

Kurtz—the Highly Gifted or an Evil Genius all Europe Contributed to the Making of Kurtz

Mamta Sharma Vyas^a, Kripa K. Gautam^b

^aDoctoral Candidate At Jaipur National University, Rajasthan, India.

^bDepartment Of English, Jaipur National University, Rajasthan, India

Abstract

Kurtz, the highly gifted or an evil genius, is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery. He is a unique victim of colonization. He becomes bound to break his ideals due to the spell of wilderness, with the touch of wisdom awakens his brutal instincts.

KEYWORDS: Prodigy, Personifies all the civilizational virtues of Europe, Hollow at the core, wilderness, Dark jungles of Africa, The Horror!

Kurtz is a larger than life figure who has both achieved tremendous success and become a kind of monster in the way he governs. Kurtz is a character who is gradually presented to the readers and this gradual unfolding of character is what the story of the novel is all about.

Marlow thinks of Kurtz as an "enchanted princess sleeping in a fabulous castle."¹ Kurtz's personality is multitalented and multifaceted. He is a man of talent in reading and writing poetry, linguistics. To his cousin, he was a "great musician"; to the Journalist a "brilliant politician and leader of men;"² to his fiancé a great humanitarian and genius.³ All of these contrasts with Marlow's version of the man and he is left doubting the validity of his memories. Yet Kurtz through his charisma and larger than life plans remains with Marlow and the reader.

Kurtz is significant both for his style and eloquence and for his grandiose almost megalomaniacal Scheming.⁴

Kurtz is a fictional character who stands as an example for civilized man. Kurtz had been educated in England with a half English mother and a half french father. The International Society of Suppression of Savage Customs had entrusted him with the making of a report, for its future guidance.⁵ He had written a report which Marlow had

¹ Available at <http://web.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/eng109/HeartRG.htm>, accessed on 15th September, 2018

² Available at <https://the-artifice.com/heart-of-darkness-the-two-sided-mask-of-kurtz/>, accessed on 15th September, 2018

³ Available at <https://the-artifice.com/heart-of-darkness-the-two-sided-mask-of-kurtz/>, accessed on 15th September, 2018

⁴ Available at <https://the-artifice.com/heart-of-darkness-the-two-sided-mask-of-kurtz/>, accessed on 15th September, 2018

⁵ Available at http://www.lorenwebster.net/In_a_Dark_Time/2011/03/04/conrads-heart-of-darkness/, accessed on 15th September, 2018

read. It was eloquent and a beautiful piece of writing.⁶ The opening paragraph, however, in the light of later information strikes me now as ominous. He began with the argument that we white, from the point of development we had arrived at, "must necessarily appear to them (Savages) in the nature of supernatural beings- as we approach them with the might as that of a deity. 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 the method." The foot note ran "Exterminate all the brutes."

In the light of this report Kurtz is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma, deep in the dark of Africa.

To deeply know the character of Kurtz it is recommended to go through different opinions of the other characters regarding Kurtz.

Starting with the Company's chief Accountant; "A first class Agent. He is a very remarkable person who sends in as much ivory as all the others put together."⁷

An Agent of the Company who Marlow meets at the central station, is a prodigy, an emissary of pity and science and progress and devil knows what else."⁸

The Young Russian (Kurtz's last disciple), "You don't talk to that man, you listen to him. He could be more terrible. You can't Judge Mr. Kurtz as you would an ordinary man."⁹

These statements unfold Kurtz's character. He is in-charge of the most productive ivory station in the Congo.¹⁰ Hailed universally for his genius and eloquence Kurtz becomes the focus of Marlow's Journey into Africa.¹¹ He is the unique victim of colonization; the wilderness captures him and he turns his back on the people and customs that were part of him.¹²

Thus Marlow hears about Kurtz as a Prodigy, as a superior being who really personifies all the civilizational virtues of Europe. He is presented as a malformed seven foot-long puppet creature, who enacts a choreographed ceremony.¹³ Kurtz has become so enthralled to the commodity, he seeks that he himself is commodified as though "an

⁶ Available at http://www.lorenwebster.net/In_a_Dark_Time/2011/03/04/conrads-heart-of-darkness/, accessed on 15th September, 2018

⁷ Available at <https://www.shmoop.com/heart-of-darkness/charlie-marlow-quotes-46.html>, accessed on 15th September, 2018

⁸ Available at http://www.lorenwebster.net/In_a_Dark_Time/2011/03/04/conrads-heart-of-darkness/, accessed on 15th September, 2018

⁹ Available at <https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/99/heart-of-darkness/1690/part-3/>, accessed on 15th September, 2018

¹⁰ Available at <https://www.gradesaver.com/heart-of-darkness/study-guide/character-list>, accessed on 15th September, 2018

¹¹ Available at <https://www.gradesaver.com/heart-of-darkness/study-guide/character-list>, accessed on 15th September, 2018

¹² Available at <https://www.gradesaver.com/heart-of-darkness/study-guide/character-list>, accessed on 15th September, 2018

¹³ Available at <https://www.gradesaver.com/heart-of-darkness/study-guide/character-list>, accessed on 15th September, 2018

animated image of death carved out of old ivory had been shaking its hand" or he is imaged as a grimacing open mouth, giving him a "weirdly voracious aspect as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the man before him."¹⁴ He also acts out of psychopathic intensity, the urge towards an autocratically governed empire, "My intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my... as if everything belonged to him." In the making of veritable Antichrist, he exacts complete submission from his subordinates and can envisage a policy of what now-a-days would be called racial cleansing: "Exterminate all the Brute." The iconoclastic power of the portrait depends upon our recognition of the fact that 'heart of darkness' has its roots firmly in Europe and that Kurtz, as its malformed outgrowth, strikes Marlow as a symbol of present and active degeneration.

But overlaying this incarnation is another one, the object of Marlow's most excited and unspecific fears - the spectacle of Kurtz as a "lost soul". This version presses us to attend to the fact that Kurtz had a pre-history. There had, it seems, been 'an original Kurtz' (no mere trader but a person of considerable idealism and with talents as a painter, poet, musician, philosopher and orator), who in Africa has been exposed as a "hollow sham". This transplanted European, originally the product of a cultured society and identifying himself with the highminded mission of bringing "light" to Africa, has been betrayed by a naive belief in imperial watch words and with his inherited assumptions exposed as fictions, stands revealed as a morally bankrupt cipher. The image of Kurtz as a greedy devouring mouth is now replaced by one of inner vacancy: he was, says Marlow, strikingly, "hollow at the core" but for Marlow the spectacle does not end there: it carries with it, the added implication that Kurtz has undergone a spectacular "fall" in Africa-brought about by hollowness so profound as to have resulted in his invasion by the dark atavistic forces of the land. Many times we come to see how the manager and his uncle represent the selfishness and greediness of civilized Europe. They care only about themselves, their positions and promotions. They ridicule Kurtz's philosophy quoting something Kurtz had said: "Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a center for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing."¹⁵ Kurtz's idyllic vision aggravates them. Ironically we found out how Kurtz's life and practices contrast with his once idealistic views. When the manager's uncle asks him if he feels well, we see the power of the jungle, as it weakens and kills people. The uncle gestures towards the forest as he suggests how the climate may destroy Kurtz. Marlow calls the man's wishes a "treacherous appeal to the lurking death, to the hidden evil, to the profound darkness of its heart."¹⁶ Physically the jungle conquers most men leaving only the strong to live on. The power of nature overwhelms the power of man.

¹⁴ Available at <https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/99/heart-of-darkness/1690/part-3/>, accessed on 15th September, 2018

¹⁵ Available at <https://www.bartleby.com/essay/The-Changing-Personality-of-Kurtz-in-Joseph-FK5WESZTJ>, accessed on 15th September, 2018

¹⁶ Available at <https://www.sparknotes.com/nofear/lit/heart-of-darkness/part-2/>, accessed on 15th September, 2018

Marlow sees people moving in the forest through his binoculars. He compares the woods to the “closed door of a prison.”¹⁷ The silence disturbs him. The Russian tells Marlow that Kurtz is very ill now.¹⁸ Only lately had he come to the river, after an absence of many months. Marlow sees round knobs on posts near Kurtz’s house. They are ‘black, dried, sunken’ heads. The first one in the row faces him. It seems to smile at some “dream of that slumber.” Marlow believes the heads show Kurtz’s restraint. The wilderness had made him mad, he figures. Marlow can only wonder if Kurtz knows of his own “deficiency.” He puts down his binoculars.

The Russian tells Marlow about Kurtz’s¹⁹ ascendancy, how the chief venerate him, how keeping Kurtz alive has occupied all his time. Marlow does not want to hear about the ceremonies used to honor Kurtz. Marlow believes he is in a “region of subtle horrors.”²⁰ The Russian justifies Kurtz’s savagery by telling Marlow the heads had belonged to rebels, Kurt’s opposition. Kurtz’s trying life, he adds, had led him to choose these cruel acts. Only keeping Kurtz alive, the Russian says he had nothing to do with these killings. A group of men carrying Kurtz on a stretcher appears from around the house. Waist-deep in the grass, they appear to rise from the ground. Naked human beings with spears, bows and shields follow. The bushes shake and the grass sways, but then stop in “attentive immobility,” as if everything waits for something to happen next.²¹ The Russian tells Marlow that if Kurtz does not say the right thing, they are done for.²²

Kurtz sits up, Marlow resents the absurd danger. Through his glasses, he sees Kurtz move his arm, talk, and nod his head. He realizes Kurtz mean “short” in German, and feels the name fits, though he looks “at least seven feet long”²³ the cage of his ribs and bones of his arms show. He thinks of Kurtz as an “animated image of death.” Marlow hears Kurtz’s deep voice from afar.

The anticipation of Marlow feel to meet Kurtz is more like anticipation solving a mystery or finding out what happens in the season finale of a T.V. show, when that ending comes Marlow is disgusted with Kurtz's actions and disappointed with the reality of the man he sees, weak, racist and dying. "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."²⁴ A voice! A

¹⁷ Available at <https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/99/heart-of-darkness/1690/part-3/> , accessed on 15th September, 2018

¹⁸ Available at <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/heart/section8/> , accessed on 15th September, 2018

¹⁹ Available at <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/heart/section8/> , accessed on 15th September, 2018

²⁰ Available at [https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/99/heart-of-darkness/1690/part-3 /](https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/99/heart-of-darkness/1690/part-3/) , accessed on 15th September, 2018

²¹ Available at [https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/99/heart-of-darkness/1690/part-3 /](https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/99/heart-of-darkness/1690/part-3/) , accessed on 15th September, 2018

²² Available at https://www.sparknotes.com/nofear/lit/heart-of-darkness/part-3/page_4/ , accessed on 15th September, 2018

²³ Available at [https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/99/heart-of-darkness/1690/part-3 /](https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/99/heart-of-darkness/1690/part-3/) , accessed on 15th September, 2018

²⁴ Available at <https://www.shmoop.com/heart-of-darkness/power-quotes-6.html> , accessed on 15th September, 2018

voice! It rang deep to the very last.²⁵ It survived his strength to hide in the magnificent folds of eloquence the barren darkness of his heart.²⁶

In the first company station, Marlow notices a picture painted by the remarkable Mr. Kurtz about a year ago. It represents “a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch, the background was somber- almost black.²⁷ The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of torchlight on the face was sinister.”²⁸ At any rate, it was not long after he finished the painting that the natives began to adore him ritually, while his hatred for them plunged to the depth out of which came his prescription of the only method for dealing with primitive people: “Exterminate all the brutes.” The painting gives us a warning that what appears to be dark or black in many different senses; that what seems holy and sacred may prove to be idolatrous and even diabolical; that what is clothed may be stripped. Kurtz represents the European parasites in Africa, who are hollow, and who have no personal moral vision of their inhumanity and folly; but they are also collapsible because they have nothing “behind them” in their society’s institutions- to hold them up. When Kurtz’s diabolism is revealed to Marlow, he says, “Kurtz had kicked himself loose of the earth²⁹ ... and before him did not know whether I stood on the ground or floated in the air.”³⁰

Marlow’s encounter with Kurtz’s Russian devotee has its own special importance in the story. The Russian, described by Marlow as a harlequin, regards Kurtz as a noble-minded, lofty being worthy of adoration. In the Russian’s view, Kurtz is not a man to be judged by ordinary standards. This view naturally stimulates Marlow’s desire to meet Kurtz and find out how the man is to be judged. Marlow has already learnt that Kurtz is a remarkable man, an emissary of progress and pity, a great collector of ivory, and so on. Subsequently Marlow sees the human skulls hung upon poles outside Kurtz’s residence. The skulls have the color of ivory. The association of ivory with these skulls suggests the essence of Kurtz himself when Marlow gives us his description of the man on personally seeing him from a distance:

“I see him open his mouth wide- it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him.”

However we are never told the secret of Kurtz’s degradation or the nature of the “abominable satisfactions” which he has been enjoying.³¹ It is because of his admiration for Kurtz and his devotion to the man that Marlow plunges into the jungle to search for

²⁵ Available at https://www.sparknotes.com/nofear/lit/heart-of-darkness/part-3/page_11/, accessed on 15th September, 2018

²⁶ Available at https://www.sparknotes.com/nofear/lit/heart-of-darkness/part-3/page_11/, accessed on 15th September, 2018

²⁷ Available at <http://emsap2.blogspot.com/2009/08/kurtzs-painting-heart-of-darkness.html>, accessed on 15th September, 2018

²⁸ Available at <http://emsap2.blogspot.com/2009/08/kurtzs-painting-heart-of-darkness.html>, accessed on 15th September, 2018

²⁹ Available at Available at <https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/99/heart-of-darkness/1690/part-3/>, accessed on 15th September, 2018

³⁰ Available at <https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/99/heart-of-darkness/1690/part-3/>, accessed on 15th September, 2018

³¹ Available at <https://doi.org/10.1002/emmm.201100211>, accessed on 15th September, 2018

Kurtz after Kurtz has slipped away from the ship's cabin to join his native followers. When Marlow has found Kurtz, the latter insists on going to join the savages but Marlow urges him to go back with him to the ship. There is here a conflict of wills between the two men. Marlow wins though Kurtz too uses his better sense to resist the call of wilderness. Kurtz is then brought back to the ship by Marlow, back to civilization. Marlow has succeeded in breaking the spell of the wilderness which seemed to draw Kurtz to itself by awakening his brutal instincts. This is a crucial stage in the story of Kurtz. Bringing him back to civilization was no easy task for Marlow. Marlow was convicted that, in wanting to join the savages, Kurtz was not behaving like a madman. Marlow was not dealing with a lunatic. Kurtz's intelligence at the time was perfectly clear.³² It was Kurtz's soul that was mad. "He struggled with himself, too, I saw it, I heard it."³³ I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself."³⁴ Thus Kurtz does allow himself to be led back to civilization; and in doing so he wins a victory over his primitive, brutal instincts which were driving him into the wilderness to join the savages with whom he had found a kinship and an affinity, and with whom he had established a close relationship too.

Marlow feels deeply impressed by Kurtz's last words: The Horror! The Horror! Marlow takes these words to mean that, while dying, Mr. Kurtz has been able to recognize the evil within himself. To Marlow, it seems that Mr. Kurtz has, at the end, partially redeemed himself by realizing the horror of the evil which had been dominating his mind, and which had taken possession of his heart and soul. Marlow regards Mr. Kurtz's last words as an "affirmation" and as a "victory." After having heard these last words of Mr. Kurtz, Marlow becomes further confirmed in his friendship for the dead man that Marlow tells a lie to Mr. Kurtz's fiancée when, in response to a question by her, he says that the last word spoken by Mr. Kurtz before his death was her own name.

³² Available at <https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/99/heart-of-darkness/1690/part-3/> , accessed on 15th September, 2018

³³ Available at <https://mirkwood.wordpress.com/2006/09/30/the-horrors-of-mr-kurtz/> , accessed on 15th September, 2018

³⁴ Available at <https://mirkwood.wordpress.com/2006/09/30/the-horrors-of-mr-kurtz/> , accessed on 15th September, 2018