

# **Light in the Darkness: A Chronotopic Analysis of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness**

*Prepared by*

Bingxian Wu, B.A. English, Global Settings, Wenzhou-Kean University Class of 2021

*With*

Mark Smith, Ph.D., Kean University

*Keywords:* Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness, colonial, imperialism, darkness, light, Bakhtin, chronotope, Marlow, Kurtz

## Declaration

I, Bingxian Wu declare that this research report submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for Student Research Day at Kean University is wholly my own work, unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged.

---

*Bingxian Wu*

Aug 23th, 2020

## **Abstract**

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is regarded as one of the greatest novellas, which reveal the darkness of humanity in colonial activities. In this novella, the character Kurtz's experiences shed light on the nature of colonialism—he is inspired by the ideology of enlightenment and goes to Congo, and soon he becomes crazy about the ivory trade. At the end of his life, his last words are “The horror! The horror!” that are usually explained as the symbol of the “heart of darkness” of the Belgian Congo in terms of imperialism that brings violence and brutality. However, if we look at the novella from a dialogic perspective across space and time, the novella can open a “gate of light” of confessional quality into the dark period of the imperial enlightenment era. This study will explore the “light” in Kurtz's last words from the dialogic aspect and Bakhtin's theory of chronotope. The brand new perspective of analyzing this novella helps us understand deeper about the imperial history and human nature.

## Introduction

Slavery and imperialism have existed throughout human history. At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, three-quarters of people in the world were enslaved in one way or the other (Hochschild). As Hochschild documents through the abolitionist pamphlets of late 18<sup>th</sup> century England, literacy and the printing press afforded new empathetic connection to the experience of the other, through which the development of a new ideology and political movement for the liberation of slaves within the colonies became possible. According to Bakhtin's theory of chronotope, novels opened the possibility for dialogues that created the new awareness of the other afforded by the novel. The "darkness" of imperialism could be revealed through greater awareness of the subjective of the other, allowing for it to be transcended. The dialogic quality of *Heart of Darkness* sheds lights on the true meaning of the word "darkness," expecting readers to respond to the description of darkness and suggesting the bright future of humanity without imperialism and slavery. The analysis of Kurtz, who is the crucial ivory business agent, and the narrator Marlow's interpretations of Kurtz's last words is the key to revealing the meaning behind the author's depiction of the darkness in Belgian Congo.

## Literature Review

Conrad's writing skills applied in *Heart of Darkness* are the key to understand the core of the novella. Cooper asserts that in Conrad's literary works, the "overall morality" suggested by the author does not appear within any characters, whether the hero or the major protagonists such as Marlow and Kurtz, contained in the book (7). To form the overall morality, Conrad uses "delayed narrative technique" (Cooper 7), which means that the first narrator interprets the story from the second narrator to readers, allowing "his characters to react about" the "overall moral outlook" (7). Merely assuming that Conrad is "only interested in how life has treated him" for using his own experiences is not proper (Cooper 9), since Conrad "bring[s] a meaning not just to the fictional existence... but to... the 'real' world" through creating characters (9), while it is not relevant to use "the morality of one novel" to demonstrate another (8). In fact, in Conrad's novels, characters are created in a particular environment as non-standard moral models to tell readers that their fate "exists... in our own 'real' world" based on his awareness of "the implications of the relationship between reality and fiction" (10). However, Conrad "suppresses the didacticism" in his works, while he "indicates and teaches simply" due to "the close relationship between fiction and

reality which it embodies” (10). Through “symbolism and autobiographical elements” (10), Conrad was successful in turning the “world of fiction” into a symbol of “the world of reality” (11), offering a chance for the fiction to change the reality by influencing readers:

All that we can really assume is that if we act in the way A acted, we may end up in the same situation as A. We may not, of course, but the fictional warning still stands, and even if it does not influence our behavior directly, it can often give us the extra degree of moral insight into our own situations that we so much need (16).

Cooper added that this is also the impact of reading that helps readers explore their personalities and gain insight (16). Conrad accomplished his goal of forcing “moral awareness” by “making insistent comparisons between the major characters” in his novel *The Secret Agent* (13). It is hard to tell whether he applied a similar technique in *Heart of Darkness*, yet he uses the same name, Marlow, and the delayed narrative technique in both works.

The effect of the delayed narrative technique is explained by John Batchelor. He elaborated that it results in readers’ experience of a circularity of plot—the previous plots often echo with the later plot—following the change of “the dramatic focus” which was first on Marlow and secondly on Kurtz (237). Batchelor discovered that in the first part of the novella, Marlow was a conventional imperialist, who had the same value as ordinary Europeans. In contrast, in the second and the third part, his narrative focused on morality and Kurtz (237). The shifting of dramatic focus brings a sort of light of righteousness to Marlow—his encounter with Kurtz sheds lights on himself (Conrad 7). When Kurtz was dying, “binary systems”—the couple of opposite things—are “hovering” around him, such as “the African women and the white women” (Batchelor 239), “action and lying” (239), and “light and darkness” (239), providing a chance for further dialogue between these conflicting elements. The interpretation of Kurtz’s last words is supplied by Marlow’s “moral presuppositions” and “a moral antithesis” that seems to purify Kurtz’s morality (240), while Batchelor disagrees that Marlow’s interpretation is the core of the novella, since it is merely an interpretation rather than Kurtz’s own explanatory words.

If Marlow’s explanation is not what Conrad tried to convey, the interpretation seems to be redundant and unnecessary. Based on Cooper’s point of view of the relationship between fiction and reality, if Marlow embodies Conrad’s awareness of

the reality of imperialism, the character is responsible for responding to the fictional reality. It is possible that Marlow's interpretation is, on the other hand, an illustration of the suggested morality or quality of the overall story. Accordingly, the question of whether readers are responsible for interpreting the meaning of the literary work is also significant in terms of shedding light on the real world. Jack Thomson states that readers produce literature through reading text (1), applying their own experience and values while interpreting the text (1) and as well as "assimilating its representations of the world" into their own or "accommodating" their "representations" to the book (1). Thus, reading enables readers to react or reply to the text. Thomson believes that Conrad "undermines our expectations and conventional ways of 'seeing'" (6), through which readers doubt the ideology of enlightenment and evil of humanity. Thomson goes on to analyze examples in *Heart of Darkness*, in which characters, such as Kurtz's fiancée, were attracted by "an ideal Kurtz which is a lie [and]... a great saving illusion" (7). However, Marlow does not directly illustrate the truth; instead, he "lied" to Kurtz's intended that Kurtz's last word is her name.

Thomson does not explain or analyze deeper about Marlow's words to Kurtz's intended. Conrad describes that the narrator "lie[s]" to her, whereas if analyzing the symbolic meaning behind the novella, there could be another explanation of Marlow's response to the fiancée. Kurtz's intended, the same as Marlow's aunt, represents for the European ideology of enlightenment, believing that White people bring civilization to Africans without knowing the fact of African slavery and the bloody ivory trade, which was also a part of Kurtz's work. Bruce Stark analyzes that Kurtz's dying words might suggest the "moral victory" (536), an illumination, through which Kurtz suddenly becomes an "ironic tragic hero" of the story (553). In other words, "the horror" could be viewed as a judgment to Kurtz's entire dark experience of his life, through which he draws a final conclusion that includes the moral restorations.<sup>1</sup> To examine this hypothesis, Stark mainly analyzes the last part of the novella, in which Marlow encounters Kurtz's intended. Stark takes an opposite position to view the connection between Kurtz's dying words and Marlow's answer that if Marlow does not lie to her, the terms "The horror! The horror!" then equal to her name. In this way, the symbolic meaning behind the intended's name expands to a larger sinister group of the European ideology that obscures imperial capitals

---

<sup>1</sup> Ashley Chantler in "Heart of Darkness: Character Studies" states that Kurtz is "an impenetrable darkness" but also sheds lights on the truth. "...he is an anti-climax, but also a climax of many of the novel's concerns: colonialism, imperialism, race, essence and existence, nature and nurture, belief systems, dichotomies, sanity and madness, power, greed, violence, restraint, certainty and uncertainty." (67)

(554). Therefore, Kurtz's intended represents "the essence of the European darkness" that can only be described as "the horror" (555).

Stark's perspective is intriguing, although it is lacking in concrete evidence or theoretical support. Patrick Brantlinger in "Heart of Darkness: Anti-Imperialism, Racism, or Impressionism?" offers better textual analysis to support Stark's symbolic interpretations. Brantlinger argues Conrad's use of language and narrative structure brings a sense of "impressionism" or "obfuscation" that helps "mask" Conrad's "nihilism" (Brantlinger 364). Based on impressionist techniques, *Heart of Darkness* offers "a powerful critique" of imperialism and racism. At the same time, the idealism is "fragile" since it is only maintained by Marlow's aunt and Kurtz's intended (370). Even Kurtz "betrays" the civilization created by the white through "going native"<sup>2</sup> when he realizes what he believed was rooted in "false ideals" and "false religion" (370). Brantlinger thus explores the "fetishism" underlying Conrad's universalizing "darkness" within the fictional setting (370):

If the 'natives' in their darkness set Kurtz up as an idol, the Europeans worship ivory, money, power, reputation. Kurtz joins the 'natives' in their 'unspeakable rites,' worshipping his own unrestrained power and lust. Marlow himself assumes the pose of an idol, sitting on a ship deck with folded legs and outward palms like a Buddha. And Kurtz's Intended is perhaps the greatest fetishist of all, idolizing her image of her fiancé. Marlow's lie leaves Kurtz's Intended shrouded in the protective darkness of her illusions, her idol-worship (370).

The "ideals" become "idols" (370). Inevitably, Kurtz's going native also represents worship of wild, the evilness<sup>3</sup> brought by "Victorian imperialism" that "painted an entire continent dark" (371). Conrad draws the story between Kurtz and Marlow in ambiguity (372). Marlow interprets Kurtz's character as a devil idol or as a tragic hero (372). The "illumination" of the European ideology is a lie, while the "truth" lies in the "darkness" in the story (376).

Accordingly, Lionel Trilling illustrates in his criticism that Kurtz is a "hero of the spirit" (17-18). Although the character is regarded as sinned against by human

---

<sup>2</sup> Anne McClintock elaborates in "Unspeakable Secrets: The Ideology of Landscape in Conrad's Heart of Darkness" that African is "the purest expression" of the "primitive emotions" laying behind rational human society (50). This is probably the reason why Kurtz abandoned civilization to go into the wild before his death—he is tired of the ideology of enlightenment, attracting by purity rather than fakeness.

<sup>3</sup> Brantlinger explains with the concept of cannibalism in Africa: "...evil is African in Conrad's story; if it is also European, that's because some number of white men in the heart of darkness behave like Africans" (371). Accordingly, Europeans are likely to be assimilated by the locals who worship cannibalism, which implies not only the change of living habits but also the fact that people who come to Africa for imperial reasons are evils.

beings, his “regression to savagery” makes him reach the heart of darkness, from which he comes to “illumination” (18).

Marlow sees Kurtz as the model that reached the bottom of human civilization. The character has the illumination quality to reveal the truth, the “innermost core” of nature and human society. However, Brantlinger regards Marlow’s paradoxical admiration of Kurtz in his last moment as an irony of horror. There is also a possible explanation that Kurtz’s last words are “an outcry” against the ideal “civilization” lies behind bloody slaying in Congo. Brantlinger sees the dying words not merely as “an outcry of guilt” or “fear of death,” but “referring to the ... idealism” that “rationalize[s]” any crimes they have done (381). Kurtz’s “moral bankruptcy” is probably complemented by Marlow.

The structure and writing technique of the novella, and the contestable meaning of Kurtz’s dying words, tend to be analyzed separately. The possible significance of Kurtz’s last words is related to Marlow and the first narrator’s perceptions about the past story and the present, rather than the core of the work as a whole. Consequently, Kurtz as a character seems to have a sense of brokenness from the whole story about Congo.

This research focuses on a dialogic analysis of *Heart of Darkness* in the chronotopic context. The research questions are:

- 1) How does the past story about Congo interact with the present space/time in *Heart of Darkness*?
- 2) What is the meaning behind Kurtz’s dying words “The horror! The horror!” from a chronotopic perspective? How does it intertwine with the metaphysical meaning behind the novella?

## **Methodology**

### ***Bakhtin: Theory of Chronotope***

Bakhtin’s theory of chronotope explains the inseparability of time, space, and meaning in a novel. Time as flesh fuses and thickens space, making the space concrete and visible, while the chronotope materializes time with meanings in the space. Time and space cannot be separated from meaning, which is dialogic and contestable. The chronotope is always colored by values and emotions. The experience or understanding of space and time cannot be separated from the meanings attached to it. Also, meaning cannot be separated from the ongoing dialogues and people’s responsibility in situated space or time.

The chronotope united and tied the narrative knots in a place. Bakhtin believes that literary works and images are all chronotropic, as well as the plots, the image of characters, the background history, etc. The chronotope defines literary genres, situating generic distinctions in time, which is the primary category in the chronotope in literature. There is an unlimited number of minor chronotopes in each such kind of chronotope. The organic cohesion of time, space, and meaning of a particular historical or social issue provides a source of images at different aspects in the development of the literature.

There are several different chronotopes within a single literary output of an author, and the complicated interactions among the chronotopes exist merely within the literature. Chronotopes are usually mutually inclusive. They coexist with each other and maybe replace, contradict, or are interwoven with one another, composing more complicated interrelationships, which cannot enter into any relationships contained within chronotopes (Bakhtin 252). Bakhtin states that these interactions are dialogical, yet they cannot enter into the chronotopes or represent the world in the literature. It is outside the represented world, while still a part of the whole work. For instance, the chronotope of the threshold, which includes the motif of encounter as the chronotope of sudden change and crisis in life, is highly charged with emotions and value and often metaphorical and implicit in the literature (Bakhtin 248). In the chronotope of the threshold, time is instantaneous, as if it falls out of the regular track of biographical time.

A chronotopic analysis would straddle periods and different spaces. It would allow for an analysis of the plot that encompasses people's sense of history and their situatedness in the present. Another chronotopic analysis could focus on people's "horizon" or their understanding of the future, which is about people's visions of the future, spaces they sense they will inhabit, or what their valuations of that future may be. An individual's prior experiences are in dialogic interaction with those of present chronotope. To Bakhtin, we encounter our past and our situatedness in the present through our encounters with the words of others.

### ***Research Design***

This research is a case study based on the chronotopic analysis of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as a dialogue about the past and its meaning in the present situation in the novella to the first narrator and Marlow, and the dialogue between Marlow as a chronotope and Kurtz as another. The whole novella is the main subject

for this research, and textual analysis is applied for the opening scene, the last paragraph, and Marlow's interpretation of Kurtz's dying words (See Appendix). The theory of chronotope is applied to explain the analysis and draw the conclusion.

## Result and Discussion

### 1.1 Light and Darkness

In the opening of the novella, the description of light and darkness is harmoniously balanced in terms of variations of the words, while "light" is overall more than "darkness" (see fig. 1).

Forms	Light	Darkness
n.	Gleams; brilliance; light+++++; flush; spark; stars; glow; glow; halos; illumination; moonshine; flames+++	Gloom +; haze
adj.	Luminous +; radiant; brilliant	Dark+; somber+; profound; misty; spectral
phr.	the torch; the sacred fire	Dull red without rays and without heat
v.	Shone+; flashing; glare	Deepening night; brooding gloom+; broom glooming

Tip: + means the extra number of the appearance of the word

Fig. 1. The variations of light and darkness

The variation of light and darkness is a motif, which symbolically leads to the imagination of the glorious history of the British Empire. Before Marlow's interruption, there is a clear boundary and comparison between the description of light and dark, mainly when the first narrator "I" depicts the scene on the Thames. However, light and darkness are mixed when "I" was attracted by Marlow:

But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be expected), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a **glow** brings out a **haze**, in the likeness of one of these **misty halos** that sometimes are made visible by **the spectral illumination of moonshine** (5).

There is a sense of mysticism and impressionist painting, as Brantlinger stated. Light becomes misty, while darkness is illuminated. The splendid history seems to be a kind of light, yet Marlow's words "and this also has been one of the dark places of the earth" (Conrad 5) bring up doubt of the "light" and make the past mysterious.

Everything becomes less absolute, whether illumination or gloom; even the image of Marlow is not clear enough to be illustrated as light or dark.

Marlow goes on to tell about the European ideology of enlightenment, which Europeans believe is a sacred sacrifice that brings civilization to the savage world. The light on the Thames becomes clearer:

He broke off. **Flames** glided on the river, small green **flames**, red **flames**, white **flames** pursuing, overtaking, joining, crossing each other—then separating slowly or hastily. The traffic of the great city went on in **the deepening night** upon the sleepless river (7).

There are four “flames” in one sentence, corresponding with the enlightenment idea mentioned above. The night is deepening, and thus the flames are brighter, creating a scene of light in the darkness. However, the light disappears at the end of the novella:

Marlow ceased and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha. Nobody moved for a time. “We have lost the first of the ebb,” said the Director suddenly. I raised my head. The offing was barred by a **black** bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed **sombre** under an **overcast** sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense **darkness** (77).

There is no more light on the river, nor any flames or moonshine. The idea of enlightenment, so-called “light,” is not permanent. The promised glory of civilizing Africans is a fig leaf of imperialist business. Once an individual uncovers the fakeness of the ideology, everything about the “glory” becomes dark, so as the great empire.

## **1.2 Past vs. Present**

To Bakhtin, people encounter their past and their situatedness in the present through the encounter with the words of others. The chronotope of the present situation on the Thames includes the chronotope of the past, which is Marlow’s story of Congo. The space of the ship where the first narrator “I” and the second narrator Marlow stay unites the knots of the narrative. Dialogue comes when the chronotope of a past encounters the present.

The first layer of the dialogue happens when the splendid view on the Thames reminds the first narrator about the great history of the empire, which echoes all the flames and lights. The second aspect of the dialogue is when Marlow speaks about

darkness, which begins his story in Congo.

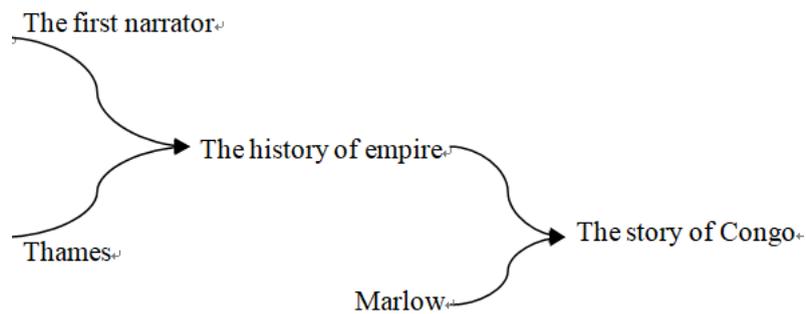


Fig. 2. Layers of dialogues

Marlow is not only a character existing in the present chronotope, but also in the chronotope of the past—the space of empire. This makes it possible for him to bring the past to the present. The meaning of dialogue between the past and present is suggested by the change of light and darkness on the river. To the first narrator, the past or the history is glorified at first, whereas at the end of the novella, Marlow’s story changes his perception about the past—the darkness of imperialism painted everything dark around them.

The chronotope of the present with biographical time makes the novella a closed circle. However, merely drawing a conclusion by analyzing the general chronotope of the present is not fair, since literary characters are also chronotopes. The dialogue between characters, or characters and their experiences, could convey the core meaning of the work as well.

### **2.1 Marlow’s interpretation**

The “penetrating words” that invade the dialogue in the present from the past are Marlow’s interruption of the first narrator’s reminder about the history. “Dark” is the first impression for Marlow to describe his experience in Congo. However, not everything in his story is dark, since his experience “throw[s] a kind of light on everything about [him], and into [his] thoughts” (Conrad 7). One of the most important characters that impact Marlow’s perception of the imperialist ideology is Kurtz, who died with the words “The horror! The horror!” (69). Marlow’s interpretation of Kurtz’s dying words is contestable in many studies.

From the interpretation, Marlow seems to pierce the gorgeous surface of enlightenment by regarding Kurtz’s words as a judgment of imperialism:

It takes place in an palpable greyness with nothing underfoot, with nothing

around, without spectators, without clamour, without glory, without the great desire of victory, without the great fear of defeated, in a sickly atmosphere of tepid skepticism, without much belief in your own right, and still less in that of your adversary. If such is the form of ultimate wisdom, then life is a greater riddle than some of us think it to be (69-70).

This is a denial of all the supposed glory and honor brought by enlightenment, which is a belief, a religion to most Europeans like Marlow's aunt. However, Kurtz's sacrifice does not give him any glory or celebration of his achievement. He died with misery in Congo, the dreamland. Such a death confused those who still believe in the ideology.

I was within a hair's-breadth of the last opportunity for pronouncement, and I found with humiliation that probably I would have nothing to say. This is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it (70).

Marlow has realized the dark truth behind Kurtz's words. At the beginning of the novella, the first narrator "I" has stated that Marlow is not an ordinary seaman who regards the sea as home. He does not fully belong to the imperialist group, though he is one of them. Kurtz is, to some degree, the same kind of person as Marlow. He is not an ordinary imperialist as the manager or a hero among Africans. He is a wanderer, the same as Marlow. This possibly explains why Marlow understands Kurtz, following him even after his death. However, the difference between Marlow and Kurtz is that Kurtz dares to cry "the horror" out, while Marlow admits he might have nothing to say if he was in a similar situation.

Kurtz's dying words, according to Marlow, are a judgment of the darkness of the whole imperialism—the conquering activities, slavery, and ivory trade and the abuse of violence to the locals. He claims the words in "a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper" (70), revealing "a glimpsed truth" (70).

True, he had made that last stride, had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot. And perhaps in this is the whole difference; perhaps all wisdom and all truth and all sincerity are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible (70).

Kurtz steps over the edge which he is not permitted to cross in the world of darkness, revealing the factors of enlightenment are the "true light," which is outside the dark world but is also a risk threatening the imperial system. Kurtz is the first one

who won the victory in the psychological battle between his previous belief—the imperial ideology, vanity, and selfishness—and the reality caused by the enlightenment ideology. He struggled but finally chose righteousness. Although his voice was weak, it struck Marlow as an illumination in the heart of darkness.

The victory can also be seen as redemption or salvation through suffering. Marlow compares Kurtz's voice to the echo from "a soul as translucently pure as a cliff of crystal" (70), which is shiny if there is a glimpse of light. Symbolically, if the heart of darkness is still dark, it is impossible for Kurtz's words to echo like crystal. One way to explain this is that his words are the light from the outside world, the hopeful future, expecting further response. The sense of purifying the soul presents the theme of salvation, which corresponds with the description of Marlow—"Buddha"—at the end of the novella. In this regard, Marlow is not only an interpreter but also a redeemer of Kurtz.

### **2.2.1 Time vs. Timelessness**

From the chronotopic perspective, time and meaning are the primary elements that determine the image of the character. The decline of religion and the dynastic realms lead to the rise of empire, in which the perception of time is coherent and quite different from Middle Ages when stories of heroes happen simultaneously without the sense of sequence (Anderson 22). In Marlow's story, time is seemingly stopped compared with the biographical time in the chronotope of the present. Most characters, including Marlow's aunt, Kurtz's fiancée, and the manager, do not change. They remain still in a time and space where most people strongly believe in the imperialist ideology, regarding civilization as a divine task that requires self-sacrifice; and another group of people who actually went to Africa grew selfishness-based fetishism of money and power. In this vein, time in Marlow's story was perceived more episodically as it was in the Middle Ages. The two extremities of the chronotope of Congo and Europe stretch the space and time of the imperialist chronotope, keeping the whole story world in a subtle balance. However, Marlow and Kurtz are the breakers of the balance. The encounter between Marlow as a chronotope with the time and space in Congo provides a chance for revealing the darkness.

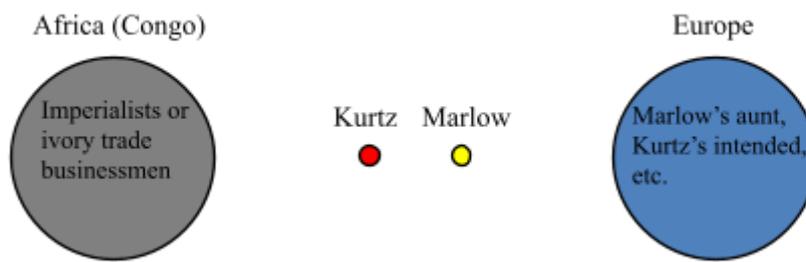


Fig. 3. The imperialist chronotope

As fig. 3. shows, the imperialist chronotope constructs with the time and space in Africa and Europe, containing the two sub-chronotopes, Marlow and Kurtz. The change between the two characters embodies another time and space in the story, breaking the homogenous timelessness of the narrative. In essence, the chronotope of the story narrative “breaks” through the dark, colonial, imperialist chronotope. In this regard, they do not entirely belong to the imperialists’ group or the regular Europeans. They at the beginning of their journey to Congo believed in enlightenment yet doubt it after realizing the darkness there. They have the imperialist identity, yet they are not like other invaders. A typical example of the imperialist is the manager, who said that “Men who come out here should have no entrails” (22). However, both Marlow and Kurtz have a certain degree of humanity. Marlow told himself to be “civil” (34), which differentiates him from others. Kurtz tried to abandon the civilizing idea by going into the wild, which might suggest the process of restoration of humanity. When Marlow went to the dark place where Kurtz lived, Kurtz was struggling with disease, the suffering that finally leads him to redemption. In other words, Marlow moves from the “fake light” of enlightenment to the “darkness” of Belgian Congo, and at the same time Kurtz leaves “darkness” to “true light”—the realization—and has an encounter with Marlow at the edge of “darkness.” Marlow’s interpretation is the dialogue with Kurtz, assigning the meaning of the supposed “future time” with moral order.

### **2.2.2 Confessional Quality**

Marlow’s explanation of Kurtz’s dying words “The horror! The horror!” could be regarded as a moment of catharsis that restores morality. Kurtz’s life is mostly interpreted by others. Readers know about Kurtz from Marlow, whose understanding about Kurtz was generally from the manager, the Russian boy, and his experience

with Kurtz in the jungle. The visitors after Kurtz's death supplement his knowledge about Kurtz's life before going to Congo. Generally, Kurtz's life is presented as a whole—he was like a renaissance person who was simultaneously a poet, a musician, and a journalist. He was deeply influenced by the idea of enlightenment and went to Congo, aiming to bring civilization there, but inevitably became a criminal of mankind. The interpretation, as it appears after Kurtz's death, solidifies the story of Kurtz as a confession, which is not done by Kurtz himself but the people around him. Through the crying of the last words, Kurtz's morality was finally restored.

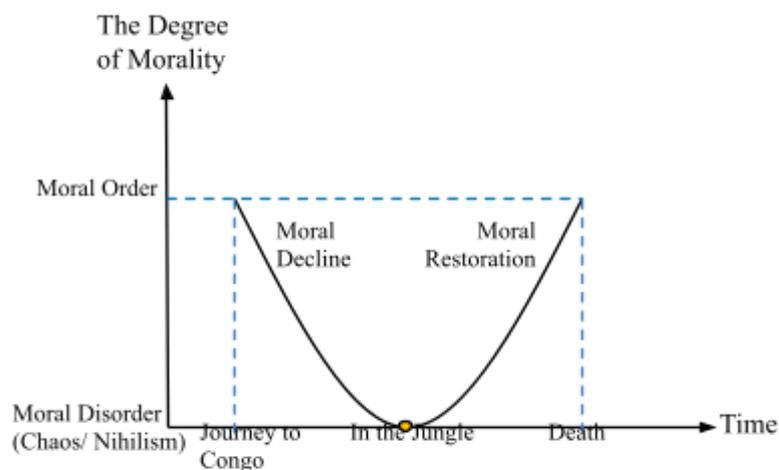


Fig. 4. The change of Kurtz's morality

The confessional quality of Kurtz uncovers the core of the novella, making the structure of the narrative chronologically symmetrical. Within the frame of the chronotope of the present, minor chronotopes of characters are inclusive in the past chronotope, while Kurtz's death is the heart of the overall chronotope.

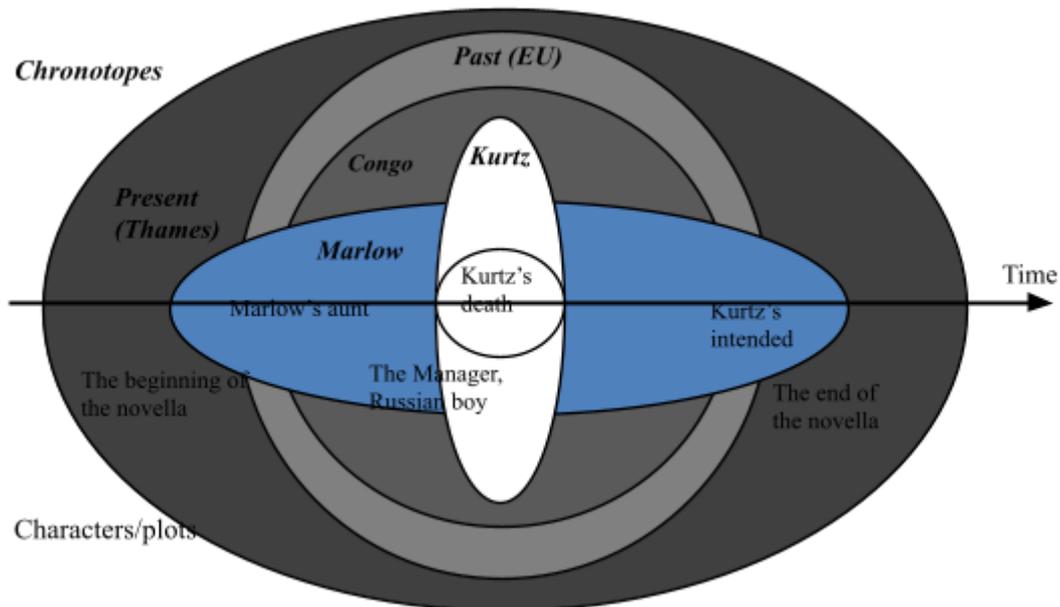


Fig. 5. Chronological relationship among different chronotopes

The circle of the narrative brings readers back to the beginning when Marlow admitted that the experience in Congo sheds light on everything about him. According to *Figure 5*, the source of the light is Kurtz's death which achieves the restoration of moral order with the help of Marlow. Accordingly, the new chronotope of the new moral order includes Kurtz's implicit and non-traditional confession, accomplished by people around him and sublimated through Marlow's interpretation. Comparing with the broken morality of the chronotope of the established imperial world, the new morality suggests the light of humanity, the sense of hope for moral nihilism, and the redemption from suffering and inhumanity of brutal violence through reflection and confession, expecting further response and reflection from the reader to finally eliminate "the horror." While the overall quality of the imperialist chronotope is dark, Kurtz's last words are the sword that pierces the darkness.

## Conclusion

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is regarded as one of the most outstanding anti-imperialist literary works in the Victorian period. The author does not directly offer critiques of imperialism and slavery, yet merely presenting the dark fact caused by human beings is powerful enough to attach the public attention to the disastrous issue in the distant land. While many scholars view Conrad as a white racist, he

does reveal in his novella the moral darkness of European imperialism as experienced by the imperialists. The fakeness of European ideology covers the dark reality in Africa where both black and white people died for the grievous ivory trade, such as Kurtz. The chronotopic analysis of the novella uncovers the dialogue between the past and present, revealing the competing values and meanings across the space and time of the Congo and the possibility for moral and ethical dialogue between them. Within the frame of the chronotope of the present, the temporal and spatial dimensions of Europe and Congo in Marlow's story consist the enlightenment-era chronotope, in which Marlow and Kurtz as sub-chronotopes encounter one another, breaking the stillness of time and bringing dialogic meanings of expected moral order. Marlow's explanation of Kurtz's dying words implicitly suggests the theme of confession and redemption, which is the possible "true light" of humanity and future society. After reading the novella, the reader experiences a challenge to the dominant timeless chronotope of imperialism. Therefore, in the heart of darkness is light that is wished to be acknowledged and seen, an idea that opens the dialogue to readers, inspiring them to respond with action.

## References

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso, 2006, pp. 22-24.
- Bachtin, Michail M. "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. The University of Texas, 2000, pp. 84-258.
- Batchelor, John. "'Heart of Darkness', Source of Light." *The Review of English Studies*, vol. 43, no. 170, 1992, pp. 227-242.
- Brantlinger, Patrick. "Heart of Darkness: Anti-Imperialism, Racism, or Impressionism?" *Criticism*, vol. 27, no. 4, 1985, pp. 363-385.
- Chantler, Ashley. *Heart of Darkness: Character Studies*. Continuum, 2008.
- Cooper, Christopher. *Conrad and the Human Dilemma*. Chatto & Win, 1970.
- Hochschild, Adam. "Bury the Chains: The British Struggle to Abolish Slavery." Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2005.
- Juehn, Robert E. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Lord Jim*. Prentice-Hall, 1969.
- McClintock, Anne. "Unspeakable Secrets: The Ideology of Landscape in Conrad's Heart of Darkness." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1984, pp. 38-53.
- Morris, Pam. "Aesthetic Visualizing of Time/Space: The Chronotope." *The Bakhtin Reader*. Arnold, 1994, pp. 180-87.
- Stark, Bruce R. "Kurtz's Intended: The Heart of Heart of Darkness." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1974, pp. 536-555.
- Thomson, Jack. "Applying Reader-Response Critical Theory to a Re-Reading of Heart of Darkness." *English in Education*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1986, pp. 1-12.

**Appendix: Textual analysis of Heart of Darkness**

**Chart 1: The opening scene:**

Words about light

Words about darkness

<p>Between us there was, as I have already said somewhere, the bond of the sea. Besides holding our hearts together through long periods of separation, it had the effect of making us tolerant of each other's yarns—and even convictions. The Lawyer—the best of old fellows—had, because of his many years and many virtues, the only cushion on deck and was lying on the only rug. The accountant had brought our already a box of dominoes and was toying architecturally with the bones. Marlow sat cross-legged right aft, leaning against the mizzenmast. He had sunken cheeks, a yellow complexion, a straight back an ascetic aspect, and with his arms dropped, the palms of hands outwards, resembled an <b>idol</b>. The Director, satisfied the anchor had good hold, made his way aft and sat down amongst us. We exchanged a few words lazily. Afterwards there was silence on board the yacht. For some reason or other we did not begin that game of dominoes we felt meditative and fit for nothing but placid staring. The day was ending in a serenity of still and exquisite <b>brilliance</b>. The water <b>shone</b> pacifically; the sky, without a speck, was a benign immensity of unstained <b>light</b>; the very mist on the Essex marshes was like a gauzy and <b>radiant</b> fabric, hung from the wooded rises inland and draping the low shores in diaphanous folds. Only the <b>gloom</b> to the west, brooding over the upper reaches, became more <b>somber</b> every minute, as if angered by the approaching of the sun.(3-4)</p>	<p>An interesting word—"ideal" becomes "idol."</p> <p>Everything is splendid, except for the west, where the European empire is.</p>
---	--

<p>And at last, in its curved and imperceptible fall, the sun sank low, and from <b>glowing white</b> changed to a <b>dull red without rays and without heat</b>, as if about to go out suddenly, stricken to death by the touch of that <b>gloom brooding</b> over a crowd of men. (4)</p>	<p>The light is going to disappear</p>
<p>Forthwith a change came over the waters, and the serenity became less <b>brilliant</b> but more <b>profound</b>. The old river in its broad reach rested unruffled at the decline of day after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks, spread out in the tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth. We looked at the venerable stream not in the vivid <b>flush</b> of a short day that comes and departs for ever, but in the august <b>light</b> of abiding memories. And indeed nothing is easier for a man who has, as the phrase goes, "followed the sea" with reverence and affection, than to evoke the great spirit of the past upon the lower reaches of the Thames. The tidal current runs to and fro in its unceasing service, crowded with memories of men and ships it had borne to the rest of home or to the battles of the sea. it had known and served all the men of whom the nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin, knights all, titled and untitled—the great knights-errant of the sea. It had borne all the ships whose names are like jewels <b>flashing</b> in the night of time, from the <i>Gloden Hind</i> returning with her round flanks full of treasure, to be visted by the Queen's Highness and thus pass out of the gigantic tale, to the Erebus</p>	<p>The memory of the empire is glorious.</p> <p>The history of the empire is full of glory. Everything in the past</p>

<p>and Terror, bound on other conquests—and that never returned. It had known the ships and the men. They had sailed from Deptford, from Greenwich, from Erith—the adventurers and the settlers; kings’ ships and the ships of Eastern trade, and the commissioned “generals” of East India fleets. Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often <b>the torch</b>, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a <b>spark</b> from <b>the sacred fire</b>. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth!... The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires. (5)</p>	<p>seems to be illumination.</p> <p>“The torch” represents the ideology of enlightenment, which is regarded “sacred”.</p>
<p>The sun set; the dusk fell on the stream, and <b>lights</b> began to appear along the shore. The Chapman lighthouse, a three-legged thing erect on a mudflat, <b>shone</b> strongly. <b>Lights</b> of ships moved in the fairway—a great stir of <b>lights</b> going down. And farther west on the upper reaches the place of the monstrous town was still marked ominously on the sky, a <b>brooding gloom</b> in sunshine, a lurid <b>glare</b> under the <b>stars</b>. (5)</p>	<p>The sun set, but there are still lights in the darkness.</p>
<p>“And this also,” said Marlow suddenly, “has been one of the <b>dark</b> places of the earth.” (5)</p>	<p>After the description about the great empire, Marlow states that it is also a dark place, which makes a dramatic comparison with the glorious memories of the empire.</p>

<p>He was the only man of us who still “followed the sea.” the worst that could be said of him was that he did not represent his class. He was a seaman, but he was a <b>wanderer</b> too, while most seamen lead, if one may so express it, a sedentary life. Their minds are of the stay-at-home order, and their home is always with them—the ship—and so is their country—the sea. One ship is very much like another, and the sea is always the same. In the immutability of their surroundings the foreign shores, the foreign faces, the changing immensity of life glide past, veiled not by a sense of mystery but by a lightly disdainful ignorance; for there is the mistress of his existence and as inscrutable as Destiny. For the rest, after his hours of work, a casual stroll or a casual spree on shore suffices to unfold for him the secret of a whole continent, and generally he finds the secret not worth knowing. The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within <b>the shell of a cracked nut</b>. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be expected), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a <b>glow</b> brings out a <b>haze</b>, in the likeness of one of these <b>misty halos</b> that sometimes are made visible by the <b>spectral illumination</b> of <b>moonshine</b>. (5)</p>	<p>Marlow is not a typical seaman. He does not regard sea as his home. He makes a living on sea, while he does not belong to sea. He is lonely.</p> <p>Seamen's life is simple</p> <p>The description of Marlow is ambivalent and mysterious, like an impressionist painting. He is not merely “light”, nor “dark”, but “misty”.</p> <p>This interpretation of impressionism is quite revealing for how the</p>
---	---

	<p>enlightenment narrative of colonialism may be too static, fixed, idealistic, and pre-planned (almost like the difference between an Ingres painting and a Monet). In essence, in the chronotope of colonialism, the meaning of what the colonizer does is arguably set in Brussels. The time and place of the action is situated in the Congo, but also in board rooms thousands of miles away. It's interesting that the narrator's description begins to reveal Marlow's humanity (he is not just a sent emissary anymore...)</p>
<p>“...They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force—nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got, it was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind—as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to...”</p> <p>He broke off. <b>Flames</b> glided on the river, small green <b>flames</b>, red <b>flames</b>, white <b>flames</b> pursuing, overtaking, joining, crossing each other—then separating slowly or hastily. The traffic of the great city went on in the <b>deepening night</b> upon the sleepless river. We looked on, waiting patiently—there was nothing else to do till the end of the flood; but it was only after a long silence, when he said in a hesitating voice, “I suppose you fellows remember I did once turn fresh-water sailor for a bit,” that we knew we were fated, before the ebb began to run, to hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experience. (7)</p>	<p>This is a description of the ideology of enlightenment, which Europeans believe they sacrificed themselves to bring civilization to the savage, and the sacrifice was “sacred.”</p> <p>There are four “flames” in one sentence, which correspond with the description above, implying that enlightenment is “light.”</p>
<p>“I don't want to bother you much with what happened to me personally,” he began, showing in this remark the weakness of many tellers of tales who seem so often unaware of what their audience would best like to hear; “yet to understand the effect of it on me you ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up that river to the place where I first met the poor chap. It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed</p>	<p>This is the beginning of Marlow's narration, while it can also be regarded as the conclusion of the Congo story. Marlow seems to gain a sort</p>

somehow to throw a kind of <b>light</b> on everything about me—and into my thoughts. It was <b>sombre</b> enough too—and pitiful—not extraordinary in any way—not very clear either. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of <b>light</b> .	of “light” in his experience in Congo.
--	--

**Chart 2: The ending paragraph**

Original Text	Analysis
Marlow ceased and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating <b>Buddha</b> . Nobody moved for a time. “We have lost the first of the ebb,” said the Director suddenly. I raised my head. The offing was barred by a <b>black</b> bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed <b>sombre</b> under an <b>overcast</b> sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense <b>darkness</b> . (77)	Buddha usually represents redemption.  There is no “light” anymore, only “darkness.”

**Chart 3: Marlow's interpretation of Kurtz's dying words**

Original Text	Analysis

<p>“However, as you see, I did not go to join Kurtz there and then. I did not. I remained to dream the nightmare out to the end and to show my loyalty to Kurtz once more. Destiny. My destiny! Droll thing life is—that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself—that comes too late—a crop of unextinguishable regrets. I have wrestled with death. It is the most unexciting contest you can imagine. <b>It takes place in an impalpable greyness with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, without spectators, without clamour, without glory, without the great desire of victory, without the great fear of defeat, in a sickly atmosphere of tepid skepticism, without much belief in your own right, and still less in that of your adversary.</b></p>	<p>This is a denial of all the expected glory brought by enlightenment.</p>
<p>If such is the form of ultimate wisdom, then life is a greater <b>riddle</b> than some of us think it to be.</p>	<p>For most Europeans, it is hard to imagine the truth/life without the “fake light” of enlightenment. The chronotopic analysis helps to reveal a bit of the “imaginary” element of the imperial truth. The fact that it is based in a mystified sense of time and space not really enlivened or enlightened by the experience of being in the present (a Buddha-like presence in the moment).</p>
<p>I was within a hair’s-breadth of the last opportunity for pronouncement, and <b>I found with humiliation that probably I would have nothing to say.</b> This is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. <b>He had something to say. He said it.</b></p>	<p>Marlow actually has the same thought as Kurtz. He also things that everything in Congo, whether it is ivory trade or something else, is the horror. The difference between Marlow and Kurtz is that Kurtz says the words, but Marlow does not (or dare not). Kurtz have said what Marlow wanted to say, and probably no one is dare to say that, or people seldom figure out the darkness, which brings them wealth and “glory.”</p>
<p>Since I had peeped over the edge myself, I understand better the meaning of his stare that could not see <b>the flame of the candle</b> but was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, <b>piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness.</b></p>	<p>The flame of the candle symbolizes “true light.” The enlightenment is “fake light,” which brings all the “darkness.” The “true light” still exists and could defeat “darkness.”</p>
<p>He had <b>summed up</b>—he had <b>judged</b>. ‘The horror!’ He was a remarkable man. After all, this was the expression of <b>some sort of belief. It had candour, it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper, it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth—the strange commingling of desire and hate.</b></p>	<p>“The horror!” is a judgment. Kurtz was claiming the truth—the reality behind the ideology is dark. The judgment itself is “candour,” “conviction,” “a vibrating note of revolt.” The judgment also expects for the</p>

	future response, the light in the heart of darkness.
<p>And it is not my own extremity I remember best—a vision of greyness without form filled with physical pain and a careless contempt for the evanescence of all things—even of this pain itself. No. it is his extremity that I seem to have lived through. <b>True, he had made that last stride, had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot. And perhaps in this is the whole difference; perhaps all wisdom and all truth and all sincerity are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible.</b></p>	<p>The difference between Marlow and Kurtz is that Kurtz says the words, but Marlow does not. Kurtz makes the “last stride” to express that he feels wrong about the reality he saw.</p> <p>The words Kurtz said were trifle, but revealed the essence of the reality—the ideology is a lie, an excuse that covers its “ambition” of fulfilling vanity and gaining wealth.</p> <p>Kurtz steps over the edge, which is not permitted. The “true light” is outside the world, but we all live in darkness. Marlow feels responsible to reveal the truth of reality. Since Kurtz already said that, the narrator does not have to risk himself to say it again.</p>
<p>Perhaps. I like to think my summing-up would not have been a word of careless contempt. <b>Better his cry—much better. It was an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory.</b></p>	<p>If there were defeats, there must be battles. The battle happens in Kurtz’s mind. It was the conflict between his world view and what he saw in Congo. In other words, it is the battle between the European enlightenment and the devastating consequence in Congo. The “fake light” vs. darkness. If finally he figures out “the horror”, then in the past he must lie to himself that all these horror was fine. But now, since he was dying, he cannot cheat himself anymore. “The horror” ultimately defeats the “fake light”/illusion of enlightenment. This is a victory of his righteousness.</p> <p>The victory can also be seen as the redemption through suffering, or the victory of salvation in seeing the “light” in the accepting God’s will rather than from the imperial myth.</p>
<p>That is why I have remained loyal to Kurtz to the last, and even beyond, when a long time after I heard once more, not his own voice, but <b>the echo of his magnificent eloquence</b> thrown to me from <b>a soul as translucently pure as a cliff of</b></p>	<p>His dying words were whispered but stroke Marlow. It seems that Kurtz’s soul is purified/ redeemed.</p>

**crystal.**

Crystal is shining if there is light, implying the hope lied behind Kurtz's voice.

The theme of salvation echoes the last paragraph of the novella, when the first narrator describes Marlow as "Buddha." It is Marlow's interpretation that helps redeem Kurtz, whose last words restore his morality.

Tip: Key sentences/words are **bold in red**