south bank....the repairs when I brought the pieces to the station, took some months." (1.50-51)*

Thought:

What seems at first an accident, Marlow later suspects to have been a planned attempt at sabotage.

Quote:

*"I heard the name of Kurtz pronounced, then the words, 'take advantage of this unfortunate accident.'" (1.56)*

Thought:

The fact that the manager wants to take advantage of this so-called "unfortunate accident" brings into question whether it was a bad turn of luck or someone's willful attempt to sabotage (indirectly) Kurtz.

Quote:

*[The manager's uncle]: "Ah! my boy, trust to this – I say, trust to this." I saw him extend his*

*short flipper of an arm for a gesture that took in the forest, the creek the mud, the river – seemed to beckon with a dishonouring flourish before the sunlit face of the land a treacherous appeal to the lurking death, to the hidden evil, to the profound darkness of its heart. It was so startling that I leaped to my feet and looked back at the edge of the forest, as though I had expected an answer of some sort to that black display of confidence [...] (2.2)*

Thought:

The jungle is so ominous that Marlow expects whatever dark force resides there to emerge from the darkness and strike down the manager's uncle for daring to believe it would ever bow to his will. His journey to the interior now seems more ill-starred than ever.

Quote:

*"And I didn't do badly either, since I managed not to sink that steamboat on my first trip. It's a wonder to me yet. Imagine a blindfolded man set to drive a van over a bad road. I sweated and shivered over that business considerably, I can tell you [...] I don't pretend to say that steamboat floated all the time. More than once she had to wade for a bit, with twenty cannibals splashing around and pushing." (2.7)*

Thought:

Marlow manages to get the steamboat whole and unscathed up the Congo and to the Inner Station. He endures a great deal of difficulty keeping it afloat and one wonders whether or not he was meant to get there alive. Marlow himself admits that he scraped the bottom more than once with the steamboat. But Fate seems to be Marlow's side.

Quote:

*"I couldn't have felt more of lonely desolation somehow, had I been robbed of a belief or had missed my destiny in life [...]." (2.25)*

Thought:

Marlow has felt all this time that it was his destiny to meet Kurtz – now he feels cheated out of it.

Quote:

*"It appears these niggers do bury the tusks sometimes - but evidently they couldn't bury this parcel deep enough to save the gifted Mr. Kurtz from his fate." (2.29)*

Thought:

The black native Africans' attempts to hide Kurtz's stash of ivory could not save him from his destiny – that of being discovered by Marlow's crew and eventually of being taken away from the interior.

Quote:

*"Poor fool! If he [the helmsman] had only left that shutter alone." (2.30)*

Thought:

Marlow laments his helmsman's fate and wishes that he could have had the foresight to prevent his death. It is as if the helmsman was destined to die.

Quote:

*[The harlequin]: "So many accidents happen to a man going about alone, you know. Canoes get upset sometimes – and sometimes you've got to clear out so quick when the people get angry." (2.37)*

Thought:

The harlequin comments on the fickle nature of Fate in the interior. It gives men "many accidents" as if trying to kill those who dare venture into the interior.

Quote:

*"I did not envy him [the harlequin] his devotion to Kurtz, though. He had not meditated over it. It came to him, and he accepted it with a sort of eager fatalism." (3.1)*

Thought:

When it comes to Kurtz, the harlequin seems to have no free will. He does not think (or "meditate") over Kurtz's purpose but accepts his words thoughtlessly, fatefully. Marlow thinks him an eager fatalist whose blind devotion to Kurtz can only end badly.

Quote:

*"They had come together unavoidably, like two ships becalmed near each other, and lay rubbing sides at last." (3.2)*

Thought:

It seems destined that Kurtz and the harlequin should meet each other.

Quote:

*"The knitting old woman with the cat obtruded herself upon my memory as a most improper person to be sitting at the other end of such an affair." (3.26)*

Thought:

As Marlow chases Kurtz through the woods, the image of the old knitting woman (representing Fate) intrudes on his thoughts. Though it is only subconsciously, Marlow knows he is destined to find Kurtz in the wilderness and bring him back; he is destined to allow the greater evil to win.

Quote:

*"I was strangely cocksure of everything that night. I actually left the track and ran in a wide semicircle (I verily believe chuckling to myself) so as to get in front of that stir, of that motion I had seen - if indeed I had seen anything. I was circumventing Kurtz as though it had been a boyish game. " (3.27)*

Thought:

Marlow, driven by destiny, is sure of all his movements when chasing after Kurtz. He has enough confidence in fate to leave the manmade trail in the woods and strike out into the wilderness blindly, knowing he will find Kurtz. To him, it seems like a "boyish game," which is exactly what it is to the knitting Fates.

Quote:

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Thought:

Marlow knows that since he chose to be on Kurtz's side instead of the manager's, he is fated to be "numbered with the dead" as far as the crew is concerned. Marlow comes to terms with this unfriendly fate, this "choice of nightmares" that was really not his choice; the circumstance forced this decision upon him.

Quote:

*"But I am of course aware that next day the pilgrims buried something in a muddy hole.*

*And then they very nearly buried me." (3.46-47)*

Thought:

Marlow is almost fated to die alongside Kurtz. This is not remarkable per se. Marlow and Kurtz's lives paralleled each other – it should come as no surprise that they almost share the same death.

Quote:

*"I remained to dream the nightmare out to the end, and to show my loyalty to Kurtz once more. Destiny. My destiny! Droll thing life is – that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself – that comes too late – a crop of unextinguishable regrets." (3.48)*

Thought:

Marlow shows contempt for Fate. He cannot fathom it or its purpose. But he does learn from it; he learns of his deepest self but is also left with "a crop of unextinguishable regrets." In *Heart of Darkness*, Fate does not seem to have a happy ending for anyone.

## Time Quotes

### Quote:

*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. (1.1)*

### Thought:

The story begins with an interruption. The *Nellie*, stranded by a flood, can do nothing but wait for the tide to turn to continue her journey. It is during this delay that Marlow tells his story.

### Quote:

*And indeed nothing is easier for a man who has, as the phrase goes, 'followed the sea' with reverence and affection, that 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. (1.6)*

### Thought:

Marlow's love for the sea turns his eyes to its past and glorious history. He recounts all the pioneers of the Thames River, all commissioned to exploration by the crown. It is obvious from Marlow's tone that he reveres these historical figures.

### Quote:

*We looked on, waiting patiently – there was nothing else to do till the end of the flood; but it was only after a long silence, when he said, in a hesitating voice, "I suppose you fellows remember I did once turn fresh-water sailor for a bit," that we knew we were fated, before the ebb began to run, to hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences. (1.14)*

### Thought:

Marlow's story is told in a period of delay as the *Nellie* cannot sail for lack of a sufficient tide.

The crew resigns itself to hearing about one of Marlow's past inscrutable journeys.

Quote:

*"I had to wait in the station for ten days – an eternity." (1.45)*

Thought:

Marlow hates delay and wants to get started as soon as possible on his journey into the heart of Africa. He is impatient. This is interesting, given that the *Nellie* is itself delayed while he tells his story.

Quote:

*"I asked myself what I was to do there, now my boat was lost. As a matter of fact, I had plenty to do in fishing my command out of the river. I had to set about it the very next day. That, and the repairs when I brought the pieces to the station, took some months." (1.51)*

Thought:

Marlow is so intent on making his journey that he loses no time in beginning repairs on the steamboat. However, the damage is done and he must delay his trip yet again.

Quote:

*"Oh, these months!" (1.55)*

Thought:

Conrad uses these delays to increase the sense of suspense and give Marlow (and the readers) more time to grow curious about Kurtz.

Quote:

*"However, they were all waiting – all the sixteen or twenty pilgrims of them – for something; and upon my word it did not seem an uncongenial occupation, from the way they took it, though the only thing that ever came to them was disease – as far as I could see. They beguiled the time by back-biting and intriguing against each other in a foolish kind of way. There was an air of plotting about that station, but nothing came of it, of course." (1.56)*

Thought:

Conrad plays with time to give the situation a feeling of futility and ineptitude. Everyone

experiences a sense of delay and, particularly in Marlow's case, a sense of endless ennui in the constant waiting.

Quote:

*[Marlow]: "Of course in this you fellows see more than I could then. You see me, whom you know [...]." (1.65)*

Thought:

The current, story-telling Marlow emphasizes the differences between himself now and himself as a character in his tale. His maturation from these events of a year ago has now given him a wisdom and perspective he previously lacked.

Quote:

*"Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings." (2.5)*

Thought:

The Congo River is a linear representation of time; the further the men go up it, the more they feel as if they are traveling backwards in time. The jungle they encounter is so thick and untouched that they feel as if they are traversing a prehistoric world.

Quote:

*"There were moments when one's past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare for yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence." (2.5)*

Thought:

In the weird, prehistoric world of the interior, Marlow's own past comes flashing back to him. Though one would expect this to give him reassurance, to help him remember who he is and remain sane, it does quite the opposite. For the memories come back not as he remembers them, but wrapped in the unfamiliar disguise of an "unrestful and noisy dream." Thus, even one's own memories become alien and unfamiliar in the reality-warping interior.

Quote:

*"We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown*

*planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil." (2.7)*

Thought:

Marlow and his crew feel as if they have stepped into a deep past; he believes they are the first men ever to walk this savage planet. Marlow feels as if he is charged with the duty to tame this wild earth at the cost of personal turmoil. Such is the power of the interior.

Quote:

*"We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign – and no memories." (2.7)*

Thought:

The men are completely devoid of any understanding of their surroundings; even though they are traversing the prehistoric past, they cannot access their *own* pasts, their *own* memories.

Quote:

*"I don't think a single one of them had any clear idea of time, as we at the end of countless ages have. They still belonged to the beginnings of time [...]." (2.14)*

Thought:

Marlow observes that the native Africans' concept of time is far different from the linear, European one. However, he is arrogant about it and assumes that they have no concept of time whatsoever, never entertaining the thought that theirs might simply be different.

Quote:

*"[...] the memory of that time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense." (2.27)*

Thought:

In the present, Marlow comments that the memory of his journey up the Congo remains with him, as if he is constantly caught in that journey and cannot break free of it.

Quote:

*"The glamour of youth enveloped his [the harlequin's] parti-coloured rags, his destitution, his loneliness, the essential desolation of his futile wanderings. For months - for years - his life hadn't been worth a day's purchase; and there he was gallantly, thoughtlessly alive, to all appearances indestructible solely by the virtue of his few years and of his unreflecting audacity." (3.1)*

Thought:

The harlequin has survived in the wilderness for years, despite the fact that back in Europe, he is not worth a "day's purchase" – or a single payday. However, in the interior, time becomes as warped as reality.

Quote:

*[The harlequin]: "'We talked of everything,' he said, quite transported at the recollection. 'I forgot there was such a thing as sleep. The night did not seem to last an hour.'" (3.2)*

Thought:

The harlequin's conversations with Kurtz were so engaging that time seemed to fly for them. Words have a way of warping time.

Quote:

*"The brown current ran swiftly out of the heart of darkness, bearing us down towards the sea with twice the speed of our upward progress; and Kurtz's life was running swiftly, too, ebbing, ebbing out of his heart into the sea of inexorable time." (3.36)*

Thought:

Going downstream on the Congo River, which we have by now equated with traveling through time, is much faster than moving upstream. Since Marlow and his crew are headed *back* towards civilized Europe, they feel as if they are traveling *forward* in time.

Quote:

*"All that had been Kurtz's had passed out of my hands: his soul, his body, his station, his plans, his ivory, his career. There remained only his memory and his Intended – and I wanted to give that up, too, to the past, in a way – to surrender personally all that remained of him with me to that oblivion which is the last word of our common fate." (3.50)*

Thought:

One of the reasons Marlow wants to get rid of Kurtz's letters is so that he can put Kurtz and his whole journey behind him, so that he can resign it peacefully to the past.

Quote:

*"I thought his memory was like the other memories of the dead that accumulate in every man's life – a vague impress on the brain of shadows that had fallen on it in their swift and final passage; but before the high and ponderous door, between the tall houses of a street as still and decorous as a well-kept alley in a cemetery, I had a vision of him on the stretcher, opening his mouth voraciously, as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind. He lived then before me; he lived as much as he had ever lived – a shadow insatiable of splendid appearances, of frightful realities; a shadow darker than the shadow of the night, and draped nobly in the folds of a gorgeous eloquence. The vision seemed to enter the house with me - the stretcher, the phantom-bearers, the wild crowd of obedient worshippers, the gloom of the forests, the glitter of the reach between the murky bends, the beat of the drum, regular and muffled like the beating of a heart – the heart of a conquering darkness. It was a moment of triumph for the wilderness, an invading and vengeful rush which, it seemed to me, I would have to keep back alone for the salvation of another soul. And the memory of what I had heard him say afar there, with the horned shapes stirring at my back, in the glow of fires, within the patient woods, those broken phrases came back to me, were heard again in their ominous and terrifying simplicity. I remembered his abject pleading, his abject threats, the colossal scale of his vile desires, the meanness, the torment, the tempestuous anguish of his soul. And later on I seemed to see his collected languid manner, when he said one day, 'This lot of ivory now is really mine. The Company did not pay for it. I collected it myself at a very great personal risk. I am afraid they will try to claim it as theirs though. H'm. It is a difficult case. What do you think I ought to do - resist? Eh? I want no more than justice.' [...] He wanted no more than justice - no more than justice. I rang the bell before a mahogany door on the first floor, and while I waited he seemed to stare at me out of the glassy panel – stare with that wide and immense stare embracing, condemning, loathing all the universe. I seemed to hear the whispered cry, "The horror! The horror!" (3.51)*

Thought:

The past comes powerfully and vividly alive for Marlow as he makes his way to the Intended's house. He finds that his memories are not the "vague impress on the brain" that he has been accustomed to. In contrast, he remembers his meeting with Kurtz quite lucidly.

Quote:

*"It was more than a year since his death, more than a year since the news came; she [the Intended] seemed as though she would remember and mourn forever [...]. But while we were*

*still shaking hands, such a look of awful desolation came upon her face that I perceived she was one of those creatures that are not the playthings of Time. For her he had died only yesterday. And, by Jove! the impression was so powerful that for me, too, he seemed to have died only yesterday – nay, this very minute. I saw her and him in the same instant of time – his death and her sorrow – I saw her sorrow in the very moment of his death. Do you understand? I saw them together – I heard them together." (3.53)*

Thought:

Kurtz's Intended seems as if she is not susceptible to the ravages nor the comforts of passing time. She stretches the time of mourning into eternity.

## Characters

### Character Roles (Protagonist, Antagonist...)

#### Protagonist

##### Marlow

We follow Marlow's story for the majority of the book, although he is not always our narrator. We sympathize with him because we assume he has a higher standard of morality than the majority of his colleagues. His motivation for going up the Congo River is not unadulterated greed or ambition for power. We know from the very beginning that he travels because he has a deep fascination with maps and unexplored spaces. He is also a good deal more sensible than his peers (such as the manager or brickmaker).

We realize as the plot continues that Marlow's driving characteristic is his curiosity. From the very beginning, he is fascinated by Mr. Kurtz and as he is fed more and more information – sometimes through unscrupulous means – Marlow finds himself irresistibly drawn to the man.

When he reaches the interior – one of many hearts of darkness – Marlow finds himself at a moral dead end. He must make a choice between two evils and, surprisingly, siding with Kurtz seems the lesser of two evils. In making this "choice between nightmares," Marlow finds the fortitude to separate himself from his corrupted peers, though it is questionable how much virtue he saves by supporting heads-on-sticks Kurtz.

Marlow's last vestige of illusion that the universe is fundamentally good is wiped away in his final interview with Kurtz's Intended. After her naïve assessment of a situation which she never saw and, Marlow knows, was fundamentally different than she believes, Marlow lies to her. In some ways, this is about Marlow giving up. Taking on a pessimistic view of life, he realizes that the world is dark and he'd better just go along and lie about it than try to maintain his integrity by standing up to the darkness.

#### Antagonist

##### The Manager

The manager proves an enemy to Marlow simply because of his intentions to oust Kurtz, a man with whom Marlow has begun to sympathize. Like many of his peers, the manager is driven by greed and ambition to move up the ladder of rank within the Company. He irks Marlow with his endless jabbering and, although Marlow never explicitly accuses him, he suspects that the manager had everything to do with the "accident" that his steamboat suffered. The manager fears Kurtz as a threat to his position and will stop at nothing to remove

him, as seen by his unnatural immunity to disease. In another, subtler way, the manager proves disturbing to us readers since he is immersed in emptiness imagery. The idea of him being hollow strikes us, in sharp contrast to Marlow's always-busy mind.

## **Antagonist**

### **The Brickmaker**

Like the manager, the brickmaker wants only to climb up the corporate ladder. However, he seems even more shady than the manager since he has a lower rank and is willing to resort to even lower tactics to get what he wants. It is implied that he uses his silver tongue to weasel his way into the trust of his victims – Company members with powerful connections. Marlow, a somewhat naïve man, does not realize quite what the brickmaker wants from him with all his useless talking. But Marlow soon finds out that the man intends to get into the good graces of Marlow's powerful aunt. Wrapped in devil imagery, the brickmaker indeed exudes an aura of sinister trickery.

## **Guide/Mentor**

## **Foil**

### **Kurtz and Marlow**

We can't decide if Marlow is a foil to Kurtz, or if Kurtz is a foil to Marlow. Either way, the two men reflect certain disturbing aspects of each other. It seems that much of the novel depicts Marlow's slow decay and transformation into the corrupted Kurtz, but stops one vital step short. Like Kurtz, Marlow shows a certain amount of respect to the native Africans – admiring their physical strength and sympathizing with their plight, especially at the Outer Station.

However, this is not true respect as we 21st century Americans would deem it. Marlow, like Kurtz, does not see the native Africans as the white man's equal and he buys in, to some degree, to all the bombastic rhetoric of "civilizing" them. This shows such a disturbing disdain for their cultural identity and intelligence that it begins to echo Kurtz's eloquent diary where he urges, at one point (the crazed postscript point), for the Company to eliminate all the savages. Marlow shares the same fascination with language that Kurtz nurtures, understanding that one's articulation in language can be the difference between plunging into madness and reconciling oneself with the true evil of the situation.

## **Foil**

### **The Helmsman's Death and Kurtz's Death**

The helmsman isn't really a foil to Kurtz. But their deaths definitely do share some odd parallels. Both men die in the same place on board Marlow's steamship. Marlow declares that

the helmsman would have been fine had he just "left that shutter alone," while Kurtz stares through the very same shutter unit he makes a point of telling Marlow to close it. Marlow throws his shoes overboard just after the death of the helmsman, while he gives away a pair of shoes shortly before the death of Kurtz. These are small and insignificant on their own, but they start to build us a picture for the more important stuff. Here comes the more important stuff.

Marlow says of his dead helmsman that "he had no restraint, no restraint – just like Kurtz – a tree swayed by the wind." Well, that's rather explicit. But if you missed it the first time, Marlow later says that Kurtz is – you got it, yes, "a tree swayed by the wind," which harkens right back to this passage. In fact, the helmsman's death is the point at which Marlow breaks from his story and alludes to several events that are yet to come in his narrative, including his meeting Kurtz, the man's death, and his (Marlow's) visit to the Intended. It is interesting that this point, the helmsman's death, is where we get this odd and actually sort of confusing break.

But, like any good foil, the death of the helmsman isn't identical to the death of Kurtz. The most important difference is what they say (or do not say) before they die. Kurtz, of course, utters the famous "the horror" line. And the helmsman? Marlow tells us that "it looked as though he would put to us some question in an understandable language; but he died without uttering a sound." Hmm. That doesn't give us much to work with. However, he does manage to frown noticeably before he expires, with what we are told is a "menacing expression." This sounds like foreshadowing to the message Kurtz will deliver, slightly more vocally, towards the end of the novel.

There's one more interesting thing to pay attention to here. When Marlow throws the body of the helmsman overboard, he notes that he is "heavy, heavy; heavier than any man on earth." Yet, when he carries the sickly Kurtz back from the jungle, this guy is "not much heavier than a child." Or so he thinks at the time. Marlow ends up physically exhausted from his journey. Hmm. We see a great weight in his tossing the helmsman overboard; he shared a kinship with this man, he says, and we see that reflected in the burden of disposing of his body. But his dealing with Kurtz is a whole 'nother weight altogether. Although the man is emaciated and thin, Marlow feels the weight of the world on his shoulders when he carries him. Kurtz isn't just a man; he's man's corruption, man's depravity, man's greed and destruction. And that's a lot to carry out of the jungle.

## **Companion**

### **The Harlequin (to Kurtz)**

The strange Russian man dubbed "the harlequin" worships Kurtz. Because of his uncomfortable relationship with his father – who does not approve of all the time his son wastes on ships – the harlequin finds comfort and friendship in Kurtz's company – or so he believes. The truth is that he is really more of a lackey and listener to Kurtz than a true

companion. By listening to Kurtz's mad discourse, he believes that the man has "expanded [his] mind" and broadened his horizons. By buying into Kurtz's foolish rationale, he finds it easier to help him commit atrocious acts – like raiding other tribes and villages for their ivory. The harlequin, as something of a religious outcast, is searching for a god. And he finds it in Kurtz.

## Tools of Characterization

### Action

Since there is not much physical description or even speech, Conrad develops most of his characters through action. As the protagonist, Marlow receives a great deal more interior consistency than most of the other characters. The accountant, the manager, the brickmaker, and even Kurtz show a great divide between what they say and what they do. Often, their actions are far more indicative of their true character than their speech.

### Direct Characterization

We know a lot about Marlow because of what the peripheral, nameless narrator tells us. "Marlow was not typical," he explains. He goes on to detail Marlow's story-telling beliefs, that "to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside" and so on and so on in this rather poetic and hugely important passage.

### Names

Did you notice that no one around here seems to have a name? Besides Marlow and Kurtz, that is. Everyone else just has a title/profession: the accountant, the harlequin, the manager, the Intended. It could be that this illustrates the dehumanization of men in the wilderness of the Congo. If this is true, then what's so *human* about Marlow and Kurtz? At the most elementary level, names are used to highlight the importance of Marlow and Kurtz above all other characters. But we think there must be more to it. Have at it.

### Speech and Dialogue

#### Standard British English

Since Marlow is the narrator, we get mostly his speech and thoughts in his specific vernacular, which is rife with British witticisms. As a general rule, only the white people speak and their speech is given in standard English. Some of the characters – namely the brickmaker and the harlequin – have rather erratic speech. Their speeches are often marked with hyphens, showing a good deal of hesitation and uncertainty.

#### The Native Africans' Wordless Grunts and Cries

For the most part, black slaves and native Africans do not speak, at least not English. There are some instances where they communicate nonverbally, through ritualized gestures or loud emotional cries. However, these are highly unintelligible to Marlow, save for the exceptional

occasions when overwhelming emotion graces their voices. However, readers often find that the Africans have a more effective way of communicating than Marlow and crew's manner of speaking.

## **Pidgin English**

Occasionally, a black slave (such as the manager's boy) or a cannibal speaks in English to communicate vital information to Marlow. Their English is always marked with heavy accents and, often, with incorrect grammar. Their speaking has a distinctly pidgin feel to it and highlights their inability to completely function in the white man's world.

## Charlie Marlow

Marlow is a British seaman whose obsession with Africa brings him into the interior on the Company's steamboat.

### Marlow and Kurtz

Marlow's feelings on the mysterious Mr. Kurtz go through several evolutions. Let's start at the beginning. When we first hear of Kurtz through Marlow, the man is described with apathy; Marlow is not "very interested in him." It is not until he hears the story of Kurtz turning back to the jungle that he becomes fascinated. This is when he "[sees] Kurtz for the first time," as a solitary white man among black men.

Shortly after, Marlow confesses that he is excited to see the man soon – a far cry from the indifference displayed only a few pages earlier. Marlow even goes so far as to say that, for him, the journey has become entirely about speaking with Kurtz. The boat, he says, "crawled towards Kurtz – exclusively."

Now that's interesting. What was it about that story of Kurtz returning to the jungle that grabbed Marlow? Well, we've already seen our storyteller become utterly fascinated by the jungle and its people. But at the same time he is drawn in by this primitive wilderness, he is terrified by it. It is a thrill, he says, but it is also horrifying. Kurtz has done what Marlow can only dream of: refuse to return to the luxury and comfort of England and choose instead to pursue fortune and glory, danger be damned.

Yet it doesn't end there. Marlow's feelings for Kurtz eventually turn to bitter resentment once he actually meets the man. Marlow is made uneasy by the cultish adoration that the harlequin and, apparently, all the native Africans, hold for Kurtz. "He is no idol of mine," Marlow declares, in what seems to be an attempt to differentiate himself from the brainwashed men around him. He also notes that, of all the elements of the wilderness the harlequin has encountered, his devotion to Kurtz is the most dangerous. Marlow becomes angry that he's at the mercy of Kurtz, which stands quite in contrast to the awe and admiration he felt earlier.

So what's next? Marlow begins to see Kurtz as childish, a helpless and selfish man who has ignorant dreams of becoming rich and powerful. Not only is the man infantile in his thoughts, but in his physicality, too, as Marlow carries him as though he is a child. Despite this, Marlow does again express a certain admiration for the man, this time for the famous words he utters on his death bed: "The horror! The horror!" Marlow appears to believe these are words of self-realization, when Kurtz may finally be facing the horrible nature of his own deeds – and perhaps the depravity of human nature in his mind. Marlow respects Kurtz for summing up so eloquently (and succinctly!) his realizations. "Kurtz was a remarkable man," Marlow says, because he "had something to say" and simply "said it."

Whatever the feelings, Marlow still declares that he "knew [Kurtz] as well as it is possible for one man to know another." But there is an interesting part following this, where Kurtz's Intended asks Marlow whether he admired Kurtz. Marlow begins to answer, but gets interrupted. We are left unsure as to what he would have said. When the fiancée suggests that Marlow loved the man, Marlow is left in "appalled dumbness." By the end of the narrative, what does he really feel toward Kurtz? Good question.

Marlow experiences a rather complicated range of emotions toward Kurtz, as you might have noticed. For Marlow, things with Kurtz should be pretty simple. He thought he admired the guy, and then he found out the man puts heads on sticks, so he stopped admiring him. Great. Let's go home. But, it doesn't quite work like that. Go home if you want, but you'll miss out on what makes *Heart of Darkness* so powerful, fascinating, and famous. Instead, we're going to suggest a wild idea here: *Marlow is like Kurtz*. Oh, the horror! Yes, that's right; our protagonist, our loveable, sympathetic Marlow, is similar to the crazed, cult-inspiring, heads-on-sticks-owning devil-man. We'll start with the basics.

Like Kurtz, Marlow comes from an upper middleclass white European family. Both nurture a certain arrogance. Marlow considers himself above the manager, the uncle, and the brickmaker while Kurtz establishes himself in an unparalleled seat of power among the native Africans. Both have streaks of obsession in them; Marlow becomes obsessed with Africa and finding Kurtz, while Kurtz stops at nothing to acquire as much ivory as possible. Both have powerful connections (Marlow through his aunt) that allow them access to positions of power within the Company.

It gets even better, as both men have eerily similar reactions to their forays to the interior of Africa. Marlow and Kurtz, despite their desire to conquer the wilderness, become victims of it. To make this point as clear as possible, Conrad uses some very specific instances to tap, if not beat, us on the head. When Marlow observes native Africans dancing at the shore, he wonders why he doesn't go ashore "for a howl and a dance." Later, he discusses Kurtz in the context of some "midnight dances" that ended in "certain unspeakable rites." Both men are described as gods – Kurtz as Jupiter and Marlow as Buddha. Both men lose touch with reality – Kurtz in the fantasy of his own power and Marlow in the dream-like world of the jungle.

So of course, the million-dollar question is whether or not Marlow is ultimately able to differentiate himself from Kurtz. What do you think?

### **Marlow and the Native Africans**

For the most part, Marlow comes across as a nice guy, if not a particularly ethical one. He's no saint, or he's a helpless one, as he does nothing about the horrible scenarios of black slavery he encounters. But he does do little things that show compassion. He attempts to give a biscuit to a starving slave. He treats his own cannibals decently. When the helmsman dies, he makes sure he won't be ignobly eaten by the native Africans on board. So, the surface

level, Marlow is a decent guy who, as a product of his times, isn't about to start a civil rights movement in the late nineteenth century.

But, like most things in *Heart of Darkness*, it's really not that simple. What causes Marlow to feel such compassion for the native Africans? How does he see them in relation to himself? How does his foray down the Congo change the way he thinks? Here we go.

Marlow's very first words are fascinating. So much so, in fact, that we underlined, highlighted, and circled them, as well as dog-eared the page and putting three sticky notes on the top. In case you were not quite so over-zealous, we'll tell you straight-up that his first words are: "And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth." This is the part where we all say, "Oooh." Oooh indeed. Marlow is about to tell the story of a dark and primitive Africa which the Europeans are so kindly "civilizing." But he reminds you that Europe, too, was once a dark and primitive place.

From the start, Marlow takes this whole noble imperialism bit with a boulder of salt. He would tell the men that "strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others." He also notes that "This conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion [...] than ourselves, is not a pretty thing." He also questions everyone's use of words like "criminal," "enemy," and "rebel" in talking about the native Africans.

So Marlow isn't quite so comfortable with viewing the world in black and white, both literally and figuratively. Naturally, things get even more complicated when he starts becoming like a "savage" himself. After talking to the manager at the outer station, Marlow is treated like a native African man, not given a seat or any food. His response? "I was getting savage," he says, unable to converse with the man as a normal, cultured European would do. Hmm. Rather than civilizing the "savages," it seems, Marlow and others begin to become like them.

Marlow's *most* interesting discourse on the "savages" occurs shortly after his confession that the African cannibals really aren't so bad after all. He peers from his boat toward the shore and sees the native Africans dancing and howling. But he doesn't see them as strange creatures – no, instead he says that they are "not inhuman." Interesting. First of all, let's talk about how he says "not inhuman" instead of just saying "human." This is a nifty little device called "litotes," which is sort of like a double negative. It's as though Marlow isn't quite ballsy enough to call them human, so he'll say it more weakly by affirming its opposite. We also see that Marlow calls their sort-of-humanity "thrilling." He is buzzed by the "remote kinship" he feels with these people. In other words, he is like them. The comparisons keep coming. Marlow becomes a part of the jungle and its people when he cannot distinguish the beating of the drum from his own heartbeat.

Marlow, of course, is scared to death by the thought that he is like these men. He seeks to explain it somehow, and does so (maybe successfully) when he discusses his kinship with the

helmsman. This camaraderie only surfaces when the helmsman dies. Only then does Marlow recognize his dependence on this guy, the fact that the helmsman, despite being black, was a man, too. For Marlow, the "pilgrims" and the "savages" are linked together by the one thing they have in common – their mortality.

### **Marlow, Lies, and Justice**

You might have noticed that Marlow makes a huge deal out of lies. He says he hates, detests, and can't bear a lie, that lies are reminiscent of death. So why does he lie to Kurtz's fiancée at the end of this whole story? Well, he claims it is because "it would have been too dark." This might be about Marlow trying to protect the woman from the scary world of reality. Or it might be that he thinks that, by pretending the darkness and the horror of Kurtz's last words don't exist, they will somehow go away. If this is true, Marlow fails utterly; the darkness still remains despite his best efforts to hide it.

Marlow adds the further question of justice. To have told the Intended the truth, he claims, would be to have "rendered Kurtz [...] that justice which was his due." After all, he tells us, Kurtz said that all he wanted was justice. What has justice come to mean in this novel, anyway? How can there be justice at all in a world where men put heads on sticks and are revered for it anyway? It seems to us as though this ending raises more questions than it answers.

### **Marlow as a God**

We feel that Conrad started to paint a subtle picture, where Marlow sits "cross-legged" telling his tale in a position only vaguely reminiscent of a spiritual teacher. But then he thought we wouldn't get it, so he told us straight out that Marlow was like Buddha. Then he thought we might have missed it the first time, so he made a big deal out of telling us again. English-major people would probably tell you that Conrad frames the story with a mention of Buddha at the beginning and then again at the end. Who knows?

The point is, Marlow is made equivalent to a spiritual figure, and in particular to a spiritual figure whose job it is to teach other people things such that they might learn and get enlightened. So, of course, the big questions are: What does Marlow teach the men? Do the men get it? Is anyone enlightened by this tale? We're not going to answer these, but we're thinking that Marlow's enlightened knowledge has something to do with the very first line he utters.

One last thought: The nameless narrator tells us before the story begins that it will be an inconclusive tale. Does this fit with the Buddha imagery, or stand in contrast to it? What kind of teacher is inconclusive, anyway? (Did you notice that we're ending this section inconclusively?)

### **Marlow and Curiosity**

Even as a child, our protagonist Marlow is driven by curiosity. He wants to be a pioneer in some sense, to map the uncharted blank spaces on maps and to explore the "darkest" and most unknown of all places – Africa. His penchant for curiosity remains consistent. As a boy, he grows curious about unexplored places. As an explorer for the Company, he becomes curious about a man named Kurtz. In fact, his curiosity often has a way of becoming an obsession. When it gets to this point, Marlow stops at nothing to satisfy his curiosity; he is willing to listen in on private conversations and even sacrifice some of his men along the way.

Interestingly, because of Marlow's story-telling tendencies, we experience events the way he did. That is, with much confusion and fog, both literal and metaphorical. When he starts ruminating on past events, our nameless narrator tells us that Marlow is not a typical seaman. He is, instead, a "wanderer," and his story is told with the sense of a wanderer penetrating the dark unknown. The story itself is revealed as if the meaning is "outside" of the tale, brought out "as a glow brings out a haze." Hmm...are you curious yet?

### **Marlow and Women**

As much as we like Marlow, it seems that the guy is something of a chauvinist. Twice in the novel, he mentions women and always sees them as somehow divorced from reality, as living in another world. To him, women are naïve and idealistic. But here's the rub: he seems to want them to stay that way. For example, he lies to the Intended about Kurtz's final words. To some extent, this behavior is a chivalrous attempt to protect women from the brutal realities of the world – like slavery and imperialism. Not to mention those two women in black, who have a strange sense of power over Marlow. What was up with that? Shmoop on.

### **Charlie Marlow Timeline**

- Marlow's chilling out on the *Nellie* and tells his story to the men aboard while they're stuck on the flooded Thames River.
- As a young man, Marlow was always enthralled by maps, especially the blank spaces where, he imagined, he would explore and fill in. The African Congo River, in particular, draws him hypnotically like a snake does a bird.
- He takes advantage of his seamanship experience to acquire a steamboat with the Company to travel up the Congo and re-supply the ivory stations.
- When Marlow comes to the port city to sign his contract, he gets an ominous and unshakable sense of discomfort. Two women who sit and knit black wool in the office really unnerve him.
- He boards a French steamer for the continent and, on the way up the river, he sees African slaves rowing a boat. He is amazed by their powerful, natural energy.
- Upon reaching the first station, Marlow distinctly dislikes what he sees. The Company has

the manacled black slaves futilely trying to blow up a cliff to clear a path for a railway. Not far from the work site, a multitude of sick slaves lounge around lethargically beneath a grove of trees. When Marlow goes among these sick and dying. He attempts to give one slave a biscuit, but the man is so far gone that he expires right there at Marlow's feet.

- During his stay at this first station, Marlow hears the name Kurtz for the first time from the accountant. He learns that Kurtz is a top agent working in the interior.
- After ten days, Marlow treks to the interior with a caravan of pilgrims and black slaves.
- When they reach the Central Station, Marlow receives a mental blow. His steamboat has had an accident and will take several months to repair. It delays his trip by three months, much to his frustration.
- He takes an immediate dislike to the manager, whose lack of emotion and mediocrity unnerve Marlow.
- After a shed burns down in the Central Station, Marlow chances across a man simply called the brickmaker who likes to babble on endlessly. For reasons yet to be revealed, the brickmaker tries to get information out of Marlow. Marlow plays along to figure out exactly why, and we find out that the brickmaker has a burning desire to move up the company ladder and become the assistant manager. He hopes to do so with the recommendation of Marlow's aunt's connections.
- Marlow is highly amused.
- While the brickmaker kisses up, Marlow tunes him out and concentrates instead on the hypnotic (and rather sinister) spell of the wilderness surrounding them. The brickmaker eventually grows discouraged by Marlow's distance and backs off, though rather resentfully.
- Marlow turns his attention toward his steamboat. He grows obsessive about getting enough rivets to complete the repair job. He jokes with the black foreman about it.
- Soon, a dubious group of explorers called the Eldorado Exploring Expedition arrive, headed by the manager's portly uncle.
- As happens quite frequently, Marlow doesn't like this guy.
- So he has no problem eavesdropping on the manager and his uncle while they talk about Kurtz.
- He learns that Kurtz is ill, but still manages to crank out more ivory than all the other stations combined. The two connivers, seeing Kurtz as a threat to their ambitions, accuse him of stealing the ivory and hope that the inhospitable climate will kill him.
- On his newly repaired steamboat, Marlow finally starts his journey to the Inner Station and Kurtz. He travels with the manager, the brickmaker, a bunch of white pilgrims, and black cannibals.
- Marlow finds himself extremely freaked out by the endlessness, eerie silence and hostile aura of the forest. His sense of reality becomes so warped that he feels as if time has stopped and he is living in a dream.
- We arrive at a turning point when Marlow admits he is identifying with the black savages out in the bush, whose thunderous and profoundly sad screams strike him deep in the heart. He sees humanity in their (supposed) primitivism.
- Fifty miles before they reach the Inner Station, Marlow discovers an abandoned flag post

with a warning sign nearby, telling travelers to approach with caution.

- They continue on and Marlow finds a deserted hut. He explores it and finds a book written by a sailor. Marlow thinks the parts he can't read are written in "cipher," though he receives a lot of comfort from the text anyway.
- At the Inner Station, Marlow meets a curious man he calls the harlequin who dresses in colored patches and swings from one extreme mood to another. It turns out that the harlequin is an intimate associate of Kurtz. Marlow learns that the hut they found earlier was the harlequin's and so he returns the book to him, much to the harlequin's delight.
- In conversing with the harlequin, Marlow learns a lot about Kurtz. He finds out that for the majority of the time, Kurtz has been acquiring ivory by forming alliances with various native African leaders and raiding villages for their ivory supply. The native Africans seem to adore Kurtz. We don't know why, either.
- Marlow discovers that the ornamental balls or "knobs" on the posts outside Kurtz's hut are actually far more morbid in nature than he first thought. They turn out to be human skulls. Rebels' skulls, as the harlequin explains.
- While they converse, a group of native Africans arrives, bearing the sick and skeletal Kurtz on a stretcher. Kurtz, having heard of Marlow through letters, is glad to see him, but does not have a chance to talk to him before the manager brusquely arrives and asks to see him in private.
- While Kurtz and the manager converse, Marlow notices a group of Africans gathering outside. A wildly beautiful native African woman is visible, adorned in brass trappings. The harlequin tells him that she is close to Kurtz.
- When the manager emerges from Kurtz's tent, it is obvious they have had an argument. Marlow alienates himself from the crew by siding with Kurtz over the manager.
- The eve before they are supposed to leave, Marlow wakes up around midnight to find Kurtz gone. He takes it upon himself to find Kurtz because, he reasons, he cannot have gone far crawling on all fours. He finds Kurtz in the woods.
- Kurtz talks to him and tells him that all his plans for greatness were ruined by the manager. During their conversation, Marlow becomes fascinated by the spell of the forest. He thinks Kurtz's words have become ineffectual. So he takes Kurtz in his arms and carries him back.
- The next morning while Marlow is leaving with Kurtz, a group of native Africans and the warrior woman gather on the banks of the river, restless. When it seems the pilgrims and native Africans are on the edge of violence, Marlow disperses them by blowing the steam-whistle.
- In the next few days, the steamboat breaks down and they have to wait to repair it. During this pause, Kurtz dies. Marlow is especially affected by Kurtz's last words: "The horror! The horror!"
- When the rest of the crew finds out about Kurtz's death, they rush to see, but Marlow stays put, for which he earns a reputation of callousness. This almost causes his men to mutiny against him. But they don't. Marlow reaches Europe safely.
- Back in Western society, Marlow feels out of place and cannot hide his contempt for normal people who haven't traveled down the Congo and witnessed evil firsthand. His

experience has changed him so much that he sees the troubles of everyday life as petty.

- He tries to decide what to do with the personal papers Kurtz entrusted to him. He refuses to surrender them to the Company.
- Instead, he decides to return Kurtz's personal effects to his fiancée, called the Intended. When he meets her, Marlow is struck by her beauty and her brilliance. The more he talks to her, the more he discovers that she did not know Kurtz whatsoever, at least not the Kurtz that Marlow has known. She idealizes Kurtz, saying that every man who has met him cannot help loving him.
- The final straw comes when the Intended asks Marlow to repeat Kurtz's last words to her. He lies. Instead of telling her "the horror! The horror!" he tells her that Kurtz said her name with his dying breath. She not only believes him, but is gratified and says she already knew.
- Marlow justifies his lie to her by saying that telling her the truth would simply be too dark.
- The narrative ends here.

## Mr. Kurtz

### Kurtz and Ambition

Mr. Kurtz is a star agent of the Company who works in true ivory country, deep in the interior of Africa. Everyone who knows Kurtz (even his fiancée, who doesn't know him at all) agrees that he has all the ambition, charisma, and eloquence to achieve greatness. Although he cranks out more ivory than all the stations combined, we have reason to believe he has turned rogue. He has yielded to the implacably hostile nature of the African wilderness and it has caused him to go mad. One thing to keep in mind is that most of the information we learn about Kurtz comes through the grapevine, adding to his mysterious aura.

### Kurtz and the Jungle

Kurtz represents a normal – perhaps ambitious – man who falls prey to the dangers of the wilderness. In the dreamlike world of the African interior, he is affected by the eerie silence and the strange, often barbaric (to him) customs of the native Africans. He finds that to thrive, not simply survive, one must approach the Africans as a god. As such, he feels he can lead these "primitive" people to the proverbial light and civilization.

However, his own greed gets in the way of this missionary-like quest. His insatiable hunger for ivory drives him to make alliances and enemies among the native Africans – raiding village after village with the help of his African friends as he searches for ivory. We see that the obsession has really taken over, so much so that Kurtz is described in terms of the very material he seeks: his head "was like a ball – an ivory ball." Again, when he utters his final words, Kurtz carries an "expression of sombre pride" on his "ivory face." These descriptions

represent physical changes in Kurtz that are probably the result of his crazed obsession. The jungle, we see, has overtaken him, has "got into his veins, consumed his flesh." Marlow even identifies two separate Kurtzes – one that went into the jungle, and one that came out.

Maybe this is why we are told three times that the problem with Kurtz is that he has "no restraint." So the problem isn't as simple as "Kurtz goes to jungle; Kurtz becomes like native Africans; Heads on sticks ensue." No, that's not it at all. Kurtz becomes something else altogether. Whereas the Africans do have a sense of decency and restraint (think of the cannibals who eat rotten hippo meat instead of attacking the pilgrims whom they outnumber five to one), Kurtz has fallen a complete victim to the power of the jungle, has transformed into its "spoiled and pampered favorite." This description fits the bill when Marlow tells us how Kurtz has indeed become a child, infantile in his desires, physicality, selfishness, and brutality. Or as Marlow so beautifully says, the "powers of darkness have claimed him for their own."

### **Kurtz's Voice**

Marlow, in his odd fascination with Kurtz, comes to refine his obsession with Kurtz to one particular aspect of the guy: his voice. He's not excited about seeing Kurtz, or shaking his hand, he says, but only about hearing him talk. "The man presented himself as a voice," Marlow says.

Marlow then breaks the order of the story's narrative to tell us that, in fact, he *does* eventually get to talk to Kurtz. He also takes the liberty of revealing that, yes, indeed, Kurtz is little more than a voice.

But the fun part comes when we consider that Marlow, too, sitting on the *Nellie* and telling his story in the pitch-dark, is explicitly described as "no more than a voice" to the men that listen. In fact, Marlow, like Kurtz, finds wisdom in his own words. When he finds an "appeal" in the "fiendish row" of the Africans dancing on shore, he negates it with the claim, "I have a voice, too, and for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced."

So is this voice business merely another tool to establish connections between Marlow and Kurtz? Maybe. If Marlow's voice is indeed never silenced, what about Kurtz's? The guy dies, after all. But are his last words resonant for us? Does *Heart of Darkness* end on a note of "horror?" You tell us.

### **Kurtz as a God**

The native Africans worship Kurtz like a god, but not without consequences. They know that the white men coming up their river want to take Kurtz back. Potentially, they attack to keep Kurtz with them. We're not sure whether Kurtz orders the attack or whether the native Africans do it on their own (we get conflicting stories from the harlequin), but if they did launch a thousand or so arrows to keep Kurtz around, there's some irony here. Kurtz, a god, is also a

prisoner to his subjects. He can order mass killings of those who rebel against him, yet he cannot walk away freely.

The irony doesn't stop there. Kurtz, a man apparently seven feet tall or so (although we figured Marlow was riding the hyperbole train here), has a name that Marlow tells us means "short" in German. So his god-like height is mitigated by his name. This discrepancy, Marlow tells us, reflects the falsity of Kurtz's life and death, which we're thinking means his life as a god was also false. As for his death? Hmm. We'll have to think about that one.

### Kurtz, Madness, and Sickness

Let's talk about Kurtz's madness. First of all, is Kurtz mad? We think that jamming a bunch of heads on sticks might qualify, but if that were not enough, Marlow makes sure we know that, although the man's intelligence is clear, Kurtz's "soul [is] mad."

But even beyond that, we can see that Kurtz's madness, a mental deficiency, becomes realized *physically*. In other words, Kurtz's sickness is a reflection of his diseased mind. His slow, painful spiral into death is marked by visions and unintelligible ravings. Parts of the narrative recount the emptiness of Kurtz's soul; this may be a commentary on the debilitating and devastating power of the wilderness to suck all the humanity out of a man. Kurtz's final words, his judgment on his own life, the Company, or all of mankind (depending on your interpretation), are of condemnation, of pure horror.

So why is it that, despite all this, people still look up to Kurtz – worship him, even? They still see in Kurtz the potential for greatness, in spite of his twisted mind. And it is this charisma and ambition that is Kurtz's legacy – not the madness and brutality and darkest realizations of human nature that are perhaps more fitting. This could be Conrad's own condemnation of mankind's blindness. What do you think?

### Mr. Kurtz Timeline

- We first hear about Kurtz when the accountant mentions that Marlow will surely meet Kurtz if he is headed into the interior. When Marlow inquires about Kurtz, he learns that he is a top agent stationed in the interior, in "true ivory country," and that he pumps out more ivory than all the other stations combined.
- At the Central Station, the manager spreads the news that Mr. Kurtz is very ill.
- When Marlow asks the brickmaker about Kurtz, he gets a sarcastic answer because the brickmaker is jealous of Kurtz's success.
- When the brickmaker comes back to Marlow to suck up, Marlow learns that Kurtz had powerful connections with the Company just as Marlow himself does.

- At the end of the first chapter, Marlow has begun identifying with and admiring Kurtz.
- Marlow overhears the manager and his uncle hoping that sickness or the environment, or possibly both will kill Kurtz for them, so that they can advance in the Company. They also have suspicions that Kurtz is acquiring his sinful quantities of ivory in dishonest ways.
- All these conversations only increase Kurtz's reputation and esteem in Marlow's eyes.
- When Marlow finally reaches the Inner Station, he meets Kurtz when a group of native Africans bears him down in a stretcher. He is emaciated and frail; only his voice rings strongly.
- Kurtz has a private interview with the manager and they argue. Marlow takes Kurtz's side.
- The evening before they plan to depart, Kurtz makes his escape. Or his pathetic attempt to escape. Being seriously sick, he cannot actually walk – he must crawl on all fours into the wilderness. It doesn't take Marlow long to find him.
- Kurtz talks to Marlow extensively for the first time, demonstrating his madness. He orders Marlow to go and hide himself – though it is unclear whether he means from the native Africans or from the pilgrims.
- Despite Marlow's threats to bring Kurtz back forcefully, Kurtz ignores him and raves on about how great his plans were and how they have now been destroyed by a pitiful man – the manager. During their conversation, Marlow finally realizes Kurtz's mind has been warped by the interior and that he has gone mad. He carries back the wasted Kurtz, who is light as a child..
- When they are about to leave on the steamboat, the warrior woman breaks through and gestures to Kurtz. Though nobody else understands the meaning, Kurtz does and refuses to share it with anybody.
- A few days later, Kurtz's madness and illness worsens. He goes blind, saying he cannot see the light when he is but a few feet from a patch of sunlight. He raves unintelligibly. In his last moments, his face undergoes some fascinating (to Marlow) changes – first pride, then power, and finally despair. His last words, uttered in some vision before his death, are "The horror! The horror!"
- In the last scene of the book, Marlow misrepresents (it's a kind word for lying, isn't it?) these final words to Kurtz's Intended. He tells her that Kurtz said her name on his deathbed.

## The Manager

The manager is a mediocre fellow within the Company, situated at the Central Station. In appearance, he is unremarkable, except for his cold blue eyes and vacuous smile. That expression gives Marlow the willies. (Us too.) He has the tendency to talk a lot and about nothing. The manager is also jealous of Kurtz for his success.

The manager is richly steeped in this sort of "emptiness" imagery. He babbles a lot, but about

nothing meaningful and his creepy smile is described as "seal applied on words to make the meaning of the commonest phrase appear absolutely inscrutable." In other words, all his prattle is made to appear profound by his mysterious, but empty, smile. The reason given for his uncommon resistance to disease is that "there was nothing within him." The manager makes the remark that any man who comes to work in the interior "should have no entrails" (much like him). Weirded out yet? The larger implications of this "empty" character are frightening. They imply that the wilderness of the interior has a way of depleting or draining away what makes men human, leaving only a shell of the former self. Sort of like Kurtz, except instead of being replaced by a maniacal, ivory-hungry devil, this guy got replaced by nothing at all.

Since there is nothing within him, everything the manager says and does has no sincerity. All his energy is devoted to keeping up appearances. As Marlow observes, he "originates nothing" because of the void within him. If he cannot create, he can only destroy, which one could say is generally what British imperialists were doing to Africa at the time. We knew this character was here for a reason.

## The Manager Timeline

- Marlow meets the manager at the Central Station. He is struck and unnerved by the manager's vacant smile which comes after each of his long speeches. This is a characteristic of the manager and irritates Marlow. He also likes to babble a lot.
- Marlow wonders at the manager's continued employment with the Company. The manager does not seem to show any great aptitude at his job. In the end, Marlow decides the reason he keeps his post is because he has never gotten sick out there in the tropical wilderness.
- Marlow learns from the manager's speech that Kurtz is sick in the interior.
- After the Eldorado Exploring Expedition arrives, the manager and his uncle have a whispered conversation about Kurtz. They are both disturbed by his influence in the Company and jealous of his success. Apparently Kurtz wants to become a manager and the manager feels threatened by this. His uncle tells him to pray that the inhospitable country will kill Kurtz for him.
- After the attack on the steamboat, the manager tries to get Marlow to move the boat. Knowing it will lead to certain death, Marlow refuses and this puts the manager back in his place.
- Upon seeing Kurtz's stash of ivory, the manager pronounces the vast majority of it "fossil," which means it is useless. This is, of course, folly, and a sign of the manager's jealousy.
- After arriving at the Inner Station, the manager speaks to Kurtz alone and they have an argument. The manager, upon talking with Marlow, calls Kurtz's methods of getting ivory

"unsound." Marlow sides with Kurtz, forever alienating himself from the manager's favor.

## The Brickmaker

The brickmaker is another rather useless worker in the crew at Central Station. Despite his name, he does little to fulfill his title. This obvious idleness is one of the reasons Marlow – a man of honest labor – dislikes him so much. He is often referred to as the "manager's spy" and, appropriately, he tries to pry information out of Marlow. Marlow is baffled at the brickmaker's strange insinuations and smiles, wondering why he is the object of such undesired attention and flattery.

In the end, we find that the brickmaker is only seeking to advance his position in the Company. Like the manager and his uncle, he is driven by ambition. However, unlike the manager, the brickmaker is by nature a sycophant, particularly sucking up to the people who he thinks will help him climb the Company ladder. He has no problem flattering and cajoling his way into what he wants. However, when snubbed, he turns cold and changes the subject. He does confess uncharacteristically to Marlow, but only when he finds that Marlow isn't going to help him with his plans.

The narrator always paints the brickmaker in devil imagery, including a "forked beard and a hooked nose," calling him a "papier-mâché Mephistopheles." (FYI, Mephistopheles was the devil in another story, *Faust*). Indeed, the man has many of the characteristics attributed to Satan. He is the personification of idleness, greed, ambition, and sycophancy. Unlike many of the other members of the Company, he has a silver tongue and uses it to his advantage, much like Satan is said to tempt his victims into sinning.

## The Brickmaker Timeline

- Marlow meets the brickmaker after a shed burns down in the Central Station. The brickmaker is nearby, discussing Kurtz with the manager. We learn that not only does this guy *not* do his job of making bricks, but he is inexplicably wealthy. The implication is that he is in cahoots with the manager and making money illegally.
- The brickmaker engages Marlow in conversation. It quickly becomes evident that he is jealous of Kurtz. He begins trying to pump Marlow for information. Marlow is perplexed. He discovers that the brickmaker is interested in his aunt's connections – the ones who got Marlow his position with the Company. Marlow accuses him of reading confidential Company mail because he could only get that kind of information by secret means. This

shocks the brickmaker speechless.

- However, the brickmaker doesn't give up there. He eventually comes back to Marlow with the truth. He has ambitions of becoming the assistant manager under the present personnel and Kurtz's success in the interior has messed up his chances. He thinks that talking to Marlow will get him in touch with the higher powers. However, by this time, Marlow has tuned him and his endless babble out. When Marlow changes the subject to rivets, the brickmaker becomes cold and suddenly starts talking about a troublesome hippo. Now THAT'S the non sequitur of the century. It becomes evident that Marlow has no intention of helping the brickmaker.

## The Harlequin

The harlequin is a Russian man who helps Kurtz and is considered his "disciple." He dresses in colorful patched clothing, which earns him his nickname of – yes, you got it – the harlequin. He worships Kurtz much like the native Africans do and finds himself listening more than speaking. In fact, exclusively listening and not speaking at all. Thus, he is privy to many of Kurtz's thoughts. Like many of the other characters, he has a tendency to babble, but Marlow tolerates the harlequin because he knows so much about Kurtz.

The harlequin's catchphrase is that Kurtz has "enlarged my mind." This paints Kurtz as a guru possessing arcane and mystical knowledge. The harlequin's motley set of clothing also hints at his role as something of a court jester for Kurtz, a clown not to be taken seriously. He acts only as a conduit of information for Marlow.

The text also suggests that the harlequin's patchwork attire might be an echo of the colored regions of the map seen earlier. This is reinforced by the fact that he is Russian (or not British, and therefore a foreigner) and that the manager distrusts him simply for that fact.

## The Harlequin Timeline

- At the Inner Station, Marlow meets the harlequin. He is struck by the harlequin's singular appearance – a rather boyish face and aspects, but dressed in colorful rags.
- The harlequin reassures Marlow that the native Africans did not really mean any harm by attacking the steamboat. He speaks rapidly and in incomprehensible fragments. Marlow gives him a cigarette to calm him down.
- Then we learn his history. The harlequin is a Russian who ran away from a religious school to serve time with the British fleet.

- Marlow returns the sailor's book to him after learning that the hut discovered earlier was his. We discover that the "cipher" is actually Russian. The harlequin is delighted to have his book back.
- The harlequin reveals that the native Africans do not want the white men to take Kurtz away from them. We learn that they worship Kurtz like a god and have accepted his reign of terror, even when he shows no mercy to "rebels," having them brutally executed and staking their skulls outside his hut.
- It becomes evident that the harlequin worships Kurtz and is somewhat blinded by his adoration. He tries to justify Kurtz's brutal actions. The harlequin also takes pride in the fact that he has nursed Kurtz through two bouts of illness.
- He reveals that Kurtz spends a lot of time raiding villages to steal ivory. His obsession with ivory even leads him to threaten the harlequin with death if he doesn't give up some ivory. The harlequin always yields to Kurtz.
- After we see the warrior woman for the first time, we discover that the harlequin does not like her intimacy with Kurtz.
- The harlequin hears of the manager's intended hostility towards him (he wants to hang him) and decides to leave. But before he does, he reveals one final shocking fact: Kurtz ordered the attack on the steamboat as a defense mechanism. He, too, does not want to leave the interior.
- The harlequin takes some spare items from the very generous Marlow and disappears into the wilderness.

## The Intended

The Intended is Kurtz's fiancée who stays in Britain while Kurtz travels to the African interior to make his fortune. She is beautiful and often connected with imagery of light and heaven. As Marlow learns in his conversation with her, she is naïve and idealistic, picturing Kurtz as something of a saint – going into Africa to spread goodness and civilization. She is utterly infatuated with Kurtz and believes herself the single most definitive authority on his character. But it becomes painfully obvious to us that she does not know the real Kurtz whatsoever. What she possesses is only a highly idealized image of the man.

The Intended not only propagates Marlow's image of women as naïve, idealistic, and gullible, but also seems to represent the desire of white Europeans to turn blind eyes to the bloody realities and brutalities of imperialism, especially the injustices suffered by the native Africans. Like the Intended, white men want to believe in the good and civilizing characteristics of the pilgrims sent into the interior. They want the illusion of a universally altruistic mankind, and choose to ignore the atrocities of reality.

Besides her naiveté, the Intended's most distinctive trait is her beauty, by which Marlow is struck the first time he lays eyes on her. She would make any man a proud wife. This is how

she and many of the other women mentioned are seen – through the male gaze. Their value is measured by their beauty and idealism – their ability to make pretty but silent wives. But it may not all be chauvinism; the men's need for the women to be beautiful may have something to do with a need for an idealistically beautiful conception of the world.

## The Intended Timeline

- Marlow's first impression of the Intended is that she is beautiful but not particularly young. He gets the distinct impression that she is not a creature subject to time. To her, Kurtz's memory is still fresh and she feels as if she is the only person who knows how to mourn properly for him.
- She keeps repeating that she knew him best out of anybody. It becomes increasingly obvious that she is blinded by her devotion to Kurtz. Any man who knew Kurtz, she says, could not help but love him. Her dialogue with Marlow is full of these sorts of grandiose statements.
- The Intended mourns Kurtz as more than simply a personal loss; she sees his death as a loss to the world at large. However, for all her saintliness, she keeps coming back to how unhappy his death has made her personally. She says she must suffer the pain of his death for all her life.
- She fixates on Kurtz's words – the only part of him that remains. She begs to know his last words. Marlow lies to her, saying that with his dying breath, Kurtz said her name (instead of what he actually said: "The horror! The horror!").
- She says something along the lines of "Great! I knew I was the most important thing ever."

## Plot Analysis

### Plot Analysis

#### Initial Situation

**Charlie Marlow loves maps. He wants to become an explorer so he can fill in those blank spaces on the maps. Upon acquiring a steamboat with the Company, he begins his journey into the African interior.**

This is a lovely little conflict-free initial situation. Although with comments like "*morituri te salutant*" ("we who are about to die salute you"), we have a feeling there's some conflict coming soon.

#### Conflict

**Marlow becomes obsessed with Kurtz.**

Marlow, upon hearing about Mr. Kurtz, almost immediately becomes obsessed with learning more about him and eventually with meeting him. To Marlow, Kurtz represents resolutions to many of the problems of the interior – eerie silence (by having an eloquent voice), the shenanigans of the native Africans (by "taming" them), the chaos of the wilderness (by bringing order with his acquisition of ivory), and the moral ambiguity of the interior. To some extent, Marlow sees himself reflected in Kurtz. The conflict lies in the perilous journey – both physical and spiritual – that Marlow must take to find the mysterious Mr. Kurtz.

#### Complication

**There are several complications. First of all, Marlow faces a number of delays in getting to the interior. He is held at the first station for ten days. Then, at the Central Station he finds his steamboat needs repairs, which takes another three months.**

As he journeys, Marlow discovers that Kurtz is not very well-liked, though he is universally respected. The manager, his uncle, and the brickmaker all have designs on moving up within the corporate hierarchy of the Company – and Kurtz's success has put a crimp in their plans.

Then, there is the slight problem of Kurtz being utterly mad. He orders the attack on Marlow's steamboat because he does not want to leave the interior. Marlow finds it difficult to relate to Kurtz in his present state. Also, the native Africans don't want Kurtz to leave either, which nearly brings the pilgrims and the Africans to violence.

## Climax

### ESCAPE FROM THE INTERIOR!

Kurtz tries to escape from his hut right before Marlow and company are scheduled to bring him home. Marlow chases after him. Marlow, at this point, has Kurtz's fate in his hands. He can either let him go and allow Kurtz his victory, or he can follow Company orders and bring him back. Kurtz is too physically weak to resist either way. Marlow opts to ignore Kurtz's ravings and carries him back. The next morning they make a successful escape from the restless Africans. And it's all very climactic.

## Suspense

### Things get horrible.

Kurtz dies. Suspenseful enough? In fact, he dies in complete agony, first going blind, then raving incomprehensibly, then finally seeing visions as he expires. His last words – "The horror! The horror!" – pronounce his final judgment on his world.

## Denouement

### England kind of sucks.

Marlow returns safely to Britain, only to find that everything is petty and small when compared to the horrors he experienced on the Congo. He is also haunted by Kurtz's letters, which he left to Marlow. Marlow decides to return the letters to Kurtz's Intended.

## Conclusion

### Oh, the lies.

Even after all the atrocities Kurtz committed and suffered, he is still remembered as something of a saint and martyr. The Intended makes this clear to Marlow as she goes on and on about adoring Kurtz, loving him, and his greatness. She sees his death as a loss not only to herself, but to the world at large. Marlow, the only man who saw Kurtz for what he *truly* was, is appalled but does nothing to correct her. In fact, he lies to her to preserve her idealistic illusion of the man.

## Booker's Seven Basic Plots Analysis: Voyage and Return

### "Fall" into the Other World

## **Pack it up – we're going to the Congo.**

Marlow embarks on his journey aboard the steamboat and travels up the Congo River. He remarks that navigating the Congo is like "traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world." It is a totally alien place to him and he feels disconcerted by the unfamiliar terrain, the sense of timelessness, the Africans and drums surrounding him, the eerie silence, and the immensity of the forest. This all serves to render the African interior dream-like and absurd for Marlow.

### **Initial Fascination**

## **Kurtz is the coolest dude on earth.**

Though Marlow feels a great unease in the wilderness, he is at once fascinated and repulsed by the cries of the native Africans hidden in the surrounding bush. He goes so far as to say he hears a bit of humanity in those chilling screams and begins to identify with them. He also pays a great deal of attention to the actions of the hired cannibals on board. At this point, Marlow seems fascinated with the 'foreigners,' those who do not live by European customs.

### **Frustration Stage**

## **They can't see anything and people die.**

This stage begins with the thick white fog that falls on the steamboat when they are deep in the interior. This renders them metaphorically blind. Because they cannot see where they are going, they must stop their forward movement. The interminable stop makes them jittery and uncomfortable, especially when they begin hearing savages in the bush. Then they are attacked by the native Africans. One of their crew – the black helmsman – becomes a casualty, and this plunges Marlow into horror.

### **Nightmare Stage**

## **Heads on sticks.**

Things actually look up for a while just before the real nightmare kicks in. Marlow meets the harlequin, a strange but harmless disciple of Kurtz, and learns more and more about the mystery man. However, the more he hears, the more troubled Marlow becomes. Kurtz has immense influence over the native Africans – even exercising the power to kill those who disobey him. Only when the harlequin leaves does he reveal that Kurtz ordered the attack on Marlow's steamboat. At last we learn that Kurtz is hostile to Marlow's decision to take him back to Europe. This nightmare stage culminates when we meet Kurtz, see that his illness has wasted him down to a living embodiment of Death, and witness his attempted escape into the interior – the very thing that drove him mad. The morning that the steamboat is leaving with

Kurtz aboard, the native Africans become restless, which makes the pilgrims nervous. They almost come to blows, but Marlow scares the Africans away just in time.

### Thrilling Escape and Return

#### Well, not everybody escapes.

Marlow scares the agitated native Africans with his steam-whistle and they make their escape with Kurtz intact. However, Kurtz dies along the way and Marlow is left to deal with his personal effects. His return to Britain is not welcome as he had anticipated because his journey up the Congo has fundamentally changed him and he can no longer relate to the petty occurrences of daily life. He visits the Intended to give her Kurtz's personal letters.

## Three Act Plot Analysis

### Act I

Marlow frames his story aboard the *Nellie*. He describes getting the job in Brussels, then traveling to the Outer and Central Stations. In the first station, he sees laboring black Africans for the first time, and is appalled at the inhumane conditions under which they work. Here, he first hears the name of Kurtz and slowly becomes more and more intrigued as he keeps hearing news about the remarkable agent. When he reaches the Central Station, he finds the steamboat intended to take him into the interior has had an accident and will require three months to repair. Here, he meets the manager, the brickmaker, and manager's uncle – the head of the Eldorado Exploring Expedition. In true Marlow fashion, he doesn't like any of them.

### Act II

Marlow learns more about Kurtz by eavesdropping on the manager and his uncle. He learns that they – like the brickmaker – have hopes of getting promoted and Kurtz's stunning outputs of ivory threaten their ambition. Marlow becomes fascinated by Kurtz. His journey from the Central Station to the interior is nightmarish. When he and his crew near the Inner Station, they are inexplicably attacked by a group of Africans. They survive with only one casualty, but the pilgrims are shaken. However, Marlow is determined to go on. They discover a little hut where Marlow finds a seaman's book, something he takes great comfort in. When they arrive at the Inner Station, Marlow meets a curious man dubbed the harlequin who apparently knows Kurtz.

### Act III

Marlow befriends the harlequin, who tells him all about Kurtz. Kurtz has allied himself with the native Africans and uses them to raid other villages and steal ivory. The Africans see him as a

god among men and worship him. Marlow learns that Kurtz ordered them to attack his steamboat because he does not want to be taken away from the interior and his precious ivory stash. At this point, we see Kurtz for the first time – sick and brought in on a stretcher by his Africans. The manager has a private interview with him to make arrangements to take him back to Europe. The harlequin decides to make a run for it. Later that night, Marlow wakes up to find Kurtz gone. He discovers him crawling off in the woods and decides to take him back. The next morning, the Africans cause a great disturbance as Kurtz is loaded onto the steamboat. On the return trip, Kurtz dies horribly in the grip of his hallucinations. Once back in England, Marlow finds himself ostracized by his crew and unable to return to a normal life. So he concerns himself instead with returning Kurtz's letters to his fiancée. His visit to her proves that everyone thinks the world of Kurtz, despite his depravity. Kurtz's Intended thinks that the last words Kurtz said were her name and Marlow allows her to think this when Kurtz's true last words were the much darker, "The horror! The horror!"

## Study Questions

1. What is Marlow's purpose in telling this story to the others? What might he hope to gain?
2. What are the consequences of Marlow's insatiable curiosity? About the jungle? About Kurtz?
3. What is the nature of madness in *Heart of Darkness*? What brings it on? Is it something that every man can fall into or is it simply the environment that instigates it?
4. What is the nature of obsession and ambition? What are some specific examples of certain characters being obsessed with something or having too much ambition? What consequences does it have?
5. Is Chinua Achebe correct in accusing *Heart of Darkness* of being a racist novel? Does the book present a simple and degrading view of the native Africans? Or are the views of race more complex?
6. How does Conrad depict Africans as different from Europeans? Does this characterization degrade them?
7. How does Conrad complicate the idea of colonization being "good"? What kind of negative effects does it have on both white men and the black men of Africa? Who suffers more?
8. What is Kurtz passing judgment upon when he voices his famous last words: "The horror! The horror!"?
9. Much of our information of Kurtz comes secondhand or through the grapevine. How does that affect our vision of him when we finally see him in person? Does Kurtz live up to our expectations?
10. Consider the accountant, the manager, and the brickmaker – all puppets of the Company. What negative concepts or themes might each one represent? How are they different from one another?
11. What is the effect of the narrative being told by Marlow first-hand? What is the effect of having this narration as a frame story told by the nameless narrator?
12. What's going on with the names, here? The only names we get are "Marlow" and "Kurtz." Everyone else is defined by their occupation, a physical description, or their relation to a named character. Does this demean their importance? Does it level the statuses of white and black individuals?

## Literary Devices

### Symbolism, Imagery, Allegory

#### Light and Dark

Contrary to popular usage, light does not necessarily symbolize pure goodness or enlightenment here. Conrad's vision is so dark that he does not even trust light. Marlow makes the comment that "sunlight can be made to lie, too." In fact, light often gives way to darkness in the novel. There are numerous instances of the sun setting and plunging the world into night. Darkness, of course, represents the unknown, that which is feared, evil, silence, madness, and death. Then you've got the white sepulcher city in London, the white ivory in the jungle, and the creepy women dressed in black. Everything gets complicated further when you consider the fact that Marlow compares white men to black men, and that Marlow concludes (potentially) that these men are all the same. If this is true, lightness is darkness, darkness is lightness, and it's all a big hairy mess.

#### Two Knitting Women (whom Marlow sees at the signing)

Did these ladies creep you out or what? They seem to represent the *Moirae* or the Fates as envisioned by the ancient Greeks. Two of the three Fates spin the life-thread of each human being. The thread represents a human life. The third Fate cuts the thread when the time comes for the man to die. The Fates, being immortals, have foresight and thus can see every man's fate. Conrad uses the two women knitting black wool as foreshadowing for Marlow's horrific journey into the interior. Yes, we too are wondering what happened to the third Fate.

#### Flies

Flies symbolize death, ever since flies hung around dead bodies and the devil got the nickname "Lord of the Flies." In *Heart of Darkness*, flies notably appear when a slave dies in Chapter One and when Kurtz dies in Chapter Three.

#### Heads on Sticks

The heads-on-sticks symbolize Kurtz's excessive brutality. The appearance of these heads-on-sticks is the graphic climax of the book, which comes conveniently close to the plot climax. Coincidence? Not if you're into Conrad half as much as we are. We've seen some pretty horrible things up until this point, but the heads on sticks take the cake. What's interesting here is that Marlow tells us "eh – no big deal." Effectively, anyway. As if to symbolize the way Marlow combats horror with humor, he tells us that these "black, dried, sunken" heads are "smiling continuously" in their "jocose dream of eternal slumber." Which,

let's face it, wouldn't really be the language we would use to describe severed heads.

## **Language**

Eloquent use of language is, in general, one of the ways out of madness (for Marlow, at least). Marlow sees Kurtz's eloquence as one of his redeeming features. Language is also used as a human connection. When Marlow finds the harlequin's book, he feels relieved because he can connect to something manmade. Marlow obviously places great value on language for he agonizes over whom to entrust with Kurtz's personal letters. In light of this, one might consider Marlow's telling of his story as a way to separate and differentiate himself from Kurtz, as a symbolic way of retaining his own individuality among the encroaching madness brought upon by the wilderness.

## **The Accountant**

The accountant symbolizes the Company as it wants to be seen. He dresses elegantly despite the heat and the poverty of the black native African workers surrounding him, emphasizing the Company's professionalism. He is always immersed in his accounting books, diligently completing his work, which represents the Company's devotion to perfection and excellence. But, despite appearances, the accountant is really a candidate for Citizen of the Year. He sees the dying groans of the native Africans an annoyance because they cause him to make mistakes in his ledger. This renders the Company rather cold and callous to the suffering of its workers.

## **The Doctor who wants to measure Marlow's skull**

This Doctor foreshadows the upcoming danger and eventual madness that Marlow will face in the interior. Measuring Marlow's skull is something akin to taking scientific observations of his brain. This may seem unnecessary until we remember that Kurtz went into the jungle as "original Kurtz" and came out one of many "shades of Kurtz." Will Marlow, too, be irrevocably changed from his journey into a murderous and obsessed madman? That's the pessimistic question asked by the head-measuring Doctor.

## **The Woman With the Torch (a painting)**

We are introduced to this painting at the central station where we find out that Kurtz painted it. It portrays a woman, blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch, and standing against a black background. Let's just take these one by one, starting with this woman business. Marlow seems to sequester women into idealized roles outside the realm of gloomy reality. This woman is so separate that she's a painting. And she's so impossibly idealistic that she isn't real.

Moving on to the blindfolded, torch-carrying part. Sounds a lot like justice, doesn't it?

Maybe. At least with the whole blindfolded bit and her being a woman and all. Some people think this image is about blind Europe trying to bring light to Africa, but we're not so sure about this since, in *Heart of Darkness*, women are pure and uninvolved in the corrupt imperialism of their country. But who knows. The torch thing in contrast with the black background is more of that darkness and light imagery, where, typically, women are the light standing out in the darkness.

## God Imagery

In the "Character Analysis" for both Marlow and Kurtz we talked about how Conrad compares both men to gods. But, as you might have come to expect by now, it's just not that simple. Marlow is like a Buddha who, last time we checked, was an enlightening teacher figure. Kurtz, on the other hand, is described as a lightning and fire Jupiter figure. Jupiter was a little more prone to the negative human emotions of jealousy, vengeance, and power-hunger. So right away, the god imagery allows us to differentiate between our two big characters.

But it doesn't end there. Interestingly, Marlow calls the white men on the ship "pilgrims." Like the Puritans at Plymouth Rock, remember that "pilgrim" is a word for people embarking on a religious journey for spiritual reasons. This may just be ironic, since altruistic enlightenment was one of the supposed motives for England's imperialistic forays into Africa. Or the label of "pilgrim" may just infuse the tale with a spiritual undercurrent, making religious Marlow's discussions of darkness and light. Take your pick.

## Setting

### The Congo River in Africa around 1890, and Aboard the *Nellie* on the Thames River in 1891

The setting of the frame story in *Heart of Darkness* just may be the most important setting to discuss in all of great twentieth century literature. (And now that we've placed upon ourselves an *enormous* burden, let's get started.)

Marlow tells the story of his travels up the Congo River. That makes the setting...the Congo. And more generally, Africa. We get the whole picture from his descriptions – the jungle, the trees, the fog, the scary darkness, the whole nine yards. Sound good?

But then we remember that Marlow is telling us this story...on the Thames in England. Which, much like the Congo, is also a river. It's almost as if the Thames River is made parallel to the Congo River. And what would that mean? If the Thames is like the Congo, then Europe is like Africa, the white men in England are like the black men encountered in Africa, and Marlow is like Kurtz.

We already have evidence of Marlow being like Kurtz (see the discussion in Marlow's "Character Analysis"). We already decided that Marlow sees himself as similar to the native Africans. And, based on Marlow's first words ("And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth"), we've got a rather solid argument for Europe being like Africa. England, too, was a place of "primitive darkness" until men from Rome (in this scenario, the noble, altruistic "civilized" people invading to do good) rode up and conquered it. Not to mention, if you somehow were unsure by the end of the text, the last line states that the Thames River leads into "the heart of an immense darkness." If you thought the heart of darkness was the interior of Africa, think again.

If Conrad makes this point and successfully draws these parallels, the entire story is imbued with a deeper and more profound meaning. Marlow's journey into darkness becomes about defining darkness itself; the term evolves into a subjective and relative one, a shifting label. Africa is only dark and primitive for the Europeans trying to conquer it. And what about the darkness in Europe? Marlow even makes the ominous comment that the light they live in now is a "flicker" – that darkness may return to the land soon. Not to mention we haven't asked just what is darkness, anyway. How "dark" are the native Africans when we consider that Kurtz is the one putting heads on sticks? What if we look for the darkness inside men's hearts, instead of the literal darkness at the geographical heart of a country? Once we establish with the setting that the Thames is like the Congo, anything is up for debate. We don't know about you, but we pretty much think that Conrad is the coolest guy ever for coming up with this.

## **Narrator Point of View**

**First person (Peripheral Narrator): Unnamed Guy; First Person (Central Narrator): Marlow**

First, our unnamed narrator introduces the frame for the story: the evening spent aboard the *Nellie*. Only through him do we meet Marlow. Marlow himself tells the framed story so most of the narration within the novel is told from his point of view.

The fact that the story is vocalized through Marlow might affect the way readers see things, especially Kurtz and the wilderness. It is obvious that everyone else thinks the world of Kurtz even if they do not particularly like him. Marlow, however, comes to see Kurtz as a madman. This may or may not be an accurate depiction, though Marlow seems to give enough logical thought and evidence to support his claim. Also, the wilderness of the interior, scary as it is, does not seem to affect all characters equally. Marlow, in particular, seems considerably spooked by it, as does Kurtz. Again, this depiction of the wilderness might be exaggerated because we see it through Marlow's eyes.

So what's the point of this nameless narrator? This has much to do with the setting discussion. Because we have another narrator, we can stop Marlow's story and hear

commentary on the Thames River and its surroundings. We also get those great little lines about Marlow's voice so we can parallel him to Kurtz. In short, the nameless narrator is an opportunity for more commentary, more connections, and more flexing of Conrad's literary muscles.

But actually, there's more to this question. As it turns out, Conrad slips in a little answer right in the first few pages when he describes Marlow's opinions on story-telling. Here it is:

"[...] 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 those misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine."

If the meaning of *this* story is similarly on the outside, then we need to be *outside* this story (i.e., on the Thames) to get at it. This supports the theory that the point of *Heart of Darkness* is to draw parallels between the Thames and Congo Rivers, Europe and Africa, white Europeans and black Africans, etc. After all, Conrad flat out says that we can't be in the story in Africa to get the meaning – rather, that the meaning envelopes the story in the narrative haze that is the frame-story. So, basically, it's a good thing that we have that other narrator handy.

## Genre

**Adventure, Psychological Thriller and Suspense, Literary Fiction**

## Tone

**Cynical, Stark, Sometimes Sarcastic.**

The novel has a pessimistic outlook on life. Marlow constantly refers to darkness, madness, and fear. This is probably based on Conrad's own negative reaction to his voyage up the Congo River. Conrad views all his characters cynically; not one of them is rendered in a completely favorable light. They all have major flaws that compromise their understanding of the profundity of the corruption under which they all work. However, the novel is not without its own brand of humor. Conrad enjoys poking fun at some of the more pretentious figures through the scathingly acerbic commentary of the perceptive Marlow. The humor is also interestingly commingled with the horror; death is treated casually, terrible scenes rendered with a literary flick of the wrist. To Marlow, it seems that this is the only way to deal with the horror.

## Writing Style

### Verbose, Poetic, Introspective

Conrad's prose is a difficult animal to wrestle. It seems long-winded and tedious, but is surprisingly poetic. (Check out the iambic meter in the description of Kurtz's African mistress.) Although *Heart of Darkness* is rather short, it seems like a long read because there is surprisingly little action. The text is very cerebral – that is, much of it happens inside Marlow's head. We get to hear his thoughts. This helps Conrad make readers think about the larger questions within the novel – about the nature of obsession, ambition, darkness, and madness. Indeed, readers may notice that Conrad tends to abstract often, focusing not on the concrete details of Marlow's journey up the Congo River, but instead on his wandering thoughts and his deep, almost philosophical digressions. This makes for rather slow reading; one has the sensation of wading through the text, but it establishes a strangely charming rhythm that haunts and echoes in the reader's mind. The rhythm is what makes Conrad's writing so deeply affecting.

## What's Up With the Title?

With such an ominous title, *Heart of Darkness* delivers what it promises: ruminations on the nature of evil. The "heart of darkness" refers not only to a physical location (inside Africa), but also to a state of mind and the grim consequences of imperialism (the European takeover of peoples and land outside of the European continent mostly during the 15th through 20th centuries). So yes, Conrad was into metaphors. The text considers the deep jungle of Africa as the heart of darkness both for its untamed and hostile wilderness and for its supposed "savages" – the black native Africans – who reside there, practicing certain non-European customs such as cannibalism.

But why is the African jungle called "dark"? The easy answer is there's not a lot of light in the jungle, what with the thick foliage and unpredictable fog. The complicated answer is that, according to the novel, the wilderness hinders men's senses and renders them metaphorically blind to their situation and surroundings. The heart of darkness also suggests a confused and unenlightened state of mind, a state of profound madness where one cannot do good but one can only choose the lesser of a series of evils.

## Did You Know

### Trivia

- The prequel of *Heart of Darkness* is entitled *Youth* and was published in 1898. (Introduction by Hampson.)
- Chinua Achebe, Nigerian author of *Things Fall Apart*, wrote an infamous criticism entitled "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," that accused the novel of being racist. Other literary critics have found Achebe's essay very provocative and controversial; it has spurred a number of heated arguments. (Introduction by Hampson)
- *Heart of Darkness* is largely biographical. Joseph Conrad traveled up the Congo River in 1890 in what was apparently a horrifying journey. And in 1891, he cruised on a British yawl called the *Nellie*. (Introduction by Hampson)
- Though he wrote *Heart of Darkness* in English, it is Joseph Conrad's third language, his first two being Polish and French. (Introduction by Hampson)
- *Heart of Darkness* inspired English poet T.S. Eliot to write his cryptic, modernist poem called *The Wasteland* in 1922.
- *Apocalypse Now*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola is based on *Heart of Darkness*. (Source)

### Allusions

#### Literature, Philosophy, and Mythology

*The Bible*: Matthew 23:27-28 – "a whited sepulchre" (1.22)

Moirae (Greek Fates): "two women...knitting black wool" (1.23), "knitting old woman" (3.27)

Plato (1.26)

Dante: the *Divine Comedy* – "some Inferno" (1.38)

King Arthur: "round table" (1.52)

Bunyan: *The Pilgrim's Progress* – "faithless pilgrims...with their absurd long staves in their

hands" (1.54)

The Devil: "with a forked little beard and a hooked nose" (1.56), "A black figure...it had horns" (3.29), "that Shadow" (3.29)

Astrea, Greek goddess of justice: "a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch" (1.57)

Goethe: *Faust* – "Mephistopheles" (1.61)

"Sleeping Beauty": The enchanted forest – "a state of trance" (2.13), "an enchanted princess sleeping in a fabulous castle" (2.15)

Jupiter, Roman king of gods: "the thunderbolts of that pitiful Jupiter" (3.11)

Poe: "A Descent into the Maelstrom" – "I had peeped over the edge" (3.48)

Wells: *The Island of Dr. Moreau* – "a danger it is unable to comprehend" (3.49)

Dickens: *A Christmas Carol* – Marley's face – "he seemed to stare at me out of the glassy panel." (3.51)

## Historical References

Sir Francis Drake: the *Golden Hind* (1.6)

Sir John Franklin: the *Erebus*, the *Terror* (1.6)

East India Company: "commissioned 'generals' of East India" (1.6)

Ravenna, Italy: Roman naval base (1.11)

Buddha (1.13), (3.87)

Freiesleben, Johannes, A Danish captain, Conrad's predecessor in command of the *Florida*, was killed on 29 January 1890 at Tchumberi in a dispute over hens: "Fresleven" (1.21)

Roman gladiators: "Ave! [...] Morturi te salutant" (1.25), ("Hail! [...] Those who are about to die salute you.")

El Dorado: "Eldorado Exploring Expedition" (1.72)

Towson, J.T., published two volumes of navigation tables: "Towson" (2.9), (2.37)

International Association for the Exploration and Civilizing of Africa, of which King Leopold was the president: "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs" (2.29)

Government of Tambov, Russia (2.35)

Latin maxim "Fiat justitia, ruat coelum" or "Let justice be done, though the heavens fall": "The heavens do not fall for such a trifle." (3.86)

## Steamiest Rating

### G

Although *Heart of Darkness* deals with profoundly dark themes, sex is not one of them. This is because the vast majority of the characters are men that travel into the core of Africa with no women aboard the ship. That makes sex difficult for the average nineteenth century heterosexual male. The closest anyone comes to saying anything even vaguely sexual is Marlow's description of the warrior woman as "wild and gorgeous." We realize that this woman

is Kurtz's mistress, but there are no steamy scenes. It is obvious that Marlow considers both the warrior woman and Kurtz's Intended (fiancée) to be beautiful, but he shows no further desire for either of them.

Readers may even question the presence of women within the novel. The two main female characters – the warrior woman and the Intended – are both nameless (not that that's uncommon in this novel) and described in rather ghostly terms. They do not seem as human as Marlow or even the nameless male characters. The warrior woman is described as "an apparition of a woman" while the Intended is seen only through light imagery. The few other women mentioned – the two knitting women, Marlow's aunt, and the woman in the painting – either have a supernatural quality to them or are never actually seen in person within the text.

Thus, one could argue that women are utterly absent from the story, though their influence is not. Why is this? If Marlow is at all representative of Conrad's beliefs, his comment that "we [meaning men] must help them [meaning women] to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse" becomes particularly relevant. If Marlow cuts women out of his tale to preserve the beauty of these particular characters, Conrad cuts women out of *Heart of Darkness* to preserve their separateness from this rather depressing and gloomy world.