Xinxin Zhao

Form is Meaning

An Iconic Reading of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

Therese Fischer-Seidel, Klaus Stierstorfer (Hg.)

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a work too short to be called a novel but so mysterious that generations of critics have been trying to decode it for more than a century. Which is why, instead of solving the mystery, this study seeks to find out why it is a mystery. Instead of revealing *what* it means, the study investigates *how* it means. Instead of digging deeper for the story's 'inner' meaning, the study focuses superficially on its form in order to show that to see the form is to see the meaning.

As one of the most studied literary works, *Heart of Darkness* (HD for short) is regarded as Joseph Conrad's greatest, albeit his most controversial, literary masterpiece. Contradictory interpretations thrive on this work, ranging from symbolic, political, psychological, mythical, to autobiographical readings. "Yet, despite extensive critical discussion, there is surprisingly little work on the book's linguistic style" (Stubbs 2005: 7). This research focuses on the formal and structural characteristics (both linguistic and narrative) of this novella, not so as to reduce the importance of the work's historical and cultural context but to find out how contradictory readings are caused by the text's structural and thematic ambiguity. When the first unnamed narrator in HD introduces the major narrator Marlow and Marlow's "propensity to spin yarns", a metaphor is used – to Marlow meaning "was not inside like a kernel but outside" (HD 1995: 6). This metaphor is adopted as an overriding diagrammatic icon to exhibit the interaction between outer and inner, form and meaning, the perceptible and the conceptual. The outer/inner interaction is structural and thematic on both the global and local levels, whereby what is made to be seen (the outer) is in such a dazzling way that it renders what is inside as speculation and guesswork.

1.1. Critical background

Heart of Darkness has a long history of widely differing reading approaches. Politically or culturally oriented readings are overwhelmingly abundant and tend to contradict each other. Both conflicting sides can spot some textual evidence to present a coherent argument. To cite the most representative example, there has been a strenuous debate over whether the novella can be seen as a racist book. In his famous "An Image of Africa", Chinua Achebe (2016: 21)[1] points

1 Note: "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" is the published version of the Chancellor lecture presented by Chinua Achebe at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, in February 1975.

out "[t]he real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans" and claims that "Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist" by quoting the following passage from *Heart of Darkness* as textual evidence:

> And between whiles I had to look after the savage who was fireman. He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind-legs (Achebe 2016: 17).

To refute Achebe's view of Conrad, Cedric Watts (1983: 196) quotes the following sentence from HD, which Achebe chooses not to discuss:

> The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. (Watts 1983: 196)

Watts defends Conrad by saying "Conrad was able to show some valuable features of European civilization (notably the complex and humane outlook represented by Marlow) while condemning its hubris, its rapacity, and its refusal to accept an equilibrium with the environment" (1983: 206).

My intention is neither to choose sides nor to settle any of those debates but instead to try to incorporate the formal evidence in a more comprehensive and less biased way. To take the word "specimen" (as in the text that Achebe takes offence at) as an example, it shows up twice in the text, as the following quotes show:

> 1. And between whiles I had to look after the savage who was fireman. He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. (HD 42)
>
> 2. And the lofty frontal bone of Mr. Kurtz! They say the hair goes on growing sometimes, but this – ah – specimen, was impressively bald. (HD 56)

After considering for a while ("this – ah –"), Marlow uses the second "specimen" to refer to Kurtz, who "had been educated partly in England" (HD 58) and whose mother is half-English and his father half-French. As Marlow says, "[a]ll Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (HD 58). If "specimen" is used to dehumanize Africans as Achebe writes, it seems safe to say it dehumanizes Europeans as well in the second. Whether *Heart of Darkness* is a racist novel can never be settled if we selectively cite the textual evidence to support one side of the story. On the one hand, formal properties are a common and open resource, which can be deployed by critics from very different approaches. Formal properties or form, in this project, is taken in the sense of the structural dimensions of the literary text (i.e. how the textual units, e.g. words, phrases, sentences, narrative frames, etc., are constructed and organized). On the other hand, they are also finite and closed because the frequency, location and collocation of the words will never change along with different readings. This finite quality is one of the reasons why this research adopts a formal approach, focusing on the sali-