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## **A Deviation from Tradition – the Unusual Narrative Technique of Heart of Darkness**

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### **Abstract**

*Joseph Conrad's novella Heart of Darkness based on his personal experience of working in Belgian Congo explores the horrible effects of imperialism and racism in Africa. It also tries to shed light on the dark corners of human psyche. To fulfill this complex purpose Conrad adopts a new technique of frame narration from multiple perspectives rejecting the age old tradition of third person linear narration. This paper discusses the main themes present in the story and analyses various narrative techniques used by Conrad in developing the story into a narrative.*

**Key Words: Narrator, Technique, Diegesis, Impression, Darkness, Journey, Point, View.**

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Heart of Darkness a novella written by the Polish-British writer Joseph Conrad first appeared serially in 1899. Heart of Darkness was based on Conrad's own exploration of the African country of Congo and the famous river Congo flowing through that country. In the year 1890 he sailed upon the river Congo as the captain of a Belgium steamship. A very large part of the country known as the Congo was at that time under the imperialist rule of the Belgian king Leopold II. Conrad had worked as the captain of a river steamship plying between the trading stations which the imperialist Belgian government had established along the river Congo mainly to gather ivory and export it to Belgium from where it was sold to various European nations who made use of it for manufacturing ornaments of all kinds and for manufacturing miscellaneous other articles as well. Ivory was the chief commodity which the agents of the Belgian trading companies collected on behalf of their employers and dispatched to Belgium. Although Conrad did not participate in any trading activity himself being the captain of the steamboat he closely observed the conditions which prevailed in Congo. From his first hand experiences he formed his own impressions of the kind of life which the local Africans were leading under the imperialist Belgian rule. He also watched the mentality and manners of the white colonizers in their dealings with the native people. All of these experiences are reflected in the novel Heart of Darkness.

The twentieth century is generally known as the period of modernism. But the term 'modernism in case of literature does not imply a chronological modernity; rather it refers to an extra historical category consisting in a programmatic departure from conventionality. Hence, modern fiction is one which explores the psychological complexities appealing to modern sensibility with the introduction of a new type of narration which deviates from traditional narrative technique. Therefore if we have to locate modernistic features in *Heart of Darkness* we have to make a thorough analysis of both its form and its content. What first attracts our attention is the title of the novel. The title *Heart of Darkness* is a juxtaposition of contradictory ideas. Heart is organic; darkness is inorganic. Inorganic darkness has then an organic centre of feeling. Again, heart is concrete; darkness is abstract. How can a good entity like heart becomes a controlling part of a bad one like darkness? At the metaphorical level *Heart of Darkness* refers to the centre of the darkest part of the darkest continent i.e. Congo in Africa. Africa is dark not only because of its forests but because it is uncivilized, unenlightened. However, as the novel progresses various forms of darkness appear e.g. darkness of jungles, darkness of blindness, and darkness of hell and at last the darkness of heart. So the title is ironical. 'Heart of Darkness' is at bottom about the darkness of heart. This enigmatic nature of the title clearly points to the modernist bias of the writer.

On the surface level the novel is an adventure story, a story of a very difficult and hazardous journey of Marlow towards Congo, the Belgian colony in Africa. Apparently the novel may be regarded as a critique on colonialism because with the progress of journey of Marlow the oppression and exploitation of the black native people by the white colonialists are gradually unfolded. Thus Conrad not only exposes the oppression over the native people but also the degeneration of the white colonialists. In the deeper level the journey of Marlow is a psychological journey in search of truth with physical and psychological hindrances along the route. It is also again a voyage into the psychic darkness of Kurtz. With the meeting with Kurtz's intended after Kurtz's death the journey of Marlow finally ends and the readers discovers Marlow in the pose of meditating Buddha at the end of the novel. This pose symbolically implies that through the experiences of his journey Marlow finally becomes enlightened.

To describe this complex story of man being set against wilderness and its consequences, Conrad uses an unusual narrative style. He deliberately avoids the traditional third person intrusive omniscient narrator precisely because it usually gives a mechanically complete picture of an object or person. Therefore he moves away from a limited third person point of view to partly symbolic and partly impressionistic mode that would be far more appropriate and realistic. He is definitely an innovator as far as the structure of the novel concerned. There are two narrators present in the novel. The first narrator appears before the readers at the very beginning of the book. It is him the first narrator who tells about the boat 'Nellie' lying anchored in the river Thames and about the men on the deck of this boat. It is also this first narrator who introduces the second narrator to the readers. The first narrator's name is not mentioned though the second narrator is named as Charles Marlow. The main plot of the story is revealed to the readers by the second narrator though

the first narrator intervenes sometimes. So there is a blend of stories of two narrators. The first narrator is mostly a listener of the second narrator's story but occasionally when the second narrator takes a break first narrator starts his line of story.

The first part of the novel tells us how Marlow, a jobless youth gets a job in an ivory company through the recommendation of an influential aunt. Commissioned by the company Marlow accompanied by a number of sailors started for Congo where an agent of the company named Kurtz lay seriously ill. Marlow would have to take him back to London for his medical treatment. The journey exposed to Marlow a varied series of experiences often grim and gloomy. For example as he first arrives at the station, he finds pieces of things lying scattered calling up a picture of chaos and disorder. Every few minutes a dynamite explosion shakes the ground as the native batter a rock cliff to construct a rail road. There are several poor local black people chained and persecuted. They suffer from starvation and over-work. On the stark contrast of this dismal picture Marlow also finds out the chief accountant of the company obviously a white man a very neatly dressed person who keeps everything including his accounting books in a very organized and tidy manner in his chamber. However he is completely indifferent to whatever happening in the outside of his premises. Marlow finds out the second station is situated in a more desolate and muddy place within the dense forest. This place is full of a number of aimless men who are wandering in circles and thinking of ivory. Marlow ironically calls them 'pilgrims'. In this station a fire breaks out. However it is brought under control and one black local boy is suspected for doing this mischief. As a result he is captured immediately and lynched forth with. At last Marlow reached the inner station after trudging a long distance till he meets Kurtz in his cabin. The second part of the story is about the meeting with Mr. Kurtz and bringing him back to the civilized world for treatment by a return journey. Marlow becomes quite curious about the life and personality of Mr. Kurtz. He learns from the Russian man about Mr. Kurtz's control and popularity over the native people. And Marlow surprisingly observes that Mr. Kurtz is almost running an empire of his own among the natives abiding by the traditions and customs of the native people. Again Mr. Kurtz although is very sick, is also very reluctant to leave his place among the natives. However on their return journey he dies of his sickness.

In senses more than one, *Heart of Darkness* is a story within a story. If it is a journey from London to Congo, it is also a story of journey from the surface of light to the bottom of darkness. It is again a story of invasion suggesting a parallelism between the Romans invading England and Europeans invading Africa. It is quietly implied that when European ivory merchants go to Congo they only add to the suffering of the poor native people. In fact the story of exploitation in the name of the advancement of civilization takes on different facades with the progress of time though the core of it remains unaltered.

< There is also another very unique feature used by Conrad in this novel which can be called cinematic technique because of the shifts of the time in the story line. As in a modern cinema we often see the use of flash back and flash forward technique Conrad uses the same

thing in his novel perfectly. The narrator's time frame frequently jumps to future or past from present and after sometimes it returns to present.

Modern period fictions mark a difference from the conventional in its technical orientation. While attempt to explore the unconscious have led to the birth of 'stream of consciousness' method the endeavour to present a four dimensional figure has given rise to the 'multiple point of view technique' in narrative schematization. And it is out of the fusion these two types of narration in the first person and in the third person that there springs a fresh bouncing method of storytelling which Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* uses very skillfully.

The introduction of many narrators is the most remarkable feature of Conrad's narrative technique in *Heart of Darkness*. The fiction aestheticizes a journey within- a psychological voyage. It is for the exploration of the psyche of the central personage the novelist has to filter his own views through those of others. Hence the necessity of many narrators arises. Presumably Conrad weaves a complex series of a parallel relationship as Kurtz is to Marlow so Marlow is to the first narrator and so the first narrator is to the reader. As a consequence of this intricate narrative design the reader can at least via the first narrator and Marlow peep into the heart of darkness of Kurtz. Between the two narrators - the anonymous narrator or the first narrator and Marlow, the anonymous narrator does the work to frame Marlow's story. Therefore he can be called 'the frame narrator'.

The story is presented in Marlow's words by the anonymous frame narrator and the frame narrator maintains the sense of actuality by referring to the setting. In using this method Conrad returns to the oldest tradition of narration - the old narrative tradition which has its origin in myths and epics. Therefore by using the narrative technique Conrad gives his tale a mythic and epical structure.

Moreover one can examine Conrad's narrative technique under the light of Gerard Genette's thesis. Genette a French linguist in his book *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1980) introduces a term 'diegesis' (*Narrative Discourse*, 42) which means spatial-temporal plane to which the story belongs. If we consider this definition to analyze the narrative technique of *Heart of Darkness* we find the first narrator is 'extra diegetic' and 'homo diegetic' while Marlow is 'intra diegetic' and 'auto diegetic'. The diegesis of the first narrator divided into 'extra' and 'homo' because he is neither the object of anyone else's narration temporally and spatially nor on the same temporal spatial plane of the story. But since he acts in the same diegetic level of the group members listening to Marlow's story he becomes 'homo diegetic'. Marlow on the other hand is both 'intra' and 'auto' because of his action at the first level; he tells his story, his experience to his homo-diegetic listeners. Marlow is the central character of the story qualifying for the description of 'auto-diegetic' narrator.

Another feature of Conrad's narrative technique is the use of sensory impressions. While the sensory Impressions are direct, ideas are combination of memories associations and realizations however the art of impressionism such as Claud Monet's painting 'Soleil Levant'

(1872) sought to capture the fleeting impressions of the moment by means of pure spectral colours with blurred outlines. The same thing observed from two different angles or by two different persons would strike differently. The thing viewed remains the same but what it seems depend on the viewer who brings his own specifics like his mood, his position etc, in short, and his point of view. In *Heart of Darkness* for example a number of characters have been introduced to comment on the central personage - Kurtz. With the effective use of 'multiple point of view', indeed, the character of Kurtz is presented by a series of impressions. The chief accountant has the impression that Kurtz is a 'first class agent' (*Heart of Darkness*, 15) and 'a very remarkable person' (18) while to the manager he is 'an exceptional man of the greatest importance to the company' (12). The Russian's hero worshipping attitude is another impression without rationality. These impressions reflect these persons' limited sensibility to view Kurtz's character as a whole. Thus this impressionism goes on until Marlow himself meets Kurtz and forms his final impression. So The Reader may build up a total personality by rounding up of all these Impressions as in a cinematic Montage or artistic collage. The same impressionistic mode is used to describe the landscape and the journey.

The pictorial quality of the description has a strong affinity with the impressionistic painting. But the texture is not limited to the impressionistic mode alone. In Conrad's hands it assumes a symbolic significance. The ideas that belong to the inner world of the consciousness could be summoned only through the use of symbols. The experience of a vision that cannot be stated can only be suggested through symbols. This point is pointed out by the frame narrator quite early in the novel. To Marlow, "the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside enveloping the tale ... those misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine."(4)

So Marlow's tales are centrifugal. The narrative vehicle has a smaller inside sphere and its function is merely to reveal a circumambient universe of meanings which are not normally visible and cannot be seen except in association with the story, just as the age appears only when there is a glow. Conrad's metaphor clearly implies the complementary and given the symbiotic relationship of the impressionist and symbolist aspects of the narrative as a whole. The symbolic aspect is intangible and theoretically infinite. It is important that the difficulty and obscurity are essential part of what Conrad is trying to convey. Finally it can be said that this new narrative technique adapted by Conrad is not ornamental or mere experimentation with the form of the novel, rather it is instrumental in making The Reader not merely 'hear' or 'feel' but 'see' too and again this style is inevitable because the vision Marlow wants to communicate is incommunicable.

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