The Avoidable Pangs of Regret

Joseph Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness” is not only a narration of Marlow’s journey up the Congo River through the dense vegetation in hopes of finding Kurtz but also Conrad’s commentary on social flaws in human nature and the influence society can have on an individual’s actions. The brutality of human nature and the systems established by human communities, such as the imperialistic mindset, have led to the belief that differences among human beings give right to control, suppress and dominate in the pursuit of wealth. This pursuit comes at the expense of those without power and at the inherent loss of justice. Justice in human society is the fairness in treatment of people. The universality of the flawed political concept of imperialism enables Kurtz to embody the imperial mindset’s reliance on preconceived notions and never-ending pursuit of opulence. The wilderness of the Congo combined with such an indoctrinated mindset result in Kurtz falling victim to a lack of restraint that postpones the realization of injustice in his actions until the deathbed.

Metonymic descriptions, vague suggestive wordings for the greater concept, of the geographical setting with the specific location of the events obscured places the reader in a global outlook and opens eyes to the spread of flawed human political concepts such as imperialism and the desire for wealth. The text successfully depicts the imperial control of the river as a mere representation of similar circumstances across the world. Marlow hints at the prevalence of a greater concept by abstaining from specificity while describing the “broadening waters [flowing] through a mob of wooded islands [on which] you lost your way as you would in
a desert [...] till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off forever from everything you had known once – somewhere – far away – in another existence perhaps” (11). The geographical vagueness in the description emphasizes the wide spread nature of the dreams of men and of commonwealths. The apparent success of this imperialistic ideology is attributive to not only its universality and pervasiveness is any other “existence” but also in the high regard that such societies give to the few who are unrelenting in their efforts. Regardless of the means employed in achieving dominance, European imperialistic society looks up to Kurtz with jealousy and admiration. Marlow, like other explorers of the Congo, is so captivated by Kurtz because he realizes that “the point was” not in the amount of ivory that Kurtz had collected but rather “in his being a gifted creature […] his] gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and most contemptible” (23). Imperial society looks at the achievements and the dominance exerted upon others rather than on the process by which such control is achieved and in this way “all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz” (25) in more than just a literal sense of origin.

This shared mindset amongst most of the people of the imperialist society in which Kurtz was raised is achieved by neglecting the rights of others based on perceived differences. In his desires for wealth and fame, Kurtz is hindered from realizing the innate evil in his own actions. Imperialistic nature relies on prejudice, preconceived notions, and regards differences profoundly in interactions. The analogies drawn to the uncertainty in the morality of black darkness portray the intrinsic desire to establish distinctions. This instinct allows them to stretch the differences in color and behavior to determine what constitutes good and evil. Marlow, the narrator and the protagonist, struggles to maintain his moral virtues as he remarks that “it was unearthly, and the men were--- No, they were not inhuman… But what thrilled [the colonists] was just the thought
of [the blacks’] humanity-the thought of [their] remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar” (Conrad 13) to highlight the colonists’ perception of the natives. The colonists, including Marlow and Kurtz, are disgusted by the idea that such savage beings could even be considered as humans and immediately resort to bestowing a lower status based on their physical characteristics. The false believe of superiority arises from the distinction between white and black as they are not seen to be on the same moral level. The contrast of simple white and black is extended to one of good and evil, pure and impure, civilized and uncivilized and light and darkness. Kurtz is able to pursue unjust means of taking advantage and denying fair treatment of others to acquire affluence due to this flaw in his moral upbringing in the imperialistic culture. The lack of equality in treatment is overlooked by Kurtz because preconceived notions of a person’s moral status and standing in society are based on differences in appearance and actions. These differences allow him to not regard them on the same level and not be deserving of equal treatment. Therefore, in Kurtz’s view, justice is not being violated. The lack of awareness of the brutality in his treatment leads to the inability to realize the evils in his actions as the imperialistic mindset has blinded him.

The value of integrity and justice is only realized in retrospect because in the heat of the moment, Kurtz fails to make rational decisions due to the immense influence that social norms and expectations have on his actions along with lack of order in the wilderness. The wilderness of the Congo in combination with such an indoctrinated mindset paves way for this lack of rational decision making. Marlow’s apparent disappointment at the thought of not being able to meet with Kurtz stems from “all the tones of jealousy and admiration” (22) with which the European imperialistic society describes Kurtz. This imperialistic society’s imperfections lie in the motivation of the never-ending pursuit of fortune, fame and power. Subjecting those without
power to exploitation creates an imbalance. The opportunity of gaining recognition is heightened in solitude as one is inherently above the law and no longer restrained by morals in this search for imperial and materialistic gain. Kurtz is thereby able to disregard all unjust actions in the wilderness as the “wilderness had taken vengeance for [his] fantastic invasion… [and] had whispered to him things about himself he did not know” (32-33). The solitude and existence without a force superior to him compels Kurtz to no longer be bound by any restrictions and this elevated view of himself consumes him entirely to a point that he is convinced of his right to “[his] ivory, [his] station, [his] river” as “everything belonged to him” (24). This high view of himself translates to his doctrine of imperialism titled ‘International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs’ in which he concludes that “[the whites] must necessarily appear to [the savages] in the nature of supernatural beings” and “by the simple exercise of [their] will [the imperialists] can exert a power for good practically unbounded” (25). 19th century imperial society’s push towards inspiring men to strive for materialistic possessions and dominance coupled with the lack of order in the wilderness press on Kurtz’s morality to an extent that he is no longer restrained or governed by morals. This view of himself as the pinnacle of human development renders him susceptible to lack of restraint in pursuing his goals. Initially, the lack of awareness of the injustice leads to an inevitable development of regret when life is regarded in retrospect. This is because his imperialistically driven society convinces him of their inherent superiority based on the differences in color and behavior. But the additional lack of restraint which allows him to reach extents of exploitation that no other explorer ever had blinds him from realizing his unjust actions until a time when all materialistic possessions lose value and possession of any amount of power is useless: death.
Restraint is natural in imperial interactions as no one except Kurtz is able to push the limits of their morals because they have not yet found themselves in a state of total dominance and have not yet been corrupted by the wilderness. An ordinary explorer would not be able to attain such power and therefore the harlequin believes that “you can’t judge Mr. Kurtz as you would an ordinary man” (31). So, despite their desires of attaining imperialistic glory, they are unable to exploit the natives to the extent that Kurtz did. The lack of restraint is what distinguishes Kurtz from men such as Marlow and the manager as they are unable to comprehend how Kurtz has achieved such an autocratic rule. Kurtz is, in the imperialistic point of view, “a remarkable man”(36) because by succumbing to the corruptive power of the wilderness he is able to relentlessly pursue the goal of wealth, fame and power. Restraint ceases to thrive in its raw form if one is sparked by a greater desire. Kurtz’s deviation towards malice brings him to a point in his life where he cannot escape the control his desires have over him. Marlow finds it striking to find Kurtz so deviated from restraint as Kurtz “could not have been any more irretrievably lost than he was” (38) when he crawls out to the jungle. The aspirations of establishing himself as not only the most opulent ivory trader but also as the most superior human being leads to the onset of such savage behavior as he has allowed his desire of power to overpower the ability to rationally proceed or separate himself from the wilderness. He has succumbed to his obsessions to such an extent that “the inconceivable mysteries of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear” still “[struggles] blindly with itself” (39). Having been consumed by an idea for such a prolonged period of time forces him to push beyond his moral restraints. But in doing so, he cannot realize the injustice that he commits until death and “the horror, the horror” (43) of not being able to redeem himself at that point eventually kills him. Kurtz, in this view, falls victim to not only the imperialistic mindset propagated by the European nations but also to the corruptive force of the
wilderness. His morals fail to surmount the challenge posed by the wilderness and he finds himself devoid of all moral restraint. Essentially, the realization that an individual must aspire to gain esteem in a moral fashion would enable a prideful reflection of the past rather than one of guilt and remorse. The pangs of regret felt are indeed avoidable but it requires not relying solely on preconceived notions so that prejudice does not inspire inequality in actions. It was not the illness that killed Kurtz, but rather the realization that he had spent most of his life being consumed by a single idea that pushed him to the very edge of human restraint when he found himself in isolation. Any brutality in his actions was obscured by the end goal of dominance that an imperialistic power ingrains in the minds of each and every one of its citizens.

Works Cited