The Repression of Dream Work

“What is involved is an actual repression of some content of thought and a return of repressed content, not a cessation of belief in the reality of such a content.” --Freud (“The Uncanny”)

The kaleidoscope of dreams, dream-like imagery, dream-like passages, and subtle allusions to vision as being an inadequate means of truly seeing “the horror” in Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness* is an apparent motif from the moment the reader boards the *Nellie* along with Marlow and Conrad’s unnamed narrator (Conrad 85). Yet, in a world in which Marlow’s “vain” struggle to relate and “to convey the dream-sensation” of his experiences in the Congo is pervaded by these same literal feelings of horror within Marlow himself, it is clear to the audience that more lies beneath the surface of Marlow’s sailor’s yarn (42). Marlow’s comparison of this impossibility of narrative to that of a dream takes on a new significance, however, when paralleled with Sigmund Freud’s grandiose work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In fact, utilizing his psychoanalytic text as a lens for approaching the framework of *Heart of Darkness*, it becomes apparent that the prevalence of dream-like structures and ambiguous imagery within Conrad’s novel are self-consciously placed for their obscurity, and allow for a deeper realization of the truth underlying Marlow’s narrative—one so devastating in magnitude that it must be repressed by Marlow and manifested instead as dream-thoughts. As such, it can be seen that the dream-like qualities in Marlow's narrative are not only necessary to the relation of the story overall, but are the only means by which Marlow can fully reveal "the horror" to his audience on the *Nellie* without revealing to himself the underlying truth that he is just as fully a part of the horror as well (Conrad 85).

Often critically theorized as either one of *Heart of Darkness*’s greatest strengths or, contrastingly, critiqued as its primary flaw is what is typically referred to as the novel’s “impressionism” (Brantlinger 304). This style manifests itself as a sensory overload of
ambiguous imagery and hazy details that shroud the meaning of the text in a “schizophrenic”
kaleidoscope (Brantlinger 313) of sounds, colors, and “adjectival insistence upon the
inexpressible,” all of which at first seem to neglect the achievement of an overall concrete
message in lieu of obfuscations, much like the indistinct brushstrokes of impressionist art (qtd. in
Achebe 1784). Conrad admits in his preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus, however, that his
goal is not, in fact, to obscure through such ambiguity, but to reveal meaning: “by the power of
the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is before all to make you see” (Conrad
xlix). This impressionistic style, what Conrad calls “impression conveyed through the senses”
(Conrad xlviii) is also strikingly reminiscent of dream-language within Heart of Darkness,
especially when paralleled with Freud’s definition in his essay excerpt “The Dream Work,”
which Freud says must forego the “pictorial” image as a whole in favor of smaller instances of
symbolism: “The dream content, on the other hand, is expressed as if it were in a pictographic
script, the characters of which have to be transposed individually into the language of dream-
thoughts. If we attempted to read these characters according to their pictorial value instead of
according to their symbolic relation, we should clearly be led into error” (Freud 501).

There is no doubt that Conrad’s intent with Heart of Darkness was one of revelation
(though as seen in the contrasting readings of Chinua Achebe and Edward Said, what is
“revealed” to his audience is highly contested), but just as the narrator in Heart of Darkness
notes that meaning for Marlow’s story lay “not inside like a kernel but outside,” and, “made
visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine” (Conrad 20), so too is the “meaning” of Heart
of Darkness found in its presentation, its stylized structure being both as hazy as “moonshine”
and as symbolically charged as dream content, rather than in its “pictorial” appearance as a mere
sailor’s yarn. It makes sense, then, that Patrick Brantlinger writes in his essay, “Heart of
*Darkness: Anti-Imperialism, Racism, or Impressionism?* that Conrad’s use of impressionism “is the fragile skein of discourse that expresses—or disguises—this ‘schizophrenic’ contradiction as an apparently harmonious whole” (Brantlinger 305). To be sure, Brantlinger makes an apt observation with his statement. The stylistic indistinctness in *Heart of Darkness*, its essential “schizophrenic” presentation as paralleled with the “manifest content” of dreams, is precisely what Freud terms “organically determined sensations;” symbolically vague abstractions and impressions through which both Conrad and Marlow are able to reveal the depth of the narrative’s underlying truth, or its “latent dream-thoughts” (Freud 501), language itself being incapable of doing so adequately, which Marlow repeatedly notes as he relates his narrative: “The essentials of this affair lay deep under the surface, beyond my reach, and beyond my power of meddling” (Conrad 54).

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud comments on these same “limitat[ions]” and the “impotence” of “the descriptive arts” as a means of expression, comparing it to the clear visual articulations of “painting [...] in comparison with poetry,” and in doing so demonstrates dream imagery as a more precise manner of representation (Freud 101). Thus, it makes sense for Marlow to utilize the impressionist qualities of dream-imagery in his narration as an attempt to describe the full sensations of his experience in the Africa. Having seen the monstrosities of the colonial camp firsthand as he first arrives, Marlow admits the incapability of his words to completely describe the horrific treatment of the natives, and the inexpressibility of the cruel hypocrisies and abuses of the white European emissaries, linking them directly to the idea of dreaming. He breaks free of his narrator role to exclaim at his *Nellie* shipmates, “Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of
absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment, […] that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams…” (Conrad 42).

In explicitly comparing the “absurdity” of his narrative to the “nonsensical” appearance of a dream, Marlow effectively links his own narration to that of “the language of dream thoughts,” and thus posits the two together to provide context for his impressionist imagery throughout the remainder of the novel (Freud 501). He further remarks on this absurd dream imagery as being “truth—truth stripped of its cloak of time,” with the “dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it” (Conrad 51), an effect which Freud calls “psychical value,” or a particular “vividness” that attaches itself to the essential idea within the “dream-thoughts” (Freud 503). Thus, combining both men’s assessment of the relation of dreams, as well as Conrad’s own appraisal of his stylistic and aesthetic choices, it can be seen that underlying Marlow’s seemingly schizophrenic imagery is a purposeful dream-like structure, with a “psychical value” that reveals a meaningful truth beneath its array of sensations and ambiguity—“a style that seeks to be its own meaning, apart from any ‘kernel’ or center” (Brantlinger 313). Thus, it is the method of Marlow’s narration—it’s dream-like presentation and descriptions—that holds the essential Truth of *Heart of Darkness*.

Examples of this impressionist imagery as reminiscent of the hazy “hallucinatory” appearance of dream content (Freud 18) are strewn throughout Conrad’s novel, particularly in moments where a revelation of its underlying truth is about to take place. Marlow increasingly uses dense layers of sensations to describe the “enearthly” feel of the atmosphere as he travels up the Congo towards Kurtz, complex phrases such as the “stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention,” which refers to the permeated the darkness of the riverbank and took the “shape of an unrestful and noisy dream” (Conrad 49). Marlow also uses vague imagery
to depict the physical realities of the Congo, hazy and ambiguous and adjective-laden
descriptions that give only the barest essentials, the immediate sensations that often defamiliarize
and mystify, such as when he describes Kurtz’s writing as giving “the notion of an exotic
Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence” (Conrad 65), or his trip up the Congo as merely,
“An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest” (Conrad 48). Likewise, deceptively
simple and contradicting descriptions such as “opaque air,” “tumultuous and mournful uproar”
are also abundant, on top of a continuous play with light and complex montages of colors
(Conrad 55). Such obfuscations have the initial appearance of failing to describe their respective
ideas adequately, though from a critical perspective, these contradictory phrases still retain the
hazy aura of a dream through their inexpressibility.

That being said, however, Marlow’s use of such hazy and impressionistic illustrations is
still a seemingly ineffective one, at least according to critics such as Fredric Jameson, who points
to Conrad’s use of such imagery as a means of obscuring the text’s contradictions (Brantlinger
304), or Chinua Achebe who classifies such narrative techniques as “trickery,” and a means of
“inducing hypnotic stupor” in readers while “pretending” to record truth (Achebe 1784).
According to Freud’s dream theory, however, such obfuscations are neither a façade nor trickery
put in place by Conrad, but rather the fault of the dangerous inexpressibility of the content itself,
which comes through in Marlow’s vague and often contradictory language: “If the dream lacks
ability to express these relations, the psychic material of which the dream is wrought must be
responsible” (Freud 111). By avoiding specifics and purposefully rendering inexactitudes as the
primary means by which Marlow relays his narrative, Conrad effectively sets up Marlow as
harboring unspoken truths and devastations in the dangerous latent “psychic material” of his
story that are unable to be expressed in narrative language, but are presented in obscure and
symbolic dream language in lieu of addressing those unspoken truths directly. According to
Freud, “The obscurity manifested by the dream, therefore, is […] a portion of the material which
excited it. A part of this material was represented in the form of the dream. The form of the
dream or of dreaming is used with astonishing frequency to represent the concealed content”
(Freud 111). Based on this explanation of the repression of “concealed content,” which Freud
also refers to as a “dream censor,” it becomes even clearer that Marlow’s narrative has more
beneath its surface (Freud 102).

The truth that is, in effect, repressed by Marlow can then be found in the ruptures in the
text, the very places where his language becomes hazy and dream-like as a result of a
psychological repression of underlying truths. Just before Marlow describes his “vain attempt”
to relate his tale, he falls into a series of impressionist images that symbolically allude to his
repressed memories, but convey only the briefest of sensations to instead avoid addressing the
meaning behind them. After meeting with the manager, he describes the forest behind the camp
as harboring “mystery,” “greatness,” and “the amazing reality of its concealed life,” all of which
are mere vague abstractions, and again invokes the hazy image of it glowing “spectrally in the
moonlight” (Conrad 39). What Marlow avoids addressing here, the memory he represses to
instead focus on the forest and the moonlight is the presence of a “nigger [who] moaned feebly
[…] and then fetched a great sigh,” having been beaten to death by a group of pilgrims with
sticks for his “transgression” of making noise (Conrad 40-41). But through the avoidance of this
topic—his feelings on which he never explicitly states—and his description of the landscape he
looks at in lieu of addressing the African’s death directly, the symbolism of those hazy images
becomes clearly indicative of that unarticulated memory, but the meaning behind it as well.
Through Marlow, Conrad presents an ironic contradiction in this scene. Marlow praises the
“greatness” of the forest through “the silence of the land [which] went home to one’s very heart;” however, rather than being silent, the forest is actually filled with the horrific sounds of this native being murdered, should Marlow choose to listen or acknowledge it (Conrad 41). Likewise, when Marlow states the “amazing reality of its concealed life,” it is again ironic for that same reason: life is nowhere to be found in the forest, as it is also home to the grove of death (Conrad 32). Yet, these details are shrouded by the nature of Marlow’s language and such glossing over of brutal realities suggests that perhaps he is not only repressing the memory itself, but his association with it: “I became in an instant as much of a pretence as the rest of the bewitched pilgrims” (Conrad 42).

A similar type of repression is perhaps even clearer as Marlow travels to Kurtz on the Congo, when his language diverges yet again into impressionistic abstractions: “The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances. On silvery sandbanks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side... It came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence” (Conrad 49). Here, Marlow’s language is not hiding a specific memory as much as it is preparing for a particular revelation. According to Freud, “Comments on the dream and seemingly harmless observations about it often serve in the most subtle manner to conceal—although they usually betray—a part of what is dreamed” (Freud 113).

When Marlow compares these observant realities to a dream in this scene, he “betrays” the act of concealment that is beneath them. The “overshadowed distances” can be seen as the heart of darkness he is literally about to travel through on the steamer, as well as figuratively the reality of the darkness that he has come to discover within himself, symbolized by the revealing
“silvery” light on the banks as demonstrative of this discovery, and just as “overwhelming” and “strange” as that of the European brutalities he wishes to “forget.” The hippos and alligators can be seen to symbolize the conflicting African natives and European emissaries: the alligator, which is typically seen as dark, savage and exotic, much like the European view of the Africans, and the hippo as representative of the white “flabby devil” (Conrad 31)—both equally as animalistic and threatening in their foreignness. In revealing the similarities between the two beasts, Conrad/Marlow shows them to be the same, or that the Europeans are just as savage as the African primitives they seek to colonize. However, in doing so, Marlow comes to his own realization of himself: in characterizing the Europeans as equally primitive as the African natives, Marlow becomes the European monster he seeks to distance himself from by looking at the natives as primitive themselves, a fact he wishes to repress through his distraction of vague dream-imagery:

We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. (Conrad 51)

Relegating the Europeans equally as “ugly” as the “unearthly” Africans, whose relation to the Europeans can only be described by Marlow as “remote,” “horrid,” and “monstrous” demonstrates Marlow’s colonial and racist attitude, though it be in an underhand fashion. That Marlow even admits that to be in “kinship” with such a “wild and passionate uproar” is “the worst of it” further demonstrates an ironic attitude of European thought which Conrad himself wishes to demonize. Thus, it is this very attitude, this truthful revelation that “would come slowly” to Marlow is one of horrific devastation, that effectively links him with “the horror” of
the European brutality and hypocrisies demonstrated through the rest of the novel, that must be repressed by Marlow, and relegated into obfuscating dream-imagery as a means of shrouding it from his conscious, though it is made clear to the audience.

Critic Dino Felluga writes in his published lectures that, “According to Freud, the very act of entering into civilized society entails the repression of various archaic, primitive desires” (Felluga). For Marlow, this statement is surprisingly accurate; his clear association with the “primitive” and barbaric desires of his fellow Europeans is a truth too horrifying to admit as he relates his story on the Nellie, one which must be suppressed, but which nevertheless recurs and manifests itself in dream-content like imagery that can be interpreted by the audience, though it remains obscured to Marlow himself as a form of repression. The impressionistic style of *Heart of Darkness*, then, is necessary to the presentation of the narrative overall. It not only portrays the truth of human brutality more effectively than can “descriptive arts,” but shields Marlow from addressing his identification with said truth outright, camouflaging the horror of his association, while Conrad himself uses this identification as a tool to educate his audience. Thus, to some degree Fredric Jameson’s determination of Marlow/Conrad’s language within the text as a means of obscuring its contradictions has merit as well; the hazy and adjectival dream-language of Marlow’s narrative ensures that he can gloss over his repressed memories and identifications, which reveal themselves beneath his “middle-ground” presentation of being aligned with neither Africa or Europe. As a result, Freud’s epithetic statement can be seen to encompass the whole of Conrad’s novel: what underlies Marlow’s yarn is a repression of the truth, or his paralleling of European thought, and thus his “talking cure” mode of narration is likewise a return of this repressed content, though not a cessation of belief in the innate hypocrisies of that content itself.
Works Cited


---. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. CHP Special Collections. Web. 22 April 2013.
