

The characteristic of the novel "heart of darkness"

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Adaptations can come under great criticism when they do not remain faithful to every step of the original text as often it is claimed the adaptation will lose the original meaning of the text. "Apocalypse Now" as an adaptation deviates from the original novel 'Heart of Darkness' but retains the same values and morals. I will be focusing on the similarities in character development of Willard and Marlowe despite the circumstantial differences in each text and also the similarities of Kurtz and his influence within both versions.

At the time the novel 'Heart of Darkness' was being written the concept of colonisation was viewed positively which is seen within the text. While colonised populations initially did see some benefits, colonialism was not "simply a matter of Europeans imposing themselves upon African societies." (Rassool 2017) However empire builders had to be able to justify their actions and they did that by imposing their 'superiority' on the colonised. Colonialism quickly acquired a hostile meaning linked to theories of white racial supremacy and was condemned by Conrad as little more than an example of violent robbery. Despite this Conrad does not portray Marlowe as particularly anti-colonisation but that he believes in the civilising aspect of it but not the savage robbery. This is reflected in the novel mainly through Marlowe's observations as they get further up the river. The difficulty in comparing both the themes and the characters in the adaptations is of course we are not dealing with colonisation but instead the Vietnam War in 'Apocalypse Now'.

The key similarity is both of the characters developing realisation of the futility of war and violence and the lack of action each of them takes in

retaliation to it. Both characters feel a certain kinship with Kurtz, Marlowe showing a kind of reverence to the extent that he alienates himself from numerous individuals by aligning himself with Kurtz. Willard begins to show an understanding of Kurtz and his decisions more and more as he descends into the madness of the war as he travels further up the river. While much of the content of the adaptation was changed to appeal to a more modern and diverse audience and also to fit the time it was created the main theme of imperialism remains prominent as the American occupation in Vietnam is portrayed as a type of Western Imperialism.

Conrad used Kurtz as the embodiment of colonialism, turning him into a crazed individual that sees himself as a God that was entitled to do whatever he wished to the natives because of his European identity. He is essentially a condensed metaphor for colonialism as a whole. In his report he claims that "by the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded" but he does not say how they could do this until the end of his report which directs them to "Exterminate all the brutes!" (Conrad PG 45) In 'Apocalypse Now' Kurtz is used not as a metaphor for colonialism but more the consequence of war. He is quite clearly psychologically damaged by the things he has seen and done for the army, much like Captain Willard who cannot reassert himself into civilised society because he no longer feels he belongs there after his first tour in Vietnam.

We can see examples of Kurtz's insanity from the various corpses and heads that adorn his camp. Kurtz does not appear to be at all bothered by them however and this is possibly because of the atrocities he has already seen

and committed when compiling his war record. The hypocrisy of the US army is referenced throughout the adaptation in the same manner that the true motives for colonisation are revealed in 'Heart of Darkness'. We see a band of helicopters performing an airstrike on a Vietnamese village with no remorse and yet when a member of that same Vietnamese town throws a grenade into one of the army helicopters Colonel Bill Kilgore refers to them as 'Fucking Savages'. (Duvall, Apocalypse Now) Marlowe also recognises the hypocrisy of the authority in the novel. He sees colonisation as a help to the uncivilised people but begins to see it for what it truly was as the novel progresses. 'They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind'. (Conrad, PG 8)

It seems in both examples it was not what Kurtz did but who he did it to. When he labelled himself a God in 'Heart of Darkness' he was threatening the authority of the colonial powers and in 'Apocalypse Now' it wasn't the manner he was killing that originally drew attention to himself but the fact that he killed some Vietnamese intelligence agents. The soldiers that are giving Willard his mission even recognise the struggle for morality that comes with being a soldier. 'In this war, things get confused out there—power, ideals, the old morality, and practical military necessity because there's a conflict in every human heart between the rational and the irrational, between good and evil. And good does not always triumph.' (Spradlin, Apocalypse Now) In the Novel it seems that Marlowe is one of the only people to acknowledge that there is something wrong with the treatment of the natives. There are parallels between Kurtz preaching about

judgement in 'Apocalypse Now' and numerous characters in 'Heart of Darkness'. "Certainly," grunted the other; "get him hanged! Why not? Anything - anything can be done in this country. (Conrad, PG 48)

Race plays a much larger role in 'Heart of Darkness' than its adaptation and we can see throughout the novel the numerous references to colour and nationality that Conrad makes. The colour of these African natives is mentioned numerous times but Conrad does not necessarily portray them in a negative light. Marlowe almost appears to have a certain kinship with some of them like his helmsman, which we realise when he dies. 'The black man lays a claim on the white man which is well-nigh intolerable. It is the laying of this claim which frightens and at the same time fascinates Conrad,"... the thought of their humanity — like yours Ugly.' (Achebe, PG 257) We also see Willard begin to realise how wrong the entire war was and how much it would affect him and his crew to continue their mission. 'Oh man, the shit piled up so fast in Vietnam you needed wings to stay above it' (Sheen, Apocalypse Now)

One of the main similarities between Marlowe and Willard despite the stark differences in the setting and circumstances of their situation is that while they acknowledge the wrong that they see they don't actually do anything about it. When the crew meets the Vietnamese peasant boat Willard kills the wounded woman simply so his mission does not have to detour. Marlowe acknowledges that he doesn't fully agree with some aspects of colonialism but attempts to take Kurtz home anyway. At the end of 'Apocalypse Now' Willard kills Kurtz despite it appearing that he did agree with him to an

extent and returns to civilisation, presumably to go on and be promoted to a Major as he referenced earlier in the film. Despite the message both versions offer, the futility of violence and the effect such actions can have on the mind, there is little action actually taken to stem these atrocities by either of the protagonists.

Both versions are set in very different circumstances and timeframes but the theme that highlights the futility of warfare is rampant in both texts. In 'Apocalypse Now' they use war as an example of Western Imperialism like 'Heart of Darkness' uses colonisation. Although they are different methods they both promote realisation and development of character for Willard and Marlowe. The character of Kurtz in both versions is complex and can be viewed as a conundrum as it is left up to the viewer and reader whether he is in fact insane or if he has just shed the restraints of judgement as is almost encouraged in warfare. Despite the strong differences between them 'Apocalypse Now' serves to promote the same values and moral lesson that can be captured in 'Heart of Darkness' and therefore acts as a unique type of adaptation that deviates from fidelity but still manages to create the same feelings and principles as the original.