

Discuss the relation between narrative style and moral judgement in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

The relation between narrative style and moral judgement in literature is an issue in aesthetic philosophy that stretches back to Plato. 'Narrative style', I define as those formal literary aspects employed by the writer, in order to construct a narrative that is unique. By 'moral judgement', I refer to the message conveyed by a given text when referring to objects beyond itself. The above question presupposes a relation between narrative style and moral judgement, and as such, part of my analysis will be to determine whether such a presupposition is warranted. Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* has been celebrated for its detailed examination of European values and conduct. Ian Watt argues that '*Heart of Darkness* embodies more thoroughly than any previous fiction the posture of uncertainty and doubt.'¹ But is this reading accurate? And if so, what stylistic devices does Conrad use in order to convey this position of 'uncertainty'?

Heart of Darkness uses an oblique narrative style, that is to say, that an unnamed narrator relates the narrative as it is in turn related to him by Marlow, Conrad's main protagonist in the novella. It is thus we can be told that for Marlow:

'the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of those misty halos that are sometimes made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.'²

¹ Ian Watt, *Impressionism and Symbolism in Heart of Darkness* in Robert Kimbrough, ed. *Heart of Darkness: A Norton Critical Edition*, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 1988) p. 316

² Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Hampson (London: Penguin, 1995) p. 18. All quotations are from this edition.

This recalls a comment made some years later by Virginia Woolf. She wrote 'Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.'³ For both Marlow and Woolf, meaning is not something 'arranged' or concrete, rather, it is a 'halo', made visible by the preconceptions of the subject, and as such, the narrative of *Heart of Darkness* is directed towards Marlow's efforts to define this 'halo', by directing attention inward, towards the actions performed by the subject that endow the world with meaning.

This style of narrative, then, is consistent with the process Edmund Husserl termed the 'epochē', a suspension of normal assumptions about the world in order to focus upon how the subject constitutes their experience, and thus, Conrad's literary style was acquiescent with the philosophical developments of his time. Bruce Johnson notes that 'The epochē is to be found elsewhere in impressionism and early modernism, and represents a generosity about subjective experience'⁴. In *Heart of Darkness*, this emphasis on subjective experience is found in the difficulties Marlow has in expressing his perceptions accurately and making fair judgements. He can be an unreliable narrator, on several occasions providing the reader with information which later transpires to be false. Watt defines this 'delayed decoding'⁵ as the method by which the author gives 'direct narrative expression to the way in which consciousness elicits meaning from its perceptions'⁶. This meaning may be inaccurate, for example, when the steamer is attacked:

³ Virginia Woolf, *Modern Fiction* in Michael McKeon, ed, *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000) p. 741

⁴ Bruce Johnson, *Conrad's Impressionism and Watt's "Delayed Decoding"* in Ross C. Murfin, ed, *Conrad Revisited: Essays for the Eighties* (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1985) p. 68

⁵ Ian Watt, *Impressionism and Symbolism in Heart of Darkness* in Robert Kimbrough, ed. *Heart of Darkness: A Norton Critical Edition*, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 1988) p. 317

⁶ Ian Watt, *Impressionism and Symbolism in Heart of Darkness* in Robert Kimbrough, ed. *Heart of Darkness: A Norton Critical Edition*, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 1988) p. 316

'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'⁷

It is not until a few lines later that Marlow conceptualises his perceptions, exclaiming 'Arrows, by Jove!'⁸ Instances like this highlight how the perceptions of the subject are constituted by their preconceptions. In the above passage, for example, the phrases 'give up the business' and 'without even taking the trouble to haul his pole in' imply that Marlow assumes his crew are incompetent or lazy, when, as it later transpires, they are under attack. As Johnson comments, 'it is vital to Conrad's moral sense that he reveal again and again the value of this phenomenological perceiving...and...that he show his readers how perception usually depends on the preconceptions'⁹.

So what is this 'moral sense'? In placing such emphasis upon the sensory impressions of his narrator, and in so doing highlighting the distinction between perception and cognition, Conrad inferred an epistemological relativism that anticipated much of the literature of the twentieth century. As Johnson notes, 'In the awareness that there is no "realist" alternative to impressionism...Conrad had not jumped but dove head first into the twentieth century.'¹⁰ In turn, epistemological relativism implies a moral relativism, as individuals base decisions of conduct upon preconceived knowledge. Marlow's narrative, as Watt argues, 'aligns *Heart of*

⁷ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Hampson (London: Penguin, 1995) p. 75

⁸ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Hampson (London: Penguin, 1995) p. 75

⁹ Bruce Johnson, *Conrad's Impressionism and Watt's "Delayed Decoding"* in Ross C. Murfin, ed. *Conrad Revisited: Essays for the Eighties* (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1985) p. 62

¹⁰ Bruce Johnson, *Conrad's Impressionism and Watt's "Delayed Decoding"* in Ross C. Murfin, ed. *Conrad Revisited: Essays for the Eighties* (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1985) p. 52

Darkness with the subjective relativism of the impressionist attitude.¹¹ Did Conrad then deny the possibility of any secure moral position? At the very least, the novella expresses 'doubt', writes Caryl Phillips, 'doubt about the supremacy of European humanity, and the ability of this supposed humanity to maintain its imagined status beyond the high streets of Europe.'¹²

Conrad's clearest expression of this doubt in *Heart of Darkness* is through the character of Kurtz. He ascribes to Kurtz the philanthropic ideals of European civilization, with Marlow saying that 'All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz'¹³. We are told that he is 'an emissary of pity, and science, and progress'¹⁴, and that he 'had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort'¹⁵. Yet, despite the constant references to Kurtz, for most of the novella he is notable only by his absence. Marlow concedes that 'He was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do.'¹⁶ The frequent references to Kurtz, coupled with the extended deferral of his eventual appearance, comprise the most significant use of delayed decoding in *Heart of Darkness*. The discrepancy between Marlow's preconceptions of Kurtz and the reality of his appearance is the foundation upon which Conrad's moral ambivalence lies.

This is why Conrad builds such intense anticipation around Kurtz. As Robert Hampson comments, 'there is a deliberate anti-climax in relation to Kurtz that expresses the story's radical scepticism about ultimate values and the possibility of

¹¹ Ian Watt, *Impressionism and Symbolism in Heart of Darkness* in Robert Kimbrough, ed. *Heart of Darkness: A Norton Critical Edition*, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 1988) p. 319

¹² Caryl Phillips, 2003, *Out of Africa* from *Guardian Unlimited*, <http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/classics/story/0,,900335,00.html> (accessed 11/02/08)

¹³ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Hampson (London: Penguin, 1995) p. 83

¹⁴ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Hampson (London: Penguin, 1995) p. 47

¹⁵ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Hampson (London: Penguin, 1995) p. 55

¹⁶ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Hampson (London: Penguin, 1995) p. 50

explanation.¹⁷ This anti-climax is the consequence of Conrad's use of delayed decoding, and again it is this distinction between perception and cognition that is used to signify the shock of Kurtz's moral abdication. This has universal consequences, for, as Marlow says, 'He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! He had kicked the very earth to pieces.'¹⁸ As James Guetti notes, 'in releasing himself from this general morality, Kurtz has illustrated not only the possibility of such a release, but also, as Marlow suggests, the possible inadequacy and irrelevance of morality to all men.'¹⁹

Yet, this critique of European morality has drawn some fierce criticism. For Marlow's perceptions of the Africans as 'a wild and passionate uproar'²⁰ and 'a black and incomprehensible frenzy'²¹, Conrad has been accused of racism. Chinua Achebe has argued that by using the Africans as no more than a metaphorical extension of the wilderness, Conrad denied them their humanity, stating 'You cannot compromise my humanity in order that you explore your own ambiguity. I cannot accept that. My humanity is not to be debated, nor is it to be used simply to illustrate European problems.'²² Hampson disagrees, pointing out that 'Marlow is a fictional character whose consciousness operates according to contemporary codes and categories. If Marlow's perceptions are at times racist, it is because those codes and conventions were racist.'²³ Can it not then be argued, that through the technique of oblique narration, Conrad refuses to assume responsibility for the moral positions

¹⁷ Robert Hampson, *Introduction to Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin, 1995) p. xxvi

¹⁸ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Hampson (London: Penguin, 1995) p. 107

¹⁹ James Guetti, *The Failure of the Imagination* in C.B Cox, ed. *Heart of Darkness Nostromo and Under Western Eyes: A Casebook* (London: Macmillan, 1981) p. 68

²⁰ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Hampson (London: Penguin, 1995) p. 63

²¹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Hampson (London: Penguin, 1995) p. 62

²² Chinua Achebe, 2003, *Out of Africa* from *Guardian Unlimited*, <http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/classics/story/0,,900335.00.html> (accessed 11/02/08)

²³ Robert Hampson, *Introduction to Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin, 1995) p. xxxi

adopted by Marlow? Perhaps this would be so, if the unnamed narrator expressed alternative perceptions, but he doesn't, and, as Achebe notes, 'Marlow seems to me to enjoy Conrad's complete confidence – a feeling reinforced by the close similarities between their two careers.'²⁴

So, is the presupposition of a relation between style and morality a fair one? Oscar Wilde famously wrote 'There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book.'²⁵ Contemporary critics, such as Edward Garnett, read the novella as 'simply a piece of art, fascinating and remorseless'²⁶. This is the formalist position, which states that all that is relevant to aesthetic evaluation are the given formal aspects of a work. Yet, from the position of an ethicist, it is possible to argue that Conrad's novella is to some extent aesthetically defective. Berys Gaut defines this position as follows: 'the ethical assessment of attitudes manifested by works of art is a legitimate aspect of the aesthetic evaluation of those works, such that, if a work manifests ethically reprehensible attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically defective'²⁷. This view is supported by Achebe, who argues that 'Art is not intended to put people down. If so, then art would ultimately discredit itself.'²⁸ For Achebe, the phenomenological narrative style is how Conrad is able both to question the validity of European morality, and consequentially to reduce 'Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind'²⁹ in the process. So, the narrative style in *Heart of Darkness* contains significant clues towards Conrad's moral vision. As Watt sees it,

²⁴ Chinua Achebe, *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness*, <http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/wyrick/debclass/achcon.htm> (accessed 11/02/08)

²⁵ Oscar Wilde, *The Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1985) p. 5

²⁶ Edward Garnett, *On Heart of Darkness* from *Academy and Literature*, 06/12/1902 in C.B Cox, ed. *Heart of Darkness Nostromo and Under Western Eyes: A Casebook* (London: Macmillan, 1981) p. 27

²⁷ Berys Gaut, *The Ethical Criticism of Art* in Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, eds. *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) p. 283

²⁸ Chinua Achebe, 2003, *Out of Africa* from *Guardian Unlimited*, <http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/classics/story/0,,900335.00.html> (accessed 11/02/08)

²⁹ Chinua Achebe, *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness*, <http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/wyrick/debclass/achcon.htm> (accessed 11/02/08)

'*Heart of Darkness* is Conrad's most direct expression of his doubts about the foundations of human thought and action, and its mode of narration reflects this.'³⁰

³⁰ Ian Watt, *Impressionism and Symbolism in Heart of Darkness* in Robert Kimbrough, ed. *Heart of Darkness: A Norton Critical Edition*, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 1988) p. 335

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