

HEART OF DARKNESS

"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!'"

What is the horror that Kurtz speaks of?

"The horror" of which Kurtz speaks in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness is the darkness at the core of humanity, concealed beneath a veneer in psychoanalytic terms, and literalised through post-colonialism. From a post-colonial perspective, Kurtz is a microcosm for the sordid avarice of the Western civilisation mission, and "the horror" is that of Western hegemony.

"The neo-colonial "horror" extends to the demeaning disempowerment of the natives. The opposing traits of Europe and Africa elucidates the contagious power of the period's imperial propaganda, seen in the contrast between the two narrator's views in the omniscient metanarrative. The unknown narrator's laudatory description of the "luminous" estuary and the "benign imensity of light" depicts England as the enlightened pinnacle of civilisation. Antithetically, the Congo's "implacable...brooding...inscrutable river" is conflated with the "a whirl of black limbs" to create a sense of darkness. The accumulation of Conrad's intensity-imbued diction including, "frenzy", "phantoms", "madhouse", "monster" and "devil" portrays Africans as inferiors needing subordination from their conquerors." The narrator praises England's imperialistic "sword", "torch", and "messengers of might within the land, bearers of a spark of the sacred fire" and celebrates the "greatness" of Western colonisers venturing into "the mystery of an unknown earth." However unlike the black and white perspective of the first narrator, ("it had become so pitch black that we listeners could hardly see one another,") Marlow comments, "you fellows see more than I could then." Through alluding to the biblical psalm stating London "has been one of the dark places on the earth" he shows his belief that the binaries of light and dark representing Europe as good and Africa evil are an oversimplification. Marlow compares how the Roman invaders must have seen England as having "savagery, the utter savagery," paralleling the degrading beliefs of Europeans believing they were emancipating the Africans. Marlow who now sees Europe as "monstrous" was initially "charmed" by the exoticism of the "snake"-like river, symbolised by his blindness caused by the equipoise of darkness and mist that signify his denial and ignorance respectively. The biblical connotations of a snake enhances the sustained metaphor revealing Marlow's prior assumption that the Congo would contain man's uncivilised "heart of darkness."

The dehumanisation of natives is reinforced through Conrad's constant labelling of the "faces like grotesque masks", "niggas", "black shapes" and "savages." Through subverting the Africans at the grove of death as "black bones", and "one of these creatures...on all-fours [who]...lapped water" like an animal, the pejorative language profiles Africans as lacking intrinsic humanness of white people. The reality of imperialism is illuminated in Kurtz's painting representing the plight of natives, who, the woman likely symbolising the Europeans has come to civilise. Her "lighted torch" perhaps represents the European customs forced upon the commodified natives, and the "draped and blindfolded" nature shows the European's ignorance to the consequences of their oppressive colonial system on the denizens. The blindfold perhaps alludes to lady justice, and the torch to the statue of

liberty, demonstrating the freedom and justice the Europeans believed they provided. In fact “it was just robbery with violence”, and the Westerners “were no colonists... they were conquerors” whose “strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others.” Indeed, Kurtz’s power arose from his assumption of his own superiority, contrasted by the alleged inferiority of the subaltern natives who he subjugated through his othering.

The greed and materialism maintained by Europe is incarnated by the sense of entitlement that “everything belonged to [Kurtz]” with his “unsound methods” echoing the questionable ethics of the West. This is epitomised by Kurtz’s mistress, analogous to the possessions that colonists sought during the epoch (SPECIFY). Kurtz’s infatuation with the “wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman” replicates the exoticism that enticed Westerners to the “savage and superb” Africa. This is enhanced by her “slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments”, the “innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck” and “the value of several elephant tusks upon her” rendering her tokenisation. This is furthered by Conrad endowing her with the same qualities as the forest using pathetic fallacy, “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.” Her own “wild sorrow and dumb pain” of Kurtz dying despite “the tempestuous anguish of his soul” exhibits her own colonised ways.

The Harlequin symbolises the ingrained imperialist societal values held at the time. His belief that “Kurtz has enlarged [his] mind” despite admitting “[Kurtz] would shoot [the Harlequin] unless [he] gave [Kurtz] the ivory ... because there was nothing on earth to prevent him killing whom he jolly well pleased” exemplifies the phenomenon of post-colonial mimicry. This is magnified by the “primitive honour” acting as a “restraint” from the 30 cannibals eating the few Westerners. The Harlequin’s clothes were “covered with patches all over” that represented his desire to cling onto the remnants of European culture. His “bright patches, blue, red, and yellow” replicates the colours that Marlow sees on the map at the company office originally, thus delineating the decimation of Africa in the Scramble for Africa where it was exoticised as a “blank space of delightful mystery.”

The “horror” speaks of the false pretence that Westerners had higher moral goals, with the “idea” being “what redeems [their actions]” and of the supposedly civilised Europe ignoring its underlying barbarity and cruelty typified by the inexplicable cannons fired by the French ship with “a touch of insanity”. The corruption stemming from the nepotism of his aunt who knows “a man who has lots of influence” permeates into the paternalistic ignorance shown through Conrad’s juxtaposition of institutionalised cultural repression highlighted through the exclusion of native dialogue throughout the novella, and the demiurgic presentation of Kurtz. The paucity of African perspective despite the Congo setting illustrates the silencing of the colonised, and promotes a white perspective. The sepulchre’s biblical connotations of employing a façade of goodness to mask one’s malignancy draws allusions to the “high and just proceedings” justifying the Belgian’s voyage to the Congo. Marlow loses navigational clarity and purpose, reflecting his reaction of liberal humanism when faced with the actualities of wider colonial politics. These ulterior motives are exemplified by the “Eldorado exploring expedition” that purportedly supported righteous purposes, but had “no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in a burglar breaking into a safe” as they proceeded “to tear treasure out of the bowels of the land,” personifying Western hypocrisy. Marlow’s decision to lie about Kurtz’s last words implicates him in the ongoing cycle of imperialism, showing that he too does not uphold what he preaches when professing, “I hate, detest and can’t bear a lie”. The way in which Marlow’s lie maintains an unrealistically positive image of Kurtz parallels the justification of crimes of colonialism. When “Mr Kurtz...crawled as much as the veriest savage of them all” at the end he too demonstrates the irony that he infantilised the natives. Kurtz himself claimed in his initial Company report his aim was to complete the great acts of “humanising, improving, instructing.” He abandons these philanthropic ideals however and positions himself as a deity, with his painting unveiling the

duality between his previous ostensible goal to bring “light” of civilisation to the Congo and his underlying mission to “exterminate all the brutes!”

Kurtz’s demise at the novella’s cessation exemplifies the dysfunctionality of Eurocentric imperialism and mirrors the devastating subsequent impacts of the deeply embedded cultural colonisation of Africa, foreshadowed by the missing member of faith. Despite Kurtz’s prevailing glory, he ended up reduced to “something in a muddy hole.” Being buried in the mud where “there remained only his memory” symbolises the aftermath of his “destruction”, given that “his words will remain.” Kurtz’s final words are his truest “as though a veil had been rent” and his “intense and hopeless despair” that Marlow interprets speaks for the incompetence of the syncretism symbolised through the “wail of mournful fear and utter despair”. The postcolonial criticism is particularly effective at helping to see connections among all the domains of human experience, including the psychological framework used to examine human repression, explored through psychoanalysis.

Through a psychoanalytic lens, the audience can infer that “the horror” refers to the internal darkness that exists at the heart of our existence. Due to Conrad’s own experience in the Congo under King Leopold’s ruling, Marlow reflects his own encounters, and alleviates Marlow’s and therefore his own guilt by projecting blame onto the vilified Kurtz and the empire.

Conrad reveals the duplicities and “horror” of internal darkness through the ambiguous nature of the novella. Commenced by the ambiguity of the title, “heart of darkness” proliferating into “The horror! the Horror!” Conrad compels the readers to interpret the horror themselves so they relate to it, with the contrasting perspectives of two narrator’s impelling the audience to develop their own. The title is moreover a medium through which Conrad explores the human mind and behaviour. The phrase “heart of darkness” itself is a recurring motif designed to evoke the feeling of being guided to a place of self-actualisation, as Marlow goes through the Campbellian “Hero’s journey.” Marlow’s journey is his process of Jungian individuation as he travels to the centre of his unconsciousness where he discovers his true self.

From a Freudian perspective, the audience can infer that the Congo represents the human psyche, with Marlow’s physical journey downstream construing his delving into the unconsciousness, the culminating experience entailing the “horror” of seeing the pervasiveness of one’s “vile desires”. Each different station represents an ego-defence, exposing progressive savagery that is the essence of horror. At the outer station, Marlow encounters the “white man in such an unexpected elegance of get-up” that is the chief accountant. His “collars, his vast cuffs, his brushed hair” and the “penholder behind his ear” as well as the practice of bookkeeping demonstrates conservatism of the superego, supported by the “high desk” and “high stool” present. The centre station where Marlow meets the “commonplace” manager, who “was obeyed, yet he inspired neither love nor fear” is ego-driven, seeking to mediate between the super-ego embodied by the accountant, and the id personified through Kurtz. His “neither civil nor uncivil” manner shows a descent into darkness, replicating Marlow’s observation, “I was getting savage,” and the shed present is more primal than the furniture in the outer station, and more civilised than Kurtz’s inner station with “heads on the stakes” turned in rather outward to scare others off, evincing Kurtz’s neuroses. The river represents the stream of consciousness, so as Marlow progresses down the river he reaches further into his own unconsciousness until finally Kurtz in the inner station representing the heart of the utter immersion into the darkness. Kurtz is a manifestation of Marlow’s own id, with the frame narrative allowing for descriptions of Marlow’s “sunken cheeks, a yellow complexion” that echoes Kurtz’s illness. The three stations themselves are attempts at oasis within the jungle, but have become corrupted by the darkness of the land.

The geographical and cultural estrangement of the African wilderness allows Kurtz to be isolated from the strict European norms keeping Kurtz's savage nature under control. This consequently degenerates and surfaces in Africa where "anything can be done in this country" as Kurtz is no longer in contact with the high moral standards and laws of Europe, thus awaking his "forgotten and brutal instincts." The dichotomy between Kurtz as an archetypal civilised painter, musician, poet, journalist who is the "making of immense success" and the megalomaniac, arbitrary killer of natives represents the multi-faceted nature of humanity, insinuating that Marlow too has a primitive element. The wild landscape, "whose banks were rotting into mud, whose waters, thickened into slime, invaded the contorted mangroves," enhanced by the compulsive cannibals and human sacrifice can be seen to represent the id, as Kurtz yields to his barbaric nature in the less civilised context of Congo. His intended who he cannot marry due to the financial constraints represents his socially confined side, whilst his African Mistress who is the "wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman" has an instinctive sexual power of id that overpowers his ego. Whilst he seeks to earn money for his wedding by obtaining job, as dictated by the law-abiding element of his super-ego, he exploits natives and works unlawfully to amass wealth when in Congo, thus acting off the pleasure principle "that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear." That "Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts" demonstrates the overpowering of his super-ego as he yields to his primitive instincts and becomes id driven, leading to his loss of contact with reality and state of psychosis. Dramatising Kurtz's duality between the "remarkable man" and having "gone mad," insinuates that all humans have an internal darkness they would be horrified to discover.

Whilst the id is often suppressed and counterbalanced by the superego and ego when awake, it is able to thrive during dreams, thus explaining the dream like setting of the novella. Characters apart from Marlow and Kurtz lack real names, positioning them as insignificant parts of the dream. The dream-like landscape is enhanced by the mythological sense given by the narrative being told on a boat, mimicking the structure of oral storytelling, which is often associated with fables.

Marlow's idolising of Kurtz represents humanity's unconscious inclination towards darkness, as the West sublimates their urge to cause destruction and assert dominance with the claim of "high and just proceedings." That Kurtz is the only character apart from Marlow who is named, gives credence to the possibility that Kurtz is an incarnation of Marlow's id, revealing his deepest suppressed and primitive desires. Whilst Marlow's narrative depicts Kurtz as highlighting the opposing facets of human nature, they are two sides of the same coin and Marlow is still driven by his super-ego, striving to conform to societal expectations, whilst Kurtz is his alter ego, representing what Marlow would become if all pretence were stripped away. His surfacing id is foreshadowed by his alienist's observation that "the changes take place inside" and he "never sees" his patients after they travel to the Congo. In stating that he "belonged to a world of straightforward facts" that "would not last long," Marlow's identity confusion escalates as his id begins to take over, through his venturing "deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness." The "irritating pretence" of confusion experienced by Marlow through the conflicting objectives of his id and super-ego is comparable to Kurtz's ego struggling to balance, causing "the inconceivable mystery of a soul" that was "struggling blindly with itself." Conrad exposes the nightmarish qualities of irrational politics depending on the obsession of a leader (in this case Kurtz), as well as the collective fixations of a people (the natives and Westerners who praise him alike.)

Ultimately, the combination of Kurtz representing the literal actualities of imperialism that can be seen in a post-colonial perspective, and the psychological metaphors for internal darkness shown through a psychoanalytic lens, utilises Kurtz as a vehicle allowing Marlow to see a darker side of reality he attempts to suppress. Coming to terms with the suppressed truths of the atrocities shows the true "horror" of humanity.