

Narrator's Reliability in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness

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Abstract:

Most of time, the major characters in a literary work especially the protagonist is assumed to be, at least, another image of the author. So, the leading character in the novella is another replica of Conrad, who, both in reality and in fiction, plays the main role in the journey to the dark continent and enriches novella with his rational observations. The journey of 1890 that Conrad participated to Congo has transformed him into distorted, full of wounds, emotionally defeated and sickness. Marlowe was very enthusiastic and attempted to polish the ugly picture of imperialism. Therefore, before the journey, he had clashing views that turned the readers to be skeptic about Marlow's story especially in the first part of novella. He has come through violence, and danger of nature, the inability to sense reality and the ethical obscurity. Marlow's unreliability came from his views which are told several times for different characters. He supports the imperialistic and racial views when he called conges as primitives. Even some characters in his journey are unnamed during the journey. This will make readers observe that some incidents, tendencies, feelings, and reactions are not authentic and unreliable because of the narrator's unreliability. Throughout novella, Marlow's attitudes, stands, and views fluctuate and do not meet the readers' expectations. This kind of fluctuation creates the sense of uneasiness, which pervades the whole novella and make readers judge that Marlow is unreliable narrator, who attempts to polish certain ugly images in novella like Kurtz, Europe, company, and imperialism. Marlow was inconsistent in his narrative and there is no doubt that this inconsistency turns him to be unreliable especially when readers find this discrepancy because it destabilizes readers.

Keywords: narrator, unreliable, Africa, imperialism, narrative, and darkness.

There is no doubt that *Heart of Darkness* (1902) is the novella that grants Joseph Conrad's (1857- 1924) his global reputation. The novella depended on the technique of frame- tale in which the narrator, unknown sailor, who was one of the men on their ship Nellie. The ship was waiting for their journey in the Thames. The first time Marlow was introduced to the readers and other

characters by that narrator then he turns to be the principal storyteller. Marlow came across his remorseful and painful past experiences mostly in disorganized and discontinuous manner. He attempted to gather the fragments of the remains of himself and memories to create a story as a kind of regret. Based on this fact, *Heart of Darkness* is a tale told based on memory and personal reflections. Marlow and Thames are both vast and deep. Marlowe told his fragments of the story to the men they accompanied him on the deck of the Nellie, which anchored in Thames river. Marlowe's listeners were of different jobs as a lawyer, an accountant, and a company manager. Marlowe made a digression to link his time to the time of Roman Britain, which was a dark place, as Marlow says, "And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth".¹

The darkness here becomes a true reflection of several things whether physical or material, sometimes even spiritual associated with the history itself. The wilds of Africa are seen dark and source of darkness for the invaders, whites. The history of the invaders is greatly associated with dark and inhumane way of thinking. The continent and the country, Congo, the setting of most of the novella is full of darkness. It is taken as a colony during the reign of King Leopold of Belgium. Marlow, in the beginning, has a belief that the coming of civilized Europeans will eradicate darkness and dimness from those places, and Europeans will bring new life, civilization and light. Marlowe's belief is affirmed when he sits in Buddah like cross-legged in a central place of the boat to show that his existence is very essential for the journey as the mast is important for the boat. Through his words with people on the deck, he shows that he has limited experience to take a decision to travel to Africa. Readers may discover that Marlowe's narration signifies the hardships and moral degradation he encountered during that journey. It is a cleansing journey that transforms Marlowe from supportive to imperialism. Marlow was reborn after passing that painful journey and acquired new understanding of the nature of darkness.²

The atmosphere of uneasiness, stress, and distrust in the novella has been created by different narrators, which in turn made readers feel doubtful about the course of the journey and the authenticity of the narrator's or writer's intentions. The details are told by anonymous narrator, first person or third person narrator. The diverse, sometimes, inaccurate details give us the indication to judge the narrator as unreliable one. Unreliable narrator is first introduced and defined by Booth in 1961 as

The narrator who shows him/herself to be untrustworthy in his/her narration is referred to as unreliable. The reason for the narrator's untrustworthiness is not usually to be found in deliberate falsification on his/her part (the first-person narrator lies) but rather in a distorted view of things. It may be the case that the narrator is too naive to be able to describe what happens in a satisfactory way; s/he may also have a world view or moral attitudes which the reader cannot condone.³

Heart of Darkness includes three important stations, which represents the development of Marlowe's character, where he has different experiences and critical times transforms and develops him into another person. The importance of these stations has increase his awareness and knowledge that reflected his attitudes towards things he believes true before the beginning of his journey, and gives readers a hint about his unreliability. The technique of framing novella makes different narrators interfere and tell their various situations and experiences, and here establishes the narrators' unreliability. Marlow, for example has told us "over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth." (*Heart of Darkness*, 2), in reference to London, the capital of the greatest empire, and he means that this city has also been built on exploiting other nations like the situation in Congo:

For a long time already he, sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice. There was not a word from anybody. The others might have been asleep, but I was awake. I listened, I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river. (*Heart of Darkness*, 54)

Marlow with his wit was able to tell some fabricated details, but it seems that he does this primarily to enjoy himself and to show others that he has been through such experience before but his listeners are not clearly accept all his tales. Marlowe has described England in the beginning of novella as one of the darkest places on earth, this darkness could be real or metaphorical; real it is night and dark and metaphorically is the dark history of England and its role to invade other countries. Therefore, giving this image to England is not meant to stimulate the astonishment or resentment of the listeners because some of his companions have fallen asleep during narration of the tale. However, Marlow tends to exaggerate the tales he narrates about his journey to Africa, which he commenced to reach to the chief of the Inner Station, and it's Kurtz. Marlow, through his journey, does not prove to be a sophisticated sailor or a brilliant teller because some details are conveyed

truthfully. Marlowe creates his story to give himself a shot to entertain his companions and workers by an exaggerated story repeated over and over that increases its boredom than entertainment. The tales repeated several times to the extent that Marlow struggles to recount a tale in which the meaning of the tale he himself is unable to obviously recognize. According to Phelan's categorization,⁴ it can be said that the distortion of facts or lack of these facts are not the only source of unreliability of Marlow; but the way he reports can be said it is detailed and accurate. The thing that preoccupies Marlow's mind lies in his interpretation and evaluation of specific incidents and persona, which turned Marlow himself to be doubtful of everything he speaks or what comes to his mind.⁵

The novella technique of the narration has created a great controversial comment and uncertainty due to its instability and inaccurate views. It could be a mistake, I think Conrad is not a position to commit mistake, or it may be deliberate cannot be told. Regardless of the inconsistency that emerges between what at sometimes appears to be all knowing narrator and a first person narration, the point arouses the readers' thought lies here. In several situations, the narrator discloses information and evidence that only omniscient narrator has access to it. But, in other situations, the narrator has a direct and active role as a participant in the novella's incidents. The majority of critics and readers have found that such unpredictability is not sincere and take it as a blemish in the writer's full ability to manage his mastery over the novella;⁶

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. ...' (*Heart of Darkness*, 10).

The above lines have put readers in confusion and raised several important question marks of Marlowe's real hidden intentions. which forms one of the critical cores of the story. If colonizing other countries is not a pretty thing, is it possible to re-give freedom and independence to these countries? These words create a sense that Marlow accepts colonialism and the evidence is that he participated in the journey. I think there is no other reasonable and acceptable justification for his participation. He is not going for a picnic but for a purpose rather than spreading European civilization for those, who "have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses." Even Marlowe's

reaction is somehow vague and hard to predict. The answer may be partially lie in the way we read the novella. When Marlow criticized colonialism harshly, he put readers in a situation hard for them to decide whether he rejected all forms of colonialism or only European colonialism that means Belgian colonialism. The readers can conclude in the end of novella that his continuous criticism is partially directed to the Belgium colonialism but for the British one it can be redeemed. This speculation is not final the situation can take other interpretations, which are left open for readers. But, in all cases, British colonialism is an exception of due to his impartiality.⁷

In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad through Marlowe intended to raise suspense and the sense of unreliability through adopting different attitudes. These unclear and ambiguous ones are meant to put readers in a maze of understanding the reality. In one situation, he describes Africans as “savages” to popularize the idea of European colonization. At the same time, he refers to European as “hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire.” (*Heart of Darkness*, 5) The oscillation of Marlowe’s ideas and views increases and in turn maximizes readers’ doubt that jeopardizes his reliability as a narrator. The apparent and declared purpose of European “colonization”, including Marlowe, is to bring civilization and education for the Africans, but the fact is far beyond this naïve lie. The readers, colonizers, and Marlowe know quite well that they are after gold and other African treasures. Colonizers do everything to accomplish their goals. They are ready to start wars not only against people but against their religion, culture, traditions, and everything related to their way of living. The jungle law is always in their minds, so they attempt to establish new world order and replace that of the original people in that country. The details of Marlowe are framed- tale narration establishes him not to be an omniscient narrator, which works to devastate the readers’ efforts to comprehend the real and authentic interpretation and purpose of such narration discrepancy. Eventually, the true and false details and views convinces readers that narrators’ reliability and authenticity are in question.⁸

There are several narrators in the novella but the first one attempts to give a set of unreliable pictures, imaginations, and interpretations. The reason may be attributed to the dominance of the narrators and their subjective views, which control and guide them. When views are personal, they will be impartial and subjective and narration will be part of biased personal judgement. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan has stated that:

The main sources of unreliability are the narrator's limited knowledge, his personal involvement, and his problematic value scheme. A young narrator would be a clear case of limited knowledge (and understanding)... The other source of unreliability is the colouring of the narrator's account by a questionable value-scheme. A narrator's moral values are considered questionable if they do not tally with those of the implied author of the given work.⁹

Marlow's narration wanders most of his life's corners especially his past and adventures. To talk about himself in an elaborative and heroic way takes derails his narration from reliability. Subjectivity is a strong motive to be un-objective, biased, and impartial. The eventual consequence of such actions is the loss of reliability that he unconsciously lost through his explanation or evaluation of the events he has witnessed, participated or justified. The way Marlow adopts to narrate his tales is characterized by avoiding short simple sentences instead he tends to use long ones to make readers lose his tracks or get confused by that kind of long and elaborative narration. In the end of the novella, Marlow will commit another lie on fiancée of Kurtz to tell her that the last words of Kurtz were your name. Stampfl has noticed that Marlow's reliability linked to the characters he encounters: "As an honorable man, he wants to tell the truth whatever the consequences; as a co-conspirator, he needs to perpetuate the lies that have always been used to justify imperialism."¹⁰

The preoccupation of Marlowe in the beginning of the novella is to venture and take risks of journeys and voyages before his real travelling to Africa. The appearance of Kurtz, another main character, will give other characters, incidents another dimension. Kurtz is the other ugly face of colonialism, exploitation, and dehumanization. Kurtz is another unreliable person, whom Marlowe considers the ideal representation of European values and civilization. Marlowe has referred several times to the Kurtz, Inner Station principal, in which he considers the story as a cornerstone of the second part of the novella. The critic Peter Brooks refers to that Marlow is not merely "a teller but a reteller (of Kurtz's story)," but he also narrates about how he got to know it, and eventually it is "less Kurtz's story that he tells than his own story inhabited, as it were, by Kurtz's story." The way Marlow follows to narrate his tales and events discusses colonialism in a general polished and fabricated manner. He attempts to elevate his stories to the level of Kurtz's stories, who considers the model for him. In the end of

the novella, the readers will discover that they are used as baits to draw audience's attention to more serious questions.¹¹

The waiting business persons on the deck of Nellie for the Thames tide turns Marlow's story, through using frame tale, into a twisting story. The narrator succeeds to mesmerize those people by the details of his story, who want any chance to conquer time and boredom. Conrad emphasizes the uncertainty of the occurrence of the story that transformed Marlow's narration into a kind of performance; as if he is acting the tales he narrates. Marlowe is smart enough to use certain vocabularies then work to convince readers the originality of his tales. Said states that, "there are also dislocations in the narrator's language. Marlow is never straightforward, and he seems capable only of rendering the story more and more obscure."¹²

People on the deck of the ship deliver their views concerning different topics and this simple event helps to show Marlowe's uncommon or unusual because of his inclination to narrate tales introspectively. This way of describing incidents leads into hypocrisy and duplicity because the speech he uses to express his attitudes is meant to conceal the horrible picture of exploitation with stylistic expressions. Kurtz in his last breath, he does not recommend to do something to be memorable after his death but he handed Marlowe a note in which "Exterminate all the brutes!" is written. (*Heart of Darkness*, 103) This note is the real, bizarre, dehumanized face of imperialism. These few words reflect Conrad's complicated style of writing that turn everything to bear many interpretations. Individualism is the emphasis in the *Heart of Darkness* that highlights individual's painful and riddle-like experiences in which Marlow has tested all his powers and abilities to articulate his observations precisely to take reasonable and just decisions. He can maneuver to be an unreliable narrator through some incidents giving the readers information that later appears in the end is incorrect and fabricated;¹³

I saw my poleman give up the business suddenly, and stretch himself flat on the deck, without even taking the trouble to haul his pole in. He kept hold on it though, and it trailed in the water. At the same time the fireman, whom I could also see below me, sat down abruptly before his furnace and ducked his head....Sticks, little sticks, were flying about. (*Heart of Darkness*, 91)

The above lines indicate that Marlowe supposes his seamen as ineffective or indolent when they are attacked by natives. Marlowe provides us with an inaccurate information and impression about his crew who encountered natives and how they tried to evade death or the hostile environment. The

novella clearly draws the emptiness and uncertainty of European humanity in Africa. Conrad touches upon the bareness of African land, it is like no man's land, where no place of humanity. Off course, this is not sincere or fair view towards the continent. But, Europe covers its real intentions behind the slogans of civilization and humanity to preserve its made-up prominence outside Europe. Conrad may attempt to condone these facts, but it is clearly manifested and slipped on the tongue of his characters. A great part of the unreliability is hidden or covered in the lies or exaggerations of the characters. Marlow now is face to face with the reality of Africa, who touches the tragic dilemma of everyone in that relentless spot of earth. However, He is able to render the impact of the black continent on Kurtz through mastering his narrative of his journey into the African depth toward Kurtz.¹⁴

It is not only Marlow who is unreliable but some other characters as Harlequin, who gives readers and Marlow false conception about Kurtz's wisdom "This man has enlarged my mind." (*Heart of Darkness*, 112) He gives much weight for Kurtz who is the representative of the spirit of imperialism, who is stripped from the essence of humanity. He attempts to convince readers and Marlow by his views towards Kurtz, who is basically fascinated by him;

I suppose Kurtz wanted an audience, because on a certain occasion, when encamped in the forest, they had talked all night, or more probably Kurtz had talked. 'We talked of everything,' he said, quite transported at the recollection. 'I forgot there was such a thing as sleep. The night did not seem to last an hour. Everything! Everything! ... Of love, too.' 'Ah, he talked to you of love!' I said, much amused. 'It isn't what you think,' he cried, almost passionately. 'It was in general. He made me see things—things.' (*Heart of Darkness*, 114)

The influence that Kurtz has on other characters as Marlow and Harlequin is paramount. Kurtz is full of contradictions that are reflected in his actions. For example, he paints the goddess of justice in his room but in fact he is the symbol of aggression and exploitation. He has sick mentality turned him into a monster thirsty for wealth and dominance. Again, this reminds readers of a true representation of colonialism ferocious power, which brings destruction to this country. Marlow and Harlequin as part of their unreliability attempted to improve and polish Kurtz's negative image especially his atrocities with the natives. The influence of Kurtz extends to make Marlowe mitigates the tension that the death scenes provoke within readers' because they become part of the company. Marlow defends Kurtz who "had kicked himself loose

of the earth. Confound the man! he had kicked the very earth to pieces. He was alone, and I before him did not know whether I stood on the ground or floated in the air.” (*Heart of Darkness*, 138) In the end of the novella, Kurtz, according to Marlowe, has not established a new code of behavior or ethics as if he is trying to find a justification for Kurtz’s conduct. Marlowe’s unreliability attempts to lead the readers blindly into his attitudes and leave no chance for them to grasp truth.¹⁵

The attitudes towards the black continent in novella cannot all be attributed to the author only but part of it is attributed to Marlow, and that is not easy to approve. The author’s real intentions are not clear but it may be meant to underestimate or degrade the people of Africa. Definitely, Conrad seems to go beyond great pains to establish covers that separate himself and the ethical world of his novella. Even this technique of separating characters is used to repeat, sometimes, the same views of different characters. It is not necessary to hear attitudes through Marlowe but given through other characters like Kurtz. With this separation, there is a difficult disorganized time of narration, other characters, and the reader to comprehend any events that may or may not have taken place. In addition, There is no real, open, and frank discussion of the mission among the characters. They depend on overhearing conversations among crew and this is a source of confusion for readers. The more narrators we have the more complicated situation becomes. The narrator retells the story of another narrator, which turns words to be, sometimes, empty or meaningless. To comprehend *Heart of Darkness* means to grasp the intentions of every character since every word counts and creates a new layer of meaning. These layers have to be removed one by one until we reach to the core of novella.¹⁶

NOTES

- 1 Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: Bantam classic, 2004), 6. All further quotations are taken from this edition; https://www.sparknotes.com/nofear/lit/heart-of-darkness/part-1/page_2/ (Accessed 10/3/2020)
- 2 Robert P. Mcparland, *Bloom’s How to Write about Joseph Conrad* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2011), 71.
- 3 Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2009), 161.
- 4 Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of the Mind and the Novel* (Ohio: Ohio state university, Ohio state university press, 2006), 66.

- 5 John G. Peters, *The Cambridge Introduction to Joseph Conrad* (Cambridge: Cambridge university press, 2006), 71.
- 6 Amar Acheraiou, *Joseph Conrad and the Reader: Questioning Modern Theories of Narrative and Readership* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 70.
- 7 John G. Peters, 57.
- 8 Paul Wake, *Conrad's Marlow Narrative and death in 'Youth', Heart of Darkness, Lord Jim and Chance* (Manchester: Manchester university press, 2007), 57.
- 9 Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction* (London: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), 105.
- 10 Barry Stampfl, "Marlow's Rhetoric of (Self-) Deception in 'Heart of Darkness'", *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, Volume 37, No. 32, Summer 1991, pp. 183- 196. Project Muse. (Accessed April 20, 2020)
- 11 John G. Peters, *Joseph Conrad's Critical Reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge university press, 2013), 40-43.
- 12 Edward Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 12-14.
- 13 Brian Spittles, *Joseph Conrad: Text and Context* (London: Macmillan press, 1992), 19.
- 14 Harold Bloom, *Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008), 19, 47.
- 15 Jacques Berthoud, *Joseph Conrad: The Major Phase* (Cambridge: Cambridge university press, 1978), 51-53.
- 16 Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness" *The Massachusetts Review*, Volume 57, Number 1, Spring 2016, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/612953>. (Accessed 20 March, 2020)

CONCLUSION:

Conrad is able to write *Heart of Darkness* to test readers and critics as well. The novella can be read on different levels. Due to this multiplicity of levels and interpretability, the narrators turn to be unreliable. The protagonist in the beginning of the novella believes in the sacred mission of the white Europeans, who raised the slogan of civilization. Marlowe propagandizes the ideas of colonialism that represented by Kurtz and the company. Moreover, he takes for granted the need of Congo for European civilization simply because they are "primitive" and in need for developed and civilized nation to take their hands. The journey Marlow leads into the depth of Africa represents the journey into his mind, soul. He tends to fabricate facts and use uncertain and ambiguous descriptions to convey the truth to the readers. Marlowe's narration adds a new layer for the pervading facts across the novella. His talking about London, Kurtz, and Africa creates doubt for readers. Conrad through repetition of certain tales attempts to intensify the events of the novella and to expose the honesty of narrators. As a result, Marlow the character and the narrator seems unreliable in transferring the pure truth to his readers, which turns the scene into foggy and blurred vision.

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