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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.

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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