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The Argument of Refusal: Narrative Elision in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* occupies an unusual position in the literary canon. It is taught as a foundational modernist text, attacked as a racist artifact, and defended as an early critique of imperialism, often by the same readers in different moods. What is rarely examined is the formal mechanism by which the novella accomplishes any of these things at once. This paper argues that *Heart of Darkness* is structurally organized around what its narrator refuses to say, and that this pattern of narrative refusal is not a stylistic mannerism but an argumentative strategy. The novella does not depict the violence of colonialism; it stages the impossibility of depicting it.

This reading positions the novella alongside the broader modernist project of formal innovation as ethical critique, but it argues for a more specific claim than the one usually made. Where critics such as Achebe (1977) have read Conrad's elisions as evasions or as evidence of a failure to confront African humanity, this paper argues that the elisions are structural and that they constitute the novella's argument rather than undermining it.

Conrad's narrator does not describe the wilderness so much as he refuses to. The Congo is rendered through what cannot be said about it. Marlow's repeated insistence that his story is "inconclusive" (Conrad 11) is not a confession of narrative weakness but a structural argument: the European mind, the novella suggests, has no vocabulary adequate to what it has done.

This argument is made through a series of formal moves. The first is the framing structure. Marlow's tale is delivered to a small audience aboard the *Nellie*, and the unnamed narrator who introduces and frames Marlow's account adds a second layer of mediation. The

reader does not encounter the Congo directly. The reader encounters Marlow's recollection, filtered through the unnamed narrator's transcription, told in a voice that itself frequently breaks down into ellipsis.

The second formal move is the persistent use of negation. Marlow describes Kurtz's final words as "a cry that was no more than a breath" (Conrad 86). The wilderness is "an empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest" (Conrad 35). Each of these phrases asserts something by denying it. The forest is impenetrable, which means the prose cannot penetrate it either; the silence is great, which means it cannot be spoken; the stream is empty, which means there is nothing to describe.

These are not failures of Conrad's prose. They are the prose's argument. The novella's central insight is that the colonial encounter cannot be represented in the language of the colonizer, and the formal strategy of negation makes that insight visible at the sentence level.

A third formal move in the novella is the deferral of meaning. Marlow tells his audience that he wants to explain Kurtz, that the explanation is the entire point of the story, and then proceeds for over forty pages without ever explaining him. The reader who comes to the novella expecting a character study of Kurtz is given instead a study of Marlow's inability to study Kurtz.

What Marlow eventually arrives at, in the famous lie to Kurtz's Intended, is the explicit acknowledgment that the truth cannot be told. He invents a final word for Kurtz that is not the word Kurtz actually said. The novella's last substantive scene is built around an act of narrative falsification, and Marlow's justification for the lie is that the truth would have been "too dark, too dark altogether" (Conrad 96).

This sequence of formal devices, framing, negation, and deferral, accumulates into the novella's argument. Each device individually could be read as a stylistic choice. Together they constitute a sustained position about what the language of empire can and cannot describe.

The formal strategies of *Heart of Darkness* become more legible when situated in the historical moment of the novella's publication. Conrad wrote in 1899, three years after the publication of E. D. Morel's first investigative reports on the Congo Free State and a decade before the Casement Report would document the systematic violence of King Leopold's regime. The European reading public in 1899 had access to fragmentary accounts of what was happening in the Congo but had not yet been forced to confront the scale of it. Conrad's narrator, in this context, occupies the position of a European who has seen what most of his readers had not, and his struggle to render that experience into language reflects the broader challenge of the late-Victorian conscience confronting its own complicity (Watt 137).

This historical positioning matters because it constrains what the novella can be read as having claimed. A reader in 1899 could not have known how thoroughly subsequent investigation would confirm the worst of Marlow's vague accusations. The novella's formal indeterminacy, then, was not just an artistic choice but a hedge against the limits of contemporary evidence. Conrad gestures at horrors that he had witnessed but could not document, and the reader is asked to fill in what the text refuses to say.

The reading proposed here must contend with Achebe's serious objection. Achebe argued in 1977 that the formal complexity of *Heart of Darkness* functions to obscure rather than illuminate, and that the novella's elisions are politically convenient: they relieve the European reader of having to confront African humanity directly. The novella, on Achebe's account, gets credit for sophistication when what it has actually done is avoid the difficult work of representation.

This objection is not refutable. It is, however, distinguishable from the present argument. To say that the novella's formal strategies have political effects that disadvantage African readers is correct. To say that the novella is unaware of this, or that the formal strategies are unintentional, is a stronger claim that the text does not support. Marlow's reflexive uncertainty about his own narration, his repeated acknowledgment that his story is

incomplete, suggests an authorial awareness of exactly the limitation Achebe describes.

To read *Heart of Darkness* as a novel of narrative refusal is not to defend it against the charges that have been leveled at it. Achebe's critique remains substantively correct: the African characters are denied interiority, the continent is rendered as backdrop rather than as place, and the moral drama of the novella is overwhelmingly a European one. What this reading argues, however, is that the formal structure of refusal is itself a comment on those very limitations. The novella does not solve the problem of representing colonial violence. It dramatizes the failure to solve it.

That distinction is not trivial. A novella that confidently represented the Congo would be, by the standards of its own argument, a novella that had failed to understand what colonialism is. *Heart of Darkness* gets credit for the discomfort it produces because the discomfort is the point. The reader who finishes the novella feeling that something has gone wrong with the telling has read it correctly.

Works Cited

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