



## JOSEPH CONRAD'S HEART OF DARKNESS

### A Signet Teacher's Guide

The inspiration for Francis Ford Coppola's stunning and controversial film *Apocalypse Now*.

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### OBJECTIVES:

- To use the film, *Apocalypse Now* as a motivation for reading or re-examining Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in terms of cross-media studies.
- To understand Conrad's novel in terms of the elements of concept, plot and theme whose universality is borne out by Coppola's film.
- To compare novel and film as to concept, plot, narrative devices, description, action, themes, tone, characterization, resolution, symbolism and significance.
- To contrast elements in these works traceable to differences in medium and in historical era: action and description, tone and symbolism, resolution and significance.

- To reflect on the meaning of both works for values according to which our culture lives and operates.

### ANALYSIS AND COMPARISON:

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1898-99) is acknowledged as one of his finest shorter novels. Almost 100 years after its publication, film director Francis Ford Coppola completed the epic film *Apocalypse Now* (1979), a work frankly based on Conrad's novella. The relationship between these two seminal works is worth the scrutiny of all students of literature and popular culture.

An angry film on American involvement in the Vietnam War appears to be a long way from Conrad's journey of self-discovery staged in Colonial Africa. And yet, a survey of its themes reveals immediately why *Heart of Darkness* suggested a concept and plot structure for *Apocalypse Now*. The novel was based on a pivotal experience in Conrad's development as a man and as an author. As he himself said, "Before the Congo, I was just a mere animal."

Conrad's brief 1890 command of a river packet on the upper Congo wasted his body with fever and dysentery, but refined his young spirit.



The Vietnam War had a similar effect on Francis Ford Coppola who, like a generation of young Americans, saw Vietnam as revealing a dark side of the national temperament. He plunged into the making of the film with the enthusiasm of the young Conrad, and the series of natural and human disasters which delayed the film's completion for 3 years and swelled its budget to almost \$40 million, tried Coppola's spirit.

Apocalypse Now is, then, as personal a statement of Coppola as Heart of Darkness is of Joseph Conrad. Coppola, however, never intended a "modern" version of Heart of Darkness. Instead, the director/writer took Heart of Darkness as the "raw material of experience" for his anguished personal statement of outrage over the Vietnam War. The result is a series of remarkable likenesses and no less noteworthy differences between the two works. This series of convergences and departures make a fascinating study, partly because they confirm the universality of Conrad's themes, and partly because they reveal how a classic work's plot and conceptual structure can be creatively mined for contemporary relevance.

Both the Conrad and the Coppola titles employ hyperbole. To call a novel about Africa Heart of Darkness was, by implication, to attain some inner limit of evil in the writing. Apocalypse, in turn, was strong, even for a war film. Both works succeed in living up to the expectations generated by their titles, although they carry their common elements of plot and concept into very different areas.

The plot shared by novel and film derives from mythical origin--a journey which taps the archetypal experience of a nocturnal descent into a primitive place close to the very roots of being. Both works use the device of a narrator to make it clear that this is primarily an interior journey. For Conrad, his own novelist's voice quickly gives way to that of his famous alter-ego, Marlow, who describes for his comrades the fascinating discoveries made on the upper Congo. Coppola's film begins with a narrator who comments on the lyrical nightmare of war obsessing the central character Willard --a professional army assassin now between assignments.

The novel is able, of course, to sustain the narrator, while the film wisely uses the voice simply to cue the perspective of the Vietnam journey as being that of Willard, who studies secret dossiers on his prey as he proceeds upriver.

Conrad's protagonist rebuilds his own packet steamer before taking command, and in the process learns the treacherous colonial situation which produced Kurtz. Kurtz, a mysterious agent of a Belgian firm, has used unorthodox means to produce untold wealth in ivory, and in the process has "gone native". Rumors have it that he is worshipped as a god and indulges in barbaric rituals to control his followers and continue the flow of "white gold". Finally, it has been decided that Kurtz must be replaced, taken out, and it is this fearful mission which carries Marlow up the Congo to his destiny.

Willard operates in a war setting, and it is his mission to go up a Vietnam river to "terminate the command" of Colonel Kurtz, a brilliant Green Beret officer who has apparently gone mad. While "pacifying" the countryside, Colonel Kurtz has assassinated Vietnamese officials as secret agents of the Viet Cong. Installed in an abandoned jungle temple near Cambodia's border, Coppola's Kurtz also is said to be worshipped as a god by his raggedy-tailed Montagnard followers. Willard is being taken by Navy patrol boat up the river and, in the process, undergoes experiences which reveal the full horror of the war--a horror which seems to be epitomized in the man he is to kill.

In these extravagantly different settings, Marlow and Willard make a common journey of self-discovery. Marlow becomes as disenchanted with the colonial company as Willard does with the military. But both men must first taste the fascination of the evil they pursue, going so far as to become part of it. Marlow defends the dying Kurtz against the company representative, and goes on to carry a message to his fiancée. Willard actually becomes a part of Colonel Kurtz' "household" before he is given the opportunity to fulfill his mission.

The element of social setting for novel and film is much closer than it seems. Without reducing the Vietnam War to a



colonial conquest, Coppola draws upon the common elements strikingly expressed by Marlow at the beginning of his tale. Speaking of the colonials, Marlow notes they were conquerors whose strength was "an accident arising from the weakness of others." "It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blindly, as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness". He goes on to note that the conquest of the earth is an ugly process of taking it away from "different" people for the sake of an idea which we bow down and sacrifice to.

For Coppola, this passage neatly described American involvement in Vietnam. The idea before which one bows, either in colonial conquest or military containment, only gradually reveals itself. Marlow sees the Congo natives enslaved, beaten and killed, their land plundered for its riches and left barren. Willard sees the Vietnam countryside ravaged by war, its jungles littered with the wreckage of the American military machine, and its people killed almost as if by chance (as in the machine-gun frenzy killing of the sampan family).

On the surface, Apocalypse Now is more of an exterior tale than Heart of Darkness. The pageant of war introduces the element of action in the movie. A helicopter attack on a Viet Cong outpost becomes a model of the war itself. An awesome, wheeling assault unleashing formidable weaponry against primitive defenses, this engagement is at once brave and foolhardy, gallant and unbelievably gross,....a waste of lives. Conrad's native attack on Marlow's boat does not equal it in scale, but like the airborne assault it serves to sharpen the protagonist's disgust with the unequal combat.

In both novel and film, the darkness which lies up-river is a mixture of elements which conspire to blot out the enlightened force of moral goodness. Some of these elements are shared by both forms--the pervasive jungle, for example. "Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were king." Other common elements are colonialism and war. Marlow witnesses the evidence of colonial degra-

dation, while Willard views the physical and moral ravages of war. The difference is one of subject matter and tone, since Coppola's perspective on the war is savagely satirical in parts.

Willard must first deal with "The Company"--military superiors alarmed by Colonel Kurtz' half-mad radio broadcasts. Then, Willard encounters Lt. Col. Kilgore of the Air Calvary Group, who madly risks lives encouraging his troops to surf the waves at the river delta. A U.S.O. show proves to be a "meat show in which lewd playgirls writhe with automatic weapons against their thighs until aroused soldiers storm the stage. One night Willard's boat passes a bamboo bridge whose defending company, lacking a C.O., and stoned on drugs pours deadly fire into the jungle. By the time Willard reaches Kurtz, the patrol boat crew is reduced to two: a young G.I. spaced out on L.S.D., and a cook, longing for the chef's life in his native New Orleans.

The encounter with Kurtz divides novel and film more dramatically than any other element of plot or theme. Conrad's Kurtz is a dying man whose final strength is spent trying to crawl back to his beloved natives. Coppola's Kurtz is a moribund but massive presence--the menace of evil in the persona of Marlon Brando's bull-like appearance. Willard is made captive and subjected to unspeakable horrors before, close to death, he is introduced to Kurtz. He falls prey to the brilliant obsession, the secret poetry, and the fascination with evil. It is only after Willard becomes an acknowledged part of the psychotic scenario that he is able to complete his mission.

What remains to unite novel and film is the attitude of Marlow and Willard.

Marlow admitted he was looking forward to a talk with Agent Kurtz, while Willard's fascination with Colonel Kurtz grows as he reads over files of the paradoxes in Kurtz' military and personal careers. Here for both men the truly primitive is not the jungle banks of the river, but the view of our own savage and primal nature revealed. Marlow mistakes the beating of a heart for that of the native drums; Willard takes on Kurtz' appearance in the jungle on his way to kill Kurtz.



The "identity" of Kurtz marks the major departure of Coppola's film from Conrad's novel. Marlow makes his journey as an innocent, gradually learning that the moral evil of the colonial trade has somehow been embodied in Kurtz. Willard, for all his boyish features, is not an innocent. He is an efficient, paid assassin. And yet he is repelled by the various aspects of the war which he encounters, especially the panic-killing of the peaceful sampan family. He has no compunction about killing Kurtz, although once he learns Kurtz' story, he is temporarily powerless to do so.

Kurtz was a Green Beret Colonel. Shortly after his patrol had inoculated a village against disease, the Viet Cong returned and lopped off the arms of the children who had received the shots. Kurtz never recovered from what he called the crystal-clear logic of this horrendous deed. Had he three divisions of such men, Kurtz claims, he could have won the war. It is on this edge of madness that Willard comes to identify with Kurtz. The insanity of the war Willard himself has witnessed coming upriver, even the insanity of his own mission matched perfectly that of Kurtz. In the logic of Coppola's plot, it is at this moment that Willard is free to kill Kurtz. (Kurtz has entrusted him with this revelation, and chosen him to carry it back to the military command..."we are all alike mad.")

The cultural indictment handed down by Coppola's film goes beyond Willard taking on Kurtz' character; it overflows into American society at large. The war symbolizes the flaws in the American temperament: the chopper attack shows war "played" like the macho world of American sports; the U.S.O. show is a ritual of deathwish sexuality; the desire to save one survivor of the sampan attack is a classic example of brutality mixed with benevolence.

Conrad's interior moral journey is symbolized by external elements: the jungle, and the river. Coppola's symbolism is broader and more image-oriented. A field Mass is depicted simultaneously with the hoisting of a cargo net filled with "sacrificial" animals. A tiger is shown as a mysterious life force in the jungles of death. Floodlights and military weapons are portrayed as sexual elements. The killing of Kurtz occurs during a

primitive liturgy of the Montagnard as they slaughter a water buffalo.

While Conrad condemns the Victorian society which created colonialism, his condemnation never becomes specific, perhaps because he was more concerned with digesting his own experience of death and evil in the Congo. In contrast, Coppola's film is designed to indict the American culture for the Vietnam War. He portrays the war as a typically "American" failure--American in its confidence in sheer organization, in its vulnerability to media hype, in the obtuseness of its military diplomacy, and its brutal, amoral technology.

Colonel Kurtz represents liberating benevolence which becomes destroying vengeance in a monomaniacal pursuit of "victory".

In spite of the moral outrage spent on the war, Apocalypse Now manages to convey the seductive, almost hallucinatory beauty of the cataclysm. The film departs from Conrad's novel in the sensual aspect of its conflict. It opens with Willard's nightmare--a gorgeous collage of combat helicopters, buzzing like insects along a tropical treeline until the forest erupts in a ball of napalm fire. Vittorio Storaro's cinematography reveals the sensuous beauty of modern war...wheeling choppers and soaring explosions, the graceful white plume of the patrol boat wake, and the gaudy smoke of signal grenades.

Joseph Conrad said "The mind of man is capable of everything, because everything is in it, all the past as well as the future. Conrad's Marlow travels into the Heart of Darkness, finds Kurtz, and discovers in him an element within himself. He returns a mature man.

This theme--self-knowledge through a descent into evil--invests Apocalypse Now with its volcanic force and makes it a powerful mythic indictment of U.S. history. Coppola is in accord with Conrad's belief that knowledge of our own capacity for evil is a necessary prerequisite for moral goodness. Both Kurtz the Colonial Agent and Kurtz the Green Beret Colonel die with some insight into their lives. "The horror... the horror!" But before they die, they pass on their revelation to us.

Conrad's Marlow lives to tell the tale, and does a penance by bringing Kurtz' fiancée an idealized version of the



man's career and death. Coppola's Willard, red with Kurtz' blood, receives the homage of the Montagnard tribesmen. But he takes with him the journal and tapes which prove that Kurtz' madness parallels that of the entire American involvement in Vietnam. Kurtz had to die, after all, because he gave personal, dramatic visibility to the combination of brutality and compassion, genius and chaos, diplomatic good will and destruction which characterized our part in the war. While its topicality and anger make Apocalypse Now less universal than Conrad's Heart of Darkness, both remain interesting and worthy additions to the ongoing disquisition on moral evil.

### SUGGESTED QUESTIONS AND RELATED ACTIVITIES:

1. Apocalypse Now is only one of many works inspired by or based on Conrad's Heart of Darkness. Read T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men," and compare it, first with Heart of Darkness, and then with Apocalypse Now. Who are the Hollow Men in these works?
2. Research the various authors influenced by Heart of Darkness and read a typical work by one of them. Report on its connection with Conrad's novel.
3. The journey is a favorite narrative device in fiction, and one which Conrad follows almost exclusively. For both Conrad and Coppola, their works flowed from intensely personal experiences. Share your recollections of the Vietnam War. Discuss why you think Coppola chose to make Apocalypse Now a personal statement on that conflict. (Research the director's statements on this issue.)
4. Novel and film share the basic plot of a journey of self-discovery--a device whose origins are found in archetypal myth. Name several classic myths which involve such a journey. (Suggestions: The Illiad, The Odyssey), and list the elements of the myth common to novel and film.
5. Compare and contrast major plot elements between the novel and the film.
6. Why do novel and film employ a narrator? Explain.
7. How does Apocalypse Now, with its sparse, introductory narration, preserve some of the interiority of Willard's role? Discuss with regard to subjective camera angles, closeup and reaction shots.
8. Novels and film give varying emphasis to the common themes of discovery of the self, the darkness of moral evil, and the critique of sociopolitical institutions. Does Willard's role as an experienced assassin preclude self-discovery for him? What kind of complicity in evil does Marlow experience?
9. How do novel and film reveal the darkness of evil in their descriptions and images? Discuss in depth.
10. The depredations of colonialism are described briefly by Conrad. How does Coppola's portrait of the United States in Vietnam exceed the evils of colonialism. Compare the two as to motives, means, and sociopolitical outcome.
11. The film paces Willard's journey with violent actions of war--a contrast to the relative inactivity of Conrad's novel. Are these actions the result of the film medium, the different subject matter, or of contemporary tastes? Discuss.
12. The attitude of novelist or director toward his/her materials determines the tone of the work. Coppola's attitude, for example, tends toward savage satire, while Conrad's style leans more toward irony. List three satirical episodes from Apocalypse Now and contrast them with examples of Conrad's verbal and plot irony.
13. Comparisons of novel and film characters are invited by the use of the common name Kurtz and by certain parallels between Marlow's and Willard's journeys. "Grade" the two Kurtzs by the depth of their moral degradation. After attempting to do so, discuss the dangers of making such judgments.
14. What do Marlow and Willard learn, respectively, about themselves on the journey? in the actual encounter with



- Kurtz? Can you choose a phrase in Conrad, or an image in the film which marks each of their personal revelations?
15. What do these protagonists find fascinating in their corresponding Kurtz? Does Willard's mission to kill Kurtz interfere with, or intensify his revelations concerning himself?
  16. The film creates a number of memorable characters. Name some of these and explain why you think they are memorable. Do they have equivalents in the novel?
  17. Comprehending the evil in the respective Kurtz figures is the key to resolving the dramatic elements of plot, character and theme. Colonel Kurtz obsessively recounts a Viet Cong atrocity which marks his descent into evil. Is there an equivalent revelation by or about Conrad's Kurtz?
  18. Conrad in the character of Marlow claims a maturing insight from his descent into evil. Can we assume the same for Willard?
  19. Does Coppola's "discovery" of an evil within the American temperament dilute the dramatic impact of the film, or does it extend and intensify its significance? Explain.
  20. Both Colonial Agent Kurtz and Green Beret Kurtz die murmuring "The horror." How does Marlow's awareness of his own capacity for evil become our own?
  21. If we were to calculate the number of readers who have read Conrad's Heart of Darkness, the total for 80 years might be exceeded in one year by the box-office attendance for Apocalypse Now. His media fact cannot help but affect the relative significance of these works, both in their creative form and their cultural impact. List and compare the symbolic elements of Conrad's novel with those of the film. Is the contrast between the two primarily due to the medium, or to the authors and their respective periods? Explain.
  22. For Conrad and Coppola alike, the sinister beauty of the natural environment is part of the primitive lure of evil. Compare specific passages from the novel with parallel scenes from the film with respect to sense
  23. Does Willard's taking over of Kurtz' role offer insights into Vietnam? Does it highlight our own responsibilities for atrocities such as My Lai and the Hanoi bombing? Discuss.
  24. Among Colonel Kurtz' books the camera focuses on Frazer's The Golden Bough. Read passages from this work, particularly the ritual killing of the king, which is part of ancient agricultural fertility rites. How does Coppola's film echo this theme, in framing its dramatic ending?
  25. Outline possible adaptations of Conrad's Heart of Darkness. Think of his plot/concept in settings from Science Fiction, Western or Crime films.

## HEART OF DARKNESS AND THE SECRET SHARER by Joseph Conrad

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