



WHY DOES KURTZ FASCINATE US?

Mordechai Gordon¹

¹*School of Education, Quinnipiac University, USA*

Abstract

This essay diverges from the majority of articles on *Heart of Darkness* in some important ways. First, Mordechai Gordon offers a literal interpretation of Conrad's novella, one that maintains fidelity to the text itself rather than to his own feelings about the merits or deficiencies of this work. More importantly, the aim in this essay is not to analyze Conrad's intentions in *Heart of Darkness* since the author's true intentions are often hidden from the reader. Instead, Gordon's goal is to explore the fascination that readers of *Heart of Darkness* seem to have with the literary character of Kurtz. In effect, this essay attempts to provide an answer to a simple question: what makes Kurtz so intriguing to readers of Conrad's novella? Gordon argues that Kurtz possesses at least four characteristics that help make him so attractive to his readers: eloquent, charismatic, enigmatic, and hollow at the core.

Keywords

Conrad, Kurtz, Fascinates, Heart, Darkness

I. INTRODUCTION

Readers and critics of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* have long been fascinated by Conrad's depiction of Kurtz through the eyes of Marlow, the story's narrator, as a complex and ambiguous character, one that exhibits extreme and demonic attributes. For instance, Cedric Watts noted that the "assessments of Kurtz are a compound of revulsion, awe, and a form of respect, the assessments to the context in which Marlow is viewing his actions."¹ Yet many of Conrad's critics have strayed away from a close reading of *Heart of Darkness* while pursuing their own agendas of either denouncing the novella's colonialist and racist resonances or defending the author for bringing awareness to the horrific legacy of Western colonialism. An example of the former is Chinua Achebe, who has argued that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* represents the "metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European humanity enters at his peril."² The latter position can be seen in an essay by Hunt Hawkins who asserted that Joseph Conrad is "one of the few writers of his period who struggled with the issue of race, and we should appreciate the remarkable fair-mindedness he achieved."³ A notable exception to these two contrasting views is represented by Paul Armstrong who insists that "Conrad is neither a racist nor an exemplary anthropologist but a skeptical dramatist of epistemological processes. *Heart of Darkness* is a calculated failure to depict achieved cross-cultural understanding."⁴

This essay diverges from the majority of articles on *Heart of Darkness* in some important ways. First, I offer a literal interpretation of Conrad's novella, one that maintains fidelity to the text itself rather than to my own feelings about the merits or deficiencies of this work. More importantly, my aim in this essay is not to analyze Conrad's intentions in *Heart of Darkness* since the author's true intentions are often hidden from the reader. Instead, my goal is to explore the fascination that readers of *Heart of Darkness* seem to have with the literary character of Kurtz. In effect, this essay attempts to provide an answer to a simple question: what makes Kurtz so intriguing to readers of Conrad's novella? I argue that Kurtz possesses at least four characteristics that help make him so attractive to his readers: eloquent, charismatic, enigmatic, and hollow at the core. In what follows, I describe

¹ Cedric Watts, "Heart of Darkness": A Critical and Contextual Discussion Source, *Conrad Studies*, 2012, Vol. 7, p. 96.

² Chinua Achebe, "An image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's heart of darkness." *Postcolonial criticism*. Ed. Moore-Gilbert, Bart, Gareth Stanton, and Willy Maley, Routledge, 2014, p. 120.

³ Hunt Hawkins, "The Issue of Racism in 'Heart of Darkness.'" *Conradiana* 14.3 (1982): 171.

⁴ Paul B. Armstrong, "Heart of Darkness and the Epistemology of Cultural Differences." *Under Postcolonial Eyes: Joseph Conrad After Empire*. Ed. Gail Fincham and Myrtle Hooper. Rondebosch: University of Cape Town Press, 1996, p. 23.

in detail each of these characteristics, illustrate how they are manifest in the person of Kurtz, and explain why they make him attractive to readers of *Heart of Darkness*. However, before analyzing why Kurtz fascinates readers of *Heart of Darkness*, I need to take a moment to show how some of the critics have approached Conrad's novella in general and its main character in particular.

II. CRITIQUES OF *HEART OF DARKNESS*

For simplicity's sake, I will divide Conrad's critics into two opposing camps—those that have condemned the novella and those that have lauded it—while acknowledging that the issue is more complex than depicted here. One of the most outspoken examples of the former is Chinua Achebe who has identified a desire and need in Western psychology to “set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest.”⁵ For Achebe, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* amounts to a work of fiction that embodies this desire and need to dehumanize Africa and Africans. In light of this assumption, Achebe ponders “whether a novel that celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalized a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art.”⁶ His answer to this question is a resounding no.

Achebe's critique of *Heart of Darkness* does not end with his assertion that Conrad's novella celebrates the dehumanization of Africans and Africa. In fact, he goes a step further by claiming that the way in which Conrad chose to depict the African characters in the novella as well as the continent in which the story takes place indicate that he should be considered a “thoroughgoing racist.” Achebe goes on to argue that this simple truth is glossed over in most criticism of Conrad's work “due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked.”⁷ The point in highlighting Achebe's harsh condemnation of *Heart of Darkness* is neither to endorse nor take issue with his position, but rather to remind readers that anti-colonialist critiques of Conrad's novella have existed for quite some time. More importantly, my point is to suggest that these types of critiques rely largely on making inferences from the author's supposed *intentions* (i.e., to diminish or dehumanize Africans and Africa) and much less on engaging in a close reading, one which is based on providing irrefutable evidence from the text.

A less extreme and more subtle critique of Conrad's novella than what Achebe has offered can be found in Frances Singh's essay “The Colonialistic Bias of ‘*Heart of Darkness*.’” In her essay, Singh attempts to make a case that the title “*Heart of Darkness*” is metaphorical on a number of levels. On the one hand, Singh proclaims that Conrad associates this title with the African jungle as well as with the wilderness and lack of sophistication of the native population. On the other hand, she argues that the notion of *Heart of Darkness* refers “to the evil practices of the colonizers of the Congo, their sordid exploitation of the natives, and suggests that the real darkness is not in Africa but in Europe, and that its heart is not in the breasts of black Africans but in all whites who countenance and engage in colonialistic enterprise.”⁸ Summarizing the ambiguity in the title that Conrad chose for his story, Singh writes:

Marlow's sympathy for the oppressed blacks is only superficial. He feels sorry for them when he sees them dying, but when he sees them healthy, practising their customs, he feels nothing but abhorrence and loathing, like a good colonizer to whom such a feeling offers a perfect rationalization for his policies. If blacks are evil then they must be conquered and put under white man's rule for their own good.⁹

Much like her interpretation of the title, Singh presents a nuanced analysis of Kurtz, the main character of Conrad's novella. Singh argues that Marlow was never able to fully understand the depravity of Kurtz, even after the narrator meets him in person and brings him aboard the steamer. “The problem with Kurtz, which Marlow doesn't realize, is not that Kurtz went native, but that he did not go native enough, for Kurtz perverted the customs of the tribe, making them a means to a deplorable end—namely, keeping the ivory flowing and colonialism a profitable venture for his employers.”¹⁰ For Singh, the problem with Kurtz was that he never adopted the positive virtues of the tribes with whom he had associated. Perhaps Singh is correct in her view that Kurtz failed to assume those beneficial tribal values and rituals, which could have saved him from ruin. But readers of *Heart of Darkness* must contend with the narrator's actual account of his impressions of the fictional Kurtz while being cautious not to read too much of their own preconceived notions into his character.

⁵ Achebe, “An image of Africa,” p. 114.

⁶ Ibid, p. 120.

⁷ Ibid., p. 119.

⁸ Singh, Frances B. “The Colonialistic Bias of *Heart of Darkness*.” *Conradiana* 10.1 (1978): 42.

⁹ Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 49.

An alternative interpretation of *Heart of Darkness* than the ones provided by Achebe and Singh can be found in the aforementioned essay by Hawkins entitled “The Issue of Racism in ‘*Heart of Darkness*.’”¹¹ Although Hawkins maintains that it would be a mistake to dismiss the attacks on Conrad brought forth by Third World scholars, he argues that “neither Achebe nor Singh fully appreciates Conrad’s condemnation of Kurtz specifically and European imperialism generally.”¹² To support his position, Hawkins cites several passages from *Heart of Darkness* such as the one in which Conrad graphically describes what the Europeans were doing in Africa:

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.¹³

The point that Hawkins is trying to make is that Conrad’s depiction of the European colonists is much harsher than the way in which he portrays the native African population.

In addition to the negative representation of the European colonists in *Heart of Darkness*, Hawkins gives Conrad credit for praising the indigenous people of Africa for their “energy, vitality, and natural dignity.”¹⁴ For instance, Hawkins points out that Conrad’s portrayal of Kurtz’s mistress is very flattering, describing her as “superb, magnificent, and stately.”¹⁵ He even suggests that there are some signs in *Heart of Darkness* that point to Marlow’s gradual development of sympathy for the native African population that he encounters. Perhaps Hawkins takes his appreciation of Conrad too far when he notes without providing much evidence that “as a result of his experience, Marlow overcomes his prejudices enough to acknowledge the ‘claim of distant kinship’ put upon him by his helmsman through their shared work and shared mortality.”¹⁶ In fact, I would argue that it is precisely the biases that Marlow brings—using words like grotesque, horrid, and ugly to describe the native population—that make this late-nineteenth century *European account* of Africa so believable.

Before turning to the main focus of this essay, I want to briefly call readers’ attention to the approach taken by Armstrong who manages to avoid both the position of those critics who chastise Conrad for his colonialist affinities and that of the ones that have chosen to defend him. Armstrong argues that Marlow’s attitude toward the African members of his crew is at once appreciative and dismissive suggesting that the narrator is both open and closed to cultural differences. For example, Armstrong notes that Marlow attributes to his cannibal crew

a kind of existential heroism in the face of absurdity which corresponds to his own ethic of carrying on with one’s duties even when they cannot be justified, but he never checks his interpretation by asking them. If he had, he might have discovered what other commentators have pointed out - namely, that cannibals do not typically eat human flesh to appease hunger but for spiritual reasons as part of specific rituals.¹⁷

Thus, Armstrong’s point is that even as Marlow exhibits an awareness and sympathy that is ahead of his time, the European prejudices about Africa that existed in the nineteenth century are still present in his account of his journey down the Congo River.

III. READERS’ FASCINATION WITH KURTZ

Readers of *Heart of Darkness* encounter Kurtz through the eyes of its narrator, Marlow, who long before he meets the great plunderer of African ivory in person, begins to gather bits of information about him. When Marlow gets to the upper station and discovers that the steamer he is supposed to be guiding up the Congo is broken, he begins to hear stories about Kurtz from different people, which all appear to share an admiration for him. Still, Marlow initially seems unimpressed by Kurtz and even bored by all the talk that he hears about him. “I wasn’t very interested in him,”¹⁸ Marlow remarks during the months that he is waiting for rivets to repair the broken steamer. Yet Marlow gradually becomes curious to learn more about the type of person that Kurtz was and, as he gets closer to finding him, develops a fascination with the enigma surrounding Kurtz and with the larger-than-life impression that others had created for him. The purpose of this paper is to show that although, like Marlow, readers of Conrad’s novella find Kurtz’s actions in the African forest abhorrent, there are several things they find intriguing

¹¹ Hunt Hawkins, “The Issue of Racism in ‘Heart of Darkness.’” *Conradiana* 14.3 (1982): 163-171.

¹² *Ibid.*, 167.

¹³ Joseph Conrad, “Heart of Darkness,” in *Great Short Works of Joseph Conrad*, New York: Harper & Row, 1966, 215.

¹⁴ Hawkins, 168.

¹⁵ “Heart of Darkness,” 274.

¹⁶ Hawkins, 168.

¹⁷ Armstrong, 10.

¹⁸ “Heart of Darkness,” 241.

and captivating about him. So the question is: what is it about Kurtz that, despite his diabolical actions, fascinates readers of *Heart of Darkness*? In what follows, I argue that Kurtz possesses at least four qualities that make him intriguing to readers of Conrad's novella: eloquent, charismatic, enigmatic, and hollow at the core.

Eloquent

Even before Marlow first confronts the person of Kurtz or reads any of his writings, he begins to hear testimony attesting to Kurtz's eloquence and ability to speak. As Marlow gets closer to the inner station (where Kurtz was based), rumors start to fly that Kurtz had fallen ill and that perhaps he was no longer alive. Having previously witnessed so much adulation of Kurtz, Marlow becomes discouraged when he hears the rumors of Kurtz's demise, supposing that maybe he had lost the opportunity to hear his voice. "I was cut to the quick at the idea of having lost an inestimable privilege of listening to the gifted Kurtz," Marlow remarks.¹⁹ Ironically, that privilege was waiting for Marlow and by the time that he gets to meet Kurtz, the latter was quite ill and presented himself as little more than a *voice*. Reflecting back on his encounter with Kurtz in the African wilderness, Marlow observes that what strikes him now is the memory of the voices that he heard, voices that he still struggled to comprehend.

One of the discoveries that Marlow makes upon meeting Kurtz was that the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs had commissioned a report from Kurtz, which he had written and Marlow had subsequently read:

It was eloquent, vibrating with eloquence, but too high-strung, I think. Seventeen pages of close writing he had found time for! ... 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 super-deity,' and so on, and so on. 'By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded.'²⁰

Marlow goes on to note that from that point in the report Kurtz "soared and took me with him. The peroration was magnificent, though difficult to remember you know."²¹ He also suggests that even though the report arrived at some ominous conclusions, it demonstrated Kurtz's ability for eloquence and for the use of noble words.

Kurtz's eloquence and ability to speak also come through from the testimony of the Russian sailor that Marlow comes across as he gets close to the inner station. Marlow accounted for the improbable relationship between the Russian sailor and Kurtz by suggesting that the latter needed an audience that the former could provide. More specifically, Marlow describes a certain occasion in which the two had talked all night, or more likely in which Kurtz had talked and the Russian had listened. "'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. Everything! Everything! ... Of love too ... He made me see things—things.'"²² And even when the relationship between the two became strained and Kurtz threatened to shoot the Russian sailor, he felt that he could not leave Kurtz since the power of his words captivated him as if he were under a spell.

My reading of *Heart of Darkness* suggests that Kurtz's eloquence represents one of the main reasons that this literary character fascinates us. Much like Marlow and the Russian sailor, we are drawn to Kurtz for his ability to command the use of words even as we are aware of the horrible deeds committed by him. To be sure, Marlow condemns Kurtz's savage cruelty (for, among other things, presiding over rituals in which human beings were sacrificed) while acknowledging that Kurtz was mad and unstable. Yet he still opts to protect Kurtz's legacy after his death by refusing to hand over his papers to those that sought to smear his name. And largely due to his eloquence, Marlow decided not to take part in the efforts of those (like the manager of the company) who chose to disparage Kurtz after he succumbed to his illness. Comparing himself to Kurtz after the latter's death, Marlow affirms that "Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it... He had summed up—he had judged. 'The horror!'"²³ Kurtz's very last words (the horror, the horror), which suggest an awareness of the crimes he had committed, reveal his eloquence and demonstrate his ability to excite others, including readers of *Heart of Darkness*.

Charismatic

Closely related to Kurtz's eloquence, is his charisma or the capacity to inspire devotion and enthusiasm in others. Charisma is a quality that can be employed for good or ill, that is, to help or to hurt others. In the case of Kurtz, he relied on his charisma in order to advance his malevolent goals of plundering as much ivory as possible from Africa

¹⁹ "Heart of Darkness," 259.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 262.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 268.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

while eliminating any resistance that stood in his way. For instance, in his conversation with the Russian sailor, Marlow states plainly that Kurtz raided the country after which the Russian reminds the reader that he was not alone during those raids. In fact, according to the testimony provided by the Russian sailor, we learn that Kurtz had managed to recruit some of the local African tribes to join him in his various raids aimed at using force to take the ivory from its indigenous population. “They adored him,” the Russian said, and went on to note that Kurtz “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.”²⁴ Likewise, the Russian himself never stopped adoring him as evidenced by his decision to stick with Kurtz while nursing him through two illnesses even after he was threatened with being shot.

Aside from the testimony of the Russian sailor, readers of *Heart of Darkness* learn about his charisma from Marlow’s interactions with Kurtz’s intended at the end of the novella when he goes to give her the papers that Kurtz had entrusted in him before he died. The intended, who was still mourning the loss of Kurtz more than a year after she received the news of his death, tells Marlow that “he drew men towards him by what was best in them.” She went on to remark that such quality (charisma) “is the gift of the great.” Marlow recounts how, as their conversation continued, the intended whispered that “men looked up to him—his goodness shone in every act. His example...”²⁵ The point here is not that the intended’s view of Kurtz was correct and consistent with the actual man that committed horrific acts in Africa. It is rather that she shared a widespread perception that Kurtz was charismatic and had the power to inspire others to follow his lead.

I bring up Kurtz’s charisma to illustrate the point that readers of *Heart of Darkness* are fascinated by this quality, much like they are intrigued by his eloquence. Charisma is fascinating because it is by virtue of this quality that one can inspire others to follow one’s lead even if one is pursuing malignant goals or using undemocratic means to pursue more lofty goals. In fact, the history of the last two centuries of Western civilization is rife with examples of atrocities and other crimes committed by leaders that possessed charisma. Charisma is an elusive attribute that is difficult to define and cannot easily be taught to others. Yet, charisma is that type of quality that we recognize when we see it and is generally held in high regard. Kurtz’s charisma was no exception and the various testimonials of the people that knew him (e.g., the Russian sailor and the intended) suggest that they were captivated by this quality and admired him for it. My contention is that readers of *Heart of Darkness* are themselves attracted to Kurtz’s charisma even as they recognize his diabolical actions.

Enigmatic

Readers of novels and short stories tend to be fascinated by characters that are uncommon and enigmatic rather than ones that are plain or dull. The latter type of characters are often complex and multi-dimensional and, therefore, can be difficult for readers to fully comprehend. Yet I submit that it is precisely their complexity and uniqueness, that is, the fact that they cannot be easily understood, which make such characters fascinating to readers. Based on the testimony of those who knew him including Marlow, the narrator of *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz embodied such a complex, uncommon, and enigmatic character. As Marlow noted,

Whatever he was, he was not common. He had the power to charm or frighten rudimentary souls into an aggravated witch dance in his honor; 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.²⁶

I suppose that Marlow is referring to the Russian sailor as the devoted friend and to himself as the soul that was conquered, but we cannot determine these observations with certainty. What does seem evident is that the mystery surrounding Kurtz helps to make him fascinating to readers of *Heart of Darkness*. Indeed, Marlow himself begins to show an interest in this enigma when he realizes that the way that others have described Kurtz to him—as ‘a remarkable man’ or a ‘prodigy’—fails to capture or do justice to that which motivated this individual. For instance, when Marlow is stuck at the Central Station, waiting for the steamer to be fixed, he witnesses the brickmaker of that station characterize Kurtz as “an emissary of pity, and science, and progress, and devil knows what else.”²⁷ Yet such descriptions only serve to add to the layer of clouds and sense of mystery hovering over Kurtz. The point is that the perplexity and mystery surrounding Kurtz help transform him into an enigma, one that is difficult to illuminate let alone make sense of. And given the stories that were circulating about Kurtz, we can appreciate Marlow’s drive to try to find him before it was too late.

Similarly, at the very end of the novella, readers of *Heart of Darkness* still encounter the sense of mystery surrounding Kurtz. When Marlow is finally back in London, he is visited by a person who calls himself a cousin of Kurtz and insists that the man had been a great musician:

²⁴ Ibid., p. 268.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 290-291.

²⁶ *Heart of Darkness*, p. 262.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 235.

‘There was the making of an immense success,’ said the man, who was an organist, I believe, with lank gray hair flowing over a greasy coat collar. I had no reason to doubt his statement; and to this day I am unable to say what was Kurtz’s profession, whether he ever had any—which was the greatest of his talents.²⁸

This perplexity about Kurtz’s true profession is confounded even further by a journalist, claiming to be a colleague of the deceased, who showed up at Marlow’s place after the cousin had left and insisted that Kurtz’s vocation had been politics and that his greatest talent was public speaking.

Ultimately, like Marlow, readers of *Heart of Darkness* are left to contend with the mystery of Kurtz, a true enigma that defies the normal labels we like to ascribe to an individual—as this kind of person doing that type of work. Yet, as mentioned previously, Kurtz’s enigmatic character is one of the main qualities that makes him so fascinating to his readers. Perhaps readers of *Heart of Darkness* sense that by studying and revisiting this novella, they have a chance to figure out the mystery surrounding Kurtz. Perhaps they feel that by reading and rereading Conrad’s novella they might finally get a good glimpse of that which drove this man to commit some unspeakable crimes in Africa. Yet even if such attempts prove to be futile, my bigger point is that enigmas fascinate us and are viewed as something that are worth revisiting and pondering further.

Hollow at the Core

The final quality I wish to discuss that helps explain readers’ fascination with Kurtz is what Marlow refers to as ‘hollow at the core.’ This phrase is used to describe Kurtz in the context of what Marlow encounters as he is approaching the inner station on board the steamer that he is guiding up the Congo River. As the steamer approaches the house where Kurtz was believed to be laying down, trying to recover from a grave illness, Marlow suddenly notices something peculiar—several posts with round wooden knobs at the top surrounding the little house. However, as he gets closer and examines these posts with his binoculars, Marlow makes an unsettling discovery. Apparently, the round knobs he had observed “were not ornamental but symbolic; they were expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing—food for thought and also for the 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.”²⁹ In due course, Marlow realizes that these round knobs were the heads of African natives that had been sacrificed in some strange rituals to honor Kurtz. Marlow goes on to illuminate the uncanny nature of this discovery by turning his gaze to observe the first knob that he had seen up close:

There it was, black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids, a head that seemed to sleep on 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.³⁰

At this point in the story, Marlow takes it upon himself to do something rare for the narrator of *Heart of Darkness*, namely, he shares with the reader his own *judgment* of Kurtz:

I want you clearly to understand that there was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there. They 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. Whether he knew of this deficiency himself I can’t say. I think the knowledge came to him at last—only at the very last. But the wilderness had found him our early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself that he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with the great solitude—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core.”³¹

I have chosen to include this relatively long passage from *Heart of Darkness* here, not only because I believe that it illustrates Conrad’s writing at its best, but also because it captures something significant about readers’ fascination with Kurtz. We are advised that the posts with heads of slain Africans point to the fact that Kurtz lacked restraint and that there was something fundamental wanting in him, though Marlow does not specify the exact nature of this deficiency. Hence readers are left to their own devices, with only some vague clues provided by Conrad, to try to figure out what it is that Kurtz lacked, which led him to invade some African villages and preside over rituals in which human sacrifices were offered to him. We are instructed by Marlow in the passage

²⁸ Ibid., p. 286.

²⁹ *Heart of Darkness*, p. 270.

³⁰ Ibid.,

³¹ Ibid.

above that he believes that Kurtz became aware of his deficiency only at the very end, which was probably when he had already fallen ill and was, therefore, more vulnerable. Perhaps Kurtz's last words in the story—*the horror, the horror*—signify his belated awareness of the horrific crimes he had committed and that he lacked the self-restraint to stop these acts.

Marlow also informs us in the above passage that Kurtz discovered things about himself that he did not know from dwelling in the wilderness and interacting with the native population. More specifically, we are told that the wilderness had whispered things to Kurtz that proved to be “irresistibly fascinating;” yet again, readers can only guess what those secrets were. Finally, Marlow tells us that the whisper that Kurtz heard about himself from the wilderness “echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core.” Although Marlow does not explain what he means when he deems Kurtz as hollow at the core, if we take that judgment together with the earlier assessment that there was something fundamental wanting in him, it seems plausible to conclude that Kurtz was morally bankrupt. In other words, Kurtz had not internalized those basic ethical codes (e.g., the Ten Commandments or the golden rule) that guide us in life and steer us away from evil, from actions that hurt others. Kurtz lacked, therefore, the ability to tell right from wrong and distinguish good from evil. For him, good was that which satisfied his various lusts and evil was what stood in the way of fulfilling his gratifications.

Still, why would someone that is hollow at the core be fascinating for readers? I suspect that one of the main reasons that we are attracted to such a person is that, like Marlow, we long to understand and account for what makes other humans, including criminal ones, tick. As Marlow maintains, “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.”³² On this view, we are fascinated by Kurtz in general and his hollowness in particular since it is not easy to make sense of them. Indeed, readers of *Heart of Darkness* are left with many unanswered questions at the end of the novella. Among these questions are: what drove Kurtz to leave his Western European life in London and go to the jungles of Africa in pursuit of ivory? What was it about the African wilderness that was so alluring for him? How did Kurtz transform into the monster that presided over human sacrifice rituals? And how did he finally realize that he was hollow at the core? I submit that grappling with these challenging questions is what makes Kurtz so fascinating for readers of *Heart of Darkness*.

IV. CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have attempted to provide a literal interpretation of *Heart of Darkness*, one that diverges from much of the critical work that has been written about Conrad's novella. Moreover, rather than trying to present a new explanation or advocate for a different way in which we should read *Heart of Darkness*, the focus of this essay has been on what makes the character of Kurtz so fascinating for readers of Conrad's novella. My analysis of *Heart of Darkness* suggests that there are at least four reasons that can explain our fascination with Kurtz. Specifically, I demonstrated that Kurtz possesses four characteristics that help make him so attractive to his readers: eloquent, charismatic, enigmatic, and hollow at the core. First, my examination of *Heart of Darkness* indicated that readers are attracted to Kurtz's eloquence, that is, to his ability to use words to motivate others to follow him. Second, I demonstrated that Kurtz possessed the type of charisma that inspired not only those that knew him but also many readers of Conrad's novella. Third, I showed that Kurtz was an enigma and that his mysterious character is an attribute that intrigues many of his readers. Fourth, is the point that readers of *Heart of Darkness* are fascinated by Kurtz's hollowness, that is, by his moral depravity, which they view as an issue worthy of further investigation. In the end, my analysis in this essay suggests that there is much to be gained for scholars of Joseph Conrad from examining why characters such as Kurtz continue to fascinate his readers.

³² *Heart of Darkness*, p. 261.

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