

## Identity-Construction and Looking into the Soul: The Narrative Structure and Dynamics of Joseph Conrad

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### Abstract

One of the notable characteristics of Joseph Conrad's fiction is the *Self-Construction* of character with self-conscious in addition to innovative use of narrative techniques. Conrad is noted for frequently employing contemplative personified narrators, many of whom produce recognizably oral narratives to a listener or a group of listeners. The most famous and arguably the most intriguing of these storytellers is *Charlie Marlow*, whose narratives form the primary subject of this research article. Joseph Conrad, through Marlow expresses his inner feelings, be it of joy at a young sailor's first command or his first view of the East. He expresses dismay at the meaningless destruction in Africa, the cost a man has to pay for his pursuit of greatness as seen in the case of Jim as in *Lord Jim*. Conrad voices the adventures, lives and the ideals of different men through his narrator Marlow who is not only the narrator of Conrad's tales, but also one who *looks into the soul* and sympathizes with the characters that he is made to describe. This method of narration gives Conrad the essential independence to express his point of view without making his presence felt during the course of the *narrative*. Conrad reformulates the concept of narrative identity in the novel itself. The present study concentrates on Conrad's interest in the power and uses of narrative and his concern with the problem of identity are intimately related. The imaginative reconstruction of the past through the act of narration involves the *construction of identities*: above all the identity of the narrator, but also that of the characters described in the narrative. Conrad's narrators often appeal to as well as challenge the purported values of the community to which they all belong.

**Keywords:** Joseph Conrad, Identity-Construction, Self-Conscious, Narrative Structure, Technique, Dynamics

## **Introduction**

Being an artistic artist, the novelist touches upon life and portrays the ordinary realities of the average person which pass by unobserved by him. The novel thus provokes the imagination of the reader and allows him the freedom to place the situations and characters described within his realization in such a way that what he reads and what the novelist describes seems to be real, "A novel is a picture of life, and life is well known to us"(Lubbock 5). The reader sees the world that the novelist portrays through the narrator and after having read a novel, he returns to reality or dreams based on novelistic models. The novelist creates a situation which appears to be real and he also creates characters that are "*free* people, capable of standing *alongside*" (Bakhtin 32, 6). One of the hallmarks of Joseph Conrad's fiction is the *self-construction* of character with self-conscious as well as innovative use of narrative technique. In particular, Conrad is noted for frequently employing contemplative personified narrators, many of whom produce recognizably oral narratives to a listener or a group of listeners. In Conrad's novels, the narrator Marlow, searches for *identity* amidst the devastation carried on in Africa under the pretext of bringing civilization to the continent and the desire to achieve recognition in life, as seen in Jim. Conrad adopts the technique of having the story told by a character in it – that is, Marlow who offers his own opinions and not those of the author. Marlow is not only a go-between as a voice but is the author as well, without the author making his presence felt during the course of the narrative.

Another characteristic feature of Conrad's fiction is a preoccupation with questions of identity – a preoccupation that is unsurprising to anyone familiar with the story of his life. Born to Polish parents as Józef Teodor Konrad Nałecz Korzeniowski in a town in Russian-occupied Ukraine, formerly a part of the Polish Commonwealth, he went on to become a seaman in French and then English merchant ships, his eventual transition from seaman to writer in his third language involved adopting "Joseph Conrad" as his pen name and the far more complicated process of crafting his English literary identity. Conrad's own understanding of his multiple identities is summed up in his oft-quoted remark, made in a letter of 1903, that "Homo duplex has in my case more than one meaning" (CL3 89).

The present study concentrates on Conrad's interest in the power and uses of narrative and his concern with the problem of identity are intimately related on top of his self-reflective storytellers engaged in an interpretative or re-interpretative enterprise that concerns not only certain events in the past but also themselves. There is a sense that it is only by telling their narratives to their listeners that Conrad's narrators can come to a better (although never

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complete) self-understanding. But self-understanding is not a matter of simply discovering a preexisting and correct interpretation of one's character and actions. Conrad's fiction suggests that such an interpretation does not exist, that there is no such thing as an individual's true identity waiting to be discovered. The imaginative reconstruction of the past through the act of narration involves the *construction* of identities: above all the identity of the narrator, but also that of the characters described in the narrative. Nor does the identity of the listeners remain unaffected. By negotiating their identities with their audience, Conrad's narrators often appeal to as well as challenge the purported values of the community to which they all belong.

Conrad reformulates the concept of narrative identity in the novel itself, he also had a fondness for multiple narrators and framed tales, in which frame narrative and embedded narrative both illuminate aspects of the story but at the same time offer competing interpretations of it, leaving it to the reader to decide which interpretation is to be given more credit. As Jeremy Hawthorn has put it, Conrad's use of personified narrators in general, and frame narratives in particular, gives the clear picture "that distinctively Conradian senses that we do not perceive the world and its people in unmediated form, but indirectly, either through one reporting consciousness, or through a chain of linked consciousnesses" ("Half-written Fictions" 155).

### **The Narrative Structure and Dynamics**

The narrator is a source of information, which flows from the novelist to the reader and may also be regarded as a means by which communication between the novelist and the reader is enabled. "One of the ... devices of the storyteller is the trick of going beneath the surface of the action to obtain a reliable view of a character's mind and heart" (Booth 171). The narrator describes events in the narrative, addressing the audience directly. He also communicates to the readers, the state of mind and emotion of the characters described. The novelist's use of a narrator serves to establish a close relationship between the writer and the reader. The writer, very subtly, is able to put forth his point of view and his comments without allowing the reader to feel his presence. This method of narration is extremely effective for the narrator sets the tone of the tale that he narrates whilst also conveying the novelist's point of view through multiple narrative strategies.

Although Conrad's fiction betrays an ongoing concern with the way in which personal as well as collective identities are constructed through storytelling, the Marlovian narratives offer a particularly fruitful ground for an examination. An almost exclusively oral storyteller whose narratives are always introduced by an anonymous narrator at a higher narrative level, Marlow tells the greater part of as many as four of Conrad's works. In all of these texts *Youth*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim* and *Chance* **Marlow** relates to his listener or listeners a narrative in which he himself features as a character. All these factors combined make him the ideal narrator for

Conrad to dramatize the close relation between narration and identity. The fact that there is another narrator describing how Marlow addresses an audience, in *Chance*, mostly a single listener, draws attention to the act of narration and thus to the process of *identity construction*. In other words, the Marlovian narratives show identity in the making. That Marlow always tells a tale, at least partly, about him also means that Conrad can exploit the difference between the narrator and the character; he can formulate the way in which the narrating self relates to the actions and thoughts of his past self. The fact that Marlow appears in four works encourages the readers to consider how his identity evolves from text to text. However, there is no clear continuity between his incarnations because he creates himself anew in each of his narratives. What makes the figure of Marlow especially interesting is that he not only allows Conrad to dramatize *identity-construction* in the fiction; it is also partly through Marlow that Conrad creates his own *literary identity*.

*Heart of Darkness* is the artistic projection of Conrad's personal journey to the Congo in 1890. It marks the beginning of a major creative phase in the literary journey of Conrad. Marlow says at the beginning of *Heart of Darkness*: "Between us there was the bond of the sea" (135) and this statement is the yarn that connects him to *Youth* which marks the introduction of Marlow as the narrator in Conrad's fiction. Conrad once again uses Marlow as the narrator, because he was not only concerned with the events described, but with their impression on the readers: "The journey is a journey into darkness...He was preoccupied with the mystery and problem 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, the Congo journey was the prime influence that determined Conrad the sailor to become Conrad the novelist. For Conrad, the expedition to the Congo became a journey within, a journey through darkness into the self. It records a journey into the darkness within man which awakens at the touch of the actual experience of the Congo and the light that it sheds on confusion, fascination, guilt, the sense of nightmare: "It seemed to throw a kind of light upon everything about me – and into my thoughts" (*Heart of Darkness* 141). Conrad's aim is not only to take the reader on a journey to the Congo but through this journey to bring to light questions which may arise in the mind of the reader, being faced with a situation as that seen in Africa.

*Heart of Darkness* to be a highly complex and layered text in which communication takes place at various different levels. This complexity alone, however, cannot fully explain why it is sometimes so difficult to distinguish between the particular instances of senders and receivers. Conrad himself used narrative to reengage indirectly with his complicity in the

colonial enterprise in the Congo. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad certainly suggests that there is no ultimate truth about the self and that language is an imperfect tool for self-expression and for rendering experience. But the text also demonstrates how language and narrative can help the readers cope with the past by organizing the fragmentary experiences into a coherent whole. Although Marlow will probably need to retell this narrative to find the effective story with which he can fully identify, he is shown to be moving towards a coherent understanding of his Congo experiences. By extension, that Conrad may have written *Heart of Darkness* at least partly in order to come to terms with his traumatic experiences as well as with his complicity in what he had seen in the Congo. Joseph Conrad, through Marlow expresses his inner feelings, be it of joy at a young sailor's first command or his first view of the East. He expresses dismay at the meaningless destruction in Africa, the cost a man has to pay for his pursuit of greatness as seen in the case of Jim as in *Lord Jim* and the role of destiny when one like Flora in *Chance* has to suffer because of no apparent fault.

*Youth* is a story about Conrad's early voyage as second mate on the 'Palestine' in 1881-82. An old leaky ship named 'Judea' is rammed by a steamship in Newcastle harbour and further damaged by storms in the English Channel. It is put into the harbour at Falmouth for repairs which seem to be endless. After the ship sets out for Bangkok the cargo of coal soon catches fire. A long, but fruitless struggle ensues in order to control the fire, but the ship explodes off Sumatra and the crew has to abandon it, taking to their boats. Marlow is able to obtain charge of a boat and relates memories of his first command. To him everything appears adventurous and he takes delight in commanding the small lifeboat. Marlow navigates to a little tropical port and wakes up the next morning to have his first view of the East: "This was the East of the ancient navigators, so old, so mysterious, resplendent and somber, living and unchanged, full of danger and promise" (131). *Youth* is a recreation of Conrad's life at sea. It is an evocation, a recollection of a mood, of an attitude that he recaptures. Marlow, whom we see in *Youth*, is a part of the group that travels to the East and authenticates his narration. Conrad adopted British citizenship. He was proud of the sea-faring activities of the Englishmen and through Marlow voices his own pride as an Englishman. The young Marlow undergoes a process of maturation from which he emerges as a more self-possessed and fully-formed person than he appeared to be at the beginning of the narrative as the indivisible component of Conrad's narration. Marlow's description is realistic, and the narration is informed by all that he goes through till the Judea blows up and he is given command of the new vessel.

More explicitly and in a more complex way than any other work by Conrad, *Lord Jim* is about the human need to construct a coherent identity by means of narrative. Both in its form and subject matter, the novel dramatizes the compulsion to tell narratives of the self and the desire to have these narratives verified by others. It also asks the related question of how the failure of one

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of its members threatens the narrative of the community and, more broadly, the narrative of imperialism. Completed about a year and a half after *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim* takes up and develops many of the issues raised in the earlier novella. But unlike *Youth* and *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim* is not primarily Marlow's self-narrative. Jim is the main character and his narrative identity the central interest of the novel. Marlow serves as his confidant and the recipient of his confession but recedes ever further into the background of the story he tells. This is not to say, however, that Marlow's narrative function diminishes in importance, but that it undergoes a profound transformation. As a full-length novel, *Lord Jim* also features various other characters who become storytellers. Criticism has tended to focus on their stories only in so far as they shed light on Jim's character, yet some of these are also interesting as self-narratives in their own right. Marlow, in both his oral and his written narrative, offers a balanced interpretation and synthesis of all these varied and partly contradictory stories. Yet, he is far from being an impartial observer. For Marlow too, the act of narration turns out to be a deeply personal undertaking, a means of creating a coherent story of this episode of his life, one that he hopes can invert the effect of the many contingencies with which Jim's case is fraught. *Lord Jim*, in turn, can be read as a piece of autobiographical fiction, even though it is not based on a single memorable event or period of Conrad's life, as were the two earlier Marlow tales.

### **Conclusion:**

The creator and his creation maintain a democratic relationship, and the Marlovian narratives are thus nothing but the result of Conrad's productive cooperation. Probably the novels of Conrad exhibit the idea of personal honour which is essential to man's existence. In his novels, a character defends himself through his actions. He 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. He used his life at sea as a canvas against which he examined human nature and action. He would gather his fellow sailors around him, on the deck of a ship and have one of them narrate a personal experience. In order to maintain distance from the narrative and to be able to comment on the situation and the characters without interfering in the narrative, Conrad created the character of Marlow who was crucial for his commentaries on the action and situation in the narrative, and who subsequently acted as Conrad's spokesperson.

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