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**MR. KURTZ IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS*:  
WHY DOES HE NOT COME BACK?**

Santa Maria, RS  
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Trabalho Final de Graduação apresentado ao curso de Letras - Inglês e Literaturas de Língua Inglesa, da Universidade Federal de Santa Maria (UFSM, RS), como requisito parcial para a obtenção do título de licenciado em Letras

Orientadora: Prof.<sup>a</sup> Dr.<sup>a</sup> Mônica Stefani

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## **AGRADECIMENTOS**

Seria injusto de minha parte não agradecer. Portanto, agradeço aos meus pais por todo o apoio na minha jornada acadêmica (e de vida), à minha namorada por tudo o que ela representa para mim, aos meus grandes amigos de vida que estiveram do meu lado nos piores momentos (e nos melhores também), à minha orientadora por ter aceitado trabalhar comigo nos últimos meses, e à minha psicóloga, que fez com que eu estivesse aqui, vivo.

He cried in a whisper at some image, at some  
vision - he cried out twice, a cry that was no  
more than a breath - "The horror! The horror!"  
(CONRAD, p. 69, 2017)

**ABSTRACT****MR. KURTZ IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS*: WHY DOES HE NOT COME BACK?**

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This paper focuses on the character Kurtz in the novella *Heart of Darkness*, written by Joseph Conrad and published at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The objective of this work is to try to answer the question: why did Mr. Kurtz not want to leave the Congo? After a qualitative analysis, we point out reasons that might have led Kurtz to stay in the Congo, why Kurtz turned out mad, what role power can perform in somebody's unsound mind, and the possible consequences of such actions in the narrative. To accomplish that, we will situate the work historically, exposing all the violence and violations suffered by the Congo and the lack of humanism of King Leopold. Later on, we will present who Mr. Kurtz was, and then we will discuss some issues that have led Mr. Kurtz to madness.

**Keywords:** Heart of Darkness. English Literature. Character Analysis.

## RESUMO

### MR. KURTZ EM *CORAÇÃO DAS TREVAS* DE JOSEPH CONRAD: POR QUE ELE NÃO RETORNA?

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Este artigo enfoca o personagem Kurtz da novela *Coração das Trevas*, escrita por Joseph Conrad e publicada no final do século XIX. O objetivo deste trabalho é tentar responder a questão: por que Mr. Kurtz não queria deixar o Congo? Após uma análise qualitativa, pontuamos as razões que podem ter levado Kurtz a ficar no Congo, o porquê de Kurtz ter ficado louco, o papel que o poder desempenha na mente insana de um indivíduo, e as possíveis consequências desse papel na narrativa. Para chegar a esse resultado, situamos a obra historicamente, expondo toda a violência e as violações sofridas pelo Congo e a falta de humanismo do Rei Leopoldo II. Em seguida, apresentamos quem foi Mr. Kurtz, e então, discutimos a combinação de fatores que levaram Kurtz à loucura.

**Palavras-chave:** Coração das Trevas. Literatura Inglesa. Análise de Personagem.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

When considering the compositions that appeared as a result of the expansion of Imperialism around the world, *Heart of Darkness* is undoubtedly cited. Written between 1898 and 1899 by Joseph Conrad, it depicts the story of a man that undertook a trip through the Congo River to bring back the best ivory collector of the Belgian crown, Mr. Kurtz. This man was deep down into the heart of the Congolese jungle being a power figure to an enormous local tribe. The question, after reading the novella, is: why did he never come back?

The choice to study and write about *Heart of Darkness* came before reading it for a subject in the fourth semester of the graduation course of Modern Languages - English Language and Literature. The text was really powerful, so much so that it was also the main inspiration for the movie *Apocalypse Now*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola and launched in 1979, one of my favorite movies of all time.

Also, one aspect concerning *Heart of Darkness* refers to the meaning of “novella”. When we look up the meaning of that term, we see the following:

a fictional tale in prose, intermediate in length and complexity between a short story and a novel, and usually concentrating on a single event or chain of events, with a surprising turning point. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) is a fine example; Henry James and D. H. Lawrence also favoured the novella form. The term comes from the Italian word *novella* ('novelty'; plural *novelle*), which was applied to the much shorter stories found in Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1349-53), until it was borrowed at the end of the 18th century by Goethe and other writers in Germany, where the *novella* (German, *novelle*) in its modern sense became established as an important literary genre (BALDICK, 2001, p. 174).

This comes from *The Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* by the English professor Chris Baldick and cites *Heart of Darkness* as a “fine example” (BALDICK, p. 174, 2001) of a novella. Another reference, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* by J. A. Cuddon, brings the following definition:

novella (It 'tale, piece of news') Originally a novella was a kind of short story, a narrative in prose of the genre developed by Boccaccio. His *Decameron* (c. 1349–51) was a collection of such stories. [...] It was not until late in the 18th and early in the 19th c. that the novella was fashioned into a particular form according to certain precepts and rules. [...] Basically, the *Novelle* is a fictional narrative of indeterminate length (a few pages to two or three hundred), restricted to a single event, situation or conflict, which produces an element of suspense and leads to an unexpected turning point (*Wendepunkt*) so that the conclusion surprises even while it is a logical outcome. Many *Novellen* contain a concrete symbol which is the steady point, as it were, at the heart of the narrative. [...] Nowadays the term is often used to distinguish a long short story from a short story and a short novel from a full-dress novel (q.v.). Stories which might be placed in this middle-distance category are Tolstoy's *The Cossacks* (1852) and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886); Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kröger*

and *Tod* in Venedig (1913); Aldous Huxley's *Two or Three Graces* (1916); Alberto Moravia's *Conjugal Love* (1951); Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952); and H. E. Bates's trilogy *The Nature of Love* (1953). Some would also include Conrad's three long short stories *Youth*, *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and *Typhoon* (1903) (CUDDON, 2013, p. 480-481).

It is not by chance that the title appears as an example in those definitions, and maybe in many others, thus the importance of the title in terms of an interesting pedagogical instrument to work in the teaching of literary genres. Indeed, the effort of looking at different forms of literature should not be in vain, as we recognise that it is never too much to focus on how we should be working with literary analysis, following Terry Eagleton's words:

The most common mistake students of literature make is to go straight for what the poem or novel says, setting aside the way that it says it. To read like this is to set aside the 'literariness' of the work—the fact that it is a poem or play or novel, rather than an account of the incidence of soil erosion in Nebraska. Literary works are pieces of rhetoric as well as reports. They demand a peculiarly vigilant kind of reading, one which is alert to tone, mood, pace, genre, syntax, grammar, texture, rhythm, narrative structure, punctuation, ambiguity – in fact to everything that comes under the heading of 'form' (EAGLETON, 2013, p. 2).

Indeed, as part of such an effort of avoiding misanalysis, we also decided to see where the work has been circulating nowadays in Brazil - is there any regional preference in Brazil, perhaps? - and what has been done with this novella in recent years. When looking for other academic works on Conrad's novella, we quickly searched the repository kept by the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES in its abbreviation in Brazilian Portuguese) and eighteen relevant results were retrieved, from 2002 until 2019<sup>1</sup>. From these results, we find theses and dissertations mainly concentrated in the Southeast and the South (with 7 works from universities situated in each of those regions), and the Northeast and Central-West of Brazil (2 works from universities situated in each of those regions) exploring many topics, presenting comparisons of the novella with other African works, such as *Things Fall Apart*, by Chinua Achebe; post-colonial analysis - focusing on racism - of the novel; analysis of the language and history of *Heart of Darkness*; the adaptation of the novella into a graphic novel; how space is worked in the narrative; depression portrayed in the novella; comparisons of the translations of the novel into other languages, such as Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese; semiotic analysis of the novella and the movie; the contrast of light and darkness in the novella; post-colonial ecocriticism applied in the novella; an exercise in comparative literature using the novel *Os papéis do inglês* by the Angolan writer Ruy Duarte

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<sup>1</sup> Available at: <<https://catalogodeteses.capes.gov.br/catalogo-teses/#/>> Accessed on: 12 Sep. 2023.

de Carvalho); how violence is represented in the novella; and the connection of the novella when compared to Albert Camus's novel *The Plague* and a videogame called *Dying Light*. This work will certainly benefit from these results, in as much as some topics are going to be readdressed, in connection with specific characters.

The setting of the story is the country of the Congo, which was legally under the sovereignty of Belgium and its king, Leopold II, after the Berlin Conference (1884-1885), commonly known as the Scramble of Africa, which was a series of negotiations between European countries to divide the African continent under their sovereignty. According to the historian and professor of African and World history Trevor Getz:

It is a conference about Africa, but happening in a room in Berlin, Germany. There are zero Africans, and only two of the attendees had ever stepped foot on that continent—which is about three times larger than Europe. [...] The Berlin Conference took about three and a half months, from November 15, 1884 to February 26, 1885. It resulted in an act that did three things. The first was to recognize the territory that King Leopold claimed as his private property. The second was to recognize some existing territorial claims in different parts of Africa. The third, and most important, result of the conference was to set up a way for Europeans to claim and annex territory in Africa” (GETZ, 2023).

These imperialist actions were secured by the “noble mission” to bring “the blessings of Christian civilization to the “barbarous communities” of the Congo and to other African civilizations”. It is known that the Congo suffered an uncountable number of violations and abuses by the crown in the name of King Leopold II, thus representing one of the most violent periods in human history. Again, according to Getz:

Leopold pretended to be a great humanitarian and an abolitionist. He claimed a huge territory in Central Africa, and called it the “Congo Free State,” declaring that he would allow free trade and also eliminate slavery there. Instead, he set about building a state that would work the local population mercilessly for his own profit (GETZ, 2023).

It is important to mention that this paper is being written in 2023, when two massive conflicts are taking place. First, we have the Arab-Israeli conflict that, in its genesis,

began as a struggle over land. From the end of World War I until 1948, the area that both groups claimed was known internationally as Palestine. [...] Following the war of 1948–1949, this land was divided into three parts: the State of Israel, the West Bank (of the Jordan River) and the Gaza Strip. [...] The competing claims to the territory are not reconcilable if one group exercises exclusive political control over all of it. Jewish claims to this land are based on the biblical promise to Abraham and his descendants, on the fact that the land was the historical site of the ancient Jewish kingdoms of Israel and Judea, and on Jews' need for a haven from European anti-Semitism. Palestinian Arab claims to the land are based on their continuous

residence in the country for hundreds of years and the fact that they represented the demographic majority until 1948. They reject the notion that a biblical-era kingdom constitutes the basis for a valid modern claim. If Arabs engage the biblical argument at all, they maintain that since Abraham's son Ishmael is the forefather of the Arabs, then God's promise of the land to the children of Abraham includes Arabs as well. They do not believe that they should forfeit their land to compensate Jews for Europe's crimes against Jews (BEINING, HAJJAR, p. 1)

The conflict has re-emerged at the time of writing this work, when the Islamic terrorist group Hamas casted another attack on the Israelis. Since its foundation, Hamas has not recognised the State of Israel. The group is commanding the Gaza Strip, a region of unstopping battles that is suffering an economic blockade by the State of Israel. The attacks by Hamas are allegedly 'self-defense', because the Israelis are casting violent attacks until now at school and even hospitals.

Another conflict that is happening right at the time of this writing involves Russia and Ukraine. The political scientist Jeffrey Mankoff explains the conflict in the following terms:

Russia's invasion of Ukraine constitutes the biggest threat to peace and security in Europe since the end of the Cold War. On February 21, 2022, Russian president Vladimir Putin gave a bizarre and at times unhinged speech laying out a long list of grievances as justification for the "special military operation" announced the following day. While these grievances included the long-simmering dispute over the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the shape of the post-Cold War security architecture in Europe, the speech centered on a much more fundamental issue: the legitimacy of Ukrainian identity and statehood themselves. It reflected a worldview Putin had long expressed, emphasizing the deep-seated unity among the Eastern Slavs—Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians, who all trace their origins to the medieval Kyivan Rus commonwealth—and suggesting that the modern states of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus should share a political destiny both today and in the future. The corollary to that view is the claim that distinct Ukrainian and Belarusian identities are the product of foreign manipulation and that, today, the West is following in the footsteps of Russia's imperial rivals in using Ukraine (and Belarus) as part of an "anti-Russia project" (MANKOFF, p. 1, 2022).

Mankoff (p. 2, 2022) also reiterates the colonial aspect of the conflict, as Russia, represented by Vladimir Putin, its president, alleged that the nations of Ukraine and Belarus are one political unit, because they are "one people". Ukraine has its nation, its culture, its own language and political identity, and the Ukrainians do not want this neo-colonization. And this situation is one of the alleged motives of the conflict:

Committed to the idea of the "all-Russian" people, imperial elites believed that rival powers were deliberately promoting Ukrainian and Belarusian nationalism as a geopolitical tool for weakening Russia—the same theme Putin has long emphasized" (MANKOFF, p. 3, 2022).

Such topics are relevant to the composition of this paper (and to the reading/reception of

Conrad's novel nowadays) because those conflicts have an echo of unsettled colonialist actions, and those wars are, somehow, something that could happen in Congo. About a year ago, the Belgian king, Philippe, visited the Democratic Republic of Congo to reaffirm his and the crown's regrets regarding the "exploitation, racism and acts of violence during his country's colonization" (REUTERS, 2022). However, King Philippe did not formally apologize for such violence. "Antoine Roger Lokongo, a professor at the University of Joseph Kasa-Vubu in Southwestern Congo, said before the speech that he would be waiting to see if Philippe formally apologized. "The simple regret that you have expressed is not sufficient," Lokongo said." (REUTERS, 2022). So those unresolved issues could lead to violent settings like the ones in the Gaza Strip or in Ukraine.

Bearing in mind this situation, we can see that what happened there in those years still has deep wounds in Congolese society, and literature is here to help us understand these historical phenomena. Following Terry Eagleton:

Literature is sometimes thought of as a 'vicarious' mode of experience. I cannot know what it feels like to be a skunk, but a gripping short story with a skunk at its centre might allow me to overcome my restrictions in this respect. But there is no particular value in knowing what it feels like to be a skunk. Acts of imagination are not precious in themselves. It is not testimony to my sublime creativity that I spend most of the day trying to imagine what it would feel like to be a vacuum cleaner. It does not feel like anything to be a vacuum cleaner. Nor is the imaginary always to be preferred to the real. To suppose that it should be, as some Romantics do, implies a curiously negative attitude to everyday reality. It suggests that what does not exist is always more glamorous or alluring than what does. This may be true if you are thinking of Donald Trump, but not if you are thinking of Nelson Mandela. There is no doubt that we can usefully extend our experience by reading works of literature. It is just that this can also be a way of compensating for deficiencies that might be set right for real. Those with enough money and leisure, for example, can explore the mountainous region between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Most people on the planet lack the resources to enjoy this experience, and are reluctant to join al-Qa'ida in order to have it for free. They must settle for reading travel books instead. If wealth were shared more equally, however, a lot more people might be able to swarm over the area, provided they were willing to risk getting shot. One advantage of reading a Lonely Planet guidebook on the place is that nobody is likely to plug you with a bullet for doing so. In the nineteenth century, literature was sometimes recommended to the working classes as a way of feeling what it was like to ride to hounds or marry a viscount, since they were not able to do these things in reality. There have been more persuasive arguments for why poems and novels are worth reading (EAGLETON, 2013, p. 78-79).

Therefore, if we want to have a clearer idea of how the colonization process of Congo was, and somehow wear Mr. Kurtz's shoes, and be aware that this account bases its historical context on the division of Africa by European countries, Mr. Kurtz has seen such violence that to any human being would be unsound. So, taking this into account, we see in the novella

that Mr. Kurtz never left the Congo until the rescue by Marlow. The question we pose then is this: Why does he decide not to leave?

When working with *Heart of Darkness*, and doing more research on the topic, some gaps have appeared in critical pieces and studies about the book. *Heart of Darkness* has a huge critical fortune, with some polemical views (mainly coming from African scholars). There are several discussions about the historical context, racism, imperialism and violence, as well as some research concerning madness as a general view in the book mainly regarding Marlow and Kurtz. However, our research has not found much information about Kurtz, for instance. To accomplish the objective of this paper, that is to discuss why does Mr. Kurtz not come back, first, we will situate the work historically, exposing all the violence and violations suffered by the Congo and the lack of humanism of King Leopold. Afterwards, we will present who Mr. Kurtz was, and then we will discuss the combination of factors that led Mr. Kurtz to his madness.

## **2 WHO IS KURTZ: SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON THE CHARACTER AND HIS AND OUR HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

This section starts presenting some important considerations about the change in the title of the novella, which may guide our reading. About the importance of the title in any narrative work, we follow Gerard Genette's comment:

A title, as everyone knows, is the "name" of a book, and as such it serves to name the book, that is, to designate it as precisely as possible and without too much risk of confusion. But people are not sufficiently aware that to name a person (among other things) covers two very different acts, and here it is essential to differentiate the two acts more carefully than natural language does. One act consists of choosing a name for the person. Let us call this the act of baptizing - one of the rare occasions when we have the opportunity to affix a name (in this case, a first name) to something, for the age of the onomatourges is long past. And this act, of course, is almost always motivated by something - a preference, a compromise, a tradition: rarely is a child's first name left up to the luck of a dart thrown at a calendar (GENETTE, 2001, p. 79).

With Conrad's work, *Heart of Darkness* once was *The Heart of Darkness*: "the definite article was removed only in the 1902 version" (ARMSTRONG, 2017). This should be highlighted because when the article is used, the interpretation could be more difficult, that is, we may consider the heart of darkness as the center of the Congo, the dark place in which the story takes place. But when we suppress the article, we can expand our interpretation more freely. Without the article, it comes to our mind the human heart, Kurtz's heart, deeply in darkness. The ambiguity in the title is central to generate meanings and guide our interpretation.

When considering the definition of “character”, and also taking into account the literary period in English Literature that sees the publication of the novel, i.e., Modernism, we have the following, according to Terry Eagleton:

With the advent of modernism, then, it is becoming increasingly difficult to tell even the simplest of tales straight. Take the case of Joseph Conrad, who as a former seaman is renowned for his ability to spin a rattling good yarn. *Heart of Darkness* is among other things a gripping detective story. Yet as the fable unfolds, it begins to blur, dissolve and crumble at the edges. The story is told in a vividly concretising style, but there is an aura of mistiness about it which no degree of meticulous detail can dispel. Marlow, the protagonist, does not seem to be getting anywhere. As he moves upriver into the centre of Africa he is also journeying deeper inside himself, into some timeless realm of myth and the unconscious. So his journey is more inward than forward. At the same time, as he sails away from civilisation towards so-called savagery, he is travelling into the primeval past. To push forward into the heart of Africa is to revert to the ‘primitive’ origins of humanity. So the narrative moves forward and backward at the same time. Progress is purely illusory. There is no hope in history. History, to adapt the words of Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, is a nightmare from which modernism is trying to awaken. If Conrad’s narrative is in trouble, it is partly because the nineteenth-century belief in progress – of a continuous upward trek from barbarism to civilisation—has taken an almighty battering. It therefore comes as no surprise that Kurtz, the monstrously depraved figure whom Marlow is in search of, first came to Africa as ‘an emissary of pity, and science, and progress, and devil knows what else’. (One might expect that last phrase to read ‘and the devil knows what else’, but English was not Conrad’s native language, and his prose sometimes reminds us of the fact.) Kurtz, a colonial official, arrived in Africa as a champion of progress and enlightenment, and has now degenerated into a man who performs certain ‘unspeakable rites’ and secret abominations. Having come to enlighten the inhabitants of the Belgian Congo, he now wants to exterminate them. So the progressive reverts to the primitive in the content of the story, as well as in its form (EAGLETON, 2013, p. 109-110).

Following Eagleton’s explanation of the characteristics of Modernism, then we focus on the last part of the excerpt, in which Kurtz is mentioned, precisely because he epitomizes the spirit in vogue at the time: a positive revolution could turn out a macabre, disastrous, deplorable experiment. Indeed, another issue posed here refers to positions of leadership: Kurtz is the leader, so he supposedly should be an exemplary man. Going back to the novella, we see that he is first described as follows, being

a first class agent [...] and [...] a very remarkable person. [...] Mr Kurtz was at present in charge of a trading post, a very important one, in the true ivory-country at ‘the very bottom of there. Sends in as much ivory as all the others put together... [...] Oh, he will go far, very far [...]. He will be in the Administration before long. They, above - the Council in Europe, you know - mean him to be (CONRAD, p. 19, 2017).

So, we see that Kurtz is decidedly considered an important person for those in charge of collecting ivory for the Belgian crown. “From 1885 to 1890, [...] Europeans were [...] engaged primarily in trading ivory” (REYBROUCK, p. 109, 2017), so being the best ivory

collector in Congo made Kurtz a very important man, and the folks working there were preoccupied. The first glance we have about the main plot of the novella is when Marlow, the secondary narrator, is talking with the General Manager of the operation, and he says that “the situation was ‘very grave, very grave’. There were rumors that a very important station was in jeopardy and its chief, Mr Kurtz, was ill” (CONRAD, p. 22, 2017).

Before continuing with the plot, let us focus on Marlow, the other main character in the novella. The narrator of the story is a fellow that is listening to the story of Marlow, and he described him this way:

We four affectionately watched his back as he stood in the bows looking to seaward. On the river that was nothing that looked half so nautical. He resembled a pilot, which to a seaman is trustworthiness personified. It was difficult to realise his work was not out there in the luminous estuary but behind him, within the brooding gloom (CONRAD, p. 3, 2017).

He was the only man of us who “followed the sea”. [...] He was a seaman, but he was a wanderer too, while most seamen lead, if one may so express it, a sedentary life. [...] there is nothing mysterious to a seaman unless it be the sea itself, which is the mistress of this existence and as inscrutable as Destiny (CONRAD, p. 5, 2017).

He is an impersonation of Joseph Conrad himself, considering that the author undertook the same trip in 1890: “A *personal record* recalls the youthful spirit of adventure with which he pointed to a map of Africa and declared, “When I grow up I shall go *there*”” (ARMSTRONG, p. XIV, 2017). We see a parallel in this passage:

When I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that), I would put my finger on it and say: When I grow up I will go there. [...] I have been in some of them, and... well, we won't talk about that. But there was one yet - the biggest - the most blank, so to speak - that I had a hankering after. [...] there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land. [...] it fascinated me as a snake would a bird - a silly little bird. Then I remembered there was a big concern, a Company for trade on that river. Dash it all, I thought to myself, they can't trade without using some kind of craft on that lot of fresh water - steamboats! Why shouldn't I try to get charge of one (CONRAD, p. 8, 2017).

After describing the main characters in the novella, we move on to focus on how the setting is developed by Conrad and how the tiny pieces of madness are presented by him throughout the story.



### 3 BELGIAN CONGO: THE SETTING

*Heart of Darkness* is divided into three acts: the story until Marlow arrives in Congo; the upriver trip; and the plot that sets off when Marlow meets Kurtz. So, for us to better understand Kurtz's importance and actions in the story, we first have to undertake Marlow's adventure to the place. And, considering literary analyses, the setting, i.e., where the story takes place, is a very important element. Using the theory proposed by the American humanist geographer Yi Fu Tuan (2001), the focus on space is justified here because:

‘Space’ is an abstract term for a complex set of ideas. People of different cultures differ in how they divide up their world, assign values to its parts, and measure them. Ways of dividing up space vary enormously in intricacy and sophistication, as do techniques of judging size and distance. Nonetheless certain cross-cultural similarities exist, and they rest ultimately on the fact that man is the measure of all things. This is to say, if we look for fundamental principles of spatial organization we find them in two kinds of facts: the posture and structure of the human body, and the relations (whether close or distant) between human beings. Man, out of his intimate experience with his body and with other people, organizes space so that it conforms with and caters to his biological needs and social relations (TUAN, 2001, p. 34).

Indeed, how each of the characters experience Congo will differ in the story. Let us start at the point that Marlow got admitted to sail the steamboat. Marlow narrates that “There was yet a visit to the doctor. ‘A simple formality’, assured me the secretary, with an air of taking an immense part in all my sorrows” (CONRAD, p. 11, 2017). There is, in this visit, one of the first glimpses of terror about Congo and what was going on there. The consultation is described as follows:

The old doctor felt my pulse, evidently thinking of something else the while; ‘Good, good for there’, he mumbled, and then with a certain eagerness asked me whether I would let him measure my head. Rather surprised, I said Yes, when he produced a thing like calipers and got the dimensions back and front and every way, taking notes carefully. [...] ‘I always ask leave, in the interests of science, to measure the crania of those going out there,’ he said. ‘And when they come back too?’ I asked. ‘Oh, I never see them,’ he remarked; ‘and moreover, the changes take place inside, you know.’ He smiled as if at some quiet joke. ‘So you are going out there. Famous. Interesting too.’ He gave me a searching glance and made another note. ‘Ever any madness in your family?’ he asked me in a matter-of-fact tone. I felt very annoyed. ‘Is that question in the interests of science too?’ ‘It would be,’ he said without taking notice of my irritation, ‘interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals on the spot, but...’ ‘Are you an alienist?’ I interrupted. ‘Every doctor should be—a little,’ answered that original imperturbably. ‘I have a little theory which you Messieurs who go out there must help me to prove’ (CONRAD, p. 11-12, 2017).

And then, the doctor gives him a piece of advice: “In the tropics one must before everything

keep calm” (CONRAD, p. 13, 2017). It was known that the ones who were familiar with the place and what was going on there were aware that the people who luckily came back probably were not sane. Well, one’s sanity cannot remain untouched after seeing the barbarism happening there. Right after Marlow hears about Kurtz the first time, he sees a scene that, particularly, has been echoing in my mind since my first reading of this book, one of the most emblematic visions of Congo’s insanity is presented next:

My purpose was to stroll into the shade for a moment, but no sooner within than it seemed to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno. The rapids were near, and an uninterrupted, uniform, headlong rushing noise filled the mournful stillness of the grove where not a breath stirred, not a leaf moved, with a mysterious sound, as though the tearing pace of the launched earth had suddenly become audible. Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the palace where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die. They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl and rest. These moribund shapes were free as air—and nearly as thin. I began to distinguish the gleam of eyes under the trees. Then, glancing down, I saw a face near my hand. The black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree, and slowly the eyelids rose and the sunken eyes looked up at me, enormous and vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs which died out slowly (CONRAD, p. 17, 2017).

In this passage, we see that the men working there would have to be devoted to efficiency, as they walk past some Inferno and have to work as nothing is happening. The violence is resumed in this paragraph, the *gore* they were seeing in their daily lives. In addition, there were some passages in the novella where the narrator portrays the natives working with Marlow in the steamboat eating rotten hippo meat or even brass wires that were given to them as some kind of payment. Also, he writes about the countless corpses that Marlow sees along the trip that were killed in a variety of cynical ways. To complete this section about the setting, let us see the words of Marlow telling how he feels in the river:

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 kings. An empty steam, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances. [...] You lost your way on that river as you would in a desert and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once—somewhere—far away—in another existence perhaps. [...] And the stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a

vengeful aspect. [...] the mere incidents of the surface, the reality—the reality, I tell you—fades. The inner truth is hidden—luckily. But I felt it all the same; I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey tricks [...]. Trees, trees, millions of trees, massive, immense, running up high; and at their foot, hugging the bank against the steam, crept the little begrimed steamboat like a sluggish beetle crawling on the floor of a lofty portico. It made you feel very small, very lost, and yet it was not altogether depressing, that feeling. [...] We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness (CONRAD, p. 33-35, 2017).

Congo itself, specifically the actions of the Belgian Crown there, is one of the main reasons for Kurtz's madness, that is, his experience with that space, as shown by Tuan:

In experience, the meaning of space often merges with that of place. "Space" is more abstract than "place." What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value. Architects talk about the spatial qualities of place; they can equally well speak of the locational (place) qualities of space. The ideas "space" and "place" require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place (TUAN, 2001, p. 6).

Considering Kurtz's situation, we can arrive at the conclusion that it is hard for anyone to maintain oneself sane in this situation. So, leaving this aside for a while, let us explore in the following section how the setting briefly described here affects Kurt's mind to another level and turns him into a commander of local natives that saw him as a god-like person.

#### **4 KURTZ'S DEVELOPMENT IN THE NARRATIVE: WHY HE NEVER CAME BACK**

To start this item, we need to consider the structure and pace of Conrad's novella, therefore the words by Terry Eagleton again seem very apt:

Yet if we want our curiosity to be satisfied, we are also wary of such fulfilment. If the pleasures of closure come too soon, they ruin the delights of suspense. We long for assurance, but we also desire to defer it. We need to be gratified, but we also revel in the anxiety of not knowing. [...] When the narrator of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* meets Kurtz's bereaved mistress at the end of the tale, he tells her a consoling untruth. It is as though she is treated by the story as a traditional audience in search of a happy ending. Conrad himself, however, suspects not only that endings are rarely happy, but that there are no definitive endings in any case (EAGLETON, 2013, p. 104).

Bearing Eagleton's words in mind, Kurtz is surrounded by mysticism regarding himself. His plot is slowly developed throughout the novella. First, the character is presented to us through people who admired him, with good thoughts about him, as cited earlier in the second section

of this paper. The first strange comment about Kurtz is a conversation overheard by Marlow between two companions, uncle and nephew, in the boat he was in:

I am harmless as a little child, but I don't like to be dictated to. Am I the Manager—or am I not? I was ordered to send him there. [...] ‘He had asked the Administration to be sent there,’ said the other, ‘with the idea of showing what he could do; and I was instructed accordingly. Look at the influence that man must have. Is it not frightful? [...] Is he alone there?’ ‘Yes,’ answered the Manager. ‘He sent his assistant down the river with a note to me in these terms: “Clear this poor devil out of the country, and don't bother sending more of that sort. I had rather be alone than have the kind of men you can dispose of with me” [...] (CONRAD, 2017, p. 31-32).

After confirming Kurtz's influence, one of the men starts to say that he was alone there and did not want anyone with him. Then the dialogue continues and Marlow hears that Kurtz has the opportunity to come back and quits the idea midway:

‘How did that ivory come all this way?’ growled the elder man, who seemed very vexed. The other explained that it had come with a fleet of canoes in charge of an English half-caste clerk Kurtz had with him; that Kurtz apparently intended to return himself, the station being by that time bare of goods and stores, but after coming three hundred miles had suddenly decided to go back, which he started to do alone in a small dugout with four paddlers, leaving the half-caste to continue down the river with the ivory. The two fellows there seemed astounded at anybody attempting such a thing. They were at a loss for an adequate motive. As to me, I seemed to see Kurtz for the first time. It was a distinct glimpse: the dugout, four paddling savages, and the lone white man turning his back suddenly on the headquarters, on relief, on thoughts of home perhaps, setting his face towards the depths of the wilderness, towards his empty and desolate station. I also did not know the motive. Perhaps he was just simply a fine fellow who stuck his work for its own sake. His name, you understand, had not been pronounced once. He was ‘that man.’ The half-caste who, as far as I could see, had conducted a difficult trip with great prudence and pluck was invariably alluded to as ‘that scoundrel.’ The ‘scoundrel’ has reported that the ‘man’ had been very ill—had recovered imperfectly.... The two below me moved away then a few paces and strolled back and forth at some little distance. I heard: ‘Military post—doctor—two hundred miles—quite alone now—unavoidable delays—nine months—no news—strange rumors’ (CONRAD, 2017, p. 32).

So, Kurtz was ill, and the story continues following the upriver endeavor of Marlow, who was going to rescue Kurtz and bring him back. That should be kept in mind, as in one of the novella's scenes, the steamboat that Marlow was in was attacked by natives in a rain of arrows. Marlow looks at the bushes and sees “naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eyes—the bush was swarming with human limbs in movement, glistening, of bronze colour. The twigs shook, swayed, and rustled, the arrows flew out of them” (CONRAD, 2017, p. 45). It is not explicit in this part of the story, but later, we read that “was Kurtz who had ordered the attack to be made on the steamer” (CONRAD, 2017, p. 62). It is the first physical manifestation that he did not want to come back. He prepared this trap to stop the steamboat from getting to him.

But why is that? It is visible that Kurtz sometimes said “my ivory, my station, my river” (CONRAD, 2017, p. 48), that everything there belonged to him. But Marlow raises a question: “The thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own [...] He had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land—I mean literally” (CONRAD, 2017, p. 48 e 49). At this point, it is highlighted that Kurtz, in the words of Marlow, was a

gifted creature and that of all his gifts the one that stood out preeminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words—the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness (CONRAD, 2017, p. 47).

Then, Marlow tells us more about the life of Kurtz, as well as some impressions regarding what was going on in Kurtz’s head. Let us see the following:

[...] how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man’s untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of solitude—utter solitude without a policeman—by the way of silence—utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbour can be heard whispering of public opinion? These little things make all the great difference. When they are gone you must fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness. Of course you may be too much of a fool to go wrong—too dull even to know you are being assaulted by the powers of darkness. [...] Or you may be such a thunderingly exalted creature as to be altogether deaf and blind to anything but heavenly sights and sounds. [...] But most of us are neither one nor the other. [...] Mind, I am not trying to excuse or even explain—I am trying to account to myself for—for—Mr Kurtz—for the shade of Mr Kurtz. [...] His mother was half-English, his father was half-French. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz; and by and by I learned that, most appropriately, the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs had entrusted him with the making of a report, for its future guidance. And he had written it, too. I’ve seen it. I’ve read it. It was eloquent, vibrating with eloquence, but too high-strung, I think. Seventeen pages of close writing he had found time for! But this must have been before his—let us say—nerves, went wrong, and caused him to preside at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites, which—as far as I reluctantly gathered from what I heard at various times—were offered up to him—do you understand?—to Mr. Kurtz himself. But it was a beautiful piece of writing. The opening paragraph, however, in the light of later information, strikes me now as ominous. He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, ‘must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings—we approach them with the might as of a deity,’ and so on, and so on. [...] It gave me the notion of an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence. It made me tingle with enthusiasm. This was the unbounded power of eloquence—of words—of burning noble words. [...] I had full information about all these things, and, besides, as it turned out, I was to have the care of his memory. [...] But then, you see, I can’t choose. He won’t be forgotten. Whatever he was, he was not common. He had the power to charm or frighten rudimentary souls into an aggravated witch-dance in his honour; he could also fill the small souls of the pilgrims with bitter misgivings: he had one devoted friend at least, and he had conquered one soul in the world that was neither rudimentary nor tainted with self-seeking. No; I can’t forget him, though I am not prepared to affirm the fellow was exactly worth the life we lost in getting to him (CONRAD, 2017, p. 49-50).

These are Marlow's impressions on Kurtz. But we note that Kurtz had the idea of a white savior appearing to the 'savages' as a supernatural being. The reasons behind his actions start to emerge. Now that we are closer to Kurtz, let us move to the part in which Marlow reaches the station where Kurtz was. A man, who was devoted to Kurtz's persona, who even nursed Kurtz through previous illnesses, told Marlow that

as a rule Kurtz wandered alone, far in the depths of the forest. 'Very often coming to this station, I had to wait for days and days before he would turn up,' he said. 'Ah! it was worth waiting for—sometimes.' 'What was he doing? exploring or what?' I asked. Oh! Yes. Of course he had discovered lots of villages, a lake too—he did not know exactly in what direction. It was dangerous to inquire too much—but mostly his expeditions had been for ivory. 'But he had no goods to trade with by that time,' I objected. 'There's a good lot of cartridges left even yet,' he answered, looking away. 'To speak plainly, he raided the country.' I said. He nodded. 'Not alone, surely!' he muttered something about the villages round that lake. 'Kurtz got the tribe to follow him, did he? I suggested. He fidgeted a little. 'They adored him,' he said. [...] 'What you can expect!' he burst out; 'he came to them with thunder and lightning, you know—and they had never seen anything like it [...] He was living for the most part in those villages on the lake. When he came down to the river, sometimes he would take to me, and sometimes it was better for me to be careful. This man suffered too much. He hated all this—and somehow he couldn't get away. When I had a chance I begged him to try and leave while there was time; I offered to go back with him. And he would say yes and then he would remain—go off on another ivory hunt—disappear for weeks—forget himself amongst these people—forget himself—you know (CONRAD, 2017, p. 55-56).

This dialogue is revealing. Kurtz was in command of many tribes there, who saw him as a kind of god. The eloquence of Kurtz convinced those people that he was this supernatural entity. He even convinced himself.

Indeed, up to this point, we have only seen what others had to tell about Kurtz. But what about himself? What was he doing there in his words? There are a few passages that do not reveal much. It is more Marlow narrating what was going on. In one of the first contacts of Marlow with Kurtz, he heard his voice behind a curtain that was keeping Mr. Kurtz after he had fallen ill. The man was yelling that they were interrupting his plans, that he would return and carry out his ideas and that he was not as ill as they believed (CONRAD, 2017, p. 61). Marlow's impressions after seeing him is that "his soul was mad" (CONRAD, 2017, p. 66). Already in Kurtz's final moments, Marlow says that

My Intended, my ivory, my station, my career, my ideas—these were the subjects for the occasional utterances of elevated sentiments. The shade of the original Kurtz frequented the bedside of the hollow sham whose fate it was to be buried presently in the mould of primeval earth. But both the diabolic love and the unearthly hate of the mysteries it had penetrated fought for the possession of that soul satiated with

primitive emotions, avid of lying fame, of sham distinction, of all the appearances of success and power (CONRAD, 2017, p. 68).

He was preoccupied with his legacy; he was full of self-importance. In his deathbed, “He had been writing for the papers and meant to do so again, ‘for the furthering of my ideas. It’s a duty” (CONRAD, 2017, p. 68). But why was all of that his? Why was he so self-important? Possible answers will be presented next, in the final remarks.

## 5 FINAL REMARKS

In this paper we decided to focus on a novella that was published in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but whose plot keeps yielding many geopolitical debates, interpretations and consequences - such as the recent visit by the Belgian King Philippe, as shown in the introduction. Following the attitudes and analysis of the characters, we can see that Kurtz, after seeing all the horror (taking his last words to create some sense of poeticism) committed by the Belgium crown and the king, went deeply mad. No one escapes with his sanity untouched living what he lived there. After all, he yet found a group of people to command, tribes that see Kurtz as a godly entity, perhaps because of his color. What he says in the report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, that white people had to appear to the ‘savages’ as supernatural entities, reveals that. Colonialism had, also, taken great part in Kurtz’s head; these ideas have colonial echoes, as in the idea of the ‘white man’s burden’.

Indeed, Kurtz was a European product. Adam Hochschild, the writer of *King Leopold’s Ghost* (1998), which tells the story of the Belgian Congo, says that “white man go about their rape of the continent in the belief that they are uplifting the natives, bringing civilization, serving ‘the noble cause’” (HOCHSCHILD, 2017, p. 166). All these illusions are embodied in the character of Kurtz.

It is a set of factors that together cause mayhem in one’s head. Considering all Kurtz’s background, being the ‘face of Europe’, being the most prodigious person for many people, being affected by colonial ideas and going to a place like that, this would indeed be a recipe for disaster. His mind, probably encrusted with presumption and the luxury of being a god-like person, led him out of sanity.

He desired to have kings meet him at railway stations on his return from some ghastly Nowhere, where he intended to accomplish great things. ‘You show them you have in hand something that is really profitable, and then there will be no limits to the recognition of your ability,’ he would say. ‘Of course you must take care of the motives—right motives—always (CONRAD, 2017, p. 68).

Therefore, taking these expositions into consideration, we tend to believe that Kurtz does not want to come back from Congo because, in his mind, he was fulfilling his colonial duty of taking civilization to the natives he was commanding, being this white supernatural entity that would lead 'savages' out of barbarism. With his duty in his mind that was full of colonialist ideas of conquest by force, he was thinking that this obligation was not yet fulfilled, and because of that, he alleges that he should stay there. However, he saw and did horrible things in this diabolic setting that was Congo. Torture, starvation, illnesses, lots of blood and so on. The setting contributed to Kurtz's madness, which was turning him into a presumptuous person who was being a god-like person to the natives—and loving it. He was, taking his broken psyche out of the way, comfortable in that position. He was professionally raised full of prestige, and we can consider that any of this prestige would let him do what he was doing: playing god.

This paper has shed light on the dangers of Colonialism in one's mind via a literary artifact. As mentioned earlier, this research has been done and put on paper in between two wars that have colonialist echoes in their genesis, and that is why these matters reverberate nowadays. Those who were and are in command of such events throughout the years are, allegedly, perpetuating visions that are destructive for those who are suffering the consequence as well as for themselves. And literature again goes on showing its power to open our eyes and make us better understand catastrophic worldwide affairs, while bringing us some relief.



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