*Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad Excerpt

*Some background on this story: The narrator, Marlow, is telling this story about his travels through the African jungle. He was on a mission to find a great Ivory merchant, named Kurtz, who has gone off the rails and set himself up as a god to the African tribesmen. In the following scene, Marlow recalls his encounter with now dying Kurtz who has become engrossed by the “Heart of Darkness.”*

* Directions: Read and annotate the following passages. Look specifically for descriptions both of the African people and the effect of being in Africa on the white Europeans (Kurtz and Marlow). What is Conrad saying about Africa as a place and Africans as a people? What literary strategies (imagery, syntax, diction, figurative language, etc) does he use to emphasize those ideas?

"'I had immense plans,' he muttered irresolutely. 'Yes,' said I; 'but if you try to shout I'll smash your head with--' There was not a stick or a stone near. 'I will throttle you for good,' I corrected myself. ['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--'](http://www.shmoop.com/heart-of-darkness/good-vs-evil-quotes-23.html#10BCD1D4E7764E2894FF02A75F231AC1) 'Your success in Europe is assured in any case,' I affirmed, steadily. I did not want to have the throttling of him, you understand--and indeed it would have been very little use for any practical purpose. [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.](http://www.shmoop.com/heart-of-darkness/man-the-natural-world-quotes-11.html#CBBCCA7B67FD4FADAE0EB166C0D9C5D2) And, don't you see, the terror of the position was not in being knocked on the head--though I had a very lively sense of that danger too--but in this, that I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low. I had, even like the niggers, to invoke him--himself his own exalted and incredible degradation. [There was nothing either above or below him, and I knew it. He 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.](http://www.shmoop.com/heart-of-darkness/madness-quotes-11.html#5A175EBDB98044FDBE7925B447FE51FE) [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.](http://www.shmoop.com/heart-of-darkness/madness-quotes-12.html#A23015E53BA146EB9984ADCAECFE3A9B)Soul! If anybody had ever struggled with a soul, I am the man. And I wasn't arguing with a lunatic either. Believe me or not, his intelligence was perfectly clear--concentrated, it is true, upon himself with horrible intensity, yet clear; and therein was my only chance--barring, of course, the killing him there and then, which wasn't so good, on account of unavoidable noise. [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.](http://www.shmoop.com/heart-of-darkness/madness-quotes-12.html#F4E2927F2F054052881E121BC21ABDBD) I kept my head pretty well; but when I had him at last stretched on the couch, I wiped my forehead, while my legs shook under me as though I had carried half a ton on my back down that hill. And yet I had only supported him, his bony arm clasped round my neck--and he was not much heavier than a child.

"When next day we left at noon, the crowd, of whose presence behind the curtain of trees I had been acutely conscious all the time, flowed out of the woods again, filled the clearing, covered the slope with a mass of naked, breathing, quivering, bronze bodies. [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.](http://www.shmoop.com/heart-of-darkness/good-vs-evil-quotes-24.html#001F946CB53C4C66A84CAA607A72B488) [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 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 response of some satanic litany.](http://www.shmoop.com/heart-of-darkness/race-quotes-6.html#5E341FC21F0B432694A03EF0F0D24FAF)

"We had carried Kurtz into the pilot-house: there was more air there. Lying on the couch, he stared through the open shutter. [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.](http://www.shmoop.com/heart-of-darkness/women-femininity-quotes-4.html#2F0D9BDB63E945F981665E717246BE9D)

"'Do you understand this?' I asked.

"He kept on looking out past me with fiery, longing eyes, with a mingled expression of wistfulness and hate. He made no answer, but I saw a smile, a smile of indefinable meaning, appear on his colorless lips that a moment after twitched convulsively. 'Do I not?' he said slowly, gasping, as if the words had been torn out of him by a supernatural power.