

Analyse and assess Conrad's presentation of Kurtz in 'Heart of Darkness.'

In the presentation of Kurtz, Conrad may be seen to have presented both the best and the worst of which the white man is capable. He is the chief of the Inner Station and he understands the power of words, a fact which is evident in his writings which are marked by the eloquence which serves to obscure a horrifying message.

One of the main themes in Heart of Darkness is Colonialism or Imperialism which is presented not only as a political and economic venture but also as a direct consequence of the individual possessiveness' and lust for power.

As the chief agent of the Company in its African territory Kurtz is reputed to be an idealistic man of great abilities. Like Marlow, Kurtz is a good orator, gifted musician and painter and this is significant because it is evidence of his mental qualities which, along with his charisma, allow him to manipulate others who view him as something of an icon or genius.

Kurtz as presented by Conrad may be seen as an exaggeration of the white people who had come to Africa for money through ivory. He went to the Congo with great plans for civilizing the natives however he becomes greedy and falls over the edge. In many ways he appears almost as a representation of the wilderness, God-like an imperialist who though his vanity had become dehumanized and inhumane.

It is through Conrad's own experience that has led him into the writing of 'Heart of Darkness' as he becomes a political commentator. Suggestions have been made that Conrad is using the adventures of H.M. Stanley who Conrad sees as a good likeness to the fictional character which he has created Kurtz. All this was on the back of the so called 'Scramble for Africa' that was prominent within the latter years of the nineteenth century. Indeed Heart of Darkness has been canonized and has been closely linked to the work of Dante in his epic 'Inferno' and the holy bible and the 'Legend of the Fall'

However the ambiguity within the novel helps Conrad distance himself from the novella. It is Marlow's narration that shows this as he never names a person. This has been done deliberately by Conrad to do two things; the first is that as a writer he could be under scrutiny from the very people to which the responsibility of colonization rests and the second is that he (Conrad) as a writer has written this as a more general piece of literature to which he not only denounces European

Imperialism in Africa but all other countries to which Imperialism is seen as the 'enlightening' other countries. Kurtz himself is seen as an enlightener but from the beginning of the novella we have an atmosphere of 'brooding gloom' to which he likens to the Romans whom came across to enlighten the barbaric British and through Marlow states that 'They were men enough to face the darkness.'

Indeed it the very theme of darkness is always present within the book and from the story of Marlow we get to the station of 'The Company' at which Marlow has been sent for a medical and to be assigned a steam ship. It is here we get the very sinister inference of the journey that Marlow will soon be embarking on as we see the women knitting in black wool 'guarding the door of darkness' again carrying on the gloom of the previous pages. The journey itself is as we find out one of interest to us as the approach to the heart of darkness we see an example of the nature of enlightening to which we have been alerted as ships are firing cannonballs into the thick forest of Africa. For this Marlow describes this as a pointless act which links into what Kurtz is doing here as he might not have such high ideals.

It is through a series of discussions with unnamed people to which Kurtz really has his first mention. We first have the praise of Kurtz from the accountant as Marlow enters the wilderness. It is the description of Kurtz as being a first class agent however we can take the inference and learn later on that the fact Marlow is making the journey to Kurtz is all to do with the influence of Marlow's aunt as to Marlow being perceived as another man with potential enough as to be just like Kurtz thus a factor of fear of Kurtz must be taken into account making our interpretation of Kurtz even more difficult when looking at the reliability. We may see the accountant as having a favourable first impression however we have this as a backdrop to the hypocrisy of imperialism to which Marlow has already witnessed namely the pointlessness of the French firing cannonballs into the wilderness. Thus we get the message that of Kurtz who may be described as an 'emissary of light' with all the European ideals to be tainted.

It is on this journey to Kurtz that can be said to be a metaphor for the journey into the soul. The title itself may be part of the presentation of the Kurtz as it is this journey towards Kurtz or towards the Heart of Darkness.

