

The Horror, The Horror, What Has Desire Made of Me?

Out of all the conversations we have with someone, we remember their last words the most. Last words envelop that person until we no longer see them and instead, we see what we've made of them through those ultimate ramblings. We rely on these few phrases given to us before Death snatches life out of one's body for comfort, for direction, and perhaps even a philosophy to live by. But what happens when one's final discourse leave us with several interpretations? Kurtz' last words within *Heart of Darkness* are just that, ambiguous; what we make of these words reflects not what the speaker wanted but rather what we see fit, making them timeless and relatable to whoever who comes across them.

To gain some insight on what these last words, "the horror, the horror" meant to its vocalizer, Kurtz, we must gain some insight upon Kurtz himself. Kurtz is introduced to readers halfway through *Heart of Darkness* and, even then, we never truly meet him, we see him through Marlow's eyes only. Throughout the work, we hear of Kurtz and his success, his talent, his knowledge. He's this being that surpasses the average man in every aspect, but all of that comes crashing down as Marlow gives us his first description of Kurtz. "...But through my glasses I saw the thin arm extended commandingly, the lower jaw moving, the eyes of that apparition shining darkly far in its bony head that nodded with grotesque jerks" (Conrad 59). Kurtz does not *look* like the talented man we've heard him out to be; he looks like the opposite of such a description. The more we hear of him and his time in the inner station we see less of a civilized man and more of a man that is part of the forest: he lives in a house surrounded by heads on spikes, after all. Kurtz's reason for wanting to stay within the forest was never given but it's clear he integrated himself deeply within the forest and its people to an extent no other 'civil' man had.

Within the forest was a society that worshipped Kurtz, “...[he] got the tribe to follow him...they adored him...” (Conrad 56). Marlow pointed out that the deeper he went into the forest, the more he could feel “...[the savages’] humanity....[and his] remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar” (Conrad 36). The further in Marlow went, the more unraveled the strings of society, similar to Ariadne’s thread and how it led Theseus out of the labyrinth, became. For Kurtz, however, that string unraveled completely and he lost his single way out of the forest. It can be assumed he lost the string of his own volition, he leached off his status within “uncivilized” man’s society, and because of it forgot about (or chose to forget) the society he came from, therefore he could never find his way out of the Congo even if he tried. Within the eyes of the savages, Kurtz was almost, if not completely, seen as God, and by taking on the role God he played with the natural order of things which ultimately led to his demise.

We never know the original intent that Kurtz came to Congo for, but it is clear that he had great success in obtaining ivory. The Company showers Kurtz in benedictions due to his success until he no longer does as it bids. The longer Kurtz stays within the inner station, the less we see of him; instead, we are left with a remnant of him. Kurtz is wrapped up in attaining the ultimate amount of power, this desolate aspiration consumes him and as it does so his physical appearance hollows out as well. Kurtz himself can no longer separate his identity from his desires. As Marlow points out: “...I heard Kurtz’s deep voice behind the curtain, ‘Save me!—save the ivory, you mean’” (Conrad 62). Marlow notes that “...the knowledge came to him at last—only at the very last...” and because of it did Kurtz emulate through his last words what could have been shame, or regret, maybe even self-loathing over how he had lost himself to his lack of restraint within the forest for he had combined his own value to that of ivory (Conrad 58).

For Kurtz, his last words can be seen as, but cannot be boxed up to, a final commentary on his actions within the forest; he realizes the haplessness of his deeds, that almost nothing will be left behind of his knowledge. So he cries out in terror, because he believes his existence has been wasted. We never know if Kurtz is appalled by his actions within the forest, or if he's distraught at what he could not complete in the forest, or if he fears his return to society, it is, as the saying goes, up to the eyes of the beholder.

Marlow perhaps believes that, through his last words, Kurtz was criticizing more than just his lack of restraint. Marlow seems to believe that Kurtz underwent the same enlightenment he did and that Kurtz was possibly facing it, as well as his fear of the knowledge he gained before his death. Before Kurtz and Marlow embark on their journey back to society, a series of events occur. Within the night, Marlow awakens "...completely unnerved by a sheer blank fright, pure abstract terror, unconnected with a distinct shape of physical danger...something altogether monstrous, intolerable to thought and odious to the soul" and soon after he notices a black figure with horns appears but he never acknowledges this experience again (Conrad 64). This figure, as well as the feeling that overcomes Marlow, can be seen as just that. A figure and some feelings. But if we look at it as something deeper, it's obvious that the forest is beckoning him just as it did in the beginning of *Heart of Darkness*, "...smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering 'Come and find out'" (Conrad 13). In a sense, the forest materializes into something with a figure resembling Satan, beckoning Marlow as Satan did Adam and Eve. But Marlow does not succumb to the jungle. The jungle uses man's desire and what resides deep within him to reel him in, but because Marlow went into the Congo with no true materialistic desire, he is immune to its magnetism.

After seeing how the forest used desires to capture its prey and how Kurtz fell victim to the forest's games, Marlow realizes how weak and blind man can be when given the opportunity to indulge in superficial ambitions. By observing Kurtz, his lapse within the forest, and his final words, Marlow realizes that our frivolous gains do not matter and will never be remembered, only our voices and what we use them to vocalize, as well as how we impact the people around us. Perhaps Marlow believes that Kurtz realized how he had taken the bait the forest hanged over his head without a second thought, and before his death he uses the one thing that truly matters, his voice, to reclaim his identity and call out the darkness that dwelled within him away from society. Marlow takes what he sees of Kurtz' last words and replaces the image of power-hungry feverish Kurtz with an untouched godlike Kurtz, ironically placing Kurtz on the throne he so desired all along.

Because Marlow has replaced the tangible Kurtz with a Kurtz contrived of the interpretation of his last words, Marlow feels the need to protect the godlike image of Kurtz. He takes "the horror, the horror," finds meaning in it, and perceives it as his life's purpose to immortalize the phrase and its significance. But before Marlow ever entered the forest, the reason for his going, or rather what he would return as to civilized society, had already been ordained. Before he embarks his journey, Marlow noticed how people attended to him as if they were attending to an "...exceptional and gifted creature..." Marlow also pointed out that he was appointed as "...an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle" (Conrad 12). We can see the fulfillment of his title when Marlow lands within the inner station. He comes across a young Russian who he deems as Kurtz's last disciple. As Kurtz's disciple agrees to disappear he lingers, worrying what would happen to Kurtz and his reputation. Doing so elicits agreement

from Marlow to protect Kurtz's reputation (Conrad 59). It's almost as if a prophecy unravels the deeper Marlow traipses into the jungle. He is a man with no true direction, but in finding Kurtz he gains purpose in life as well as a deeper understanding of man. When he returns to society he struggles with sharing his knowledge, but attempts to do so anyway.

Within Marlow's eyes, Kurtz is almost a god but also the absolute foil of one. Within the forest, Kurtz is selfish, greedy, hollow; everything a god is not. But before his death Kurtz transforms into a god, his almost immoral acts that led to his sickness and death are a sort of self-sacrifice through which Marlow finally realizes man's secrets. Marlow, in turn, believes he must make sure Kurtz's sacrifice does not go unnoticed, he must also make sure that the Kurtz within the Congo is separated from the Kurtz within civilization otherwise his knowledge and name would have been tainted in the eyes of a society that would have cast out a man that sought the company of the "uncivilized" man.

The last words of Kurtz and their importance as well as flexibility doesn't just apply to Marlow and Kurtz, but other facets as well. Throughout the work, we see the racial gap between the white man and colored man, the "civilized" versus the "uncivilized." White man views the colored man as degenerate, backward. But the closer we get to the Congo, and the further in we go once there, one must take note on how the "savages" have more self-control than the Europeans. Marlow points out that the cannibals working under him have not had a proper meal for a large stretch of time, yet still do not eat the weaker handful of white men that order them around (Conrad 42). In comparison, the Europeans have little to no restraint. It can be seen in Kurtz, as well as the Company's battle with Nature. The Company chooses to defile Nature in their fervor for ivory, but Nature fights back; "The [railway truck] looked as dead as the carcass

of some animal. I came upon more pieces of decaying machinery..." (Conrad 15). Not only does the Company waste its own materials in order to gain ivory, but it also wastes the lives of the savages. Conrad makes sure to imprint the Grove of Death within the minds of his audience through the most bloodcurdling and tragic description in order to emphasize the inhumane ardor that consumes the Europeans. The savages will subdue their hunger, a hunger that "...takes a man all his inborn strength to fight...It's really easier to face bereavement, dishonour, and the perdition of one's soul—than this kind of prolonged hunger" but the white man can't control himself and reaps the lives of other men in order to create inane objects of pleasure (Conrad 42). Kurtz's last words invoke repugnance toward the acts of European man, less on their racism and more at their lack of self-restraint as well as avoidance of the truth concerning how they are no better than the savage, how they cannot play God and conquer Nature, and their evasion of facing, naming, and conquering the darkness within them. *If* "the horror, the horror" that Kurtz and Marlow felt was horror toward the vastness of mankind and how simple it is to pass through the universe with no imprint left to immortalize oneself, through philosophy and/or impact on others, the Europeans during the Imperial era failed to leave something positive.

What one decides on *The Heart of Darkness* and Kurtz's last words will be different from what the person to the left or right of them perceives. But to come to a conclusion on what it means, the reader must have patience and mull over the piece as a whole. When tasting a wine one must let the wine sit and then swish around in their mouth, ensuring it has reached every taste bud. Only then does the taster come to a conclusion over the flavor they receive. The flavor one person comes across may be different from someone else, and the conclusion one makes of the taste of the wine applies to them and them only. *Heart of Darkness* as well as Kurtz's last

words must also be allowed to sit, we must allow it to reach every facet of our mind, and then come to a conclusion on what it means to us.

Conrad has left readers today with a piece of work that not only transports us to the Congo but to the darkness that resides in all of us. It is a darkness left unnamed that we must take the time to delve into and discover. Through Kurtz's last words Conrad gives us a chance to name that darkness as well as the chance to leave it unnamed. Living in a world that promotes security through fame, economic gain, and tangible success makes it difficult to avoid becoming a Kurtz rather than an enlightened Marlow. Playing God is simple now, as it was for Kurtz once he set foot in the inner station. And because it's so easy to be God, it's difficult for man to come back down from his hilltop and face the reality of things; our tangible success does not matter if we don't bother to live by, and spread, our philosophies which require introspection to create.