Joseph Conrad and Chinua Achebe use “Heart of Darkness” and Things Fall Apart, respectively, to portray traits in the prevalent mindset of their societies. Through a comparative look at both their works, we find that the trait of greed, the desire for wealth and power, is not limited to the imperial ideology common in European empires of the 19th century but is a result of human flaws that exist on both sides of colonialism: the colonists and the colonized. The authors expose the human quality of greed as a result of the clash between imperialism and traditional culture. Portraying the downfall of the most powerful men in their societies whom everyone looks up to serves to show not only the ability but also the strength of this trait to corrupt. Their downfall is highlighted vividly through the Aristotelian tragedies that the protagonists, Kurtz and Okonkwo, suffer. The Aristotelian tragedy lens allows the authors to effectively get their message across to the readers and serves beneficial to the author’s cause because such tragedies rely on the “incidents arousing pity and fear to accomplish catharsis of such emotions” (Aristotle). The Greek philosopher also states that this type of emotion in the audience can only be spurred by the “intermediate kind of personage, a man not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however is brought upon him not by vice and depravity, but by some error of judgment” (Reeves 173). Therefore, the hero must not be far from ordinary at first because that enables the reader to relate with him on an emotional level and the change from happiness to misery must have its cause on the tragic hero’s part to fulfill the plot of an Aristotelian tragedy. Conrad and Achebe use an Aristotelian tragic downfall of their respective
society’s most powerful man to comment on the corruptive strength of human greed and a
comparative look at their works highlights the prevalence of this trait on both sides of
imperialism.

Conrad achieves his commentary on the human trait of desiring wealth and power by
making Kurtz a relatable figure to the citizens of imperialistic empires. Kurtz harbors in him the
same indoctrinated ideology that European natives have grown up with during this era. In order
for such a plot of a tragedy to be successful, Aristotle believes that the “man himself [must be]
either as we have described, or better, not worse than that” (Aristotle). Therefore, Kurtz must be
ordinary, or comparable, in his desires and nature. Kurtz fits that criteria almost perfectly
because the continuous driving force that motivates him lies in acquiring materialistic
possessions, land ownership and power over others. This is a mindset that he shares with the rest
of his countrymen and this embodiment of the imperialistic ideology is what allows him to
overlook the malice in his actions. Most of the people of the imperialist society in which Kurtz
was raised achieve a shared mindset by neglecting the rights of others based on perceived
differences. The desires for wealth and fame hinder Kurtz 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, 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 idea that
such savage beings could even be considered as humans disgusts the colonists, including Marlow and Kurtz, and they 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. Kurtz overlooks the lack of equality in treatment 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. Kurtz represents a typical imperialist and other European explorers share his prejudice. Residents of such imperial empires would relate not only to Kurtz’s desires for wealth and power but also to the means by which he goes about achieving his goal.

Through Kurtz’s eventual tragedy, Conrad shows that this mindset has the strong capability of bringing out the flaws, even in someone as mentally powerful as Kurtz. A flaw, often a flaw in human frailty, interferes with a tragic hero’s powerful wish to achieve some goal. And an ignorance of this flaw can lead to an Aristotelian tragic downfall. The actions committed can be “conscious … out of ignorance … [or] mediated” by the hero (Aristotle). Kurtz’s flaw lies in his ignorance as he is unable to realize his lack of restraint. The human traits of greed and desire that empower Kurtz have gone out of his hands and this flaw of ignorance impedes him
from realizing the consequences of his actions. The pursuit of materialistic wealth, fame and opulence corrupts Kurtz. Conrad uses this tragedy of Kurtz to show how the human trait can bring the best to their knees. 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. 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 sustains 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 [has] taken vengeance for [his] fantastic invasion… [and] [has] 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 retrained or governed by morals. This view of himself as the pinnacle
of human development renders him susceptible to a lack of restraint in pursuing his goals. 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. The desires for opulence and dominance that are relatable to most people bring out a weakness in Kurtz because the human trait has been pushed too far. Conrad, by using the downfall of the most powerful man in a tragic manner, shows that the tragedy was not as much a result of Kurtz’s flaw, the inability to keep his restraint, but rather was more of a consequence of the human trait of greed. Conrad makes this commentary on a prevalent trait more vivid due to the Aristotelian tragedy as the imperial audience can very well relate to Kurtz’s desires. This tragedy of a man who was not much different from the rest shows the strength of human greed to easily corrupt and bring out the flaws in even the best of men.

A similar theme resonates in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and goes to show that the human desire for power and wealth is not limited to the imperial mindset but is prevalent throughout the world; and anyone can be the victim of this trait’s corruptive strength. Okonkwo embodies a tragic hero because his personality and drive are exemplary of what most in the tribe admire. They can emotionally relate to him and therefore commend his attributes. Achebe successfully employs such a character to undergo a tragic outcome because “age [is] respected among [Okonkwo’s] people, but achievement [is] revered” (Achebe 6). Okonkwo has been set to a high standard and great things are expected from him because of his early fame as the greatest wrestler. Men of the village saw ideal behavior in Okonkwo’s continuous desire towards success as Nwakibu readily invests trust in Okonkwo because “it pleases [him] to see a young man like
[Okonkwo] these days when [their tribe’s] youth has gone so soft” (16). And this continual respect for Okonkwo’s industry and success is attributive to the connection that his tribesmen feel with him. Okonkwo serves as the perfect hero to suffer an Aristotelian tragedy as the audience would undergo a catharsis of pity. Achebe highlights a similar flaw in Okonkwo as Conrad did in Kurtz as it serves to be the human trait of desiring fame that exposes the flaw. Okonkwo is “determined” that “he would return with a flourish and regain the seven wasted years” (126) to achieve glory and power. Like Kurtz’s flaw, the clash between imperialism and traditional culture exposes his flaw and is spurred from his ignorance. He underestimates the power of the imperialists as his flaw lies in not admitting weaknesses because his “whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness” (9). His innate fear of frailty rules his life and his strive for power and glory blinds him from admitting his flaw. Achebe uses this quality to enlighten the reader of how devastating the desire of wealth can be. Allowing a single purpose to govern his life, Okonkwo is compelled to ignore his fears as any weakness would pull him away from his goal. But this ignorance allowed “the white man” to “[come] quietly and peaceably with his religion. […] Now he has won [their] brothers and [the] clan can no longer act like one” (130). Just as Kurtz steered away from rational decision making when he found a chance of asserting dominance and gaining power, Okonkwo is also blinded by the same human trait and overlooks the strength of his enemies. His flaw of not giving way to any weakness pushes him to “fight these men and drive them from [their] land” (129) and “not act with cowardice” (129) at a time when the opposition is clearly stronger. The corruptive aspects of human greed pave way for the demise of the tribe’s greatest man. Even though his own flaw of not succumbing to any weaknesses brings about his tragedy, it is the continual desire that not only exposes this flaw but also extenuates it.
Conrad and Achebe highlight the brutal strength of human greed to corrupt the most powerful men of their respective societies through a lens of an Aristotelian tragedy. This not only allows the reader to sympathize with the heroes but also realize the negative aspects of a prevalent mindset. Both Okonkwo and Kurtz fulfill the plot of an Aristotelian tragedy as at the end, they both undergo “a change from ignorance to awareness” (Aristotle) by gaining insight into their flaws. Having been consumed by an idea for such a prolonged period of time forces both of them push beyond their limits, Kurtz’s limit of restraint and Okonkwo’s limit of greatness. But in doing so, they cannot realize the consequences of their actions and the authors aim at a similar revelation in humanity with such tragedies to show that a trait as common as greed can be devastatingly corruptible. A simultaneous look at both works of literature shows that this trait is widespread across cultures on both side of colonialism and not limited to imperial nations.

Works Cited

