
Secluded Characters and Their Use. How Do They Help in Further Narrating?

Joseph Conrad's writing has captivated millions with its vast voyages with places far away, sojourners in distant lands, and an omnipotent force of nature disrupting everything. The concept of writing about seafaring comes directly from Conrad's own adventures, as he went on many voyages throughout his life. Whether intentionally or not, Conrad's personal understanding of people, ships, and nature mirror his use of them in his books, such as *Typhoon*, *Falk*, and *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad's stories not only tell a fictional narrative of events happening in another universe, but also describe what Conrad himself believes about reality based off of his personal experiences. Joseph Conrad's writing features lonely seamen aboard isolated ships to colorfully describe Conrad's own worldview.

Conrad's personal experience with the sea directly relates to details in his novels, linking the works of Conrad to the memories of Conrad. Many novels Conrad wrote come from actual memories during Conrad's life. During his personal travels, he sailed out of Bangkok on a ship to Singapore, and in his novel *Falk* the characters interact in the port, a place where Conrad spent much time. In a voyage to the port of Java, he sailed on the ship Highland Forest under the Captain John MacWhirr, and in *Typhoon* Captain MacWhirr sails to Asia. *Heart of Darkness* describes a man becoming a Captain of a steamboat in the Congo river, and Conrad did the same in his personal travels. These novels serve not only as entertainment but also as recollections of memories that Conrad himself went through and recorded using his own worldview. The main characters in Conrad's writings effectively put Conrad personally into the story. In *Heart of Darkness*, as the main character narrates his life's journey a bystander mentions that "His remark did not seem at all surprising. It was just like Marlow. It was accepted in silence" (*Heart of Darkness* 447). The beginning of the novel includes a group of men on a ship in silence, and then Marlow begins to describe his life. This reflects what the reader achieves by reading his books: the reader listens to Conrad tell his story. Thus, in this novel, Conrad can use Marlow as a representative of himself. A similar example of this comes from *Falk*, in which the narrator states "This reminds me of an absurd episode in my life, now many years ago, when I got first the command of an iron barque" (*Falk* 270). Then the narrator describes the entire story. While the physical representation of a visible archetype of Conrad (such as Marlow) does not appear in the novel, there still remains an element of narration which symbolizes what Conrad himself does in writing his novels. Although *Typhoon* does not include any designated narrators, a main character uses the same name that a captain in Conrad's life history does. Conrad writes "Captain MacWhirr, of the steamer Nan-Shan, had a physiognomy that, in the order of material appearances, was the exact counterpart of his mind" (*Typhoon*

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195). This purposeful hint gives a connection between Conrad's life and *Typhoon* in the sense that Conrad's experience overflows into his writings. In addition, Ian Robinson writes in "Conrad's Belief in Victory" that "like Dickens, Conrad is not supposed to be a philosophically sophisticated novelist. But both can get philosophical notions as clear as they need." Conrad's writing, according to Robinson, includes either vague or clear philosophy. In fact, Conrad's writing contains copious amounts of philosophical details and hints which can link his life and philosophy to his writings. All three of these works include a connection to Conrad's personal life and journey that help to explain how Conrad reflects his worldview in his writings.

Ships create divisions between people and nature that expose Conrad's views about nature, loneliness, and civilization. In *Typhoon*, a voyaging ship faces a powerful typhoon in the ocean. In the novel there exist two sides: those aboard the ship and the forces outside the ship. This construct distinctly separates humanity from the power of nature, and illustrates Conrad's opinion that nature contains immense power, enough to have a "wind [that] strangled[strangles] his [MacWhirr's] howls" (*Typhoon* 218). Using this, Conrad goes on to describe the sovereignty that nature plays over the life of everyone, both physically and emotionally. In *Falk*, living on ships isolate people from each other and shows the displeasure and difficulty of living alone. Falk, a lonely man who "lived on board his tug, which was always dashing up and down the river" (*Falk* 278) finds that "it [is] every day more difficult to live alone" (*Falk* 300). Due to Falk's living aboard a ship alone, he finds life difficult. The use of a ship emphasizes Conrad's disgust of loneliness by creating a division between Falk and society. In *Heart of Darkness*, characters aboard ships possess qualities of nobility and civility, while the people not on the ship act savagely and thus bear the name 'savages.' A fight breaks out between people on the shores of the river and the colonists aboard the steamboat. Marlow "made out, deep in the tangled gloom, naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eyes, -- the bush was swarming with human limbs in movement, glistening, of bronze color" (*Heart of Darkness* 476). He fails to see people, but parts of them, deep in gloom. On the other hand, the men aboard the ship retain visibility and humanity. When the conflict breaks out, "the arrows came in swarms" (*Heart of Darkness* 476) while the "the report of a rifle just at my back deafened me" (*Heart of Darkness* 476). Noticing the qualities associated to the respective weapons, the arrows retain a swarm-like, animalistic, savage quality while the rifle simply contains the word report, a much more civilized word used more in societies when one reports to a leader. From the qualities of words and the imagery associated to the 'savages,' Conrad uses ships here as the decisive factor that distinguishes the civilized from the barbaric. Using ships as an agent of division, Conrad develops his ideas about loneliness, nature, and civilization.

Characters in solitude express Conrad's opinion that men don't function well alone. Numerous examples in Conrad's works highlight this perspective. In *Falk*, Falk becomes damaged by his singleness and responds by speaking to the narrator. In their discussion, "He[Falk] caught my [his] hand and wrung it in a crushing grip. 'Pardon me. I feel it every day more difficult to live

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alone . . .” (*Falk* 300). The derangement Falk endures from his desolation causes him to physically attack and harm someone. In this state, he mistakenly assumes that the narrator wants to marry a woman he liked. Falk’s desire for a wife comes from a sense to not be alone because he says that he finds life more difficult everyday to live alone, not because he wants children or love. Similarly, in *Typhoon*, sailors become drawn to write home to their wives. An example would be the ship’s engineer, “Mr. Rout [,who] likewise wrote letters; only no one on board knew how chatty he could be pen in hand, because the chief engineer had enough imagination to keep his desk locked. His wife relished his style greatly” (*Typhoon* 201). This means that while the engineer appears quiet among the other sailors, he wishes to communicate with his wife. He longs to not be around people who voyage with him primarily for financial gain. He yearns to come home to be with his wife and family. Clearly, he wants to leave the confinement of the ship and live a social life. In *Heart of Darkness*, shallow understandings of characters leaves little knowledge of whether men at the colony in Congo wrote letters to their loved ones, but they all share a respect and admiration for the man named Kurtz. When Marlow asked “who Mr. Kurtz was, he said he was a first-class agent; and seeing my disappointment at this information, he added slowly, laying down his pen, ‘He is a very remarkable person.’” (*Heart of Darkness* 456). Many men at the colony share a similar view of Kurtz. The universal admiration of Kurtz symbolizes the need people have for other people, and in this case these men want to talk with a remarkable man. These colonists have an eager expectation and hope that they will get to be with Kurtz. Holger Nüstedt, in his literary criticism “Joseph Conrad’s “The End of the Tether: An Old Man’s Rite of Passage,” writes that Conrad “leans rather heavily on the idea of initiation,” which means “the transition of young people from childhood to adulthood in so-called ‘primitive’ societies and may therefore seem a plausible enough metaphor for a number of changes experienced by young persons in literature.” The concept of initiation comes up in all three of these books in that characters who possess mature traits communicate with others (their wives or Kurtz). They all have someone they want to communicate with, and without communication they feel dismayed. Having been initiated into society as adults, they strive for a similar goal of relating to other people. Thus, the enjoyment of others’ company in all three books exposes Conrad’s disbelief in joyful isolation.

Ships remove people from the superficiality of life to enable characters to observe and ponder the world. Some characters engage in a change described by Shirley Galloway in her critical essay “Joseph Conrad: The Sense of Self” as “deal [dealing] with a process of maturing that involves the loss of youthful illusions, a process usually precipitated by an actual “trial” that challenges the protagonist’s professional skills as well as his assumptions about his identity and sanity.” All three novels reflect a trial that a character experiences. In *Typhoon*, the narrator personifies a battle between sailors aboard a ship and a raging typhoon. When the typhoon first breaks out, “in an instant the men lost touch of each other” (*Typhoon* 212). Separated at sea from their fellow seamen and loved ones at home, the men became attacked, and “the storm penetrated the defences of the man and unsealed his lips” (*Typhoon* 236) with a force “like the

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sudden smashing of a vial of wrath. It seemed to explode all round the ship with an overpowering concussion and a rush of great waters" (*Typhoon* 212). Conrad makes it clear that the typhoon not only attacks and hurts the ship (which it does), but also intervenes on the inner reaches of the men aboard, singling them out and pouring wrath on and in them. In this separated and distressed state, the men are forced to think about the storm, the might of nature, and the state of their lives. The sailors focus all of their strength to attack the storm not merely physically, but mentally and emotionally to keep their lives from breaking down internally into despair. Furthermore, the narrator in this story fits Galloway's understanding of trials in Conrad's works, which makes the story contain numerous depictions of inner destruction wrought by the storm. Conrad's narrator Marlow in the novel *Heart of Darkness* describes with great thought and feeling the journey he had in Africa. Separated from his former life and catapulted into a new job far from home, Marlow ponders the essence of nature. He states that "going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine" (*Heart of Darkness* 467). Marlow sees nature untamed (mostly) by mankind, where the big trees were important rather than skyscrapers. The nature stands strong, steadfast, and dark. Marlow believes that the forest's seclusion resembles how he felt that he "lost your[his] way on that river as you[he] would in a desert" (*Heart of Darkness* 467) even though a river contains a set path one travels on. The lostness Marlow experiences comes from internal thoughts created from his remote adventure, not from any navigational failures. In this river, left to himself, he ponders nature much as the narrator in *Typhoon* describes his battle against the sea. Marlow embodies the youthful person described by Galloway in the sense that Marlow becomes privy to the expansiveness of nature and becomes lost, losing his identity due to the trial he finds himself in. In contrast to the other two books that start with people in society that enter secluded thinking, *Falk* describes a mysterious single man becoming a married man. He "would come along unsympathetically, glaring at you with his yellow eyes from the bridge, and would drag you out dishevelled as to rigging, lumbered as to the decks, with unfeeling haste, as if to execution" (*Falk* 279). Falk hates his job, and "feel[s] it every day more difficult to live alone" (*Falk* 300). Due to Falk's complete isolation on a ship for many years filled with feeling and internal depth, Falk wishes to have company. The social abandonment Falk faces causes him to feel pain and depression, and walks to work as if he were walking to die. Galloway's concept of finding identity amidst a trial resembles the pain Falk experiences while single, and his plight to leave this pain exposes his loss and forces him to acknowledge his own weakness. While this book incorporates desolation differently from the other two books, it still creates significant meanings about Conrad's worldview. In all three books, men cut off from others ponder the world they live in.

Characters in faraway lands, isolated from their homeland, give Conrad a unique vehicle to discuss white supremacy and the commonly held belief of social Darwinism. In all three works

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people of other races are looked down upon as barbaric, chaotic, and duplicitous. The majority of passengers in *Typhoon* called 'China men' all congregate together in a big room in the ship with big chests that store valuables. When the storm struck the ship, the chests burst open, and suddenly "all these clumsy Chinamen [are] rising up in a body to save their property" (*Typhoon* 229). The Chinamen fought so much that with "every fling of the ship would hurl that tramping, yelling mob here and there, from side to side, in a whirl of smashed wood, torn clothing, rolling dollars" (*Typhoon* 229). The fight in the ship during the storm symbolizes the carnage brought on by the inner depths of everyone on board the ship, and further describes how the storm effects the entirety of people, threatening the separation between ship and sea. In covalent validity, the storm overwhelms the Chinamen early and completely, pushing them as a group differentiated by race, into depravity and greed. The sudden change of the Chinamen amidst the storm mirrors social Darwinism because only the Chinamen group falls into chaos while all the other white men aboard the ship maintain their ability to continue working. In addition, Chinamen don't work for the ship, but live under the authority of the white men on the ship. Adding to the perspective that the Chinamen symbolize the storm's effect on individuals, the Chinamen only serve to disturb the other race attempting to survive the brutal storm. In *Falk*, a similar situation occurs in which the narrator hires a Chinaman to help on his ship, and "before the end of the third day he had revealed himself as a confirmed opium-smoker, a gambler, a most audacious thief, and a first-class sprinter" (*Falk* 274). In short, the only prominent person of another race garners significant disrepute for his inability to do work correctly. This minor, cameo appearance of a person from another race illustrates the idea that people from other races do not possess the necessary skills and discipline required to work a 'white man's job'. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad separates the colonists from the colonized to describe how the white race contains more nobility and civility while the indigenous Congo people consist of savagery and primitiveness. Marlow describes the Congo as having "Sandbanks, marshes, forests, savages,—precious little to eat fit for a civilized man, nothing but Thames water to drink" (*Heart of Darkness* 447). This statement elevates Marlow and the colonizers above the Congo people, saying that good food for civil people comes up rarely. In general, the way Marlow describes the Congo as dark, with "no joy in the brilliance of sunshine" (*Heart of Darkness* 467) relates exactly with how Marlow describes the Congo people. The people and the environment also mix in several occasions, one being before the fight at the river when Marlow finds that "the bush was swarming with human limbs in movement, glistening, of bronze color" (*Heart of Darkness* 476). Marlow not only finds the Congo repulsive, but the people who live in it as a natural extension of his dislike of the Congo. He suggests that one race, the white race, contains civility and nobility that no other race can match. Conrad's stories across the world bring Conrad to specialized discussion about social Darwinism and racism.

Conrad's placement of ships brings to light his belief about the sovereign hand of nature over human action. Out on the open seas in *Typhoon*, the ship comes under an attack from nature. The typhoon holds the existence of everyone aboard in the palm of it's hand and can sink the

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ship at any moment. Like an actual person, “The Nan-Shan was being looted by the storm with a senseless, destructive fury: trysails torn out of the extra gaskets, double-lashed awnings blown away, bridge swept clean, weather-cloths burst, rails twisted, light-screens smashed — and two of the boats had gone already” (*Typhoon* 215). Throughout the novel, Conrad employs personification to describe how the sea acts like an independent person. This storm’s personality also contains attributes, in this case a large amount of wrath. Nature does not act out of chance because it retains the qualities of an actual person. The nature described here acts not out of chance but out of will, and the life of all aboard the ship comes under the omnipotent authority of nature. Building off of this idea, *Falk* includes an accident that would never have happened unless nature had intervened. The character Falk spends his days pulling boats up and down the river, yet damages the ship he tows. This ship happens to belong to Captain Hermann, whose niece Falk wishes to marry. With so much at stake, Falk fails at doing the task he was supposed to do for one of the most important jobs in his life! The narrator exclaims “The damage! The damage! What for all that damage! There was no occasion for damage” (*Falk* 287). This event could not have come out of mere chance, because Falk put lots of effort into making sure it didn’t become damaged so he would have a better chance of marrying the niece. Under the authority of nature, however, the ship becomes damaged. In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow describes the river as “dead in the centre. And the river was there—fascinating—deadly— like a snake. Ough!” (*Heart of Darkness* 450). Marlow notes that nature itself looks fascinating, yet deadly as a snake. As an archetypal representative of Conrad’s own experience in this story, he acknowledges the power nature holds over his head, knowing how deadly and powerful it can be. Conrad’s placement of nature constructs his thoughts about how nature controls the fate of human beings, trumping their free will.

Seamen without direct communication home have to act on a whim, paralleling Conrad’s endorsement of adaptability and improvisation in remote places. In the middle of a storm in *Typhoon*, Captain MacWhirr reads a book on typhoons. After reading and thinking about it, he stolidly states “You don’t find everything in books” (*Typhoon* 233). With his experience at sea, MacWhirr believes that simply studying books does not teach men enough, and that they need to learn more outside of books, such as an experience at sea, to truly know and understand the gravity of the storm. While factual books supply MacWhirr with facts and figures, they fail to tell him of the internal conflicts he would experience during the storm that Conrad describes. When books fail, Conrad believes that one must improvise to ensure the survival of the ship, and when the storm strikes, events occur that cannot be easily discussed at length in a book. For example, some passengers’ chests break open and they start fighting over everything in the middle of the ship. Events like these force the captain to act on a whim for the given situation and not rely solely on what the book says. In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow travels to Africa for a job as the captain of a ship, and after he meets a man and “told[tells] him who I [Marlow] was, [said] that my steamer was at the bottom of the river. I was thunderstruck” (*Heart of Darkness* 458). After this accident, Marlow’s plans change to “fishing my[Marlow’s] command out of the

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river" (*Heart of Darkness* 458) instead of starting to tread up the river. Marlow must now change what he plans to do, and for some months he must now work on repairing the ship. His profession, similar to MacWhirr's, requires spontaneity. It must be noted that the ship sunk mainly because the company, "in a sudden hurry" (*Heart of Darkness* 458) hired a "volunteer skipper" (*Heart of Darkness* 458) to move up the river. In this sense acting on a whim maliciously forces Marlow to change his plans. Conrad, therefore, makes a distinction between intelligent improvisation and being unwise because he includes negative and positive improvisations. If he had wanted to only describe how useful all improvisations are, he would have used another story that did not include a great hurry which demands improvisation. Improvisation in *Heart of Darkness* describes the indispensable need for good improvisation and the downfall if situations are not handled correctly. *Falk* includes some spontaneity when Falk tries to arrange a marriage. Falk wishes to marry the niece of another captain named Hermann while at a seaport on the Eastern coast of China. Hermann serves as the man who oversees the marriage for the niece, while the narrator helps Falk. As noted earlier, Falk wants to be married, and feels pain every day he remains single. In Conrad's time, a father would supervise the process of courtship. The narrator starts the process, assuring Falk that he does not have affection for the niece by saying, "I am ready to do all I can for you in that way[for Falk's marriage]" (*Falk* 298). In this situation, everyone improvises and the niece's uncle takes authority. Falk also tells everyone a gruesome story that includes his act of cannibalism to stay alive. At this distance from home, everyone improvises and ignores the father. The process happens relatively quickly and the marriage becomes a reality, started from some voyagers at the right place and the right time with the right actions. Whether from navigating a ship or arranging a marriage, Conrad expresses the need for empirical improvisation.

Conrad's reflective writing not only captivated millions but also subtly incorporated in Conrad's concepts about life, many discovered on his adventures. Above all, he employed the repetitive use of loneliness and separation to address meaningful ideas and concepts. According to Conrad, people should respect the power of nature, socialize with others, ponder the world, be willing to improvise, and accept that some races are better than others. From all of his ideas and beliefs, it can be clearly observed that what one experiences in their life greatly influences the perspective they take on the world, which can have harmful effects. An example of this being Conrad's racism. This warns everyone to read these works with definite discernment of what contains truth and what was simply an old idea proven false long ago. Joseph Conrad's writings about ships and sailors specifically delineate Conrad's worldview.

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