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Paper #1

Imperialism as a Mad Man

*Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad is one of the most intriguing portrayals of imperialism in literature. The story is told by Charles Marlow, a new member of the Company setting out on a journey through the Congo to retrieve Mr. Kurtz, a Belgian tradesman in the Inner Station with the purpose of collecting ivory. Kurtz’s life and moral character are shrouded in mystery from the beginning, and Marlow is surrounded by differing accounts of what to expect if and when he finds the trader. Kurtz represents much more than just an ivory collector within the story, which becomes obvious through his actions, how he is perceived by others, and his relationships formed. Conrad uses Kurtz is a reflection for all of imperialism, mad with greed and tainted and consumed by the savage environment in which he lives, eventually leading to a horrific death with what Kurtz himself believes has little meaning.

From the very first encounter with the name Kurtz, it is well known that the ivory trader is a matter of intrigue. When Marlow joins the Company to indulge his own curiosity in going to Africa, he learns that his mission is to retrieve Kurtz because he is “ill”. When speaking with his employer in Belgium, Marlow recalls learning, “There were rumours that a very important station was in jeopardy and its chief, Mr. Kurtz, was ill… Mr. Kurtz was the best agent he had, an exceptional man, of the greatest importance to the Company; therefore I could understand his anxiety” (22). Before the journey even truly begins, the true intentions of the Company are brought into question… are they worried Kurtz’s health and well-being, or are they worried about the productivity and profits of the Inner Station where Kurtz is stationed? This lies in parallel to the question of what imperialism was truly meant to accomplish… helping the nations that were invaded by the imperialistic countries, or to solely benefit those countries, no matter the cost to the invaded territories? Kurtz already begins to represent much more than is revealed on the surface level.

The role of Kurtz is a contradiction to itself, being viewed as both a messiah and a demon within the Congo. Marlow notes, “His very existence was improbable, inexplicable, and altogether bewildering. He was an insoluble problem. It was inconceivable how he had existed, how he had succeeded in getting so far, how he had managed to remain and why he did not instantly disappear” (54). Those around him viewed the man as a god, elegantly winning the favor of those around him and somehow managing to hang on to that, even through the atrocities he commits and the cruelness he exudes. Africans and white men alike, such as the Russian trader, fall under the spell of Kurtz and are unable to condemn him for his action. The Russian trader tells Marlow of Kurtz, “You can’t judge Kurtz as you would an ordinary man. No, no, no! Now – just to give you an idea – I don’t mind telling you, he wanted to shoot me too one day – but I don’t judge him” (56). Though Kurtz is obviously mad and murderous, the Russian trader excuses his actions, claiming that it is not the Belgian’s fault, and he simply cannot be held to the moral code of other men. The Africans with whom Kurtz resides have a similar view of this particular white man as well, though he has ravaged their country and villages in search for the precious ivory. Conrad chose to model Kurtz after men he had encountered during his own adventures, as researcher Adam Hochschild notes in his essay “Meeting Mr. Kurtz”, “The ‘Inner Station’ of *Heart of Darkness*, the place Marlow looks at through his binoculars only to find Kurtz’s collection of the shrunken heads of the African ‘rebels,’ is loosely based on Stanley Falls [ivory station]” (176). When Marlow does eventually reach Kurtz, he notices what he believes to be ornaments decorating poles around Kurtz domain. As he gets closer, Marlow notices, “These rounds knobs were not ornamental but symbolic; they were expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing – food for thought and also for the vultures if there had been any looking down from the sky; but at all event for such ants as were industrious enough to ascend the pole” (57). They were in fact the heads of those Kurtz murdered, or had ordered to be murdered, which now serve as a reminder to those around him and himself of what he is willing to do in order to maintain control and to gain that precious resource he was sent to find. He is worshipped by those around him for his actions, yet feared and viewed as atrocious for the monstrosities committed in order to harvest the ivory. This is the idea of imperialism in plain. These imperialistic nations had the idea that the ends justified whatever means necessary, and that what is done in these invaded countries should not reflect the behavior that is generally acceptable and promoted in Europe, for that would certainly not gain the results necessary to quench the greed of imperialism.

Kurtz’s mistress, a beautiful African woman, is telling of the relationship between Belgium (as well as other imperialistic and colonizing nations) and the continent (grouped in its entirety) that it invades and bleeds dry. Kurtz is engaged with a woman back in Belgium, but while he is away he cannot help but to be tempted by the allure and exoticness of an African woman. Similar to that of the story of imperialistic countries… the capital in Europe and within trading nations were more than sufficient to sustain said nations, but it was greed and lust that caused the invasion of less developed countries, sucking them dry of their own labor and resources. Marlow describes his first observation of Kurtz’s mistress, recalling:

“She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high, her hair was done in the shape of a helmet, she had brass leggings to the knees, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, a crimson spot on her tawny cheek, innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck, bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch-men, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step. She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her. She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress” (60).

This could not be more telling of how Africa was viewed by the author. It describes Africa as under-developed but full of warriors, filled with treasures and the magnetism of the unknown. The presence of elephant tusks on the body of this woman is of the utmost importance, speaking to the entire reasoning as to why the Belgians delved into the Congo. Africa is described as wild and mysterious in this, ringing true to the actual image of the continent at the time. The unnamed woman’s relationship with Kurtz is what is most imperative to the story, for it physically unites the two countries, the Congo and Belgium, and gives the correlation of these two nations a literal and metaphorical meaning.

Conrad says a lot about imperialism in his descriptions and depictions of Africa. The author observably does not support imperialism, but it seems as though he lay the blame on Africa, not the Europeans. Kurtz becomes ill while at his time at the Inner Station, simply a product of his atrocious environment. Before even meeting Kurtz, Marlow concludes from the descriptions given by those he has encountered, “As for me, I seemed to see Kurtz for the first time. It was a distinct glimpse: the dugout, four paddling savages, and the lone white man turning his back suddenly on the headquarters, on relief, on thoughts of home perhaps, setting his face towards the depths of the wilderness, towards his empty, desolate station” (32). It is Africa’s fault that this white man has fallen, and thus a negative light should be cast on imperialism. Marlow compares the samples of writing by Kurtz before he entered the jungle to the characterization he gained before even meeting the trader, and finds that there was the “original Kurtz”, and then there was the Kurtz that now dwelled in the Congo (49). But this was the cross that the white man has to bear, for when put in a savage situation as Kurtz was, his reaction was to be expected. This is telling of imperialism as a whole, and why Conrad believes that it was negative for imperialistic countries, as opposed to those who suffered at the hands of these nations. It was to be expected that Kurtz should go mad, for Marlow describes his actions as, “They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him – some small matter which when the pressing need arose could not be found under his magnificent eloquence” (57).

The death of Kurtz is ultimately sad and ineloquent, meaning little to those around him and serving as a relief for the Company he once served. His last words being, “The horror! The horror!” reflect his time in the Congo, as well as what it has done to himself (69). The reaction of those around him is sad and meaningless, for his loss is not revered as would have been expected. In fact, an African worker simply tells Marlow and the manager that, “Mistah Kurtz – he dead” (69). Reflective of imperialism itself, the existence of which caused the madness and death of many men the spirits of European society members. This of course, is not viewed as the fault of Kurtz, but rather the fault of the environment in which the want of imperialistic Belgium placed him. Marlow states, “I tried to break the spell, the heavy mute 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” (65). Marlow was unsuccessful; Kurtz had already fallen ill and was too far within the Congo, and the “Heart of Darkness”. As Marlow tells Kurtz “intended” when visiting her to return the last of Kurtz few meager things, “I knew him as well as it is possible for one man to know another” (74). This insinuates that all men have this darkness and ability inside them, but its evoking is dependent on the environment placed. Imperialism only places men like Marlow and Kurtz in unruly areas of the world, that the reason for Kurtz going mad, and even Marlow falling ill at the end of his visit. This is telling that if Marlow was to stay longer, he would meet the same fate at his fallen, insane predecessor.

The “Heart of Darkness” in which the book is titled for is viewed as the literal center of the horrific events that take place in the book, as in the Inner Station which Kurtz resides and tracks down ivory. Even in the beginning, Marlow states his affinity for maps as a boy, and observing that, “But there was one yet - the biggest – the most blank, so to speak – that I had a hankering after” (8). It was his dream to fill in this blank map, and even as it was filled in with the snake like river that so attracted him, the urge to venture deep into the Congo pressed within himself. The name entails so much more than just the literal, physical dark place where the men venture but never seem to return. Kurtz literally has a heart of darkness, filled with malice and insanity that is a result from where he is and what he has done. Perhaps most importantly is the view of imperialism as the “Heart of Darkness”, as Marlow notes when visiting Kurtz intended. Marlow states, “The vision seemed to enter the house with me – the stretcher, the phantom-bearers, the wild crowd of obedient worshippers, the gloom of the forests, the glitter of the of the reach between the murky bends, the beat of the drum regular and muffled like the beating of a heart, the heart of conquering darkness” (73). This cannot help but be interpreted as imperialism, becoming evil in its intentions and actions, becoming the reason that civilized men do uncivilized things with and to uncivilized people.

The unfortunate fate of Mr. Kurtz is meant to be in parallel with that of imperialism. Even Kurtz himself recognizes the horror and disturbing actions of the imperialistic nation he works for, having painted a picture that is hung in the Central Station, before he descended into the jungle and madness. Marlow observes, “Then I noticed a small sketch in oils, on a panel, representing a woman draped and blindfolded carrying a lighted torch. The background was somber – almost black. The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the torchlight on the face was sinister” (25). Imperialism was literally a shot in the dark, invading nations that could not be saved by the enlightenment of the Europeans and all their want and greed. The efforts of the imperialistic nations were viewed as blind and unsatisfactory, because of the effect had on those doing the invading. Conrad views imperialism as bad, not because of the detrimental effects on the Congo, elephant population, or Africans, but because of the negative effect it had on civilized nations. As Hochschild writes, “He [Conrad] was partly a prisoner of what Mark Twain, in a different context, called ‘the white man’s notion that he is less savage than other savages’ ” (178). Kurtz is a prime example of the barbarian that can reside in the white man, as well as the Africans. Kurtz is the literal medium of the consequences of imperialism, in all his madness and greatness and eventual death.

Bibliography

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