Heart of Darkness: a Journey through the Unconscious Mind

In Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, sailor and narrator Marlow recounts the story of how he traversed the then-unexplored African Congo and found in its center Kurtz, a reclusive man so revered by his imperialist peers as to have been made into a sort of legend. Using the alien, savage setting of uncivilized Africa, Conrad explores and speaks to the nature of the innermost workings of the unconscious mind as first described by Sigmund Freud. In Freud’s model, which utilizes the metaphor of an iceberg, the great majority of the mind lies below the figurative surface of consciousness. The id, which is comprised of our most primal drives and desires, rests far below the surface where we are not consciously aware of its existence. In *Heart of Darkness*, the id is represented by the savagery of uncivilized Africa and its people. Next to develop is the ego, which resides primarily in our conscious mind above the figurative surface, and reasons with the needs of the id based on the standards of our society—Conrad’s ego equivalent is European civilization. Last is the superego, which extends from the conscious surface deep into the unconscious recesses of our mind alongside the id, and functions to control the id’s primal impulses and push the ego to strive for morally sound, as opposed to simply acceptable, behavior. In the story, Kurtz himself serves to represent the superego, or more specifically a superego out of place, coming into direct contact with the id. While this relation
may be pessimistic given Kurtz’s fate, it’s only befitting of the message Conrad means to communicate: In his heart, every man is ultimately driven by darkness.

The concept of introspection is first hinted at before Marlow begins telling his story, by one of his shipmates who, observing him, describes him as “[having] the pose of a Buddha… without a lotus flower” (Conrad 69). It is with this reverent description that Marlow begins his story. First, he speaks briefly of his childhood, wherein he remembers longingly poring over the empty, unmarked area of the map in Africa, along the Congo River. He describes it as resembling “an immense snake uncoiled with… its tail lost in the depths of the land.” His fascination with the unknown and uncivilized parallels humankind’s being constantly drawn to the inner desires of the unconscious id, and the river’s being compared to a snake, the Archetypal symbol of sin, only reinforces the Freudian parallel. However, growing up Marlow’s reality is of civilized Europe, in a society long-dictated by norms and morals (regardless of said morals’ questionable nature). As such, this setting serves to symbolize the ego, originally defined by Freud as “that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world” (McLeod)—the external world in this case represented by civilization. Marlow, true to his earlier depiction as a meditative idol in search of self-awareness, takes his first chance as an adult to delve into the unexplored Congo, leaving the realm of his ego and traveling into his unconscious mind.

The nature of this world becomes very clear upon his arrival. Marlow describes his first look at the tribal African population in which the id is clearly manifested as “a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage.” It is alien to him, but at the same time he realizes its resonance within himself. As
Marlow puts it, “what [thrilled him] was just the thought of their humanity—like [his]—the thought of [his] remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar.” (Conrad 105) He sees it as evil and denounces it as ugly, but does not deny its presence in every man, no matter how civilized. “It was ugly enough”, he says to his listeners, “but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you… a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend.” (Conrad 106). It would even appear that the instinctual evil and chaos Marlow encounters here is stronger than the will of the civil ego, as many European colonists have taken to immoral and selfish practices in the absence of a society to judge or punish them for it. This theme of savagery, or id, as dominant and the root of humanity is something Conrad reinforces repeatedly throughout the book, and could be interpreted as his own response or addition to Freud’s ideas.

Piercing deeper into the jungle in spite of the constant selfishness and corruption he encounters, Marlow only ever finds more of the ugliness of the id. There is only one thing that drives him forward: Kurtz. As his journey has progressed Marlow has learned more and more of the esteemed, cultured man said to lead the innermost station in the operation. He’s described as “a remarkable person” (Conrad 84), an “exceptional man” (Conrad 89) who embodies the ideals of European culture and is said to be attempting himself to civilize the natives. Kurtz, or at least the Kurtz Marlow comes to know prior to meeting him, is an embodiment of the superego. The superego’s function according to Freud’s model is “to control the id’s impulses, especially those which society forbids, such as sex and aggression.” It consists of the ideal self, an “imaginary picture of how you ought to be”, as well as the conscience. Based solely on what Marlow hears of him, Kurtz is a perfect embodiment of the Ideal self, and as such he is sought out eagerly. However, When Marlow finally meets Kurtz he is horrified by what he finds. The man who for
Marlow has come to embody a beacon of hope for the goodness of man has in reality fallen himself to the evils present all around him. Based on the testimonies of those who knew him, as well as what he later has to say himself, it’s apparent that Kurtz’s intentions were the best. Reinforcing his role as superego, he came to Africa with the goal of bringing peace and civilization to the savages, battling and suppressing the primal nature of the id. But consistent with the message Conrad ultimately seeks to communicate, the id was evidently far more powerful than he could handle, and he himself was overtaken by it.

Marlow is disheartened by what he finds, but chooses to take Kurt’s side against his peers regardless, seeing through to the man’s initial good, or at the very least his genius. The perseverance of his belief in the superego in spite of the circumstance reinforces his role as a spiritual thinker optimistically searching the inner self in pursuit of enlightenment. And he isn’t wrong: while Kurtz may no longer represent the “ideal self”, he still serves as the superego. It is when Kurtz is finally removed from the densely packed evils of his environment that he begins to reflect the superego in its second sense. His idealistic image in shambles having given in fully to darkness, Kurtz now begins to embody the superego’s conscience aspect. The conscience, according to Freud’s theory, functions to “[punish]… through guilt” “behavior which falls short of the ideal self” (McLeod). Fittingly enough, Kurtz falls sick and is haunted on his deathbed by the evils he adopted and his failure to carry out his initial plans for bringing civilization and ego to savagery and id. His last words, if nothing else, indisputably demonstrate the severity of his suffering—his punishment—as he dies. As Marlow recounts, “he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath: ‘The horror! The horror!’” (Conrad 147). With that, Marlow experiences the death of the superego in his symbolic journey.
Joseph Conrad uses deeply ingrained parallels consistent with Freudian psychology to tell the allegorical story of a soul-searcher traversing the unconscious mind of man. Using the historical pretense of European imperialism in Africa, he creates a setting of savage Africa, civil Europe, and a remarkable man to closely reflect Freud’s model of our inner psyche, and uses this setting to drive home his own theme. *Heart of Darkness* seeks to communicate that despite the influence and image of goodness and morality, the nature of man is at its core one of inextinguishable, primitive darkness.