UNIT 3 LITERARY ANALYSIS-II

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

You may have already got some idea about how tricky the task of reading *Heart of Darkness* is. The purpose in this unit is to clear some of the snags you might encounter while reading the text by suggesting some guidelines to approach it. We shall see, among other things, how it is a reworking of the genre of the adventure story. Marlow embarks on an adventurous journey all right, but does that mean that his journey therefore becomes an adventure? If yes, how is that different from the conventions of the genre? How does Marlow's character contribute to his way of telling the tale? Is it a psychological drama; not so much a journey in space and time as a spiritual descent into the heart of darkness, some kind of a Dantesque Inferno? (Dante (1265-1321), as you know is the Italian poet who wrote the allegorical epic *Divine Comedy*). As Marlow would say, "My purpose was to stroll the shade for a moment; but no sooner within than it seemed to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno." In this unit, we shall take up these issues drawing mostly on textual evidence. So I shall expect you to pick up the references as we move along.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the context of the genre of the adventure story, and the more general consideration of Conrad's artistic intentions in the tale, it would be worthwhile to look at his well-known "artistic principle" laid down in the "Preface" to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* part of which I quote at some length below. For this is an indispensable statement of his artistic principles, and stands as a touchstone for much of his writing career.

> A work that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art should carry its justification in every line. And art itself may be defined as a single minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colours, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter, and in the facts of life what of each fundamental, what is enduring and essential—there one illuminating and convincing quality—the very truth of their existence. The artist, then, like the thinker or the scientist, seeks the truth and makes his appeal. Impressed by the aspect of the world the thinker plunges into ideas, the scientist into fact—whence, presently, emerging they make their appeal to those qualities of our being that fit us best for the hazardous enterprise of living. They speak authoritatively to our common sense, to our intelligence, to our desire of peace, or to our desire of unrest; not seldom to our prejudices, sometimes to our fears, often to our egoism—but always to our credulity. And their words are heard with reverence, for their concern is with weighty matter:

> with the cultivation of our minds and their proper care of our bodies, with the attainment of our ambitions, with the perfection of the means and the glorification of our precious aims.
>
> It is otherwise with the artist.
>
> Confronted by the same enigmatical spectacle the artist descends within himself, and in that lonely region of stress and strife, if he be deserving and fortunate, he finds the terms of his appeal. His appeal is made to our less obvious capacities: to that part of our nature which, because of the warlike conditions of existence, is necessarily kept out of sight within the more resisting and hard qualities—like the vulnerable body within a steel armour. His appeal is less loud, more profound, less distinct, more stirring—and sooner forgotten. Yet its effect endures for ever. The changing wisdom of successive generations discards ideas, questions facts, demolishes theories. But the artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependant on wisdom; to that in us which is gift and not an acquisition—and, therefore, more permanently enduring.

It was prescient of him to have anticipated the exact situation with regard to his work, particularly *Heart of Darkness*. Ideas have indeed been discarded, facts have been questioned, and theories have been demolished. Conrad's fortunes have changed. In the current theoretical climate, his appeals to the higher faculties, universal, transcendental values have lost their significance. There are no more any "universal categories"; or so we are told. In spite of such intellectual scepticism, our business as readers of a Conrad text will be to make sense of our own reading experience.

"Before the Congo I was a beast", Conrad was to say later. The effect of Congo remained with Conrad for many years. "An Outpost of Progress" was not a profound enough journey into the depths of darkness that Conrad had experienced in Congo. As he explores the dark recesses of his heart and mind via Marlow, we as readers are also conducted through the same route. Does Conrad the artist appeal "to that part of our being which is not dependant on wisdom; to that in us which is gift and not an acquisition—and, therefore, more permanently enduring?" Unfortunately our reading habits have changed, as I have just said. And our subject positions determine the effect of a text on us. We have learnt for example that an African, an Indian, a woman, a postcolonial subject will each read the text differently. Accordingly, it will mean different things to different people, not in the sense of its literal ambiguities, but also because of the subject positions of the readers. We shall take these up in separate sections.

3.2 AN APPROACH TO THE MEANINGS

3.2.1 Structure-wise

> ...So we have an adjectival and worse than superogatory insistence on 'unspeakable rites', 'unspeakable secrets', 'monstrous passions', 'inconceivable mystery', and so on.... Conrad... is intent on making a virtue out of not knowing what he means.
>
> (F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*. pp.198-9).

Leavis was one of the earliest and most influential critics of Conrad's method. Forster's complaints were no less influential, the most famous being this: "the secret casket of [Conrad's] genius contains a vapour rather than a jewel". With such authorities to contend with, it would be hard to defend the Conradian method; but I shall make a modest attempt at least to try to understand the method, if not defend it. In this effort I need your cooperation.

Let us first look at the bald structure first. Conrad breaks the story into three sections: In the first, Marlow travels from Europe to the Central Station; in the second, he travels

from the Central station to the Inner Station; and then, in the third, he returns to Europe. The plot, similarly, is a straightforward one; ostensibly following the convention of the tale within the tale, where a story is told by a British gentleman to other gentlemen.

In spite of this simple structure, there are many levels to *Heart of Darkness*, some of which – especially those dealing with symbolism – are complex. In what follows, I have collected some important topics, considerations, or questions. If you try, you can reach these levels in your own way. The suggestions below are designed to alert you to the richness of the story and its complexities.

In the beginning, there is a mention of "the fascination of the abomination". What does this mean? Try to find its significance in the later development of the story [I].

> Marlow talks about "breath[ing] dead hippo, so to speak, and not to be contaminated" [II]
> Why does Kurtz say "The horror! The horror!" ? [III]
> Why does Marlow lie to Kurtz's Intended about Kurtz's last words? Does he lie at all? [III]
> What does Marlow actually *do* in the story as an adventurer?

To be able to tackle these issues let us see what happens in the text. The episodes on board the yacht are minor no doubt, but the frame narrator introduces Marlow and the events which he would describe by drawing parallels between their present situation and what is to follow. Even Marlow does the same, though their respective "points of view" are different: on what an adventure or exploration is; what amounts to heroism, and the ethics of empire-building. Since their views are presented with cutting irony, it would be interesting to see where the author is chuckling; or to quote Joyce, where the "artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails" (*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*). Do you feel the same way about Marlow?

Among the many contrasts that we go on encountering, is the obvious one between the simple situation and "predicament" that the listeners aboard the 'Nellie' find themselves in, and those complications which Marlow is to enumerate. These latter, he goes on to stress repeatedly, are "unspeakable". He expresses his frustrations in trying to recall his strange experiences. He begins by saying that he is not going to "bother" his listeners much "with what happened to [him] personally". Yet when he goes on to enumerate what he was going to tell, he uses variations of the personal pronoun eight times. Similarly, the frame narrator, showing a remarkable, and perhaps uncharacteristic, acumen in his understanding of Marlow's character, warns us about the complexities of Marlow's tale:

> The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), *and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.*

I have italicised some lines here, which you must keep in mind; and ask yourself whether Conrad is himself not giving us a clue as to what and what not to expect of *his* narrative, and how to approach its meaning(s). To my mind the kernel of the meaning lies in the middle in a realistic tale, whereas in a tale in the symbolist-impressionistic mode the meaning envelops the tale. Here, then, perhaps one can see Conrad himself sounding a warning signal to the contemporary readers not to expect the realistic kind of fiction that they were wont to expect. This is the frame narrator's "Preface" to Marlow's tale, not dissimilar to Conrad's "Preface" to *The Nigger*. Marlow himself was also worried about epistemological issues: "When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality—the reality, I tell you—fades. The inner truth is hidden—luckily, luckily."

3.2.2 Not Exactly A Story for Boys

Let us now look at how Conrad uses the narrative convention as well as the popularity of the adventure story. He had earlier used the latter mode in 'Youth', which Sir Arthur Quiller Couch had called "after all... a story for boys...." In *Heart of Darkness* similarly, he introduces the voyage situation to raise expectations of an adventure. He uses an elaborate pattern of voyages, weaving the reader back and forth in time: the voyages of the Romans to Britain; the voyages of Marlow, Kurtz, the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, and the other pilgrims to the Congo (never named, only suggested, in the tale); and Marlow's two visits to the "whited sepulchre" after and before his Congo experience. The central voyage in this labyrinth of voyages is Marlow's visit to the "Inner Station". As it turns out, it becomes a quest for Kurtz, who then himself grows into an enigma to be unravelled. The quest for the real Kurtz thus replaces the original adventure: the blank space of the geography book; and thus would increasingly come to symbolise the quest for truth. So by the end of Part I, Marlow says: "I wasn't very interested in him. No. Still, I was curious to see whether this man, who had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort, would climb to the top after all and how he would set about his work when there." This is how Part I ends. But by the middle of Part II, he would imagine their beetle-like steamer "crawl[ing] towards Kurtz—exclusively".

3.3 APPROACHES TO THE MEANING

3.3.1 Is Marlow A Passive Receptacle of Experience?

I have drawn your attention to the view expressed by some critics that Conrad, even while appropriating the genre of the adventure story, was subverting it. Instead of using action, as it was commonly understood, and which was such an important component of any adventure, he relied on just the opposite: inaction, and passivity. We have also discussed how various layers of voyages are submerged into the narrative framework. Of these, the chief voyage, of course, is Marlow's into the very heart of darkness. Marlow begins his tale by remarking that he was tired of the usual kind of Eastern voyages, and then of resting. But before this, the frame narrator tells us that Marlow was an untypical seaman: "The worst that could be said of him was that he did not represent his class. He was a seaman, but he was a wanderer, too, while most seamen lead, if one may so express it, a sedentary life. Their minds are of the stay-at-home order, and their home is always with them— the ship; and so is their country—the sea. One ship is very much like another, and the sea is always the same." What, then, are we to accept? What the frame narrator tells us about Marlow, or what the latter tells the former about himself? What Marlow reports about his own "action" would suggest, and perhaps confirm the first impression, that the frame narrator was naive in comparison with him. For much later, Marlow would tell his audience (one of whom is the frame narrator himself) that "She [the steamer] had given me a chance to come out a bit—to find out what I could do." But suddenly realising that he might raise our (the nineteenth century reader's) false expectations about his being a romantic adventurer, he tells us : "No, I don't like work. I had rather laze about and think of all the fine things that can be done. I don't like work—no man does—but I like what is in the work." Thus evasion of action, rather than action, is what we are drawn to see again and again.

Virginia Woolf also draws the same kind of inference about Marlow:

> Marlow was one of those born observers who are happiest in retirement. Marlow liked nothing better than to sit on deck, in some obscure creek of the Thames, smoking and recollecting; smoking and speculating; sending his smoke beautiful after rings of words until all the summer's night became a little clouded with tobacco smoke.

But his physical inertia does not prevent him from leading a vigorous intellectual life. It is not surprising, then, that the Marlow who tells the story is a wiser man, having come back from the depths of his Congo experience. Hence the constant reference to him as the

Buddha, the "enlightened one", the literal meaning of the word. Though Viriginia Woolf does not go as far as saying this yet she recognises the streak of the philosopher in Marlow:

> Marlow, too, had a profound respect for the men with whom he had sailed; but he saw the humour of them. He nosed out and described in masterly fashion those livid creatures who pray successfully upon the clumsy veterans. He had a flair for human deformity; his humour was sardonic. Nor did Marlow live entirely wreathed in the smoke of his own cigars.

So Marlow talks about what work means for him, soon after admitting his reluctance to do any work. "I like what is in the work—the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself, not for others—what no other man can ever know. They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means." After worrying himself about the rivets, he says: "Hang!—and let things slide. I had plenty of time for meditation." Accordingly his manner of reporting the incident is different from that of the other seamen: "For the rest, his hours of work, a casual stroll or a casual spree on shore suffices to unfold for him the secret of a whole continent, and generally he finds the secret not worth knowing...." says the frame narrator, thus showing a rare insight into Marlow's character.

3.3.2 Marlow's Adventure Then Is An Inner One

Once Conrad said about the artist: "In that interior world where his thought and his emotions go seeking for the experience of imagined adventures, there are no policemen, no law, no pressure of circumstance or dread of opinion to keep him within bounds. Who, then, is going to say, 'Nay' to his temptations if not his conscience?" Marlow, not unlike his author, has turned into a conscientious story-teller after years of sea adventures, with himself as a seer and experientialist rather than an adventurer. He too is worried about being as true to his experience as possible. Hence his occasional frustration in trying to tell: "This is the worst of trying to tell ...." For he was trying to tell, not what was happening outside himself, but of his own psychological adventure. He begins, for example, by saying that he did not want to bother his listeners with what happened to him personally. But then he goes on to declare in the same breath:

> ...yet to understand the effect of it on me you ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up that river to the place where I first met the poor chap. It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me—and into my thoughts. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light.

The deliberate use, and repetition of the term "a kind of light", in contrast to the darkness of the title, and the repeated invocation of it, is significant. Light and darkness, black and white operate as complex symbolic pairing, of manichean implication, but more often than not as truth and the lack of it.

3.4 DELAYED DECODING

One of the reasons why the technique employed in it has impeded our understanding of *Heart of Darkness* is that he does not reveal the protagonist-narrator's immediate understanding of what he sees or hears. The narrator finds it difficult to make sense of his experience immediately; and Conrad's impressionistic technique allows for such gradual unravelling of the truth of his experience. Conrad says in his famous Preface that his task was "by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is before all to make you *see*. That—and no more, is everything." Now take the case of Marlow. Like his author, he perceives the difficulties of a story-teller, who is trying to tell an incredible tale: "No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone...." Exasperated with the difficulty of his task he asks his audience: "Do you see the story? Do you see anything?" He admits that what he had seen was much less than what his listeners are

able to see now. But he must try and exactly convey his own sense impressions to his audience: so he follows the same route which he had taken while experiencing the sequence of events, the sequence of impressions on his brooding/meditating mind. Accordingly we notice that none of his understandings are conveyed immediately; and we have to wait for another dimension to unveil. This is perhaps what Ian Watt has so aptly called "Delayed Decoding". Says he: the author through this method attempts "to prevent a sense impression and to withhold naming it or explaining its meaning until later.... This takes directly into the observer's consciousness at the very moment of the perception, before it has been translated into its cause." This is a technique whereby effects precede causes. Conrad had tried this method even earlier; but it is with *Heart of Darkness* that he perfects the technique. Two examples would suffice to illustrate the point.

Do you remember some details of Marlow's approach to Kurtz's station? If you do, you would recall how they suddenly encounter a snag. The snag is both literal and metaphorical. Instead of saying directly that their steamboat was being shot at, he expresses his irritation at the way his poleman and fireman were behaving: "I saw my poleman give up the business suddenly, and stretch himself flat on the deck, without taking the trouble to haul the pole in. He kept hold on it though, and it trailed in the water. At the same time the fireman, whom I could also see below me, sat down abruptly before his furnace and ducked his head. I was amazed." Gradually he notices "the little sticks". Then he stops talking about all this, and starts talking about clearing the snag. And then exclaims suddenly: "Arrows, by Jove! We were being shot at!" What is happening here is that the listeners as well as the readers are experiencing the same sequence: "And before all to make you *see*".

The second exhibit is a case even of more delayed decoding. This is about the sighting of Kurtz's station towards the end of Part II. The jungle and the woods provided the background for the decayed building. "There was", Marlow saw through the glasses (telescope), "no enclosure or fence of any kind; but there had been one apparently, for near the house half-a-dozen slim posts remained in a row, roughly trimmed, and with their upper ends ornamented with round carved balls...." Just as Marlow did not know then what this "ornamentation" was, neither his audience then nor the reader now knows what the significance of this apparently insignificant detail is. Since Marlow had to wait, he makes us wait too; but not for the sake of making us wait. The timing of the disclosure is important. After considerable time lapse (for the listeners on the yacht) and several pages (for the reader), Marlow reminds them all:

> You remember I told you I had been struck [we do remember, but he never told us that he was really "struck"] at the distance by certain attempts at ornamentation, rather remarkable in the ruinous aspect of the place. Now I had suddenly a nearer view, and its first result was to make me throw my head back as if before a blow. Then I went carefully from post to post with my glass, and I saw my mistake. These round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic; they were expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing—food for thought and also for the vultures if there had been any looking down from the sky; but at any event for such ants as were industrious enough to ascend the pole.

I am sure you will be able to appreciate the virtues of this method; by which the text does not always progress, it is regressive too and memory which drives Conrad, and Marlow, drives us too, and to a better understanding of the experience that is being relayed back to us. The complexity does not end there. When Marlow talks about the symbolism of the poles, Conrad too seems to be consciously making us see further symbolism in the poles. The heads are food for the vultures, the likes of Leopold, and the imperialist forces all of whom are represented in the lone figure of Kurtz. The ants are the smaller fries who are crawling around him: the accountants, the managers, the brick-maker, all profiting at the expense of the natives. Kurtz had meant the heads to symbolise something else: as warning signals, scarecrows of some sort for the natives, a warning not, revolt. If they do, he would "exterminate the brutes".

The longest and interminable, unfinished decoding is that of the character of Kurtz himself. And we have seen and shall continue to analyse how this happens. I just want to tell you at this point that all the delayed decodings suggest how we ought to look at Kurtz, and why Marlow does not present an unambiguous portrayal of his character.

3.5 LET US SUM UP

So much depends, then, on our understanding of Conrad's handling of Marlow. But that is just the beginning of the process of grasping the meaning. The important thing is to re-enact Marlow's manner: surrender your consciousness to the sense-experiences that are being heaped on us, try to see and hear. Then analyse the experience with the data in hand. The trick is not to accept everything on face value. Do not proceed in a linear fashion, travel backward even while moving forward. See how your past reading experience is enriched by what you get to read subsequently in Marlow's narrative. That is his way.

3.6 QUESTIONS

1. On what aspects of narration does Conrad lay stress? Cite examples from the text to substantiate your answer.

2. What adventure stories have you read? Have you read any by Stevenson and Wells? In what way does Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* resemble or differ from those?

3. How does Conrad create "atmosphere" and "mood"? Do you see traces of the symbolist and impressionist devices in his style and technique?

3.7 SUGGESTED READING

F.R Leavis. *The Great Tradition*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1948, rpt 1963.
Allan Ingram. *Joseph Conrad: Selected Literary Criticism and The Shadow Line*, London: Methuen, 1986.