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Joseph Conrad and Sigmund Freud: How the Reality-
Ego and Pleasure-Ego Explain Conduct, and Contribute
to Marlow's Survival and Kurtz's Death in *Heart of
Darkness*

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Abstract

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) has long been analysed through various approaches towards its protagonists' journeys and outcomes of survival and death. In contrast, this paper situates their journeys and outcomes under a single psychoanalytical approach to answer the question of what psychological factors contribute to Marlow's survival and Kurtz's death. This paper pursues an answer through utilizing Sigmund Freud's *Formulations Regarding the Two Principles in Mental Functioning* (1911). In consequence, this paper contends that Marlow's ability and Kurtz's inability to sustain the reality-ego, as based on Freud's paper about pleasure and reality principles, explain their conduct, which in consequence contributes to their distinct outcomes where Marlow survives and Kurtz dies. To arrive at this conclusion, this paper establishes whether Marlow and Kurtz focus on what is real or pleasurable, as what they focus on influences the operability of their, as coined by Freud, psychic functions of *attention*, *impartial passing of judgement* and *thinking*. The established baseline of the two characters is subsequently tested by the isolation and wilderness of the African environment, in consequence either reinforcing the reality-ego or accelerating its regression to the pleasure-ego. The reinforcement or regression of the reality-ego thus explains Marlow and Kurtz's conduct and perception of reality, where Marlow's ability to sustain the reality-ego sustains his perception under pressure, whereas Kurtz's regression into the pleasure-ego leaves him unable to perceive the danger that kills him. By departing from previous scholarship's tendency to analyse Marlow's survival and Kurtz's death through a symbolic approach, this paper offers a psychoanalytical account of *Heart of Darkness*, in which survival and death are contributed to by each man's own psychology.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, pleasure- and reality-ego, psychic functions, regression, primitivity, Sigmund Freud, psychoanalysis, *Heart of Darkness* (1899)

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Introduction

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) is a novel that from the beginning pages establishes itself as a quest narrative. Although the novel begins on the river Thames in England, the story is about the protagonist's journey into the African continent. The novel's protagonist is Marlow, a sailor and riverboat captain. He is employed by the Trading Company to make his way through a "mighty big river" (11) to rescue Kurtz, an exceptional agent said to accumulate "more Ivory than any other agents together" (64). The rescue mission is prompted amidst growing concern for Kurtz's seemingly declining health as he ceases his ivory shipments. As Marlow embarks on his journey towards Kurtz, it becomes apparent that the pressure of the isolating and wild African environment impacts the psychologies of both Marlow and Kurtz. By the novel's conclusion, the outcomes of Marlow and Kurtz's journeys into Africa and its isolating and harsh environment are revealed to be Marlow's narrow survival and Kurtz's death.

This paper approaches Marlow and Kurtz's outcomes of survival and death as contributed to by their psychologies, rather than as incidental to their journeys. This approach follows from a division in existing scholarship where the journeys of the two characters are often examined through a psychological lens, while Marlow's survival and Kurtz's death are often read symbolically. A psychoanalytical approach appears to be the favourable alternative as the novel treats the mind as a central concern. The Company doctor, for instance, measures recruits' skulls before they depart for Africa because "the changes take place inside the [crania]" (16). Furthermore, John Tessitore (1980) reflects on *Heart of Darkness* (HoD) by remarking that it is "more psychological than it is symbolic" (30). This paper aims to reconcile Marlow and Kurtz's journeys and their outcomes of survival and death under a single psychoanalytical approach. It does so by answering the question of what psychological factors contribute to the two characters' outcomes, where Marlow survives and Kurtz dies.

To explain the mechanism behind Marlow and Kurtz's psychologies contributing to their outcomes of survival and death, this paper employs a psychoanalytical approach to scrutinise the two characters' psychologies. For this purpose, this paper utilises Sigmund Freud's paper about *Formulations Regarding the Two Principles in Mental Functioning* (1911). In his paper, Freud distinguishes between the pleasure- and reality-principles and a subject's ego. This distinction is important as Freud refers to the principles as the underlying rule that governs a subject's mental functioning, while accentuating that the mental functioning is a subject's ego that operates under the rule of the pleasure- and reality-principles. Moreover,

Freud establishes that the development of the principles occurs “in the ego-instincts” as he remarks that that is where the initial development of the pleasure-ego, and the later development of the reality-ego, occurs (222). Freud defines the initial developmental stage of the pleasure-ego as the psyche’s original pleasure-seeking mode where “the pleasure-ego can do nothing but wish, work for a yield of pleasure, and avoid unpleasure” (223). On the other hand, Freud remarks that the later developmental stage of the reality-ego focuses on self-preservation and survival, where “the reality-ego can do nothing but strive for what is useful and guard itself against damage” (223). In other words, the pleasure- and reality-egos determine whether a subject’s conduct remains oriented towards reality, or regresses (or does not fully develop to begin with) to its original pleasure-seeking stage of the pleasure-ego.

Freud contends that a subject’s ability to sustain the reality-ego is reflected in the adequate development of specific psychic functions that support it, namely *attention*, *impartial passing of judgement* and *thinking*. The psychic functions enable the reality-ego to assess, judge and mediate external reality (220-221). However, the psychic functions are not independent of the subject’s orientation towards reality or pleasure-seeking. In other words, what a subject focuses on pursuing subsequently influences what receives *attention*, how perceived information is *judged*, and which possibilities are considered through *thought*. The functions consequently construct an understanding of reality, but the existing focus influences the direction in which the functions are applied. In the case of Marlow and Kurtz, depending on their focus, the psychic functions may reinforce the reality-ego, or facilitate regression into the pleasure-ego. For this reason, an approach that establishes the baseline for Marlow and Kurtz’s psychic functions is necessary. It is necessary because their established baseline towards reality and pleasure is what the African environment will test once they encounter its isolating pressure, revealing both characters’ ability to sustain the reality-ego, or suffer its regression to the pleasure-ego. Consequently, the contributing psychological factors to Marlow’s survival and Kurtz’s death are the former’s ability to sustain the reality-ego, and the latter’s inability to do so as he regresses into the pleasure-ego.

Previous research regarding Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* has covered linguistic, colonial, symbolic and psychological approaches among many others. In this paper, the research is organised by dividing the approaches and sorting them chronologically. This is done to accentuate the progression of research and results over time, in effect showcasing the existing gap that this paper aims to fill. Because of the psychological nature of this paper,

alternate psychological approaches to HoD are established first, and other approaches spanning linguistic and symbolic fields are established later.

Psychological approaches to *Heart of Darkness* were popular in the 1980s. For instance, Tessitore (1980) utilises Freud's pleasure and reality principles to distinguish between Kurtz's pursuit of pleasure and Marlow's resistance towards immediate gratification of the pleasure principle. Tessitore argues that Kurtz's pursuit of pleasure stems from his regression into the primitive instincts as he becomes manic because of Africa's isolation and wilderness. On the other hand, he highlights Marlow's restraint from pleasure and primitivity as he diverts his attention towards notions associated with reality. Building on Tessitore, this paper aims to address the gap between identifying Marlow and Kurtz's psychological inclinations towards the pleasure- and reality-principles, and their symbolically examined outcomes of survival and death. This paper aims to do so by applying Freud's theory to Marlow and Kurtz's psychologies and the actions that they carry out, consequently establishing the two characters' psychologies as major contributors to their outcomes of survival and death. In addition to Tessitore's account of HoD, almost half a century after, Sinan Gül (2023) returns to Freud via Durkheim's *homo duplex*, extending Freud's pleasure and reality principles towards his id, ego and superego theory. Moreover, Gül takes a sociological approach to *Heart of Darkness*, arguing that the primal instincts of an individual are hidden behind societal constraints and the fabric of civilised society.

Further psychological research departs from Freud's two principles. For example, Marshall Alcorn (1984) instead extends his psychological research towards Kurtz's narcissism. In the same year, Richard Arneson (1984) frames Kurtz's failure to live up to his ideals as a matter of an insufficient strength of will, where Arneson's framing relates to this paper's account of focus towards reality and pleasure. Furthermore, in 1985, Michael Levenson withdraws from both the narcissistic thread and an ethics-based precedent by contending that "restraint, after all, is a psychological concept that in itself implies no ethical norm..." (275-276). In addition to already established research, Sumbal Maqsood (2014) alternatively reads Kurtz as having undergone authentic self-discovery that before his arrival in Africa was impossible as it was obstructed by civilisation's veneer. Such a position in its analysis has valuable insights, but this paper's psychoanalytical approach towards sustaining the reality-ego departs from Maqsood's conclusion.

As mentioned previously, other relevant research of HoD approaches the novel from a symbolic perspective or alternatively examines the characters through a linguistic approach. An example of the linguistic approach is provided by John McClure (1977), who scrutinises restraint and morality through linguistics and rhetoric rather than psychoanalysis. On the other hand, Lillian Feder (1955) and Rosemary Pitt (1978) pursue a symbolic route, arriving at conclusions about Marlow and Kurtz's outcomes (referred to as "fates") of survival and death, through a methodology alternate to psychology that is rooted in religious and mythological contexts.

Past studies rarely extend towards the ability to sustain the reality-ego as a contributing factor towards Marlow's survival and Kurtz's death. As noted, despite Tessitore's application of Freud's principles to Marlow and Kurtz, prior studies instead tend to focus on intertwining psychology with sociology or sociology with symbolism to explain the behaviours of the two characters and their outcomes of survival and death respectively. For this reason, this paper utilises a psychoanalytical approach to bridge the gap and link psychology as contributing to the outcomes of Marlow and Kurtz, where the former survives and the latter dies. To bridge this gap, this paper aims to answer its established question of what psychological factors contribute to the two characters' outcomes, where Marlow survives and Kurtz dies. Thus, this paper posits that Marlow and Kurtz's ability to sustain the reality-ego, as based on Freud's paper about pleasure and reality principles, explains their conduct, which in consequence contributes to their distinct outcomes where Marlow survives and Kurtz dies. Although both Marlow and Kurtz are fictional characters, their psychological consistency in *Heart of Darkness* makes them valid subjects for psychoanalytical literary criticism and allows them to highlight how psychology can impact conduct and outcome. Despite this paper applying Freudian theories to Conrad's novel that predates the works of Freud by over a decade, this paper does not suggest any influence in either direction but rather uses Freud's psychoanalytical methodology through a retrospective lens to describe the psychological dynamics that Conrad's novel already dramatises.

To maintain continuous analytical coherence, this paper is divided into three sequential parts. The first section establishes a baseline for Marlow and Kurtz's psychic functions that support the reality-ego, additionally establishing what they focus on and what their motivations for being in Africa are. The subsequent section explores Marlow and Kurtz's ability to sustain the reality-ego as they encounter the immense pressure of isolation and wilderness of the African environment. Finally, the third section marshals together the established information

to arrive at a conclusion about how the ability to sustain the reality-ego explains conduct and contributes to the two characters' outcomes where Marlow survives and Kurtz dies.

1 Psychic Functions of Marlow and Kurtz

1.1 Marlow, Kurtz, and the Psychic Function of *Attention*

The psychic function of *attention* is described by Freud to “periodically [...] search the external world, in order that its data might be familiar already if an urgent internal need should arise” (220). In plain terms, the *attention* “[directed] at the external world” (220) keeps a subject oriented to the events happening around them, continuously (periodically) scanning the environment for items that can satisfy pleasure, if necessary. Without the function of *attention* operating adequately, a subject cannot perceive, therefore act, in accordance with a real condition, leaving him exposed to dangers he fails to perceive.

Marlow, being the protagonist of HoD, is mentioned in the novel from the very start. The psychic function of *attention* also appears to be quite developed in his case. From a very young age, he “had a passion for maps” where he would “lose [himself] in all the glories of exploration” (11). As his psyche scans the external world, a precedent is set early where Marlow's *attention* is not focused on a desire for gratification, but for curiosity for the unexplored based on what is real. This is an important distinction to accentuate, as *attention* towards curiosity contrasts with a pleasure principle-oriented approach towards pleasure-seeking. This is thus an early indicator of Marlow's development of the reality-ego.

Marlow's indifference to expanding his energy towards pleasure becomes more evident while at the Company's office, before leaving for Africa. There, he showcases his perceptual abilities further, unchanged, if not strengthened, by the passage of time from the previous example. Marlow has seemingly “no difficulty in finding the Company's offices” as “It was the biggest thing in the town” where “everybody was full of it. They were going to run an over-sea empire and make no end of coin by trade” (13). These excerpts provide a significant glimpse into Marlow's psychic function of *attention*. Marlow notices not only generalities in the architecture of the city but also directs his attention to social attitudes.

This directly provides a perspective on Marlow's psychic function of *attention* and how developed it is. While Marlow embarks on the journey for other reasons than to satisfy the alternate (and mostly popular) desire for an “over-sea empire” rooted in materialism, his

attention function searches the external world for themes not only limited to materialism but also social attitudes. Arneson's observation of Marlow's ethics is of value. He remarks that "it is Marlow's attitude that right conduct is a matter of observing simple, elementary decencies that should go without saying" (425). It is of importance to clarify that Arneson's approach to this matter is less psychological and more ethics-based (though these distinct fields do overlap). However, Arneson's observation still has a value that reflects Marlow's perceptual abilities. It supports the idea of Marlow's psychic function of *attention* focusing on a multitude of things, even if in his argument they are simple and elementary. In consequence, the provided evidence indicates Marlow's psychic function of *attention* to be developed adequately to support the reality-ego.

In the case of Kurtz, the identification of his psychic functions before he arrives in Africa is less simple than in Marlow's case. *Heart of Darkness* is seemingly stingy with providing utterances from Kurtz himself before his character is introduced "in the flesh" towards the end of the novel. However, it is still possible to discern what type of man Kurtz was before, and during the early times of, his arrival in Africa. Although situationally different from the perception Marlow had prior to Africa, the concern about Kurtz's health does not occur until well into his time in Africa, making the beginning of his time in Africa a fair basis for comparison when perception is concerned.

Kurtz is described as a highly operational individual. Numerous accounts from the pilgrims, managers, traders and soldiers identify him as a kind of "prodigy [...] an emissary of pity, and science, and progress" (34). Indeed, such epithets are justifiable when returning to the notion that he could somehow gather "more Ivory than any other agents together" (64). After all, Kurtz's ability to sustain the reality-ego must be robust enough to aid his mission to be the most efficient and profitable, as reflected in his operational efficiency and eloquent epithets. Thus, it becomes likely that Kurtz must possess somewhat adequate levels of *attention* that allow him to perceive the external world in a manner that aids efficient and remarkable results.

However, besides identifying Kurtz's ability for efficiency and eloquence based on his epithets, as with Marlow, it proves necessary to discern what notions and themes Kurtz's *attention* revolves around. These themes essentially reflect what his *attention* focuses on. When asked "what it was that induced [Kurtz] to go out there?" (referring to Africa), Marlow provides Kurtz's famous report that reveals Kurtz's motivations (99). It was Kurtz's vision that he "must appear to them [savages] in the nature of a supernatural [being]" (69). Kurtz's resolute purpose

in Africa showcases how inclined towards domination he was. Furthermore, Kurtz's *attention* is shown to focus on desire and possessiveness as he "repeatedly entreated [Marlow] to take a good care of "[Kurtz's] pamphlet" as "it was sure to have in the future a good influence upon [Kurtz's] career" (69). While Kurtz's *attention* was intact in so far as perception of the environment for the good of the Company's purpose was concerned, what he focuses on showcases what he truly desires and what his *attention* is biased towards: domination, fame and wealth.

The difference between the two characters becomes observable when subjecting their psychic function of *attention* to comparison. Both Marlow and Kurtz have their own reasons for embarking on a journey to Africa, but evidently they differ vastly in nature. Marlow is driven by curiosity to explore the unknown, while Kurtz is driven by rapacious acquisition and visions of domination. *Attention* thus functions not only as a pillar that contributes to defining the reality-ego but also shows how the two characters' perception and focus differ.

1.2 Marlow, Kurtz, and the Psychic Function of *Impartial Passing of Judgement*

The second psychic function of *impartial passing of judgement* is equally as important as *attention*. *Impartial passing of judgement* is situated as a subsequent function, needing *attention* to operate adequately. Freud explains that, as items perceived by the psychic function of *attention* are ultimately stored in a subject's memory, a subject must *judge* whether "a given idea is true or false – that is whether it was in agreement with reality or not" (221). A decision distinguishing between truth and falsity is thus "determined by making a comparison with the memory traces of reality" (221). In other words, the event requiring judgement is dependent on a subject's memory that is derived from the psychic function of *attention* that perceives reality. A subject whose *attention* is focused on an external item of interest (reflecting Marlow's focus on what is real and Kurtz's on what is pleasurable) will consequently judge the external world from a distorted or incomplete memory-trace. This means that *judgement* can only assess reality as accurately as *attention* has already perceived it, and if it was perceived with bias towards e.g. pleasure, the judgement will reflect it.

To identify Marlow's ability for this important function supporting the reality-ego, an examination of his *judgement* in action is warranted. To do this, it proves beneficial to return to Marlow's memory of everyone being full of it as they want to make no end of coin by trade.

Before encountering the immense pressure of Africa to its fullest extent, Marlow arrives at a trading station in which he senses “an air of plotting” as he remarks that

[the trading station] was unreal as everything else – as the philanthropic pretence of the whole concern, as their talk, as their government, as their show of work. The only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading post where ivory was to be had, so they could earn percentages (33).

Despite Marlow’s comment that it was unreal as everything else seemingly reflecting a lack of perceptive ability, his comment is rather in line with Freud’s *impartial passing of judgement*. Marlow’s sense of unreality is not a failure of *judgement* or *attention*, but rather proof of their functionality. He recognises a mismatch between the scene at the station and anything in his prior experience (since no comparable memory-traces exist), rather than either agreeing with what he is seeing or rejecting it as false. However, what does track with his memory-traces is the recognition that even in Africa, just as in Europe during his visit to the Company’s office, traders want to earn percentages. Indeed, such a remark reflects the adequacy of Marlow’s *impartial passing of judgement*, as he utilises the memory gathered by *attention* to identify whether a scene agrees or disagrees with an earlier-perceived memory of reality.

To analyse Kurtz’s judgemental abilities, it once again proves useful to resort to his utterances. This approach proves adequate as Marlow provides evidence that to utter an observation earnestly is in essence to utter how one’s *attention* perceives the external world and imparts *judgement*. Thus, a semantic and rhetorical analysis, as derived from McClure’s linguistic and rhetorical approach, strengthened by the psychoanalytical terminology already established, makes it easier to examine Kurtz and his judgemental abilities.

During his time in Africa, Kurtz was known for his speeches and eloquence that his “burning noble words” (68) exhibited. In one of his speeches, Kurtz remarks that “[we whites] must approach [the savages] with the might as of a deity” (68). In this utterance, the bias established in the *attention* section comes to light. Kurtz judges the savages with a bias towards superiority and domination.

To illuminate Kurtz's bias towards his desire for domination, McClure utilises a semantic and rhetorical analysis of Kurtz's speech in contrast to that of Marlow's. McClure observes that "like Kurtz, [Marlow] is tempted to assert their absolute otherness and inferiority, but resists" as Marlow remarks that the natives "were not inhuman (36)" (311, McClure quoting HoD in second quote). The difference illuminates Kurtz's lack of restraint towards his bias of domination, thus presenting Kurtz's flawed psychic function of *impartial passing of judgement*. Furthermore, McClure identifies Kurtz's lack of restraint and subsequent flaw in his judgement by imposing a semantic and rhetorical analysis upon his utterance. McClure remarks that

[Kurtz is] speaking only in vague generalities [to] reduce the world to an unproblematic totality which he, Kurtz, both understands and controls. Thus Kurtz's eloquence, born of that lack of restraint which licenses his appetite for domination, provides him at once with symbolic experiences of mastery, and with false images of a mastered world. His eloquence is the product of his speech habits, which not only enact the dream of domination but also distort the reality to make the dream seem plausible (312-313)

This vital piece of semantic and rhetorical analysis of Kurtz's speech habits can be directly linked to the very psychic function of *impartial passing of judgement*. Indeed, as Kurtz's *attention* is biased towards domination, his *judgement* results from a distorted memory-trace by such bias. As a result, Kurtz's reality-ego is operational, but not entirely intact, as exemplified by McClure's semantic and rhetorical examination of Kurtz's utterances.

1.3 Marlow, Kurtz, and the Psychic Function of *Thinking*

Thinking is the third and final, for the purpose of this paper, psychic function that needs defining. As *judgement* depends on *attention*, *thinking* depends on the preceding interplay between the former psychic functions. Freud describes *thinking* as a function "developed from the presentation of ideas", which allows "the mental apparatus to tolerate an increased tension of stimulus while the process of discharge is postponed" (221). Here, "discharge" refers to the direct release of psychical tension through immediate motor action. In other words, the impulse can be acted upon (thus "discharged") the moment it arises, with no interval for reflection. This

immediacy is precisely the pleasure-ego's mode of operating, since the pleasure-ego looks for immediate gratification that requires the tension to be discharged at once rather than held in check. *Thinking* is thus the psychic function that evaluates reality as perceived by *attention* and *judgement* to restrain the discharge and consider it from the standpoint of what is useful (as the reality principle would have it), rather than convert it into immediate action to satisfy the pleasure-ego.

Unlike *attention* and *impartial passing of judgement*, HoD does not provide any evidence for the *thinking* function of Marlow and Kurtz before they become immersed in the African environment. This is because *thinking* can be evaluated only if the need to restrain a discharge arises. In other words, because there is no clear impulse that requires *thinking* to intervene, the *thinking* function's adequacy cannot be directly observed in Marlow and Kurtz. For this reason, a deviation from the text-based sequence established in the preceding sections must occur. This shift is not necessarily a bad thing, as it instead provides an opportunity to narrow down Marlow and Kurtz's ability to sustain the reality-ego directly. For this reason, this part of the paper examines Marlow and Kurtz's *thinking* function not through a single scene, but through the nature of the desires each man possesses, and the degree to which those desires would require *thinking*'s intervention at all.

Marlow's pleasures and desires are rooted in the reality-ego. His motivation to venture into Africa is based on exploration as perceived by reality in order to seek out what actually exists. By focusing on this approach, Marlow has no desire to impose any personal wish upon what he finds, alternatively aiming to absorb the reality he perceives as knowledge. Because this desire generates little friction with reality, it produces correspondingly little discharge that would require *thinking* to delay it.

In contrast, Kurtz's founding desires stand in direct tension with reality from the beginning. His desire to appear to the natives in the nature of a supernatural being and his preoccupation with a pamphlet's good influence upon his career are desires for domination and wealth that, as McClure's analysis in the preceding section established, distort reality to sustain their own plausibility (312–313). The *thinking* function's adequacy to sustain the reality-ego would therefore need to intervene in Kurtz's case far more often than in Marlow's, effectively delaying the discharge that his desire generates. Because no such intervention of thought is recorded both before and during his immersion into the harsh African environment, a question arises as to whether Kurtz's psychic function of *thinking* ever developed enough to sustain the

reality-ego, or whether its lack causes regression into the pleasure-ego once the pressure of Africa affects his psyche.

2 Marlow's Reality-Ego and Kurtz's Pleasure-Ego

2.1 Defining Regression and Desire

The development of psychic functions to any extent does not guarantee the stability of the reality-ego that they sustain. Freud notes two things in regard to this. Firstly, he contends that the shift from the pleasure-ego to reality-ego “is not in fact accomplished all at once; nor does it take place simultaneously all along the line” (222). Secondly, he remarks that “the substitution of the reality principle for the pleasure principle implies no deposing of the pleasure principle, but only a safeguarding of it” (223). This means that a subject's ability to sustain the reality-ego can vary by degree, and that regression to the guarded pleasure-ego is a real possibility.

This variation in ability to sustain the reality-ego becomes observable in the interaction between a subject's psychic functions and a subject's focus that is aimed towards something real or pleasurable. Although Freud does not explicitly articulate this mechanism based on the psychic functions and a subject's focus, his paper *Formulations Regarding the Two Principles in Mental Functioning* (1911) provides the context needed to infer that such a mechanism exists. Furthermore, Alcorn's research into narcissism (research which he bases on Freud) provides a clearer articulation of the mechanism:

Ideally considered, reality need not be in opposition to the imagination; reality can act as a stimulus to the imagination. According to Freud, the ego should “grow” in relation to the pressures imposed upon it by external reality. Its functions of self-regulation and reality perception should become more complex and co-ordinated through increased exposure to the “reality principle”. (115)

Alcorn's remark supports the established approach that the psychic functions' adequate operation constructs a subject's understanding of reality. This understanding is itself influenced by whether a subject's focus is towards what is real or what is pleasurable. To examine this

mechanism in relation to Marlow and Kurtz, it becomes necessary to analyse what the two characters focus on when they encounter pressure. Their focus under pressure subsequently influences the operability of their psychic functions that sustain the reality-ego or make regression into the pleasure-ego possible.

Regression requires a subject to be placed under sufficient pressure from an unpleasant reality for the reality-ego to cede ground to the pleasure-ego's promise for immediate gratification, thus remedying the unpleasant reality with pleasure. For Marlow and Kurtz, this pressure is the isolation and wilderness of Africa that they encounter at the climax of the novel. As they encounter the unfamiliar environment of Africa and isolation, they become removed from the oversight of the familiar societal constraints otherwise imposed on them by e.g. Europe, the Company, or Marlow's aunt. This interpretation is supported by Maqsood's observation as he identifies the impact of isolation from what is known by arguing that "the core of evil and primitivity is ineradicable in every being" and is restrained only by "forcefully imposed social constructs" (8). Although Maqsood utilises alternate terminology and arrives at a conclusion different from this paper's, his methodology signals similar notions of social constructs and most basic mental processes that this paper's psychoanalytical approach is also concerned with. Moreover, Maqsood's mention of 'primitivity' proves especially important as it correlates with the 'pleasure-ego' and its status as one of the most basic, 'ineradicable' processes 'safeguarded' by the reality-ego.

The term 'primitivity' is important for this paper, especially as Marlow and Kurtz encounter the isolation and wilderness that enable regression due to pressure. This is because when regression from the reality-ego is concerned, the notions and terminology used to describe the real must shift, to accommodate the basic and wild that the two characters encounter. Before regression occurs, the desire is mediated by notions from Marlow and Kurtz's social environment. For instance, Kurtz's initial pursuit of domination, wealth and eloquence occurs through channels that are moderated by reality. In an instance of regression, the desires rooted in societal constraints would no longer have this mediation of reality, instead yielding the mediation of the wild and primitive.

However, this does not mean that the content of the desire shifts, meaning that no new desire is introduced, but rather that the nature of the desire shifts from notions based in reality, to notions based in the basic processes of primitivity. For this reason, this paper adopts 'primitivity' descriptively to refer to the primary, wild and basic instinct that emerges when

societal constraints are removed. Primitivity is not introduced as a separate psychological theory or Freudian concept, but as terminology for describing Kurtz's desires during his regression into the pleasure-ego.

To accentuate the argument further, HoD provides an example of the shift from societal constraint to primitivity. The wilderness seemingly "beguiled [Kurtz's] soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations" (90). This means that while his aspirations remain unchanged, the permitted boundary of society ceases to exist. Gül appears to agree, noting that "when the social environment fails to exert influence on an individual's consciousness, their primal instincts assume control, leading to a state of anomie" (339). Although Gül assumes 'primal instincts' as a term defining regression towards the most basic mental processes, this term can be reconciled with primitivity. Both terms indicate the loss of societal mediation in favour of the pleasure-ego's governance and the pleasure-seeking mode of pursuing desire. This section therefore traces how Marlow's reality-ego sustains its mediating hold under the pressure of isolation, and how Kurtz's reality-ego regresses towards the most basic mental functions of the pleasure-ego. In this instance, the pleasure is pursued without the societal restraints that once gave it an acceptable form, instead resorting to acquiring pleasure through a means that strips societal constraints: primitivity.

2.2 Sustaining the Reality-Ego Against Regression

Regression and its inverse (sustenance of the reality-ego) are not strictly a matter of psychic functions weakening or strengthening under pressure of isolation. The mechanism is based on the established interplay between the psychic functions' understanding of reality and the existing focus influencing the direction in which the functions are applied. Marlow's *attention*, *impartial passing of judgement* and *thinking* perceive and act upon the reality adequately as his focus is towards what is real, like his curiosity, scepticism towards the Company's rhetoric and exploration. When encountering the pressure from the wilderness and isolation of the African environment, Marlow's psychic functions focus on the reality-ego because of his desire being rooted in what is real.

Contrastingly, Kurtz's focus was already aimed towards domination and acquisition. As with Marlow, when met with pressure from isolation and wilderness, Kurtz merely reinforces what his psychic functions are focused on. His bias towards desirable things like domination and wealth, under pressure of isolation, entrenches his desire for pleasure further, in effect

accelerating his regression from the reality-ego to the pleasure-ego. The pressure of isolation, then, does not act on a neutral psyche in either case. It acts on a psyche that focuses on what it deems necessary, which explains a subject's conduct depending on the subject's ability to sustain the reality-ego rather than regressing into the pleasure-ego.

Marlow's focus on what is real, coupled with adequately operating psychic functions to support the reality-ego, provides him with the protective quality against the pressure of wilderness and isolation. His ability to sustain the reality-ego enables his grasp on reality as he redirects focus on what is necessary, which is reality itself. Marlow's focus towards reality is observable as he states that "[he does not] like work – no man does - but [he likes] what is in the work – the chance to find yourself. Your own reality – for yourself, not for others – what no other man can ever know" (39). This excerpt provides insight into Marlow's reality-ego 'protecting itself against damage' as he focuses on an item in reality to not fall victim to the immense pressure of isolation and primitivity. As his focus is reality, and his psychic functions operate adequately, he possesses the ability to sustain the reality-ego by focusing on reality.

Researchers like Arneson reinforce this approach by reflecting on how Marlow is able to sustain his sanity by resisting the wilderness and isolation of Africa. Arneson concludes that

Marlow offers a splendid image of resisting and containing the widening [apolitical] doubt. He tells his listeners he reveres the discipline of work just in virtue of its narcotic effects; work saves the worker from introspective meditation that might issue in antisocial conclusions. (428)

Indeed, Arneson's position is in line with this paper's approach despite his utilisation of alternate terminology like apolitical doubt and antisocial conclusions. These terms can be accounted for in this paper's own terminology, where apolitical doubt refers to the disappearance of social constraints in favour of unconstrained primitivity. Furthermore, the mention of antisocial conclusions is self-explanatory, as it falls in line with the apolitical doubt established in what is primitive, as primitivity is the state that rejects society, yielding antisocial conclusions. By agreeing with, and extending, Arneson's approach towards the psychoanalytical approach of this paper, Marlow's ability to sustain the reality-ego and its

mechanisms are established as robust enough to provide Marlow with protection against danger by the very means of redirecting focus towards what is real.

The resistance that Arneson mentions is not an arbitrary tactic, but a mechanism elicited by the reality-ego in favour of postponing discharge. In addition, Alcorn provides an excellent comparison to Marlow's profession of a sailor, as he illustrates Marlow's grasp on reality and the mechanism behind such grasp:

"Inner strength" marks a mariner's discipline in relation to the "sacrifices" required of sea duty. The ideal sailor, for example, ignores the call of his own inner imaginative world in order to meet the "real" challenges of the present: challenges of wind and wave. The best seamen [...] defend themselves from imaginative usurpations through a "self-sacrificing" "devotion" to duty. They abandon personal thoughts and grievances in order to work together to save the ship. They "sacrifice" their narcissistic concerns (their concerns for their own unique individuality) in order to manage effectively a threatening sea. (115)

The culmination of mechanisms, though introduced from perspectives alternate to psychology, provides an image of Marlow's ability to sustain the reality-ego. His psychic functions operate adequately to sustain the reality-ego, whereas his established focus towards what is real prompts the psychic functions to utilise their defensive mechanisms by sustaining and applying what is real. In effect, Marlow's defence mechanism against isolation and wilderness is reality.

By contrast, Kurtz's bias towards what is pleasurable despite operational psychic functions renders his ability to sustain the reality-ego at a disadvantage. This is because Kurtz's psychic functions do not reinforce reality in the same manner as Marlow's do. For this reason, any pressure encountered cannot be mediated by any mechanism that Kurtz's pleasurable biases provide. As regression into the pleasure-ego becomes probable for Kurtz, returning to Freud to establish whether Kurtz can sustain any protective mechanisms at all proves necessary. As Freud remarks,

Neurotics turn away from reality because they find it unbearable – either the whole or parts of it. The most extreme type of this turning away from reality is shown by certain cases of hallucinatory psychosis, which seek to deny the particular event that occasioned the outbreak of their insanity. (218)

Freud's insight suggests that an individual whose reality-ego fails to hold may be understood, in this framework, as neurotic. Moreover, the connection between a neurotic individual and Kurtz becomes visible considering his biases that lack protective qualities against the pressure that he finds unbearable. Because Kurtz's ability to sustain the reality-ego is flawed, and his psychic functions are biased to focus on what is pleasurable, when Kurtz encounters pressure of reality and finds it unbearable, he directs his focus towards pleasurable items, regressing into the pleasure-ego to find consolation.

Diagnosing Kurtz as the most extreme type of a neurotic proves inappropriate given the scope of this paper and its focus on the ability to sustain the reality-ego rather than dealing with clinical diagnosis. However, the combination of Kurtz's regression to the pleasure-ego and his continuous pursuit of desire may characterise him as manic. Kurtz's collapse aligns with the general neurotic pattern just outlined, but not with its most extreme form. For this reason, Kurtz's pursuit of desire is better captured by mania. Tessitore appears to support this position as in his account no other word than "Mania [...] adequately captures Kurtz's appetite for lust, power, adoration, and finally veritable godhead among the savages" (34). Labelling Kurtz as manic because of his flawed ability to sustain the reality-ego explains why he fails to articulate proper defence mechanisms against regression towards the pleasure-ego.

Kurtz's mania and impeded reality-ego do not recognise work as an anchor, the same way Marlow does, but as a mode of pursuing pleasure through direct and immediate action. Tessitore agrees with such a position as he states that "For Kurtz, work is not the means of sublimation but the very means by which he exercises his narcissism and aggression" (33). Tessitore's observation reveals that the same behaviour of work can serve opposite functions depending on a subject's bias that impacts his psychic functions. Kurtz utilises them for direct gratification, whereas Marlow uses them to retain his sanity by focusing on what is real. When faced with pressure of isolation, Marlow and Kurtz's psyches are either altered or sustained in favour of their focus towards reality or pleasure. Because Kurtz cannot exert a defence

mechanism like Marlow does through focusing on work, the only way Kurtz utilises work is to pursue primitivity and pleasure by direct and immediate action.

2.3 Marlow and Kurtz's Reality-Ego Under Direct Pressure

Marlow's plunge into work and Kurtz's pursuit of pleasure when the two characters encounter pressure are not merely theoretical concepts. They are visible in their conduct as Marlow and Kurtz's psychic functions are tested directly by the pressure of isolation and wilderness. This sub-section thus provides text-based instances of Marlow's ability to sustain the reality-ego, and Kurtz's inability to do so, as he regresses into the pleasure-ego under direct pressure from the African environment. The two characters' abilities to sustain the reality-ego can be identified in the very manner of their journeys converging. In other words, the same instance that provides an insight into Marlow's resistance of isolation and wilderness, also provides Kurtz's pursuit of primitive desires as his reality-ego regresses into the pleasure-ego.

The situation that provides this evidence occurs when Marlow pursues Kurtz into the wild jungle as Kurtz tries to escape into the primitive wilderness. However, Kurtz's escape was not only towards the wilderness, but towards the savages that he established himself as a veritable godhead among (per Tessitore's account). As these savages attack Marlow's steamer in an attempt to retrieve Kurtz, it is Kurtz that tries to escape towards the primitive desire of domination of the savages (88, 89).

Although both characters effectively plunge into the wilderness, it is Marlow who reflects that it would be silly to embrace primitivity permanently: "I thought I would never get back to the steamer, and imagined myself living alone and unarmed in the woods to an advanced age. Such silly thing – I know" (89). Even though this scene occurs during the climax of the novel, Marlow retains his grasp on reality as he understands that reverting to primitivity is neither a useful nor necessary thing to do, as his mission is to rescue Kurtz and leave the immense African environment. Furthermore, Marlow reflects on his own allure towards the primitive as "[Marlow] seemed to come to his senses" and is immediately able to recognise "the danger in its right proportion" when trying to retrieve Kurtz (89). Despite the pleasure that the wilderness and primitivity may offer, Marlow focuses on his work, sustaining him in the reality-ego, which allows him to recognise that he and Kurtz were still in the wilderness as the steamer is under assault (89).

Just as the development of the reality-ego does not happen at once, nor simultaneously with other processes, Kurtz's regression does not happen immediately. In the specific instance when he attempts to escape into the wilderness, his regression had seemingly come a long way. The mania that describes Kurtz's appetite for power and desire to be a veritable godhead among the savages reveals his regression as he starts muttering irresolutely. Marlow recounts how Kurtz speaks of his "immense plans" and that "[he (Kurtz)] was on a threshold of great things" (90) while Marlow tries his best to avoid danger and return to the steamer with Kurtz.

Kurtz's psychic functions are effectively collapsing under his primitive desire for pleasure. He is so consumed by fantasies of future grandeur that his *attention* no longer registers anything real, similarly to his *impartial passing of judgement* not registering the danger which he is in. Marlow, on the other hand, perceives the dangers around him, as well as judges Kurtz as "utterly lost" if he does not succeed at "[breaking] the spell – the heavy, mute spell of wilderness – that seemed to have drawn [Kurtz] to its pitiless breast by awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions" (90). Indeed, it appears as though wilderness and primitivity had consumed Kurtz's psyche in the end, signaling his regression from the reality-ego that allows protective conduct, to the pleasure-ego that pursues desire by direct action.

Marlow's vigilance under pressure must be further considered, as he is not only dealing with pressure from isolation. Marlow is simultaneously juggling Kurtz's declining physical health, his regressed psychology, and the natives' assault on Marlow's steamer as he is on the shore attempting to rescue Kurtz. All of these factors remain in Marlow's memory despite the pressure, as he focuses on his mission to rescue Kurtz. Marlow remarks that

the terror of the position was not in being knocked on the head – though [he] had a very lively sense of that danger too – but in this, that [he] had to deal with a being to whom [he] could not appeal in the name of anything high or low. [He] had [...] to invoke Kurtz – [Kurtz's self] – [Kurtz's] own exalted and incredible degradation (90).

It is Marlow's own position that Kurtz's current state resembles some sort of withdrawal, in this paper's terms – regression. In consequence, it is Marlow's ability to perceive the reality

around him through focusing on his work and mission to rescue Kurtz that sustains his reality-ego and its operability.

The difference between Marlow and Kurtz's ability to sustain the reality-ego is the mechanism where focus determines the direction in which the psychic functions are applied. Marlow himself explains that an individual must depend on his "innate strength" and "capacity for faithfulness" when isolated from "a kind neighbour [that] can be heard whispering of public opinion" (67). In effect, when stripped of social constraints, Marlow relies on "power of devotion, not to yourself, but to an obscure, back-breaking business" (68) to sustain his reality-ego and rescue Kurtz. On the other hand, Kurtz regresses into the pleasure-ego and primitivity as "Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts" where "wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance" (79).

3 Kurtz's Death, Marlow's Survival and Sustaining the Reality-Ego

The definition of the reality-ego is not merely descriptive. It carries a functional stake as well, as unlike the pleasure-ego, the reality-ego "can do nothing but strive for what is useful and guard itself against damage" (223). Freud's remark reminds us that the reality-ego's absence has direct consequences for the subject that it governs. The preceding sections have traced how Marlow's psychic functions sustain the protective qualities of the reality-ego, as he focuses on what is real under pressure of isolation and wilderness. On the other hand, preceding sections also established how Kurtz's psychic functions are influenced by his focus towards pleasure, effectively resulting in his regression into the pleasure-ego that the reality-ego was meant to safeguard. This section focuses on the distinct outcomes of Marlow and Kurtz's journeys, where Marlow survives as he sustains the reality-ego, and Kurtz dies as he regresses into the pleasure-ego.

3.1 Kurtz's Death

Kurtz dies in the cabin of Marlow's steamboat, marking the end of his journey into Africa. His death can be interpreted on two levels. Firstly, Kurtz dies physically. Secondly, however, his death is the culmination of an earlier collapse of his reality-ego that is brought on by his regression into the primitive pursuit of pleasure under the pressure of isolation and wilderness. Because Kurtz's reality-ego regresses into the pleasure-ego before his physical death, he has

long been unable to perceive reality and the dangers that the reality-ego is supposed to guard against. The danger itself, in the case of Kurtz, is less from the side of the natives living in Africa than from his own failure to perceive danger at all while pursuing pleasure without limit.

Kurtz's initial pursuit of desire and pleasure is observable in his pursuit of socially restricted notions of domination, wealth and fame. However, when faced with isolation from society's constraints and pressure of unpleasant wilderness, the mode of his pursuit regresses into primitivity, where his only mission becomes pleasure-seeking. This occurs as his focus is directed towards what is pleasurable, resulting in the degradation of his biased psychic functions that sustain the reality-ego. In consequence, Kurtz loses the reality-ego's protective quality of discerning what is real, what is useful, and what guards against damage, as he regresses into the pleasure-ego.

Kurtz's pursuit of primitivity and pleasure (section 2.3) leads to both his psyche's regression and his physical exhaustion as he is unable to set a boundary. While Marlow retrieves Kurtz from his attempt to escape into the wilderness, he describes Kurtz as "not much heavier than a child" while "his bony arm [is] clasped around [Marlow's] neck" (91). Kurtz's frailty, as described by Marlow, testifies to the physical cost of Kurtz's unchecked pursuit of pleasure. Even at his weakest, Kurtz's earlier attempt to escape back into the wilderness shows that his manic desire for pleasure overrides whatever traces of self-preservation his weakened body should impose. Feder converges towards Kurtz's regression through symbolic methodology by remarking that the "struggle in [Africa is] symbolic of inner defeat [...] Kurtz [...] also betrayed the humanity in himself" (291). Feder signals that Kurtz's defeat stems from his isolation and endless and aggressive pursuit of pleasure. As far as Kurtz's death is concerned, Pitt highlights Kurtz's death "as a kind of expiation for the crimes he committed" (147) while pursuing pleasure. Kurtz's focus on pleasure, in effect influences his psychic functions' adequate operations, and causes his regression from the reality-ego to the pleasure-ego, removing his ability to perceive danger as he strives towards pleasure without boundaries.

3.2 Marlow's Survival

Marlow's survival is contributed to by his ability to sustain the reality-ego by focusing on what is real. Marlow was combating pressure by plunging into work. His mission to retrieve and rescue Kurtz kept him on track. As exemplified in section 2.3, Marlow's work to get Kurtz back on his steamer and escape the assault is what oriented Marlow towards the dangers and reality.

However, when Kurtz died, Marlow's focus on his mission also ceased to exist. Pitt reflects on Kurtz's death as a necessity for Marlow "since it frees him from succumbing to the powers of darkness and evil through his active attempt to rescue Kurtz, and then in work of preserving his memory" (147). Although Pitt reaches her conclusion through a symbolic method, her statement reflects that although Marlow was dedicating himself to "a futile purpose" (HoD, 96) of work throughout his journey, whether it was waiting for rivets to repair his steamboat (38-41), or steering the boat while getting shot at by arrows (63), his entire, after Kurtz's death futile, purpose in Africa was to reach and rescue Kurtz.

With Kurtz's passing, Marlow no longer had any work to focus on. Marlow's journey back to the Trading Company's headquarters in Europe consists of him lapsing into unintelligible babble about Kurtz. Pitt's remark proves especially precise in this regard, as seemingly, the thing that kept Marlow alive during his fever on the way back to Europe was the memory of Kurtz. Although Kurtz himself is gone, Marlow's earlier focus on rescuing him left a lasting impression on his mental functioning. For this reason, when met with the absence of a working purpose in the face of pressure, he resorts to the only thing that secured the adequate functioning of his reality-ego: Kurtz.

With Kurtz gone, and Marlow successfully anchoring his focus on preserving his memory to recover from Africa's pressure, Marlow must reconcile with civilised society to come to terms with his experience with isolation. Gül supports this approach by positing that for Marlow to recover from pressure of isolation and wilderness,

[Marlow's] objective is to reinstate the fabric of civilized society. Hence, he deliberately omits any mention of Kurtz's transformation, recollecting him as he was prior to his expedition, thereby subduing the illustrious instincts of the wilderness with the moral conscience of the urban environment (348)

By anchoring himself in reality yet again, Marlow manages to restabilise his reality-ego from the immense pressure that Kurtz's death had on his mental functioning. Marlow returns to his memory of Kurtz described as an eloquent man not because he wants to reminisce about his mission to rescue Kurtz, but because Marlow understands that the civilised society cannot understand their encounter with African pressure. Marlow reflects on the society's inability to

understand experiencing isolation as the people in society have a “solid pavement under [their] feet, surrounded by kind neighbours that cheer [them] on or to fall on [them]” (67). As a result, Marlow, by focusing on notions of reality rooted in society and work, has the ability to sustain his reality-ego and survive the journey that claimed Kurtz’s life.

Conclusion

This paper aims to answer the question of what psychological factors contribute to the outcomes of Marlow and Kurtz, where Marlow survives and Kurtz dies. The answer this paper argues for is Marlow’s ability to sustain the reality-ego, and Kurtz’s inability to do so as he regresses into the pleasure-ego. Freud’s own account in *Formulations Regarding the Two Principles in Mental Functioning* (1911) establishes that the ability to sustain the reality-ego is neither fixed nor guaranteed by the presence of psychic functions. In addition, this ability depends on how the psychic functions of *attention*, *impartial passing of judgement* and *thinking* interact with a subject’s existing focus and bias towards an external item or notion. Marlow’s psychic functions are influenced by his focus being aimed towards what is real, like work or exploration, consequently, reinforcing reality as he encounters Africa’s isolation and wilderness. Contrastingly, Kurtz’s psychic functions are focused and biased towards his need for domination and pleasure. In Kurtz’s case, this focus on what is desirable and pleasurable entrenches his psychic functions towards his bias, accelerating his regression into the pleasure-ego and primitivity.

The three sections this paper provides trace the mechanism behind the ability to sustain the reality-ego in stages. The first section establishes Marlow and Kurtz’s baseline focus before Africa’s pressure is applied, showing that their psychic functions are influenced by their distinct focuses. The second section examines what happens once the pressure of isolation and wilderness arrives, tracing how Marlow’s reality-ego holds while Kurtz’s gives way. Moreover, this section clarifies that regression does not introduce new desires but strips the existing ones of their societal mediation. The third and final section draws out the consequences Freud’s own definition promises. Because the reality-ego, and not the pleasure-ego, “can do nothing but strive for what is useful and guard itself against damage” (223), its presence or absence has literal stakes. Marlow’s survival and Kurtz’s death are contributed to by this difference, where Marlow’s grasp on reality allows him to discern real danger, and where Kurtz’s regression no longer allows him to perceive it.

This paper departs from previous research, which often diversifies its approach across multiple domains like psychology, symbolism, colonialism or sociology. By using Freud's theoretical apparatus, pushed, where necessary, beyond Freud's implicit statements, this paper adopts a psychoanalytical approach that can account for both characters' outcomes of survival and death, and their journeys in Africa, without recourse to morality, imperialism or symbolism as explanatory frameworks. Additionally, this paper's utilisation of e.g. Maqsood's reading shows that even similar methodology can yield different results, in effect offering the psychoanalytical approach as a valuable way to approach literature, among several other possible approaches. To conclude, this paper's psychoanalytical approach to the journeys and outcomes of Marlow and Kurtz is done through analysing their distinct abilities to sustain the reality-ego, as based on Freud's paper about pleasure and reality principles, which explains their conduct, and in consequence contributes to their distinct outcomes where Marlow survives and Kurtz dies.

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