NARRATIVE METHOD AND DESIGN IN J. CONRAD'S "HEART OF DARKNESS" AND F. F. COPOLLA'S *APOCALYPSE NOW*

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Abstract

A comparative analysis of Joseph Conrad's story and F.F. Coppola's film can greatly benefit from a rhetorical approach that may help reveal the artistic method and design, the authorial intention and the correct way in which readers and viewers should understand and react to the way in which the events are narrated and the characters are depicted. The two artistic works in the title are connected because Apocalypse Now was inspired by Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" and thus it has the same plot pattern of a river journey to deep wilderness, but also because their authors have chosen the method of character narration which involves multilayered communication.

Keywords: the rhetorical approach to narrative, character-narrator, progression, narrator functions, multilayered communication.

Composition, public release circumstances, and parallelism

"Heart of Darkness," published in serialized form in 1899 and in a book in 1902, while Joseph Conrad was at the peak of his writing career, draws heavily on the author's experience as a sailor, particularly the adventurous voyage up the Congo River he undertook in 1890 at the age of 32. That experience made a profound impression on him, therefore Conrad took to depict a hero's journey within the isolated exotic setting of the African jungle (in many ways similar to a journey to the underworld), which triggered the hero's confrontation with fear, doubt, evil, the subconscious, and the effects of political ideology.

Conrad's text, labelled a novella (between 80-100 pages long, depending on the edition) and divided into three sections, features a nameless narrator (a peripheral narrator) recounting in the past tense an evening aboard the *Nellie,* a cruising yawl anchored on the Thames near London, during which captain Charles Marlow (the central narrator) tells four other fellow sailors the story of his own voyage as captain of a river-steamboat for a European ivory trading company up the river Congo in Africa to bring back from wilderness an agent named Kurtz. The experience occasioned a European sailor's encounter with an indigenous community and triggers his awareness of the effects of colonialism, imperialism and corruption. The meeting with the mysterious Kurtz, a European ivory trader who has gone mad and turned himself into a jungle demigod with an army of devoted followers among the natives, contributes to Marlow's final psychological transformation. Kurtz used to be a widely respected, first-class agent who brought in more ivory for the Company than all the other agents combined, but then he refused further orders from the management and under his command the natives attacked a steamboat of the company to prevent his own removal and dismissal. By the time,

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Marlow meets Kurtz, the former is irrecoverably ill, and, on the way out of the deep jungle, the latter entrusts to him some personal documents telling him to keep them away from the manager, then he dies, not before Marlow hears him weakly whisper: "The horror! The horror!" Marlow himself becomes increasingly ill, near death. Both repelled and fascinated by the man, Marlow comes back to London, a sadder but a wiser man (to paraphrase Coleridge), but mainly embittered and contemptuous of the "civilized" world. Two callers come to retrieve the papers of Kurtz: a representative of the Company (interested in information regarding the whereabouts of ivory) and a man who claims to be Kurtz's cousin. The latter as well as Kurtz's fiancée, whom Marlow visits afterwards, glorify the deceased man's adventurous character, his nobility and see him as the great Christian do-gooder who has gone into the heart of darkness to transform and educate a savage community. But Marlow knows that the real man was virtually the opposite, having killed others at will, and having become the embodiment of instinctual behavior, wild appetite and savage un-restraint. Marlow yearns to tell the truth, but is coerced in conversation not to shatter the illusion of Kurtz's noble characters or the mythology embracing the rationale for the Western imperialism.

The novella was not a big success during Conrad's life, Conrad himself not considering it to be particularly notable, either. However, by the 1960s, it became a regular assignment in high school textbooks and college courses, being considered a prime and fine example of modernist literature: for its exotic setting and topic, for its innovative use of perspective, for its profound messages, for its parable-like quality, for its universality derived from specific experience, for its enigmatic character, as well as for the range of potential interpretations.

In 1979, a movie adapting the novella to screen but set in the jungles of Vietnam had its theatrical release. *Apocalypse Now* directed by Francis Ford Coppola is a similarly disturbing exploration of the darkness potentially inherent in humanity. Coppola keeps the basic plot of Conrad's novella for his film. As "Heart of Darkness"follows Marlow's journey through the different Company stations and eventually upriver to Kurtz, Coppola's film follows an American Army Captain (Willard) up the Nung River in Vietnam and Cambodia to find and "terminate" the command of a mad Special Forces colonel named Kurtz, who refuses to take orders from his superiors and has formed an army of devoted savage natives. Both the Company and the Army want their Kurtz dead, because their employees detest and expose their false pretentions of humanity and their unsound methods. Neither Kurtz is capable of resisting the temptation of savage instincts, once they have given in they find that their lives have become 'hollow' and that they cannot lead such lives. Whereas in Africa Kurtz has a terminal disease and dies a natural death, Colonel Kurtz wants "someone to take the pain away." When Willard kills him, he opposes no resistance but he utters the same ambiguous words "The horror! The horror!" The murder scene of Col. Kurtz happens simultaneously with the cruel ritualistic killing of a bull, which can be interpreted as two simultaneous sacrifices, Col. Kurtz being sacrificed to redeem the sins of the American Army. After Willard commits the

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assassination, hundreds of Kurtz's followers bow to him giving him the chance to become Kurtz's successor. After a brief hesitation, Willard chooses to return to the boat and the civilized world.

During their journeys, the protagonists in both "Heart of Darkness" and *Apocalypse Now* gradually notice and question the hypocrisy of their organizations, while at the end they learn the same lesson about the potentiality for evil of the human mind and soul. Their glimpse of the darkness when finally meeting Kurtz mark their lives for good - they will never forget what lay over the edge and return to their routine lives wiser yet more shaken as a result.

Narrative techniques

In discussing the narrative technique of Conrad's novella "Heart of Darkness," many start by emphasizing that Conrad sets the story up as a 'frame' story (i.e. there is one narrative embedded into the main narrative) instead of having Marlow be the first person narrator. In light of this premise, readers make a major observation: the technique saves the narration from being biased and leaning on only one perspective, as the main purpose of the frame story is to add different perspectives to the narrative.

I, on the other hand, choose to discuss Conrad's novella "Heart of Darkness" as an example of multilayered communication. The novella has two character-narrators which involves three levels of communication. First, there is the primary character-narrator's communication to his narrative audience – he is an unnamed passenger on a domestic trade ship, who has listened to Marlow's story together with three other passengers and reports on behalf of all of them, using the first-person plural. The anonymous narrator describes events from Marlow's recent past. His narration introduces all the characters, as well as the circumstances of Marlow's telling his story: the evening spent aboard the Nellie, the description of the sunset, the Thames River and its surroundings. Very significant are the bits of characterization of Marlow's voice, physical appearance and reactions. A very important piece of information in this layer of communication is: *"*to him [i.e. to Marlow] 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*"* (Conrad 9). In other words, if the meaning of Marlow's story is to be discovered outside it, then the readers need to be offered an outside perspective (the setting of the boat on the Thames years later), and thus they will be able to understand the parallels and differences between the atmosphere on the Thames and the one on the Congo River, between the political and anthropological conditions of the two continents, between the mentality of the white European colonists and the one of the native Africans. The nameless narrator is an opportunity for more commentary, more connections, even for an implicit parallel between Marlow and Kurtz. This primary narrator is given the privilege of both introducing and concluding the

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novella as a whole. Rather than making personal comments on Marlow's story, he simply offers more details of setting.

Character narration is, according to Phelan[2], an act of indirection, i.e. an author communicates to their audience by means of the character narrator´s communication to a narrative audience. Consequently, we must also speak about communication between the author and the authorial audience. Because in "The Heart of Darkness" every event narrated by the unnamed narrator is adequately accounted for from the mimetic standpoint, there is no divergence between the two tracks of communication nor does the implied author communicate from behind this narrator, and no distance between the two tracks of communication means that one exists on top of the other. This character-narrator records Marlow's oral telling within quotation marks which adds reliability to the primary narrator, being a sign that as his opinions will not corrupt the story.

The use of this complex multi-layered structure has to do with the notions of *truth*, *subjectivity, authenticity* and the *reliability* of the governing voice, especially in the context of an eye-witness report, as is the case with Marlow's account of his travel up the river Congo. Moreover, every layer of narrative presentation is accompanied by its own set of values, characteristics and aesthetic norms and reveals to the reader an increasing complexity of distancing on the part of Conrad. If the account of the anonymous narrator is totally supported and reinforced by the implied narrator, the account of Marlow benefits from a different treatment.

The inside layer of communication is connected with a second character-narrator and the protagonist of the novella, the middle-aged ship captain Charles Marlow, who narrates his story in the first person, describing what he witnessed years before and providing his own commentary on the story. Most of the novella is allotted to this layer. When Marlow becomes the narrator, the primary narrator becomes the narratee receiving the story alongside the other characters on board, the authorial and narrative audiences. This inside narrative told in the first person by Marlow raises issues of personal motivation, subjectivity, and reliability.

Firstly, in describing his experience in Africa, Marlow recounts the story of another character (Kurtz), a story filtered through his own personal understanding. Despite pretense of objectivity, of delivering first-hand information and of comprehensiveness, Marlow is not capable to fully explain Kurtz's experience. Kurtz was the central authority on the darkness, but given his mental state and being overcome with its effects he would not have been able to explain them coherently to someone else. All Marlow could do was to pick up the pieces of Kurtz' life and try to make sense of them on his own terms. The account of Kurtz's story is entangled with his own subjective story of discovery and confrontation with the forces of the 'darkness' and his daily life is greatly altered because of this - there is even an identification in narration between Marlow and

[2]*Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*, Phelan's study published in 2005, focuses extensively on the matter of narrative technique, which he chooses to refer to by distinguishing between character narration and non-character narration.

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Kurtz (Kurtz' narrative becomes Marlow's, and Marlow's story parallels Kurtz's). Secondly, we have to take into account the fact that Marlow also fell seriously ill in Africa, and this surely affected his perception of reality. Thirdly, Marlow informs his narratees that Kurtz "discoursed," never providing details about what exactly Kurtz had to say, or the exact content of Kurtz's personal or official written texts. Furthermore, Marlow having the ultimate control over his narrative he chooses to defy the way in which Kurtz himself wanted his life story told. Marlow erases the "Exterminate the brutes!" scribble on the last page of Kurtz's report commissioned by the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, thus eliminating the authenticity of Kurtz' written account. Lastly, Marlow discloses that fact that he told an outright lie to the Intended (ignoring Kurtz's instructions). Having failed as a narrator by giving a fake oral version of Kurtz's story, chances are that he is not being straight again retelling it to the new naratees (the sailors onboard the Nellie). Only that this time, the suspected alterations will serve another purpose: to raise awareness of the dangers of the 'darkness' that consumed Kurtz and almost overtook Marlow, to involve more people in the knowledge of this darkness, and to account for his currently being such a tormented human being. There is constant perversion of Kurtz' story by Marlow, consequently it can be argued that Marlow's second attempt at narrating also fails and this demonstrates his unreliability as narrator. Marlow's account is more of an interpretation of Kurtz' story than the literal conveyance of it.

When there is clear evidence of unreliability, one should not reproach the implied author for creating a flawed construction. On the contrary this situation is considered, James Phelan claims, a mark of ingenuity (28). Thus, because the disclosure functions of Marlow as a narrator become dominant over his narrator functions, the synthetic status of the narrator becomes apparent, and the audience finally come to the realization that "Heart of Darkness" with its complexly layered narrative scheme is meant to tell a story about the way a story is narrated. All the audiences absorb Marlow's narrative and become to a certain extent aware of the potential darkness, but *Heart of Darkness* is more about how a man who witnessed the darkness struggles to put his experiences into words and how the tale is conveyed to layers and layers of audiences. The *way* in which Marlow tells the story is equally important in the novel as the story itself.

Apocalypse Now is a double-layered communication. There is the communication between the director and the viewing audience, which, in case of this screen production, is an act of indirection, as the director communicates the story to their audience by means of a character narrator´s communication to a narrative audience. Willard as a voice-over guides his listeners' understanding and even anticipates (in the first minutes of the film) the outcome of his journey into the heart of the jungle: "When it [the mission] was done, I'd never want another." He, as opposed to his counterpart Marlow, tells his story to teach his listeners about his discoveries concerning the "heart of darkness" into which he travelled. An important difference between these characters is that Willard began the descent into the darkness of the jungle as a man already accustomed to the "horror" - he

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was a man who had been fighting his inner demons, who as a result of war trauma failed re-adjust to the life in the United States, and who desperately needed a mission to give his life some purpose. Another difference is that there is no intention from the part of the film director to subvert Willard's story telling. Cinematography with its means enhances *authenticity* and the *reliability* of the governing voice, as the eye-witness report is supported by images of actual events and the actual people, shifting Willard from the narrator role into that of a character involved in the tale. Viewers can witness Kurtz in action and expressing his opinions and principles of life.

Conclusion

The author of any narrative (be they a writer or a director) conceives it rhetorically, calculates effects, adjusts techniques and finds solutions to reach a clear purpose. It can be argued that "Heart of Darkness" and *Apocalypse Now*are meant to depict the voyage to the heart of the jungle and the dark spheres of the human mind and soul from observers' perspectives, in order to demonstrate the danger of people losing their minds during a trip to the underworld and becoming conflicted people, as well as to demonstrate that the English/American society is painfully ignorant of the abuses and the extent of the evil.

But more importantly, it has to be argued that both Conrad and Coppola insist on narrating Marlow and Willard in the act of telling their tales. Their purpose is to create an awareness, not necessarily an understanding of the darkness, and to depict how a man who witnessed the darkness struggles to put his experiences into words and convey the tale to layers of audiences. This purpose is achieved through the rhetorical function of the complexly-layered narrative structure. The two or three levels of communications move the reader further and further outward from the essence of the story, from the darkness that consumes Kurtz and threatens to overtake Marlow and Willard. On the one hand, Joseph Conrad develops Marlow's narrative functions but he emphasizeshis disclosure ones more - he has Charles Marlow speak out of emotional drive rather than fact, so that it becomes clear that he is not a reliable narrator, for which reason he introduces the second perspective of the anonymous character-narrator and a third layer of communication, an outsider's point of view meant to provide background information and objectivity, as well as to verify the information. Coppola, on the other hand, gives *Apocalypse Now* a reliable narrator whose account of the events is never subverted and needs no validation.

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