



The Tragedy of Kurtz

--An Analysis of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract

Heart of Darkness is Conrad's representative work which explores the heart as well as the outward appearance of civilization and also reveals the darkness, complexity and fallacy of human nature by Marlow's search of Kurtz from Europe to Africa. Through an analysis of the tragedy of Kurtz, this paper will discuss the darkness of human nature and its destructive influence on human beings.

Keywords: Darkness, Tragedy, *Heart of Darkness*

1. Introduction

Heart of Darkness is one of the best novels of the 20th century. First of all, it is a symbolic journey into the dark places of the soul. And it is also a story of spiritual breakdown. The central idea of this novel—darkness is the true nature of our world—gets into the veins of the story. This type of darkness will break human, as it did to Kurtz. Through Marlow's narration, we can see how Kurtz, who came to Africa full of hopes, deteriorated physically and spiritually at last. Though Kurtz seemed to be the most successful and capable man that Marlow met during his journey, his life was actually a tragedy.

2. An Analysis of Kurtz as a colonizer

Driven by the two temptations: the desire to make a fortune through ivory and the desire to discover latent kinship with the savages, Kurtz yielded to their combined power by using his authority as deity to help him attain his goals. But he should not be viewed as simply a man that did everything under his own wills. On the contrary, he was a representative of the European colonizers, and his behavior represented the wills of what he belonged to. For example, his behavior of enslaving the natives and even slaughtering them at the Inner Station was neither accused nor stopped by the Trade Company. As Marlow told us, he was praised solely for his "talented capacity" of collecting ivory.

And his eloquent report, with 17 pages in length and with "exterminate all the brutes" as its last slogan, was actually written under the entrustment of the International Society for the Suspension of Savage Customs and this report was finally taken away for publication by a journalist after his death. The point was that if he did make it true, who would be the ones that worked for their endless desire after all the native "brutes" died out? This makes me agree with Ian Watt that the disconnection in Kurtz between words and reality reflected a disparity between his verbal expression and his actual behavior. (Watt, 1980, p.235) And it is easy to understand why Kurtz seemed to be so weak and helpless amidst the wilderness, though he was mentally ambitious and powerful and thought that he could acquire everything as he wished as long as he tried hard.

2.1 Greedy Kurtz

Greediness is a common character of colonizers, which shows their great desire for fame, power and wealth in most of the cases. At the beginning, Kurtz seemed to be quite successful in his purchase of three of them, and he was famous for his great eloquence, his absolute power at the Inner Station—the ability to make everything and every man under his control, and his outstanding capacity—the terrible ways in collecting ivories. And his cruelty was proved to be the most powerful weapon for him to rule his place. For example, he made the heads of natives who dared to offend him the remarkable ornamentations outside his windows. And he once threatened to shoot the poor Russian if he refused to hand out his small lot of ivory, which showed at the same time how greedy and cruel he was.

Just from this small case, we pretty understand the reasons for Kurtz to announce that everything at the Inner Station belonged to him. And so I'm not surprised when it turned out that it was Kurtz who ordered the attack on the steamer, because "he hated sometimes the idea of being taken away" (Conrad, 2004, p.91), even that it was held for the sake of saving his life. This reminds me the joke of a mean and greedy man: once he fell into a pond and was drowning, one of

his friends said: "Give me your hand and I'll pull you out." The man didn't give out his hand. His friend thought for a while and said: "Take my hand, I'll pull you out". And the man stretched his hand and was saved at last. Unfortunately, Kurtz was not saved at last, because he couldn't leave the place that brought him wealth and fame, even for the sake of saving his life. And the power that he gained from the wildness had already made him an emperor which would neither allow his territory nor his ivory fall onto other's hand, such as the General Manager and his disciples.

All of the above made Kurtz a Faustian evil. For him, there was no moral restraint since all the natives there were only "brutes" at the Inner Station, and he had the right to deal with them freely as they all belonged to him. To make sure that they would go and collect ivory for him, he used the guns in his hands and the "great thoughts" in his mind. Of course the latter was more powerful, and its influence didn't vanish even after Kurtz died regretfully.

2.2 *Regretful Kurtz*

"Kurtz—Kurtz—that means short in German—doesn't it"(Conrad, 2004, p.87). I do think so. Everything that was about Kurtz was short: his fame as an eloquent orator, his career as an ivory agent, and his life as well. Yet his influence on some particular people lasted for a long time. For example: Marlow regarded the journey towards Kurtz as a lasting nightmare that wouldn't fade from his memory: and Kurtz's Intended was still in mourn one year after his death, what's more, she told Marlow that she would live with Kurtz' last words, which was just a lie by Marlow.

It is natural but regretful that this man didn't gain his happiness after working so hard. Of course he was brutal and bloody both to the whites of lower position like the Russian and to the natives. Yet compared with those who got rich through the ivory he collected at the risk of his life and conscience, he was the one worthy of the reader's sympathy. Marlow was the only one there that showed great sympathy to Kurtz, especially when he saw that Kurtz was fighting with himself—his evil soul that knew no restraint, no pain and no fear. And at that time, he firmly believed that the temptation of the wilderness made Kurtz's brutality and destroyed his soul, so he tried to break the spell "of the wilderness that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions"((Conrad, 2004, p.94).

Yet Marlow could not change Kurtz's fate of being swallowed by the wilderness, which was dominated by the time Kurtz made his decision of being the emissary of civilization to the dark Africa. However, we feel very regretful for Kurtz because he was the victims of history, and the goals of colonization and enslavement that he had devoted himself to have been proved wrong by time.

3. The Reasons for Kurtz' tragedy

Kurtz seemed to be the most successful and capable man that Marlow met during his journey towards the Inner Station, and he was praised enthusiastically by many people whom Marlow came across on his way. But in my opinion, Kurtz's fate was doomed the moment Marlow saw the remains of his predecessor—Fresleven, who was killed in a scuffle with the natives and buried by nobody but the grass growing through his ribs. Just through a casual look at the sketch of the poor man, Marlow would indicate to us a cruel fact that no White there would show any sympathy to the defeated, not to say offering their hands.

3.1 *Direct cause—Kurtz's incessant rapacity*

The abnormal greediness of Kurtz lied in his absurd belief that everything belonged to him, and he wouldn't sacrifice any of the goals for the sake of another. Therefore, we can say for sure that even if he was rescued by Marlow, he wouldn't live in the civilized city with he "beloved Intended". Instead, he would again go back to the Inner Station where there were so many things he couldn't abandon.

Under the guidance of his illogical thoughts, Kurtz's mind was "capable of a fearless acting out of the whole past of human barbarism"(Watt, 1980, p.226). And it was the main reason why he enslaved the natives and even killed them when they rebelled, and why he wouldn't let the Russian keep even a small lot of ivory. To me, Kurtz' success in upholding the Inner Station and his position as well as the ivory collection actually predicted his doomed fate of being a victim, since he was the representative of the colonizers who would take advantages of the weaker part as the General Manager did to him when he was dying.

3.2 *Origin—the civilized yet depraved social system*

In my opinion, the origin of Kurtz's tragedy is the civilized yet depraved society. From the way Marlow got the job as captain of a steamboat for the Trade Company, we can see that Kurtz was the same kind with Marlow, because the same people who sent him specially also recommended Marlow. No wonder the people on board with him considered Marlow as a man of prospect just as they thought of Kurtz. But what surprised me were their totally different attitudes towards these two men before and after they saw the dying Kurtz.

In my opinion, this is only one case that reflects the decadence of the social system of Kurtz's time, which depended a lot, if not all, on words: words to recommend a person, words to praise a person, words to carry on the ideas, and most importantly, words to criticize a person. That was why Kurtz remained only a voice or a word in the story. And even

after his death, after his value vanished as a remarkable agent, there was still an enthusiastic admirer who asked for his famous report and tended to make it published. And it was actually this kind of social system that turned the Manager of the Central Station a cunning opportunist who was always waiting for a good chance and avoiding any threat to his position, though he was supposed to be the connector between the Company and the Stations distributed on the outmost land.

As an emissary of civilization to the dark Africa, Kurtz should have known the system very well, especially the things that he expected from those of his type. Unfortunately, it was until he was dying that he finally realized his pitiful fate of being substituted sooner or later. And that was why he was so annoyed by the idea of being taken away from the Inner Station.

4. Conclusion

When the native boy finally announced his death, Kurtz lost everything that he once firmly believed to be his: his Intended, his ivory, his station, his river and so on though he seemed to be the most successful and capable man that Marlow met during his journey towards the Inner Station. If we take a look at some of the well-known politicians in the past century, we would agree that Conrad was telling us about the tragedy of the people of Kurtz's kind. Among them, Richard Nixon, President of the United States from 1969 to 1974, was a good representative. He was forced to resign during the presidential election because of the Watergate Event, which made him lose his political influence as well as his personal reputation that he dreamed desperately to gain.

From their loss of fame, power and even lives, I firmly believe that avarice is the root of evils. And as individuals, it would be impossible for them to put the whole world under their control, no matter how hard they tried. But the fact is that, there are still all kinds of wars in today's world, with almost the same purpose –profits. If we are not aware of that, Kurtz's fate would undoubtedly happen to you and me. I think that's the apocalypse that *Heart of Darkness* left for us.

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