

Man's Journey into Self in *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*

Inherent inside every human soul is a savage evil side that remains repressed by society. Often this evil side breaks out during times of isolation from our culture, and whenever one culture confronts another. History is loaded with examples of atrocities that have occurred when one culture comes into contact with another. Whenever fundamentally different cultures meet, there is often a fear of contamination and loss of self that leads us to discover more about our true selves, often causing perceived madness by those who have yet to discover.

The Puritans left Europe in hopes of finding a new world to welcome them and their beliefs. What they found was a vast new world, loaded with Indian cultures new to them. This overwhelming cultural interaction caused some Puritans to go mad and try to purge themselves of a perceived evil. This came to be known as the Salem witch trials.

During World War II, Germany made an attempt to overrun Europe. What happened when the Nazis came into power and persecuted the Jews in Germany, Austria and Poland is well known as the Holocaust. Here, human's evil side provides one of the scariest occurrences of this century. Adolf Hitler and his Nazi counterparts conducted raids of the ghettos to locate and often exterminate any Jews they found. Although Jews are the most widely known victims of the Holocaust, they were not the only targets. When the war ended, 6 million Jews, Slavs, Gypsies, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Communists, and others targeted by the Nazis, had died in the Holocaust. Most of these deaths occurred in gas chambers and mass shootings. This gruesome attack was motivated mainly by the fear of cultural intermixing, which would impurify the "Master Race."

Joseph Conrad's book, *The Heart of Darkness*,

and Francis Coppola's movie, *Apocalypse Now*, are both stories about Man's journey into his self, and the discoveries to be made there. They are also about Man confronting his fears of failure, insanity, death, and cultural contamination.

During Marlow's mission to find Kurtz, he is also trying to find himself. He, like Kurtz had good intentions upon entering the Congo. Conrad tries to show us that Marlow is what Kurtz had been, and Kurtz is what Marlow could become. Every human has a little of Marlow and Kurtz in them. Marlow says about himself, "I was getting savage (Conrad)," meaning that he was becoming more like Kurtz. Along the trip into the wilderness, they discover their true selves through contact with savage natives.

As Marlow ventures further up the Congo, he feels like he is traveling back through time. He sees the unsettled wilderness and can feel the darkness of its solitude. Marlow comes across simpler cannibalistic cultures along the banks. The deeper into the jungle he goes, the more regressive the inhabitants seem.

Kurtz had lived in the Congo, and was separated from his own culture for quite some time. He had once been considered an honorable man, but the jungle changed him greatly. Here, secluded from the rest of his own society, he discovered his evil side and became corrupted by his power and solitude. Marlow tells us about the Ivory that Kurtz kept as his own, and that he had no restraint, and was "a tree swayed by the wind (Conrad, 209)." Marlow mentions the human heads displayed on posts that "showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts (Conrad, 220)." Conrad also tells us "his... nerves went wrong, and caused him to preside at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rights, which... were offered

up to him (Conrad, 208),” meaning that Kurtz went insane and allowed himself to be worshipped as a god. It appears that while Kurtz had been isolated from his culture, he had become corrupted by this violent native culture, and allowed his evil side to control him.

Marlow realizes that only very near the time of death, does a person grasp the big picture. He describes Kurtz’s last moments “as though a veil had been rent (Conrad, 239).” Kurtz’s last “supreme moment of complete knowledge (Conrad, 239),” showed him how horrible the human soul really can be. Marlow can only speculate as to what Kurtz saw that caused him to exclaim “The horror! The horror,” but later adds that “Since I peeped over the edge myself, I understand better the meaning of his stare... it was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness... he had summed up, he had judged (Conrad, 241).” Marlow guesses that Kurtz suddenly knew everything and discovered how horrible the duplicity of man can be. Marlow learned through Kurtz’s death, and he now knows that inside every human is this horrible, evil side.

Francis Coppola’s movie, *Apocalypse Now*, is based loosely upon Conrad’s book. Captain Willard is a Marlow who is on a mission into Cambodia during the Vietnam war to find and kill an insane Colonel Kurtz. Coppola’s Kurtz, as he experienced his epiphany of horror, was an officer and a sane, successful, brilliant leader. Like Conrad’s Kurtz, Coppola shows us a man who was once very well respected, but was corrupted by the horror of war and the cultures he met.

Coppola tells us in that Kurtz’s major fear is “being white in a non white jungle (Bahr).” The story Kurtz tells Willard about the Special Forces going into a village, inoculating the children for polio and going away, and the communists coming into the village and cutting off all the children’s inoculated arms, is the main evidence for this implication in that film.

This is when Kurtz begins to go mad, he “wept like some grandmother” when, called back by a villager, he saw the pile of little arms, a sophisticated version of the “escalating horrors.” What Kurtz meant by “escalating horrors” is the Vietnamese army’s senseless decapitation, torture, and the like. Kurtz is facing a new culture and has a terrible time dealing with it. This was the beginning of his insanity.

“All America contributed to the making of Colonel Kurtz, just as all Europe produced Mr. Kurtz. Both Kurtzes are idealized in their function as eyewitnesses to the atrocities. What is reflected is the threat of loss of self, loss of centrality, and the displacement of Western culture from the perceived center of history by those whom it has enslaved and oppressed (Worthy 24).” This tells us that the evil side and the madness in both Kurtzes was brought out by the fear of new cultures different from their own, and their inability to deal with this fear. The disconnection between the opening words of Kurtz’s report “By the simple exercise of our will, we can exert a power for good practically unbounded” and the note on the last page, “Exterminate all the brutes!” illustrates the progressive externalization of Kurtz’s fear of “contamination,” the personal fear of loss of self which colonialist whites saw in the “uncivilized,” seemingly regressive lifestyle of the natives. Gradually, the duplicity of man and reality merged for the two Kurtzes, one in the Congo, and one in Vietnam. As this happened, the well-defined cultural values, masculine/feminine, and self/other that had specific segregated roles, could not be sustained in the Congo or in Vietnam. “For the Americans in Vietnam, as for the colonialists in Africa, madness is the result of the disintegration of abstract boundaries held to be absolute (Worthy 24).”

“As it attempts to confront the ‘insanity’ of the war through Kurtz’s madness, that of the filmmakers, and the madness of U.S. culture, *Hearts of Darkness* exposes the contradictions

between the inherent hierarchy and inequality within the cultural forces of the United States and official democratic principles, which led to the perception that it could waste what it viewed as insignificant little people and preserve its own image in the world. Along with that is the growing realization, since the Tet Offensive of 1968, that the U.S. was somehow way off the mark (Worthy 24).” American Culture views it self as “correct”, and we see ourselves as powerful police of the world. Our culture looked down upon the Vietnamese because they were more simple than us, just as Europe and Marlow looked down on the Africans. Believing ourselves to be superior, we had a lot of trouble dealing with the discovery that we are not.

Coppola makes a point to show us that the Chief of a boat armed to the teeth was killed by a native in a tree who threw a spear. Not even an “advanced” Navy boat can defend itself against some “simple” natives armed only with spears. This opens Captain Willard’s eyes to the horror of the situation he now finds himself in.

Even more intriguing, however, is the similarity between the transformation of the characters in *Apocalypse Now*, and the cast and crew that created it. In *Hearts of Darkness*, (a documentary about the making of *Apocalypse Now*.) Eugene Coppola becomes the narrator (a Marlow or Captain Willard) and Francis becomes Kurtz.

“Francis believed that only if he could duplicate Willard’s experience, could he understand his moral struggle. In other words, he had to lose control of his own life before he could find the answers to the questions that his narrative asked (Worthy 24).” Coppola’s main horror was his fear of producing a pretentious movie. “Eleanor repeatedly calls the making of *Apocalypse Now* a journey into Coppola’s inner self. Coppola, like Kurtz, is regarded as a deity. Moreover, while Willard stalks Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*, Coppola stalks himself, raising questions which he feels compelled to answer

but cannot, finally announcing his desire to “shoot himself. “ He means suicide, but the cinematic connotation of the term, “to shoot,” jointly criticizes both the U.S. and Coppola’s film for exercising a demented self-absorption (Worthy 24).” Coppola had to deal with perhaps the most agonizing of his troubles: his shriveling self-confidence. As the budget soared, as the producers worried, as the crew and actors grew restless and dispassionate, Coppola worried that he did not have what it takes to finish the film. He struggled with the ending, with his own creative ability, and with his sense of purpose.

Martin Sheen, who plays Captain Willard, is the one who really faces the horror. During the filming he has a nervous breakdown and later a heart attack. Some of his co-actors believed that Martin was becoming Captain Willard, and was experiencing the same journey of self-discovery.

We live our lives sheltered in our own society, and our exposure to cultures outside of our own is limited at best. Often, the more technologically advanced cultures look down upon those that they deem to be simpler. On the occasion that some member of one culture does come into contact with another, simpler culture, a self-discovery happens. Both cultures realize that deep down inside, all humans are essentially the same. We all possess a good and an evil side, and no culture, no matter how “advanced,” is exempt from that fact. This discovery often causes madness as this evil side is allowed out. Only those who have completed the “journey into self” can understand the actions of people such as Kurtz. They are alone in this world of horror... The Horror!