

“The Great Subterranean Pool of the Subconscious”: Psychoanalyzing the Subjectivity of Marlow and Kurtz in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*

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*“The conscious mind may be compared to a fountain
playing in the sun and falling back into the great
subterranean pool of subconscious from which it rises.”*
—Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900)

In the area of literary criticism, it is arguable that no other theory placed as much emphasis on the realm of the subconscious as that of psychoanalytic theory. Led by the works of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, the theory searches for the meaning of its literary text beneath the written language of the printed page, in much the same manner as its psychological use in the treatment of human patients. For example, the repressed elements of a character’s subconscious can be used to reveal unstated elements of his or her characterization, enlightening the reader with a deeper, more complex comprehension of its plot and characters. The richness of its sub-textual analysis can be potentially vital in the reading of a work such as *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, in which much of the story’s psychological depth lies below its rhetorical presentation. Under the theories of Lacan and Freud, the characterization of Marlow and Kurtz may be interpreted through a psychoanalytic discourse that provides unique understanding of the reasoning and motivation in the construction of each character’s subjectivity. The mysterious characterization and unarticulated actions of Kurtz are uniquely exposed through Freud’s theory of narcissism, particularly in its “queering” of his sexuality and subsequent causation of mental illness, and since Marlow acts as the reader’s pedagogical entry point into the text of the story, it seems appropriate to examine the construction of his subjectivity through French psychoanalyst Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage and its effect on his view of language.

With Kurtz, the aura of mystery surrounding his descent into madness is an ideal subject for psychoanalytic theory to tackle. Of principle interest is the true nature of his “unspeakable rites” and secrets to which the text refers and the role it plays in the construction of his subjectivity (50). Most recently, the contemporary rise of gender and sexuality theories in literary criticism have pointed to the possibility of that which is unspeakable being a subtle reference to Kurtz’s sexual orientation, as thematic secrecy in the motif of male bonding for many Victorian authors denoted “strong sexual implications” (Schwarz 15). However, the groundwork for this interpretation of Kurtz with focus placed upon his narcissistic tendencies provides a theoretical perspective suggesting the queering of his character dates back to Freud’s 1914 work “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” one of the most important and pivotal texts of psychoanalysis. Much like the budding of Marlow’s obsession with Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, the inspiration for the essay’s framework extended from his interest in the life of Daniel Paul Schreber, a German judge who was diagnosed with schizophrenia, which began in 1911 when Freud published a case study based on Schreber’s 1903 autobiography *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*.

Freud was particularly fascinated by Schreber’s admitted desire to “‘be a woman submitting to the act of copulation’” and his increasing delusions of grandeur (Robbins 134). As a result, Schreber’s mind adopted an alternate identity that was both feminine and divine, which he believed would provide salvation for humanity (Robbins 131). Years of analyzing these memoirs and previous documents on the subject, most famously the studies performed by Carl Jung, led Freud to the conclusion that Schreber’s selfemasculatation and megalomania stemmed from the repression of his narcissistic homosexuality, ultimately leading to the controversial addition of narcissism as a stage in his theory of psychosexual development.

Since Freud theorized that each individual's sexual development has a "fundamentally bisexual constitution," the normal development of a male requires the libido to enter a period of self-love beginning at birth and move through five stages of fixation. It will then attach itself to erogenous zones in the oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital phases, a concept referred to as "sublimation" (Crockatt 12-13). At the end of this period, the libido will finally undergo "cathexis," wherein the libidinal drive should transfer its pleasure derivation to the infant's mother, which he refers to as the true object choice.

However, Freud states that there are two types of "perversions" that can problematize proper libidinal transference in the development of the homosexual male. Most commonly, the libido may permanently transfer to the father, who is the parent that most physically resembles him. Slightly more complex, though, is the regression of the libido from the true object choice to the narcissistic object choice. Known as primary narcissism, this phase occurs when the male's libido attaches itself to "an object not only like himself, but one that *actually* represents himself," consequently forming a "sexual relationship with the self" (Crockatt 13). While it is nearly impossible to observe Kurtz's own psychosexual development, as little information about his infancy and childhood is given, his well-documented psychotic behavior exhibits many of the same symptoms displayed by the adult males included in Freud's study that were suffering from secondary narcissism. These patients were classified as narcissistic, passive homosexuals and diagnosed with a psychosis that Freud wrote never obstructed their intelligence. These males demonstrated similar behavior to that of Kurtz, such as "megalomania, omnipotence of thoughts, and a diversion of libido from the external world of people and things" (Crockatt 14).

Under the assumption that the unspoken rites of Kurtz are directly related to the repression of homosexual desires, the application of Freud's narcissistic theory to his subjectivity creates an interesting association between the cause of his eventual mental breakdown and the homophobic views of his culture. In a socio-historical context, the mental burden of hiding one's homosexuality was undoubtedly an emotionally exhausting task during the late nineteenth century, as the time period and setting of the novella coincides with a period in British history when homosexuality and the act of sodomy were not only stigmatized as culturally taboo but also deemed illegal. When taking into account the repercussions, especially for a man of Kurtz's pedigree and stature within the state, the pressure to suppress and eventually repress one's homosexual desires was not only a necessity but a natural survival instinct for any male citizen in England.

In Freud's analysis of Schreber's case, the patient's inability to achieve repression of his homosexuality results in his attempted transition into a transgendered individual. Freud's hypothesis stated that Schreber's creation of a female identity was an attempt to legitimize his homosexuality to society (Schwarz 16). Likewise, Kurtz's dislocation to the Congo and embrace of the savage tribal customs could be interpreted as his construction of an alternate reality to express what British societal norms deemed inexpressible. Nevertheless, the unlocking of the repressed subconscious often results in further societal detachment and introversion, aggrandizing megalomaniac tendencies (Crockatt 16). As such, Kurtz's repressed desires are inferred frequently, though without name, throughout the novella in the physical, often bloody evocation of his neuroses and are consistently juxtaposed with acts of dictatorship and brutality. Explicitly voiced in Marlow's description of the miasmatic gore, including dissevered heads placed on stakes surrounding the Inner Station, Conrad suggests his tyrannical enactments are not senseless deeds but are meant to mask the secret of Kurtz's identity. Marlow contemplates:

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. Whether he knew of this deficiency himself I can't say. I think the knowledge came to him at last – only at the very last. (57)

Furthermore, the explicatory analysis of Kurtz's infamous final words also displays parallel characteristics of the Freudian narcissistic theory. Seen through the eyes of Marlow, the moment prior to Kurtz's last breath is described as one of "intense and hopeless" desperation, a man haunted by the realities of his unspeakable desires, temptations, and his surrender to them. Marlow recounts, "[Kurtz] cried in a whisper at some image, some vision – he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath: 'The horror! The horror!'" (69). Naturally, there has been much critical debate on the intentional ambiguity of the phrase's ultimate meaning within the context of Kurtz's subjectivity, yet beneath the textual observation of Marlow lies a perceived self-loathing and nearly masochistic connotation, which is symptomatic of what Freud terms "narcissistic identification." As Nina Pelikan Straus states:

In narcissistic identification, which is closer to homosexual object-choice than to the heterosexual kind, the self-reproaches and regrets are in the service of 'repelling an undesirably strong homosexual impulse...The subject...strikes with a single blow at his own ego and the loved and the hated object. (132)

Therefore, the image or vision believed to be disturbing Kurtz's consciousness is the presence of his once repressed desires, relating to that which the text cannot evoke, which preoccupy much of the text and prominently figure into the most fascinating aspects of his characterization.

As for the man who actively pursues him, if, according to Albert J. Guerard, *Heart of Darkness* is a thematic "'journey within the self'" then Marlow, the narrator of the story within its story, is standing on a great precipice of recognition within his own subconscious (Meisel 20). However, while Marlow and the text seem engrossed in uncovering the center of Kurtz's subjectivity, a strictly Lacanian reading of Conrad's work reveals that the character actually in need of recognition is in fact Marlow, not Kurtz whose development of self exists in a purely passive form. The reader merely learns about the construction of Kurtz's subjectivity through documents and interviews detailing elements of his past that have been chosen by Marlow to include in his oral storytelling.

On the other hand, in dealing with the liminal development of Marlow's subject, his transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic states of consciousness, by means of Lacan's highly influential theory of the mirror stage, is represented through the binary oppositions within Marlow's own character throughout the course of the physical and mental quest he endures in the plot. At the beginning of the story, Marlow is still living in the 'Imaginary' state of consciousness, a product of the Victorian society in which he was raised and a newly hired member of the Company's marine subculture. However, his assignment to travel to the Congo and retrieve Kurtz sparks the "misrecognition" that ultimately leads to his "entrance into the 'Symbolic' realm," as he begins to interact with 'others' and become aware of difference, a fundamental aspect of Lacanian theory, in their beliefs and ideologies (Bertens 126). Following his initial visitation to the Company's office, Marlow himself comments on the uncomfortable sensations elicited from this difference, saying, "You know I am not used to such ceremonies and there was something ominous in the atmosphere. It was just as though I had been let into some conspiracy – I don't know – something not quite right" (Conrad 10).

According to Ben Henricksen in his article "The Construction of the Narrator in The Nigger of the 'Narcissus,'" Marlow's isolation is a natural progression of the self's evolution toward recognition. "For Lacan," he states, "the self is always inhabited by alien discourses, like foreign cities within" (Henricksen 783). This social disconnection only continues once he sets sail toward the Congo in search of Kurtz. For three months, he becomes increasingly obsessed with the radical works of Kurtz and the interviews conducted with his intermediate family and coworkers, slowly withdrawing and detaching from the ideals of the British imperialist culture. This gradual acceptance of the darkness that exists beyond the English Channel, seen in both Kurtz's transformation and the visual deterioration of the terrain surrounding him, is parallel to the acceptance of language and discourse by the infant in the Lacanian developmental theory, which signals the advancement towards the 'Symbolic' stage of consciousness. The closer he gets to the Inner Station the more aware he becomes of the destruction of the idyllic wholeness that is tied into the impressions and fantasies of the 'Imaginary' (Bertens 126).

Fifty miles before Marlow and his crew reach the banks of the Inner Station, Conrad sets the stage for the character's identity formation in a lengthy passage describing his desperate grasps for a comprehension of reality and truth in light of his now shallow, empty past. Remembering the overwhelming frustrations and anxiety to complete his journey, Marlow ruminates to his listeners:

Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world...There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine...you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once...in another existence perhaps. There were moments when one's past came back to one...but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream. (34)

While some interpretations of Marlow's moment of recognition point to his initial encounter with Kurtz, it is this scene that most successfully evokes his confrontation with his 'mirror' image. Faced with the harsh visual images of the Congo and the influence of Kurtz's ideological text, he seems to finally reject any previous concept of the world, now seemingly just delusions of idealism. He continues, "When you have to attend...to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality – the reality I tell you – fades. The inner truth is hidden...But I felt it all the same...It

made you feel very small, very lost, and yet it was not altogether depressing, that feeling” (34-35). Furthermore, his denunciation of corporate greed and capitalism as corruptive yet inescapable forces within the framework of every society, such as the ivory trade in Africa, shows his verbal acknowledgement of what Lacan coins the *nom du père*, which is translated to the “name of the father” in English, the recognition of the “patriarchal character of our social arrangements” (Bertens 126). By the completion of this passage, Marlow has completed his transition into the ‘Symbolic,’ linguistically constructed a new ideology and, in consequence, formulated a more assured, socially conscious self that is independent to his once “violently passionate” yet blind identification with Kurtz (Straus 133).

Had Marlow not been transformed in this manner, his actions proceeding Kurtz’s death would have had a much different outcome, principally those pertaining to the role of language that were depicted at the novel’s conclusion. Through the censorship of Kurtz’s treatise “Suppression of Savage Customs” and his misleading conversation with the Intended, Marlow displays a thorough understanding of the role of verbal and nonverbal discourse in identity formation and ideological structures. Both instances of misrepresentation are an example of his willingness to alter reality by intentionally blurring the lines between fact and fiction to serve a singular purpose. In these cases, the guiding motivation was to preserve the illusion of Kurtz’s former self by saving the character from the figurative darkness of his morality. This distortion of the real or rational is a power that Lacan believed to be inherent in both verbal and nonverbal language (Stockholder 402). Marlow’s deployment of this quality in language is transformed into a form of narratological repression in itself, banishing the unflattering and potentially upsetting elements of Kurtz’s character from the consciousness of the story and effectively hiding them behind the words of his depicted version.

While many contemporary critics have questioned the legitimacy and accuracy of psychoanalysis as a field of psychological study, including many of the concepts created by Freud and Lacan, its practice in the realm of theory continues to present thought provoking and subversive interpretations of literature for critics and audiences alike and stands as a palimpsest of influence for all future theoretical movements. The benefit of its concentrated effort in revealing the relationship between the deep subconscious desires of literary characters and the construction of their subjectivity is invaluable when analyzing a work of such complexity and textual ambiguity as Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. The reading of Kurtz’s subject as a narcissistic homosexual through Freudian theory and Marlow as an individual transitioning through Lacan’s mirror stage is simply one psychoanalytic perspective of many that an individual can choose to shed light on the text’s popularly discussed thematic darkness. The universal beauty of its criticism, though, is located in its recognition, revelation, and articulation of the deep, possibly repressed desires contained within the minds of the readers themselves. The relationship between psychoanalysis and literature holds the potential to take readers beyond the textual fountain of diegesis and discover the reality and truth behind the vagueness of words and ideas, allowing them to touch that which is untouchable and even speak that which is unspeakable.

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