



Textual Representation of Mr. Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*

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Received: 12 May 2024; Received in revised form: 15 Jun 2024; Accepted: 23 Jun 2024; Available online: 30 Jun, 2024
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Abstract— The paper attempts to study the way the character of Mr. Kurtz is materialised in *Heart of Darkness*. The portrayal of Mr. Kurtz's character is studied and analysed in this research work with reference to two of the major ways of character portrayal – direct definition and indirect presentation. The direct mode of description refers to the description of a character directly and explicitly with the help of a particular word, sentence, or event, whereas in indirect presentation, a character is materialized in terms of various means, such as the action, the speech, the external appearance and even the environment. The paper with references to the textual examples from *Heart of Darkness*, endeavours to explore how Mr. Kurtz's character is sketched out using the two modes of textual representation.

Keywords— Conrad, direct definition, indirect presentation, Kurtz, textual representation of characters.



I. INTRODUCTION

Heart of Darkness is one of the most studied narrative prose fictions in English literature. “Through Marlow and his narrative, the reader starts a journey that is too mysterious to be enjoyed and too complex to be comprehended.” (Romdhani, 2022, p. 2) The character of Mr. Kurtz holds the second most important place in the novel, apart from that of Marlow. In the creative narrative, Kurtz is mostly presented from the point of view of Marlow. In his character portrayal Joseph Conrad adopts different modes of portraying. In novels, “there are two basic types of textual indicators of character: direct definition and indirect presentation” (Rimmon-Kenan, 2005, p. 61). A writer adopts one of these character portrayal modes or even through the mutuality of both. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad manipulates both methods in a way which reflects nothing but his artistic excellence.

II. DIRECT DEFINITION

The direct mode of description refers to “the technique of presenting a trait of any character directly and explicitly; the text clearly indicates some particular characteristic through the use of a particular word, sentence, event or description” (Sengupta, 2012, p. 11). In *Heart of Darkness*, we first come

to know about Mr. Kurtz through the words of the Company's chief accountant; in his reference to Kurtz, he says that Kurtz is a remarkable person who deals in ivory (Conrad, 1992, pp. 20-21). Further, the Manager and the Brickmaker also give their opinions about Mr. Kurtz. These are examples of direct description. It is Mr. Marlow who gives all the information regarding Kurtz directly. For example, his description (Conrad, 1992, p. 59) regarding the background of Mr. Kurtz enables the readers to discover that Kurtz had a half-English mother and a half-French father. After the death of Mr. Kurtz all his thoughts, feelings, emotions, and philosophies are unravelled before the reader by Marlow himself (Conrad, 1992, pp. 85-86). The Harlequin, a Russian disciple of Kurtz whom Marlow meets also delineates the character of Kurtz.

After the death of Mr. Kurtz, many aspects of his character are revealed to Marlow as well as to us by Kurtz's relatives and friends and even by his wife. It is through direct description by different characters that we come to know, Kurtz had a very charismatic voice, and he could easily corrupt anybody, whoever comes into contact. Kurtz was a painter, a musician, a journalist, a politician, a diplomat and what not; all these we come to know from other characters. It is noteworthy that Mr. Kurtz himself appears on the scene only for a few pages. All the time, in the novel

he has been presented from the viewpoint of different characters. All these references give us a very static picture of Kurtz.

However, Brooks and Warren are of the view that “When direct presentation of character becomes also direct comment on a character, the author may find himself “telling” is what to feel and think rather than “rendering” a scene for our imaginative participation. (Understanding Fiction, 1979, p. 108)”. Therefore, the technique of direct presentation is more fruitful in the delineation of ‘flat and typical characters.’ In *Heart of Darkness*, besides Marlow and to some extent Mr. Kurtz, most of the characters are flat or static. Conrad adopts the mode of direct definition in the portrayal of all such characters as the Manager, the Doctor, the Accountant, the two women, etc. He employs Marlow, the narrator and the most ‘authoritative voice in the text’, to define the static and typical characters. For instance, Marlow’s delineation of the two women characters who would knit ‘black wool feverishly’ (Conrad, 1992, p. 10) is suggestive of their passive nature and role in the narrative:

“People were arriving, and the younger one was walking back and forth introducing them. The old one sat on her chair. Her flat cloth slippers were propped up on a foot-warmer, and a cat reposed on her lap. She wore a starched white affair on her head, had a wart on one cheek, and silver-rimmed spectacles hung on the tip of her nose. She glanced at me above the glasses. The swift and indifferent placidity of that look troubled me. Two youths with foolish and cheery countenances were being piloted over, and she threw at them the same quick glance of unconcerned wisdom. She seemed to know all about them and about me, too. An eerie feeling came over me. She seemed uncanny and fateful.” (Conrad, 1992, p. 10)

III. INDIRECT PRESENTATION

Complementing the direct definition mode, we also perceive the indirect way of presenting the character of Kurtz. “The danger of direct presentation is that it tends to forfeit the vividness of drama and the reader’s imaginative participation” (Brooks & Warren, 1979, p. 108). Since there is a potential consequence of producing “a rational, authoritative and static impression” (Rimmon-Kenan, 2005, p. 60) on the readers during the incorporation of direct definition technique, Conrad employs the other way of textual representation of a character i.e., indirect presentation. According to the mode of indirect presentation, a character is not directly described about, instead different traits of the character are revealed through various means such as the action, the speech, the external appearance, and even the environment. Kurtz’s character is manifested before us through these means.

ACTION:

The character of Kurtz appears only in the third chapter of the book, he has a brief and the most striven for appearance. After a toilsome journey, Marlow, at last, is able to meet with Kurtz. Marlow says that even when Kurtz is unable to stand, he was under the spell of darkness and he was not ready to go away from that darkness, from that belief. Marlow says to himself,

“He can’t walk – he is crawling on all-fours – I’ve got him” (Conrad, 1992, p. 78)

This action of Kurtz reveals his fascination towards darkness. Marlow then remarks,

“Sometimes he was contemptibly childish. He desired to have kings meet him at railway-stations on his return from some ghastly Nowhere, where he intended to accomplish great things.” (Conrad, 1992, p. 83)

These lines again deal with Kurtz’s action which reveals his desire. Thus, these are some of the actions which reveal the character of Kurtz.

SPEECH:

Further, there are speeches by Kurtz that Conrad incorporates in *Heart of Darkness* to portray the character of Kurtz. For instance, when Marlow prevents Kurtz to go into the forest, the latter asserts,

“I had immense plans’, he muttered irresolutely... ‘I was on the threshold of great things”

This speech by Kurtz exposes his ambitious soul, his strong adherence to his beliefs. Again, while coming back, in the steamboat he mutters the following lines:

“Live rightly, die, die...”

“I am lying here in the dark waiting for death.”

And finally comes out his last words,

“The horror! The horror!”

All these of his speeches mark the development of the character of Mr. Kurtz from his ambitious goals in life to his gradual realization of the truth and ultimately to his final judgement of himself.

EXTERNAL APPEARANCE:

In the novel, we also find the description of the external appearance of Kurtz; we find Marlow describing him,

“He looked at least seven feet long. His covering had fallen off, and his body emerged from it pitiful and appalling as from a winding-sheet. I could see the cage of his ribs all astir, the bones of his arm waving. It was as though an animated image of death carved out of old ivory had been shaking its hand with menaces at a motionless crowd of men made of dark and glittering bronze. I saw him open his

mouth wide — it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him. A deep voice reached me faintly. He must have been shouting.” (Conrad, 1992, p. 72)

This passage of description points towards the fact that Kurtz was moving towards his end and had lost everything in the pursuit of the darkness.

Another example of this kind is when Marlow says about Kurtz:

“He rose, unsteady, long, pale, indistinct, like a vapour exhaled by the earth, and swayed slightly, misty and silent before me”. (Conrad, 1992, p. 79)

These lines reflect the indomitable will of Kurtz which makes him stand even at the moment of sheer weakness.

IV. COMBINATION OF DIRECT DEFINITION AND INDIRECT PRESENTATION

Apart from the independent application of Direct definition and Indirect Presentation, in *Heart of Darkness* by Conrad, we also find a combination of both the modes in the portrayal of all the characters in general and Kurtz in particular. One of the best examples in this respect would be the following paragraph:

“He rustled one of the letters, and looking straight in my face said, ‘I am glad.’ Somebody had been writing to him about me. These special recommendations were turning up again. The volume of tone he emitted without effort, almost without the trouble of moving his lips, amazed me. A voice! a voice! It was grave, profound, vibrating, while the man did not seem capable of a whisper. However, he had enough strength in him — factitious no doubt — to very nearly make an end of us, as you shall hear directly.” (Conrad, 1992, p. 73)

Here, in this passage, we can see not only Marlow’s direct comments over Kurtz but also, we find him talking and in action. The passage reveals Kurtz’s indomitable will to do something or whatever he wants. It is not his physical strength that makes him work but it is the will of his soul which makes him do the impossible. Furthermore, the following paragraph is another instance where both Marlow’s views as well as Kurtz’s mental struggle and his sense of possession get manifested.

“Kurtz discoursed. A voice! a voice! It rang deep to the very last. It survived his strength to hide in the magnificent folds of eloquence the barren darkness of his heart. Oh, he struggled! he struggled! The wastes of his weary brain were haunted by shadowy images now — images of wealth and fame revolving obsequiously round his unextinguishable gift of noble and lofty expression. My Intended, my station,

my career, my ideas — these were the subjects for the occasional utterances of elevated sentiments. The shade of the original Kurtz frequented the bedside of the hollow sham, whose fate it was to be buried presently in the mould of primeval earth. But both the diabolic love and the unearthly hate of the mysteries it had penetrated fought for the possession of that soul satiated with primitive emotions, avid of lying fame, of sham distinction, of all the appearances of success and power.” (Conrad, 1992, p. 83)

V. CONCLUSION

The discussion in the paper attempts to throw light on how Joseph Conrad has textually represented characters in general and Mr. Kurtz in particular. The two major methods of character portrayal – direct definition and indirect presentation, proposed by narratologists are elaborated in the paper with reference to how these techniques are adopted in *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad through the narrator Marlow defines directly the minor characters in the novel along with Mr. Kurtz at times. Moreover, he has successfully indirectly presented the character of Mr. Kurtz through his action, speech, and external appearance.

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