

# Kurtz and ayesha: a comparison



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On the surface, two novels such as *Heart of Darkness* and *She* probably seem drastically different. They are both tales of adventure, however, their plots are extremely contrasting. While Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* creates a somewhat bleak and ominous setting in order to tell a tale of the human psyche in the face of danger, it may seem as though H. Rider Haggard's *She* is a complete contrast. Haggard employs elements of the supernatural, creating an exciting and fast paced narrative, while Conrad's story creeps along slowly and deliberately. After delving deeper into each of these novels, it becomes apparent that under the surface they have more in common than one would have originally thought, namely their main characters. The similarities between these two characters greatly outweighs the thematic differences between the two novels. The characters Ayesha and Kurtz have both completely immersed themselves in the African culture, acquiring the love, respect, and even the fear of the natives along the way. Despite their different plotlines, Ayesha and Kurtz have many similarities when it comes to personality, philosophy and how they treat those around them. Conrad and Haggard both employ these details in an effort to convey to their European audience the extreme differences between the two cultures.

The differences in these novels mainly lies in themes and plots. While both are adventure tales, centered on characters venturing into the heart of Africa, the thematic differences are vast. *Heart of Darkness* focuses greatly on the psychology of the main characters, showing the very dark side of Marlowe's adventure. *She* comes across as a slightly more lighthearted, less psychological tale. While *She* does eventually take a darker tone, it never

comes across quite as bleak as Conrad's tale. If it had not been for the characters or Kurtz and Ayesha, it would be hard to find similarities other than that of the setting.

Both Kurtz and Ayesha are mysteries to the audience at the beginning of each of the novels. Kurtz, we learn, is an ambitious ivory agent stationed in Africa. Ayesha, also known as She, is a mysterious and supernatural figure hidden away in the heart of Africa. In *Heart of Darkness*, the only clues Marlowe is given is when he is told of Kurtz's importance: "'He is a prodigy... He is an emissary of pity and science and progress, and devil knows what else'" (Conrad 83). The only information Marlowe can gather about Kurtz is that he is immensely successful at gathering ivory and very admired by many within the company. While Marlowe is puzzled over the limited knowledge of Kurtz, in *She, Holly and Leo* learn a lot about Ayesha through letters from Leo's father. They learn that Ayesha is "the mighty Queen of a savage people, a white woman of peculiar loveliness..." (Haggard 19). Both characters are enigmas until midway through their respective novels, when the narrators eventually meet them.

Moreover, Kurtz and Ayesha have both immersed themselves in the culture of the native Africans they live amongst. They both have earned the devotion, love and fear of the natives as well. Kurtz had the power to inspire complete devotion in those surrounding him: "His ascendancy was extraordinary. The camps of these people surrounded the place, and the chiefs came everyday to see him" (Conrad 128). The natives seem to be in awe of Kurtz. Not only do they admire him, but they also respect and listen to him, despite his being from Europe. He has used his charm and power to

sway them: “ He had the power to charm or frighten rudimentary souls into an aggravated witch-dance in his honour...” (Conrad 118). Ayesha has had a similar effect on her people. She has become the ruler of the natives in her part of Africa and is greatly respected and feared: “ She was obeyed throughout the length and breadth of the land, and to question her command was certain death. She kept a guard, but had no regular army, and to disobey her was to die” (Haggard 86). Ayesha has also earned the respect of the people, but her greatest achievement is that she has become their queen. Both Kurtz and Ayesha have very egotistical personalities. Both seem to love the power they have over these people, and seem to relish in it. It is clear that while neither of them respect or show kindness to the natives, they still expect to receive respect and kindness in return.

Kurtz and Ayesha have both lived somewhat solitary lives in Africa, and because of this, they have each developed their own set of beliefs and philosophies that are very much alike. Kurtz, while in Africa has become obsessed with ivory and the power that comes with it: “ I heard him say ‘ my intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my- everything belonged to him” (Conrad 115). Kurtz has become so obsessed with his position, that he would do anything to maintain his power, even going so far as to fool the natives, as he describes in his report: “ He began the argument that we whites,... must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings-we approach them with the might as of a deity”(Conrad 117). Kurtz does not care about anything other than acquiring the most ivory, and the money that comes with it. Ayesha is very like-minded in that she also believes no one should stand in the way of something she wants. The only

difference is that what Ayesha wants is not an object, but an actual person. When Holly is trying to convince Ayesha to spare Ustane's life, she states, "Her sin is that she stands between me and my desire" (Haggard 182). Later, when Ayesha is explaining her philosophy in detail she asks of Holly, "Is it, then, a crime, oh foolish man, to put away that which stands between us and our ends?" (Haggard 182). Ayesha has no qualms about ending another's life in order to obtain what she wants. This just shows that she has no regard for anyone but herself. Both Kurtz and Ayesha strongly believe that their wants and needs exceed those of anyone else, especially those of the native Africans.

The treatment of the natives Africans is very problematic in both *Heart of Darkness* and *She*. Both Kurtz and Ayesha see the natives as servants they can order around and that can do their bidding. They are both cruel and ruthless with their punishments. Kurtz feels no respect or kindness towards the natives. Marlowe realizes this when he comes across a disturbing discovery: "These round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic; they were expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing" (Conrad 127). What Marlowe had originally thought was some sort of ornamentation turned out to actually be heads on stakes, placed there by Kurtz himself. Rather than earn Marlowe's respect for this cruel act, Marlowe believes, "That only showed that Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts" (Conrad 128). Ayesha also shows that she lacks restraint when it comes to her anger: "Her voice had risen in anger...I saw poor Billali...a very fearless person, positively quiver with fear at her words" (Haggard 133). This shows that Ayesha has the power to make even the bravest warriors tremble in fear

when faced with her wrath. Ayesha also shows her merciless side when claiming Leo for herself, breaking Ustane's heart in the process: " Utterly awed and broken down, the poor creature rose, and,...crept from the room sobbing bitterly" (Haggard 186). This shows not only Ayesha's selfishness, but also her disregard for the feelings of Ustane, who she views as below her. It is clear that both Kurtz and Ayesha rule with cruelty and do not care for the feelings or well-being of the natives over which they reign.

Kurtz and Ayesha are both very troubling characters. While they come from completely different novels, with different settings and plots, their similarities are vast. The characters of Kurtz and Ayesha are perhaps what made these novels so revolutionary. These novels and their main characters showed the European audience parts of the world and culture that may have been previously unknown to them. These novels gave insight into different views about cultures other than that of Great Britain, as well as different views on subjects such as colonialism. Without characters as cruel and ruthless as these, both *Heart of Darkness* and *She* would not be the classic, groundbreaking adventures stories they are today.