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Of Ivory and *Eros*: How Kurtz was Corrupted by the Congo

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In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, there is a sense of awe held by the company men for Kurtz and the fact that he "collect[s] barter[s], swindle[s], or st[eals] more ivory than all the other agents together" (*Heart* 92). Indeed, these men are so enraptured by the mythos of Kurtz that even Marlow, and to a degree, the reader, is eager to finally meet this greatest expeditioner of the Belgian Congo, which makes his revelation as a twisted idol that much more horrifying.

Yet the question stands as to how someone so revered could turn into a deformed god hidden within the jungle. Perversion via capitalism does not bring about a full understanding of the situation, nor does the concept of "man's return to nature" with Kurtz merely exploiting the rules of the jungle. However, there is a means of analysis disregarded when viewing Kurtz, based entirely upon his seeming lack of humanity: the concept of love.

To truly understand how love plays into the tragic situation of Kurtz and how he could fall so far from grace, one must turn to the Greeks and their idea of the three loves: they are ἔρως, or lustful love, the φιλία, or platonic love, and finally an ἀγάπη, or divine love. The exemplars of these within the novel are the Ivory Woman, the Intended, and Kurtz respectively. In the Congo, Kurtz becomes misguided and misdirected in his search for divine love and turns into the monster ultimately presented by Conrad.

The agape equation must begin with the Intended, as she is the longest-standing relationship presented in the novel, having been engaged to Kurtz since before he joined the Belgian Company, and the diction Conrad employs in discussing her. There is a stark irony in the presentation of the Intended as the one destined to marry Kurtz is one he has lost all interest in once departing from

Europe. Yet the commitment that still stands, and that connects the two across the continents, cannot be ignored; this apparent loss of love on Kurtz's part demonstrates precisely how Marlow can come to discover the Kurtz he finds in the Congo; this is a vital first step in his tainted apotheosis.

Conrad forces the reader to wait until the conclusion of the novel to find this catalyst, and it is likely for this reason that most scholarship ignores what the Intended shows the reader. Yet the wisdom of this ending is revealed by one of the numerous letters Conrad wrote to William Blackwood which lift the foggy veil of Marlow's narrative, in which he notes:

The interview of the man and the girl locks in—as it were—the whole 30000 words of the narrative description into one suggestive view of a whole phase of life, and makes of that story something quite on another plane than an anecdote of a man who went mad in the Centre of Africa. (*Blackwood* 154)

Indeed, then, one cannot ignore this section, as it allows for the full picture of Kurtz to be understood. Marlow, prior to this appointment, only knows of an explorer in the strict confines of the Congo and how he interacts with it. The Intended, however, points to a life before Africa, a life rooted in Europe. Only by viewing this easily-forgettable woman, can this man elevate to another plane, where the concept of love is far more conceivable and understandable.

Despite, and because of, her importance to the grand narrative, the discovery of the Intended in the final pages of the novel serves as a shock to the reader, as she appears as nothing more than a walking corpse. “[T]he Intended is static and passive...has the odour [sic] of death about her...[and] is a thing of black and white” (Hawthorn 408), in stark contrast to the color and liveliness of the Ivory Woman. Truly, her existence is highly ironic, as someone so vital to understanding Conrad's anti-hero is barely alive at all. While she lacks the vibrancy of Kurtz's new and sexual affair, hers is still an essential love to be considered for the enigmatic existence of Kurtz.

While the Intended still mourns, as, “[f]or her he had died only yesterday,” (*Heart* 122) it is clear that she barely knew her fiancé, resorting to Marlow as an authority on Kurtz. She asks the roundabout questions, “you admired him...[and] you knew him well” (123), as Conrad’s Congo is “a world from which the Intended...[is] excluded” (Straus 128) and she was never intended to penetrate his inner circle. Rather, being the “‘foil,’ [or] ‘moral contrast’...the Intended is reserved for the role of white lady in the tower” (129), as hers is destined to be a purer love, free of the lust that taints the Congo affair.

While the Intended was enamored with Kurtz, still mourning “more than a year [after] the news came” (*Heart* 122), the reverse is not true, and it is Kurtz’s position that matters most. His hiding of his more intimate secrets, the demon he becomes, proves theirs to be more of a platonic love such as that shared between two good friends. She is aware of his errand into the jungle, and the fact that he is the most successful of the company’s explorers, but not the means of collection.

The protection that is granted to the Intended highlights the truth of her relationship with her fiancé. After being pressed for information, Marlow tells the woman that “[t]he last word he pronounced was — your name” (*Heart* 125), to hide her from the reality that his last words were merely an exclamation of horror, seemingly in a desperate attempt to preserve this platonic love towards Kurtz, that the whole equation may not fall apart.

This need to comfort and protect the Intended from Kurtz is unique to *Heart of Darkness*, and this uniqueness is vital to understanding the woman; setting her apart is what allows her to contribute her *philia*. There are a number of women seen in the Congo, including the Ivory Woman discussed below and the two white women, “one fat and the other slim, sat on straw-bottomed chairs, knitting black wool” (*Heart* 50), who dwell in the Company headquarters. This fact reveals that is not impossible for women — or even just European women — to inhabit the jungle, and to face the harsh realities therein, which makes this exclusion evermore crucial to identity.

To reveal the full breadth of Kurtz's actions in Africa would taint her love towards him. The Intended would likely be just as horrified by what her love becomes as those that went down the river with Marlow, and thus would have shattered the *philia* she contributed to the *agape* equation. As she continues to inquire about her fiancé, Marlow finds himself "bowing [his] head before the faith that was in her, before that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness, in the triumphant darkness from which [he] could not have defended her" (*Heart* 124). This woman is wholly pure, even angelic — the only such person in the whole piece — free of the taint that the Congo set upon all other characters referenced even in passing.

Marlow does, in fact, defend her with his lie. By doing so, he proves the point of purity and highlights why the Intended is so pivotal to how Kurtz operates. Kurtz never wanted this woman to understand the devil he became while gathering ivory. As far as she is concerned, Kurtz went to the Congo to make enough money for a wedding, and she must never know more. Marlow, if only subconsciously, understands this need to protect the Intended, and so conceives his lie, so that the pure love can survive.

The love was not entirely gone between Kurtz and his betrothed; while her protection may posit this concept, her portrait proves it. Marlow notes in the painting that she is "draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch" (*Heart* 67), suggesting two things: (1) he wants to protect her from the truth of himself, and (2) that the link between the two is the key to understanding Kurtz in his entirety. She is the torch that will illuminate Kurtz's inner turmoil.

Hers is still a vital piece of the puzzle since, to get to a pure *agape*, the Greeks argue that one must have a firm platonic relationship. This ironically platonic relationship is the catalyst which allows Kurtz to delve into the Congo and discover the other half of the *agape* equation.

To find the other variable, then, we must travel to the Inner Station to discover Kurtz, and uncover the lust that is hidden away in this jungle. Far too often the mistress in the wilderness is

overlooked, as scholars “consider her exclusively as the embodiment of the savagery inherent in the continent, and thence they pronounce an aggrieved or enraged condemnation of the novelist” (Viola 163), and reduce her character to nothing more than an extended metaphor of European racism and justification for subjugating Africa. Yet, Conrad has a more profound rationale for including this woman, and for including her for more pages than the Intended.

The Ivory Woman presents an interesting contradiction to the *modus operandi* of Kurtz. In the pamphlet he penned about how to subjugate the natives properly, Marlow notes that Kurtz even wrote: “Exterminate all the Brutes!” (*Heart* 95). There is a palpable irony in the fact that his lustful affair is with one such “brute” for whom none of the rules seem to apply, indeed her existence breaks a number of the codes of Conrad’s women. Gabrielle McIntire notes, “the African woman is powerfully granted sound” (McIntire 266) which no other woman is granted, and in general is described in flowery language uncommon for Conrad.

As diction was the method of revelation for the Intended, with the Ivory Woman, imagery will show the fundamental truth of how the Ivory Woman transcends what most theories note about her existence. Within the research that focuses on Kurtz’s mistress, much of it falls into two camps: (1) looking at her as a furthering of how Conrad, and Europe as a whole, view the Africans, generally with heavy-handed racism, and (2) seeing her as tied fundamentally to the geography of the Congo. Both of these views must be borrowed from and combined, then, to unveil how this native ties into the *agape* equation.

The most noticeable facet of the Ivory Woman is in her adornments, which Marlow describes in excruciating detail, especially her decorations of ivory. By discovering that Kurtz’s “remarkable quantity of ivory – [is] mostly fossil” (*Heart* 108), the extent of the native subjugation is revealed, having demanded even their buried religious ivory to send upriver. Yet this native woman is seen to “have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her” (*Heart* 107), in blatant defiance of

Kurtz's rules. Thus two questions must be asked: why is she allowed to keep her ivory when all the rest is taken from the tribe, and what this reveals about her *eros* variable.

Indeed, Conrad, in a letter to his publisher, states that within *Heart of Darkness* there is “no love interest [. . .] and no woman” (*Collected Letters* 294), so the only possible explanation for the Ivory Woman is that of a lustful relationship, or *eros*, rather than Kurtz doing what he could to impress a traditional love interest. To allow the Ivory Woman to keep hold of her tusks, the view of a racist work, one obsessed with “nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation lying confusedly in the greenish gloom” (*Heart* 58), seems fallacious.

Moreover, by having a black woman serve as the, for all intents and purposes, dominant love interest of a European, Conrad shows her as a quasi-metaphor for the dark beauty and majesty of Africa in general, left her herd's worth of tusks out of reverence and due to a poetic, romantic, viewing of woman and land. This initial description invites further inquiry as to the extent of the Ivory Woman, both connecting her to her native land, and seems to elevate her above all other tribesmen. The gifting, or at least the lack of theft, of her ivory, immediately indicates that her involvement with Kurtz steps beyond that of worshipper to deity, tending towards lover to lover.

To further this logic, Marlow observes that the “black native woman is granted a sexual and valuable body: she is ‘gorgeous,’ and laden with costly ornaments” (McIntire 260) as continued signs of Kurtz's affections toward her. Moreover, “the African woman is given an important signifying power as she struts along the river bank” (260) seeming to serve as the ceremonial guardian of Kurtz. Her warrior imagery furthers this: “her hair...[is] done in the shape of a helmet; she had brass leggings to the knee, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, [and] a crimson spot on her tawny cheek” (*Heart* 107), the fierce protector of her diseased lover.

Beyond this warrior imagery, however, it is significant to note that, while on the shores, “the African woman here ‘passe[s]’ back into the feminized indecipherability of the unknown which

defines her” (McIntire 261), again tied to the nature around her as, from a “lighted shore moved a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman” (*Heart* 107), both entering and leaving the jungle seamlessly. This symbolic tie between woman and the feminine landscape goes further than simply lifting the work into a love letter to Africa, instead combining with her romantic relationship with Kurtz to create an elevated *eros* hidden deep in the Inner Station.

Within this context, Andre Viola’s observation of the Ivory Woman being “the evocation of a war goddess, both on account of some of the character’s equipment...and of her whole attitude” (Viola 164) serves to aid in understanding why the *eros* of this character is so pronounced and so fundamental to the development of the Kurtz presented in Part 3. Indeed, when “[f]aced in the savage woman with not only the threat of sexuality but also the allure of grief” (Smith 194), there is a transcendence that occurs.

Given both her ties to the land and her appearance, the “name of Athena immediately comes to mind. Yet, contrary to Athena, the African woman carries no weapon, which may give the first hint as to Conrad’s intention not to foreground the aggressive properties of the character” (164), showing that, while she has been elevated to a higher plane of love than the Intended, she is still missing celestial qualities. This mellowing of the Conradian Athena furthers the insight into how the Ivory Woman can transfer her *eros* to Kurtz more efficiently.

While the Intended was a friend and had a more acquaintance-like relationship with Kurtz due to her exclusion and being contained by European life, the Ivory Woman seems on a similar level with Kurtz, seen as goddess-like to Kurtz’s twisted divine, and thus able to connect in a more romantic and affectionate way than the Intended could ever. It is for this reason that the Ivory Woman, once bonded with Kurtz in the Congo, could supply for him the second part of the *agape* equation.

She indicates her love further when Kurtz is taken away from the Inner Station, and she “rushe[s] out to the very brink of the stream. She put[s] out her hands, shout[ing] something” (*Heart* 114) before being murdered by the company men. This gesture itself has a duality to it. Other than the Intended, this is the only other sound Marlow notes coming from a female character in *Heart of Darkness*, and one of unadulterated pain, rather than a grief-stricken, yet restrained, conversation. In the theme of godliness, “one could perhaps fancy, in the background, Athena raising her arms to invoke Olympian wisdom” (Viola 169), reaching out to her Zeus counterpart on the riverboat. Moreover, this is the pained cry of a mistress watching her love be ripped from her grasp, never to return. While Kurtz has been sick for some time before Marlow arrives, it is only after the Ivory Woman is killed, breaking this love triad, that the godliness of Kurtz is finally shattered, his Athena now gone, leading to his ultimate death on the river.

With the guardianship of the Ivory Woman in mind, and the link between hers and Kurtz’s deaths, it is clear that she is the other half of the equation for *agape*; her *eros* is enough to allow for Kurtz to ascend once he reaches the Congo, thereby completing him. It takes both of these loves, the platonic feelings towards the Intended and the heat of the Ivory Woman’s lust, to create the Kurtz discovered at his hut. The ritual sacrifices Marlow hints at “were established in the interest of perpetuating Kurtz’s position as a man-god” (Reid 347), and this status cannot be disputed.

Kurtz’s ascendance proves a vital point, as he is not found to be an angel, but rather a devil, and a dying one at that. He is an anomaly, “he comes from the outside, and is, naturally, unwilling to play the game of submitting to death when his strength fails” (349), creating anxiety in the natives, especially his lover, hence she is seen as a guardian, trying to protect her diseased deity.

To understand how this man turns out a demon rather than a god, we must turn back to the Greeks. As mentioned repeatedly, the equation is *philia* + *eros* = *agape*, requiring both components

equally, but the intent is that this divine love will be sent to the proper recipient: the Supreme Divinity. In this endeavor, Kurtz fails, instead turning it in on himself.

For a brief time, Kurtz reaps the rewards of god-like status, but soon these mistakes begin to take their toll. The explorer has to face two devastating realities: his waning health and the crumbling of his little fiefdom. Because of his odd status as white god over African natives, Kurtz “had been able to establish the ritual which would allay the anxieties of the natives and therefore maintain his own position” (349), using the ivory in this ceremony to both keep face with his worshippers and to send to the Company, as he does still have employment with the Europeans.

It is the drain of maintaining this status, a mantle that Kurtz is never meant to assume, that brings about his inevitable downfall. As mentioned before, it would seem that his emaciated frame was barely kept alive through his unknown illness only because of the maintained love triangle, but we must still ask how it is that Kurtz could come to this position, being a warped god and kept standing by two fragile pillars. How could a man who was idolized by the Europeans in the Congo move from such heights to his inevitable fall, left screaming about a mysterious horror? Indeed, the answers point to Conrad’s broader theme about the effects of isolation in a foreign land.

Inarguably, Kurtz becomes a selfish monster when he sets up the Inner Station, but this is through no fault of his own. He is a man pulled by two extremes: an impending dead-end marriage in Europe awaiting his return, and a tryst which would destroy his reputation if revealed to the Company and his peers. Yet love is a base human need, like water and bread, and so, in this foreign land, left alone but for the natives around him, Kurtz has no other option but to fall in love with himself, extending far beyond a healthy level of self-love, as a means of preserving his fragile sanity.

Moreover, the field of psychology would seem to argue in favor of this theory as well. In a report published by the Association for Psychological Science, it was discovered that “the link between threatened egotism and aggression...causes violence” (Baumeister et al. 27). The report

further posits that narcissism is a considerable factor of building aggression and violent outbursts (28). Kurtz would fit the mold thus presented, seen by all as a savant-like genius, able to paint, write, and charismatic as any politician; yet wounded when the Company sends Marlow to collect him from his station as if the Europeans have lost faith in him. He turns to the violent, sacrifice-demanding god seen in the end as the logical response to both his built-up self-love and the looming threat of European demands for consistent ivory shipments.

This entire endeavor, the Kurtz revealed at the end of the river, is no more than a measure of protective self-love taken to the logical extreme, where Kurtz is forced to build himself into a tyrannical god to keep the illusion alive in his head. He has all the makings of a man to be revered, who has the perfect mixture of Grecian love to be in harmony with God, Nature, and Man, but he falls victim to his circumstances and hubris.

Conrad's inherent irony, with platonic love coming from a fiancé and a deep sexual love coming from a woman Europe was intent on subjugating, blended with the isolation of the explorers of the African jungles, results in the perfect storm. In the end, the almost-divinity of Kurtz, this lost chance at becoming a hero, stands as the greatest tragedy of Conrad's Congo.

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