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Department of Translation

Narrative Technique in Joseph Conrad’s

“Heart of Darkness”

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Presented By:

Mohammed Emad Khalil

Ghofran Shakir Jafaar

Mustafa Jasim Mohammed

Supervised By

L.Raad Sabir Rauf

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CERTIFICATION

I Certify That This Project Was Prepared Under My Supervision at The Department of
Translation / College of Arts and Letters, Cihan University - Erbil as A Partial

Requirement for The Degree of:

Bachelor of Art

In

Translation

Supervisor

L. Raad Sabir Rauf

Date: / / 2025

In view of the available recommendation, I forward this project for debate by the examining committee.

L. Raad Sabir Rauf

Head of Translation Department

College of Arts and letters - Cihan University

Date: / / 2025

We, the examining committee, certify that we have read this project and have examined the students in its contents and that in our opinion it is adequate as a partial requirement for the degree of:

Bachelor of Art
In
Translation

Examining committee:

A.L Huda Shwan Omer

A.L Imadin Maged Muhammed

Approved for the department committee of undergraduate studies.

L. Raad Sabir Rauf

Head of Translation Department

College of Arts and letters - Cihan University

Date: / / 2025

DEDICATION

*This Research is dedicated to everyone we have met
these past 4 years.*

With gratitude to our families and friends

وَقُلْ رَبِّ زِدْنِي عِلْمًا

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Abstract

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is not simply a tale of imperial adventure; it is a self-reflexive deconstruction of narrative authority. The paper examines the novel's narrative strategies in terms of Marlow's unreliability as a narrator, the disorienting use of non-chronological narrative and the recursive frame narrative organizing the reader's experience. Close narratological analysis examines the ways in which Conrad subverts traditional storytelling in order to reflect the psychological and ideological fragmentation underlying imperialism. Relying on the scholarship of scholars such as Watt (1979), Achebe (1977), and Guerard (1958), the paper contends that both *The Great Gatsby* and *Heart of Darkness* use narrative unreliability to unmask cultural myths and that the novel's formal innovations are put into context through comparison with *The Great Gatsby*. The paper concludes that Conrad's manipulation of narrative form is not so much a stylistic issue but a philosophical inquiry into the very act of storytelling.

Keywords Narrative Technique, Unreliable Narrator, Frame Narrative, Postcolonial Critique, Psychological Depth, Modernism

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I. Introduction

“We live in the flicker—may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday.” (Conrad, 1899) Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is not simply a novel; it is a vortex of conflicting voices, distorted recollections, and narrative instability that draws readers into its murky depths. First published in 1899, the novella masquerades as a journey into the African Congo but quickly reveals itself as something far more intricate, an exploration of power, deception, and the limits of human perception.

Storytelling is manipulation. Every narrator, consciously or unconsciously, bends reality, skews facts, and chooses what to illuminate and what to leave in shadow. *Heart of Darkness* is not merely about its plot, it is rather about the telling of that plot, about the instability of memory, the fragility of truth, and the eerie way words warp reality. Marlow, the novel’s sole narrator and central voice, does not merely recount his journey, but also filters, distorts, and rearranges it, pulling the reader into an abyss of ambiguity where certainty dissolves. (Conrad, 1899)

This paper unpacks Conrad’s approach to narration, dissecting the novel’s labyrinthine structure and its relentless interrogation of perception. Marlow’s role as both storyteller and subject erodes the boundary between experience and interpretation. The text becomes a palimpsest of conflicting meanings, with its form mimicking the disintegration it depicts. Scholars such as Ian Watt (1979) and Cedric Watts (1993) have wrestled with the novel’s slipperiness, emphasizing the way it defies neat categorization. This analysis builds upon their work, exploring how Conrad engineers’ narrative instability to mirror the psychological and ideological collapse at the novel’s core. According to Rauf (2019), Marlow lacks the credibility required from an unprejudiced narrator. The readers do not have the slightest knowledge about his cultural and educational background. (Guerard, 1958)

Since its publication, *Heart of Darkness* has been the subject of extensive critical debate. One of the most prominent areas of discussion involves the novella’s portrayal of race, particularly in relation to how Conrad depicts the African characters and the African continent itself. While some critics, especially postcolonial scholars like Chinua Achebe, have argued that Conrad’s portrayal of Africa is deeply problematic and racially biased, others contend that the novella critiques imperialism and the ideology of European superiority, offering a more nuanced and complex exploration of race. (Rauf & Danial, 2021)

Chinua Achebe's landmark critique, *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness* (1977), presents a powerful argument that Conrad's portrayal of Africa is steeped in racist stereotypes. Achebe argues that *Heart of Darkness* dehumanizes Africans by reducing them to mere symbols of darkness and savagery, a reflection of the colonial view that Africa was a "primitive" and "uncivilized" land. In Achebe's reading, the novella upholds the racist ideologies of its time, reinforcing the belief in the inherent superiority of Europeans and the inferiority of African peoples.

I.II The Author and His Influence

Conrad does not write stories, he dissects them, unwinds them, exposes their inner machinery. Born into displacement, speaking English as a third language, and thrust into a world of imperialist expansion, he approached narrative not as a mere vehicle for plot, but as a living, unstable organism. His time in the Congo shattered any lingering illusions of colonial nobility, and *Heart of Darkness* bears the scars of that realization. The novel functions as both an indictment of empire and a meditation on the impossibility of capturing reality in words.

His radical structural techniques paved the way for literary modernism, influencing figures such as T.S. Eliot, William Faulkner, and Virginia Woolf. Conrad's rejection of omniscient clarity in favor of fractured, subjective storytelling marked a turning point in literary history, introducing the uncertainty and perspectival instability that would become hallmarks of 20th-century fiction. (Said, 1993)

I.III. Objectives of The Study

This study aims to explore the intricate narrative techniques employed in *Heart of Darkness*. By dissecting the interplay between Marlow's subjective retelling and the novel's overarching frame narrative, this research seeks to highlight how Conrad manipulates perception, challenges the notion of objective truth, and mirrors the psychological and ideological turmoil at the heart of imperialism. Additionally, this study examines the novel's influence on modernist literature, its engagement with postcolonial critique, and the ways in which its fractured storytelling continues to provoke scholarly debate. (Watts, 1993)

II. Literature Review

The narrative techniques of *Heart of Darkness* have been the subject of extensive academic debate, with scholars analyzing its fragmented structure, unreliable narration, and philosophical depth. Ian Watt (1979) discusses the novel's departure from traditional linear storytelling, emphasizing how its frame narrative creates layers of interpretation that force readers to engage critically with the text (1993) expands on this by highlighting Conrad's use of narrative ambiguity, which blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality. (White, 1987)

Chinua Achebe (1977), in contrast, critiques the novel's racial portrayals, arguing that its stylistic complexity cannot be divorced from its problematic depictions of Africa and its people. These perspectives reveal the richness of *Heart of Darkness* as a text that invites multiple readings and interpretations, making it a cornerstone of both modernist literature and postcolonial critique.

Further studies explore the psychological dimensions of Marlow's narration, particularly his role as an unreliable narrator. Guerard (1958) suggests that Marlow's storytelling reflects a deeper existential crisis, where his hesitations and contradictions mirror his own disillusionment with European civilization. Rauf & Danial (2021) examine Marlow's credibility in comparison to narrators in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Great Gatsby*, noting how his selective storytelling reveals as much about himself as it does about the events he recounts. These analyses underscore how *Heart of Darkness* is more than a critique of imperialism, it is a study of perception, memory, and the instability of truth

More recent studies have begun to explore *Heart of Darkness* through the perspectives of metafiction and narrative ethics. Scholars like Edward Said (1993) have pointed out how Conrad's storytelling defies direct political interpretation by weaving structural ambiguity and ethical unease into the text's very framework. According to Said, Conrad's depiction of imperialism is inextricably linked to his intricate narrative strategies, which convey the complexities of colonial ideology as well as the inherent limitations of language and representation. This evolving scholarly approach moves away from focusing solely on authorial intent and instead emphasizes the active role of the reader in constructing meaning within a narrative that is deliberately unstable and introspective. In this light, modern critics view *Heart of Darkness* not just as a critique of colonialism, but also as a meditation on the ethics of storytelling—exploring how narratives are constructed, manipulated, and used as instruments within power structures. This perspective

enriches traditional postcolonial interpretations while expanding the conversation to include broader philosophical and literary issues.

III. Qualitative Narratological Analysis

Close reading and a dissection of structure and form. This study pulls apart the novel like a puzzle, examining the layers, the shifts, the ruptures. Key passages are selected for each technique: the moment Marlow sees the severed heads on stakes but only later processes what they mean; the intrusion of the outer narrator, a reminder that we are always hearing a story secondhand; the temporal distortions that make past and present collapse into each other (Guerard, 1958).

IV. Discussion

How a story is told is just as crucial as what is told. Narration dictates perspective, and perspective determines meaning. *Heart of Darkness* operates within a tangled hierarchy of voices, each one distorting and reshaping the story's events. To contextualize its innovations, it is useful to examine key narrative approaches:

1. First-person narration

A character tells the story directly, saturating it with their personal experiences, biases, and interpretations. Marlow exemplifies this, layering his memories with doubt, contradiction, and philosophical digression.

2. Third-person omniscient narration

A detached, all-seeing voice provides insight into multiple characters and events. Conrad rejects this, forcing the reader to experience the novel through a narrow, shifting, and highly subjective lens.

3. Third-person limited narration

A compromise between the previous two, this perspective offers access to a single character's thoughts while maintaining some narrative distance. *Heart of Darkness* actively subverts this, as even within Marlow's account, the truth remains elusive.

4. Frame narrative

A story encased within another, creating layers of interpretation. *Heart of Darkness* employs this device to great effect, embedding Marlow's voice within an unnamed narrator's recollection, which only deepens the novel's ambiguity.

IV.I. Narrative Framework

The novel begins with an anonymous man aboard a boat on the Thames. He listens. Marlow speaks. We listen too. But the voice is already twice removed, refracted. The frame narrator is a witness, but passive, an ear to Marlow's words, just as we are. This is not Marlow's tale. It is Marlow's telling of a tale.

Distance is key. Conrad does not hand us a direct experience. He filters it through time, through voices, through memory. We are always at least two steps removed. The frame serves many purposes: it calls attention to the act of storytelling, it positions Marlow not as omniscient but as interpreter, and it subtly aligns the reader with the frame narrator himself, an outsider, trying to make sense of Marlow's opaque recollections (White, 1987).

Sudden and unexpected actions unfold within the protagonist's consciousness, and the delay in his comprehension allows the reader to experience a simultaneous sense of horror and sardonic amusement. The amusement arises from the patronizing contempt we may feel for those who fail to grasp things as quickly as we do. Additionally, there is a dark irony in the simple visual impression of the helmsman's "air of being afraid I would try to take (the spear) away from him," a moment that evokes both grim humor and a chilling recognition of the underlying tension in the situation. (Guerard, 1958)

The relationship between the unnamed narrator and Marlow introduces a subtle power dynamic that is central to the frame narrative. The frame narrator's role as a passive listener, relaying Marlow's words, positions him as a conduit for the story rather than an active participant in the events themselves. This dynamic shifts the power of storytelling onto Marlow, who controls the narrative's flow and interpretation. By placing Marlow in the role of both narrator and central figure, Conrad subtly critiques the authority that storytellers wield over their audience. This power is not only about controlling the narrative but also about shaping how events are remembered and understood. In this way, the frame narrative functions as a commentary on the malleability of truth and the control that comes with the ability to tell a story.

This dynamic also impacts the emotional experience of the reader. By presenting Marlow's account within the context of another narrator's reflection, Conrad creates a sense of distance and uncertainty. This narrative structure heightens the psychological tension of the novella, as the reader is never allowed full immersion in Marlow's direct experience. The uncertainty introduced

by the frame narrative mirrors the ambiguity of Marlow's own perceptions, forcing the reader to navigate a world of shifting truths and unreliable narratives. This distancing technique amplifies the reader's emotional unease, making them more aware of the subjective nature of the narrative and the complexity of the experiences it recounts. (Rauf & Danial, 2021)

By interposing Marlow's story within a frame, Conrad effectively decentralizes the narrative authority and makes the reader acutely aware of the mediated nature of storytelling. This structural decision compels readers to question not only the content of the story but also the reliability of the storyteller. The distance created between the events and the narration increases the psychological tension, as the reader is kept at arm's length from the immediate experience, while also being encouraged to scrutinize the mental and emotional distance between Marlow and the truth he attempts to convey. The layered narrative ensures that what is told is never fully trustworthy, pushing the reader to question both Marlow's account and the unnamed narrator's framing of it, adding an additional layer of complexity to the novella's themes of memory, truth, and power. (Rauf & Danial, 2021)

IV.II. Nonlinear Chronology: A River That Loops

"There is a world of ruin, misery, and desolation—the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention." (Conrad, 1899) Time in *Heart of Darkness* doesn't flow in a straight line. Flashbacks interrupt. Foreshadowing unsettles. Marlow speaks of Kurtz long before we meet him. He recalls past experiences mid-story, making it hard to tell what is happening now and what already happened. Conrad refuses to let the reader move through the story smoothly. Why? Because truth, in this novel, isn't simple. It's fragmented, shifting, unstable. The way we remember things is never neat; it's full of jumps, delays, and contradictions. Conrad builds that into the novel's structure, making the reader feel the same disorientation Marlow does.

This disjointed progression mirrors the winding, unpredictable course of the Congo River, which acts as a powerful metaphor for both Marlow's journey and the narrative itself. The river is not a direct path from point A to point B; rather, it twists and turns, creating a sense of confusion and unpredictability in Marlow's physical and mental journey. Just as the river moves in a non-linear direction, so too does Marlow's understanding of the events he witnesses. His memories of

the Congo and of Kurtz surface intermittently, not in a linear sequence but in fragmented moments that disorient both him and the reader. In this way, the river embodies the instability of time itself. The past doesn't stay behind but reemerges throughout the novel, forcing Marlow and the reader to grapple with a reality that is always shifting, always uncertain (Conrad, 1899). (Watt, 1979)

The river's serpentine flow symbolizes more than just the disjointed timeline of Marlow's journey; it also reflects the deeper psychological and existential journey that he undergoes. The further Marlow travels down the Congo, the deeper he plunges into his own subconscious, where time is warped, memory is fractured, and truth becomes elusive. The twisting path of the river becomes a reflection of Marlow's fractured perception of the world and his own inner turmoil. The river's path is unpredictable, much like the narrative structure, and it's in this lack of a clear, linear progression that the disorienting experience of *Heart of Darkness* becomes more pronounced.

This narrative choice, mirroring the unpredictability of the river, reinforces the novel's theme of the unknowability of truth. Marlow's journey is not just a physical trek into the heart of Africa, but an introspective journey where the past and present blend together, creating a sense of cyclical time rather than linear progression. The ambiguity of the Congo River and its erratic course parallels the fragmented nature of Marlow's perception and the narrative itself, forcing the reader to actively piece together the story rather than passively follow a straightforward plotline. (Watts, 1993)

IV.III. The Unreliable Narrator in Heart of Darkness

"There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies—which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world—what I want to forget." (Conrad, 1899) Marlow is not simply a storyteller, he is a weaver of illusions, an architect of doubt. His voice, hypnotic yet fractured, constantly undermines itself. He tells the audience what he saw, yet confesses he cannot be sure of what he saw. He provides details, then withdraws them. He reveres Kurtz, then fears him, then dismisses him. His narrative is a hall of mirrors, reflecting different versions of the same events, each warped by perception and memory. (Achebe, 1977)

Marlow's unreliability is a reflection of his internal conflict—his struggle to reconcile the disturbing reality of what he has witnessed with his desire to maintain some semblance of rational understanding. His hesitations, contradictions, and omissions serve to protect his psyche from

confronting the deeper horror and moral ambiguity of his journey. As he narrates, Marlow becomes entangled in his own perception, unable to separate the subjective interpretation of his experiences from the raw, objective reality of what has occurred. In the case of Kurtz's final words, where Marlow chooses to lie about the true horror of "The horror! The horror!" by instead offering a softer, more palatable version to Kurtz's fiancée, we see how Marlow manipulates the truth to ease his own discomfort. This selective distortion of reality reflects his ongoing internal battle between truth and self-preservation.

Marlow's narration, therefore, does not just convey the events of his journey, but also his psychological and emotional struggle with the chaos of the world around him. His unreliability stems from this tension between confronting the harsh truths of his experience and reshaping those truths to align with his internal, more manageable version of reality. In this way, *Heart of Darkness* forces the reader to question not just the factual accuracy of Marlow's account, but the very nature of truth itself, illustrating the complexity of human perception and the distortion of reality through the subjective lens of the narrator (Watt, 1979). (Conrad, 1899)

This method is peculiar to *Heart of Darkness*, not found in *The Great Gatsby*.

Both *Heart of Darkness* and *The Great Gatsby*, for instance, deploy intricate narrative techniques to explore the illusions that shape human experience. While Conrad's novel dissects the delusions of imperialism through a fragmented and ambiguous storytelling structure, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* navigates the illusions of the American Dream through the constrained perspective of Nick Carraway. In both cases, the narrators are unreliable, complicating the reader's ability to discern objective truth from subjective interpretation. Marlow's retelling of his voyage into the Congo is saturated with contradictions, omissions, and philosophical digressions, while Nick's account of *Gatsby* is tinted with admiration, bias, and an admitted tendency to withhold judgment until it serves his own interpretation of events.

One striking parallel between the two works lies in their use of an elusive central figure, Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* and *Gatsby* in *The Great Gatsby*. Both characters embody the extremes of ambition and moral decay, their legacies constructed more from the perceptions of others than from any definitive truth. Kurtz is simultaneously revered and condemned, described in glowing terms yet ultimately revealed as a hollow, corrupted ideal. Similarly, *Gatsby* is both the tragic romantic and the orchestrator of his own downfall, a man whose grandeur is built on deception.

The stories surrounding these figures become narratives of disillusionment, exposing the myths that uphold imperialism and the American Dream, respectively. (Rauf & Danial, 2021)

Furthermore, both novels manipulate time and memory, presenting narratives that refuse linear clarity. Marlow's recollections blur the boundaries between past and present, his mind filtering experience through layers of introspection and doubt. Fitzgerald, too, disrupts chronological storytelling, using Nick's retrospective narration to shape Gatsby's rise and fall with a dreamlike quality, where fact and nostalgia intertwine. The effect in both novels is a disorienting, almost hypnotic reading experience, one that forces readers to confront the instability of memory and the constructed nature of personal and historical narratives. (Rauf & Danial, 2021)

IV.IV. Psychological Dimensions of Marlow's Narration

"He struggled with himself, too. I saw it—I heard it. I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself." (Conrad, 1899) Marlow's mind is a battleground, his narration a reflection of his inner turmoil. The novel's structure mirrors his descent into obsession, a journey not just into the Congo but into the recesses of his own psyche. He fixates on Kurtz, projecting onto him all the contradictions of empire, the brilliance and the horror, the ambition and the madness. His storytelling spirals, becoming increasingly erratic, as though the act of recounting the past unravels him further. (Said, 1993)

Marlow's growing obsession with Kurtz emerges as a key psychological feature of his narrative, intertwining with his complex relationship to silence and speech. As Marlow journeys deeper into the Congo, his fixation on Kurtz becomes more consuming. Initially, Kurtz is an enigmatic figure, an idealized symbol of European civilization gone awry. But as Marlow progresses through his journey, Kurtz transforms from an abstract concept into an object of obsession, representing both Marlow's fascination with the unknown and his desire to understand the darkness at the heart of imperialism. This obsession, however, is not merely intellectual but deeply psychological. Marlow begins to see himself reflected in Kurtz's moral decay, creating a connection that is almost existential. Kurtz becomes a mirror of Marlow's own fears and doubts, embodying the potential for destruction within every colonizer.

Marlow's internal fixation on Kurtz grows in tandem with his increasing reliance on silence. Throughout the journey, Marlow avoids confronting the true horror of his experience directly, often

choosing silence over speech. This is evident in his conversations with others and his retelling of events. Marlow's silence becomes a form of psychological defense, a way to cope with the overwhelming sense of chaos and moral collapse around him. It is through his silence that Marlow protects himself from acknowledging the depth of his complicity in the colonial system. His refusal to fully articulate what he has seen—especially in moments when words could reveal the brutality of the imperialist enterprise—reflects a deeper internal conflict. In choosing silence, Marlow avoids fully confronting the unsettling truths that Kurtz's fate represents. (Watt, 1979)

However, as Marlow becomes more fixated on Kurtz, this silence begins to fracture. When he does speak, it is often in the context of Kurtz, attempting to rationalize and make sense of the man's downfall. Marlow's speech in these moments is filled with contradictions and hesitations, mirroring the psychological conflict he faces. He both admires and fears Kurtz, seeing in him a reflection of his own potential for moral decay. This oscillation between silence and speech becomes a way for Marlow to navigate his own psychological instability. His words are often measured, restrained, and at times, evasive, as he struggles to reconcile his growing understanding of the darkness at the heart of both Kurtz's and his own existence. (Watts, 1993)

Marlow's obsession with Kurtz and his reliance on silence are intricately connected. His desire to understand Kurtz, to unravel the mystery of his madness, drives him deeper into his own internal world, where silence offers a retreat from the harsh reality he faces. Yet, as the narrative unfolds and Marlow's obsession intensifies, silence becomes less a refuge and more a psychological prison. It is through speech that Marlow begins to engage with the full complexity of his thoughts and feelings about Kurtz, but even then, his words cannot escape the distorted lens of his own fragmented perception. (White, 1987)

This psychological dynamic speaks to the broader theme of the novella: the collapse of rationality in the face of overwhelming evil. Marlow's growing obsession with Kurtz, coupled with his intermittent speech and persistent silence, illustrates the difficulty of confronting the truth in a world built on contradictions and moral ambiguity. His psychological unraveling, driven by his fixation on Kurtz, underscores the instability of both the individual and the imperial system they are part of.

“The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future.” (Conrad, 1899) The novel's disjointedness, the halting sentences, the abrupt tonal shifts, the shifting chronology, mirrors Marlow's unraveling mind. He is both a man haunted by

what he has seen and a man unable to express it fully. Conrad's narrative structure reflects this breakdown, pulling the reader into the same disorientation Marlow experiences. (Watts, 1993). (Achebe, 1977)

Additionally, Marlow's selective memory plays a crucial role in his unreliability as a narrator. He consciously or unconsciously omits certain details, embellishes others, and even contradicts himself throughout the narrative. This selective storytelling reveals his inability—or unwillingness—to confront the horrors of his experience directly. His distortions expose the human tendency to reshape the past to fit personal or psychological needs. By filtering and reshaping his recollections, Marlow creates a narrative that reflects his internal struggle, where truth is elusive and constantly being edited to protect his psychological stability.

IV.V Colonial Critique: A Story of Power and Corruption

“The conquest of the earth... is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only.” (Conrad, 1899) At its core, *Heart of Darkness* is a critique of European imperialism. But it doesn't present this critique directly. Instead, Conrad weaves it into Marlow's observations. the absurdity of the Company's operations, the senseless violence, the blind greed. (Guerard, 1958)

Marlow himself is conflicted. He sees the horrors of colonialism but never fully condemns them. He respects Kurtz, even as he recognizes his downfall. This moral ambiguity forces the reader to grapple with the contradictions of imperialism, civilization bringing destruction, progress masking exploitation. (Rauf & Danial, 2021)

Conrad uses subtle irony to highlight these contradictions. The European traders speak of “civilizing” Africa while committing atrocities. Kurtz, the “ideal” agent of the Company, becomes its greatest monster. Everything is upside-down, making the reader question who is truly savage. ((Rauf & Danial, 2021).

Marlow's unreliability is not just a personal trait but also a reflection of colonial ideology. As a representative of European imperialism, Marlow's narrative often downplays or avoids confronting the violence and inhumanity inherent in the colonial enterprise. His attempts to rationalize the actions of the Company and his reverence for Kurtz mask the brutal reality of imperialism. In this way, Marlow's selective storytelling reflects the larger patterns of denial and

self-justification that colonial powers used to legitimize their actions, ultimately presenting a narrative that refuses to confront the full extent of colonial atrocity. (Rauf & Danial, 2021)

The so-called "civilizing mission" of European colonialism is one of the central contradictions in *Heart of Darkness*. The very premise that European powers were "bringing civilization" to the Congo is systematically dismantled throughout the novella. Conrad reveals that colonialism itself is the greatest form of barbarism, as it dehumanizes both the colonizers and the colonized. The Company's operations, driven by greed and exploitation, reveal the falsehood of the civilizing mission, exposing it as a facade for economic and political domination. By highlighting the hypocrisy of this justification, Conrad calls into question the very foundations of imperialism, suggesting that the so-called "civilized" world is no better than the "savage" lands it seeks to control.

“The wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion.” (Conrad, 1899) Kurtz, as a central figure in the novella, epitomizes the collapse of imperial ideals in the face of absolute power. His transformation from an idealistic figure, believed to be bringing civilization to the Congo, into a madman consumed by power and greed, underscores the inherent dangers of unchecked authority. Kurtz’s descent into madness mirrors the moral decay at the heart of colonialism—where the supposed civilizing mission is revealed to be a pretext for exploitation, brutality, and degradation. His ultimate death, as a result of his moral and psychological collapse, serves as a grim commentary on the destructive force of colonialism, not just for the colonized, but also for those who perpetrate its violence. (Said, 1993)

While *Heart of Darkness* is set during the height of European imperialism, its critique of colonialism extends far beyond the historical context of the novella. The enduring legacy of colonialism—its economic exploitation, psychological trauma, and social stratification—continues to affect both the colonizers and the colonized long after the formal end of empire. Marlow’s reflections on the moral decay of imperialism serve as a timeless reminder of the ways in which colonialism shapes the cultural and political landscapes of postcolonial societies. By exposing the destructive forces at work within the colonial system, *Heart of Darkness* invites readers to confront the ongoing effects of imperialism and consider how its legacies continue to haunt contemporary global relations. (Watt, 1979)

This legacy, far from being confined to the Congo or the era in which the novella is set, reverberates through history, shaping the world long after the formal end of colonial rule. The

consequences of imperialism—economic disparity, psychological damage, and social inequality—are still felt by both colonizers and the colonized, continuing to affect global relationships and structures of power. In this sense, *Heart of Darkness* is not just a critique of colonialism in the late 19th century but a reflection on its enduring, pervasive influence, which lingers long after the colonial era has ended. By connecting the immediate impacts of imperialism to its long-term legacies, Conrad emphasizes the cyclical and lasting nature of colonial oppression, challenging readers to reflect on its ongoing consequences. (Watts, 1993)

VI. Conclusion

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* stands as a landmark in literary modernism precisely because of its radical manipulation of narrative form. Through its fragmented structure, unreliable narrator, and recursive frame, the novel challenges readers not just to follow a story, but to interrogate the nature of storytelling itself. Marlow's voice shifting, evasive, and often contradictory serves as both the lens and the barrier through which we encounter the imperialist horrors of the Congo. This technique destabilizes the line between perception and reality, casting doubt on the very possibility of objective truth.

The novel's nonlinear chronology and psychological depth deepen this instability, forcing the reader to experience time and memory as fluid, uncertain terrains. By mirroring Marlow's disorientation, Conrad invites us into a world where meaning is elusive and truth is a matter of perspective. In doing so, *Heart of Darkness* becomes not only a searing critique of colonial power, but also a self-reflexive exploration of narrative authority.

When viewed alongside *The Great Gatsby*, the novel's innovations become even more apparent. Both texts deploy unreliable narrators and elusive central figures to expose cultural myths of imperialism in Conrad's case and the American Dream in Fitzgerald's. Yet where Nick Carraway offers a restrained, retrospective voice, Marlow unravels in real time, dragging the reader into his psychological descent.

Ultimately, *Heart of Darkness* is not merely a story about empire or madness; it is a meditation on the very act of telling. Its genius lies in making readers conscious of the filters through which all stories historical, personal, or political are constructed. In this way, Conrad transforms the novel into a mirror, reflecting not only the darkness of the world it depicts, but also the shadows within the human mind.

VII. References

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