

On The Point of View in *Heart of Darkness*

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Keywords: Point of view, Heart of Darkness, Conrad

Abstract. This essay studies the point of view in Joseph Conrad's work — *Heart of Darkness*, especially the use of multiple narrators. By analyzing those narrators one by one in the novel, it is found that multiple narrators have some advantages than a single narrator. This writing skill used by Conrad helps him express the theme of colonialism and imperialism.

1. Introduction

Heart of Darkness, written by Joseph Conrad, is considered to be one of the best novelettes in the 20th century. It was in the last year of his sea career that Conrad went to the Congo and gathered the necessary raw material with which to write this most harrowing work of fiction. This story unrelentingly condemns the imperialism and colonialism that swallow up almost the whole continent of Africa. So far, lots of researches have been done to study this story on the theme, the characters, the writing features, such as modernism, impressionism, contrast, symbolism, and so on. Conrad is a skillful writer in the use of a narrator. Marlow, who tells the story in *Heart of Darkness*, is more than a narrator—he is also a listener. By studying the point of view in this story, it is helpful to see how the structure influences the expression of the theme and how the writer achieves the effect.

This paper will first introduce the general knowledge about point of view and then analyze its use in *Heart of Darkness*. After that, it will be discussed what the strong points are.

2. Analyses of *Heart of Darkness*

2.1 Introduction of *Heart of Darkness*

Heart of Darkness, one of the best novelettes in the 20th century, is based on Conrad's personal experience down the Congo in 1890. The story is told by Marlow, Conrad's famous narrator, whose task is to make a voyage to the inner land of Africa up through the Congo River and bring Mr. Kurtz, a sick ivory trader, back to Belgium. Sailing up the river stage by stage, Marlow passes the three main stations set up by the Belgian colonizers. What Marlow sees on both of the banks is a wretched picture of chaos, destruction, waste and decay. At the trade stations, Marlow finds the blacks are being mercilessly chained, toiled, tortured and destroyed. It is "a grove of death" in which the diseased and starving natives are slowly dying. The ruthless apathy and brutal callousness of the white "pilgrims" give Marlow shocks as strong as the wretched picture can.

During his voyage, Marlow meets different kinds of white people who give bits of information about Kurtz; Marlow and his men have also experienced some strange adventures, which again in one way or another linked with Kurtz. As he goes deeper sphere of the fear and death become heavier, but Marlow's inner reaches the inner station and finds Kurtz, who is mortally sick and dies soon on the way back. The journey that Marlow has been through is so horrible that it has changed Marlow into a different man. And Marlow desires to tell his story to anyone he meets.

2.2 The Point of View in *Heart of Darkness*

Heart of Darkness is written from the point of view of first person narrator and it has its own feature, that is, there is more than one narrator in the whole story. Conrad has realized the fact that man has very complex personalities: he may do and say one thing while his mind takes quite a different

attitude. And even an action can be interpreted in different meanings by different observers or from different angles. To obtain psychological answers to man's actions, Conrad has created a number of narrators in his novel, *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*. And a particular narrator may address different interlocutor at different points in his story. Multiple narrators in *Heart of Darkness* will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

2.2.1 Narrator 1

First, Conrad uses "I", who is a common sailor, as the outer narrator, to tell the whole story. This can only be found just in the first seven paragraphs and the last paragraph.

At the beginning of the story, "I" first tell the time and the place. It's on "the Nellie, a cruising yawl" at "the sea-reach of the Thames" when "the flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river, the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide." Then "I" describe the surrounding and introduce the people on the cruising yawl. They are the Director of Companies, the lawyer, the accountant and the most important person, Marlow.

Conrad spends much of the space in describing the scene and the people and this creates an easygoing atmosphere. Besides, some punctuation can also make the reader have such a feeling:

"it had the effect of making us tolerant of each other's yarns—and even convictions. The lawyer—the best of old fellows—had,"

There are many dashes in the first seven paragraphs, that is, before the main narrator, Marlow, begins to tell the story. Those dashes slow down the rhythm of the narration which is an indication that a story will be told soon.

The role "I" play in the story is a narrator, receptor of the narration and also a reader. That's why during the story telling, "I" have interrupted only for several times and each time for a short while. But "I" is not only the narrator, but also a listener. And let's come to the most important narrator, Marlow.

2.2.2 Narrator 2

Conrad has invented an intermediate narrator, Marlow, to tell the main story. Marlow is an embodied point of view; his presence helps to dramatize the action and compels the reader to see it through his eyes, thus, providing an intense focus. Marlow, who can look into the depth of another man's mind and who can sympathize with other characters, plays the role of reporter, commentator, and interpreter; through him, the author can reach down to the secret springs of his character's emotions and moralize his ideas freely without ruining the narrative effect of objectivity. But Marlow is more than a narrative voice; he becomes a participant as in *Heart of Darkness*.

Marlow is first described in the forth paragraph: "Marlow sat cross-legged right aft, leaning against the mizzenmast. He had sunken checks, a yellow complexion, a straight back, an ascetic aspect, and, with his arms dropped, the palms of hands outwards, resembled an idol." After that, he becomes an observer created delicately by Conrad. He leads us to see, to listen, to feel, and to observe everything.

Marlow wanted to go to the Congo river though he knew it to be "a place of darkness" so he went to sign the contract at a trading society at Brussels and then boarded a French steamer to go the mouth of the big Congo river where the seat of the government was. There he witnessed the horrible sight of "grove of death", "the gloomy circle of some Inferno", of many "shadows of disease and starvation". He met a white man who was the Company's chief accountant, who told him first about the ivory gathered there and then about a Mr. Kurtz, a first-class agent, "a very remarkable person", "at present in charge of a trading post...in the true ivory country." Fifteen days later, he came in sight of the Congo river again and arrived at the Central Station where the manager spoke again of Mr. Kurtz who was ill. There Marlow also met another white man who also spoke of Mr. Kurtz as "the chief of the Inner Station," as "a prodigy", as "an emissary of pity, and science, and progress," a "universal genius." On their way up the river they met with all sorts of strange adventures, all of them somehow linked up with Kurtz. Then they finally saw in the distance Kurtz's station and upon landing they met a young Russian the son of an arch-priest, who was a staunch admirer of Kurtz and who told him how Kurtz went to the tribesmen" with "thunder and lightning" and "could be very terrible" in his expeditions for ivory. Then appeared Kurtz, sick in a stretcher carried by a group of black natives,

followed by pilgrims carrying his weapons of guns and a rifle and a revolver, as well as his correspondence of torn envelopes and pen letters. Then the engines broke down and the steamer had to stop for repairs at the head of an island where Marlow found Kurtz dying.

From the above story it is obvious that the story told by Marlow actually is about Kurtz, who is a mysterious figure in the story. And he is also one of the narrators in this novel.

2.2.3 Narrator 3

Kurtz is another narrator in the work. Although his narrative part is not so long, what he presents is also important. He is the most mysterious figure in the novel because on the way to the Station, Marlow met some people who talked differently about him and heard some strange things about him. But just the last moment did Marlow see the real person and witnessed his death. So before Marlow met him, what Kurtz told become precious because it is the first-hand material for the reader to know this person and understand his personality.

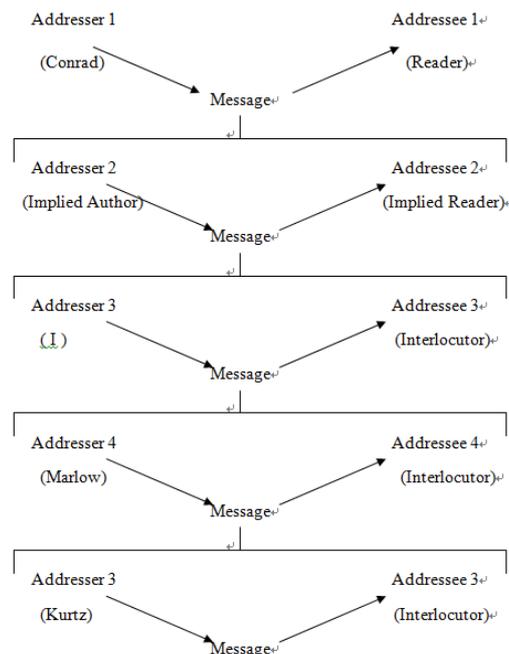
The International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs had entrusted Kurtz with the making of a report. In the report, he said: “we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, ‘must necessarily appear to them (savages) in the nature of supernatural beings—we approach them with the might as of a deity’”. “Exterminate all the brutes!” Even when Kurtz was dying, he murmured: “Live rightly, die, die ...” and “for the furthering of my ideas. It’s a duty.” What is the respond of Kurtz’s loyalty (fatuous loyalty) and his collecting ivories by all means? Some people said Mr. Kurtz is of the greatest importance to the Company and would be put in a very important position in the future. But he knew exactly that “This lot of ivory now is really mine. The Company did not pay for it. I collected it myself at a very great personal risk. I am afraid they will try to claim it as theirs though. H’m. It is a difficult case. What do you think I ought to do—resist? Eh? I want no more than justice.”

From Kurtz’s narrative part, the reader can go deep into his heart and listen to his monologue. By this way, a tragic figure was shown to us.

2.2.4 Discourse Structure

According to the three main narrators we just referred, diagram 2 can be developed into the following one to make the discourse structure of this story clearer:

Diagram 3



From the diagram we can see that there are multiple narrators and a particular narrator may address different interlocutors at different points in the story. Then we come to discuss the strong and weak points of the use of narrators in *Heart of Darkness*.

2.3 Strong Points

First, this framed story creates an aesthetic distance. As the main narrator, Marlow is like a cameraman who gives the pictures at all directions. The reader can always see the shadow of the *dramatis personae*, Kurtz, but not clearly. Even at the last moment Marlow met Kurtz, he doesn't tell what exactly this person is. What is his appearance? What is his personality? What does he think? These are still questions to the readers. However, they can make judgment themselves according to Marlow's description. Besides, before Marlow met Kurtz, he had heard and thought a lot about him. So although he was far from Kurtz, he can understand this person in a certain degree. Marlow's inward journey can be seen as his mental growing. The journey is not only the realization of evil nature of other people, especially Kurtz, but also a realization of evil nature of himself, because Kurtz might be the dark side in his own heart. What is the relationship between Marlow and Kurtz? This is also a big question in readers' mind. To this question Marlow told nothing and left it to readers. This narrative structure created by Conrad makes the figures in the story neither too far nor too near. In this way he forms an aesthetic distance between readers and the figures.

Second, "I" can represent a large number of readers and lead the way of listening and thinking of them. Conrad doesn't tell exactly the identity of "I". The reader doesn't know the job, the age, and even the sex of the outer narrator. There are also some other people who listen to the story with "me". They are the Director of Companies, the lawyer, the accountant. Those people come from different ranks and do different jobs. In fact, they present different social status and different levels of ideology. And this makes the door wider opens to the reader. No matter who you are and what job you do, you can enjoy the story. All this shorten the distance between the story and the implied reader. Besides, they play a role just like the reader. All of them listen to the story without say anything:

"No one took the trouble to grunt even;"

"Try to be civil, Marlow," growled a voice, and I knew there was at least one listener awake besides myself."

"Nobody moved for a time. 'We have lost the first of the ebb,' said the Director suddenly."

These four listeners arranged by Conrad play the role as the reader. They are all attracted by Marlow's story and say nothing when listening. This enables the reader to have the same feeling. And the only a few interruptive narration of "I" is to remind the reader to have a little rest and think about what they have read.

Third, the use of the narrator Marlow prevents the author from making comments directly. The purpose of this writing by Conrad is to reveal the primitive and barbarous world of Congo, and most important of all, to show the barbarous and cruel ways by which the imperialist, colonialist rulers of the West imposed upon the primitive superstitious black natives of Central Africa, especially the unspeakable acts of murder and highhanded oppression and exploitation that were perpetuated by the servants of the Belgian King Leopold II such as Kurtz. The author lets the reader see all the things from Marlow's eyes. And that is vivid enough to explain the reality there. When necessary, Marlow expressed his opinion to the listeners. This prevents the author from making comments directly and it is much more persuasive than keeping on making comments by the author himself.

Forth, this structure makes the figure, Kurtz, more mysterious. The readers are listening to "I" telling a story from the very beginning to the end. Even "I" himself is also a listener of Marlow. During the story telling, readers can't find the truth at the last moment. They have to see and to think according to what Marlow says and try to find the truth by themselves. Kurtz is the core figure in the story. Before Marlow met him, he had and heard lots of different rumors and about him. What kind of person is Kurtz? This is a suspense that everyone is curious to know. This makes readers have to continue reading.

3. Conclusion

In the writing of *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad didn't use the omniscient narrator — the third person narrator, but use the first person narrator. What's more, he creates at least three narrators to tell the

adventure along the Congo river. The narrative structure is like a cabbage with one level in another one. Readers can hardly find the core thing until they shell the last level.

Having analyzing the use of multiple narrators, the strong points have been discussed. This framed story creates an aesthetic distance between the dramatis personae and readers. And this makes the figures in the story more attractive. However, as the outer narrator “I”, the teller keeps a close distance with readers by introducing little information about “himself”. So “I” can represent a large number of readers and lead the way of listening and thinking of them by interrupting them when necessary. Besides, Conrad used the narrator Marlow to express his own opinion so as to escape making comments directly. In this way, the story sounds more persuasive.

By analyzing the point of view in *Heart of Darkness*, we can appreciate Conrad’s writing skill and find out how he succeeded in expressing the theme. In addition, this helps us to keep an open mind of learning some effective writing methods in our literary creations.

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