

“Heart of Darkness” and *Apocalypse Now*
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What follows is an outline which I prepared for an in-class response to this question: “Is *Apocalypse Now* a modern-day adaptation of ‘Heart of Darkness,’ or is it merely a series of allusions thereto?”

Thesis: The film is an adaptation of the story, but a very loose one.

There are several overt allusions: (1) imperial control of savages in the jungle (2) protagonist pursues Kurtz on a ship that traverses a serpentine river (3) savages kill a crew member (4) blow siren to scare away savages (4) Kurtz’s native followers, raggy man/photojournalist, skulls on posts (5) Kurtz is poetic and revered as a God; people don’t talk to him but rather, listen to him (6) Kurtz, skilled at what the establishment had wanted him to do, is now called unsound by the establishment (7) Kurtz dies, “The horror” (8) narrator hates lies.

But there are also many parts of *Apocalypse Now* that contrast with or seem completely disconnected from “Heart of Darkness”: (1) Willard sent involuntarily to kill; Marlow goes voluntarily and is driven by curiosity and awe at Kurtz’s eloquence (2) movie has nothing to do with ivory, starving African, sick African, lying to Kurtz’s wife; story has nothing to do with bombing Vietnamese village, massacre of the Vietnamese on the boat, Playboy bunnies, firework-like shootout (3) Marlow watches Kurtz die; Willard murders Kurtz.

Those factors are what make the story only a loose, liberal remake. But it is a remake because it does not just involve allusions of characters, settings, events, but also themes and moods: (1) The central theme of both is the dark side of the human heart. Both endeavor to show how isolation from society, the carnage of war, and the “darkness” of the jungle can transform a person from kindly to savage. Both Kurtzs started out normal, but through the senselessness of war and brutality of the jungle, they end up the conceited rulers of a group of natives who revere them as Gods. Both also flatter themselves with heads on sticks, showing that they have lost their sense of moral repugnance. By the end, both see the best solution as killing all of the natives, not transforming them for the better. The horror that both Kurtzs see as they die is the horror in their own hearts of darkness, as they realize the terrible side of all human souls. (2) The film is a journey for the protagonist to confront this and to be driven onward. They are afraid of what they will find, but they are impelled by a need to confront him. (Could this be similar to man’s need to confront his inner fears and his inner evil?) The protagonists think that they might succumb to Kurtz’s power, and they find that they themselves harbor some darkness (Willard when he kills Kurtz as savagely as Kurtz kills others; Marlow when he lies?) (3) In their main theme—the dark side of human nature—both works capture the same idea. This fact is enough to justify the label of adaptation for *Apocalypse Now*, because it makes the movie more than simply a collection of allusions as mere inclusion of factual references would.