

Defining Modernism: Defining Modernism:
An Exploration of the Defining Characteristic in *Heart of Darkness* and “An Image of Africa”

The First World War is known for a great number of things. First and foremost, it wrought death and destruction, the likes of which had never before been seen. Said to have laid waste to an entire generation of lost boys, it was the devastating collision of ruthlessness, power without reason, and mechanized and industrial warfare. “It brought to an end the life and values of Victorian and Edwardian England ... it changed reality” (Peters 34). The Western world could not reconcile The Great War’s barbaric violence with its own sense of evolutionary civilization. As a result, the war catalyzed a widespread loss of faith in prewar beliefs and values. What remained when the dust settled were millions dead and millions more baffled and traumatized by the magnitude of the tragedy that had befallen them. Out of this disillusionment, Modernism was birthed. A literary and artistic movement aimed at “dismantling the myths of nineteenth-century Western society” (Santiáñez 302), modernists like Joseph Conrad and Chinua Achebe aimed “above all, to make you *see*” (Moser 312) and, from that awareness, to determine your own truth. Through close analysis of Joseph Conrad’s novella “Heart of Darkness” and Chinua Achebe’s essay “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s ‘Heart of Darkness,’” this research paper defines Modernism as an artistic strategy that employs experimental uses of juxtaposition, irony, and narrative forms to craft a single story with multiple interpretations that each offer social commentaries and foster a philosophical questioning of the human condition.

In a sense, Modernism as a movement is rooted in juxtaposition. Specifically, it’s proponents and adherents strove to distinguish themselves from the what scholar John Peters terms, “the prewar world and its values” (Peters 35):

The massive loss of life and dehumanizing nature of the first truly mechanized war, with its use of chemical weapons and trench warfare, had a profound effect both on those who participated in it and those who witnessed its consequences. ... [It] brought to an end the life of values of Victorian and Edwardian England; but it did something more fundamental than that: it added a new scale of violence and destruction to what was possible—it changed reality. ... Furthermore, the fact that it appeared to contradict so violently the dominant Western idea of civilization's evolutionary progress brought about widespread loss of faith in the claims of Western civilization. (34)

That loss of faith catalyzed Modernism's aim to stand in stark contrast to all that preceded it. Thus, where Victorian and Edwardian literature was characterized by all-knowing, godlike narrators who represented mainstream culture and reflected its values and ideologies, Modernist literature introduced unreliable narrators, focused more on the individual than on society, who underscored the increasing absurdity and irrationality of the real world. Where Victorian and Edwardian literature operated within linear plotlines that had a traditional beginning, middle, and end, Modernist literature featured nonlinear and framework narratives in a deliberate effort not only to frustrate reader expectations, but also to foster deeper moral and philosophical questioning. Where Victorian and Edwardian literature adhered to conventional formatting and literary styles, Modernist literature prided itself on experimentation and innovation out of which new writing techniques, such as stream-of-consciousness and interior monologue, took shape.

The same juxtaposition that was foundational to the Modernist movement is also at the center of Modernist writings, including Joseph Conrad's famed novella "Heart of Darkness." Perhaps, the most cited example is Conrad's comparison and contrast of the African natives in

his story to the colonizing Europeans. Throughout the novella, Marlow's description of the former is cryptic and dehumanizing. Not once does he present them as entire human beings. Instead, again and again, he reduces them to body parts. For instance, there is a scene in the story, where he stumbles across a shaded grove where many of the natives, after being worked and beaten within inches of their lives, have crawled away to die. Marlow, "horror-struck" (Conrad 26) expresses deep pity and sympathy for their plight. Seemingly, in an act of humanity, he offers one of the dying men a biscuit from his pocket. Marlow describes the encounter thusly: "Slowly the eyelids rose ... and the fingers closed slowly around it" (26). The native is assigned few other attributes. He's not given a name, face, voice or even an age. Other descriptions of the African natives include: "black shadows of disease and starvation ... moribund shapes free as air—and nearly as thin" (25), "black bones" (26), "bundles of acute angles" (26), and "creatures" (26). Perhaps, his most revealing observation is of one native "with his chin propped on his knees, [who] stared at nothing in an intolerable and appalling manner: his brother phantom rested its forehead, as if overcome with a great weariness" (26). As he observes their suffering during what, at first blush, appears to be an instance of humane compassion, Marlow's disgust of them is apparent as is his deeply ingrained, albeit subconscious, sense of superiority. While they are dying at the hands of Westerners who espouse progress and salvation, Marlow refuses the natives their humanity by referring to one of the men as an "it."

Marlow's image of the imperialist Europeans, on the other hand, starkly juxtaposes the grotesquely primitive natives. Take into account, for instance, his description of his encounter with the Company's chief accountant: "I met a white man, in such an unexpected elegance of get-up. [He wore] a high starched collar, white cuffs, and light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clear necktie, and varnished boots. No hat. Hair parted, brushed, oiled under a green-line parasol

held in a big white hand. He was amazing” (26-27). This fellow is presented as a complete man, a whole person. Marlow’s adulation of the man does not stop there. He goes on to describe him as “a miracle” (27), “wonderfully odd” (27), and “verily accomplished” (27). After only moments of meeting and greeting him with a handshake, Marlow concludes, “I respected the fellow. Yes; I respected his collars, his vast cuffs, his brushed hair. His appearance was certainly that of a hairdresser’s dummy; but in the great demoralization of the land he kept up his appearance. That’s backbone. His starched collars and got-up shirt fronts were achievements of character” (28). Conrad’s protagonist does not mince words. What he admires most about the accountant is that he represents the complete opposite of Africa and its people.

Since juxtaposition is foundational to “Heart of Darkness,” it only makes sense that ““An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness,'” Chinua Achebe’s scathing critique of Conrad’s novella also centers on the story’s strategic contrasts. As Achebe notes, from the outset, “Heart of Darkness” projects the image of Africa as ‘the other world,’ the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization” (Achebe 2). While a considerable amount of his essay focuses on Conrad’s contrasting characterizations, he first draws attention to the way in which the author establishes the novel’s setting as contrary, pitting the African landscape on which the story’s events unfold as inherently undesirable and conspicuously lacking in comparison to its European counterpart.

The book opens on the River Thames, tranquil, resting, peacefully. ...But the actual story will take place on the River Congo, the very antithesis of the Thames. The River Congo is quite decidedly not a River Emeritus. ...We are told that ‘Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world.’ Is Conrad saying then that these two rivers are very different, one good, the other bad? Yes. (2)

Juxtaposition, then, in numerous forms, rests at the soul of “Heart of Darkness.” Whether or not it is used by Conrad to condemn colonialism or it cleverly works to reinforce a long-held cultural belief of authoritative supremacy is not the point. Whatever one’s interpretation of these contrasts, their primary function is to herd readers to a place of deeper reflection and philosophical questioning about the human condition, in part, by forcing a comparison of Self versus Other that prompts both the evaluation of generationally ingrained assumptions and the examination of how one personally navigates society and the world-at-large in light of those deeply held beliefs or set of values.

Much like juxtaposition, irony is a defining characteristic of Modernist writings. It’s impossible to explore Conrad’s use of irony without first defining what it is and understanding its function within the Modernist movement as a whole. Modernists considered irony “an indication of modern man’s growing historical awareness within the development of mankind; moreover, [they considered] it is an expression of the mind reflecting upon itself and the conditions of human consciousness as such” (Ziegler 283). Considered by some to be “an age of absolute irony” (284), Modernism approached irony as not only a way to thumb its nose at capitalism, industrialism, and the politics of colonialism, but also as a tool to intensify or heighten the truths exposed and their accompanying emotions as a conduit to greater revelation.

Perhaps the greatest and most obvious irony in “Heart of Darkness” is Kurtz’s decent into savage barbarism while on his mission to civilize the inhabitants of the Congo. In a 17-page pamphlet, described by Marlow as “a beautiful piece of writing” (79), Kurtz outlines a plan to colonize the African brutes by suppressing their savage customs. Marlow recalls: “He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived

at, ‘must necessarily appear to them [the savages] in the nature of supernatural beings—we approach them with the might as of a deity,’ ...By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded” (79-80). Kurtz, then, began his assignment in the Congo with lofty, if not misguided, ambitions. Working within the assumption that the Africans would view him and other Europeans as supernatural godlike beings, he ascribes whites both the responsibility and the power, by virtue of the West’s more developed state, to overpower the natives and, in a show of altruistic benevolence, lead them to a more enlightened way of being. Marlow confesses, that Kurtz’s “burning noble words” (80) made him “tingle with enthusiasm” (80). What ultimately makes Kurtz’s plan ironic, of course, is that rather than civilize the savages, he becomes the greatest savage of all. He abandons the very moral restraint that, in his own estimation, qualifies Westerners to reprogram the natives’ primitive culture and customs. In the end, Kurtz positions himself as an all-powerful figure, worshipped by those he is supposed to aid. Instead of turning them from their brute savagery, he takes part in it, attending night rituals and beheadings and leading violent ivory raids. It is this ironic reversal of fate that many critics point to as evidence of Conrad’s outright condemnation of imperialism. “Forcefully exposing the contradictions lying at the heart of the Belgian colonization of the Congo, a system purporting to do one thing and doing the exact reverse” (Vandamme 179) is a “clever way to convey a scathing indictment of [the] colonial system” (179). For some, there is no greater mockery of imperialism than to watch the cultivated, progressive imperialists, lauded as purveyors of the way, the truth, and the light, prove no better or different than the people they come to enlighten.

Achebe acknowledges the irony present in Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness,” but he doesn’t interpret it as a vehicle used by Conrad to criticize colonialism. Instead, he considers use of irony

the ultimate assault against Africa and its inhabitants. Of Kurtz's descent into madness and subsequent death, he questions, "What better or more appropriate finis could be written to the horror story of that wayward child of civilization who willfully had given his soul to the powers of darkness and 'taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land' than the proclamation of his physical death by the forces he had joined" (50)? In Achebe's estimation, Conrad's use of irony only reinforces Africa as a landscape of all-consuming darkness that is reduced to "a setting, a backdrop" (6), used as a measuring stick against which Europeans can reaffirm their superior position. Instead of heralding "Heart of Darkness" as a literary masterpiece, Achebe questions the hubris of the author and his proponents. "Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in reducing Africa to a role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind? ... The question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art?" (6). Achebe's answer is an emphatic no. However, one's individual interpretation of Conrad's use of irony is secondary consideration. Whether the story is "germane to an exposé of imperialism and genuinely anti-racist or racist and weakly anti-imperialist" (Nayak 30), it successfully fosters a "daring and deliberate exploration of the difficulties in understanding cultural otherness" (30).

A third defining characteristic of Modernist literature is its use of frame narrative. Simply defined, a frame narrative is a story within a story. "Heart of Darkness" features two narrators. The first narrator is unidentified, introduced only as a sailor aboard a boat called the *Nellie*. The second narrator is Marlow himself. His journey into Africa is told as a story within a story, and the first narrator only appears at the very beginning and at the very end of the novella. The peripheral narrator introduces Marlow who, subsequently takes over as the central narrator, recounting his story from his point of view. The use of two narrators is a literary technique that

allows Conrad to interject commentary and make objective comparisons that Marlow, who is too close to the story, cannot make. Early on, Marlow is introduced as a man to whom “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 sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine” (7). Marlow believes that real understanding can only come by looking in from an outside vantage point. So, it only makes sense that Conrad employ a peripheral narrator to relay Marlow’s story. In this way, the reader is distanced from the action so that he can more clearly see the parallels between Africa and Africans and Europe and Europeans. Additionally, Conrad’s use of a frame narrative introduces the all-important unreliable narrator, also characteristic of Modernist literature. Marlow’s account, his vacillating opinion of Kurtz, his willingness to ignore Kurtz’s unconscionable actions, and decision to like Kurtz’s fiancée about the last words Kurtz utters before he dies, call into question Marlow’s version of events. The audience cannot be certain of the accuracy of his story. He offers no absolutes, no solutions, no neat ending. Rather, the reader is left to draw his own conclusions and to make sense as best he can of the chaos and atrocities that are purported to have taken place.

Achebe views Conrad’s choice of a frame narrative with a bit more skepticism. He accuses Conrad’s use of “a narrator behind a narrator” as the author’s attempt to “set up layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of his history” (5). However, Achebe maintains that Conrad’s choice to filter Marlow’s story through a second, shadowy person is done so in vain:

If Conrad's intention is to draw a cordon sanitaire between himself and the moral and psychological malaise of his narrator his care seems to me totally wasted because he

neglects to hint however subtly or tentatively at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters. It would not have been beyond Conrad's power to make that provision if he had thought it necessary. Marlow seems to me to enjoy Conrad's complete confidence—a feeling reinforced by the close similarities between their two careers. (5)

Achebe is of the school that the unnamed peripheral narrator and Conrad are interchangeable and that the use of a second narrator is simply the author's unsuccessful attempt to separate himself from the story's imperialist sentiments. Regardless of who Conrad chooses to narrate the story or the distance he attempts to place between himself and his narrator, however, "Heart of Darkness" exhibits a "violent ambivalence based on the troubling recognition of the self in the other" (Christensen 7). In other words, racism is predicated on Westerners', like Marlow, search "for foundational difference that ... affirms their own identities as white, modern, and civilized" (7). No matter how charitable or honorable their intentions seem, no matter their "bleeding-heart sentiments" (5), they do not, cannot, will not ever view Blacks as equals. Achebe uses missionary Albert Schweitzer as an example. A brilliant man with many talents, Schweitzer gave his life in service of Africans "in much the same area as Conrad writes about" (5). But despite his sacrifice, rooted in Christian service and brotherly love, he is quoted as saying, "The African is indeed my brother but my junior brother" (5). This mindset manifested itself in Schweitzer's work. As Achebe notes, the famed missionary "proceeded to build a hospital appropriate to the needs of junior brothers with standards of hygiene reminiscent of medical practice in the days before the germ theory of diseases came into being" (5) As with Conrad and Achebe's differing viewpoint on juxtaposition and irony, though, the interpretation

of “Heart of Darkness” narrative techniques comes second to the greater questions of the human condition it fosters.

Ultimately, Modernism is a resistance Movement, born from the profound and widespread disillusionment that followed The Great War. Modernist writers worked to distinguish themselves from prewar writers by experimenting with literary forms, techniques, and functions. Gone were the days of simply continuing what came before, following tradition, meeting reader expectations, and simply reflecting the ideas and values of mainstream culture. They strove, instead, to help their audiences see. They found beauty and purpose in the chaos and absurdity of life. They harnessed the pain, desolation, and hopelessness left behind by the sheer carnage of World War I and used it to create exciting and innovative literature that made valid multiple and contradictory interpretations that compelled society to ask the hard questions about their past and present, all in pursuit of a better future.

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