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## Light out of Darkness: The Search for the True Self in the Novels of Conrad and Woolf

Gabriella Raccio

The modern novel seeks to reveal true reality to the reader. This means that the author of a modernist text will more than likely ignore plot, brush aside setting, and make an obvious moral or message indecipherable. The modernist author's main goal is to bring out what reality *really* is instead of how novels of the past portray it to be. It is true that texts of realism accentuate small details that mirror reality, but never does a realist text completely delve into every aspect of human thought, uninteresting or thrilling, as a stream-of-conscious modernist text does. One knows that there is typically not a neat and comprehensible beginning, middle, and end to every journey in life. The process that happens between these points is what concerns the modernist author. It is what actually occurs inside of one's consciousness that is the true subject of the modernist text. Virginia Woolf explains what the modernist author desires to focus on in her essay "Modern Fiction." "Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad [of] impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel" (144). What the modernist author seeks is as simple as "an ordinary mind on an ordinary day." Pomp and circumstance do not concern them. It is what truly concerns human beings' consciousness—whether it be as significant as marriage or as trivial as tying a shoelace—that authors such as Virginia Woolf and Joseph Conrad wish to write about.

Both of these modernist authors write about a journey that people face daily in their ordinary lives—the journey to find the true self. One typically goes through a day without being fully conscious of what one's brain is actively thinking. Stream-of-consciousness exhibits all of the thoughts that a character is thinking. However, although a character is thinking, he or she is not consistently fully in touch with the thought stream to the point where the character can say that he or she fully understands his or her true self. The "myriad impressions" consume one constantly, causing one to often turn the consciousness on to a sort of autopilot mode in which one simply glides through life, and not actively paying attention to the constant stream of thoughts bursting through the brain. In the texts of *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad and *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf, it is nature and work that allow literary characters to deeply tune in to their consciousness and find their true selves. In *Heart of Darkness*, nature reveals Kurtz's true self regardless of his lack of searching. Marlow expresses his admiration of hard work because of its ability to assist one in finding one's inner truth. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf mentions nature only when a character has a revelatory moment about his or her true self because nature assists in this realization. Lily Briscoe's work, her art, eventually allows her to reach her vision, if only for a moment. Nature and work in these modernist texts allow literary characters to deeply focus on their genuine consciousness and catch glimpses of their true selves.

*Heart of Darkness* exposes how the elements of nature and work reveal the characters' true selves whether or not they are actively searching for this knowledge. Nature reveals Kurtz's true self even though he is not outwardly seeking it. Charlie Marlow, the narrator of the majority of *Heart of Darkness*, values work because he believes that it can reveal one's true self. However, it is evident that the journey to find one's self is difficult because a person's truth is complex and deeply hidden. Conrad portrays the difficulty of understanding the true self through his abundant use of symbolism. The title of his modernist novel alone is symbolic of the confusing haze that is one's true self. The word "darkness" implies what the self signifies to the characters of this novel. The self is not an obvious, glimmering beam of light that is noticeable

and clear; it is dark, making it difficult to see and comprehend. Woolf writes about the difficulty of obtaining the true self. In her celebrated essay titled “Modern Fiction,” she writes, “Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (144). Woolf delves into the difficulty of understanding the true self and reality. Attempting to seek out the true self is so difficult because of this glowing halo that distorts concise direction and obtainability. The frame narrator in *Heart of Darkness* discusses a comparable anguish of being unable to define the self through similar symbolic language. Conrad writes that “Marlow was not typical ... and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine” (5). It is here where Conrad implements almost the same language as Woolf to show that meaning is not fixed. According to the frame narrator, only moonlight, a working of nature, is capable of capturing a glimmer of one’s true self and the true meaning of living. The intricacy of Marlow’s story is representative of the intricacy of the self. This intricacy is what makes attaining a glimpse of the true self so difficult without the elements of work or nature playing their parts in *To the Lighthouse* and *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad’s use of symbolic imagery represents the search for one’s true self and its immense arduousness.

In *Heart of Darkness*, nature plays an intricate role in revealing Kurtz’s true identity. Nature brings Kurtz’s inner madness to light. To the outside viewer, Kurtz appears mad. However, Kurtz has discovered a reality within himself that onlookers have not realized within themselves. Perhaps the onlookers are the mad ones. Yet, how are we to know? No one has the same inner truths. Maybe this is how all humans are, but it is impossible to tell because one is rarely face to face with nature in the same way Kurtz is. If a human is completely in touch with nature and dedicates his or her life to living in the wilderness, he or she is traditionally deemed “mad” by the rest of society, just like Kurtz. Kurtz tries to live a material life in the wilderness, but nature will not allow it. Nature possesses Kurtz. Marlow expresses this concept: “But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating” (58). Even when one is not seeking his or her true self, nature will reveal it if one gives it time. Wilderness “whispers” realities to Kurtz that he is not actively searching for, but nonetheless finds. His tyranny over the inhabitants of the Congo and of the natural land can only go on for so long before nature finds what truly drives Kurtz.

Kurtz is completely consumed and realized by the wilderness because of nature’s lack of constraints. In the wilderness there are no laws, no boundaries, nothing to hold one back from divulging into one’s innermost truths. Michael Levenson, a critic of modernist texts, writes in his essay “On the Edge of the Heart of Darkness,” “In the age of anthropology the European mind can only discover truths about its origins by going outside the limits of its culture. It can only learn all that it contains by passing beyond its own boundaries” (156.) Kurtz, an established and prosperous European man, finds his darkest and wildest truths when he steps outside the bounds of his culture. He is no longer a man who must abide by social and governmental laws. Society does not glare at Kurtz with its critical eye as it does in Europe. Instead, he is free to explore his most suppressed truths without the threat of a developed society scrutinizing his every move. However, what really occurs inside of Kurtz’s consciousness when he goes “mad” and finds his inner truth is not explained in any type of detail by Marlow simply because it is unexplainable; the truth of one can never be the truth of another. Nonetheless, nature brings out a darkness

inside of Marlow that cannot be obtained through material goods, a developed society, or another human.

One of the ultimate workings of nature, a working that is completely unconquerable by human beings, is what ultimately reveals to Kurtz his absolute truth. This working of nature is none other than death. When Kurtz yells “The horror! The horror!” (69) at the moment of his death, it is clear that Kurtz’s truth is not something that he wants to be revealed to him. His attempts to suppress his true self are, however, irrevocably destroyed by the enlightening and incommunicable workings of death. Marlow acknowledges that the true self cannot be realized until the natural occurrence of death: “True [Kurtz] had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot. And perhaps in this is the whole difference; perhaps all the wisdom, and all the truth, and all sincerity, are just compressed into that unappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible” (70). Marlow admits that he will never see his own true self quite the way Kurtz does until he, himself, dies. He also admits that within death Kurtz has reached ultimate wisdom and truth, which suggests that a full understanding of the self can never be achieved before death. However, glimpses of the self can certainly be obtained in the wilderness.

Work is another element that reveals one’s true self in *Heart of Darkness*. For the characters in this novel, work is characterized as demanding, physical labor. They are forced to carry large loads of ivory and completely immerse themselves in the uncivilized world of the Congo. According to Ian Watt, in “Impressionism and Symbolism in *Heart of Darkness*,” “*Heart of Darkness* embodies more thoroughly than any previous fiction the posture of uncertainty and doubt; one of Marlow’s functions is to represent how much a man cannot know; and he assumes that reality is essentially private and individual” (355). Marlow confirms Watt’s idea that that inner truth is individual and uncertain when Marlow says, “I don’t like work—no man does—but I like what is in the work—the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself—not for others—what no other man can ever know” (29). Marlow feels that the uncertainty and doubt of one’s true self that Watt describes can be found through work. Marlow recognizes that one man cannot know the inner workings and realities of another man. That is why work, a nonhuman force, is able to reveal truths about an individual the same way that nature does. The inner realizations that one gains from work, according to Marlow, cannot be communicated to another human. Kurtz loses himself both in nature and in work. His work to gain more ivory leads him into nature, which leads him into his inner madness.

Similar to *Heart of Darkness*, Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse* brings forth the journey to find the true self. Although death reveals the true self irrevocably for Kurtz, nature and work yet again provide literary characters with glimpses of their innermost truths. Woolf also implements symbolism in her text to explain her concept of the hazy halo that is one’s true self. For example, the lighthouse, far off in the distance and unreachable for the first two parts of the novel, is representative of the difficulty of reaching an understanding of the true self. It is symbolic that once the lighthouse is finally reached, after years of yearning and desiring to reach it, Lily finishes her painting and has her vision. The Ramsays’ eventual arrival at the lighthouse symbolizes Lily’s arrival at a glimpse of her true self—her vision. Woolf makes nature’s ability to reveal the true self clear by only mentioning nature when it is relevant to the characters’ developments in understanding themselves. Similarly, Lily’s painting, her life’s work, is mentioned in more detail when it brings insights into her true self. Work takes a more mental and less physical form in this novel. For Lily, her work is art and painting. She is not lifting pounds of ivory like the men in *Heart of Darkness*. But she is delving into work nonetheless. Woolf’s use of symbolism and references to art and nature represent the journey to find the true self.

Nature is an essential part of reaching insights into the characters' true selves because Woolf mentions nature and setting mainly when a character realizes an inner truth. Woolf does this to highlight that without nature her characters would not catch these brief but certain glimpses into themselves. Nature is mentioned because it is essential to what is being told. For example, on Cam and her family's journey to the lighthouse, to their symbolic inner truths, Woolf notes how Cam's hand gliding through the natural, open ocean brings her revelations about her self. She writes,

From her hand, ice cold, held deep in the sea, there spurted out a fountain of joy at the change, at the escape, at the adventure [...]. And the drops falling from this sudden and unthinking fountain of joy fell here and there on the dark, the slumberous shapes in her mind; shapes of a world not realised but turning in their darkness, catching here and there, a spark of light. (192)

This passage suggests that the ocean leads to Cam's insights into her true self. The "world not realised" is Cam's suppressed inner thoughts and truths. The feel of the chilled seawater brings light to the darkness of Cam's mind. Here again, the reader sees the concept of darkness symbolizing the character's inner truth and its unrealized state. The openness of the ocean is liberating to Cam's thoughts in the same way that the openness of the wilderness liberates Kurtz's thoughts. There are no constraints holding Cam back. Even the boat that she is seated in can be removed if Cam so chooses. It is this ultimate liberation in nature that reveals the true self because it allows boundaries and laws to vanish.

Unlike nature, which finds one out when one is not necessarily searching for it, work is used more deliberately as a way to find glimpses of one's true self. Lily uses her work intentionally to find herself. She calls the search for herself the search for her "vision." Her vision represents her inner reality. Painting, like nature, is limitless for Lily. There are no boundaries other than the canvas that she paints on. To deal with words and letters as Mr. Ramsay and Mr. Tansley do is not liberating for Lily. Words are constraining and definitive. It is not linguistically accepted to simply make up words to search for truth in oneself. Clive Bell, a prominent art critic of Woolf's time, writes, "to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions. Art transports us from the world of man's activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation" (qtd. in Van Buren Kelley 63). Lily paints and gets lost in her work in order to remove herself from the material world of man. She desires a liberated process where she can dive into her innermost, suppressed thoughts. Language is simply not freeing enough for her. The world of "aesthetic exaltation," as Bell describes it, is what eventually allows Lily to reach her vision, which is her true self—her unsuppressed thoughts.

Lily's desire for liberation comes through in her art. It is there where she is free to manipulate images however she so chooses. In the midst of one of her meditative-like trances whilst painting, as Woolf writes, "[Lily] had been looking at the table-cloth, and it had flashed upon her that she would move the tree to the middle, and need never marry anybody, and she had felt an enormous exultation" (179). Lily's freedom to change her art, her work, brings upon her freeing revelations about her true self. Her power to move the tree to a different section of her canvas accompanies her realization that she does not want to marry. Her freedom to be able to manipulate the objects on her canvas causes her to realize her freedom as a human being. She wants to be as free of social constraints as her work is. She does not want to live a life where she

must tend to children and a husband because, to Lily, that life, the life of Mrs. Ramsay, represents ultimate restrictions. Alice van Buren Kelley explains the similar thoughts of the art critic Roger Fry (whose thoughts in the following quotation are noted in single quotations) when she writes, “Whereas actual life demands responsive action, the writing of a check or the joining of a society, art requires ‘no such moral responsibility—it presents a life freed from the binding necessities of our actual existence’” (62-3). Lily’s work allows her to catch glimpses of her true self because of this lack of constraint and order that Fry describes. The lack of moral responsibility allows Lily to deeply explore her thoughts more than written words can ever allow because painting is far less defined than words are. Lily’s work is what liberates her from the structures of society.

Without her work, Lily would never fully reach her vision. It is what allows her to explore her true consciousness as opposed to allowing it to exist unexamined. Lily does not mind if her work is hidden in the attic because, like Marlow, Lily understands that one person’s reality is different from anyone else’s. Even though her work may not be hung in a gallery on display to the masses of society, she still values her art because it gives her an opportunity to reveal herself, and that is what sincerely matters to her. She does not need a grand reveal of her art to society because her painting’s main purpose is to reveal Lily’s inner truth to herself and to nobody else. In describing the elements of the modern novel, Jesse Matz writes that “apparently insignificant things disclose greater truth and finer beauty than things that might seem far more critical or conclusive” (43). To an ordinary passerby, Lily’s art may appear insignificant because of its seemingly unexplainable geometric shapes. However, to Lily, this one small painting reveals to her a world of significance. It reveals to her a true self—even if only for a moment.

The modern novel, unlike its predecessors, is concerned with true reality without any type of romanticizing or embellishment. The elements of ambiguity, confusion of setting or time period, and lack of coherence present in the modern novel emulate reality. This is symbolic of the confusion that one faces when seeking out one’s true identity. The true self is never clear and definite. It is never simple. In *Heart of Darkness* and in *To the Lighthouse*, glimpses of the true self can be reached through the forces of nature and work. Nature’s lack of boundaries and laws bring out Kurtz’s inner madness. Marlow ponders the worth of hard work and explains that it helps one realize their inner truth. In *To the Lighthouse*, nature is mentioned mostly when a character has a revelation into his or her innermost realities. Lily’s work, her painting, embodies Marlow’s thoughts on hard work because her work eventually brings her to her vision which is, after all, a glimpse of her true thoughts perfectly realized. It is not through other human beings that these characters come to grasp sparks of their inner truths. The outside forces of nature and work prevent the characters in Conrad’s and Woolf’s fiction from remaining unaware of their innermost thoughts and ultimately bring them to the knowledge of their deepest, hidden truths. However, the true self can never be fully and permanently realized until the occurrence of death. Therefore, Kurtz, unlike Marlow and Lily, reaches ultimate realization of his inner truth when he yells, “The horror! The horror!” (69) as he dies. Knowing the true self fully as Kurtz does is so difficult because one goes through daily life suppressing thoughts one wishes not to dwell upon, even though these suppressed thoughts are parts of our true selves. This is why Kurtz is so terrified when he dies; his most hidden thoughts are realized and he finds his true self, for better or for worse.

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