

**Mistah Kurtz; A Champagne Socialist: A Marxist Study to Joseph
Conrad's Novella, *Heart of Darkness***

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Abstract

Joseph Conrad's most enticing work "Heart of Darkness (1899), has been regarded as a consequential novella in the canon of English literature and praised as a marvelous literary creation of all times. It is about a voyage, a journey, an expedition up the Congo River into "one of the dark places on the earth" (Conrad 7), that is, the cold wild Congo, situated in the heart of Africa, by the storyteller Marlow, a psychologist cum philosopher who watches there, the marry dance of death-cold, fog, tempests, disease, and death"- "death skulking in the air, in the water, in the bushes"....(Conrad, 18,9). It finds a sophisticated civilized European Kurtz, transformed into the Supremo of the savages, and an incarnation of evil. A remarkable socialist, genius, "an emissary of pity, and science, and progress (Conrad 20), who wanted to bring the light to the darkness in the best tradition of white Man's burden, Kurtz now dogging after the greed of ivory, money and power.

This paper will illustrate how Mistah Kurtz, a champion socialist, turns into a champagne socialist and lives a bourgeois life subjugating the savages of Africa.

Keywords: Kurtz, evil, champagne, socialist, bourgeois, subjugate

Introduction

Joseph Conrad (1857-1927) is an ever-glowing literary star in the cosmos of the modern English novels. He is a consummate artist, a man of adjectives, a maker of alliteration, a master of suspense and irony, and above all, a careful and conscious literary genius. Through entertainment and moralizing in his novels, he records the complex pattern of human existence. He had a penetrating insight into the human situation and the human mind. Every aspect of his novels- the language, the setting, the characters, and the mode of narration- form a single organic whole and contribute to the total effect.

Heart of Darkness (1899) is an imposing and fascinating piece of art. Conrad's art lies in the depiction of white men's hostile, unsympathetic, and inhuman relationship with the background black natives of dark Africa and the story of a European, Mr. Kurtz, who becomes an embodiment of evil due to his greed for ivory and his prolonged stay in the dark continent Africa. Conrad's Heart of Darkness is a

big ironic story about white men's deeds and responsibilities. For white men, colonialism is a necessity, a social need, "a moral imperative as well as a political and economic one (Spurr 29), and a white man's burden "for humanizing, improving, and instructing (Conrad 19)" the illiterate, underdeveloped dark world. They see Africa as a dark continent physically as well as morally. Kurtz, as a white angel holding a lighted torch, comes to Africa to destroy the darkness of the center of Africa (Congo). However, the biggest irony is that he becomes the center of the darkness. Kurtz, a white man, in the name of false social responsibility, becomes "an impenetrable darkness" (Conrad 70). He becomes so dark that even the candle, which burns while he dies, cannot spread any light into that darkness. It is the saddest tragedy that a man who belongs to a nation that went to bring light into a dark continent ends his life in ultimate darkness.

A Marxist Glance to *Heart of Darkness*:

A significant part of the Marxist approach also concerns class division, most notably between the wealthy 'capitalist' class and the poor exploited 'proletariat' class. This creates a common ground for the rich to exploit the poor easily. Marxist writers, therefore, frown upon this treatment of the proletariat's exploitation and instead aim to create an equal society.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad illustrates how the imperialistic powers of Europe exploit the Africans to increase their wealth, creating a visibly apparent class division between the Europeans and the Africans. Marxism is demonstrated within the novel as we, the readers, are narrated the story of the exploitation of the natives by the Europeans, eliciting the theme of man's inhumanity to man. Marlow's repetition of the greed of the bourgeoisie pilgrims as 'despicable' attests to this theme. For example, Marlow questions the presence of the fat man who is portrayed to be unfit to survive in Congo: "I could not help asking him once what he meant by coming there at all. 'To make money, of course. What do you think?' he said scornfully" (Conrad 25).

This above quotation draws the parallel between exploitation and monetary gain, displaying how capitalism is essentially exploitative. Furthermore, from Conrad's descriptive writing, we learn through Marlow that Kurtz's hands are 'plump,' indicating the idea that he does not work as the natives who work are both starving and dying; therefore, it is logical to believe they would not have plump hands. In addition, we find out that there is no even distribution of wealth within the society of *Heart of Darkness*, as even some white Europeans are described as poor. We are narrated that Kurtz's engagement with his lover had been disapproved by her family as Kurtz "was not rich enough," denoting that Kurtz was not able to afford to marry above his class and therefore left for Congo in order for what we may assume, to obtain this level of wealth.

In this case, a strength of the Marxist literary approach is that it looks at society as a whole, considers its misdemeanors within a society, and understands the problem of the class struggle. Through the Marxist approach, readers can tell that a dominant class is ruling and comprehend the reason behind this.

A limitation of the Marxist approach when looking at the power dynamics in society is that Marxist theory needs to consider the dynamics of human behavior, such as selfishness and the desire to do better and reach the highest rank. It is instilled in human nature that we will always crave to have more, even at the expense of another human being. Marxism does not consider classic human behavior and instead refers to an equal society where there is no desire to progress higher into the human food chain'.

Kurtz: A False Socialist

We gather all information about Kurtz from Marlow, the storyteller. During his visit to the dark continent of Africa, Marlow discovers how a well-sophisticated, socialist, civilized Mr. Kurtz turns into a devil, a blood-sucking capitalist.

Kurtz's primary life was glorious and happy. His biography says that Kurtz was born in England (heaven) and was a product of a half-English mother and half-French father. "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (Conrad 61). He had a good education, partly in England. Born in a well-to-do family, Kurtz successfully brought out his talents to the public eye. He was a handsome man with a slim figure, seven feet tall, and a strong body. He had deep eyes and a vibrating voice that almost caused veneration among his listeners.

Kurtz was a multi-talented man, a painter, a musician, a writer, an orator, and a promising politician. The oil –sketch that Marlow sees at the inner station proves that he has a good hand and a genius mind. In England, he had a good reputation. His nears and dears greatly loved him. To his fiancé, he was a handsome genius and a great humanitarian; to the journalist, a brilliant politician and leader of men; and to his cousin, he was essentially a great musician. He was making immense success in England.

For his fiancé, Kurtz was a noble person with a 'noble heart' (Conrad 93). She was "very happy - very fortunate – very proud" (Conrad 93) to be Kurtz's fiancé. She had known him at her best, "better than anyone on earth" (Conrad 92). After the death of his mother, she was the only hope for his life. She "believed in him more than anyone on earth-more than his mother-more than –himself" (Conrad 94). He was a great humanitarian. He wanted to bring light to the dark world.

Kurtz was a remarkable writer. The International Society for the Suppression of Savages (ISSS) requested him to write a treatise on savages. "It was a beautiful piece of writing (Conrad 61). This was the unbounded power of eloquence –of words of burning noble words (Conrad, 61, 62). It was a very well-written document mentioning the white people's endeavors to develop the backward countries. He had an ardent desire to improve the lot. From these points, we can say that Kurtz was an angel of Karl Marx who wanted to bring light to the dark.

However, Kurtz was not like that at all. He is a genius; he is glorious, but at the same time, he is evil-minded and a hard-core capitalist. We consider him a prolific writer for his pamphlet on savages; we praise his hand and mind for his beautiful paintings; we call him a gifted orator and musician for his commanding, vibrating, and sensational voice; we think him a leader of leaders for his art of winning the heart of people; we laud him as a great humanitarian, a noble soul, for his noble steps to

bring light into the savage and dark world. However, let us consciously and critically examine his works. We can find they are nothing but the products of an evil body, an evil mind, and an evil soul because he was an inborn capitalist.

In the pamphlet, at the end, Kurtz uses the very symbolic metaphor "Exterminate all the Brutes" (Conrad 62). This is a very contradictory and burning example of his evil mind. He wants to progress by "destroying the savages." This proves that Kurtz is not at all a socialist. His mind was full of evil; he was an English capitalistic evil.

Kurtz is an excellent painter. His oil painting represents a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch, whose background was "somber-almost black and the movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the torchlight on the face was sinister" (Conrad 31) unfolds the motive, the characteristics, and how he wants to progress in the dark world. In the name of civilization, bearing a fake socialistic torch, he only wanted "to make money" (Conrad 25); to tear the treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire with no moral purpose" (Conrad 38). Kurtz has used his vibrant voice and leadership quality to make himself the king of the savages. He has used all his skills in an "unsound method" (Conrad 76). He let his soul to be guided by "brutal instincts" (Conrad 81) and "monstrous passions" (Conrad 81). "He feared neither God nor devil" (Conrad 35).

So, Kurtz's greed for power and money, like other Europeans, had evolved in his motherland. He is evil biologically as well as environmentally. He always wants to have whatever he longs for, by hook or crook. However, in England, it is impossible on his part to become powerful or to be a king because it is the land of super intellectuals. He searches for a place where he can translate his dream into reality. Everywhere he sees, there is white supremacy, where he will be counted as a mere white agent. However, he wants to be a king of the land, which is his ultimate goal.

Kurtz was a "greedy phantom" (Conrad 84). He wanted to destroy those who were not like him and were not obeying him. He had used all his superb intellect to achieve his goal. However, his superb intellect and brilliant brain were misguided, as he lacked restraint and neither God nor devils. A critic Said, "When there is no moral stress to call forth the fiber of the deeper man, to bring out latent powers of mind, the tragedy is supreme" (Bancroft 46).

"Power tends to corrupt, and absolutely," says Lord Acton. Moreover, it is the correct phrase to describe Kurtz's tragedy. Kurtz was sent into the jungle to rape the land, and its people, of its natural resources. Only the greed of power kept Kurtz in the jungle for a long time. Determined not to be a mere agent or servant of England, he allied with the natives and became the Supremo of the savage country, Congo. He was a betrayal of England as Satan was a betrayal of the Lord or Heaven. A critic has rightly said, "Heart of Darkness offers an analysis of the deterioration of white men's morale when he is let loose from European Restraint and to make trade profits out of the subject races" (Garnett 99).

Conclusion

One of the most enigmatic characters in twentieth-century literature, Mr. Kurtz is a petty tyrant, a hollow man, a dying god, an image of evil, an embodiment of Europe, and an assault on European values. He had traveled to Africa to complete the great acts of "humanizing, improving, instructing" (Conrad 40) in the best white Man's burden tradition. Once he tested the power that could be his in the jungle, Kurtz abandoned his philanthropic ideals and set himself as a god to the natives, the king of Congo. For a critic, "Kurtz is a thief, murderer, raider, persecutor, and above all, he allows himself to be worshipped as a god.... Kurtz seemed a universal genius, lacking basic integrity or a sense of responsibility" (Roberts 43).

So, Kurtz is an inborn evil. He has those evil traits in his mind, heart, flesh, bones, and every drop of blood in his body. He is an embodiment of evil. He cannot do good; he cannot think of good as to do wrong is his religion. It is foolish to think that the dark Congo has changed a modest Kurtz to an evil Kurtz. The jungle has only provided a conducive atmosphere for the budding/unfolding of those evils he had as his personality. As critics have rightly observed, "Kurtz possesses the evil forces already as a part of his personality but is ignorant of their existence until the wilderness enlightens him and exhibits those forces publicly" (McClure 140).

So Kurtz resembles the archetypal evil genius—the highly gifted but ultimately degenerative individual whose fall is the stuff of legend. For critics, Kurtz may be an evil god; for readers, he may be Faustus or Heathcliff; even for Conrad, Kurtz may be a greedy phantom, but for me, he is a blood-sucking capitalist, **Mistah Kurtz: A False Socialist.**

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