

Conrad's Narrative Art in "Heart of Darkness"

Dr. Randhir Kumar

Assistant Professor, English, R. D. College, Sheikhpura, Munger University, Munger.

Abstract: *Joseph Conrad's narrative art combines delayed crisis, vivid atmosphere, sensory detail, and complex shifts in viewpoint and time. Heart of Darkness demonstrates these qualities through its oppressive African setting, impressionistic description, and Marlow's limited narration. Conrad draws upon his own voyage to the Congo while reshaping personal experience through imagination, framed storytelling, and carefully selected details. Marlow's account gives the narrative emotional unity, credibility, and psychological depth. The gradual portrayal of Kurtz, especially through the images of ivory, human skulls, and physical hunger, reveals the moral corruption caused by unchecked power and exploitation. Conrad also moves between past, present, and future instead of following a fixed chronological order. These time shifts create tension, connect contrasting events, and reflect the way memory works in the human mind. Through these methods, Heart of Darkness achieves a powerful artistic effect in which atmosphere, perception, and narrative structure work together.*

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness, narrative technique, atmosphere, time shift

Conrad's stories are distinguished for certain qualities of narrative art, notably a tendency, somewhat like Meredith's and James's, to put off until another time the crisis, and defeat expectation. The result is to concentrate on the force of the situation in a total effect in a total effect of explosive intensity. This feature of the art of the short stories has been adopted by the novelist, and in Conrad's case with extraordinary success. Again, he deals with characters of a powerful and bizarre originality, tested by strange conditions and extraordinary events. Above all, he handles scenes with wonderful effect to create that significant and influential medium which we call atmosphere. "Heart of Darkness" (the story in the volume, "Youth") is a magnificent example of atmosphere determining the unity and total effect of the short story. The heavy tropical air of equatorial Africa broods like a miasma over the monstrous and uncouth works of nature, twisting humanity itself into a similar form of atrocity. For fiction to be successful as art it must, in Conrad's opinion, appeal to the senses – sight, smell, sound, touch and taste. This theory accounts for the impressionistic effects of Conrad's narratives. In Conrad's own words, "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is before all, to make you see. That – and no more, and it is everything."

The narrative technique of Conrad in "Heart of Darkness" is very complex. Conrad tells some stories in the third person, as objective a view point as possible as in *The Rover*. In others – *The Secret Agent*, for example, the mood is more subjective. In still others, such as "Nostromo", though no narrator is satisfied, it is apparent that Conrad is assuming a Marlow like mask to tell the tale. First person account is very popular in these stories which are hardly more than transcripts of his personal experience. "The Shadowline" is a first account, with only insignificant variations from fact of Conrad's voyage from Bangkok to Singapore in the bark Osage, his first command.

Something like this is true of tales like "Youth" and *Heart of Darkness*, although Conrad in these cases provided a special framework for his stories. Experiences which were his own almost literally exact throughout is "Youth" somewhat more worked up and highlighted in "Heart of Darkness" he attributes to a Captain Calls Marlow. He has the captain narrates his adventures orally to a group of men. The author

describes the place and conditions under which the stories were told, thus furnishing a sort of stage for his little drama. And so, they are provided in advance with a certain emotional tone. This goes far to give them artistic unity and precision of effect. It chastens Conrad's Orientalism making it seem a peculiarity of Marlow's temperament. It altogether contributes to the plausibility, the verisimilitude a most important consideration in the art of making us "see".

"Heart of Darkness" is a remarkable outcome of Conrad's creative imagination and a much more difficult artistic achievement than "Youth". It is based on Conrad's voyage to the Congo and his personal impression of the geographical and social conditions of that exploited country. Many of the characters are taken from life. Kurtz is suggested by one Klein, the Company's agent at Stanley Falls. But what Marlow makes of Kurtz and his way of doing it, that is the story. Marlow has already learnt that Kurtz is a remarkable man, an emissary of progress and pity, a great collector of ivory, and so on. Subsequently Marlow sees the human skulls hanging upon poles outside Kurtz's residence. The skulls have the colour of ivory. The association of ivory with these skulls suggests the essence of Kurtz himself. When Marlow gives us his first description of the man on personally seeing him from a distance.

I saw him open his mouth wide it gives him a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the man before him.¹

Thus, we have a triumph of atmospheric effect produced through the technique of the limited point of view, a story in a class with "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Turn of the Screw".

The second scene of "Heart of Darkness", offers an illustration of Conrad's use of time-shift, the technique of working backward and forward in time that Conrad devised. His purpose, so well shown of "Heart of Darkness", is to make the novel more psychologically true, more complex more dramatic and more involved than any other so that the reader would have to consider the novelist's artfully juxtaposed elements of past, present and future in order to discover the chronology of events. Marlow begins by flashing ahead to tell

us that he first met “that chap” Kurtz at the “farthest point of navigation”. In other words, Marlow gives us a glimpse of the end of the story at its beginning. He then returns us to the past in London. Immediately, however, he offers us to a brief flashback to what he had doing for six years prior to his arrivals in London: sailing the Indian ocean, the Pacific and the China seas. He swings back to London again to inform us of his search for a job. But, an instant later, we are again shifted back in time to hear about his boyhood passion for maps and his ambition to explore the blank spaces on them.

Again, in the story of Fresleven, Marlow swings to present to past to future. While Marlow is hunting for a job (present), the Company learns of Fresleven’s deal (past). It is only afterward (future) that he learns how and why Fresleven died, Conrad’s time shift technique involves a careful selection of detail to give the effect of the passing of time. It provides paralleling and contrasting situations to provide time conflict and tensions. It also involves the use of specific time to suggest real life.

Ostensibly, Conrad works towards what we now call the cinematic view point, based on the modern concept that psychological order of time is different from the chronological succession of moments. Thus, Conrad is employing the time-shift technique back and forward in the way the story floats in the mind.

References

- [1] Conrad, Joseph: *Heart of Darkness*, Rama Brothers, Educational Publishers, New Delhi, 1993, p, 99.

Author Profile



Dr. Randhir Kumar, Assistant Professor, English, R. D. College, Sheikhpura, Munger University, Munger.