

An “Inconclusive Experience”: Openness and Closure in Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness

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Abstract

The informing element of Conrad’s tale is mystery itself, inviting exploration and closing upon itself. The current paper endeavors to reveal this interplay of transparency and closure which permeates the novella. Blurred boundaries, a diffuse relationship with hard facts, a halo of significance enveloping every human gesture represent the substance of the story. If darkness can be narrated, then the protagonist’s sharing of his memorable journey into and out of the Dark Continents is as fluid as the two waterways evoked in the story unfolding up to an inscrutable horizon. For Marlow, the atypical seaman, meaning is not what is contained in the kernel of reality but that floating, dream-like quality which irradiates out of an event. As the story-teller reminds us, “there is no initiation into such mysteries” so the journey into and out of the heart of darkness remains an “inconclusive experience”.

Keywords

darkness, openness, closure, journey, fluid, experience, meaning

“(…) it can be said that with this work, written right at the turning-point of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Conrad invented the modern novel”. This view put forward by Professor John Batchelor (*Heart of Darkness*, *Source of Light*, 230) testifies to the centrality of the Conradian masterpiece in the field of literature in general and of the literature written in English in particular.

The novella opens with an image of rest, of balanced contraries, of peacefulness in the midst of favorable elements:

The Nellie, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. 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 (Conrad 1).

The scene has a pivotal function, establishing the backdrop of the story to be unfolded and acting as the meeting ground of inter-related opposites of which “the sea and the sky (...) welded together without a joint” are suggestive.

Two antithetical pairs are already introduced and the symbolic correspondences between their terms are established – “the luminous estuary” is “out there”, that is, far away, in an indefinite open space while “within the

brooding gloom”, a syntagm evocative of containment and closure, a menacing something is taking shape. The significance counterparts are thus set up, generating the meaningful associations light-openness and darkness-closure which provide insight into the metaphysical adventure which is about to be narrated.

Looked upon from an external perspective, the story itself is shaped upon an event in the author’s biography, namely, the expedition up the Congo river into the heart of Africa and out of it, back to Europe, an expedition which he completed in 1890. He took up a three-year appointment as captain of a river-steamer with the “Societe Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo” but he was soon to be shattered by the grim reality of the Belgian enterprise in the wilderness and resigned only half a year later.

However, on a different level, Conrad effected the alchemical transfiguration of the raw data of this episode in his life into the artistically consummate novella he finally entitled *Heart of Darkness*. Referred to by Michael Ashley as “Conrad’s enigmatic *Heart of Darkness*” (281), this literary gem bears the seal of an intense process of craftsmanship and artistic encoding.

Reading *Heart of Darkness* entails an effort focused upon the process of disclosure or the attempt at disclosure, being mindful of the narrator’s warning that “the essentials (...) [lie] deep under the surface” (Conrad 48), beyond the readers’ reach.

The interplay of openness and closure pervades the Conradian novella, enhancing the ambivalence of its message and informing its symbolic structure. This antithetic pair assumes a distinctive role in the design of the story, emerging, most of the times, not as a clear – cut dichotomy, but as a dyad of interrelated opposites. Closure and openness – as they appear in *Heart of Darkness* are involved in a dynamic ambiguity projected against the background of equivocalness and blurred boundaries of the tale.

J. Hillis Miller offers a felicitous view of Conrad’s work as “an effort of demystification”, of release from the bondage of illusion:

The aim of all Conrad’s fiction is to destroy in the reader his bondage to illusion and to give him a glimpse of the truth however dark and disquieting that truth may be. His work might be called an effort of demystification. It attempts to rescue man from his alienation. His problem in reaching his goal is double: to lift the veil of illusion and to make the truth appear (18-19).

Miller's insightful observation may be deepened in the light of the openness-closure binary relation. Thus, the story can be read as a desperate attempt to undermine the closure of the unreal and to dynamite the oppressiveness of the counterfeit. Marlow, the internal narrator of the novella, the protagonist and witness of the journey, undertakes the act of storytelling, which represents an instance of opening, of disclosure by means of unfolding a narrative and sharing experience in the hope of reaching the truth.

The story-teller recounts the advancement towards the center, the "heart of darkness", constructed as a journey of exploration, of gradual revelation and progressive opening. As Benita Parry most aptly observes, it is the "story of a voyage into the unknown" which, "by virtue of its generic form, promises revelation" (40). Moreover, the narrative form creates the expectation of disclosure, understood both as revelation – as Parry contends – and as the undoing of closure which is the equivalent of the act of opening. The early stages of the story, in which the narrator describes his inexplicable and sudden itch for one of the remote locations which used to be represented as a blank space on a map, encapsulate the anticipation of a progress towards a "heart", which is tantamount to a pilgrimage towards the center. The references to the center seen as the ultimate point of this apparently highly mundane enterprise abound in the text, reinforcing the quest-like character of the journey.

Furthermore, the group of adventurers aboard the vessel under Marlow's command includes a number of characters which are ironically but consistently referred to as "the pilgrims". Even if the personages in question lack any of the qualities which go into the making of real pilgrims, the mere reference to a pilgrim's role suggests that such an enterprise should have assumed the shape and the function of a pilgrimage, that of spiritual endeavor while striving after answers.

The story which Marlow is about to share is described by the frame narrator as "one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences" (Conrad 6), a label which points to the open-ended quality of the yarns this atypical seaman usually spins. The absence of closure characteristic of his tales is in consonance with the complex fluidity of his life-experience and with his unbounded mind-set – "it [is] just like Marlow" (Conrad 4). Being a "wanderer" (Conrad 4), unlike his fellow seamen, to whom he is bonded only through "his propensity to spin yarns" (Conrad 4), his approach to the world around him is modulated by the nuanced significance with which he is prone to invest an event. For him, the meaning of experience, inconclusive though it may be, has a diffuse quality, dynamic and unrestrained, in contrast to the "direct simplicity" of a sailor's yarns, the message of which can be condensed "within the shell of a cracked nut" (Conrad 4).

Through his commitment to “wandering” as a mode of being and his reclusive mind order pertaining to his being a sailor, Marlow conflates in his world view the two vectors of openness and closure. Therefore, his life-changing adventure up “the river” into the center of “the continent” is an instance of this coalescence of contraries – to the listeners it sounds like an “inconclusive” event but to the protagonist it represents the apex of his enterprises, or, as he phrases it, “the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of [his] experience”(6).

The entire undertaking is surrounded by a mythical aura, being placed in the domain of exemplary stories whose meaning is generated only through evoking. The narrative does not mention any explicit geographical location or itinerary of the journey – there are references only to “a continent” and “the river” without any determining label. A halo of mystery is conferred upon these two geographical realities through the way they are referred to. Marlow never pronounces the words “Africa” of the Congo”. Instead, he mentions “a continent” three times – the indefinite article amplifying this sense of imprecision and secrecy – and “one river (...), a mighty big river (...), that river”:

I felt as though, instead of going to the centre of a continent, I were about to set off for the centre of the earth (13).

(...) we came upon a man-of-war anchored off the coast (...) there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent (15).

(...) that ship of war I had seen firing into a continent (17).

Since naming is a form of closure and possessing, Marlow prefers to entrust this tale to his collection of “inconclusive experiences” (6) which simply remain open-ended because their meaning is perpetually alive and elusive. The actual delimitation of the story can be inferred from the event in Conrad’s biography which functioned as the basis of the plot and provided the setting of the novella.

This insistence to refrain from naming, from drawing boundaries around the narrated experience by evoking the unnamed through indefinite reference is in accordance with the overpowering sensation of imprecision and dynamic significance under the sign of which the whole event unfolds. Unlike the trajectory of the expedition into the fabulous and the unnamable, the European setting is relegated to the domain of the commonplace and the known, which can be transparently and directly referred to – the Thames, Gravesend, Fleet Street, the Channel, the Continent.

The special quality of this enterprise originally looked upon as a mere routine by a sea-captain “who used to clear out for any part of the world at twenty-

four hours' notice" (13), a man to whom no corner of the Earth poses any threat or represents any challenge, is foretold by the instant of hesitation which he describes as "a startled pause" (13). This premonitory feeling which seizes the protagonist, a citizen of the world for whom the entire Globe holds no mystery, is brought about by his sudden realization that what is lying ahead of him may be an adventure of a deeper significance and import; he experiences the feeling that he is not on the verge of embarking on an expedition to "the centre of a continent" (13) – which is a recognizable geographical reality with clear spatial determinations – but one "to the centre of the Earth" – a location with a different symbolic value. What should have been a mere "commonplace affair" (13) turned into a journey to "the threshold of the invisible" (92), a spiritual enterprise of gaining knowledge and decoding meanings.

As he goes on to confess, the experience, paradoxically, "seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything" about him. Therefore, Marlow regards this story as a source of illumination in his life, which, most surprisingly, shines out of dimness and somberness. "It was somber enough, too" – he continues – "and pitiful – not extraordinary in any way – not very clear either. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light" (7). Transfiguring darkness – suggestive of closure and repression – into illumination – symbolic of openness and clarity – is in consonance with the narrator's perception of the signifying process:

(...) to him 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 these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine"(4).

Thus, for Marlow, meaning is configured through a translation of closure into openness – just as "a glow brings out a haze", the tale actuates its message and "the heart of darkness" illumines the gloom around it. In fact, the recounting of the story does not provide any stable interpretation or ultimate understanding. Its meaning is only lived, relived and vicariously lived by Marlow's audience, without any claim to finality.

He confesses that the knowledge he has gained through his journey into and out of the heart of darkness – even though deeper and richer than "the irritating pretense" (92) of knowledge displayed by the inhabitants of the "sepulchral city" – has been just a flash of "peep[ing] over the edge" (91). The entire experience resists being crystallized, catalogued, or restrained by any type of particularization; it retains its open character and imprecision, assuming an ineffable aura. Marlow

conveys his sensation of the indistinct by depicting it as a pervasive nightmarish atmosphere. Contours are dissolved and the whole event translates into a state of trance:

Nowhere did we stop long enough to get a particularized impression, but the general sense of vague and oppressive wonder grew upon me. It was like a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares (15).

Upon returning to Europe from his life-changing adventure, the narrator longs for closure as privacy, isolation and protection against the gross money-making world around him, driven by petty interests and “insignificant dreams” (92). He feels “they trespass upon [his] thoughts” (92) and asserts his right to a sanctuary, an enclosure for his own memories where he can dwell upon the knowledge he has gleaned and the understanding which has been revealed to him in the “heart of darkness”. Yet, he is reluctant to impart any of this knowledge to “the commonplace individuals” the “sepulchral city” teems with simply because he is aware they are the prisoners of their stifling “assurance of perfect safety”, therefore impervious to any influence of the unknown: “I had no particular desire to enlighten them”. Their snug and smug world is closing in around them precluding any communication with a mind that has witnessed the “unspeakable” and grasped the message of “horror” pronounced by a man “during that supreme moment of complete knowledge” (90):

They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretense, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew (92).

In his letter of December 31, 1898 to William Blackwood, his publisher, Conrad offered a reading key for what was to crystallize into “Heart of Darkness”: “The title I am thinking of is 'The Heart of Darkness' but the narrative is not gloomy.” (*Letters*: 139-140). The author himself orients the work towards an optimistic opening by stating that it is not a sense of gloom which permeates the tale.

A major source of openness in the story consists in the plurality of meanings, interpretive fluidity and absence of final answers. The quester returns from the enterprise which marked the peak of his experience richer in questions and poorer in answers. The culminating adventure – the apex of his explorations – which should have brought a sense of closure and finality – only modulated and relativised his vision while opening up new existential avenues – the physical symbolic counterpart of which is none other than the never-ending waterway.

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