

The Folk Horror and Crime Fiction Hybrid in *Heart of Darkness*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores hybridization and generic experiments within the crossovers and intersections between crime fiction and folk horror in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Published in 1899, this novella is a beautiful, grimly bleak look at colonialism. Chinua Achebe identifies *Heart of Darkness* racism and scathingly calls it “‘permanent’ literature,” which is, he explains, “read and taught and constantly evaluated by serious academics” (15). This article applies genre fiction to this revered canonical novella, retrospectively identifying it as a folk horror text. *Heart of Darkness* has been categorized as a crime/detective narrative before (see Brooks 238–63), but I will argue that examining *Heart of Darkness* as a hybrid of crime fiction and folk horror allows us to look askance at a text that has engendered so much scholarship and criticism. Mapping the narrative trajectory through, in particular, a folk horror lens, can deepen our understanding of the nuances and contradictions present in the text. (RH)

KEYWORDS: *Heart of Darkness*; colonialism; folk horror; crime



Introduction

This article explores hybridization and generic experiments within the crossovers and intersections between crime fiction and folk horror in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Published in 1899, this novella is a beautiful, grimly bleak look at colonialism. Chinua Achebe scathingly calls it “‘permanent’ literature,” which is, he explains, “read and taught and constantly evaluated by serious academics” (15). There is no doubt that in Anglophone countries Conrad's text has a lofty place in the canon of English literature and that it is taught in countries as far apart as Italy and Hong Kong. This article applies genre fiction to this revered canonical novella, and provides a retrospective identification of the text as a folk horror text. *Heart of Darkness* has been identified as a crime/detective narrative (see Brooks 238–63) but I will argue that looking at it as a hybrid, a blend of crime fiction and folk horror allows us to look askance at a text that has engendered so much scholarship and criticism. Mapping the

narrative trajectory through, in particular, a folk horror lens, can deepen our understanding of the nuances and contradictions present in the text. Folk horror texts are very often also crime fiction texts and crime fiction itself has a rich seam of folk horror running through it. There are true hybrids to explore and an application of genre fiction and theory to a literary text highlights some unexpected connections and illuminates some subtleties that may have been hidden before.

The term *folk horror* was popularized by Mark Gatiss, who coined it in relation to films in 2010 during his television documentary on the history of horror. The identification of the folk horror genre coalesced more coherently with Adam Scovell's important 2017 book *Hours Dreadful and Things Strange*, in which Scovell clarifies what he calls the "Folk Horror Chain" (15–19) and he identifies four main tropes of folk horror texts. The first is *landscape*, most often a rural, ancient landscape—or rather, eerie palimpsests of landscapes that seem vast and inhuman. The second is *isolation*, that is, the sense of being "out of the world"—perhaps a tiny community or people cut off from what could be seen as "civilization." The third comes from these communities: *skewed belief systems and morality*. The sense of an isolated world or community where ordinary beliefs and "common sense" morality do not exist. Instead, ancient pagan beliefs continue and flourish, as Scovell puts it, "away from Modern eyes" (18). And in these isolated communities, what we might see as crime is often not viewed as criminal. The final trope, *a summoning or a happening* (19), leads to the dénouement. Something (usually evil) appears—sometimes accidentally, sometimes it is invited. Ancient entities rear their heads, or isolated communities do their worst.

From this we can see that it is inevitable that folk horror and crime fiction will have an affinity: folk horror and crime fiction are often inextricably linked. In very many folk horror texts the concept of law and order is important. Law and lore mix and meld and the focus of many folk horror texts are the unacceptable beliefs and practices such as ritual murder and blood sacrifice. Law and order of any conventional sort break down entirely into a carnivalesque reversal.

Heart of Darkness has been peripherally identified as crime fiction and never as folk horror. Although Joseph Conrad's famous novella follows in the footsteps of the popular imperial adventure stories of H. Rider Haggard and Rudyard Kipling, it is a literary text and there can be a snobbery about genre labels such as crime fiction and folk horror. This article attempts to deconstruct this genre snobbery and argue that the depth evidenced in *Heart*

of Darkness comes, at least in part, from its generic experiments and brushes with crime and folk horror. Critics have often likened the text to crime fiction. Owen Knowles claims that *Heart of Darkness* “often works—like a detective investigation . . .—through symptomatic clues, ciphers, witnesses, and testimonies” (82), while J. Paccaud calls Marlow an “unwilling detective” (42). Conrad’s text exemplifies an über text of crime that is infiltrated with folk horror. In this way I will retrospectively identify *Heart of Darkness* as folk horror in order to strengthen the history of the genre and to back-up the claim of the text’s anti-imperial “heart.”

Anyone studying *Heart of Darkness* is aware of Chinua Achebe’s stark statement made in 1977 that “Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist” (21). He claims, “*Heart of Darkness* projects the ‘Image of Africa’ as other world, the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where a man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality” (15). This view was seen as quite shocking at the time, particularly as it is such a canonical and revered text. Achebe’s words, however, provided a good wake up call. The raging question of whether or not the text is racist has continued to provoke heated debate, but it has become more nuanced over the years, with the consensus seeming to rest with an acknowledgement of a “double vision” within the text, whereby Conrad offers a scathing critique of imperialism but only within the ideological/imperialist/racist discourse that he was able to both think and write in. This is what Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism* terms Conrad’s “two visions” (20). Whichever way you look at the text though, racism is ever present in one form or another throughout the novella, whether through Conrad’s own culturally-bound views, or through the depiction of racism as critique.

Although most readers will be familiar with the text, it is worth just briefly recapping the very basic story. Employed to travel up the Congo River to bring back the legendary Mr. Kurtz, Charles Marlow encounters cruelty, criminal futility, greed, waste, and murder. Hired by a Belgian imperial company (like the East India Company), Marlow and a small group of both white and native people travel up the river into the jungle. For Marlow, his journey into this vast wilderness is a journey of detection, leading him to Kurtz. The deeper he penetrates into the jungle, the more he learns about Kurtz. Witnessing terrible violence and folly, Marlow acts like an investigator as he follows his winding, dangerous path. Kurtz is, we hear, an “exceptional” man who has a station way up the river (32). He has brought down more ivory to the main stations than any other agent.

However, he may now be dying and his methods have become “unsound” (89). In the article “Witness to Death,” Sung Ryol Kim states that “perhaps of all Conrad’s works of fiction, *Heart of Darkness* is the bloodiest in terms of the images of violence and death” (59). Kim continues, “Conrad exposes the radical disjunction between the reality and the ideal of the European colonizing mission in Africa, and this reality is a horrifying one in which natives are being murdered” (69). Along his journey Marlow sees a gang of chained native people who are designated “criminals,” he states:

I’ve seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but, by all the stars! There were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men—men, I tell you. But as I stood on this hillside, I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly. (23)

This “flabby, . . . pitiless folly” of the “weak eyed” white colonizers saturates the book. And the concept of crimes—of who are the criminals and who are not—is turned on its head.

The main story of *Heart of Darkness* starts with a murder, which is how Marlow gets his position. This murder is futile and stupid. In Marlow’s words, “the original quarrel arose from a misunderstanding about some hens. Yes, two black hens” (13). Captain Fresleven, “the gentlest, quietest creature that ever walked on two legs” beat the chief of the village so badly that his son stepped in and, “in desperation . . . made a tentative jab with a spear at the white man and killed him on the spot” (13). This is a pointless, worthless crime that sets the tone of the novella, that of senseless violence and almost accidental viciousness. But, as Marlow contends, “out there there were no external checks” (32). As he travels on, Marlow comes upon a small group of white treasure hunters calling themselves the “Eldorado Exploring Expedition.” This, he laments, is just a criminal enterprise: “[t]o tear the treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe” (44). As Kim explains, “[t]he real criminals are of course the Europeans who participate in the imperial project, their viciousness taking the form of organized violence. The African corpses that Marlow stumbles upon bear the mark of this organized criminality” (69). Here we have the intersections and hybridizations of literary fiction and crime fiction. There is theft, organized violence, murder, and other crimes. One of the great crimes

in *Heart of Darkness* comes with rapacious and blind greed. Marlow notes, “The word ‘ivory’ rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it. A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse.” (33) Greed has taken over from God. There is a taint of imbecility and death here. And it is the outsiders who are committing the crimes. The overweening, hubristic, rapacious, violent, and racist nationalism of the European countries involved in imperialism thrust themselves into the isolated communities they destroy and plunder.

Backwards into pre-history: Nature and folk horror

The frame narrative of the novella does not begin in Africa but aboard a ship called the *Nellie*, where our protagonist Marlow and his fellow seamen are waiting quietly on the Thames in London for the tide to turn. There is a complicated palimpsest of narrative layers. Both folk horror and crime fiction narratives consist of multiple layers that question truth, origin, and narrative perspectives. There is a reading backwards. Michael Cook calls this “one of the cornerstones of the classic detective narrative: the backward progression of the logic from effect to cause” (19). In folk horror, this reading backwards tends to look backwards to questions of origin (which will never be found)—origins of folk communities, objects, cults, or the horrifying and the supernatural. There is often a deep sense of the past in folk horror texts—beginnings and truth shrouded in the mists of what James Thurgill has called “deep time” in relation to folk horror (47).

In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow retells the story of his journey in a retrospective narrative. In the colonial view, there is an inevitability of reading backwards as they travel further into the “empty” places on the map. In folk horror, this is often a teleological reading back—unearthing, reviving, re-living the past. Matthew Cheeseman states that “Folk Horror relies on a sense of, if not the prehistorical, then the ahistorical, or atemporal. It draws its anger and strength from being before or aside history” (406). In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow’s journey takes him back to the prehistorical. In his description:

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. . . .

The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, . . . till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known

once—somewhere—far away—in another existence perhaps. . . . And this 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. (48–49)

Going up the river is traveling back in time. Thurgill advances the idea that folk horror texts present what he calls a “*topophobia* of rural landscapes as *a priori*, suggesting that pastoral spaces are conceived of in the popular geographic imagination as inherently threatening. This suggests that, at their core, ‘countryside’ geographies are read as problematic spaces due to their perceived isolation and *backwardness*.” (34) Marlow and his crew are on a journey towards what were seen as the old ways, the primitive, the uncivilized. And they are traveling in extreme isolation.

Nature itself is threatening. As Thurgill says: “[t]here is a tangible anxiety or discomfort with landscape present throughout folk horror—a framing of rural landscapes as simultaneously innocuous yet malign, a sense that, underneath the superficial solitude of the pastoral, malevolent forces are working to promote acts of unspeakable violence” (49). The landscape has agency and is malign. The land has an “inscrutable intention” and a “vengeful aspect” (49). It is brooding, waiting, watching. The wilderness is massive and ancient:

We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. It was very quiet there We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance

We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign—and no memories. (50)

They have gone too far. And they have gone past comprehension. They can hear, but not see people in the jungle wilderness: “[t]he prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell?” (50). Marlow sees prehistory, which is, of course, one of the centuries-old stereotypes/myths/inaccurate Western views of Africa: it is not just still prehistoric but that it has no history at all. No progress, no movement. In this colonial view there is an inevitability of reading backwards as they travel further into the empty places on the map.

In many folk horror texts, there is a sense of traveling away from civilization and there is very often a sense of nostalgia. There have been criticisms of this, of course; as Dawn Keetley says, “the regressive nostalgic impulses of folk horror’s landscapes . . . mirror (and even perpetuate) tendencies toward an insular nationalism” (8). The imperial adventure stories of Kipling and Rider Haggard have been identified as brimming with what Renato Rosaldo terms “imperialist nostalgia,” a concept translatable to folk horror texts whereby “people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed” (69). In folk horror works this nostalgia manifests itself as an undoubted pull towards what is seen as the primitive, the un-civilized. In one of the most famous and most often quoted passages in *Heart of Darkness* Marlow muses on this attraction:

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend. (52)

There is kinship and an attraction towards the “monstrous and free.” There is authenticity, “frankness,” and truth here, a call from that “night of first ages.” Marlow declares: “Principles won’t do. Acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags—rags that would fly off at the first good shake” (52). Civilization means nothing and will fly off at any “good shake.” Marlow, the white, supposedly civilized colonial man sees kinship and common humanity. And it terrifies him, this “faintest trace” of a response to the native people. It is, he suggests, “ugly” but true. It is particularly in relation to this passage that Achebe calls Conrad a racist. But this is Marlow speaking, not necessarily Conrad. And Marlow feels a kinship between the Africans and himself, albeit that this is expressed in racist language and conceptions of the Black other. He feels the pull from what he calls “monstrous freedom.” But there is still recognition and a harkening backwards to that “night of first ages.”

Heart of Darkness does not deal with an isolated community such as those often seen in folk horror texts. And although Marlow and his fellow travelers might stumble unwittingly into what folk horror would see as an isolated community, that community belongs rightfully to its inhabitants. Marlow might see kinship in the “howling, leaping, spinning” natives with their dances, songs, and drumming, but in this place it is not they who are the monsters. As he travels towards Kurtz, Marlow sees a boat “paddled by black fellows”:

They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks . . . but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at. (20)

Undoubtedly racist from Marlow’s narrative, but there is a recognition that these people belong in this landscape: it is theirs. As outsiders, there is a strong sense that these white men should not be here. It is not their place, and it is dangerous for everyone that they have come. Keetley argues that the folk horror plot has a

permeable boundary between “normality” and the “monster”—[it] is driven, in fact, by a kind of doubled “othering” and thus a doubled “normality.” The seeming protagonists, avatars of “normality,” are never completely “normal,” and the apparently monstrous antagonists that threaten them are never completely “monstrous.” In other words, both the protagonists and the antagonists—typically the “outsiders” and the community they stumble into—are each simultaneously “normal” and “other.” The extent of the ambiguity pervading this central divide of horror, the extent of the ambiguity surrounding “normality” and the “monster,” is one of the most distinctive traits of folk horror. (19–20)

Who is the monster in *Heart of Darkness*? Marlow and his group are undoubtedly the outsiders, representatives, one would suppose, of European “normality.” But for the white colonizing men, the wilderness, this land where they do not belong and from which they want to steal, is extremely dangerous and poses an existential threat. However, they too pose a threat and one that is perhaps even greater.

Talking about isolation in folk horror texts, Scovell caims:

The landscape must in some way isolate a key body of characters, whether it be just a handful of individuals or a small-scale community. Creatures are “banished” to this landscape but the implication is actually that it is an inhospitable place because it is in some way different from general society as a whole and not simply because of a harsher topography. Isolation in a specific Folk Horror context is even more extreme. (17)

It is both Marlow and Kurtz, who are banished here—neither belongs. And this land is vastly different to where either of them come from. In true folk horror fashion, they are moving further away from what they see as civilization and out into the isolated wilderness.

Commenting on landscape and isolation, Scovell highlights that “[t]he landscape is essentially the first link, where elements within its topography have adverse effects on the social and moral identity of its inhabitants” (17). In *Heart of Darkness*, it is the morality of Kurtz that is at question in the most extreme way. To quote Achebe, the moral seems to be: “[k]eep away from Africa, or else!” (25). Marlow sees the danger. He says at one point of the journey: “The forest, the creek, the mud, the river—seemed to beckon with a dishonouring flourish before the sunlit face of the land a treacherous appeal to the lurking death, to the hidden evil, to the profound darkness at its heart” (48). But throughout the book there is a sense that the wilderness can get you. Marlow resists often through a sense of duty and by applying himself to small, practical tasks. Kurtz does not resist. The isolation, the wilderness gets inside him. As the seamen sit on board the *Nellie* on the Thames, Marlow tells them:

The wilderness had patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a ball—an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and—lo!—he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation. . . .

You should have heard him say, “My ivory.” Oh, yes, I heard him. “My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my—” everything belonged to him. It made me hold my breath in expectation of hearing the wilderness burst into a prodigious peal of laughter that would shake the fixed stars in their places. (70)

Kurtz displays hubris in the face of the awful wilderness. Yet it has overtaken him, consumed him. He has sold his soul to it.

Cult fiction

In colonial times there was a fear of British men out in the colonies “going native,” but Kurtz has gone far beyond that. What Marlow discovers is that Kurtz has set himself up as a God and created a tribe of his own. Or perhaps he stole a tribe. Keetley “would argue that the monstrous ‘tribe’ is one of the most definitive characteristics of folk horror” (10–11). Marlow has gone up-river to find Kurtz—instead, he finds the cult. As the sole white person, a Russian, they find in Kurtz’s compound tells Marlow: “They adored him” (81). Kurtz has gathered natives around him. Marlow says,

The thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own. That was the reflection that made you creepy all over. It was impossible—it was not good for one either—trying to imagine. He had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land—I mean literally. You can’t understand. How could you? . . . [H]ow 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 . . . —by the way of silence—utter silence. (70–71)

Kurtz has given in to temptation and he has no limits. He has given in to the “powers of darkness.” The isolation, the solitude, the silence have eaten him up as a civilized man and spewed him out as a devil. And it is Kurtz who has created the monstrous tribe. And he is the criminal.

In the colonial imagination there is a fear of what Stephen D. Arata calls “reverse colonisation” (621), where the threatening otherness from the colonies might slip back into the mother country. The darkness from what is seen as “over there” might invade Britain: it might come home. *Heart of Darkness*, however, does something different. The contagion comes from the white man; it is he who is the demon, it is he who brings corruption to the wilderness. There is, as we know, a section of true crime texts that deal with cults: with the creation of tribes clustering around a charismatic leader. As Robert Snow explains in *Deadly Cults*,

History has shown over and over that these groups are usually founded by charismatic, and always self-appointed leaders who often attribute divine qualities to themselves. . . . Most cult leaders claim to have some type of supernatural or superhuman powers or abilities, or claim to have exclusive access to some universal truth or knowledge unknown to anyone else in the world. Because of this, cult leaders often feel that they are not bound by normal social, legal, or moral limitations of conduct. (5)

This is what Kurtz has become. The Harlequin Russian says to Marlow that Kurtz spoke to him “of everything! . . . I forgot there was such a thing as sleep. The night did not seem to last an hour. . . . He made me see things—things” (79). The tribes people “adore” Kurtz. The Russian Harlequin worships him. Kurtz has no limits and has set himself up as a God. He has gone too far and slipped from exceptional into horrific. As Marlow says of him, “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” (72). Kurtz has turned himself into a horrific cult leader presiding over “unspeakable rites” in his honor. In *The Routledge Companion to Folk Horror*, Miranda Corcoran, in a chapter on cults highlights that “[s]trange or anomalous beliefs are often framed in Folk Horror texts as the product of alienation. Individuals or communities severed from social progress invariably cultivate unusual, even abhorrent, moral and religious systems” (65). The whole of the racist colonial project identifies that superstitions, terrible rituals, abhorrent religions belong to “other” races in the imperial imagination. Here, however, it is Kurtz who is that terrible “other.”

When Marlow docks at Kurtz’s compound, he finds the somewhat crazed Russian, many silent natives and what he at first thinks are ornamental knobs on sticks adorning the landscape. Although, looking closer, this is not what they are. Marlow says, “there was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there. They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him—some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence.” (83) Something wanting. Something missing. A lack of restraint. Marlow asks the Russian how this happened:

“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. . . . “They adored him,” he said. . . . “What can you expect?” he burst out; “he came to them with thunder and lightning, you know—and they had never seen anything like it—and very terrible. He could be very terrible. You can’t judge Mr. Kurtz as you would an ordinary man. No, no, no!” (81)

Kurtz has exploited the native people. He arrived with “thunder and lightning.” He brought himself, a self that knows no bounds, and which overweened itself into madness and complete amorality. We have moved beyond Scovell’s skewed beliefs, into his summoning of Kurtz as an absolute monster. The clear suggestion is that these appalling acts of violence and the abomination of the rites and displays are not the usual behavior for these lake tribes. All these have been done at the instigation of Kurtz. The Harlequin Russian tells Marlow of Kurtz:

His ascendancy was extraordinary. The camps of these people surrounded the place, and the chiefs came every day to see him. They would crawl . . . “I don’t want to know anything of the ceremonies used when approaching Mr. Kurtz,” I shouted. Curious, this feeling that came over me that such details would be more intolerable than those heads drying on the stakes under Mr. Kurtz’s windows. After all, that was only a savage sight, while I seemed at one bound to have been transported into some lightless region of subtle horrors, where pure, uncomplicated savagery was a positive relief, being something that had a right to exist—obviously—in the sunshine. (84, ellipsis in the original)

It has been pointed out that the displaying of heads was, if not common, still a practice of some colonial powers: severed heads and sometimes hands displayed to indicate absolute power and invoke terror. This is different and, Marlow feels, more terrible, as the soul itself is at stake. Marlow sees the adoration of the Harlequin to Kurtz as part of this “lightless region of subtle horrors”: “I did not envy him his devotion to Kurtz, though. He had not meditated over it. It came to him, and he accepted it with a sort of eager fatalism. I must say that to me it appeared about the most dangerous thing in every way he had come upon so far.” (80) Kurtz is the danger. Kurtz is the perpetrator. Kurtz is the diabolical criminal. And it is Kurtz who has corrupted the tribes, it is not, as is more usual in folk horror, the tribes who have corrupted the outsider. Marlow says of Kurtz:

the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. (83–84)

Whose is this “fantastic invasion”—Kurtz’s or the entire empire’s? The land, the space, the place, the wilderness have taken vengeance.

Marlow has arrived at the end of Kurtz’s life. As Kurtz is dying, the native people carry him out of his house:

Suddenly round the corner of the house a group of men appeared, as though they had come up from the ground. They waded waist-deep in the grass, in a compact body, bearing an improvised stretcher in their midst. Instantly, in the emptiness of the landscape, a cry arose whose shrillness pierced the still air like a sharp arrow flying straight to the very heart of the land; and, as if by enchantment, streams of human beings—of naked human beings—with spears in their hands, with bows, with shields, with wild glances and savage movements, were poured into the clearing by the dark-faced and pensive forest. The bushes shook, the grass swayed for a time, and then everything stood still in attentive immobility. (85–86)

This is a pure folk horror summoning or happening. Yet, in classic folk horror it would be the tribe who would represent the terrible ones—the monsters. In *Heart of Darkness* they have been corrupted by Kurtz. In contemporary filmic texts like *The Wicker Man*, *The Ritual* or *Midsommer*, the tribe was already there waiting for unwitting, naïve outsiders to merrily trip into their landscapes and too often end up as the sacrifice. This is not the case in Conrad’s novella, where it is Kurtz who is the true outsider. *Heart of Darkness* represents a reflection of an already perverted colonial system. As Shuting Sun writes, “insofar as Kurtz represents the heart of darkness it is only insofar as he holds a mirror up to the imperialist ideology itself” (65). Yes, he has gone too far in his immoral and criminal activities, but Kurtz and his new religious, criminal cult are, it could be argued, at the liminal, marginal, extreme edge of the colonial system. His ivory. His natives. His wilderness.

Conclusion

Achebe accuses Conrad of using “Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril” (21). There is certainly peril for the European traveling into the wilderness. However, there is an argument to say that the African folk are given humanity. The appalling racist language masks the idea that the tribes *belong* in this place. Jeffrey Tolbert states that “[t]he idea of the anachronistic folk is central to folk horror” (“Frightening Folk” 31).

Yet are the tribes people anachronistic? It is Marlow who plants all the seeds of the ideas of going back in time; of the idea of prehistory; going back to the “night of first ages”; of the anachronistic. Tolbert talks about modern folk horror film texts trading “in images of ‘backwards’ rural folk mindlessly preserving violent traditions” (“Frightening Folk” 32). And if we follow Marlow, it seems as if we have entered what could be seen as quite a straightforward folk horror text. However, looking at *Heart of Darkness* through the lens of folk horror and crime fiction actually allows us to penetrate Marlow’s narrative. What we see is a shift of the usual folk horror trope of the outsider stumbling into the threatening, backward, isolated community. Achebe reproaches Conrad for failing “to hint clearly and adequately at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters” (21). However, by interrogating the text as folk horror, we might be able to see an alternative frame of reference. Through this lens we do not find a backward looking, savage, anachronistic community that threatens those who unwittingly come across them. We do not see traditions, we do not see the old ways. We do not, in the “symbiotic relationship between Kurtz and his acolytes,” see as Benita Parry insists, “enactments of rituals that are native to Africa” (29). Instead, we see what Tolbert terms the “folkloresque” which connotes and creates “invented folklore” (“Deadly Discipline” 126). And although this is a retrospective narrative, in the text we find an exploited group of indigenous folk who were here-already: tribes people who are being corrupted in the present. In *Heart of Darkness*, despite the rhetoric, the violence is new, current, and present. Kurtz’s unholy rites and rituals are new, created by himself: these are his rites and unspeakable rituals, not old traditions. He has created folklore and new abominable rites—he has committed the crimes and he has created folk horror. Kurtz, as a white outsider, has not stumbled into a backwards wilderness, he has penetrated into the heart of darkness with intention. And it is he who has created the horror, not the indigenous population.

Conrad, through the genres of crime fiction and folk horror, holds up a mirror that is a blinding reflection of imperialism. So, in the end perhaps Kurtz is not the extreme but the logical endpoint of imperialism and colonization, “a figure existing at the far end of the colonial continuum,” as Parry puts it (28). Marlow predicts that “[h]e 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” (Conrad 73). Kurtz has taken the colonial project to its perverted

extreme: his rites, his rituals, his corruption and exploitation of the local people in the pursuit of his monstrous appetites and his vast hubristic ego. Yet perhaps it is Kurtz who is sacrificed in the end. When he returns to Europe, Marlow conceals the truth about him as it would have been “too dark—too dark altogether” (111). And what does “too dark” mean? The clue may be in the title, which places Kurtz, the criminal, murdering, folk horror monster, at the heart of the imperial darkness.

There is a strain of folk horror that has been associated with fascism, along with the danger that its focus on the old ways and intransigent folk can be appropriated for ultra-nationalist rhetoric (Paciorek). This article has argued that it is both possible and fruitful to see *Heart of Darkness* as a folk horror text while using the genre reading as a way of agreeing with the critical consensus that Conrad’s text is of an anti-imperial nature. However, there is undoubtedly racism threaded through the novella and a doubling of vision (imperial/racist and, at the same time, scathingly critical), which is part of what Said has called Conrad’s “tragic limitation” (34). Thus folk horror too can be seen as paradoxical, sometimes in similar ways to those identified by Cedric Watts in 1996:

Civilization can be barbaric. It is both a hypocritical veneer and a valuable achievement.

Society saves us from corruption, yet society is corrupt. . .

Morality is a sham. Without it, human beings become sham humans. . . .

A person who sells his [*sic*] soul does at least have a soul to sell. (47)

These paradoxes echo key concerns in folk horror and viewing *Heart of Darkness* as folk horror gives us access to these contradictions. Folk horror can be seen (and used) as either fascist or radical and resistant in the same way in which *Heart of Darkness* has been read through both lenses over the years. In fact, the genre has a double vision similar to that seen in Conrad’s imaginary. Thus, Said’s “two visions” mooted for the novella also work for folk horror narratives. And it is in this way that we arrive at the final “summoning” of Kurtz and the revelations of what he has done to the tribe. It is not the folk in *Heart of Darkness* who commit the worst violence or who engender the horror. In contrast to the generic possibilities of fascism and racism present in the folk horror form, it also presents a radical undermining of these tropes and ideologies. As Keetley explains, folk horror “can serve both politically progressive and conservative ends” (9).

For the most part, though, folk horror is adept at critiquing the nationalistic in a similar way in which *Heart of Darkness* both recreates and savagely exposes nationalism/racism and imperialism. Reading, re-reading, and (re-)identifying the text as folk horror doubles and mirrors the text and the genre. A retrospective reading of *Heart of Darkness* helps to show the literary history of the genre as well as illuminating the folklore and folkloresque elements in the novella. At the same time, such a reading shores up the contemporary reading of the text as anti-imperial through a tracing of the genre's forms and their paradoxical double visions. Using folk horror as a model through which to examine Conrad's text helps to bring to light some of the more nuanced and contested readings of *Heart of Darkness*. By looking at the text through the lens of both crime fiction and folk horror, it becomes even clearer that it is the imperial project and Kurtz himself who provide, as Kurtz exclaims with his last words, "The horror! The horror!"

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