

RESEARCH ARTICLE

MARLOW'S DEBUT ROLE AS NARRATOR IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S *YOUTH*

Dr. INDRANI B. BHUYAN

LECTURER, ICAFI UNIVERSITY, MEGHALAYA, SHILLONG



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ABSTRACT

Joseph Conrad, in many ways was the true heir of Henry James. He learnt English when he was twenty three with such remarkable skill that he can be compared to De-Quincey and Ruskin. His being a seaman contributed largely to the wealth of his fiction. But he cannot be regarded as a mere writer of sea-tales – his work reflects, to a large extent, his own personality. His life at sea was not only a source for the material for his fiction, but it provided him with convenient backgrounds wherein he could examine human nature and action. Realizing the need for a narrator to effectively narrate his tales, without him having to intrude into the narrative, Conrad created Marlow. The reader sees the world that the novelist portrays through the narrator and after having read a novel, he returns to reality. Joseph Conrad's narrator Marlow is an individual who is able to create the necessary connection between the novelist and the reader. The origin of Marlow can be traced back to *The Nigger of Narcissus* which is a prelude to Conrad's stories featuring Marlow. His role as narrator developed gradually and its authenticity can be traced from *Youth* onwards to *Chance*.

Key words: Narrator, The Nigger of Narcissus, Youth, Heart of Darkness, Chance, Lord Jim, Marlow

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Storytelling has been a means of communicating a point of view by a novelist to his readers and also of handing down tradition, folklore and culture. A story originates in the mind of an individual as he/she gives shape to his perception of an experience weaving the magic of his/her narration. A narrator brings to life images that excite the imagination of his/her listeners, enabling them to create a world which is inhabited by the characters of his/her stories which are not only

meaningful, but serve to emulate human experience itself.

In every narrative there is a hidden narrator. A narrator is either a first person narrator or a third person narrator... "First person narrative means writing from the "I" point of view...Third person narrative form is writing from the omniscient point of view...Second person is the least-used form in novels, mainly because it usually reads more awkwardly"...(Harper 2004 ,1). Occasionally, one comes across a second person narrator as well, in

which he narrates from the 'you' point of view. The reader sees the world that the novelist portrays through the narrator and after having read a novel, he returns to reality: 'we might substitute for our own life an obsessive reading of novels, or dreams based on novelistic models' (Bakhtin, 32). The novelist creates a situation which appears to be real and he also creates characters that are "free people, capable of standing *alongside*," (Bakhtin, 6)

A novelist may allow the narrator to have more knowledge than that of an ordinary person and he may even limit the knowledge that he allows the narrator to have. He may use a single source of information which is personified as the narrator or he may use a source of information which is less specific. Joseph Conrad's narrator Marlow is an individual who is able to create the necessary connection between the novelist and the reader. Joseph Conrad used Marlow, a character he created, in order to narrate his powerful stories. Conrad depended on his experience as a seaman in order to write his novels. In order to maintain distance from the narrative and so that he did not intrude into the narrative, he invented the character of Marlow. Conrad adopted British citizenship as well as the life and ways of England, and also made valuable contributions to English literature: "Conrad was a Polish mariner who wrote in English. Hence most of his tales have a surface structure of telling a tale of exploration and voyage" (Peters 105).

Conrad's novels exhibit the idea of personal honour which is essential to man's existence wherein a character defends himself through his actions. Conrad took recourse to the character of Marlow in order to voice his own feelings. His 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.

Conrad, a sailor by profession, wrote about ... "seafarers, used to solitude and silence...men hard

to manage, but easy to inspire; voiceless men but – but men enough to scorn in their hearts the sentimental voices that bewailed the hardness of their fate"... ("Joseph Conrad") He voiced their adventure, lives and their ideals through his narrator Marlow, who is not only the narrator of Conrad's tales, but also one who understands the characters that he is made to describe by the novelist. This method of narration gives the novelist the space which is essential for him so that he may clearly express his point of view without making his presence felt during the course of the narrative. His works reflect the loneliness which surrounds every man and the background of his stories comprise of the sea or an island in the South Pacific: "Conrad is a special case, since his personal experience brought him into such close contact with picturesque and exotic material, and his passion to get to the bottom of human motives gives a depth and seriousness to subjects" (Beach 10).

Conrad used the old method in English fiction to tell his tales: he gathered a number of men around a dinner table and has one of them narrate a strange personal experience. Part of Conrad's achievement as a novelist rests on his creation of Marlow, his narrator in some of his important novels: *Youth*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim* and *Chance*. In searching for a device that would provide both form and shape to his work, he not only used Marlow to narrate his tales but also established him as a character in the novel. Marlow's role and his growth from narrator to a character play a definite role in the turn of events in Conrad's fiction,

Marlow provided Conrad with the space which every writer requires in making his point of view clear to his readers without really intruding into the course of events described. Marlow was first introduced in Conrad's novella *Youth* and he continued to appear successively in *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim* and *Chance* and Conrad's use of the narrative device of Marlow helps dramatize the action and its projection through the eyes of Marlow. But it is to be noted that Marlow does not remain a mere narrator or a spokesman of Conrad, but is developed to a character, playing a definite role in the narrative.

The idea of using a narrator to narrate his tales occurred to Conrad when he was writing The

Rescue. In a letter dated 29th March 1898, addressed to Edward Garnett, one of the most influential publishers of his time, Conrad wrote:

...I sit down religiously every morning. I sit down for eight hours every day – and the sitting down is all. In the course of that working day of eight hours I write three sentences which I erase before leaving the table in despair. There's not a single word to send you. Not one... (Baines, 255-56)

It was in the end of the summer of 1898 when Conrad laid aside *The Rescue* with which he could not make desirable progress. In the author's note to the *The Rescue* which he later completed in 1918, he cited his reasons behind his earlier failure.

...“The truth is that when *The Rescue* was laid aside it was not laid aside in despair. Several reasons contributed to this abandonment and, no doubt, the first of these was the growing sense of general difficulty in the handling of the subject. The contents and the course of the story I had clearly in my mind. But as to the way of presenting the facts, and perhaps in a certain measure as to the nature of the facts themselves, I had many doubts. I mean the telling, representative facts, helpful to carry on the idea, and, at the same time, of such a nature as not to demand an elaborate creation of the atmosphere to the detriment of the action. I did not see how I could avoid becoming wearisome in the presentation of detail and in the pursuit of clearance. I saw the action plainly enough. What I had lost for the moment was the sense of the proper formula of expression, the only formula that would suit”...

At this point of time, the idea of using a narrator to narrate his tales occurred to him as a means to tide over his difficulty with expression. Thus, Marlow was created – a character that not only narrated the story, but also commented on different situations as well as on different people.

In the Author's note to the volume in which *Heart of Darkness, Youth – A Narrative; and Two other Stories* appeared in 1917, Conrad devoted three paragraphs to Marlow with whom his relation had grown intimate in the “course of years”. He stated that he did not have any “meditated plan for his capture” and added: “The man Marlow and I came together in the casual manner of those health resort acquaintances which sometimes ripen into friendships. This one has ripened.” Hereafter, Marlow emerged as an important narrative device in Conrad's fiction.

Virginia Woolf understands of Marlow as:

“... 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 after his smoke beautiful rings of words until all the summer's night became a little clouded with tobacco smoke. Marlow, too had a profound respect for the men with whom he had sailed; but he saw the humour of them...”

The origin of Marlow can be traced back to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* which is a prelude to Conrad's stories featuring Marlow. But the narrator himself and his role in *The Nigger of the Narcissus* are shadowy, developing gradually from *Youth* onwards to *Chance*, giving authenticity to Marlow and his voice. Conrad's use of the narrative device of Marlow helps dramatize the action and the projection of it through Marlow's eyes. Marlow enabled Conrad to comment on the narrative while maintaining distance from it. Virginia Woolf opines: ... “A rough and ready distinction would make us say that it is Marlow who comments, Conrad who creates”...

Marlow makes his debut as the narrator of Conrad's stories in *Youth*, written in September 1898. Conrad described his work as ‘a narrative’ which in fact, is a recreation of his life at sea. It is a recollection of a mood, of an attitude that cannot be recaptured. Marlow narrates the tale of his first visit to the east:

And this is how I see the East. I have seen its places and have looked into its very soul; but now I see it always from a small boat, a high outline of mountains, blue and afar in the morning; like faint mist at noon; a jagged wall of purple at sunset. I have the feel of the oar in my hand the vision of a scorching blue sea in my eyes. And I see a bay, a wide bay, smooth as glass and polished like ice, shimmering in the dark. A red light burns far off upon the gloom of the land, and the night is soft and warm. We drag at the oars with aching arms, and suddenly a puff faint and tepid and laden with strange odours of blossoms, of aromatic woods,, come out of the still night – the first sigh of the East on my face That I can never forget. It was impalpable and enslaving, like a charm, like a whispered promise of mysterious delight. (*Youth*, 221)

Youth aimed at a straightforward effect and Marlow plays a simple role: to give the tone of the narrative and to give detailed descriptions of people and situations simultaneously. The narrative is given actuality by Marlow's periodic reference to the setting:

However they are both dead, and youth, strength, genius, thoughts, achievements, simple hearts – all dies...No matter. (*Youth* 200)

Marlow, whom we see in *Youth*, is a part of the group that travels to the East and that is why his narration appears authentic. Conrad adopted British citizenship and was proud of the seafaring activities of the British and Marlow voices Conrad's pride as an Englishman. The need to use Marlow may have arisen because of Conrad's anxiousness to adopt an English point of view. Marlow, who sailed to the East was overjoyed with his promotion and is attracted to the ship 'Judea' with the motto 'Do or die' and like all young men, is ecstatic about the voyage he is about to set on. He recollects the comedy and misadventure he encountered during the course of

his voyage. His description is realistic, being based on his experience and all that he went through till the Judea blew up and he was given command of the new vessel.

Conrad's first use of Marlow in *Youth* represents a break with the distance, impersonality and omniscience of third – person narration. Marlow is made to narrate his past experience in the narrative present:

Yes, I have seen a little of the Eastern seas; but what I remember best is my first voyage there. You fellows know there are those voyages that seem ordered for the illustration of life that might stand for a symbol of existence. You fight, work, sweat, nearly kill yourself, sometimes do kill yourself, trying to accomplish something – and you can't. Not from any fault of yours. You simply can do nothing, neither great nor little – not a thing in the world – not even marry an old maid, or get a wretched 600 ton cargo of coal to its port of destination. (*Youth* 185, 86)

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. Conrad uses the third person narrator for the first time in *Youth*. Marlow gets the 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 recaptured. It voices Conrad's memorable vision of the east:

And this is how, I see the East. I have looked into its very soul ; but now I see it always from a small boat, a high outline of the mountains, blue and afar in the morning; like faint mist at noon; a jagged wall of purple at sunset. I have the feel of the oar in my hand, the vision of a scorching blue sea in my eyes. And I see a bay, smooth as glass and polished like ice, shimmering in the dark. A red light burns far off upon the gloom of the land, and the night is soft and warm. We drag at the oars with aching arms, and suddenly a puff faint and tepid and laden with strange odours of blossoms, of aromatic woods come out of the still night – the first sight of the East on my face. That I can never forget. It was impalpable and enslaving, like a charm, like a whispered promise of mysterious delight (127).

Marlow, whom we see in *Youth*, is a part of the group that travels to the East and that is the reason why his narration appears authentic. Conrad adopted British citizenship and was proud of the sea-faring activities of the Englishmen and Marlow voices Conrad's pride as an Englishman. Conrad says in *Youth*:

This could have occurred nowhere but in England, where men and sea interpenetrate, so to speak - the sea entering into the life of most men, and the men knowing something or everything about the sea, in the way of amusement, of travel, or of bread-winning (91).

The Marlow who sailed on the 'Judea' was four years younger than the Conrad who sailed on the 'Palestine' in 1881-82 and overjoyed with his promotion: "It was one of the happiest days of my life. Fancy! Second mate for the first time – a really responsible officer!" (94, 95). We see a young, romantic Marlow, who is attracted to the ship with the motto "Do or die" (108) and like all young men,

is ecstatic about the voyage he is about to set on: "I remember it took my fancy immensely. There was touch of romance in it, something that made me love the old thing – that appealed to my youth" (95).

Marlow reminisces about the comedy and misadventure he encountered during the voyage. Old Beard, Marlow recollects, has none of the dignity or self-command that one expects of a skipper; when the 'Judea' is damaged by a collision in the dock. Beard's immediate and highly unprofessional concern is for his wife's safety. He gets her into the ship's boat which has no oars and the old couple drifts helplessly about the dock. Mrs. Beard's concern for her husband's health is sweet and engaging, but it undermines the old man's authority as she asks the young Marlow to look after her husband and keep "his throat well wrapped up" (99).

At the beginning of the voyage Marlow is a young man who is ready to take on the world with his determination to achieve and prove his worth to the world:

I would not have given up the experience for worlds. I had moments of exultation... (Youth 102).

The adult Marlow who narrates the story is telling the tale of a leaky old ship which is in the hands of an incompetent captain in a way that is as naive as he was when he first sailed on the 'Judea'. *Youth* reveals a young, optimistic and innocent Marlow, looking forward to the adventure of the unknown:

The old bark lumbered on, heavy with her age and the burden of her cargo, while I lived the life of youth in ignorance and hope. She lumbered on through an interminable procession of days; and the fresh gilding flashed back at the setting sun, seemed to cry over the darkening sea the words painted on her stern, 'Judea, London. Do or Die' (102).

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 was given command of the new vessel.

Conrad seemed to be at ease, using the narrative device of Marlow for the first time. He realized the advantage of using a character who could not only narrate, but comment on the story as well. Thus Marlow figures in Conrad's fiction, beginning with *Youth* and gradually playing increasingly complex roles in subsequent novels.

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