



JOSEPH CONRAD'S YOUTH, HEART OF DARKNESS, LORD JIM, EMILY BRONTE'S WUTHERING HEIGHTS AND HERMAN MELVILLE'S MOBY DICK: THE ROLE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NARRATOR

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ABSTRACT

The role of the narrator is vital to the novel since he/she is a powerful means of communicating the novelist's point of view to the readers. The reader sees the world through the narrator's eyes. In the imaginary world of the novelist new feelings, ideas, and experiences are described with the help of the narrator. The novelist sometimes takes the help of a narrator in order to bridge the gap between the reader and his point of view. In Conrad's novels, *Youth*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, *Chance* he voices the adventures, lives and the ideals of different men through his narrator Marlow not only narrates the novelist's tales, but also one who sympathises with the characters that he is made to describe. Nelly Dean's search for meaning in *Wuthering Heights* is more complex as she tries to understand the children whom she had once looked after and Ishmael's quest in *Moby Dick* is for the underlying meaning of man's futile attempt to challenge nature and its forces. This method of narration gives the novelist the essential independence to express his/her point of view without making his/her presence felt during the course of the narrative. The narrator puts forth the novelist's thoughts and experiences, gives a realistic touch to the narrative and helps in the unraveling of the plot.

KEY WORDS: Novelist, narrator, *Youth*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, *Chance*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Moby Dick*

The art of storytelling is a powerful means of communicating the novelist's point of view to his/her readers. The role played by the narrator hence, is vital to the novel. Stories have existed from time immemorial and story-telling has been one of the oldest forms of entertainment. It is the narrator's responsibility to make the story work. 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. As a narrator, he/she brings to life images that excite the imagination of his/her listeners, enabling them to create a world inhabited by the characters of his/her stories which are not only meaningful, but serve to emulate human experience itself. R. K. Narayan comments "...for after all stories are also

stores in a manner of speaking..." (From: "A Writer's Nightmare", *Malgudi Landscapes. The Best of R.K. Narayan* 314)

As an artist, the novelist touches upon life and portrays the ordinary realities of the average person which pass unnoticed by him. The novel thus arouses the imagination of the reader and allows him/her the freedom to place the situations and characters described within his/her consciousness in such a way that what he/she reads and what the novelist describes seems to be real: "A novel is a picture of life, and life is well known to us" (Lubbock 5). The reader sees the world that the novelist portrays through the narrator and after having read a novel, he/she returns to reality: "we might substitute for our own life an obsessive reading of

novels, or dreams based on novelistic models". The novelist creates a situation which appears to be real and he/she also creates characters that are "free people, capable of standing *alongside*" (Bakhtin 32, 6).

According to Bakhtin, "The novel is an artistic genre" (269). The novelist creates a world that is inhabited by characters that enact clearly defined roles. He/she creates an imaginary world replete with all that is required to make it appear real to the reader. R.K.Narayan is of the opinion that... "a novel is about an individual living his life in a world imagined by the author, performing a set of actions...contrived by the author"...(317). In this imaginary world, new feelings, ideas, and experiences are described. In order to facilitate the entry of the reader into this world the novelist sometimes takes the help of a narrator so that the distance between the reader and the novelist's point of view is successfully bridged. Ian Milligan in *The English Novel* writes:

...The measure of the novelist's success lies in how far he arouses the interest and attention of the reader, to what extent he enlists his active participation in making the novel and how skillful he is in creating characters and devising situations which might surprise or disconcert or puzzle the reader so that he is compelled to find justification for the actions of the characters... (11)

The novelist projects his views through the narrator: the act of narration as performed by even the most highly dramatized narrator is itself the author's presentation of a prolonged "inside view" of a character...The author is present in every speech given by any character who has had conferred upon him, in whatever manner the badge of reliability...the author's judgment is always present, always evident to anyone who knows how to look for it (Booth, 181, 183).

The role played by the narrator hence, is vital to the novel for the onus is placed upon the narrator to make the narrative tell its tale: "for after all stories are also stores in a manner of speaking" (Narayan 314); that narrate a tale, that projects the author's thoughts and experiences, and features characters

that help in the denouement of the plot and that make the narrative appear real with the help of a narrator(s).

In Conrad's novels, the narrator Marlow, searches for meaning amidst the devastation carried on in Africa under the pretext of bringing civilisation to the continent and the desire to achieve recognition in life, as seen in Jim. Nelly Dean's search for meaning in *Wuthering Heights* is more complex as she tries to understand the children whom she had once looked after and Ishmael's quest in *Moby Dick* is for the underlying meaning of man's futile attempt to challenge nature and its forces. The novelist, through the narrator projects his views: "the act of narration as performed by even the most highly dramatized narrator is itself the author's presentation of a prolonged "inside view" of a character" (Booth 181, 183).

Conrad adopts the technique of having the story told by a character in it – that is, Marlow who offers his own opinions and not those of the author. Marlow is not only a go-between as a voice but is the author as well, without the author making his presence felt during the course of the narrative. Similarly, Melville has his narrator Ishmael narrate his story to the reader and it is through his narration that the reader is inducted into the process of collecting blubber for fuel, the mammoth struggle between Ahab and the whale, Ahab's initial failure to kill Moby Dick, the frustrations that follow, the reaction of the crew to his orders, and finally, the great struggle and its result. Emily Bronte too, uses a similar method of narration wherein the character of Nelly Dean emerges as she tells Lockwood, the story of *Wuthering Heights* and Thrushcross Grange and it is during the process of her narration that events and characters come alive and the reader is provided with a view of the events described during the entire story.

Conrad, Melville and Emily Bronte have succeeded in holding the interest of the reader, in the way that he/she empathises with the characters to such an extent that their actions seem justified as in the case of Marlow, in *Heart of Darkness*, who lies to Kurtz's Intended saying that Kurtz had uttered her name before he died. In *Lord Jim*, Jim faces death in order to protect his honour which was at stake. In the case of Ahab and Ishmael in *Moby Dick*, Melville

successfully convinces the reader about the action of each character in the backdrop of the circumstances faced by each one of them. Similarly, in the case of Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, the reader understands the reasons behind the action of each character though it may sometimes appear strange to him/her. The narrator has always played an important part in maintaining the connectivity between the story and the listener or the reader.

In *Youth*, Marlow voices the feeling of elation of one who sees the East for the first time, especially in his maiden command of a ship. He also voices the novelist's desire to visit Africa and his dismay at what he sees when he is there. He observes Jim and Flora from close quarters, understands their feelings and so, is able to effectively portray the character of both. In *Moby Dick*, Ishmael presents a life-like description of Ahab and the other characters in the *Pequod* and also tells the reader about the feelings of Ahab, his frustration at his failure to kill Moby Dick and the fact that nature has no appeal to him because of the fact that he is always reminded of the loss of his leg and his inability to take revenge. Nelly Dean reports upon the feelings of Catherine, the circumstances of her life and her actions. Lockwood reports upon the strange settings of Heathcliff's household and through the two narrators; a realistic portrayal of the story is achieved. This is also determined by the kind of information that a narrator imparts on a character's life.

The narrator thus is also seen to have an objective point of view. The narrator is a source of information, which flows from the novelist to the reader and may also be regarded as a means by which communication between the novelist and the reader is enabled. "One of the ...devices of the storyteller is the trick of going beneath the surface of the action to obtain a reliable view of a character's mind and heart" (Booth 171).

The narrator describes events in the narrative, addressing the audience directly. He/she also communicates to the readers, the state of mind and emotion of the characters described. He/she may narrate his story from his/her point of view or from that of one of the characters in the story. The novelist's use of a narrator serves to establish a

close relationship between the writer and the reader. The writer, very subtly, is able to put forth his/her point of view and his/her comments without allowing the reader to feel his/her presence. This method of narration is effective for the narrator sets the tone of the tale that he/she narrates whilst also conveying the novelist's point of view through multiple narrative strategies.

Conrad voices the adventures, lives and the ideals of different men through his narrator Marlow who is not only the narrator of Conrad's tales, but also one who sympathises with the characters that he is made to describe. This method of narration gives the novelist the essential independence to express his/her point of view without making his/her presence felt during the course of the narrative.

In *Moby Dick*, Melville narrates the story through Ishmael the narrator. Marlow, Conrad's narrator searches for meaning amidst the devastation carried on in Africa under the pretext of bringing civilisation to the continent and the desire to achieve recognition in life, as seen in the character of Jim in *Lord Jim*. Emily Bronte's narrator Nelly Dean's search for meaning is more complex as she tries to understand the children whom she had once looked after and Herman Melville's narrator Ishmael in the novel *Moby Dick* is in pursuit of the underlying meaning of man's futile attempt to challenge nature and its forces. The novelist, through the narrator projects his views through the narrator:

... the act of narration as performed by even the most highly dramatized narrator is itself the author's presentation of a prolonged "inside view" of a character...The author is present in every speech given by any character who has had conferred upon him, in whatever manner the badge of reliability...the author's judgment is always present, always evident to anyone who knows how to look for it... (Booth, 181, 183)

Conrad, Melville and Emily Bronte have succeeded in holding the interest of the reader through narrators who in a way sympathise with the characters even to the extent of justifying them, as in the case of Marlow, in *Heart of Darkness*, who lies to Kurtz's intended saying that Kurtz had uttered her name before he died. In *Lord Jim*, Marlow displays his understanding of Jim's desire to face death in

order to protect his honour. In *Moby Dick*, Ishmael displays his perception of the futility of Ahab's obsessive desire for revenge. Similarly, in the case of Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, Nelly Dean and Lockwood play an important part in maintaining the connectivity between the story and the listener and the reader. The novel is not only telling a story, but portraying something through the story. Marlow voices the feeling of elation of one who sees the East for the first time, especially when he is in his maiden command of a boat as seen in *Youth*. He also voices the novelist's desire "When I grow up I will go there" (HD 142) to visit Africa and his dismay at what he sees when he is there. He observes Jim and Flora from close quarters, sympathises with them and so, is able to effectively portray the characters of both. In *Moby Dick*, Ishmael presents a life-like description of Ahab and the other characters in the *Pequod* and describes Ahab's feelings, his frustration at his failure to kill Moby Dick and the fact that nature has no appeal to him because of the fact that he is always reminded of the loss of his leg and his inability to take revenge. Nelly Dean reports upon the feelings of Catherine, the circumstances of her life and her actions. Lockwood reports upon the strange settings of Heathcliff's household and through the two narrators a realistic portrayal is achieved. The narrator's objective point of view is a source of information that flows from the novelist to the reader determining the kind of information that a narrator provides about a character. The narrator may even be regarded as a means of communication between the novelist and the reader:

One of the...devices of the storyteller is the trick of going beneath the surface of the action to obtain a reliable view of a character's mind and heart. Whatever our ideas may be about the natural way to tell a story, artifice is unmistakably present whenever the author tells us what no one in so-called real life could possibly know (Booth 171).

The narrator may be involved in the unraveling of the entire course of the events or he/she may be so uninvolved as to simply narrate the story without being involved in the events in the slightest way. A narrator may also narrate his/her story in flashback

as in the case of Ishmael in *Moby Dick*. He is seen to have certain attributes and limitations which are determining conditions for the readers' perception of the story. However, the most important aspect of narration is the point of view from which the story is narrated: "An author can have the story told through the mediation of a *personified narrator*, a 'teller' recognized by the reader as a distinct person with well-defined individual human characteristics" (Hawthorne 67).

In *Moby Dick*, Melville narrates the story through Ishmael the narrator who appears to be an unusual narrator because he plays different roles during the course of the narrative:

His major roles, other than the active part he plays on shore, include hinting at the end of his tale, commenting philosophically on nearly every occurrence, factually informing the reader on the subject of whaling, and at times even serving as an omniscient narrator with unlimited sight and hearing (Lucy Day Web N. pag).

In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Bronte uses a method in which a story occurs within a story. In each framework of the story, a different narrator is seen to narrate different parts of the story. *Wuthering Heights* consists of two main frames in which, the first frame is Lockwood's narration, the second which contains the more important part of the story is the narration of Nelly Dean who narrates the story as an omniscient narrator, narrating in detail the events which occur throughout her life in *Wuthering Heights* and *Thrushcross Grange*.

The point of view in *Wuthering Heights* results from a combination of two speakers who outline the events of a plot within the framework of a story within a story. The frame story is that of Lockwood who informs us of his meeting with the strange and mysterious "family" living in almost total isolation in the stony uncultivated land of Northern England. The inner story is that of Nelly Dean, who transmits to Lockwood the history of the two families during the two generations (Shunami 449).

The narrative begins with the narration of Lockwood who takes up the narrative in the first three

chapters of the novel. He presents the situation to the reader as he sees it just like an omniscient writer does till the novelist brings in the character of Nelly Dean who is the main narrator of the story. Emily Bronte expresses what she sees around her in such a way that this novel created a place for her in the history of English fiction: "She looked out upon a world cleft into gigantic disorder and felt within her the power to unite it in a book" (Woolf Web N.pag). Joseph Conrad adopted British citizenship and took to the sea for a profession. He depended on his experience at sea to write his novels. John G. Peters is of the opinion that: "all authors are products of their cultural and historical circumstances, but if ever there was an author who was a product of the historical and cultural circumstances in which he lived it was Joseph Conrad" (3).

Similarly, Ishmael Melville's narrator narrates his story to the reader and it is through his narration that the reader is inducted into the process of collecting blubber for fuel, the mammoth struggle between Ahab and the whale, Ahab's initial failure to kill Moby Dick, the frustrations that follow, the reaction of the crew to his orders, and finally, the great struggle and its result. Melville expresses his view on about the narrative structure of his novel and the use of the narrator Ishmael at the beginning of Chapter 63: "Out of the trunk, the branches grow; out them, the twigs. So, in productive subjects, grow the chapters." (*Moby Dick*, 297) This method of narration gives Melville the freedom to narrate his tale without making his presence felt during the course of the narrative. Emily Bronte too, uses a similar method of narration wherein the character of Nelly Dean emerges as she tells Lockwood, the story of *Wuthering Heights* and *Thrushcross Grange* and it is during the process of her narration that events and characters come alive and the reader is provided with a view of the events described during the entire story.

Conrad's British citizenship, his appreciation of the valour of the English sailors led him to write his novels. It may be noted here that his ability to express his artistic views was aided to a great extent by his use of Marlow, the narrator in four of his novels.

N.S. Sahu in the preface to his *An Approach to American Literature Studies in the Writer's Craft*,

writes about Melville: "The great dream inspired the work of the romantics...Melville led his hero into the open spaces of the Pacific Ocean" (vii). Captain Ahab wanted to establish the fact that for him, nothing was impossible and faced with the great challenge posed before him by the dangers of the sea as well as the whale Moby Dick, he plunges into action to take revenge against the whale, an action which was considered impossible by many. Melville's narration of a story that has religious and sociological implications has been aided by his narrator Ishmael, who not only narrates, but also voices Melville's views on different issues.

Marlow voices the feeling of elation of one who has seen the East for the first time, especially when he is in command of a ship for the first time as seen in *Youth*. He also voices the novelist's desire to visit Africa and his dismay at what he sees when he is there. He observes Jim and Flora from close quarters, understands their feelings and so, is able to effectively portray the character of both. In *Moby Dick*, Ishmael presents a life-like description of Ahab and the other characters in the Pequod and also tells the reader about the feelings of Ahab, his frustration at his failure to kill Moby Dick and the fact that nature has no appeal to him because of the fact that he is always reminded of the loss of his leg and his inability to take revenge. Nelly Dean reports the feelings of Catherine, the circumstances of her life and her action. Lockwood reports the strange settings of Heathcliff's household and through the two narrators; a realistic portrayal of the story is achieved. This feature of the narrative is also determined by the kind of information a narrator can give about a character's life and it appears that the narrator has an objective point of view. The narrator is a source of information, which flows from the novelist to the reader. The narrator may even be regarded as a means of communication between the novelist and the reader:

...One of the ...devices of the storyteller is the trick of going beneath the surface of the action to obtain a reliable view of a character's mind and heart. Whatever our ideas may be about the natural way to tell a story, artifice is unmistakably present whenever the author tells us what no one in so-called real life could possibly know...

(*Twentieth Century Criticism. The Major Statements*, 171)

It is noticed that 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, Emily Bronte's narrators Lockwood and Nelly Dean, and Melville's narrator Ishmael, are individuals who are able to create the necessary connection between the novelist(s) and the reader. The narrator describes events in the narrative, addressing the audience directly. He also communicates to the readers, the state of mind and emotion of the characters described. He may narrate his story from his own point of view or from that of one of the characters in the story. The novelist's use of a narrator serves to establish a close relationship between the writer and the reader. The writer, very subtly, is able to put forth his point of view and his comments without allowing the reader to feel his presence. This method of narration is effective because the narrator sets the tone of the tale he narrates and also conveys to the reader the novelist's point of view.

...Some narrators may even have names and detailed personal histories...Other narrators merely indicate to us that they are persons – perhaps by the occasional use of 'I' in their narrative – but tell us no more about themselves than this. We have a continuum of possibility: (i) personified, named, and with a full human identity; (ii) human but anonymous; (iii) not fully comparable with any human perspective (Hawthorne 67).

The novelist, like the dramatist, interprets life by representation. He/she elucidates the action, discusses the characters and their motives. He becomes the interpreter of the world he has created. The reader enters the world created by the novelist and resides in this world for a short period of time. However, it may be said that when powerful and effective narrators are used to express the novelist's point of view, the narrative becomes

effective and assumes a life-like stature providing at the same time a realistic view of the situation and the characters described. This method of narration serves to win the reader's confidence and allows him the space to live in the world described and feel that he is a part of it.

In *Moby Dick*, Melville narrates the story through Ishmael the narrator who appears to be an unusual narrator because he plays different roles during the course of the narrative. Herman Melville in *Moby Dick* focuses on man's helplessness when faced with forces that are superior to him and when he feels that he is overpowered by the same forces that he can do nothing to defend himself; the frustration that he feels when he grapples with a situation which seems to defeat him at every turn.

In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Bronte uses a method in which a story occurs within a story. In each framework of the story, a different narrator is seen to narrate different parts of the story. *Wuthering Heights* consists of two main frames in which, the first frame is Lockwood's narration whereas, the second which contains the more important part of the story is the narration of Nelly Dean who narrates the story as an omniscient narrator, narrating in detail the events which occur throughout her life in *Wuthering Heights* and *Thrushcross Grange*. The narrative begins with the narration of Lockwood who takes up the narrative in the first three chapters of the novel. He presents the situation to the reader as he sees it just like an omniscient writer does till the novelist brings in the character of Nelly Dean who is the main narrator of the story. Emily Bronte expresses what she saw around her in such a way that this novel created a place for her in the history of English fiction: "She looked out upon a world cleft into gigantic disorder and felt within her the power to unite it in a book"... ("*Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*"). Thus, Emily Bronte weaves her story with the help of Nelly Dean and Lockwood.

Conrad's use of the narrator began with *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. This narrative voice develops into Conrad's valuable narrator, Marlow. Marlow's narration incorporates multiple views and impressions of the past as well as the present and also those that have been gathered from different places. The action is seen to move in a back and forth sequence wherein the past lives on in the

present and in human memory. In this way, it also influences the future. Thus we see that human action, to a great extent is irrational as well as emotional. Marlow narrates an incident which takes place in the past, but the impact of which may be seen years after. The action which he describes is sometimes irrational sometimes emotional. Marlow alludes to certain events that have taken place in the past, sometimes making certain suggestions that pertain to information that will be told later. This increases the suspense and makes the narrative speculative.

The narration of *Wuthering Heights* presented several problems to Emily Bronte. The reader's interest had to be maintained and the tale had to be kept together. The reader had to be made to feel the passage of time without being bothered about dates. The author had to accurately visualize the ages of the characters at different stages in the development of the story: "Emily Bronte conveys this...by sheer imaginative power...especially by a mastery of the dramatic device..." (Cecil 150). Just as Marlow is the confidante of Jim, Nelly Dean too, enjoys the confidence of the major characters in the novel. This places her at a vantage point, through which she can give a clear and first-hand account of the happenings and characters in the novel. Nelly does not have a life of her own. She is closely associated with the characters and she loves the children that she had taken care of when they were younger. She may be regarded as the vital link between *Wuthering Heights* and *Thrushcross Grange*, making the transition between the two houses and the two families smooth. She knows about everything that goes on at *Wuthering Heights* because of her close relationship with everyone and even when she is not physically present, she still manages to get information about what is going on. Nelly Dean narrates the story of *Wuthering Heights* to Lockwood curiosity is the key to the narrative. The primary narrator is Lockwood, who begins and ends the narrative and is recording the story that he hears from Nelly. Nelly is Lockwood's inside source of information, though, as he can only directly report what he witnesses in the present time beginning in 1801, the year before Heathcliff dies. So, Nelly is telling Lockwood her version of the events, which then get filtered and recorded

through his perspective. In cases where Nelly was not a witness to the events, she fills in the story with either someone else's eyewitness report to her, or she quotes a letter.

Conrad's use of Marlow in four of his works *Youth*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim* and finally, *Chance* reveals Marlow's gradual maturity as narrator. In *Youth*, a young Marlow is seen, voicing Conrad's first journey and vision of the east. He is made to play the role of a character in *Chance*, which marks the end of his use as narrator by the novelist. Marlow, whom we see in *Youth*, is part of the group that travels to the East and that is the reason why his narration appears authentic. Conrad, a naturalized British citizen, expresses his pride as an Englishman through Marlow. The need to use Marlow may have arisen because of Conrad's strong desire to be identified as an Englishman, an identity which was perhaps difficult to achieve. In the preface to "*The Nigger of the Narcissus*" Conrad expressed his intentions as a novelist as: "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see"(Web N.pag).

It may be said that Nelly Dean and Lockwood are narrators who while effectively narrating the story, situates the novelist within a particular historical and cultural background. More than Lockwood, Nelly Dean plays a strong role in determining the course of events. Lockwood, on the other hand becomes a part of the larger framework of the narrative. Taking on a judgmental role, she calls Heathcliff a villain and a beast and Cathy, a naughty girl but who means no harm. The affairs of the Grange and the Heights have taken up her whole life and she remains inextricable from then to the very end.

Ishmael enjoys a privileged position among the crew of the *Pequod*. He gives firsthand information of his impressions and experiences on board the *Pequod*. Ishmael, like Kurtz, travels on the *Pequod* for the purpose of whaling. His is an autobiographical account of his own life as well as an account of how Ahab turns this expedition into one of revenge. Ishmael takes the readers on a symbolic voyage to the depths of the self.

Thus; Marlow, Nelly Dean, Lockwood and Ishmael are important characters, playing out definite roles

allotted to them by their respective creators. They make the action that they describe accessible and credible to the reader through their narration where they help to “erase all direct addresses to the reader, all commentary in the author’s own name” (Booth 16).

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