

Close Reading Passage: *Heart of Darkness*

“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. It was
5 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
10 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. And why not? The
mind of man is capable of anything —because everything is in it, all the past as well as
all the future. What was there after all? Joy, fear, sorrow, devotion, valour, rage—who
15 can tell?—but truth—truth stripped of its cloak of time. 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. An appeal to me in this
20 fiendish row—is there? Very well; I hear; I admit, but I have a voice, too, and for good or
evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced. Of course, a fool, what with sheer fright
and fine sentiments, is always safe. Who’s that grunting? You wonder I didn’t go ashore
for a howl and a dance? Well, no—I didn’t. Fine sentiments, you say? Fine sentiments,
be hanged! I had no time. I had to mess about with white—lead and strips of woolen
25 blanket helping to put bandages on those leaky steampipes—I tell you. I had to watch the
steering, and circumvent those snags, and get the tin—pot along by hook or by crook.
There was surface truth enough in these things to save a wiser man. 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
30 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
35 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 watched the glass fearfully (with
40 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, the short noise was left behind, the interminable miles of silence—and we crept
on, towards Kurtz. But the snags were thick, the water was treacherous and shallow, the
boiler seemed indeed to have a sulky devil in it, and thus neither that fireman nor I had
45 any time to peer into our creepy thoughts.