

Kurtz: a mystery in disguise

[Parts of the World](#), [Africa](#)



Sometimes a character, one that is barely mentioned in the novel, can be an integral part of the novel itself – one who brings out one of the novel's main themes. Kurtz is one such example in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The mystery in this novel is mainly about a character named Kurtz whom Marlow desires to meet and speak with. Kurtz, like many others, changes due to overexposure in the African jungle. But even after Marlow meets with Kurtz, Kurtz is still a mystery to Marlow and to Conrad's readers. To Marlow, Kurtz became widely known as the man with many faces –like adding an entire new identity over his body. In the novel, Kurtz can be viewed in many perspectives. He could be the "flabby devil," he could be an honest man, and he could even be mindless idiot who was overwhelmed by Africa. Because of Kurtz's constant changes, his mysteriousness starts to cloud the reader's impression of Kurtz. His ambiguity of his nature not only reflects how Africa changes a person entirely, but also the mysteriousness of Africa itself. Through his ambiguity, Kurtz teaches Marlow a lesson that all men are hiding from the truth, but Kurtz still reveals himself more like a cipher, a mysterious human code. Conrad uses Kurtz as one of his prime examples to represent the mystery of Africa; from Kurtz's many faces to Africa's effect on Kurtz as well as the other Europeans, Conrad wants to point out that everyone/everything possesses a mystery within themselves – an idea Marlow soon realizes through Kurtz's final words: "The Horror! The Horror!" (64). Kurtz however, before his venture to the African jungle, was just an ordinary Englishman with hopes and dreams. To many people back home, he was known to be a loving intelligent young man. He also "had been essentially a great musician," but that all changed after he came and lived in

Africa for a number of years (66). Now, he became a man with many faces as if Africa morphed his personalities into entirely new ones. When Marlow first sees the "legendary" Kurtz, his eyes sees an ordinary man who has lived in the jungle for quite some time; but at other times, he sees a man who utterly has gone insane. Even before Marlow reached Kurtz, he didn't even know who Kurtz is to the fullest degree. All of the information about Kurtz has been through another person – which has a good chance of the information of being colored by the individual; such as the Russian, who praised Kurtz as a good friend, or the general manager, who sees Kurtz more negatively. Even when Marlow finally meets with Kurtz, he still doesn't understand fully who Kurtz is. Conrad uses these two mysteries to reflect our own lives. Like Africa and Kurtz, we hide something, a mystery. Conrad is mainly focusing on things we don't admit in our lives. When he sees Kurtz on his death bed, he sees "the change[s] that came over his features I have never seen before;" those are the changes Conrad wants in us in a way – that we come forth become true men and women and acknowledge yourself as who you are. Marlow sees the ambiguity, the changes, his overall nature, etc, of how Kurtz became a man nobody will ever understand to the fullest – he revealed his inner ways and revealed what he was hiding. Like Kurtz, Conrad also views Africa as a mystery as well. Africa, before imperialism, has always been a "blank space on the earth" (5). Despite all of the exploration the Europeans have done, they have only experienced a fringe of the enigmatic world of Africa. For example, when Marlow sails though the Congo River, Marlow sees "a mystery greater.... than the curious, inexplicable note of desperate grief in this savage clamor that had swept by us on the river-bank, behind the

blind whiteness of the fog (28). Marlow sees the fog/Africa is hiding something from him, his curiosity driving him closer to the truth that awaits him. In a flash, Marlow is stroked with a dazzling dose of reality – he sees the African natives showing their culture and way of life. He is fascinated yet unable to use this visual clue to decipher what Africa is trying to tell him: that like Kurtz, Africa is also revealing the truth about itself, that it is also savage. Along with the sense of mystery, Kurtz also gives Marlow a lesson that is encoded through the words, "The Horror! The Horror!" (64). After hearing these 4 words, Marlow begun to realize what Kurtz is trying to tell him – that man hide their true nature, a nature of ruthlessness, within themselves. The horror is pertaining to the horrors that mankind commits and acknowledges but ignores. Marlow overcomes this darkness and survives knowing Kurtz and his evils. He returns to civilization and knows a great deal more about man and his inner truth and about Kurtz than anybody else. Enlightened with this new knowledge, however, Marlow still sees Kurtz as an enigma. Marlow is indeed the closest one to Kurtz, but that doesn't tell much at all. The only part that Marlow understood from Kurtz is when Kurtz himself released it to Marlow. Not only does Kurtz teach Marlow a new view on life, but Conrad uses Kurtz to teach us, the readers, to open our eyes as well. Marlow realizes that the Europeans don't realize there own savagery, but is Conrad trying to tell us that we are savages - could be. But in general, he is telling us to be who we are and not who we disguise to be. Conrad wants us to be like Kurtz, not in his behavior, but for his truthfulness. Even Marlow respects that one quality of Kurtz; the fact that Kurtz "made that last stride" (65). Marlow sees back home in Europe that everyone practically

conceals their true personality away from others as if they are ashamed of it. And if you think about it, we aren't any different. Some of us pretend to be the person we want to be, instead of being you. Realizing who our identity is, even Marlow is passing the torch from the " sacred fire" (2). Marlow realizes that this is a lesson everyone needs to know – including ourselves. Kurtz, who is a man of mysteries and codes, is still a mystery to this very day. But we can point to ourselves and say the same exact thing: we are a mystery, maybe to ourselves. Conrad stresses on our identity, one of the most important things in our possessions. Kurtz in the end, became truthful of who is really is, and because of that, he is forgiven – by Marlow at least. Conrad uses Kurtz and the continent of Africa to not only open Marlow's eyes, but perhaps to the reader as well. It does not matter on whether or not one has parts of him/herself that can be considered bad. All things can be forgiven in one way or another – something Marlow knew from firsthand experience – he forgave a man who brought much death and chaos to a pure and untouched society, not only that but he also showed compassion for the mystery known as Kurtz. Work Cited