

There are many themes that run through the novel Heart of Darkness. There are however two main and significant ones. These are the theme of restraint and man's journey into self.

The importance of restraint is stressed throughout Heart of Darkness. In the novel Marlow is saved by restraint, while Kurtz is doomed by his lack of it.

Marlow felt different about Africa before he went, because the colonization of the Congo had "an idea at the back of it." Despite an uneasiness, he assumed that restraint would operate there. He soon reaches the Company station and receives his first shock, everything there seems meaningless. He sees no evidence here of that "devotion to efficiency" that makes the idea work. In the middle of this, Marlow meets a "miracle". The chief accountant has the restraint that it takes to get the job done. He keeps up his appearance and his books are in "apple-pie order." Marlow respects this fellow because he has a backbone.

"The cannibals some of those ignorant millions, are almost totally characterized by restraint." They outnumber the whites "thirty to five" and could easily fill their starving bellies. Marlow "would have as soon expected restraint from a hyena prowling amongst the corpses of a battlefield." The cannibals action is "one of those human secrets that

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baffle probability." This helps Marlow keep his restraint, for if the natives can possess this quality Marlow feels he certainly can.

Kurtz is the essence of the lack of restraint Marlow sees everywhere. Kurtz has "kicked himself loose from the earth." "He owes no allegiance to anything except those animal powers, those various lusts, those unpermitted aspirations lurking in the darkness of his inner station. Marlow also responds to these dark callings, and he almost becomes their captive. He confuses the beat of the drum (the call to man's primitive side) with his own heartbeat, and is pleased. Yet he does not slip over the edge as Kurtz does. Marlow keeps to the track. When he is confronted with the ultimate evil where a man "must fall back on (his) own innate strength, upon (his) own capacity for faithfulness," he is able to do so, he shows the necessary restraint.

The second theme of course is man's journey into self. During Marlow's mission to find Kurtz, he is also trying to find himself. He, like Kurtz had good intentions upon entering the Congo. Conrad tries to show us that Marlow is what Kurtz had been, and Kurtz is what Marlow could become. Every human has a little of Marlow and Kurtz in them. Marlow says about himself, "I was getting savage," meaning that he was becoming more like Kurtz. Along the trip into the wilderness, they discover their true selves through contact with savage natives.

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As Marlow journeys up the Congo, he feels he is travelling back through time. He sees the unsettled wilderness and can feel the darkness of it's solitude.

"Marlow comes across simpler cannibalistic cultures along the banks. The deeper into the jungle he goes, the more regressive the inhabitants seem."

Kurtz had lived in the Congo, and was separated from his own culture for quite some time. He had once been considered an honorable man, but the jungle changed him greatly. Here isolated from the rest of his own society, he discovered the evil side and became corrupted by his power and isolation.

Marlow realizes that only very near the time of death, does a person grasp the big picture. He describes Kurtz's last moments "as though a veil had been rent." Kurtz's last "supreme moment of complete knowledge," showed him how horrible the human soul really can be. Marlow can only guess as to what Kurtz saw that caused him to exclaim "The horror! The horror," but later adds that "Since I peeped over the edge myself, I understand better the meaning of his stare... it was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness..he had summed up, he had judged." Marlow guesses that Kurtz suddenly knew everything and

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In conclusion the themes of restraint and man's journey into self run through Heart of Darkness and actually become intertwined. It is interesting to note that Marlow and Kurtz coming from the same background do not end up the same in the novel. Kurtz is doomed by his lack of restraint.

Two Themes That Affect Marlow and Kurtz
In Heart Of Darkness

Mrs. Lopreiatio

Paul Kelly

Oac English

Feb. 27,1997

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