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Nietzsche, Freud, and *Heart of Darkness*

Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* can be used to illustrate parts of the philosophy of both Friedrich Nietzsche in *Genealogy of Morals* and Sigmund Freud in *Psychoanalysis in Culture*. The behavior of Kurtz and Marlow provide excellent examples of Nietzsche's concepts of guilt and asceticism, as well as Freud's concepts of primitive man and behavior. Kurtz represents the man who has overcome his Christian upbringing, his asceticism, and his super-ego, while Marlow is a man with great restraint, still strongly tied to his Western Christian ideals and moralities.

According to Nietzsche, guilt is a feeling that arises not from any kind of innate knowledge of what is right and wrong, but rather from the way in which we are raised. A Christian environment fosters a sense of guilt in people when they do something that they have been told is wrong (Kimmerling 49). This characteristic, which Nietzsche categorizes as Christian, is exemplified by Marlow, who is compelled to do what he has been told is right in various situations throughout *Heart of Darkness*. He feels guilt when, in a fit of what they call "sport," the English passengers aboard his boat open fire on the native Africans lining the bank of the river down which Marlow is sailing. Marlow purposely scares the natives away when he sees "the pilgrims on deck getting out their

rifles with an air of anticipating a jolly lark" (Conrad 69). Later on, when Kurtz flees from Marlow's ship, Marlow gives chase to bring him back despite the fact that he too is tempted by "the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness... with forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of monstrous and gratified passions (Conrad 67). Marlow, however, is able to resist the pull of the jungle because of his fear of Nietzsche's concept of guilt and the fact that he is convinced that his actions are "good" as opposed to Kurtz's "evil." Even though he feels something "invincible" in the power of the African wilderness, his imprinted sense of right and wrong forces him to resist it (Miller 34).

According to Nietzsche's belief of what is "right" and what is "wrong," none of Kurtz's heinous crimes could actually be considered "evil." Nietzsche's philosophy that "right" and "wrong" are simply learned behaviors rather than deeply ingrained instincts could be used to excuse nearly any crime, because if a behavior or belief can be learned, it can surely be unlearned just as well. Marlow is a perfect example of someone operating under these learned behaviors; he "insists upon the distinction between truth and lies", between right and wrong, and between good and evil without ever thinking about them critically and making a decision for himself (Kaplan 325). Because Marlow is part of a distinct society and social group, unlike the isolated Kurtz, he "acts in harmony with a

higher and less personal notion of utility and honor,” not thinking only about his personal gratification (Holub 23).

Nietzsche also states that the ascetic ideal is man's method of giving meaning to his life. Because man suffers, he longs for a reason for his suffering, and through asceticism, he encounters his own will. By denying himself material gratification, which can also be thought of as facing off with the will and winning, man imbues his life with meaning: his purpose is to continually conquer his own "primitive" instincts and desires (Nietzsche 100). Kurtz, who was once a man with an ascetic ideal like Marlow and most everyone else in his previous Western culture, has given it up in favor of hedonism after being supplanted to another continent where he is not accountable for his actions in relation to British society. His “moral isolation”, permits him to act on his impulses freely, without fear of judgement by his peers (Goonetilleke 14). Instead of denying his will, he has embraced it fully, and has therefore returned to Nietzsche's idea of primitive man, or "the animal man." He lives a life devoid of meaning because he has ceased to deny his will, the act which, according to Nietzsche, separates man from animals (Nietzsche 100).

Kurtz's situation in *Heart of Darkness* can be seen as a metaphor for Freud's concepts of the ego and super-ego. Kurtz himself is representative of the ego, the will and

instincts of man, and the society from whence he came represents the super-ego, imposing various social and religious restraints on the ego. When the super-ego is left behind, the ego is free to act as it sees fit, just as Kurtz does when he leaves Britain behind and heads into the wilds of Africa where he can fulfill his base desires and instincts without fear of guilt or retribution.

Freud believes that a people's instincts are the primary driving force in their life, and the most important factor in motivating their actions. From birth, human beings are driven to experience physical pleasure in all of its various forms, and until their super-ego develops, they do not have the restraint necessary to stop themselves from ruthlessly seeking pleasure wherever they might find it. The super-ego is a part of the mind that develops in order to keep the pleasure-seeking part of the mind in check, to keep people's behavior within the range of the socially acceptable so that they are not cast out of their society (Thornton 87). Unlike Marlow, Kurtz is no longer able to repress his primal urges. Kurtz is made to confront "his kinship with primitive man, and granted the opportunity to gratify his primitive lusts to their absolute full, Kurtz succumbs completely... Marlow does precisely the opposite" (Ridley 45). Marlow does, however, understand Kurtz's temptation "because he has experienced the same temptation;" seeing

Kurtz's descent into near-madness only strengthens Marlow's resolve to restrain himself (Gillon 69).

Only a few of Kurtz's transgressions are explicitly described in *Heart of Darkness*. When Marlow arrives at Kurtz's encampment, the first thing he sees are the heads of native Africans, chopped off and placed on stakes around Kurtz's jungle home (Conrad 40). It is understood that Kurtz has murdered countless numbers of tribesmen, although Marlow never witnesses the man commit any sort of crime. It is implied that Kurtz has been in a relationship with a "barbarous and superb" native woman who is later shot by the Englishmen on board Marlow's ship (Conrad 69), and it is even more carefully hinted throughout the book that he has engaged in cannibalism as the tribesmen do (Perry 48). While in the jungle, free from restraint, he has gratified all of his urges, from the drive to obtain sexual pleasure, to the instinct to kill and possibly consume his enemies. Just as Freud's psychoanalyses attempt to delve into man's innermost desires, Kurtz has gone on "a night journey into the unconscious, a mythic descent into the underworld" (Parry 39), and fails to come out of his own dark depths alive. Conrad, like Freud, believes that "the mind of man is capable of anything- because everything is in it" (Conrad 37).

Freud's postulations about man's behavior also fit well with Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*. The acts which Kurtz commits, while they may seem extremely evil and inexcusable, are actually easily explained as normal behavior for a man thrown into a "primitive" society. Kurtz's involvement with the African woman is to be expected, since he had become the "oldest and strongest male" in the tribe in which he lived, which made him capable of making whatever sexual choices he wished (Picart 90). As the strongest male, it also became his prerogative to keep the other males in line, hence his murder of them and grisly display of their heads as a deterrent.

Freud's theory can most easily relate to Kurtz's participation in the tribes' cannibalistic rituals. In *Psychoanalysis in Culture*, Freud vividly describes the importance of "totem meals," ceremonies in which a tribe or clan devour an animal which symbolizes their deity or "tribal ancestor" (Freud 94). Whether the tribe in question happens to consume a wolf, an alligator, or even another human being, this ritual is what ties them to their deity, the center of their personal and communal life. By taking part in the most important religious ritual of the people he had come to rule, Kurtz becomes an embodiment of "ruthless power" (Conrad 71), and fully incorporates himself into the African society, leaving behind every trace of his former British self.

The characters of Kurtz and Marlow in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* illustrate parts of the philosophies of Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche. Kurtz is a man who has dismissed his super-ego and embraced his will, whereas Marlow is Freud's definition of "repressed" and claims a distinction between "right" and "wrong."

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