

## Study Guide 1 to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Coppola's *Apocalypse Now!*

### Similarities and Differences in Character

- (1) one similarity: both are on a mission up a river in a “wild” place, headed for a man named Kurtz
  - big difference: their missions with respect to this man (how so?)
    - Does this (and the different personal histories behind it) connect in turn with any differences in our conception of the kind of individual each is — their character (in the psychological & ethical sense of the term), their personalities?
- (2) another similarity: in their trips up their respective rivers, both Marlow (in the novella) and Willard (in the film) grow increasingly interested in, and fascinated with, Kurtz.

One factor in this is the mediocrity and incompetence and corruption the two protagonists encounter on their journey upstream.

  - How is this so — but in different ways?
  - What additionally accounts for Willard's admiration for Kurtz, as he proceeds on his mission?
- (3) Each protagonist is in for a big surprise when he finally arrives at where Kurtz is — a surprise that alters the nature of the fascination Kurtz holds for him.
  - These surprises have some common denominators.
    - The basic similarity is that they are “ethically mad” — have stepped over some key line.
      - How is this the case, in each instance?
    - For example, both men turn out to be highly cultured individuals.
      - How is this shown, in each case?
      - Why do you figure Conrad and Coppola were concerned to make this a fact of the story?
  - But in other respects the two Kurtzes are different. (Spell these out.)
    - The factors that contributed to their respective sorts of moral corruption are different in each case.
      - This really invites spelling out.
    - Each entrusts the protagonist with taking charge of their “memory” back home.
      - But there are some big differences in this case.
        1. Note that the relationship between Kurtz's treatise in the novella and the truth about his actual conduct is very different from the relationship between the corresponding treatise (on military strategy and tactics) in *AN!* and the policy Col. Kurtz has been pursuing. (How is this so?)
          - What is the memory of himself that the Belgian Kurtz wants Marlow to secure for him in Europe?
          - What is the memory of himself that Colonel Kurtz wants Willard to foster in his (K's) son?
        2. Each manuscript has a shocking “postscript” that the author has apparently forgotten about. Though similar, these are different. (The difference perhaps says something about the era in which the action of *AN!* takes place.)
        3. What Marlow & Willard do (or don't do) in response to this commission from Kurtz is different as well.
          - [Note, incidentally, that this calls our attention to a difference between Conrad's novella and Coppola's film that, though it doesn't have to do with the differences between Marlow and Willard, is important.
            - We learn about what Marlow does with the manuscript (and how this relates to the lie he tells Kurtz's “Intended” — his admiring fiancée) because Conrad has provided a “frame narrative” in which Marlow's first-person narration of his experiences is told to an audience of fellow company members on a ship waiting for the tide to go out on the Thames (a vessel on which Marlow will be acting as captain, after the others return to shore).
            - The film on the other hand has no explicit frame story, yet we sense there must be one, since the coherence *and depth* of the film depend so heavily on the constant voice-over narration by Willard, which affords us a constant window on what Willard was thinking and feeling at the time, and occasionally on what he is thinking “now” — i.e., in the moment in which he is talking in voice-over, after the story he's telling is over. What is some plausible hypothesis about where he is, when he's talking in voice-over, and whom he's talking to? Might this account for his not having ended his narrative with an account of his contacting Col. Kurtz's son? Could there be additional reasons why this hasn't happened? By not going there, has Willard done the functional equivalent — or something very different from — what Marlow does in visiting Kurtz's Intended?]

**Study Guide 2 to  
Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Coppola's *Apocalypse Now!*  
Kurtz's entrusting Marlow/Willard with his memory: issues to ponder**

In Conrad's novella, Kurtz entrusts Marlow with his memory, handing over to him his treatise on "The Suppression of Savage Customs." Ideally, you'd want to

- say something about what this contains.
- remark how ironic it appears, in light of what Kurtz has eventually ended up doing.
- note how the irony is compounded by the way some of the passages Marlow reveals invite us to see the seeds of Kurtz's downfall in them.
- say something about the implications of the fact (which Kurtz has evidently forgotten) that the manuscript contains a scrawled note on one page: "Exterminate the brutes."

When he gets back to Belgium, Marlow decides to give this treatise to Kurtz's fiancée (whom he refers to as Kurtz's "Intended"). This woman turns out to be wholly taken with Kurtz's high-minded character and mission. Marlow doesn't pass along the page with the scrawled note. And, when she asks Marlow to tell her what Kurtz's last words were, Marlow tells her a lie: instead of telling her the truth (Kurtz died murmuring "The horror, the horror"), Marlow tells her that "[h]is last words were your name." Among issues worth exploring are:

- What might Kurtz have been referring to in his final words?
- What motives led Marlow to lie to Kurtz's fiancée?
  - Note that he gives an explanation of this act to the people to whom he's telling his story. (Here we have to recall the frame story, set on a boat in the Thames estuary waiting for the outgoing tide.)
- What are we to make of Marlow's action here? Shall we endorse it? Are there some issues that Marlow doesn't properly evaluate?
  - A traditional way of framing such a question might be to ask whether we figure Conrad, the author behind the creation of Marlow, identifies with Marlow here, or whether he expects the reader to join him in adopting an ironic distance to Marlow's stance here. But we might just ask well as ourselves, regardless of whatever Conrad may personally have thought of Marlow's decision to keep this creature "in the dark" (in a work entitled "*Heart of Darkness*," no less!), what *we* think of it? How, for example, do the illusions on the part of influential elements of society back home facilitate the continuance of the enterprise as a whole, which Marlow is unequivocal in regarding as morally despicable — in part because of its thoroughgoing hypocrisy?

Note that the relationship between the Kurtz's treatise in the novella and the truth about Kurtz's actual conduct is very different from the relationship between the corresponding treatise (on military strategy) in *Apocalypse Now!* and the truth of what Col. Kurtz has been doing. It's important to get clear on exactly how this is.

Col. Kurtz originally imprisoned Willard, because he understands quite well why Willard was sent. But he eventually frees him so that Willard can carry out his mission to kill him. (You'd want to explain why, we figure, he does this.) Before he dies, he asks Willard to go see his son to make sure he knows the truth about his father. When Willard leaves, he takes with him Kurtz's treatise. We know that this is about what Kurtz came to believe was the correct strategy for American to adopt in order to defeat the enemy in Vietnam. We also know that this is

1. the strategy that Kurtz figured out on the basis of his insight into the "brilliance" of the enemy when he had his epiphany on seeing the heap of amputated arms of children in the village where his unit had earlier been administering inoculations (part of the official strategy of "winning the hearts and minds" of the rural Vietnamese, the chief constituency of the Viet Cong, and about 95% of the population of the country);
2. the strategy of resort to terror that Kurtz himself came to adopt;
3. the strategy that the higher command regarded as so scandalous that it dispatched Willard on his mission to "terminate the colonel's mission."

Does Willard visit the colonel's son?

- If yes, how? (You'll have to infer this.) If not, why not? (You'll have to infer this.)
- What are the implications of his decision — i.e., for us, the audience?

A question that this incidentally confronts us with — a question that has been on the table from the beginning of the film, and that is clearly important for our understanding of Coppola's work as a whole — is:

- To whom to we figure Willard is addressing his narrative in the voice-over that holds the film together?