



Looking into the Soul: Self-Identity in the Select Novels of Joseph Conrad

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Abstract

Conrad's novels exhibit the idea of personal honour which is essential to man's existence. In his novels, we see that a character defends himself through his actions. Conrad took recourse to the character of Marlow in order to voice his own feelings, whether skeptical or otherwise. Joseph Conrad's stories of the sea, the jungle, and the social and political instability of mankind and the innermost workings of the human heart are commentaries on and reflections of his own life and varied experiences. Conrad's early experiences set the pattern of his life and provided themes which often occurred in the books he later wrote. Like many of his heroes, he was lonely and sought independence. The emotional estrangement of man in an alien surrounding whether self-imposed or circumstantial recurs in Conrad's novels.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, Identity-Construction, Self-Conscious, Self-Identity, Voice.

Introduction

Conrad's personal journey to the Congo in 1890 is depicted artistically in *Heart of Darkness*. In Conrad's writing career, it ushers in the start of a significant creative phase. In the opening lines of *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow states: "Between us there was the link of the water" (135) and this claim serves as the thread that ties him to Youth and introduces Marlow as the narrator in Conrad's novel. The journey is a journey into darkness... Conrad employs Marlow as the narrator once more because he is interested in the readers' perception of the events as much as those themselves. He was obsessed with the enigma and difficulty of evil in life. He tended to focus on man's predicament which often forces him to face the unknown (Sethuraman et al 104,105) Marlow too is developed into the self-expressive character seen here and in *Lord Jim* and *Chance*. However, Conrad's purpose is not merely to entertain, but also to instruct. It is Marlow's memory that pieces together and re-creates Conrad's journey into the Belgian Congo.

On a personal level, Conrad's trip to the Congo was the major factor that led him to change from being a sailor to a novelist. The voyage to the Congo for Conrad evolved into a journey within, a journey through the depths of the soul. It depicts a trip into man's inner darkness, which awakens upon contact with the actual experience of the Congo and the light it sheds on uncertainty, fascination, remorse, and a sense of horror: —It seemed to throw a kind of light upon everything about me – and into my thoughts! (*HD* 141). Conrad's purpose



is to not only take the reader on a journey to the Congo but also to use this tour to answer any queries the reader may have when confronted with an African issue.

Looking into the Soul vs Self-Identity

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow reflects on the time when he transitioned from a world of innocence to the world of experience—from a world of light to a world of darkness. Marlow deals with a number of problems in this world that a person in his so-called “civilized status” in Europe would not think were feasible. While people in Europe are living in a state of delusion, Marlow encounters the “heart of darkness,” the fundamental reality of life in Africa. While Kurtz represents the white man in Africa, his actions end up being worse than those of the black man, whose actions are meant to be natural to him. Kurtz had gone to Africa with grand ideals but he loses them to the wilderness surrounding him: ... the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion (221).

Kurtz sets out on his mission to the Congo as a representative of good, but paradoxically finds himself drawn into the very system that he had intended to subvert after failing to overcome his inherent evil: —he had the power to charm or frighten rudimentary souls into an aggravated witch-dance in his honour (209). Over time, Kurtz gives in to the wilderness and merges with it. In fact, he thinks his plunder is his.

Almost immediately after arriving in Africa, Marlow learns of Kurtz. Kurtz travelled to Africa with the intention of bringing the locals up to speed, and he was well-known to everyone involved with the continent and the apparent effort to bring the locals up to speed. But in a setting that is barely supportive of education of any type, his beliefs start to degenerate, and he eventually became someone else. He started to prioritize getting ivory over everything else and started to behave just like the people he was supposed to be passing the torch of civilization to. Even better, he was able to persuade the tribe to follow him and had a connection with a tribeswoman. It should be noted that Kurtz had an impact on Marlow during his travels, and that impact persisted even after Kurtz passed away, as evidenced by Marlow’s refusal to provide the business Kurtz’s documents. To return her letters and portrait, he went to Kurtz’s house. Marlow was with Kurtz when he passed away, and he overheard his final comments belittling the lofty goals that motivated him to travel to Africa.

Marlow stops being a purely objective observer and narrator as he absorbs events and impressions. His position is perceived as evolving continuously. Marlow is coerced into forming a partnership with Kurtz because he is in some manner connected to him and, like him, is drawn to the woods. Marlow feels a connection to Kurtz, and as a result, he worries about Kurtz's destiny. Like Kurtz, Marlow also encounters hardship in the jungle. Although he overhears Kurtz's final remarks, he does not tell his intended recipient. Instead, he lies to her saying: —The last word he pronounced was – your name (251).

The conflict that *Lord Jim* depicts which constitutes a threat to the harmony that exists amid everyone. Jim, a straightforward and sympathetic man, serves as the main character and Conrad once again chooses Marlow as the narrator in *Lord Jim*—Jim’s entire story could



have been related in a few pages, but in this book... the author's strategy includes exhibiting the processes by which other people learn this story, and their reactions to it (Najder 82).

Marlow makes references to events that are crucial to Jim's story but that the readers are unaware of right from the beginning of his narration. Marlow makes reference to a well-known fact. This is, of course, the white crew of the ship "Patna" abandoning it, and he knows little more than Jim and the other crew members do, which is that the ship has not sunk. Conrad presents Marlow as a crucial counterpoint to Jim because he is interested in analyzing motives in this book. We are able to understand Marlow's knowledge and feel what he is feeling because of the story. His realization that Jim's death was the result of Brown's own actions horrified him as he spoke with the dying Gentleman Brown. Intellectual and moral suspense are present in *Lord Jim*. We observe that Jim had to flee into the uncivilized world of Patusan in order to fulfill his desires and himself as well as to avoid the wrath of the civilized world: —In the face of an unsalvageable dishonour, Jim's steadfast pursuit of his dream of honour (Berthoud 189). However, it becomes clear that Jim never finds peace. Just as he starts to feel secure with the prefix "Tuan" added to his name as a symbol of accomplishment, his world is upended when he is dubbed a pirate by a group led by "Gentleman" Brown, which nearly kills him.

As Jim's narrative begins, we are informed about the "Patna," a ship that is said to be carrying many pilgrims to their final destination when it is subsequently sinking and their crews, including Jim, abandon it. The ship, which is not lost, is instead towed to port by a French gunboat. The case of those who had left the ship is then brought to trial. Having abandoned the ship and disregarded his obligations to his passengers, Jim is overcome by feelings of remorse. He believes his behaviour amounted to desertion of duty and was also a cowardly conduct on his part. His actions at that time were in opposition to his fantasies of carrying out heroic deeds, and in order to make amends, he alone chose to attend the trial rather than the other policemen who fled. Jim appears in court and bravely accepted the penalty that was handed to him—the cancellation of his certificate.

During the trial, Jim is first observed by Marlow, who immediately develops a fondness for him. Jim is understood by him, and he assists Jim in finding employment. Finally, with the aid of Stein, Marlow's buddy, Jim is sent to Patusan, a secluded inland town where Jim's past can be forgotten. Here, Jim gains the trust of the populace and rises to the position of leader by freeing them from the threat posed by the bandit Sherif Ali and defending them from the dishonest local Malay chief, Rajah Tunku Allang. After winning Jewel's devotion, Jim starts to feel content with his existence. A few years later, "Gentleman" Brown attacks the town, which brings the story to a close. However, Dain Waris, the son of the Bugis community's leader, is killed despite Brown and his gang being chased away. Even though Jim ultimately dies from a gunshot to the heart, he finally achieves his destiny by accepting responsibility.

Marlow does not merely serve as the narrator throughout the duration of the book. While assuming the role of Jim's benefactor, he actively participates in the analysis of Jim's mental state. He plays a very specific role in the series of events that are narrated, and it is



obvious that the author gives Marlow plenty of room to grow as a character. Marlow is introduced early in the narrative and makes references to events that are crucial to Jim's story but are unknown to the readers. These allusions are crucial because without them, the reader cannot understand what Marlow is talking about.

In *Lord Jim*, connections between impressions are made emotionally and psychologically rather than logically. During Jim's trial, Marlow observes him. In order to achieve a key advantage, he simultaneously distances himself from his story. Marlow first encounters Jim during this trial; as a result, he grows to like him and takes on the position of Jim's guardian. After that, Marlow empathizes with Jim and makes every effort to help him. Jim is hired by Marlow in a variety of roles and locations. But anytime he senses that his past is about to come to the surface, he goes deeper inside. In the end, Marlow's friend Stein proposes relocating Jim to Patusan, an isolated inland community with a mixed Malay and Bugis population, where Jim's background may remain buried. Here, Jim gains the people's respect and takes on the role of leader until he is fatally shot through the heart.

As the narrator, Marlow fears that Jim's passing will leave behind all of his shortcomings. After upholding his principles and being known as Tuan or Lord Jim, Jim ultimately meets his demise at the hands of Doramin. Marlow believes that Jim finally made up for his cowardly jump in death by achieving the glory he had yearned for his entire life. Because of his comprehension of Jim and his concern for his welfare, which led him to assist Jim in the manner in which he did, Marlow gives Jim a vivid portrait that is significant. He plays the part of Jim's supporter while actively assessing Jim's mental state, thus he is not just a passive narrator.

Conrad once more employs Marlow as his narrator in *Chance*, the only novel with chapter titles. Marlow integrates the tale using a combination of his own experiences and conversations with others. For the last time, Conrad employs him as narrator, and at this point, his job is well defined and plays a crucial role in how the story develops. The reader can go between the story and each character because he has the ability to get into the head of each one with whom he engages.

If his novels make a tragic point, it is that man seems capable of discovering the reality of his own values only through their defeat or contradiction," Marlow is quoted as saying. "As we see Marlow, during the development of the plot of the four novels studied, he grows into a character that has an assertive role to play in the course of the events (Berthoud 189).

Conrad is shown to be correct by Marlow, who supports his position. He is not just Conrad's spokesperson, yet.

Similar to *Lord Jim*, Emily Bronte's story starts in the midst. The story opens with Mr. Lockwood's first visit to Wuthering Heights, which takes place at the height of Heathcliff's retaliation, when he has finally achieved total control over young Catherine and Hareton. Mr. Lockwood sees Catherine and Hareton in misery and Heathcliff triumphant. Lockwood is compelled to seek shelter at the home of his obnoxious landlord, Heathcliff, due to a storm that night because he is helpless. Cathy's ghost may be heard calling at the



window, keeping Lockwood up all night. We see Heathcliff and *Wuthering Heights* for the first time as they would appear to an outsider, who serves three functions that might be enumerated as follows: Second, it allows the novelist to visualize for the reader the contrast and harmony that drive the story's action. Thirdly, it reveals the conflict, its origin, and subtly suggests a way to resolve it.

'Call me Ishmael', the narrator who serves as the voice of *Moby Dick* by Melville says in the opening paragraph (M D 1). He holds a position on the crew of the *Pequod* that enables him to speak from personal experience about his perceptions of the people working on the ship, which in actuality serves as a metaphor of the experienced reality. Ishmael, like Kurtz, embarks on the *Pequod* with the intention of "whaling," but in addition to his professional background, he encounters Ahab, who transforms this voyage into an act of vengeance against the White Whale that has stolen his leg.

Ishmael participates in the action of the book without being impacted by it, like Marlow and Nelly Dean do. He can conveniently comment on them and the overall scenario in the narrative because of his close proximity to the many characters. This gives him the benefit of being able to provide the readers a more in-depth understanding of both his own function and that of the characters, which is a further benefit. Ishmael also recounts his experiences, demonstrating that Heath Cliff's actions are motivated by love and revenge whereas Ahab's actions are motivated by retaliation and hatred.

Conclusion

In Conrad's fiction, Marlow takes on increasingly complex roles; in youth, he serves as the author's mouthpiece; in *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness*, he considers the protagonist's subjective consciousness; and in chance, he is viewed in a different light. Marlow is misogynistic and sardonic, and he plays a significant role in the story. Marlow is employed to deepen the idea of the book and to provide some distance between the events mentioned in order to obtain a critical perspective as he gathers experiences and impressions. It's possible to relate Marlow's function in *Lord Jim* to Nelly Dean's in *Wuthering Heights*. Ishmael encounters Queequeg, becomes close with him, and participates in his prayers, but he is unaffected by him, in stark contrast to Marlow in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, who may be influenced by the horrifying truth about Kurtz and tells his intended that Kurtz said her name before he passed away.

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