

**CONRAD'S IMPRESSIONISM: THE TREATMENT OF SPACE AND ATMOSPHERE IN  
SELECTED WORKS**

THESIS

Submitted in fulfilment of the  
requirements for the Degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
of Rhodes University

by

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December 1995

## ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on Conrad's representation of space and atmosphere in the "impressionistic" works published between 1897 and 1904, notably The Nigger of the "Narcissus" (1897), "Heart of Darkness" (1899), Lord Jim (1900), and Nostramo (1904).

The many conflicting statements regarding the nature of Conrad's impressionism lead one to ask two fundamental questions: What constitutes this strange and elusive phenomenon, and how does it bear upon interpretation?

This thesis works towards defining the elusive quality of Conrad's writing by investigating and assessing the contribution of impressionist techniques in the creation of a pervasive space and atmosphere; secondly, it considers how the various constituent elements interact with, and complement one another to form a dominant mode of fictional space in each work; and, thirdly, it indicates the possible impact that these particular Conradian configurations of space and atmosphere might have upon the interpretation of his impressionist works.

The thesis argues that the existential condition of isolation experienced by Conrad's heroes and narrators is a consequence of epistemological frustration and fragmentation, which, in turn, is a function of impressionist ontology. There is a definite and complementary relationship between each of these notions in Conrad's fiction. The mysterious atmosphere in his works results from the interplay between various configurations of theme, narration and description, and these novelistic elements correspond roughly with the notions of existential isolation (the dominant theme), epistemology (narrating, telling and (re)telling as a method of knowing and understanding the space in which the characters find themselves) and,

lastly, the ontological dimensions of the various modes of fictional space (as realized in description).

The evocation and invocation of cosmic space in The Nigger of the "Narcissus," the mapping of a dominant symbolic space in "Heart of Darkness," the (re)constructions of Jim's psychological space in Lord Jim, and, finally, the "transcription" and "inscription" of a mythical space in Nostromo, indicate a definite development from epistemological to ontological issues. Phrased in more theoretical terms, this development is a movement from asking predominantly epistemological questions like "How can I interpret this world of which I am a part?" "What is there to be known?" "Who knows it...and with what degree of certainty?", to asking predominantly ontological questions, such as "Which world is this?" "What kinds of worlds are there...and how are they constituted?". Such questions, categorized by McHale as the dominant characteristics of Modernist and Postmodernist fiction respectively, are already present in Conrad's texts, thus undermining any clear-cut division between these broad categories. Indeed, this thesis suggests that these categories are at best tenuous, and that they should perhaps be used heuristically, rather than definitively.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	
Acknowledgements	i
Textual Notes and Abbreviations	iii
<u>Chapter 1</u>	1
Introduction	
<u>Chapter 2</u>	29
<u>The Nigger of the "Narcissus": Evoking/Invoking Cosmic Space</u>	
<u>Chapter 3</u>	84
"Heart of Darkness": Mapping Symbolic Space	
<u>Chapter 4</u>	147
<u>Lord Jim: (Re)Constructing Psychological Space</u>	
<u>Chapter 5</u>	207
<u>Nostramo: "Transcribing/Inscribing" Mythical Space</u>	
Conclusion	248
Bibliography	257



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the following individuals and institutions for their assistance in completing this thesis:

\* My warmest thanks goes to my supervisor, Professor Laurence Wright, for his knowledgeable guidance, sympathetic support, and especially for his genuine and sincere interest in my scholarly development.

\* The management and staff of the following libraries for permission to use the libraries and for assistance in locating material: Rhodes University library; Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education library; UNISA library; British library, London; Polish Library, Polish Cultural Centre, London; Birkbeck College library, University of London; and the University of Warwick library, Warwick.

\* Professors Laurence Davies (Dartmouth College), Donald Benson (Iowa State University), and Ivo Vidan (University of Zagreb), for kindly providing me with material unobtainable in South Africa.

\* Professor Paul Armstrong (University of Oregon) for asking some incisive and probing questions during the initial stages of the project.

\* The Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education for granting me leave of absence for a term and for generous financial assistance to conduct research in the UK.

\* The Centre for Science Development at the Human Sciences Research Council for financial support. The views expressed in this thesis are my own and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the CSD, the views of its management and staff, or that of the HSRC.

\* A very special thank you to my wife and family for their longsuffering, patience, and -- above all -- constant encouragement and loving support during the many, and often difficult, months spent working on this project.

\* Lastly, I wish to thank my Heavenly Father for providing me with so many academic opportunities in a country where large numbers of people have been deprived of a basic education, and for giving me the strength and health to complete the thesis.

## TEXTUAL NOTES AND ABBREVIATIONS

Page references to Conrad's works refer to the Oxford World's Classics Series. In all other instances, the particular edition used has been specified, e.g. (Penguin 16).

In each instance where a text forms the main focus or a substantial portion of a chapter, the following abbreviations have been used in parenthetical references to avoid having to repeat the full title of the particular work:

<u>LE</u> :	Last Essays
<u>MS</u> :	The Mirror of the Sea
<u>NLL</u> :	Notes on Life and Letters
<u>NN</u> :	The Nigger of the "Narcissus"
"HoD":	"Heart of Darkness"
<u>LJ</u> :	Lord Jim
<u>N</u> :	Nostromo

References to the collected letters edited by Frederick Karl and Laurence Davies (CUP, 1983-) are indicated by the abbreviation CLJC, followed by the volume number in Arabic numerals and the relevant page number, e.g. (CLJC 1, 26). References to the later letters not yet covered by Karl and Davies are to G. Jean-Aubry's Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters (Heinemann 1927), and are indicated by the abbreviation Life and Letters, followed by the relevant volume and page numbers in Arab numerals, e.g. (Life and Letters 2, 342).

All references to reviews and articles in the collections by Norman Sherry and Keith Carabine are indicated by either the words "Sherry documents," or "Carabine documents," followed by page numbers. In the case of the Carabine volumes, the volume number has been added in Arabic numerals, e.g. "Carabine documents 1, 34". References in the text are to the Sherry and Carabine collections. Details of the original publications are noted in full in the bibliography.

In matters of presentation I have in general adopted the conventions prescribed in The MLA Style Manual (New York: Modern Language Association, 1985), and followed the academic stylesheet of the Microsoft 5.0 word processing programme.

## Chapter One

### Introduction

A novel by Conrad, though it invites the reader to hope that he can find a center of the sort Coleridge ascribes to the good work of art, has nothing certainly identifiable outside itself by which it might be measured or from which it might be seen. It has no visible thematic or structuring principle which will allow the reader to find out its secret, explicate it once and for all, untie all its knots and straighten all its threads...Though the meaning is outside, it may only be seen by way of the tale which brings it out. This bringing out takes place in the interaction of its different elements in the reference to one another. These the critic must track, circling from one word or image to another within the text. Only in this movement of interpretation does the meaning exist. It is not a central and originating node, like the kernel of a nut, a solid and pre-existing nub. It is a darkness, an absence, a haze invisible in itself and only made visible by the ghostlike indirection of a light which is already derived. It is not the direct light of the sun but the reflected light of the moon which brings out the haze. This visible but secondary light and the invisible haze create a halo of "moonshine" which depends for its existence on the reader's involvement in the play of light and dark which generates it.

J. Hillis Miller: Fiction and Repetition (1982)

### I

This thesis will discuss Conrad's representation of space and atmosphere in the major works written between 1897 and 1904.

The transition from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century signalled the crucial break between pre-modernity and the

modern,<sup>1</sup> and ushered in a cultural crisis of immense proportions resulting from the tension between the view of a cosmos "made to man's measure" and that of "a universe which is alien, meaningless and indifferent" (Erdinast-Vulcan 1). Conrad found himself at this juncture facing intimations that one's view of the world is fragmented, relativistic, subjective and that, ultimately, one is faced with an unknowable world. This common uncertainty gave rise to a general ferment which, in turn, manifested itself in many diverse strands of thought and forms of artistic expression. It was, as Rodway rightly puts it, the "period of Shaw and the Fabians, of Wells and scientific humanism, of James and Hardy, as well as the period of such writers as Wilde, Dowson, Thompson, or the young Yeats -- to say nothing of Kipling and Henley, Housman and Davidson" (385). Like these eminent thinkers and artists, Conrad also experienced the fin-de-siècle<sup>2</sup> as intensely troubling and harrowing; but, perhaps in a much more extraordinary way than most of these fellow travellers, he

<sup>1</sup> This thesis will retain the period delimitations of Modernism indicated by Bradbury and McFarlane in their seminal collection, Modernism: A Guide to European Literature, 1890-1930 (1991). The definition and period designation of the notions of "modernism" and "modernity" have had a long and chequered history, with little consensus being reached. For a more detailed discussion of this debate, see Bradbury and McFarlane (19-55); Stevenson (1-15); and Habermas (1-22). Recently the focus has shifted from the complex question of how -- and with what degree of acceptance -- the terms "modern," "modernism," and "modernity," are used, to a discussion of their usefulness as delimitations of periodicity. Some critics refer to any post-Medieval (but pre-Modern) field as the "Early Modern Period," while others place the modern period in the 18th century. See Marcus (41) in this regard.

<sup>2</sup> See Bergonzi (379-450) and Hewitt (129-135) for a more general discussion of the characteristics of the period. For a detailed discussion of Conrad's particular position with regard to the ideas and trends of the period, see Rose ("Decadence" 795-810) and Martin (199-213).

was able to document what Giedion-Welcker (443) calls the "poetic-philosophical" issues of the time -- the opposition between the inner and outer world, subject and object, and the increasingly problematic perception of matter, time and space -- in an unique body of fiction with its characteristic and dominant motifs of physical and spiritual exile and isolation in a hostile and alien world. These motifs resulted partly from Conrad's personal experiences as a sailor, having to deal with loneliness and homesickness while in foreign ports, and especially from the painful process of acculturation which he had to go through in his attempts to become an "Englishman." But they were also influenced by a new awareness regarding matter, space and time, an awareness which was symptomatic of the general changes in outlook at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. This change was articulated in the work of philosophers such as Henri Bergson, Frederich Nietzsche and William James,<sup>3</sup> who, says Stevenson, all suggest "a change in something as fundamental as the relation of mind and world -- a kind of epistemological shift, from relative

<sup>3</sup> Conrad was familiar with Nietzsche's work and referred to it in letters (e.g. in a letter to Helen Sanderson dated 22 July 1899) (CEJL 2, 188) and in NLL 124-5). It is commonly assumed that the work of both Bergson and William James was of crucial importance to the development of the modern novel. Ian Watt's comments on Conrad's familiarity with these thinkers are somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, he argues that "Conrad was not concerned with any particular philosophy of time; and it is unlikely that he had any knowledge of either William James or Bergson, except perhaps for some general notions which were a good deal talked about in the nineties" (Century 289). On the other hand, he also states that "there is enough sense of free introspection in Marlow's narration [in LJ] to bring it into partial accord with the views about time in the thought of both Bergson and James" (Century 301). It is difficult to imagine a perceptive writer such as Conrad not being familiar with the general ideas propounded by these writers. For a detailed discussion of Conrad's relation to 18th and 19th century philosophers, see Pratt (161-169), and Wollaeger (Carabine documents 4, 310-331).

confidence towards a sense of increased unreliability and uncertainty in the means by which reality is apprehended in thought" (11).

A natural consequence of this movement towards uncertainty is reflected in another common element in Conrad's early work, namely the fact that the characters and narrating consciousness are each, in one way or another, represented as trying to "read" and "interpret" the space in which they find themselves. This process is constantly flawed and frustrated by one of the most compelling features of Conrad's early work, a pervasive yet elusive atmosphere which seems to energize and activate each work.

This atmosphere -- a vague, intangible and almost indefinable concept at the best of times -- assumes many forms; it is shaped, for example, in "Typhoon" (1901), by the overwhelming cosmic forces with all their anger and wrath:

It [the lightning] was something formidable and swift, like the 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, as if an immense dam had been blown up to windward. In an instant the men lost touch of each other. This is the disintegrating power of a great wind: it isolates one from one's kind. An earthquake, a landslip, an avalanche, overtake a man incidentally, as it were -- without passion. A furious gale attacks him like a personal enemy, tries to grasp his limbs, fastens upon his mind, seeks to rout his very spirit out of him (40).

Very often the mysterious atmosphere is created by the dazzling interplay of colours and ethereal shapes as found here in the opening passage of "The End of the Tether" (1902):



For a long time after the course of the steamer Sofala had been altered for the land, the low swampy coast had retained its appearance of a mere smudge of darkness beyond a belt of glitter. The sunrays fell violently upon the calm sea -- seemed to shatter themselves upon an adamantine surface into sparkling dust, into a dazzling vapour of light that blinded the eye and wearied the brain with its unsteady brightness (Dent 165).

At other times the atmosphere takes on a distinctly eerie quality as the frozen immobility of Lingard's brig in The Rescue -- a story begun in 1896 but only completed in 1919 -- seems to suggest:

There was no wind, and a small brig that had lain all the afternoon a few miles to the northward and westward of Carimata had hardly altered its position half a mile during all these hours. The calm was absolute, a dead, flat calm, the stillness of a dead atmosphere. As far as the eye could reach there was nothing but an impressive immobility. Nothing moved on earth, on the waters, and above them in the unbroken lustre of the sky. On the unruffled surface of the straits the brig floated tranquil and upright as if bolted solidly, keel to keel, with its own image reflected in the unframed and immense mirror of the sea. To the south and east the double islands watched silently the double ship that seemed fixed amongst them forever, a hopeless captive of the calm, a helpless prisoner of the shallow sea (Penguin 16-17).

And, sometimes, the atmosphere is that of an abstract and oriental landscape in which cosmic forces seem to conspire with the forces of death, as Marlow's description of Patusan in Lord Jim (1900) suggests:

I saw part of the moon glittering through the bushes at the bottom of the chasm. For a moment it looked as though the smooth disc, falling from its place in the sky above the earth, had rolled to the bottom of that precipice: its ascending movement was like a leisurely rebound; it disengaged itself from the tangle of twigs; the bare contorted limb of some tree, growing on the slope, made a black crack right across its face. It threw its rays afar as from a cavern, and in this mournful eclipse-like light the stumps of felled trees uprose very dark, the heavy shadows fell at my feet on all sides, my own moving shadow, and across my path the shadow of the solitary grave perpetually garlanded with flowers. In the darkened

moonlight the interlaced blossoms took on shapes foreign to one's own memory and colours indefinable to the eye, as though they had been special flowers gathered by no man, grown not in this world, and destined for the use of the dead alone. Their powerful scent hung in the warm air, making it thick and heavy like the fumes of incense. The lumps of white coral shone round the dark mound like a chaplet of bleached skulls, and everything around was so quiet that when I stood still all sound and all movements in the world seem to come to an end (322).

These examples all carry an impressionistic emphasis on sensory perception and experience. Yet they also share other important characteristics: each is imbued with a distinctive atmosphere, and the characters and narrating consciousness find themselves isolated in a space so vast that actions appear insignificant and ineffectual, constantly thwarted by the accelerating and accidental world confronting them.

More significant than this descriptive aspect is the fact that Conrad -- through his descriptions -- manages to evoke a version of reality which exceeds his characters' (and readers') interpretative grasp; the conditions created seem to defy interpretation and allow only the registering of brief and immediate impressions. And it is this quality, more than anything else, which has intrigued critics and scholars, almost challenging them to capture this elusive atmosphere in words.

Donald Benson ("Painting" 29) lists a number of critics who have commented on this aspect of Conrad's work. Richard Curle, for example, acknowledged the difficulties of this task when he wrote in 1914 that "the secret of Conrad's atmosphere eludes me as a critic, though emotionally it is as clear as the day" (Joseph Conrad 66).

Curle felt that the atmosphere was a complex mixture of a physical element -- a "brooding spirit" infusing the story with a kind of "nervous energy" -- and the writer's personality which was forever "radiating itself through his work" (Joseph Conrad 90-91). Edward Garnett, Conrad's editor and one of his closest readers, described the "whole shifting atmosphere of the sea, the horizon, the heavens" as being felt "by the senses as mysteriously near us, yet mysteriously aloof" (Sherry documents [1898], 107). H.G. Wells felt that the essential atmospheric quality of Conrad's language is "not so much told as seen intermittently through a haze of sentences" (Sherry documents, 74). More recently Donald Yelton has described Conrad's language as a kind of verbal filter, composed of "diffuse images" through which the "inner truths" of the visible world are "refracted" (Mimesis 63, 66). The common experience of these critics could be expressed in Dr. Johnson's famous comment regarding the nature of poetry: "...it is much easier to say what it is not. We all know what light is; but it is not easy to tell what it is" (Boswell 38).

The same forceful atmospheric quality is found in what are generally regarded as the major works produced during the "exuberantly creative decade [1897-1907]" (Watts, Introduction - Lord Jim 15), namely The Nigger of the "Narcissus" (1897), "Heart of Darkness" (1899), Lord Jim (1900), Nostramo (1904), and -- to a lesser extent -- in The Secret Agent (1907). These works are filled with provocative intimations of vagueness, mistiness and illusion; their inner dynamics generated by passages and sections which, says Thurber, are "weighty, polyvalent, skirting the edge of obscurity even as they gesture

towards cultural, symbolic and even mythological vistas the text itself can scarcely contain" (43). They share the simulation of the fractured and relativistic interpretative process going hand in hand with the atmospheric evocations. Critical comment about this dominant quality has remained varied and scattered, giving rise to an eminent Conradian scholar like Donald Benson recently asking why "no systematic attempt has been made to determine just what this atmosphere is and how it might bear upon interpretation" ("Painting" 30).

A number of reasons for this neglect suggest themselves. One of the most important can certainly be attributed to Conrad's problematic position as a writer straddling the 19th and 20th centuries, sensitive to the Romantic movement, the popular and highbrow traditions of literature, and to the Impressionist and Symbolist movements. In a sense, Conrad found himself caught between what Stowell calls "the ferocious revolt against the subjectivity of romanticism" on the one hand, and "the headlong dash into the anarchy of modernism" (13) on the other. Put in Frederic Jameson's words, it is clear that this historical position also gave a certain property to Conrad's fiction as his work marks "a strategic fault line in the emergence of contemporary narrative...[eventually becoming]...what will be contemporary modernism" (206). This peculiar position has resulted in Conrad being labelled at various times a Romantic, a Realist, a Symbolist, a Romantic-Realist and an Impressionist.

A second important reason for the neglect is that while most of these claims were based on implicit agreement about the assumptions

underlying the particular movement or "school" with which they wished to associate Conrad, there was never any clear articulation of what exactly in his oeuvre qualified him for membership.

Given the strong sensory nature of his work and his much quoted "dictum" in the Preface to The Nigger of the "Narcissus" -- "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!" -- it is not surprising then that one of the most commonly used "labels" to classify Conrad is that of being an impressionist. But even this category is thoroughly problematic, as these divergent claims about his impressionism indicate:

It is true that Conrad remained an Impressionist all his life and his novels and tales remain a living testament of his adherence to this ideal (Yaseen 169).

[Conrad's] achievement...lies in relating an ironic, existential vision of exposure to an impressionistic mode of rendering experience (Bradbury and McFarlane 616).

Nevertheless, it is unlikely that Conrad either thought of himself as an impressionist or was even significantly influenced by the impressionist movement (Watt, Nineteenth Century 179).

For Conrad and James any attempt to perceive 'things as they really are' is inevitably coloured by the perceptual apparatus of the individual receiver. Both authors accepted a label borrowed from recent developments in visual art, 'Impressionist,' as a description of their style (Stevenson 24).

This leads us to Conrad's poetics, not by chance definable and defined as the father of literary impressionism (Paruolo 82).

Conrad may be best situated historically if we understand his practice of style as a literary and textual equivalent of the impressionist strategy in painting (hence his kinship with the greatest of all literary impressionists, Proust) (Jameson 225).

In the history of the novel, however, the tradition of realistic representation reaches a turning point with James and his fellow literary impressionists Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford (Armstrong, Bewilderment 1).

[After] celebrating the previous period's new emphasis on impressions, James, Conrad, and Proust reconstituted the whole concept of the word 'impression' in such a way as to deny the chief claims made for it by the 'impressionists' (Hay, "Proust" 374).

Conrad's 'impressionism' is for some critics his most praiseworthy quality, while for others it appears instead to be a means of obfuscation, allowing him to mask his 'nihilism,' or to maintain contradictory values, or both (Brantlinger 364).

[M]y use of the concept of literary 'impressionism' is heuristic (hence the quotation marks). By this I mean that I am unpersuaded by the many attempts that have been made to define the concept...I see no comparably useful designation for the global tendency that Crane, Norris, and Conrad all instantiate (Fried 197).

These conflicting statements (and there are many others) indicate that, despite attention given to Conrad's use of impressionistic devices and techniques, these are still a bone of contention among Conrad scholars, as noted recently by Higdon:

Conrad's centrality to certain theoretical topics remains clearly evident. Racism, colonialism, and imperialism continue to attract attention...as do considerations of Conrad's language...[and] the nature of his modernist and impressionist qualities ("Bibliography 1987-88" 68).

Recent studies by well-known Conrad scholars such as Paul Armstrong, Donald Benson, Eloise Knapp Hay, Bruce Johnson, and Ian Watt -- and the differences of opinion which emanate from their work - - all suggest that the debate has not been closed and that a rigorous examination of the various arguments regarding Conrad's impressionism is called for. Having accepted the challenge, a note of caution must immediately be sounded, as this is a major exercise far exceeding the

scope of a single thesis. Indeed it is a project that would cover many volumes, need many commentators and take years to complete. However, while readily acknowledging that this is a mammoth task with many pitfalls, it need not prevent one from contributing in a small way to the project initiated and articulated as follows by Benson:

For Conrad...[the] spatial, material and particularly...[the] ethereal/atmospheric ambiguities [of the cosmos] were integral not only to the devastating spiritual isolation of his characters but to all hope of resolving this isolation. Insofar as these claims are credible within the limited context in which I have argued them here, they would seem to suggest a general reconsideration of Conrad's relation to contemporary physical science...and a rereading of his fiction ("Physics" 146).

Bearing in mind Paul Armstrong's warning that the "term 'impression' is an elastic construct which has been invoked by widely divergent theories of knowledge in philosophy, criticism, and art" and that it "covers so much ground that one might despair at discovering common properties which unite even the novelists it designates, let alone the philosophers and painters" ("Hermeneutics" 245), this thesis will contribute to Benson's rereading programme by examining a small aspect of what can broadly be classified as "Conrad's impressionism" through systematizing some of the more important aspects concerning his rendering of space and atmosphere. It will do so by trying to find answers to Benson's central questions mentioned earlier, namely: What exactly constitutes the famous Conradian "atmosphere," and how does it bear upon interpretation?

The recurrence of concepts such as "atmosphere," "space," and "interpretation" in the body of criticism dealing with Conrad's

impressionism suggests that the focus thus far seems to have been on the centrality of its epistemological element with little or no attention having been given to interactions between the atmosphere, and the epistemological and ontological aspects. Consequently, the thesis has three aims: first, it will work towards defining the nature of this elusive quality of Conrad's work by investigating and assessing the contribution of impressionist techniques in the creation of space and atmosphere in the major works produced between 1897 and 1904, namely The Nigger of the "Narcissus," "Heart of Darkness," Lord Jim, and Nostramo. Secondly, it will investigate how the various constituent elements interact with and complement each other to form a dominant<sup>4</sup> mode of fictional space in these works. It will do so by concentrating on Conrad's evocation of cosmic space in The Nigger of the "Narcissus"; the mapping of a dominant symbolic space in "Heart of Darkness"; the various reconstructions of Jim's psychological space; and, finally, the "transcription" and "inscription" of a mythical space in Nostramo. The third aim of the thesis is to indicate the possible impact that these particular Conradian notions of space and atmosphere might have upon the interpretation of these texts, as well as other works commonly designated as "impressionist."

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<sup>4</sup> I wish to use the word "dominant" not in its general sense but in the way that Mukarovsky and Jakobson have used it to indicate relationships between certain elements. According to the Prague School theorist, Jan Mukarovsky, the dominant is "The systematic foregrounding of components in a work of poetry [which] consists in the gradation of the interrelationships of these components, that is, in their mutual subordination and superordination. All other components, foregrounded or not, are evaluated from the standpoint of the dominant" (82). Roman Jakobson has added that it "rules, determines and transforms the remaining components" (in Mukarovsky 82).



## II

The concepts "atmosphere," "space," and "interpretation" are crucial concepts in any consideration of impressionism, whether in painting or literature. The history of Impressionism in painting is well documented and its importance readily accepted. However, the same does not hold for literary impressionism, and especially not for Conrad's impressionism. The main reason for this should again perhaps be ascribed to definition: in a sense, these concepts are more complicated to represent in words than they are perhaps to represent visually. Dr. Johnson's words continue to reverberate: it is easy to say what these concepts do not mean, but far more difficult to state exactly what they do mean. A brief "impressionistic" foray into art criticism quickly indicates that there are a number of common elements which provide useful perspectives with which to "get into" the works of literature.<sup>5</sup>

One need look no further, as indeed Benson ("Painting" 30-31) has done, than some of the comments made by writers such as Stéphane Mallarmé, Jules Laforgue and Walter Pater for proof of their centrality in painting and art. For example, Mallarmé, in his analysis of Manet's Le Linde, states that the painting has "a luminous and transparent atmosphere" in which the objects, "consumed by the hidden sun and wasted by space, tremble, melt and evaporate into the

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<sup>5</sup> See Hauser (156-213), Kronegger (Impressionism, 1973) and Van Gunsteren (29-38) for an in-depth discussion of the relationship between impressionism in painting and literature. See Rewald for a general history of impressionism.

surrounding atmosphere, which plunders reality from the figures, yet seems to do so in order to preserve their truthful aspect" (30-32). For Laforgue, the Impressionists, by rejecting traditional treatment of perspective and light have restored our capacity to see reality as it is, "in the living atmosphere of forms, decomposed, refracted, reflected...in incessant variation" (Nochlin 15-18). Walter Pater went further by integrating physical reality and consciousness into a diffused spatial order informed with a kind of spiritual energy. Pater saw the experience of art as the experience of atmospheric energy. Some of Leonardo's figures were for Pater like "delicate instruments" through which the viewer becomes "aware of the subtler forces of nature...those finer conditions wherein material things rise to that subtlety of operation which constitutes them spiritually...These people seem to...feel powers at work in the common air unfelt by others...and pass them on to us in a chain of secret influences" (91).

The treatment of space was an equally complex matter. The "world of flux and fugue" (Halдар 562) with its concomitant shifting space forced impressionist painters to flatten the picture-space and deal with the convex rather than the concave, juxtaposing and contrasting multiple pictorial planes to suggest the impressionist vision of a pervasive ambiguity and duality. Halдар (563) summarizes this new approach to representing space well when she states that "Cézanne's canvasses...present the dynamic tension of several pictorial planes which rush and pull the viewer's eye across the canvas to create ambiguous space. Reflections, in mirror and water,

surround the protagonists of Renoir's and Monet's paintings with complex space to convey the ironic sense of lostness in a world that glitters but also deceives" (563).

In short, the painters commonly designated by the term impressionist all seemed to have abandoned a unitary perspective in painting, rejecting the tradition of seeing things from a single point in space in favour of "an apparent multiplication of points of view which allows...[them] to present [the] opposite sides...[of the object or scene in question]" (Stevenson 6). Just as Monet grappled with the epistemological question of the source of our knowledge of reality as a painter (Rookmaker 85), Conrad broke new ground as a writer in presenting his readers with an "ahistorical, atemporal world in which segments of time, past, present, or future, whirl and eddy endlessly in a total defiance of the sequential character of history" (Halder 564). Using another comparison with painting, Morgan also emphasizes the rejection of a unitary point of view in Conrad's work when he states that "[a] mirror, like a Renaissance painting or a photograph, is optically extra-dimensional; in two dimensions it represents three. The Conradian mirror is polydimensional, absorbing time and space in shifting series of spatio-temporal points...like the post-Einsteinian universe" (Carabine documents 2, 113).

These few random comments implicitly underline the fact that both the painters and writers of the period were not only subject to many of the same pressures (Pool 8; Watt, Century 169-172), but that they invented new techniques which nobody had used before to represent this new view of reality.

How does all of this translate into literary-critical terms? Seen in a structuralist context, the categories of atmosphere and space are fairly unproblematic and have fixed locations within a hierarchy of terms. In this context, atmosphere is the penultimate layer of abstraction, following on language, character and action and leading on to theme. Space is merely a structural category along with aspects such as temporality, setting, and so on. Even a superficial reading of Conrad's early work makes it clear that these concepts cannot be used only in such a limited frame of reference.

"Atmosphere" is the more elusive of the two concepts. Seen from the reader's perspective, it can broadly be described as an aspect of the experiential interface between reader and text through which the narrating consciousness mediates his<sup>6</sup> impressions. Conrad's beginnings are unique in that they set up atmosphere as the "filter" through which the reader must perforce enter into the fictional world. There is no immediate apprehension of space; the reader is confronted with visual and oral impressions of the various kinds of space as these appear in the novels. The atmosphere presented at the beginning of these works drenches character and action, thereby complicating both the act of narration for the narrative consciousness and the interpretation thereof for the reader. It is almost as if the atmosphere presented to the reader seduces him or her into joining the

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<sup>6</sup> It is necessary at this point to comment on the use of the masculine form in the thesis. I have elected to stick to the masculine form because all Conrad's narrating consciousnesses and the majority of "readers" (apart, perhaps, from Kurtz's Intended and Jewel) in the texts under discussion are male. When reference is made to real readers, the form "he or she" is used.

kind of interpretative struggle in which the characters of the fictional world are engaged. The result of this interactive process is that the reader never really gets through the atmosphere and impressions to an objective, verifiable and non-problematic understanding of space.

"Space"<sup>7</sup> is not used simply in the structural sense as a category for analyzing the structure of the novels. It is an integral part of the thematic substance of each text and therefore a much more complex concept than merely that of a structural category. In a certain sense -- as for most post-Kantian thinkers and theorists -- there is a dialectic between space as an entity and space as part of an interpretative process, as, for example, described in May Sinclair's novel Mary Oliver (1919), in which she suggests that in general, "Time and Space were forms of thought -- ways of thinking" (227).

The experience of space fascinated Conrad, as can be seen from the various comments scattered through his letters and essays, his life-long interest in maps, and the various fictional representations of journeys into wild and unknown spaces. Within the context of this thesis, both atmosphere and space are regarded as problematic and integral to the thematic and symbolic import of each of the works to

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<sup>7</sup> The concept of space is derived from the fictional texts themselves and does not necessarily correspond with the more popular conception of fictional space as described by Frank (1945, 1977, 1978), Smitten and Daghistany (1981), and Zoran (1984). I have used some of the more generally accepted spatial categories only in order to describe or elucidate a particular aspect of Conrad's representation of space.

be discussed. Of central importance will be the way in which the various kinds of space are mediated through the atmosphere of each novel.

Succinctly put, "atmosphere" can be called the Conradian objective correlative of mood by means of which the thematics of each work is mediated to the reader. This process of mediation is evocatively described by Conrad himself in the Preface to The Nigger of the "Narcissus":

To snatch in a moment of courage, from the remorseless rush of time, a passing phase of life, is only the beginning of the task. The task approached in tenderness and faith is to hold up unquestioningly, without choice and without fear, the rescued fragment before all eyes in the light of a sincere mood. It is to show its vibration, its colour, its form; and through its movement, its form, and its colour, reveal the substance of its truth -- disclose its inspiring secret: the stress and passion within the core of each convincing moment (xlii).

It is through the atmosphere that the "vibration," "colour," "form," "substance," and "truth" of each work is transmitted to the reader. The question which now arises is, Exactly how do these aspects manifest themselves in the fiction?

The majority of Conrad's central characters find themselves -- through a combination of volition and destiny -- isolated and exiled in strange and hostile spaces: Wait is isolated by his race and exiled to the narrow and claustrophobic confines of his cabin, mirroring the crew's isolation by the cosmic forces and subsequent confinement on the ship during the tempest. The same can be said of "Heart of Darkness," as Kurtz is enclosed by the African jungle and finds himself in the void resulting from the interface between

"civilization" and "barbarism" and the paradoxical inversion of these forces, while the interaction of Marlow and Kurtz with the Africans leads to a general sense of isolation, which -- in turn -- results from the "ambiguous double nature of hermeneutic encounters with other cultures" (Armstrong, "Epistemology" 7). Jim's sense of deep isolation is exacerbated by the contrasting sets of values represented in his violation of the sailor's code of ethics. Jim is trapped morally and emotionally by his betrayal of the "space" or value system of the brotherhood of the sea, and enclosed physically in what Mongia calls the "womb-like enclosure" (7) of Patusan. Decoud isolates himself because of his scepticism -- he has "no faith in anything except the truth of his own sensations" (229); Nostromo is isolated by his vanity and greed; and Gould is alienated from reality by his belief in the mythical heritage of the mine, while the shady political anarchists in The Secret Agent form small enclaves in which like-minded political thinkers can undermine the larger and "unjust" political system.

In most cases this sense of isolation is exacerbated by the lack of communication between the exiles and the people who inhabit the hostile environment in which they find themselves, the classic case being that of Yanko Gooral in "Amy Foster" (1901). The isolated characters cannot understand their predicament and constantly try to "read" the space in which they find themselves. This sense of spiritual isolation is invariably accompanied by geographical disjunction: the Narcissus is caught in a ferocious storm which throws her off course; Kurtz and Marlow find themselves not in "civilized"

London, but in "darkest" Africa, while Jim is forced to exchange the "civilities" of the court room for the violent conflict on Patusan. Those with "material interests" ruthlessly pursue their own ideals, and force the people of Sulaco to reconstitute their social space, while the political anarchists try to spread chaos and terror in what seems to be the relatively stable public space of London.

The various kinds of spatial modes depicted in Conrad can be ordered along a continuum: at one end there is the mythical space with its almost transcendental implications in Nostromo; while at the other there is the more personal and psychological space of an individual's mind and character as portrayed in Lord Jim. There are other variants and combinations in-between: the immensity of cosmic space completely dwarfs the sailors' actions in the microcosm of the Narcissus. We find a symbolic space to be the dominant mode in "Heart of Darkness," while the constant conflict between public and private space propels the internal dynamics of The Secret Agent. In some instances the dominant space is physical; in others it is symbolic, while in others it is used in a metaphorical sense. The common element in all these instances lies in the fact that the space in which each character finds himself has a unique atmosphere in which the impinging physical world dominates action and thought, and in which the relatively friendly and "cozy bowl of heaven" has turned into a "cold immensity of space" (Krutch 7-9).

The characters and narrators respond to this state of affairs in many different ways in Conrad's oeuvre. One common response is that characters caught in exile or isolation are all, in some way or



the other, trying to "interpret" and "read" the space in which they find themselves in order to penetrate its vague and mysterious atmosphere. As such there is a strong emphasis on the epistemological processes of the characters, of the narrating consciousness and the reader. Bonney (171) supports this view when he argues that one of the major concerns in Conrad's fiction is "the dramatization of the necessary entrapment of the human psyche as it assigns meaning to the phenomenal world in the act of perception." These attempts at "assigning meaning" invariably result in "misreadings," and are frustrated for a variety of reasons: very often, this is because the character or narrating consciousness tries to grasp reality with mental constructs incapable of capturing the qualities of the accelerating world facing him.

A second common response to the alienating space is the failed attempt to establish a relationship with an individual or group. Kurtz has a relationship with his "Intended" but cheats on her through his liaison with the African woman. Edith Travers and Tom Lingard enter into a complex and unhappy relationship, while Jim and Jewel seem to find temporary happiness. Wait tries to manipulate the sailors to accept him into their group, while the exiles in the European novels form small groups of Europeans to counter their isolation. The final result of this isolation and lack of belonging is very often a retreat, either voluntary or involuntary into solitude, and even death.

These dominant and related motifs of physical exile in strange and hostile spaces, the attempts of the characters to "read" and

understand these spaces, and, finally, the isolation which results from their inability to do so, are all interrelated by, enshrouded in, and mediated through a mysterious atmosphere. Translated into literary-critical terms, this thesis will argue that the existential condition of isolation experienced by Conrad's heroes and narrators is the product of the epistemological frustration and fragmentation which, again, is a function of impressionist ontology. It will show that there is a definite relationship between each of these notions and that they constantly complement one another in Conrad's fiction. The readings of the works selected will be based on the assumptions that the mysterious atmosphere results from various configurations of the triad of theme, narration and description; and secondly, that these novelistic elements correspond roughly with the notions of isolation (the dominant theme), epistemology (narrating, telling and (re)telling as a method of knowing and understanding the space in which the characters find themselves) and, lastly, the ontological dimensions of the various kinds of fictional space, (or description). As mentioned earlier, the atmosphere is the linking medium through which the narrating consciousness mediates to the reader his impression of space, of reality, of what lies "beyond" the impression.

### III

Having outlined the general framework of impressionism and defined the central concepts of space and atmosphere, it now remains

to consider Benson's second question, namely, how this unique Conradian atmosphere affects the reader's interpretation.

It is commonly accepted that the reader of modernist fiction in particular has a definitive role to play in generating meaning. Conrad himself acknowledged this active involvement in a letter to Cunninghame Graham written in August 1897, in which he stated that "one writes only half the book; the other half is with the reader" (CLJC 1, 370). Yet critical comment often seems to suggest that the odds are stacked against the reader when dealing with the reading process. For example, in his now dated but seminal work Conrad the Novelist (1958), Guerard argues that Conrad's writing is a "deliberate invasion" of his readers' lives which consciously "manipulates" their responses to the novel in question (1). He also makes the following observation about the reader's engagement with Nostromo: "We have, as in Lord Jim, a combat between author, material, and reader. But the reader's main effort is now largely to gain some foothold, assume some habitual stance, put himself in a less vertiginous relationship to what he observes" (215). Darras supports the notion of a battle between reader, writer and material in a more recent work, entitled Joseph Conrad and the West: Signs of Empire (1982), when he argues that Conrad uses space "strategically, as a military expert would" (110), in a sense implying that the reader is engaged in battle with the author and material.

In dealing with the notion of interpretation, the thesis takes its cue from the epigraph to this introduction by J. Hillis Miller and tries to redirect attention away from merely describing the setting

and action in the works, to showing that the important aspect that should be investigated is the symbiotic relationship between the constitutive elements of each work, and particularly how this interaction between the elements structures the reader's processing and experience of the text. The passage is so important that it bears repetition:

A novel by Conrad, though it invites the reader to hope that he can find a center of the sort Coleridge ascribes to the good work of art, has nothing certainly identifiable outside itself by which it might be measured or from which it might be seen. It has no visible thematic or structuring principle which will allow the reader to find out its secret, explicate it once and for all, untie all its knots and straighten all its threads...Though the meaning is outside, it may only be seen by way of the tale which brings it out. This bringing out takes place in the interaction of its different elements in the reference to one another. These the critic must track, circling from one word or image to another within the text. Only in this movement of interpretation does the meaning exist. It is not a central and originating node, like the kernel of a nut, a solid and pre-existing nub. It is a darkness, an absence, a haze invisible in itself and only made visible by the ghostlike indirection of a light which is already derived. It is not the direct light of the sun but the reflected light of the moon which brings out the haze. This visible but secondary light and the invisible haze create a halo of "moonshine" which depends for its existence on the reader's involvement in the play of light and dark which generates it (Repetition 25-6; my emphasis).

The central premiss of the thesis is based on the underlined passage. The thesis will argue that the "different elements" are the interdependent elements of description, narration, and thematics, and that "bringing out" the meaning rests upon the reader's ability to recognize not only the intricate workings of each of these elements, but also on the recognition that the "interaction" between these elements is essential in assigning meaning to each work.

The reader's "entering into" the fictional world has already been discussed. A second premiss concerns the "outward movement" from within the fictional world towards that of the reader. The process of the narrating consciousness' penetration of the space and action, the epistemological frustration resulting from the fragmentary and accidental way in which impressions defy the creation of a unified whole, the consequent experience of impressionist ontology, and -- finally -- the existential isolation resulting from the awareness of a reality "out there" are transferred to the reader's mind and simulated through the atmosphere of each work which the reader in turn has to negotiate. The "halo" or atmosphere is in a sense the medium through which the idea is mediated to the reader. Judd and Saunders, in describing the work of Conrad's friend, collaborator and fellow impressionist, Ford Madox Ford, capture something of the process between writer, text and reader which is applicable both to Ford and Conrad's writing:

The way the Impressionist writer gets the sight out of his head is to get it into his reader's. Ford (like Dowell) often echoes Conrad's credo in the preface to The Nigger of the "Narcissus," that his task as a writer is 'by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel -- it is, before all, to make you see'. One way to exorcize anguish and bafflement is to transfer it onto another person...or onto another relationship -- rather as, in psychoanalysis, the patient's unconscious conflicts are projected onto his or her relationship with the analyst, in the powerful emotions produced by what Freud called 'transference'; or to express it in a work of art. Ford's art in The Good Soldier is pre-eminently an art of transference, as Dowell's feelings about Ashburnham get taken up into his relationship with his silent listener, and into Ford's intimacy with his reader (xxvii-xxix).

Conrad's readers experience a similar transference as they too enter into an intimacy with the text, trying to -- in Hillis Miller's

words -- track the interaction of the different elements, "circling from one word or image to another within the text," trying to penetrate the "misty halo." Conrad's works are linguistic structures in motion which carefully order the experience of the various aspects of the fictional world which he wants to impart to the reader. The journey of "reading" and "understanding" which the characters are forced into and the reader's journey of interpretation are symbiotically related: the narrating consciousness, characters and reader are involved in the same process of trying to make sense of the fractured and dislocated narratives and worlds.

This leads to the third premiss, namely that -- as far as interpretation is concerned -- the notions of space and atmosphere should be regarded as the result of the reading process and the analysis of the interaction between description, narration, and thematics, and not merely as critical categories.

If a would-be reader of Conrad is unfamiliar with the experimental efforts of Modernist writers to capture Woolfian atoms "as they fall upon the mind," or Conrad's deferring narrative tactics, he or she may find interpreting these works a daunting and impossible task, and may indeed even feel the way Captain Mitchell's privileged listener does near the end of Nostromo, "stunned and as it were annihilated mentally by a sudden surfeit of sights, sounds, names, facts, and complicated information imperfectly apprehended" (486-87). It may well be that systematic analysis of Conrad's treatment of space and atmosphere empowers the reader with a method to respond

intelligently to the impressionistic techniques which Conrad employs in rendering a particular mode of space and atmosphere.

Much has been written about the way in which Conrad is consciously obstructing the reader's interpretation by delaying information, giving multiple and relative views of an event or character, and by mediating his tales through unreliable narrators. The thesis will show that a thorough knowledge of the way in which Conrad deals with space and atmosphere assists the reader in coping with these delaying and obfuscating tactics by enabling him or her to "read" the placement of strong atmospheric evocations at central points in the narrative, and to register the repeated use of certain techniques such as the piling up of adjectives, episodic scenes, and a strong reliance on sensory images, not as obstacles to the reading process, but as central "signposts" and "markers" in the process of interpreting impressionistic works of literature.

A reader charged with the difficult task of unravelling the often dense and obscure texts of Conrad can easily identify himself with George Steiner's comments on the difficulties which art critics face in trying to verbalize a picture or a sonata. In his book Real Presences (1989), Steiner argues that "[g]rammatical-logical discourse is radically at odds with the syntax of matter, with that of pigment, stone, wood, or metal"(16). Capturing the impressionistic syntax of the Conradian space and atmosphere with the limited range of words at one's disposal is almost impossible. If this thesis succeeds in overcoming something of this seemingly insurmountable task by systematizing a small segment of Conrad's "crafty tracery of words"

and capturing it in "grammatical-logical discourse" of some kind, it will have succeeded in its aims.



## Chapter Two

### The Nigger of the "Narcissus": Evoking/Invoking Cosmic Space

[S]omething very fine, a little elusive; something pervading, impalpable and distinct; like, in the morning, the glorious charm of a golden haze.

Conrad: Letter to E.L. Sanderson, 21 November 1896

#### I

Conrad's experimentation with descriptive techniques and innovative narrative methods, and their concomitant thematic import in his fiction, display a marked growth in sophistication during the five years between the publication of Almayer's Folly (1895) and Lord Jim in 1900. It was during this period that his development of distinctive impressionist techniques, such as the accretion of adjectives, the use of episodic scenes with their strong reliance on sensory perception, and shifts in narrative stance, provided him with basic tools which would later become common properties of important narratives such as The Nigger of the "Narcissus" (1897), "Heart of Darkness" (1899), Lord Jim, The Secret Agent (1907), and even Under Western Eyes (1911). With these techniques Conrad tried to render in vivid and picturesque terms a new kind of fictional space and atmosphere that would reflect humankind's experience of the "modern"

world in which it found itself, a space which was generally experienced as bewildering and fragmented.

Given the importance that Conrad attached to the openings of his works, it is no surprise to find some of the most striking uses of these techniques at the beginning of the texts. Consider, for example, the graphic rendition of space and atmosphere in the opening passage of the second chapter of The Nigger of the "Narcissus" (NN):

The Narcissus left alone, heading south, seemed to stand resplendent and still upon the restless sea, under the moving sun. Flakes of foam swept past her sides; the water struck her with flashing blows; the land glided away slowly fading; a few birds screamed on motionless wings over the swaying mastheads. But soon the land disappeared, the birds went away; and to the west the pointed sail of an Arab dhow running from Bombay, rose triangular and upright above the sharp edge of the horizon, lingered and vanished like an illusion. Then the ship's wake, long and straight, stretched itself out through a day of immense solitude. The setting sun, burning on the level of the water, flamed crimson below the blackness of heavy rain clouds. The sunset squall, coming up from behind, dissolved itself into the short deluge of a hissing shower. It left the ship glistening from trucks to waterline, and with darkened sails. She ran easily before a fair monsoon, with her decks cleared for the night; and, moving along with her, was heard the sustained and monotonous swishing of the waves, mingled with the low whispers of men mustered aft for the setting of watches; the short plaint of some block aloft; or, now and then, a loud sigh of wind (27-28).

This passage vividly illustrates how Conrad uses sensory perceptions to render the atmosphere and action of a moment in time. The observer's eye rests on the ship which, paradoxically, seems to be motionless and "still" on an otherwise "restless" sea. A subsequent "movement" is that of the observer's field of vision being extended outward, to sea, to the "horizon," and eventually, to the heavens -- "clouds." On the one hand, the ship seems to be mysteriously near the

observer; on the other, it seems to be intriguingly aloof and isolated. The use of words like "motionless," "vanished," "disappeared," "lingered," and "glistening" adds to the sense of mystery evoked by the passage, while the immensity of this cosmic space is foregrounded by almost inaudible sounds: "flashing blows," "hissing shower," "swishing of the waves," and "low whispers" of the sailors. Elusive and mysterious, the atmospheric nature of this scene is also enhanced by the fact that the ship almost seems to have a life and destiny of its own as it sails imperturbably on, ignoring the "restless sea," the "flashing blows of the water," the flaming "crimson" of the sun, and the "sunset squall."

One important -- and as this thesis will argue, probably the most functional -- way in which to probe such a passage is to invoke words like "mystery," "atmosphere," "universe," and "senses," words which capture the central issues with which this thesis deals: the representation of a fictional space which encapsulates the social space of man against the backdrop of the larger space of civilization, nature, and the cosmos; the perennial Conradian theme of isolation; and, lastly, the dramatic and graphic way in which man's experience of the potentially threatening forces of nature is documented.

Another way of examining passages like these is to do so against the wider context of Conrad's thought at the time of composing the work. A brief "impressionistic" detour into some of Conrad's

letters<sup>1</sup> written at the time of the publication of NN provides one with a useful and different perspective on his conscious experimentation with techniques which would capture the impressionistic nature of reality, and his attempts to render a fictional space that would "get through the veil of details at the essence of life" (CLJC 1, 334). More importantly, his letters of the time reveal especially his need to reconcile the notion of a metaphysical darkness with the practicalities of constructing a fictional world. This "subtext" of space and atmosphere seems to have been compelling enough to have structured his own experience and interpretation of the imaginative and creative processes. For

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<sup>1</sup> The debate about the usefulness of Conrad's letters and critical writings in determining his fictional "theory" (in as far as it existed) is problematic and diverse. While the letters and essays are obviously not as explicit as Henry James's Prefaces, or T.S. Eliot's essays produced in his "workshop", and, consequently, are often dismissed as perfunctory self-defences, I firmly believe that these contain an important account of Conrad's working methods and literary convictions, and share the views held by E.M. Forster, Frederick Karl and Richard Ambrosini. Forster, in a review of Conrad's Notes on Life and Letters (1921) is of the opinion that the essays are "...like the snow man Michaelangelo made for young Piero de Medici at Florence. Every line in them is important because the material differs from the imperishable marble that we know, and may help to interpret the lines of that" (Sherry documents 348). Karl, in an essay entitled "Conrad's Literary Theory" (1960), maintains that the best cue to Conrad's aesthetic theory lies in the critical comments scattered in his early essays and letters ("Theory" 317). More recently, Ambrosini, in his Conrad's Fiction as Critical Discourse (1991), has argued that the "dismissal of the theoretical relevance of Conrad's comments about his work has frustrated the kind of discussion by which other modernist writers have gained considerably" (1). (See also Nettels 25, and Yaseen 1). Given these points of view, I do feel that an intertextual approach to Conrad's fiction, non-fiction and letters does provide a different and useful perspective on his fiction as these highlight the aspects which occupied him at the time of the composition of the various works under discussion. For this reason the letters and essays will be used to elucidate some aspects of the central argument in the rest of the thesis as well.

example, in a letter to Marguerite Poradowska on 29 March 1894, Conrad describes his creative process in terms which clearly suggest a spatial and atmospheric framework, as well as the sense of objects materializing out of a formless mist:

Inspiration comes to me while gazing at the paper. Then there are vistas that extend out of sight; my mind goes wandering through great spaces filled with vague forms. Everything is still chaos, but, slowly, ghosts are transformed into living flesh, [and] floating vapours turn solid (CLJC 1, 151).

This passage brings to the fore a central issue examined in this thesis, namely the process of vision -- "to make you see" -- with its implications of perception and cognition. At the same time, it also supports the idea that the experience of these "vistas" is mediated through an atmosphere "filled with vague forms," thereby giving a strong indication of the impressionistic qualities of this process.

A similar concern with atmosphere is located in Conrad's response to Garnett's impressionistic sketches of London. The comments seem to suggest that Conrad was very much aware of the potential of a work of art to elicit a reading that at once conceals and reveals, moves and lives:

You do not jump on me. You grow -- so to speak -- around me. Your sentences luxuriate in your own atmosphere, they spring up on every side -- till at last the picture is seen through the crafty tracery of words, like a building through leaves, both distinct -- and hidden.

Light and gloom...wave before our eyes in the stir of sentences -- and one feels the greatness, the mistiness of things amongst which lives...a crowd mysterious (CLJC 1, 331-332).

The emphasis in this passage is clearly on the dynamic quality of the process of "reading" space -- it "grow[s]" around one, and is at the same time "distinct" and "hidden." "[M]istiness" and "mystery" are dominant once more, indicating, if not a predilection for, at least a very real awareness of the impressionistic nature of sensory perception. This awareness is given a more direct airing in a letter to E.L. Sanderson, dated 17/10/1897, in which Conrad states that "I am impressionist from instinct," and that he can consequently only respond to Sanderson's poem emotionally; he suggests that Sanderson change the word hoarse in the line "The ocean's hoarse reverberating roar" to something that would convey the "persistent tumultuous voice of the sea" (CLJC 1, 398-9; my emphasis). The importance of sensory perception, which will be shown to be prominent in the works under discussion, is clearly also present here. Perhaps of more immediate relevance to this chapter is Conrad's response to an anonymous reviewer of NN dated 9th Dec. 1897, in which Conrad provides us with a representative example of the ideas uppermost in his mind at the time:

I wanted to give a true impression, to present and [sic] undefaced image. And You, who know amongst what illusions and self-deceptions men struggle, work, fail -- You will only smile with indulgence if I confess to You that I also wanted to connect the small world of the ship with that larger world carrying perplexities, fears, affections, rebellions, in a loneliness greater than that of the ship at sea (CLJC 1, 420-21).

"Impression," "undefaced image," and "illusions" all reflect a recognition of the need to develop fictional techniques which would momentarily "entrap" as it were the elusive and fleeting reality "out there." The spatial opposition between the "small" and "larger" worlds is clearly also part of his mindset. These passages all seem

to insist on the role of sensory impressions as a means of creating a fictional space out of a fragmented and often threatening reality.

As the term "impression" is obviously a key concept in all these passages, it is rather tempting to categorize Conrad as an "impressionist" merely on the basis of descriptive properties suggested by these examples. Such a manoeuvre would, however, provide a very simplistic view of the complex nature of his impressionistic practice. There is clearly much more to it than just a descriptive quality. Hidden in Conrad's reply to the reviewer, is an indication that there is also a thematic side to this process of "capturing space." Conrad's reply provides a paradoxical perspective on his link with impressionist practice in general. The implied futility in this -- and many other similar impressionistic passages in Conrad -- is in direct contrast to the techniques of impressionist painters, which often show "man in harmony with nature, and nature resplendent with a shimmering, congenial sunlight," whereas the thematic implications of Conrad's impressionistic passages often induce "a sense of absurdity, rather than harmony, and a sense of nature's antipathy rather than congeniality to man" (Watts, "Techniques" 141).

The "perplexities, fears, affections, rebellions...[and]...loneliness" all hint at the idea of a mysterious and menacing threat which humankind has to face in a hostile and forever changing world. This pervasive sense of individual isolation is one of the logical consequences of impressionism. Walter Pater states as much in his celebrated conclusion to The Renaissance:

Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to without thought (247).

Conrad's heroes are, for various reasons, all isolated from the rest of mankind and find themselves in a strange and mysterious relationship with their environment, which is more often than not, violent and threatening. Yet his use of impressionistic techniques to capture man's attempts to break through "that thick wall of personality" also distinguishes him from the general impressionistic practice: it is less celebratory and less delighted by sensory multiplicity than that of the more aesthetic Pater and other literary impressionists.

Where does NN -- the central focus of this chapter -- fit into this broader context? Conrad's masterful ability to render an exotic and elusive atmosphere which first manifested itself in Almayer's Folly and An Outcast of the Islands (1896), shows even greater development in NN, and especially in the pervasive atmosphere resulting from the use of highly visualized detail, and the employment of other novelistic techniques. It is a text filled with colours, shapes, and sounds, and translates into language the texture and mood of painting. Thematically, the crew coping with the constant awareness of imminent death, nagging fear for the possible destruction of man and ship, and the inability of the characters to translate their impressions into clear and firm knowledge and insight all support the central tenet set out in the introduction, namely that these characters are "trapped" in a space which they have to "read"



and interpret, but which also has properties which prevent a clear "reading," and which consequently leaves them feeling bewildered and further isolated. In short: while it is obviously in many respects still the early work of a novelist "in the process of learning" (Beach 352), the novella -- along with its famous Preface<sup>2</sup> -- represents the first major work of a writer as important as Conrad. David Smith, in a standard work on the Preface, states as much when he argues that "the one determined and gave form to his career as novelist, the other was a statement of that determination" (7). Albeit in embryonic and uneven form, NN displays many of the techniques, devices and thematic configurations outlined earlier, and which would become the basis for his work between the years 1887 to 1904.

## II

In contrast to a painter, a novelist has only words with which to create new worlds. Conrad, as a practitioner of the written word, was clearly aware of the multivalency of words, as can be seen from a letter, written to a fellow writer, Hugh Clifford, on 9 October 1899. In the letter Conrad observes that

words, groups of words, words standing alone, are symbols  
of life, have the power in their very sound or their

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<sup>2</sup> It should be borne in mind that the Preface was written some six months after the novel and that it embodies artistic preoccupations and problems some of which are more complex than anything in the novella itself.

aspect to present the very thing you wish to hold up before the mental vision of your readers. The things 'as they exist' exist in words; therefore words should be handled with care lest the picture, the image of truth abiding in facts should become distorted -- or blurred (CLJC 2, 200).

It is this very multivalency and evocative power of language which Conrad exploits to create the dialectic between description, narration and theme in his impressionistic works, a dialectic which, in turn, invokes a rich and compelling atmosphere in these works. Consider, for example, the tension and mood of an impending disaster which emanate from Jimmy Wait's first two appearances in the novella. In the first appearance, Conrad uses one of his favourite techniques, namely the early introduction of a leitmotif with visual connotations:

The lamplight lit up the man's body. He was tall. His head was way up in the shadows of lifeboats that stood on skids above the deck. The whites of his eyes and teeth gleamed distinctly, but the face was indistinguishable. His hands were big and seemed gloved...The boy, amazed like the rest, raised the light to the man's face. It was black (17).

The two central words with visual connotations, "whites" and "black," thrust into the foreground the dominant black vs white opposition established in the title by the implied opposition between "white," the connotation attached to the Narcissus through its implied reference to a white flower, and the Negro, or "Nigger" (James Wait). By just mentioning these two words, Conrad's technique here can be likened to that of a painter, who draws the viewer's eye to a specific point or object in the canvas by means of this colour contrast. Having established the opposition, it is then used to form the descriptive basis of Wait's second appearance:

In the blackness of the doorway a pair of eyes glimmered white, and big, and staring. Then James Wait's head protruding, became visible, as if suspended between the two hands that grasped a doorpost on each side of the face. The tassel of his blue woollen nightcap, cocked forward, danced gaily over his left eyelid. He stepped out in a tottering stride. He looked as powerful as ever, but showed a strange and affected unsteadiness in his gait; his face was perhaps a trifle thinner, and his eyes appeared rather startlingly prominent. He seemed to hasten the retreat of departing light by his very presence; the setting sun dipped sharply, as though fleeing before our nigger; a black mist emanated from him; a subtle and dismal influence; something cold and gloomy that floated out and settled on all the faces like a mourning veil. The circle broke up...He leaned his back against the doorpost, and with heavy eyes swept over them a glance domineering and pained, like a sick tyrant overawing a crowd of abject but untrustworthy slaves (34-35).

Here, the "blackness" of the doorway serves to foreground the "white" of Wait's eyes. Note, however, that this opposition and its connotations are subtly inverted by the image of the sun (representing "white" or "light") "departing" before the "nigger" (representing "black" or "darkness"), instead of the usual metaphoric use of "darkness" retreating before "light." This example introduces one of the most significant aspects of Conradian descriptions in general, namely the predilection for inversion, which has as its primary aim the dramatization of the concomitant thematic implications. This purely descriptive inversion subtly "feeds into" the thematic level: consider the racial implications of Wait -- the "nigger" -- whose presence is so pervasive that it breaks up the circle of "white" sailors, leaving Wait like a "domineering...tyrant" looking out over

the overawed crowd of white "slaves," but also, at the same time isolated by his "Otherness."<sup>3</sup>

Building upon the reader's first "impression" of Wait in the first chapter, with the ambiguity arising from his calling his surname and the (white) officer thinking that a (black) sailor orders him to "wait," Conrad also veils this second appearance in a enigmatic and ambiguous atmosphere. The insistence on making the reader "hear," and "see," is once again evident in the active sequence of sensations: there is a distinct movement from the visual, "blackness...glimmered white," to the kinetic, "protruding," and "stepped out." Even more important than this movement is the conscious way in which the reader's total visual experience of what Wait looks like, is built up impression by impression; slowly each feature comes into focus, is highlighted briefly, and then fades from the mind's eye as the next impression is conjured up: "eyes," then "head," "hands," and finally, his uncertain movements. The final effect of these impressions is that both narrator and reader cannot distinguish between what seemed, at the beginning of the passage, a clear-cut distinction between "black" and "white." This is clearly emphasized by the use of words and phrases such as "appeared," "as if suspended," and "seemed to hasten." Both narrator and reader can only be sure of one thing: a hazy "black mist," an indescribable force emanating from the presence

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<sup>3</sup> Because of the specific meaning assigned to the word "other/Other" by post-colonial theorists, I will use the word without a capital to indicate differentiation and isolation within a character's own racial group, while "Otherness" will be used to indicate the same idea but within a different racial group. See Hawthorn (Glossary 141-142) and Ashcroft et. al. (171-72) in this regard.

of this mysterious figure who dared to penetrate the previously "all-white" space of the Narcissus.

The passage is literally framed by a "frame," the doorway, which, in turn, places the black vs white opposition at the centre of the picture, thereby giving a visual affirmation of the thematic opposition between good and evil. Note that the blackness of the doorway surrounds and "engulfs" the eyes in much the same way as Wait's influence permeates the whole ship.

It is already clear from this early passage that in Conrad, descriptions also have important narrative implications. He uses descriptive passages in a way not dissimilar to the Symbolists's use of motifs. A particular description is introduced, dropped and then re-introduced at later stages in the narrative. The effect of this method is that the second, third and fourth repetition of a particular aspect all carry with them the impression left by the first use of a particular technique, or the presentation of a particular mood. Arthur Symons, in commenting on the interrelatedness of Symbolism and Impressionism,<sup>4</sup> makes an important point which provides a significant perspective on this kind of writing:

The Impressionist in literature as in painting, would flash upon you in a new, sudden way so exact an image of what you have just seen, just as you have seen it...The Symbolist in this new, sudden way, would flash upon you the 'soul' of that which can be apprehended only by the soul-the finer sense of things unseen, the deeper meaning of things evident ("Movement" 858-859).

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<sup>4</sup> See also Rose ("Decadence" 795-810) and Watt (Century 169-199) in connection with the interrelatedness of Symbolism and Impressionism.

Generally speaking, one could argue that Impressionist space is the result of humankind's limited faculty which restricts it to perceiving "reality" only in fragments. The impressionist "strings" together a series of such "flashes" of the present whose cumulative impact is to create the mood and atmosphere of these "impressions."

Seen in this light, this description of Wait forms part of a narrative sequence of three passages which, in their combined effect, all have strong narrative and thematic implications. Note how the sense of mystery surrounding Wait which was introduced during his first appearance ("He held his head up in the glare of the lamp -- a head vigorously modelled into deep shadows and shining lights -- a head powerful and misshapen with a tormented and flattened face -- a face pathetic and brutal: the tragic, the mysterious, the repulsive mask of a nigger's soul" (18)) is heightened by the description of his second appearance in the doorway. The closing paragraphs of the second chapter emphasize this complex interaction, thereby echoing the previous scenes and reinforcing the symbolic matrix of the novella:

He fascinated us. He would never let doubt die. He overshadowed the ship. Invulnerable in his promise of speedy corruption he trampled on our self-respect, he demonstrated to us daily our want of moral courage; he tainted our lives. Had we been a miserable gang of wretched immortals, unhallowed alike by hope and fear, he could not have lorded it over us with a more pitiless assertion of his sublime privilege (46-7; my emphasis).

These examples are simple, but deceptively so and serve to illustrate a crucial point with regard to the critical method used in this chapter, as well as in the rest of the thesis. It is clear that, in Conrad's fiction, the same stretch of language can point in a

metaphysical direction; it can also point in the direction of sensory perception; and it can point in the direction of narrative progression. In contrast to novelistic practice in many eighteenth and nineteenth century novels, in which these fictional elements were ordered in such a way that the reader could clearly distinguish between narrative and descriptive passages and their respective functions, the Modernist project compels novelists to present their work in such a way that the reader experiences the simultaneous representation of description, narration and theme. Modernist novels -- and Conrad's novels in particular -- present the reader with brief episodes in which these elements "conspire" to present the reader with impressionist reality in "rapid flux" by "capturing discrete moments of experience in which the world is perceived and internalized, but not arrested, touched for an instant but not known for all time" (Nagel 168). These passages reaffirm Conrad's belief that "words...have the power in their sound or their aspect to present the very thing you wish to hold up before the mental vision of your readers" (CLJC 2, 200). Thus, to separate "description," "narration," and "theme" is almost to falsify the total experience of the particular novel or novella in question.

To investigate the interaction between these constituent elements of Conrad's space and atmosphere is an extremely difficult task in view of the fact that these elements are so tightly interwoven. The brief analysis of these passages clearly indicates that to separate them entirely is almost impossible, as it is obvious that sensory impressions (or, "description," to use the term used more

commonly in the thesis) "blend" into narrative and thematic concerns. Any division is at best artificial and can only be done if one is fully aware of the complementarity of these elements and, indeed, of their contemporaneous and simultaneous function, which is to simulate the same kind of experience of space and atmosphere for the reader as that which the characters have to deal with in the fictional world. As it is in NN that most of these techniques are deployed together for the first time to such a large extent, and as it is a fairly simple text in comparison with the other texts to be studied, it seems a sound point of attack to start this investigation into the complex dynamics of the Conradian triad of description, narrative and theme by looking at NN, the first of Conrad's books which, says Guerard, "deliberately and with care [carries] the burden of several major [novelistic] interests and various minor ones" (100). In order to establish the mechanics of each of these aspects as a basis for the rest of the thesis, this chapter will therefore be divided into somewhat "artificial" sections dealing with each of these aspects. The same procedure will not necessarily be followed in the subsequent chapters.

### III

One of the earliest critics who wrote a full-length study on Conrad's work, R.L. Megroz, makes the following observation about



Conrad's descriptions in his book Conrad's Mind and Method: A Study of Personality and Art (1931):

It would be impermissible to quote enough from Conrad's novels to give anybody ignorant of them an adequate sense of the superb evocative power of the prose when it is devoted to merely impressionistic description. This poetic faculty in the writer, controlling changing hues and tidal rhythms, is evident also in distinct touches, in a phrase or curious thought (170).

In many ways this suggests the "method" which many of the early Conrad critics, like Curle, Garnett and Beach, used to deal with the descriptive or ontological dimension of Conrad's fiction. As is quite clear from the examples discussed thus far, these passages are all imbued with an atmospheric quality which is, as Symons has rightly noted, "more mysterious, menacing and more troubling to the senses and to the nerves...[than the work of great painters]...[because Conrad] creates thrilling effects by mere force of suggestion, elusive as some vague mist, full of illusion, of rare magic, which can become poisonous or sorcerous" (Notes 28). Yet to follow Megroz's procedure would again not get one out of the impasse in which most of these critics find themselves, an impasse which I maintain has resulted from a one-sided emphasis on epistemological issues only. This thesis argues for the need to approach Conrad's "impressionistic" works in a way that ensures a focus on the essential interaction between the ontological and epistemological aspects of his fiction.

The architectonics of NN are relatively simple when compared to those of, say, Lord Jim, or Nostramo. Its plot consists of discontinuous and abbreviated episodes of experience dealing with the interaction between the Negro, James Wait, and the rest of the

predominantly white crew of the Narcissus, testing the values and attitudes of the crew. At the same time the small ship forms a microcosm of society and is brought into sharp relief by the contrasts between it and the wide cosmic expanse of the ocean. The basis of each of these episodes is what Courtney calls Conrad's "deliberate word-painting" (Sherry documents 86), resulting in the familiar evocative descriptions. The immediate question which comes to mind is, How then does Conrad use description in NN?

Novelists make use of description to achieve various effects. Generally speaking, its primary function is to provide the reader with a semblance of reality by describing accurately observed phenomena, or the physical characteristics of a location, or even a character. This in turn sets the mood and atmosphere against which the plot can develop. Descriptions are often introduced at strategic points in the plot, such as the beginning of a novel or a chapter, or following on a long narrative sequence. Conrad himself was fond of this procedure, if one were to believe Ford Madox Ford, Conrad's friend, fellow writer and disputed collaborator, who, in Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance (1924) -- the much-questioned memoir of his relationship with Conrad -- states that

Openings for us, as for most writers, were matters of great importance, but probably we more than most writers realized of what primary importance they are...the opening paragraph of book or story should be of the tempo of the whole performance. That is the règle generale. Moreover, the reader's attention must be gripped by that first paragraph. So our ideal novel must begin either with a dramatic scene or with a note that should suggest the whole book (171).

Despite the speculation about the intentions behind, and validity of Ford's remarks, Conrad's works do seem to insist that special attention be paid to their beginnings, for it is here that he employs all his novelistic "know-how" to evoke an atmosphere and mood which constrains the reader's experience of the novel and sets up the architectonic thrust which will carry the reader into, and through the novel. Conrad's beginnings frequently add a metaphoric energy to the atmosphere and mood generated in these passages by infusing them with strong sensory images and other impressionist techniques. This practice provides the reader with a cue to interpreting the novel. Yet at the same time it also "sets up" the reader to expect one thing, only to be confronted with another. Note, for example, the dramatic opening paragraph of NN:

MR. BAKER, chief mate of the ship Narcissus, stepped in one stride out of his lighted cabin into the darkness of the quarter-deck...Above his head, on the break of the poop, the night-watchman rang a double stroke (3).

Like so many others in Conrad, this paragraph appears deceptively simple, but a closer examination reveals that it contains the germs of the mysterious and menacing atmosphere which will pervade the whole narrative. The structural devices of opposition and contrast are implied and immediately reinforce the central symbolic polarity already established in the title, between the "narcissus" and the blackness suggested in the passage.

Conrad's insistence on making his readers "hear," "feel," and "see" manifests itself in the active sequence of sensations presented in the passage: visual, "lighted cabin" vs "darkness of the quarter-

deck," but also kinetic ("in one stride") and aural: "rang a double stroke." The minute encapsulated space of the cabin is contrasted with the relative spaciousness of the quarter-deck, and with the wider -- and more dominant -- cosmic space.<sup>5</sup> This introduces the dominant opposition of small vs large which will later culminate in the structural centre of the novella, the storm episode during which Wait is trapped in his cabin. Conrad uses this kind of contrast in a number of scenes which all contribute to the evocation of the wide cosmic space which dominates the action in NN, a space which, in a sense, "culminates" in the structural and thematic "centre" of the text, the storm episode. In short, what we are dealing with here is an example of how, in a seemingly insignificant descriptive passage, Conrad already inserts clues which -- if followed by the reader throughout the text -- will blend into an affirmation of the thematic matrix of isolation hinted at in the opening chapter of the novella. These spatial concepts introduced in this first paragraph will also be seen to function in the rest of the novella on the other two important levels of description and narration.

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<sup>5</sup> Technically, NN provides us with a good example of the early Conrad's concern with space and his attempts as a writer to represent space. This process of experimentation becomes all the more obvious when one considers the strong spatial focus of the working titles for the novel. In the MS Conrad originally called it The Nigger of the "Narcissus," but in sending it to the publisher he suggested The Forecastle. A Tale of Ship and Men, and changed the word Forecastle to Nigger a few days later. Its first appearance in print was in the New Review under the title, The Nigger of the "Narcissus" - A Tale of the Forecastle. It was only in its second book edition (1898) that the final subtitle was changed to A Tale of the Sea (Najder 205). "Forecastle" and "sea" are clearly oppositional spatial dimensions, and this opposition forms one of the central spatial axes in the novella.

A second favourite Conradian device -- the contrast between colours -- is introduced here in the basic black vs white contrast.<sup>6</sup> This opposition develops in complexity as it gathers more and more associations during the course of the narrative, and will contribute significantly to the presentation of theme. For example, both the ship and her crew are linked to darkness, emphasizing the strong effect of evil deeds and invisible dangers, which in turn, underscore the notions of doubt and chaos so omnipresent in the lives of the crew. When the ship leaves the harbour, the Narcissus is described as resembling

an enormous and aquatic black beetle, surprised by the light, overwhelmed by the sunshine, trying to escape with ineffectual effort into the distant gloom of the land. She left a lingering smudge of smoke on the sky, and two vanishing trails of foam on the water. On the place where she had stopped a round black patch of soot remained, undulating on the swell -- an unclean mark of the creature's rest (27).

This description offers the reader of the early Conrad an interesting example of how he interweaves description and theme. The word "beetle" conjures up images of a small, vulnerable and slow-moving creature which can easily be trapped. Furthermore, it

<sup>6</sup> It is obvious from these passages that Conrad's verbal portraits are usually dominated by a particular colour and a hazy atmosphere. This technique is also used in the other texts: for example, Inamdar (205) points out a number of images with visual connotations, such as the contrast between the green jungle and the brown waters of the river in Almayer's Folly; or Aissa's wearing of crimson and white flowers, colours which prefigure her and Willems' death; there is also the multivalency of the colour white in "Heart of Darkness," and the repetition of "silver" in relation to Nostromo's various appearances and ultimate obsession with the silver. These colours have the function of attracting the reader's attention in order to establish an impression in his mind and support the notion of the interdependence between description and thematics, as it clear that these colour images blend into different fictional categories.

foreshadows the insignificance of the crew and their attempts to overcome the storm. Their isolation on board the ship caught in a raging storm on a vast ocean is presented a number of times and in a number of different configurations, the combined effect of which is -- in the words of Cox (Writers 136) -- to represent "an archetype of human society on its journey through an inexplicable universe." The symbolic connotations of "black," "soot," and "unclean" provide further symbolic significance to the first description of the crew, which is described as "a shadowy mob of heads visible above the blackness of starboard bulwarks" whose members only step "into the circle of light" (15-16) when Mr. Baker calls out their names.

Despite his so-called "dispute" with the concept of impressionism,<sup>7</sup> almost all Conrad's novels adhere to these "guidelines" articulated by Ford in his comment on fictional openings. Translated into more theoretical terms, it is clear that Conrad uses descriptions to "frame" the narrative, in the same way Lotman describes (209-217). Lotman's argument is briefly that the text -- which is finite -- presents a model of the infinite world outside the text. The essence of the world outside the text is translated into the medium of language. The beginning of a text (often a richly

<sup>7</sup> One of the passages quoted most often to illustrate Conrad's "aversion" to literary impressionism is his comment on Crane's work: "He [Crane] is the only impressionist and only an impressionist" (CLJC 1, 416). The same goes for the received critical opinion of his dislike of Impressionist painting, documented by Hay ("Impressionism" 141, 143). More recently Gene Moore, through a detailed reconstruction of Conrad's probable contact with Impressionist painting, was forced to come to the conclusion that what "Conrad actually thought of the works of Cézanne, Van Gogh, and the other Impressionists -- assuming he ever saw them, or noticed the ones he did see -- must apparently remain a mystery" (175).

descriptive passage) has a defining function, in that it provides the reader with concrete information about the precise moment in the narrative, and suggests the action preceding the beginning of the plot. The reader will proceed to decode the text which, in turn, may attempt to thwart the various processes of decoding in terms of the information given at the beginning of the text.

Conrad's "beginnings" are not, however, restricted to the first chapters of his works. Very often the opening paragraphs of successive chapters build upon "impressions" created in the first paragraphs of the first chapter. In the case of NN, the space of the Narcissus is constantly kept in the reader's focus through the opening lines of the first three chapters: "MR. BAKER, chief mate of the ship Narcissus stepped in one stride...(Ch. 1); "NEXT morning, at daylight, the Narcissus went to sea" (Ch. 2); and: "MEANTIME the Narcissus, with square yards, ran out of the fair monsoon" (Ch. 3).

These lines, along with the evocative openings following them, can -- when combined with the continuous shift in narrative perspective -- be likened to what Gillon ("Painter" 254) calls "verbal paintings," snapshots, or the roving pictures of a moving camera. For example, in the opening passages of chapter two we find some of the most strikingly descriptive and suggestive passages anywhere in Conrad's early work. Notice, for example, how subtly the spatial dimensions are foregrounded by a shift in perspective:

Next morning, at daylight, the Narcissus went to sea.

A slight haze blurred the horizon. Outside the harbour the measureless expanse of smooth water lay sparkling like a floor of jewels, and as empty as the sky...The loose

upper canvas blew out in the breeze with soft round contours, resembling small white clouds snared in the maze of ropes. Then the sheets were hauled home, the yards hoisted, and the ship became a high and lonely pyramid, gliding, all shining and white, through the sunlit mist (27).

The reader is forced to follow the observer's gaze, which is made to rest on three different, but related, foci: first, there is the confined space of the Narcissus; then there is the contrasting wide expanse of the ocean, followed by a view of the microcosm of the crew with Captain Allistoun as "ruler of that minute world" (31). The reader's perspective is guided along the near vs far axis, from concrete to abstract and he or she "sees" in one glance the perceptible foreground (the Narcissus), and the background (the horizon). The three dominant modes of perception in this passage are all directly related to general impressionist practice. Note how the direct, visual observation blends into the second mode, that of reflection, while the third mode -- the clusters of metaphors suggesting a mythical voyage -- become a constituent of both (Lothe 90).

The interwoven nature of this passage not only corroborates the idea of an interdependence between the elements of the atmospheric "triad" -- description, narration and thematics -- but provides an intricate example of how this interaction creates the particular atmosphere of a work, while at the same time enhancing the theme through the symbolic density of this, and other related passages. Two illustrations will bear this out: in this passage the perennial Conradian theme of isolation -- manifested here in the relief of the "lonely pyramid" against the "measureless expanse" -- is hinted at by



the movement of the reader's eye from the ship, out to the measureless horizon and back again.

On another level, the purgatorial experience of the crew during the storm, and their confrontation with the moral challenge of anarchy represented by the waster, Donkin, and Wait, move the crew from the one end of the continuum of black vs white, evil vs good, dark vs light, towards the other end, thereby reinforcing the circular structure of the narrative and the spatial focus of the novella. Note, however, that the contrast between the descriptions of the crew at the start and end of the voyage also has symbolic implications:

A lot trooped in at once but many were late. The room was large, white-washed, and bare; a counter surmounted by a brass-wire grating fenced off a third of the dusty space, and behind the grating a pasty-faced clerk, with his hair parted in the middle, had the quick, glittering eyes and the vivacious, jerky movements of a caged bird...The crew of the Narcissus, broken up into knots, pushed in the corners. They had new shore togs, smart jackets that looked as if they had been shaped by an axe, glossy trousers that seemed made of crumpled sheet-iron, collarless flannel shirts, shiny new boots...Most had clean, radiant faces (167-8).

The "shadowy mob of heads," barely visible in the dark, are now smartly dressed, with "clean radiant faces," and are now described in terms which conjure up military precision: "shaped by an axe," "made of crumpled sheet-iron," and "shiny new boots." In a manner reminiscent of the way in which order is restored in Shakespeare's plays when the force of evil is removed, the thematic import of this descriptive passage is that the equilibrium has been restored, and the cosmic forces "pacified" by the removal of the "intruder," Wait.

To return to the opening passage of chapter two: the implied reference to a "halo" or "haze" -- which was later recognized by critics as the sine qua non of Conradian atmospheric evocations -- is already evident in this early impressionistic piece where the play of light creates a "blurred horizon" through the "sunlit mist." This "mistiness" is emphasized by words such as "haze," "blurred," "measureless," "empty," and "breeze." Conrad uses aspects of the same technique to introduce the initial descriptions of Singleton, Donkin and Captain Allistoun:

Old Singleton, the oldest able seaman in the ship, sat apart on the deck right under the lamps...Between the blue and red patterns his white skin gleamed like satin...With his spectacles and a venerable white beard, he resembled a learned and savage patriarch, the incarnation of barbarian wisdom serene in the blasphemous turmoil of the world (6; my emphasis).

Another new hand -- a man with shifty eyes and a yellow hatchet face, who had been listening open mouthed in the shadow of the midship locker -- observed in a squeaky voice: 'Well, it's a 'omeward trip, anyhow...' (9; my emphasis).

Captain Allistoun, serious, and with an old red muffler round his throat, all day long pervaded the poop. At night, many times he rose out of the darkness of the companion, such as a phantom above a grave, and stood watchful and mute under the stars, his night-shirt fluttering like a flag -- then, without a sound, sank down again (30; my emphasis).

In each of these passages, Conrad breaks down matter to "evoke" character by moving from the description of the figure to the immediate atmosphere surrounding him. In typical impressionistic fashion, the setting against which each character has to be "read" is imbued with an eerie, phantomlike aura. In the first passage, Singleton sits Buddha-like under the full focus of the gleaming light

which etches the red and blue rings on his white skin, suggesting an almost funereal impression; the presence of the shadowy character in the second example is suggested not only by his namelessness, but also by his features and shadow; and, in the last passage, only one of Allistoun's features -- his throat -- is mentioned before he is compared to a phantom. In each of these instances character is educed by an interplay between an instantaneous impression of one physical feature of the character and mysterious and enigmatic atmosphere or "haze" surrounding the characters.

The technique used here strongly reminds one of Virginia Woolf's famous description of perception in her seminal essay, "Modern Fiction" (1919): "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" (88). The impression created by each of these passages is precisely that of a "semi-transparent envelope" which not only surrounds the characters, but which is everywhere in nature and complicates humankind's understanding of the universe. It is precisely this "envelope," or impressionistic atmosphere, which has to be penetrated if the world beyond it is to be "read" and "understood," both by the characters as they struggle to "see" beyond their immediate position in space and time, and by the reader who can only enter into this simulated game of interpretation by "breaking down" the atmosphere into its constituent parts. Even at this early stage in Conrad's career, the faint echoes of the omniscient narrator's famous observation in "Heart of Darkness" -- "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 those misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine " ("HoD" 138) -- are clearly "audible" in these descriptions.

Yet it is not only Conrad's beginnings which have an elusive and vague atmosphere. The beginnings set in motion a momentum which continues in the build-up of the whole work's atmosphere. Consider the following passage which follows the opening sections of the tale. Here the reader is given a series of random impressions of the preparation of the Narcissus and some of the crew, narrated by an unknown narrator:

Outside the glare of the steaming forecastle the serene purity of the night enveloped the seamen with its soothing breath, with its tepid breath flowing under the stars that hung countless above the mastheads in a thin cloud of luminous dust. On the town side the blackness of the water was streaked with trails of light which undulated gently on slight ripples, similar to filaments that float rooted to the shore. Rows of other lights stood away in straight lines as if drawn up on parade between towering buildings; but on the other side of the harbour sombre hills arched high their black spines, on which, here and there, the point of a star resembled a spark fallen from the sky. Far off, Byculla way, the electric lamps at the dock gates shone on the end of lofty standards with a glow blinding and frigid like captive ghosts of some evil moons. Scattered all over the dark polish of the roadstead, the ships at anchor floated in perfect stillness under the feeble gleam of their riding-lights, looming up, opaque and bulky, like strange and monumental structures abandoned by men to an everlasting repose (14-15).

Conrad here combines a large number of impressionist techniques and characteristics discussed thus far, all of which graphically foreground the specific spatial and colour focus of the novella. The sheer strength with which the physical world impinges on the human

senses is represented in vivid detail. The words "captive ghosts" highlight the impression of an intangible moment in time, frozen, and "plucked out" of its normal progression. The silence and immobility suggested in this passage have both spatial and thematic implications: the sense of opposition - "Outside" vs "inside," "On the town side" vs the "other side," the distance between the observed object -- "Far off" -- and the implied closeness of the observer's vantage point all serve to provide a good illustration of what Watts calls the "dwarfing perspective" ("Technique" 143). The observer's field of vision is extended outward, from the forecandle out to "Byculla way." This perspective offers a reductive view of human activities, graphically illustrating one of Benson's central tenets, namely that for Conrad, "a description, and by implication an explanation, of physical reality is fundamental to a faithful account of human moral and spiritual experience" ("Painting" 138). The vast space not only invokes an awareness of the immensity of the cosmic space in which the observer is but a minuscule object, but at the same time enhances the sense of isolation. A second thematic perspective found in this passage lies in the idea of a frozen immobility, of a moment in time trapped in this vast space. This suggestion of entrapment will develop and become more obvious as the novella progresses.

As so often happens in Conrad, the setting here becomes much more than just the "background," or mere "description." Instead, by creating an elusive and mysterious atmosphere, setting is foregrounded, much like the function of setting in the works of Van Gogh, Matisse, and Picasso. In their work, setting becomes foreground

rather than background, and the physical conditions under which the imagined world functions become a "moral labyrinth which the characters are unable to negotiate and which not only shapes their destiny but also subsumes them" (Schwarz, Transformation 22).

The "labyrinth" which the characters are "unable to negotiate" can be encoded into the central premiss which this thesis argues, namely that this illustrates humankind's attempts to penetrate the atmosphere and "read" the "space" in which it finds itself. The strong emphasis on sight and visual observation, emphasized by at least seventeen words and phrases with visual connotations -- "glare," "stars," "luminous dust," "blackness," "rails of light," "lights," "spark," "blinding," "opaque," "glow," "gleam," and so forth -- amplifies and foregrounds the impressionist notion of "separate fleeting impressions" (Stowell 14). The function of what Lucas (125) has called "epithetic adjectives and adverbials" is to provide optional information which -- if omitted -- would not change the sense of the description in a fundamental way, but when added, contribute significantly towards the creation of a certain atmosphere. Translated into a painting metaphor, one could liken the function of these visual categories to touches of a painter's brush to heighten the colours, to intensify the impression, to make the reader "see," which, in Conrad's fiction, almost always implies the impressionist fusion between concrete and abstract.

Conrad's endings, be they the endings of novels,<sup>8</sup> or of individual chapters, also provide important insights into the way in which description shades into narration and theme. Take, for example, the passage at the end of the first chapter of NN, and compare it with a very powerful passage from Lord Jim, which appears at the end of chapter twenty six:

Singleton stood at the door with his face to the light and his back to the darkness. And alone in the dim emptiness of the sleeping forecastle he appeared bigger, colossal, very old; old as Father Time himself, who should have come there into this place as quiet as a sepulchre to contemplate with patient eyes the short victory of sleep, the consoler. Yet he was only a child of time, a lonely relic of a devoured and forgotten generation (24; my emphasis).

The passage from Lord Jim reads as follows:

He stood erect, the smouldering brier-wood in his clutch, with a smile on his lips and a sparkle in his boyish eyes. I sat on the stump of a tree at his feet, and below us stretched the land, the great expanse of the forest, sombre under the sunshine, rolling like a sea, with glints of winding rivers, the grey spots of villages, and here and there a clearing, like an islet of light amongst the dark waves of continuous tree-tops. A brooding gloom lay over this vast and monotonous landscape; the light fell on it as if into an abyss. The land devoured the sunshine; only far off, along the coast, the empty ocean, smooth and polished within the faint haze, seemed to rise up to the sky in a wall of steel (264-65).

This comparison synthesizes a number of pivotal aspects regarding Conrad's variegated use of description. The first important point to note is the graphic effect achieved in these passages, as the sketchiness of the characters -- glimpsed very briefly and intensely against wider and overwhelming background, leaves the reader with such

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<sup>8</sup> See Davidson (1984) for a detailed discussion of some of the formal properties of Conrad's fictional endings.

a fragmentary experience that it becomes very difficult to detect and interpret the characters' actions.<sup>9</sup> In both descriptions, Conrad's choice of words succeeds in presenting the elusive nature of this imaginary space. The reader's field of vision first focuses on the concrete details of the immediate object of observation, and is extended out to what Faris calls the "luminous activity" of the sea and sky (313).<sup>10</sup> Colour, light and darkness become the symbol of time, of "now" vs "then." In both these passages the characters are depicted against a background of light in a way not dissimilar to the Impressionist painters' use of light and shade.

The interrelationship between description and narration is particularly striking. Both these passages have three divergent, but related, foci. The first focus is on the characters, Singleton and Jim; the second falls on a contained space, the ship, and the landscape; while the third point of focus progressively extends the observer's gaze further and further into an almost metaphysical space occupied by the abstract and fluid entities of time, darkness and

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<sup>9</sup> Cedric Watts calls this use of description an empirical hyperbole: "[T]he observer's fidelity to the immediate testimony of his senses entails the subordination or exclusion of conventional notions of the function, role or order of what is observed. Experience becomes at once vivid and recalcitrant" ("Techniques" 141).

<sup>10</sup> Gould, in an early review of Victory published in the New Statesman on 2 October 1915, also compared the works of Turner and Conrad in a way which captures all the very same ingredients of the Conradian triad at work here -- narrative (implied by "delineator" as opposed to "portrait painter"); theme (pathetic and fugitive human figures); and description ("fuliginous spaces"): "Mr. Conrad is here no more than a character-delineator (as in the sense in which Thackeray is, say, or Meredith), than Turner was a portrait painter. As in Turner, the human figures are pathetic and fugitive against lurid and fuliginous spaces" (Sherry documents 300; my emphasis).



light. While this is less so in NN than in LJ, both deal with comprehension and communication. The NN passage confronts the reader with an unknown narrator's vision, while in the LJ passage the reader has to deal with the opacities of Marlow's vision and the transparent film through which the reader sees and traces the movement of the characters in space and time. In both passages the characters move in and out of focus through the narrator's descriptions. The spatial connotations of the worlds of Singleton and Jim -- in the words of Conrad -- "spring up on every side" (CLJC 1, 331), and emphasize the forceful impact that the physical world has on the creation of Conrad's fictional world.

These passages with their graphic and vivid visual description all evoke fragmentary glimpses of objects, people, forms, and movements, which, in turn, constitute the bare fragments of the Conradian cosmos -- space, darkness, motion, atmosphere and mystery. Or, phrased in another way: both these passages correspond in varying degrees with Conrad's "dictum" laid down in the Preface of NN:

To arrest, for the space of a breath, the hands busy about the work of the earth, and compel men entranced by the sight of distant goals to glance for a moment at the surrounding vision of form and colour, of sunshine and shadows; to make them pause for a look, for a sigh, for a smile -- such is the aim, difficult and evanescent, and reserved for a very few to achieve. But sometimes, by the deserving and the fortunate, even that task is accomplished. And when it is accomplished -- behold! -- all the truth of life is there: a moment of vision, a sigh, a smile -- and the return to an eternal rest (xliv).

Conrad presents a series of momentary impressions which can be seen as the "shorthand" (Gillon, "Painter" 258) of his story-telling art. He first creates a series of "charcoal sketches" and

"impressions" from a distance. As the tale progresses, the reader is provided with some details; and at crucial moments, Conrad then -- like a cameraman -- "zooms in" for dramatic effect. Although it may not be apparent immediately, each scene, each narrative point of view, adds a significant detail to the fictional canvas, filling in a blank spot, or adding another "layer" of "paint." It is the reader's task to assemble these details, these Woolfian "impressions," into one comprehensive canvass as they fall "upon the mind," and shape them into "the life of Monday or Tuesday" by linking them and placing them within the narrative and thematic matrices of the text.

#### IV

"[T]he value of the book lies in the telling, and not in the events of the tale" (Sherry documents 90). This comment, quoted from an unsigned review published in the Daily Chronicle of 22nd December 1897, is but one of the many examples emphasizing the fascination that Conrad's unusual narrative techniques held for his first readers. While the narrative techniques of his first two novels -- Almayer's Folly and An Outcast of the Islands, or those of NN -- are not nearly as complex as those in "Heart of Darkness" or Lord Jim, they represent in embryonic form the strong emphasis that Conrad would place on a shifting and merging of perspectives and visual impressions. The crucial point which emerges from a consideration of the narrative

strategies employed in NN, is that a distinct and necessary interaction between description, narrative and thematics becomes evident in this text, an interaction that would become more intradependent and complicated in each of the subsequent works. This aspect of narrative technique is captured very succinctly by Zaal, and underscores the idea of the multivalency of language which blends into different kinds of meaning:

While the narrative technique of this early masterpiece [NN] shows a distinct development, there is an advance also in the non-narrative sphere of its imagery. In The Nigger as in the first two works, Conrad, following his French realist masters, is concerned to give his narrative a densely sensuous texture. Most of the imagery of the novella is purely descriptive and subserves the narrative. But he begins tentatively to add an imaginative dimension to the confined world of the ship. The images of this kind, mostly similes and metaphors, are counterpointed to the narrative to provide a potentially powerful vehicle for mood and theme, though their effect in The Nigger is as yet ill-defined (6).

A great deal has been written about Conrad's narrative technique in general, with some of the most notable and authoritative work being presented in Jakob Lothe's Conrad's Narrative Method (1991), and Jeremy Hawthorn's Joseph Conrad: Narrative Technique and Ideological Commitment (1992). Instead of repeating what these critics have already said, this section will build on the argument presented in the first part of this chapter by focusing on the role of narrative as "a potentially powerful vehicle for mood and theme," and will do so briefly by examining some aspects of the narrative techniques used in NN, but -- more importantly -- showing how the interaction of narrative and description contribute to the overall development of theme.

The first aspect to be noted is that, in a writer whose work is as densely textured as Conrad's, each passage, and indeed, each sentence, contains either descriptive, narrative or thematic elements which can in most instances be used to illustrate the working of any of these constituent parts. In practice this means that the strikingly visual passages used in the evocation of atmosphere also have a narrative function. The alternation between descriptive passages with a brooding or retrospective nature, and a dialogue, an interior monologue, or third person narrative passages forces the reader to -- in the words of Henry James -- create "stopping places" in the novel which foreground the preceding action.<sup>11</sup> This notion of "stopping places" in the narrative is also given prominence in Edward Said's list of retrospective and investigative narrative devices often employed by Conrad, such as the inquiry (Lord Jim), historical reporting (Nostromo), methodical quest ("Heart of Darkness"), the translation (Under Western Eyes), and the ironic investigation (The Secret Agent) (World 96). Each of these techniques has an epistemological function as it forces the reader to re-examine and re-interpret the preceding action.

Iser's theoretical description of the reading process in The Act of Reading (1978) provides important perspectives on the argument developed so far, particularly as his work not only suggests convenient concepts with which to describe a reader's cognizance and

<sup>11</sup> Kestner (110-11) also sees framing as a device of narrative retardation, a spatial practice which opposes the temporal movement in a narrative. Both Lotman and Kestner's notions of framing are equally applicable to the function of descriptions within this, and other Conradian narratives.

interpretation of the various constituent aspects of a novel, but also gives valuable insight into the interactive and complementary nature of these elements, and the way in which this complementarity influences the reader's interpretation of the work as a whole. A second valuable contribution is that these observations also allow one to generalize about the processes involved in the reading of other impressionist texts. For example, Iser argues that a novel does not point to a referential reality, but represents a pattern, a "structured indication to guide the imagination of the reader" (9). This pattern is incomplete and full of "gaps," "blanks," or "indeterminacies" which the reader must "fill in," thereby constructing a Gestalt of the novel by linking the various perspectives. The analogy between the reading process and a coach journey is particularly relevant to the reader's actions as he or she "processes" a text with impressionistic qualities:

[The reader can be] likened to a traveller in a stagecoach who has to make the difficult journey through the novel, gazing out from his moving perspective. Naturally, he combines all that he sees within his memory and establishes a pattern of consistency, the nature and reliability of which will depend partly on the degree of attention he had paid during each phase of the journey. At no time, however, can he have a total view of that journey (16).

Exactly how does this have an effect on the way in which the reader interprets Conrad's narrative technique? A comparison with impressionist painting will illustrate this point. Just as Monet's series of paintings of the cathedral at Rouen can be "read" as a "narrative" in which the particular painting under consideration only really achieves an impact when contrasted with the preceding one, so

the atmospheric descriptions in NN -- and all the other texts under discussion in this thesis -- have a specific narrative function in that they provide the reader with breaks in the narrative which may force him or her to reassess the implication of the action which has preceded the atmospheric description, the symbolic connotations of some of the motifs used, the importance of the conversation, and so on.

Conrad's narratives also share another noteworthy characteristic, namely the many sudden changes from a narrative to a descriptive mode, and vice versa. The importance of this recurrent phenomenon in Conrad's texts is easily missed because of the often subtle way in which narration almost "shades into" description. It is important to note that Conrad's spatial descriptions are, in a sense, always related to aspects of time and temporal arrangement.<sup>12</sup> A strong visual impression is often -- as indicated in the impressionistic descriptions discussed earlier -- intensified because it lasts only for a short while, taking the form of a sudden insight, or with a gathering together of ideas and impressions developed up to that point in the narrative. These "impressionistic" passages contrast quite strongly with the hustle and excitement aboard the Narcissus, described and punctuated by short truncated sentences and

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<sup>12</sup> Gerard Genette's succinctly summarizes this interaction in his famous paper, "Frontières de récit," when he states that "Narration attaches itself to actions and events considered as pure processes, and thus it puts the emphasis on the temporal and dramatic aspects of récit; description on the contrary, because it lingers on objects and things considered in their simultaneity, and because it envisages processes themselves as spectacles, seems to suspend the course of time and contributes to spread the récit in space" (59).

phrases at the beginning of the novel, thereby underscoring the fact that, in Conrad, descriptive passages are always strongly linked with the slackening of narrative progression. Consider, for example, the excitement of the first few pages:

The two fore-castle lamps were turned up high, and shed an intense hard glare...white collars, undone, stuck out on each side of red faces; big arms in white sleeves gesticulated; the growling voices hummed steady amongst bursts of laughter and hoarse calls. 'Here, sonny, take that bunk!...Don't you do it!...What's your last ship?...I know her...Three years ago, in Puget Sound...This here berth leaks, I tell you!... Come on, give us a chance to swing that chest!' (5).

As a practical illustration of the link between description and narrative progression, the reader here arrives at a point of stasis in the narrative after having been exposed to the excitement and tension of the first few pages. It is fairly clear from this passage that the sudden change from a narrative into a descriptive mode underscores the relation which exists between his spatial descriptions and the aspects of time and temporal arrangement.

Conrad's use of various kinds of narrators complements the descriptive and thematic matrices of the novel. Berthoud (29), for example, argues that the role of the anonymous seaman acting as narrator whose attention, moving from one character, or event to another, is to create a gradual impression of unity. Lothe (20), on the other hand, is of the opinion that the use of a personal narrator enables Conrad to dramatize parts more convincingly, which, in turn, brings the theme more clearly into focus. Given the premiss of this thesis, Lothe's notion is especially relevant, particularly when one considers the sudden and unexpected switching between descriptive and

narrative modes -- which naturally enhances the dramatic effect of the switch -- and the interdependency between narrative and thematics.

The narrative in NN is fairly straightforward and linear and is made up of a rapid succession of pictures which emphasizes both the interaction of the "atmospheric triad" and the creation of a fictional space. These pictures present the men, the officers and James Wait either singly or in groups; they find themselves in the forecabin and on deck, forward, amidships and on the poop. Frequent descriptions of the ship as these would have appeared to a distant observer -- pictures of the sea as it appeared from the ship, pictures of particular parts of the ship as seen from other parts on board, and pictures of the land as it disappears from sight -- are presented to the reader. The same goes for the presentation of vignettes of the characters in thought about themselves, of the men as they appeared to the officers, and vice-versa. There are conversations and the cacophony of excited voices shouting fragments of speech. Yet, as Ambrosini rightly notes, the conflict of points of view does not produce a dissonant effect, but has rather the opposite effect as the "symphony of speeches, dialects, whispers and secret thoughts lends a choral quality to the voices of the ship's community" (68). While this view could generally be supported as far as NN is concerned, it must be pointed out at this early stage in the thesis that, in contrast to the sense of "symphony" in NN, the many "voices" and "readings" in "HoD," LJ, and N will have the opposite effect, namely that of a multitude of discordant voices. This "multiplicity" of voices will become an important distinguishing characteristic of



Conrad's work after 1899, and will be explored in some detail in the rest of the thesis.

Be this as it may, the important point to note is that, in NN, we already find Conrad's first attempts -- albeit in rudimentary form -- to portray the characters' isolation and epistemological frustration by evoking a large and dramatic cosmic space, as well as trying to construct their psychological space. In NN, the "outside" pictures of the characters reinforce and complement the "inside" pictures created by the unknown narrator by adding more "colour" or "shading" the picture as in, for instance, the case of the mysterious James Wait. The development of this "interiorization" will become more obvious when one considers how Conrad's internal focus is intensified in the symbolic world of "HoD," the psychological space of Lord Jim, or even the mythical space of Nostramo.

As indicated earlier, the storm and its aftermath described in chapter three of NN form the central focus of the narrative, both structurally and thematically. The whole chapter is devoted to colourful -- even if at times somewhat excessive and anti-climactic -- descriptions of the gale and the dramatic account of Wait's rescue. What is of particular importance is the way in which the storm dislodges the ship from its plotted course, foregrounding its cosmic proportions while at the same time inducing a sense of complete disorientation in the sailors, a disorientation which undermines even what they had regarded as the fixed notions of space, time and matter.

Rephrased in the painting metaphor used earlier, the first two, and the last two chapters can be seen as the "frame" of the "canvas" depicting the storm, illustrating how description has a narrative function as well. The visual impressions in Conrad are intensified because they not only last a short while, but also because they demand such scrutiny that they in effect lead to a slackening of narrative progression.

Thematically, the storm reaffirms Conrad's vision of man's fate when pitted against the forces of the universe and links up intertextually<sup>13</sup> with the Conradian theme of man's isolation.

The role of narrative technique as part of the Conradian triad is not as important in NN as it is in, say, "HoD," or LJ. What is important to take cognizance of, is the way in which it supports and complements description and thematics; or, phrased in Lothe's words, to be aware that the narrative, "[c]ombined with the authorial narrative -- diversified through the varying use of personal pronouns -- contributes to the dramatic effectiveness of the narration, and

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<sup>13</sup> "Intertextuality" has often been touted as the panacea for many of the pitfalls in historical approaches to literature. One of the main problems with the concept is, however, that it is used in different contexts without the exact meaning being defined. Plottel and Charney (vii) succinctly summarize some of the various contexts in which the concept is used: "For some authors, the notion of intertextuality opens all cultural facts and artifacts to the internal exchanges between them, or it opens up words to make them yield the 'infinite modalities' of language. Other writers turn to the more discursive and rational dialogue between literary texts. Still others spring free the text itself of its referential bounds, while many read, as the perfectly apt expression goes, between the lines." The concept is used in this thesis to indicate the dialogue which exists between all the texts in a writer's oeuvre.

also provides a productive method of constituting, developing and confirming the book's thematic concerns" (100; my emphasis).

V

One of the central thematic interests for Conrad throughout his life was what Jeremy Hawthorn, in an introductory essay on The Shadow-Line, calls "the fascinating tension between isolation and collectivity" (Introduction x). In fact, Conrad himself raised the aspect of isolation in a letter to Henry S. Canby, written on 7 April 1924, explaining what he had tried to do twenty-seven years earlier:

In the Nigger I give the psychology of a group of men and render certain aspects of nature. But the problem that faces them is not a problem of the sea, it is merely a problem that has arisen on board a ship were the conditions of complete isolation from all land entanglements make it stand out with particular force and colouring (Life and Letters 2, 342).

This category of isolation has its own built-in dynamics, namely that between individual and collective isolation. In this concluding part of the chapter, the way in which Conrad uses impressionistic descriptive techniques to amplify the central thematics in NN, will be examined.

As can be expected from a writer who has had personal experience of commanding a ship, the ship's captain plays a pivotal

role in works like "Typhoon" (1903), "Falk" (1903), "The Secret Sharer" (1912), and The Shadow-Line (1917), in that individual isolation is encapsulated in the character and bearing of the captain. The same holds true for NN: consider, for example, this description of Captain Allistoun:

Captain Allistoun, serious, and with an old red muffler round his throat, all day long pervaded the poop. At night, many times he rose out of the darkness of the companion, such as a phantom above a grave, and stood watchful and mute under the stars, his nightshirt fluttering like a flag-then, without a sound, sank down again...He, the ruler of that minute world, seldom descended from the Olympian heights of his poop. Below him, at his feet, so to speak -- common mortals led their busy and insignificant lives (30-31; my emphasis).

Allistoun is isolated from the crew because of his position of authority. He is also in the minority when the attempted mutiny threatens to nullify this position of authority and indeed the very survival of the ship. In this passage, Conrad paints Allistoun's figure against the relief of a vague mist of the immediate atmosphere surrounding him -- he is like a "phantom" rising from a "grave." The horizon is blurred by the phantomlike aura which is so indicative of the impressionist styles in both painting and literature.

Other important examples of individual isolation can be found in the character and bearing of Singleton and Wait. Singleton's isolation from the rest of the crew is clearly indicated in the following two passages:

Old Singleton, the oldest able seaman in the ship, sat apart on the deck right under the lamps...Between the blue and red patterns his white skin gleamed like satin...With his spectacles and a venerable white beard, he resembled a learned and savage patriarch, the incarnation of barbarian

wisdom serene in the blasphemous turmoil of the world (6; my emphasis);

and:

Singleton stood at the door with his face to the light and his back to the darkness. And alone in the dim emptiness of the sleeping forecastle he appeared bigger, colossal, very old; old as Father Time himself, who should have come there into this place as quiet as a sepulchre to contemplate with patient eyes the short victory of sleep, the consoler. Yet he was only a child of time, a lonely relic of a devoured and forgotten generation (24; my emphasis).

Singleton's isolation results from the difference in age and experience which exists between him and the crew. But, more importantly, this "setting apart" is rendered through means of visual detail presented in an impressionist manner: he is most often associated with light, as opposed to the darkness which envelops the rest of the crew.

The most important example of individual isolation is that of James Wait. His "Otherness" is not only foregrounded by the central position of the word "Nigger" in the title, but also by the way in which his first and second appearances -- discussed earlier in this chapter -- are described so that these descriptions enhance one's initial impression of him, while at the same time preparing the reader for the threat which Wait's strong individuality will pose to the collective good of the ship and the crew. All the passages suggesting his isolation culminate in the lengthy description of the storm and his claustrophobic experience in his cabin during the storm (63-71).

The main methods used to depict the underlying thematic assumptions of the "individual vs collective isolation" opposition are

those of narration (particularly the device of varying perspective), and descriptive technique. The theme of the collective isolation of the crew is emphasized by four consecutive "sunscapes." Note, however, that the effect of these sunscapes does not result from the reader's "processing" of each individual sunscape, but rather from the cumulative effect resulting from this "string" of narrative descriptions, much like the "descriptive narrative" resulting from Monet's paintings of the Rouen cathedral, mentioned earlier. It almost seems as if Conrad wants the reader to plot -- like a ship's navigator -- his or her position in the narrative as the storm progresses by a re-orientation and reshaping of the reader's spatial perspective through these sunscapes.

The first sunscape establishes the spatial position of both ship and reader at the outset of chapter three and evokes the larger dimensions of cosmic space through an ever-widening perspective:

Then, again, with a fair wind and under a clear sky, the ship went on piling up the South Latitude. She passed outside Madagascar and Mauritius without a glimpse of the land...Anxious eyes looked westward, toward the cape of storms. The ship began to dip into a southwest swell, and the softly luminous sky of low latitudes took on a harder sheen from day to day above our heads: it arched high above the ship vibrating and pale, like an immense dome of steel, resonant with the deep voice of freshening gales. The sunshine gleamed cold on the white curls of black waves (48-9).

The spatial axes of this picture are again horizontal (east vs west) and down vs up: "The ship began to dip" vs "arched high above our heads." The already enclosed space of the ship is encapsulated under a "dome of steel," indicating the collective sense of isolation and captivity of the ship and its crew on the one hand, and

reinforcing the creation of a cosmic space in the narrative on the other. The "cold" sunshine is already an indication of impending disaster, enhanced by the foaming "black waves." The size of the ship appears miniscule in contrast to the dome and engenders a sense of disproportion, while the notion of disharmony is reaffirmed a few pages later when the crew is described as "fantastically misshapen...swaying clumsily...they resembled men strangely equipped for some fabulous adventure" (51-2).

The motif of entrapment introduced earlier in various configurations, here serves to prepare the reader for the far more overt and dramatic passage dealing with Wait's claustrophobic experience in his cabin, providing a powerful example of the interwoven density of Conrad's work, combining as it does the narrative and thematic levels of the novella.

The second sunscape is only a momentary event which -- despite its brevity -- dramatically heightens the sense of impending doom, while at the same time helping the reader to "navigate" through the dense and staccato-filled description of the storm: "For a moment a livid sun shot horizontally the last rays of sinister light between the hills of steep rolling waves" (53; my italics). Notice how the emotional momentum created in the first passage by words such as "dip," "arched," and "gleamed," is sustained by the use of the verb shot and the adjective sinister.

The third vignette focuses on the setting the sun and presents the reader with a much more complex and interwoven interplay of

spatial and thematic elements, making it a very useful passage to consider in some detail:

The sun was setting. A sun enormous, unclouded and red, declining low as if bending down to look into their faces. The wind whistled across long sunbeams that, resplendent and cold, struck full on the dilated pupils without making them wink...The wisps of hair and tangled beards were grey with the salt of the sea. The faces were earthy, and the dark patches under the eyes extended to the ears, smūdgéd into the hollows of sunken cheeks. The lips were livid and thin, as though they had been glued to the teeth. Some grinned sadly in the sunlight, shaking with cold. Others were sad and still. Charley, subdued by the sudden disclosure of the insignificance of his youth, darted fearful glances. The two Norwegians resembled decrepit children, staring stupidly. To leeward, on the edge of the horizon, black seas leaped up towards the glowing sun. It sank slowly, round and blazing, and the crests of waves splashed on the edge of the luminous circle (74-5).

The narrator's focus moves from a wide perspective -- the setting sun high up in the sky -- to a narrowing perspective, thereby again emphasizing the insignificance of human endeavours when measured against such a vast universe. The alternate spatial oppositions of "extrinsic vs intrinsic movement," "down vs up," and "horizontal vs vertical," form the various axes on which this moving perspective is based. The reader's perspective moves along the extrinsic vs intrinsic axis, and is directed downward from the heavens, and it seems as if the sun is attacking the already weary sailors, an impression which heightens one's awareness of the cosmic dimensions evoked in this scene. One's gaze is directed at individual features such as the eyes, hair and beards, on to the more complete picture -- "faces." In using the favourite impressionist technique of "piling up" impressions, it is almost as if the minutia of the faces, the eyes, lips, and ears, are visualized and emphasized even more by the



slow and deliberate focus which falls on each of these features, emphasizing that the storm has clearly taken its toll on the sailors. The reader's gaze is then guided along a horizontal plane, from groups of sailors to individuals, like Charley and the two Norwegians. The first impression which greets one along this horizontal axis, is one of vagueness and numbness. The nameless faces of "some" of the sailors only become individualized characters when the narrator adjusts his focus, which is abruptly moved outward again, from the ship to the "edge of the horizon" and upward towards the "luminous circle" with its connotation of a halo. The metaphor of aggression, implied in the passage by verbs such as "whistled," "leaped," and "splashed," emphasizes humankind's isolation and insignificance when measured against natural phenomena with cosmic proportions, such as the seas and the heavens.

Significant cosmic spatial dimensions are found in the next descriptive passage as the reader's eye is guided even further along the widening perspective of the vertical axis a few pages later:

On the black sky stars, coming out, gleamed over an inky sea that, speckled with foam, flashed back at them the evanescent and pale light of a dazzling whiteness born from the black turmoil of the waves. Remote in the eternal calm they glittered hard and cold above the uproar of the earth; they surrounded the vanquished and tormented ship on all sides: more pitiless than the eyes of a triumphant mob, and as unapproachable as the hearts of men (77).

The reader constantly has to adjust focus as his or her field of vision is guided back to the dome. In the final sunscape, the reader is provided with another "stopping place" from where he or she can assess his or her position and "plot" the interpretative course

ahead. Note that, in contrast to the other sunscapes, there is a positive tone and the promise of the calm after the storm is reinforced by the haziness of the colours:

The sky low by the horizon took on the delicate tints of pink and yellow like the inside of a rare shell. And higher, where it glowed with a pearly sheen, a small black cloud appeared, like a forgotten fragment of the night set in a border of dazzling gold. The beams of light skipped on the crests of waves. The eyes of men turned to eastward. The sunlight flooded their weary faces (84).

A comparison of these sunscapes reveals a number of important aspects which strengthen the similarities between the art of the painter and that of the novelist. The use of setting and scene has atmospheric and spatial implications for both media. It is clear from these passages that the changing perspective and focus foreground the spatial opposition between large and small, which, in turn, enhances the theme of collective isolation. This is especially significant in the use of verbs and adjectives, not only a useful guide to the strong spatial implications of these pivotal passages in the narrative, but one which contributes to the general theme of seclusion:

A sun enormous, unclouded and red, declining low as if bending down to look into their faces...

and:

The sky low by the horizon took on the delicate tints of pink and yellow like the inside of a rare shell.

In the first passage the sun appears to overwhelm everything, looking down from an exulted position, dissecting and exposing the very essence of each character's face, thereby isolating him from the rest of the crew. By way of contrast, the sun, in the next passage,

is "low by the horizon," on the same level as the characters. The harsh verbs "whistled" and "struck" have become more mellow. i.e. "glowed." The large number of words with visual connotations mostly leave one with a dark and dreary impression, qualifying this "painting" to stand in Horace's "dark corner":<sup>14</sup> "grey," "dark patches," "smudged," "sunken," "black seas," whereas the opposite is true of "delicate tints of pink and yellow," "pearly sheen," and "dazzling gold." The interaction between verbs and adjectives in the last few lines of each passage is also interesting, as this has thematic implications:

To leeward, on the edge of the horizon, black seas leaped up towards the glowing sun. It sank slowly, round and blazing, and the crests of waves splashed on the edge of the luminous circle.

The beams of light skipped on the crests of waves. The eyes of men turned eastward. The sunlight flooded their weary faces.

The verbs and adjectives reaffirm the basic opposition of negative vs positive, of attack vs reconciliation, and support the general "movement" in the narrative from the dark and negative descriptions of the land, to the light and positive description of the land when the Narcissus berths.

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<sup>14</sup> The use of visual detail by Conrad in these sunscapes strongly remind one of Horace's famous dictum ut pictura poesis, explained in his Ars Poetica: "A poem is like a painting: the closer you stand to this one the more it will impress you, whereas you have to stand a good distance from that one; this one demands a rather dark corner, but that one needs to be seen in full light, and will stand up to the keen-eyed scrutiny of the art critic; this one only pleased you the first time you saw it, but that one will go on giving you pleasure however often it is looked at" (Dorsch 91, line 361).

The sense of collective isolation is carried forward in the fourth chapter by a number of significant atmospheric passages which all strengthen the basic pattern established in the first three chapters. Conrad's technique of "framing" the central action with highly atmospheric passages, as discussed by Lotman and commented on earlier in this discussion, is used to great effect here. The crew has survived a terrible period at sea, experienced raging storms and felt the crashing of the waves on deck. But a careful reading of the "sub-text" of the following passage leaves one with the impression of an uneasy and tense calm after the storm:

It looked as if it would be a long passage. The south-east trades, light and unsteady, were left behind; and then, on the equator and under a low grey sky, the ship, in close heat, floated upon a smooth sea that resembled a sheet of ground glass. Thunder squalls hung on the horizon, circled round the ship, far off and growling angrily, like a troop of wild beasts afraid to charge home. The invisible sun, sweeping above the upright masts, made on the clouds a blurred stain of rayless light, and a similar patch of faded radiance kept pace with it from east to west over the unglittering level of the waters. At night, through the impenetrable darkness of earth and heaven, broad sheets of flame waved noiselessly; and for half a second, the becalmed craft stood out with its masts and rigging, with every sail and every rope distinct and black in a fiery outburst, like a charred ship enclosed in a glove of fire. And, again, for long hours she remained lost in a vast universe of night and silence where gentle sighs wandering here and there like forlorn souls, made the still sails flutter as in sudden fear, and the ripple of a beshrouded ocean whisper its compassion afar - in a voice mournful, immense, and faint...(103-104; my emphasis).

It would be natural to expect that the crew of a ship that has survived such a terrible storm would make the most of the good weather and try and get out of areas known for their violent storms. Yet no positive forward movement is suggested here. The ship seems to float

about aimlessly, as if unable to escape the oppressive effect of the "low grey sky." Expectations created by the first few lines of the passage are affirmed by the troop of squalls, hovering on the horizon, waiting for the right moment to attack. Notice that this war image reiterates the impression left by similar images discussed earlier, namely that the ship is under siege from forces far greater than it can cope with. The ship is followed by a "patch of faded radiance," and is never let out of sight, and it seems as if nature with its full force is waiting for the right moment to strike again. A sense of impending doom is heightened by the inevitable uncertainty brought by the "impenetrable darkness." The recurrent motif of an enclosed space is used very effectively here: just as Jimmy Wait had to go through the traumatic experience of being trapped in a water-logged cabin, so the crew is trapped in a "glove of fire." Words and phrases like "fiery outburst," "charred," "fire," and "lost in a vast universe of night and silence," conjure up a picture of purgatory, with the hapless sailors awaiting the decision of the gods. "[F]orlorn souls," "sudden fear," and "mournful" all underscore the general picture of a terrible fate awaiting the Narcissus. The dramatic impact of this passage and its symbolic and thematic sub-texts is enhanced by the chiaroscuro of colours, especially by the central role afforded the colour black. As pointed out, these descriptive passage retard the flow of the narrative, and this last passage is a very good illustration of this technique in action. Having painted an atmosphere of impending doom, Conrad has prepared the reader for Wait's death and the attempted mutiny.

In summary then, it is clear that the mood of the "atmospheric" passages in the novella is suggested by fairly obvious and overt symbols which contribute to the function of these passages, namely to create an air of expectation. The pattern created is not one which allows for Conrad's favourite device of ironic reversal; it is rather an accumulative series of vignettes, each of which builds on the effect of the previous vignette, and which adds its own particular colour to the total picture. Translated into the now familiar painting metaphor, these short descriptive passages seem to resemble a dab of additional paint added to give a darker hue to the picture. Yet the implicit potential for ironic reversal is there, and will develop in subtlety and suggestive power in the texts which follow NN.

This chapter set out to outline and illustrate the "mechanics" of the interaction between description, narrative technique and thematics in Conrad's first important "impressionistic" novella, and it is clear in NN that narrative and descriptive techniques are inextricably interwoven with Conrad's thematic concerns.

The dominant feature shared by all these atmospheric descriptions discussed in this chapter that will become increasingly important in the texts to follow, is that this atmospheric "filter" conditions the reader's response to the story as a whole. The oscillation of the observer's field of vision between claustrophobic spaces on the one hand, and the vast cosmic expanse on the other, underlines the dialectic between invoking and evoking cosmic space, as the vast atmospheric emptiness surrounding the ship, so spectacular in its variability, seems to be some kind of objective correlative for

the mental space experienced by humanity as a condition of its being. The emptiness is unresponsive to human volition, yet hugely influential in determining the course of events and registering the cosmic, and perhaps even metaphysical, dimensions of the story. Part of the reason for Conrad's evoking cosmic space is precisely to invoke this particular notion of human ontology and destiny. While still very much an "early" novella, NN displays in embryonic form many of the important impressionistic qualities which would eventually become characteristic of the major works produced between 1897 and 1904.

## Chapter Three

### "Heart of Darkness": Mapping Symbolic Space

I have no doubt that star-gazing is a fine occupation, for it leads you within the borders of the unattainable. But map-gazing, to which I became addicted so early, brings the problems of the great spaces of the earth into stimulating and directing contact with sane curiosity and gives an honest precision to one's imaginative faculty.

Conrad: "Geography and Some Explorers" (1924)

## I

Conrad was fascinated by geography, maps and space from an early age and his fiction, letters and non-fictional writings all have numerous allusions to maps and charts, geographical descriptions and features, and various kinds of space. This intense interest in the concept of space and its various manifestations inevitably found its way into the fiction of Conrad, the sailor and traveller, with its exotic settings, tales of voyages into the dangerous and uncharted waters of the East, and the penetration of imaginary spaces such as Costaguana. All these elements are characteristic of much of the early work such as Almayer's Folly, An Outcast of the Islands, "Karain" (1898), "The Lagoon" (1899), Romance (1903) and even Nostromo (1904). Of central importance to this chapter is the integral part



which maps and various kinds of space play in the narrative by "mapping" the symbolic space of "Heart of Darkness" ("HoD").

Sometimes Conrad's references to maps and space are deeply romanticized, revealing something of the "Lord Jim" in Conrad himself. At other times, his interest is expressed in a more pensive and philosophical tone. And -- when struggling to capture the essence of his craft -- his references to space become abstract and mysterious, illusive and even vacuous at times.

Reading and dreaming about voyages of exploration and discovery aroused an intense interest in the concept of space in the young Conrad who, one must remember, spent his childhood in a land-locked Poland and the Ukraine. One of the earliest records of Conrad's interest in distant lands is noted by Najder (33-34) who lists among Conrad's early reading interests the Polish journal Wedrowiec, which published many illustrated descriptions of travels and adventures, such as the tales of Polish explorers Pawel Edmund Strzelecki -- who mapped the Australian interior -- and Jan Kubary -- who had been exploring the Pacific islands. This reading matter, along with the influence of Romantic literature imbibed by his father may even have provided Conrad with the inspiration to set out to sea himself. For example, the deeply romanticized description of Ulysses' adventures published in The Mirror of the Sea (1906), is typical of this kind of influence:

Happy he who, like Ulysses, has made an adventurous voyage; and there is no such sea for adventurous voyages as the Mediterranean -- the inland sea which the ancients looked upon as so vast and so full of wonders...The dark and fearful sea of the subtle Ulysses' wanderings,

agitated by the wrath of Olympian gods, harbouring on its isles the fury of strange monsters and the wiles of strange women; the highway of heroes and sages, of warriors, pirates, and saints (MS 186-87).

The romantic cadences evident in this passage reverberate through much of his fiction. Phrases like "adventurous voyages," "the dark and fearful sea," the sea "so vast," and "so full of wonders," could almost be used as publishers' blurbs for Conrad's early novels and tales. It is common knowledge that his use of the sea and ocean as setting has earned him the label of a major writer of sea fiction. In many instances the allusions to the space of the ocean with its mysterious and awesome power are clothed in words and tones reminiscent of religious worship and genuflection. Take, for example, the following passage in Nostromo (1904):

The chief engineer strode on without a word, but I looked back once or twice at the feeble gleam. After we had gone some considerable distance, the Garibaldino, who was walking by my side, suddenly said, 'I have buried many men on battlefields on this continent. The priests talk of consecrated ground! Bah! All the earth made by God is holy; but the sea, which knows nothing of kings and priests and tyrants, is the holiest of all' (341).

Yet the sea was not the only thing which inspired him. Another significant example of how Conrad's reading of romantic stories about travel and exploration influenced his writing can be seen in the following passage from "HoD" -- it is difficult not to read some element of Conrad's personal background and history into Marlow's words:

Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a

map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, When I grow up I will go there (142).

The childhood dreams about travelling on the seven seas clearly provided Conrad with imaginative "impressions" around which he could build many of his episodes and tales. But they also made for more mature, pensive and philosophical thinking about these notions as this passage from the essay, "Geography and Some Explorers" (with its revealing original title "The Romance of Travel"[1924]) illustrates:

From the middle of the eighteenth century on, the business of map-making had been growing into an honest occupation, registering the hard-won knowledge, but also in a scientific spirit recording the ignorance of its time. And it was Africa, the continent out of which the Romans used to say some new thing was always coming, that got cleared of the dull imaginary wonders of the dark ages, which were replaced by exciting spaces of white paper. Regions unknown! My imagination could depict to itself there worthy, adventurous and devoted men, nibbling at the edges, attacking from north and south and east and west, conquering a bit of truth here and a bit of truth there, and sometimes swallowed up by the mystery their hearts were so persistently set on unveiling (LE 19-20).

The passage exudes a spirit of mystery and wonder, of quest and adventure, of danger and expectation, all constituent elements of the mysterious and pervasive atmosphere controlling what Curle (Study 90-91) calls the "nervous energy" of so many of Conrad's novels.

"Exciting spaces" and "regions unknown" find fictional counterparts in the natural, symbolic, psychological, social and political space in which Conrad's central characters are all isolated and alienated by their very attempts to unravel the mysteries of these unknown regions. "[N]orth and south and east and west" reaffirms this strong spatial orientation, and resurfaces in the spatial axes of the many descriptive passages in Conrad's fiction. "[E]dges," "conquering a

bit of truth," and "so persistently set on unveiling," allude to the central theme of interpretation, of trying to decipher the impressions foisted upon us through our senses, of "making sense" of the world around us. This aspect will be explored at some length in this chapter.

Sometimes when trying to put into words the very nature and essence of his craft, Conrad's allusions to space and maps assumed a more abstract form. As a fictional craftsman Conrad's interest in space was primarily an interest in novelistic "mapmaking," in the representation and interpretation of space as an arena through which the complex dynamics between an individual's consciousness and the surrounding world could be explored. This is clearly the subtext of a letter written to Marguerite Poradowska early in April 1884:

My thought goes wandering through vast spaces filled with shadowy forms. All is yet chaos, but, slowly, the apparitions change into living flesh, the shimmering mists take shape (CLJC 1, 151).

And again, in a letter to Edward Garnett, dated 29th March [1898], Conrad refers to the difficulty of his craft in spatial terms:

I feel my brain. I am distinc[t]ly conscious of the contents of my head. My story is there in a fluid -- in an evading shape. I can't get hold of it. It is all there -- to bursting, yet I Can't [sic] get hold of it no more that you can grasp a handful of water (CLJC 2, 50)

As a writer, Conrad's constant battle was to "shape" and transform into "living flesh" the "evading shape" of the "apparitions" and impressions. By trying to grasp the "shimmering mists," Conrad -- consciously or unconsciously -- often adhered to one of the basic tenets of impressionism, described by Kronegger as the "seizure of a

moment in time" ("Novel" 129), and his works are punctuated by scenes and episodes which try to do just that.

On the surface, these passages all illustrate Conrad's concern with space and matters geographical. But on a more abstract level, they illustrate the impinging of the physical universe on humankind's understanding of its world, the sensory "encoding" of these impressions of the physical world (and the demand that they be interpreted), the many diverse attempts at understanding or "decoding" these impressions (or the vigorous response to this demand for interpretation), the epistemological frustration emerging from the near impossibility of these endeavours, leading finally to existential isolation (the consequence of not fulfilling this demand). This interactive process is the source of the dynamics in all the novels under discussion, but is particularly relevant to "HoD" and forms the parameters within which the central argument of this chapter will be conducted. However, before exploring these particular notions and their relationship, it is important to make a brief, but necessary, detour in order to deal with the notion of the novelist as fictional cartographer.

The history of mapmaking documents the perennial contest between the known and the unknown. This conflict has a historical as well as a fictional dimension, and arises from the contrast between the knowing world, the world of the explorers, the people who "know" what the real geographical features of the particular space to be mapped are, and the mythic stories about the unknown world created by the writers, those who have a "different" perspective of "reality"

which is made manifest in the new and wonderful "worlds" which they create. Literary history has shown that the line which separates "mapmaking" from "mythmaking" is very thin indeed and more often than not crossed or made indistinct.

Africa in particular has captivated the minds of the earliest cartographers, from the Romans to the present day.<sup>1</sup> The blurring of boundaries between "mapmaking" and "mythmaking" is well captured by Van Wyk Smith ("Waters" 67-77) in his survey of the most salient attributes that accrued around the notion of the two Ethiopias, one in the east and one in the west, from Greek antiquity to the early Renaissance:

The African 'terrestrial paradise' maintained a vigorous and itinerant literary history. Sought for in Abyssinia by the earliest Portuguese venturers, it yielded 'Mont Amara' on the equator to inform the writings of Samuel Purchas, Milton and Johnson's Rasselas. It became ubiquitous in a number of eighteenth-century fictitious travelogues and nineteenth-century colonial (and notably East African) nostalgia, as in the writings of Karen Blixen, Elspeth Huxley, and Gerald Hanley.

The 'savage wasteland' of the Western European tradition had an equally vigorous and protean history. Growing and intimately associated in the European mind with the horrors of disease, the slave trade, and the actual desert aspect which large stretches of the African coast present along both the Sahara and the Namib, this image of an unredeemed world degenerated into the notion of 'the whiteman's grave,' the diabolist and cannibalist reputations of, notably, Dahomey, Asiante, and Benin, and the recidivist mythologies (often associated with an Antonine spiritual quest in a primitive wilderness) of Conrad, Celine, Gide, Graham Greene, Saul Bellow and V.S. Naipaul.

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<sup>1</sup> See Van Wyk Smith ("Narrative of Africa," 11-30; and "Waters," 67-77) for a detailed discussion of the image of Africa in Classical and early European literature. See also Darras (37-43) with regard to the relationship between literature, geography, and mapmaking.

The resonances of these ideas are firmly fixed in Conrad's own writings, in both the fiction and in allusions to the craft of fiction. The most obvious fictional correspondence lies in the fact that Conrad's "heart of darkness" coincides with this traditional view of the west coast of Africa. An implicit allusion to the craft of fiction and this conflict between mapmaking and mythmaking appears in his essay, "Geography and Some Explorers," (LE 1-31) in which these two sides of the coin are presented by the metaphors of "geography militant" and "geography fabulous." The allusions to "mapmaking," "hard-won knowledge," and "scientific spirit" represent the exact and scientific nature of "geography militant," or, in the terms used earlier, the "historical" dimension of cartography. "Geography fabulous" is represented by "imagination," "truth," and "unveiling," all aspects related to the mythical journey through the self and the space in which it finds itself. When translated into fictional terms, we find the writer "slaving away to draw the map of his vision of truth" (Brink 167). The writer's map -- and I think particularly that drawn by the impressionist writer -- is not concerned with "mapping the real." What he does, is

to perceive, below the lines of the map he draws, the contours of another world, somehow a more 'essential' world. And from the interaction between the land as he perceives it to be and the land as he knows it can be, someone from the outside, the 'reader' of the map, watches -- and aids -- the emergence of the meaning of the map (Brink 169).

Conrad the fictional cartographer, in his attempts to describe, evoke, and interpret these unknown spaces, employs the technique of juxtaposition, of presenting the reader with the difference between

perception and reality, thereby bringing "mental attitudes and dispositions of these contrasting kinds together, forcing them to form a context for his fictional space" (Tanner, "Gnawed Bones" 95).

One of the key themes in Conrad's fiction which is inextricably bound to the concept of mapmaking, is that of the physical voyage which mirrors the journey through the self. Cartography is a means to plot real physical voyages; writing captures the contours of the journey into the self and the fictional world. It is through this theme of the journey that the notion of mapmaking is worked out more fully by "mapping out" the space through which the characters will "travel" as they try to "read" and "interpret" it.

As indicated earlier, most of Conrad's early tales have strong echoes of adventure and romance, much like the similar tales of adventure written by Robert Louis Stevenson, Rider Haggard and Jules Verne, all of whom firmly establish their tales in geographical space. "HoD" is essentially the mapping of a journey initially with strong echoes of adventure and romance, echoes which soon disappear as the description of the physical journey becomes the verbalization of Marlow's introspective journey, his attempts at charting what Huggan (20) calls the "geography of the mind." This mapping of the mind also represents a "contraction of space" says Darras, because Conrad started his own journey as a writer of fiction at a time when "it...[was] too late; the last phase of dividing up the world...[had] already ended...[all that is left] is this ultimate contraction of space...[with its] tone...of regret for lost horizons" (40). The



concept of maps and its importance in "HoD" will be revisited in the last part of this chapter.

To return to "HoD": Berthoud (41) has commented on the continuity of setting between NN and "HoD," arguing that, while NN ends in London, the physical and narrative journey of "HoD" actually starts in London. However, within the framework presented in this thesis, there are also other important differences between the two fictional worlds created in these texts. For example, there is a far greater sense of narrative closure in NN than in "HoD," as indicated by the restoration of the equilibrium on the ship and the positive descriptions of both the setting and the crew. Because of the very nature of Marlow's experience, "HoD" will be shown to be far more open-ended, with no sense of a restoration of "order" or a return to the "centre" and should perhaps be prefaced by T.S. Eliot's famous statement found in "Gerontion": "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" (32). There is also a dramatic inversion of the interaction between light and darkness which shades into symbolic meaning, as NN ends in "light," whereas "HoD" is drenched with an all-embracing symbolic darkness.

Another important similarity between NN and "HoD" is that both share fictional techniques to evoke the dominant space of each work. If the reader is aware of these links, he or she can use this awareness to "read" the evocation of the cosmic space in which James Wait finds himself, or "map" the "contours" and "co-ordinates" which "position" the reader as he or she tries to make sense of Marlow's narrative journey. The task at hand in this chapter is to "read" the

"maps" of "HoD" with their hidden contours and legends, their coordinates obscured by the narrative density and atmospheric evocations enveloping the action.

## II

"HoD" reveals a dual fascination with matters geographical and fictional. One of the novella's major structural features (which will be inverted as the tale progresses) is the contrast between "civilized" space and the savage wasteland of Africa. Marlow's partial, oblique and symbolic descriptions first of London, then of Brussels not only enhance the atmospheric quality of the work, but also ensure that these descriptions of this "civilized" space and the contrasting nightmarish impressions of darkest Africa and their effects on "civilized" humans will be foregrounded in the reader's consciousness.

Conrad's method in "HoD" shows distinct similarities with that which he used in NN: he presents the reader with a mixture of episodic scenes, juxtaposition, interrupted narrative sequences and highly evocative descriptions. The interaction between the notions of "space," "geography," and "mind" conjures up images of a psychological space which the reader must traverse on his journey towards understanding. Although "HoD" is deeply concerned with psychological experience, particularly the psychological experience of the narrator,

it is not only concerned with psychological space. As one journeys through the novella, one slowly realizes that it also deals with a symbolic journey into the cultural landscape of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the "sensational, physical, external world was replaced by a speculative space of boundaries, thresholds, limits and interstices, inhabited by...borderland dwellers and the morally insane, all constructed, in turn, in relation to their location within this space" (Coroneos 10-11). The journey in "HoD" becomes a quest for and test of the "sanity" and "normality" of Western civilization. It is -- like all the physical journeys in Conrad's fiction -- a mirror of the journey through the self, a road mapped and signposted by the ambiguous metaphors of "darkness," "heart," and "centre."

The motif of the quest or journey in "HoD" has been interpreted in many ways. Guerard, for example, sees it as a "journey into self", an "introspective plunge," "a night journey into the unconscious" (33,39). Cox identifies two primarily psychological journeys: the first is a Jungian journey into the unconscious, characterized by its "trafficking with...secret criminal energies" commonly repressed by civilization. The second journey is seen in Freudian terms, interpreting Marlow's journey as a symbolic voyage "into the wilderness of sex, a discovery of the Id...[in which] Marlow penetrates down a narrow channel to find in the darkness an orgiastic experience" (Introduction xii-xiii). Berthoud (45) also sees the main qualities of this quest in psychological terms when he isolates the

"sense of dream, of phantasmagoria and nightmare" as the essence of Marlow's experience.

Given the pluralistic nature of modern critical discourse, it is obvious that these interpretations of the journey are all valid within a more psychologically-oriented approach to criticism. However, recently there has been a reaction against this prevailing psychologism (Levenson, "Edge" 153-156). Levenson argues that the tale addresses the process of interpretation, rather than that of psychological action: "Marlow seeks to interpret, to understand, to know Kurtz" ("Edge" 156). "HoD," says Levenson, is a "crisis in knowledge": "Psychological critics identify the heart as an emotional plenitude; epistemological critics look in the same place and find an emptiness" ("Edge" 154).

This chapter seeks to extend Levenson's argument by illustrating how the interactive framework of description, narrative and theme and its use of various impressionistic techniques lead to the pervasive atmosphere. "HoD" is a novella about experiencing a particular symbolic space created through the complex dynamics of narration, description and theme; secondly, the novella enacts the process of interpreting this space on both a micro and macro textual level; and thirdly, it tries to represent graphically the existential isolation of a character (such as Marlow) which is a direct result of the epistemological problems experienced on this journey. In pursuing this line of argument, I hope to illustrate the central importance of impressionistic elements in the epistemological process represented in Conrad's fiction by comparing the techniques favoured by Dickens -- a

writer whose work also displays the impressionistic evocation of a mysterious atmosphere -- and those used by Conrad to create the symbolic space of Bleak House and "HoD" respectively. The interaction between descriptive techniques and the thematic structure which results from this process will then be illustrated by a reading of three key scenes in "HoD," after which the argument will centre on Conrad's use of visual "texts" or "maps," such as the map in Brussels, the sailor's manual, Kurtz' tract commissioned by the "Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs," and, finally, the sketch in oils, to establish and develop the themes of interpretation and understanding on the micro level. The argument will be concluded by commenting on how the narrative "enacts" the process of interpretation on the macro level through the continuous interaction between forward and backward movement, each movement adding another "impression" or perspective on the preceding or oppositional movement. The evocative and mysterious descriptions of the various stoppages along the journey up-river can be likened to a cinematographic technique, each "shot" providing a different angle or focus before moving on to the next "frame." While the general direction of the implied movement is forward, the accretion especially of visual detail has a retarding effect on this movement as it forces the reader to "slow down" and first "read," "decode" or "interpret" the impressions before he or she can continue with the reading process.

The voyage motif is the one continuous thread that runs through the text, providing a cohesive framework for the narrative, descriptive and thematic components. It colours and directs the

psychological and symbolic substructures of the text by contributing a convenient metaphor to render the reading process, while at the same time uniting the fictional and metafictional thematics of space.

In addition to the various interpretations discussed above, the voyage motif can also be read on two levels which I will label the personal (or psychological), and the communal (or symbolic) levels. These levels constantly interact and expose both complementary and oppositional aspects in each other, providing polar opposites in the spectrum of Marlow's experiences, while at the same time confronting the reader with two densely interwoven textual layers which must be unravelled if one is to -- even if only partially -- "understand" the novella. These levels are united by the voyage motif, which implicitly provides the spatial dimensions of both as the voyages undertaken by the characters. This is especially true of the journeys undertaken by Marlow and Kurtz, journeys which imply a downward and backward movement into an unknown and mysterious space, that of the mind and the heart (the psychological), or the space in which communal and "civilized" values are seen to be the cohesive elements in society (the symbolic).

Marlow's second "journey" -- his own narrative -- functions on the epistemological level in that the retracing of his steps represents the process of "understanding" the essence of the "heart of darkness." The mechanics of this process rest on the continuous juxtaposition of the two dominant motifs of "centre" and "edge." The journey up the river towards Kurtz is symbolic of the journey to the

centre. But this journey takes Marlow beyond the "centre," towards the "edge":

'...he 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 truth, and all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible' (241).

This process of decentring has been commented on by a number of critics, notably Huggan (19-46), Meisel (23), and Said (World 96).<sup>2</sup> Drawing upon their arguments, I wish to broaden the context by linking it to the three major elements broached in this thesis -- the perennial Conradian themes of spatial dislocation, epistemological fragmentation, and existential isolation.

Instead of leading to the "centre," Marlow's journey and experiences actually "decentre" and dislocate him, both physically, geographically and symbolically. He is isolated physically by means of nationality and race in Africa; geographically he is taken from London -- the "centre" and "heart" of the British Empire -- to

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that Todorov, in his paper, "Knowledge and the Void: 'Heart of Darkness'" (Carabine documents 2, 371) argues that the journey does not go beyond the centre, but that it reaches its end in the "void" which is in the centre. I tend to side with those who see the journey as one not reaching its end, but as a journey of progressive decentring.

Brussels, via (a historical excursion into) Rome, and finally on to the Congo.<sup>3</sup>

If one were to place this process of decentring on a symbolic continuum, various possibilities for naming the opposite ends suggest themselves: the one end of the continuum could be occupied by the notion of "centre", the other by the notion of "edge." Two other sets of alternatives -- "light" vs "darkness," "positive" vs "negative" -- also illustrate this symbolic process of isolation. Marlow's journey can be plotted along this axis, from "light" (ironically speaking, of course) to "darkness," from "positive" to "negative," from "belonging" and "understanding," to "isolation" and "bewilderment." The journey ultimately leads to the most extreme existential isolation caused by the inability to communicate with one's fellow man, nowhere as evident as in the breakdown in communication between Marlow and Kurtz's "Intended": "But I couldn't. I could not tell her. It would have been too dark -- too dark altogether" (252).

The reader who accompanies Marlow on this, his second, journey into these spaces has to pass through several portals, travelling through "states which [lead] the reader ever deeper into the darkness" (Hillis Miller, Poets 23). These "states" of "darkness" also give

<sup>3</sup> In placing Conrad in a wider historical perspective, it is important to note that there are interesting similarities between Pater's Marius the Epicurean (1885) and "HoD" as far as plot is concerned. Pater uses Marius as a "pivot between the historical and the fictional levels of his text...[and] establishes through him a parallel between second-century Rome and nineteenth-century England" (Ryan 30), while Marlow is exposed to a historical parallel. Significantly, Karl and Davies (CLJC 1, 355 n. 3) acknowledge the apparent influence of Pater's text on Conrad's Preface to The Nigger of the "Narcissus."



rise to the central questions which this chapter will attempt to answer, namely, Exactly how is this "geography" of the mind and heart constituted? How is the symbolic space created? How is the process of interpretation and understanding represented? And: What role does impressionist technique play in creating the unique and mysterious atmosphere of "HoD"?<sup>4</sup>

### III

Scheid (4) has argued that space in literature is delineated through the use of sensory words and images, which describe setting, create an atmosphere, or generate a mood. Certain poetic devices like onomatopoeia, metaphor, simile, repetition and word choice all contribute to the composition of a "word-picture." By using richly descriptive adjectives and exercising a choice between active and passive verbs, prose can succeed in "painting a picture." Both

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<sup>4</sup> A brief note about the mechanics of analysis is perhaps apposite here. It is important to note that the symbolic space of "HoD" is constituted and energized -- as was in the case in NN -- by the close and almost indivisible interaction between description, narration and thematics. It is extremely difficult, if not downright impossible, to separate spatial and temporal devices in the text. There is almost no plot in the conventional sense, and the main structural devices connected to space and time, namely the slowed tempo of the narrative and vague and hazy quality of character and event, are closely intertwined. Because of this, critical analysis may seem to "impose" artificial categories and matrices onto the tale. Any attempt at "unravelling" these elements should therefore be seen in the light of this note.

Dickens and Conrad excel at employing these elements to create their impressionistic and mysterious descriptions.

Dickens creates the symbolic space of Bleak House through visual impressions and authorial intrusions into the narrative. The opening passages share a number of qualities with that of "HoD": the setting of London, and the Thames in particular; a sense of the past; and -- of particular importance to this thesis -- similar techniques in evoking the hazy and murky atmosphere in which the symbolic action of each text is embedded with its concomitant blurring of boundaries.

Dickens's passage begins thus:

LONDON. Michaelmas term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes - gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another's umbrellas, in a general infection of ill temper, and losing their foot-hold at street corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if this day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest.

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows down among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex Marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping in the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwhales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards. Fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful

skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little 'prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapits into a nether sky of fog, with fog all around them, as of they were up in a balloon, and hanging from the misty clouds (Bleak House 49).

The geographical space of "LONDON" is foregrounded by means of the word's initial position and typography.<sup>5</sup> It is also a fixed location, stationary, unable to move, just as the inability of the legal system to "move" and develop over the years will, subsequently, inform the novel's thematic movement. The basic colour opposition is that of black ("soot," "mud," "mire") vs the implied white of the snowflakes, with black as the dominant pole. There are also other oppositions which infuse the passage with their own dynamics, the most obvious one being the contrast between nature and civilization. Dickens employs natural elements (mud, fog and mire) to evoke a symbolic framework for the workings of the legal system. He also establishes the larger time-framework of this symbolic space by invoking the images of the "elephantine lizards" or Megalosaurus, thereby extending the time scale of his tale from the present to primeval times. This movement backward in time simultaneously becomes a downward movement into the earliest beginnings of the earth, as the reference to the megalosaurus with its obvious implications for the legal system suggests. The motif of voyage or journey is not an obvious one, but it is there, as the reader realizes soon after reading this passage that he will be taken on a journey through the

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<sup>5</sup> One could even argue that the black ink typography of the word LONDON on the pristine white of the paper enacts an inversion of the moral polarity "white/good," "black/evil," which, in turn, captures the final message of "HoD."

maze of the legal system, a journey which needs to be interpreted and understood.

The first paragraph is dominated by natural images of mud and mire. The phrase "tens of thousands" of pedestrians evokes images of a seething mass of humanity, and a continuous throng throughout the ages of man, trampling the earth into a quagmire, making dogs, and horses -- the inhabitants of the natural world -- "undistinguishable." Even the snowflakes have gone into mourning for the "death of the sun," thereby implying that the one force in nature which gives direction, warmth and light, cannot survive this murky world created by the Lord Chancellor and the legal system he represents and protects.

The second paragraph sees an inversion, and the focus now falls on the natural reaction to this "defiled" space of London, and of the legal system. Just as the legal pronouncements will be shown to be "foggy" and "hazy," so the reader has to try to penetrate the fog which has, to put it in Conrad's words, "enveloped the tale," thereby actively preventing the "kernel" from breaking open.

There are two distinct spatial movements offered to the reader's eye. The first is an outward movement, from the narrator's observation point, out on an horizontal axis, down the "green aits and meadows," down the river. The second movement conjured up by the repetitive use of "fog" is a strong visual movement, a concentric movement outward from the centre, like the rippling effect on water after a pebble has been thrown into a clear pool. The notions of

"mud" and "mire" suggested by this concentric movement underpin the geometric qualities of the symbolic space created in the novel.

The second "movement" offered to the reader suggests an implied downward movement into the primordial netherworld, carefully balanced by the juxtaposition with its opposite, the image of the balloon "hanging in the misty clouds." This upward movement directs the reader's vision to a fragile world, consisting of intangible elements such as air and misty clouds, the symbolic implications of which are clear: the upward movement out of this world of mud and mire is difficult, almost impossible to achieve.

Up to this point in the narrative, Dickens has used mainly visual elements to build up his (almost crude) symbolic picture. This assessment is demonstrated by the last paragraph of this general picture, before the narrator moves on to the description of a particular afternoon:

Never can there come fog too thick, never can there come mud and mire too deep, to assort with the groping and floundering condition which this High Court of Chancery, most pestilent of hoary sinners, holds, this day, in the sight of heaven and earth (50).

To describe Dickens in impressionistic terms is not, of course, to suggest that Bleak House can or should not be interpreted on a naturalistic level. What does happen, however, is that the impressionistic qualities license the reader to read symbolically by adding the authorial narrator's authority to the symbolic dimensions of the space created in the first two passages. In doing so, a reading focused on the impressionistic characteristics is a heuristic

reading, allowing one to "discover," as it were, the nature of the "co-ordinates" which the reader must look out for on his or her journey through the novel.

Conrad, writing forty-six years later, uses similar techniques in a different configuration to achieve a very different effect. The symbolic space of "HoD" is not nearly as apparent in the opening passages in which temporal and spatial levels are closely intertwined:

The Nellie, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound to the river, the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide.

The sea-reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway. In the offing the sea and sky were welded together without a joint, and in the luminous space the tanned sails of the barges drifting up with the tide seemed to stand still in red clusters of canvas sharply peaked, with gleams of varnished sprits. A haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea in vanishing flatness. The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth. The Director of Companies was our captain and our host...He resembled a pilot, which to a seaman is trustworthiness personified. It was difficult to realize his work was not out there in the luminous estuary, but behind him, within the brooding gloom...The day was ending in a serenity of still, exquisite brilliance. The water shone pacifically; the sky, without a speck, was a benign immensity of unstained light; the very mist of the Essex marshes was like a gauzy and radiant fabric, hung from the wooded rises inland, and draping the low shores in diaphanous folds. Only the gloom to the west, brooding over the upper reaches, became more sombre every minute, as if angered by the approach of the sun. And at last, in its curved and imperceptible fall, the sun sank low, and from the glowing white changed into a dull red without rays and without heat, as if about to go out suddenly, stricken to death by the touch of that gloom brooding over a crowd of men...The sun set; the dusk fell on the stream, and lights began to appear along the shore. The Chapman lighthouse, a three-legged thing erect on a mud-flat, shone strongly. Lights of ships moved in the fairway -- a great stir of lights going up and going down. And farther

west on the upper reaches the place of the monstrous town was still marked ominously on the sky, a brooding gloom in sunshine, a lurid glare under the stars.

'And this also,' said Marlow suddenly, 'has been one of the dark places of the earth' ("HoD" 135-138).

In contrast to the static physicality of Dickens's London, the narrator in "HoD" finds himself on a yawl in a position on the edge of the land. An air of expectation and anticipation hangs in the atmosphere. This dense passage interweaves and blends description, narration and thematics in such a masterly way to create an almost perfect Turner-esque landscape, a landscape in which the atmosphere obscures two important structural and thematic "co-ordinates" from the reader's eye, as it were. The first is that the geographical detail provided in this elaborate description stands in marked contrast to the "haziness" which envelops the rest of the tale and obscures detail. In a certain sense this opening passage seems to outline the way in which setting will act as a conduit for narrative and thematic issues; it is not long, however, before this view is shattered by the now-familiar technique of inversion in Marlow's opening words.

Another important aspect that one might miss is the very fact of the complementarity of description, narrative and theme in the passage. Lindenbaum, in an essay entitled "Hulks With One and Two Anchors: The Frame, Geographical Detail, and Ritual Process in 'Heart of Darkness'" (1984), points out that at the beginning of the tale, the bow of the Nellie is pointing outward, away from England and London, while at the end it faces toward London or the English landmass, the boat having drifted around at anchor with the turn of the tide. Lindenbaum significantly concludes that: "This change in

orientation or direction of the narrator's point of view suggests...a possible change in moral vision as well" (704). As the reader journeys through the text he or she will ultimately realize that the greatest irony in the whole structure of ironic inversion has a spatial link: the "heart of darkness" does not lie "out there"; it is to be found right in front of the listener's eyes, so to speak, right there in London, the "heart" of the "civilized" world.<sup>6</sup>

An important point to reiterate here is that an awareness of Conrad's technique, of his use of fictional beginnings and predilection for inversion will subtly prepare the reader to appreciate the way in which the powerful atmospheric descriptions blend into narrative and theme.

Whereas in Bleak House Dickens seems hastily to create a symbolic space in which he can begin to develop his narrative, Conrad on the other hand seems to be more interested in capturing and depicting the atmosphere and mood of the moment, representing what Faris (309) calls the "process of viewing," a practice which tends to encourage the development of strong impressionistic characteristics. The predominant emphasis on visual aspects as a means of capturing a

<sup>6</sup> Doloff (2) accentuates the idea of double irony when he states that "A perhaps overlooked irony, further suggesting the abiding, if forgotten, 'wilderness' beneath the facade of [civilization] may be found in the very name of the metropolis near which Marlow tells his tale, London. Eric Partridge's Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English, 3rd ed., (New York: Macmillan, 1963) offers as the possible source of the early Latin name of the city (Londinium), the Old Celtic form 'lond-', meaning 'wild.' Whether or not Conrad was aware of this etymological information is unknown; nevertheless, the onomastic irony here further underscores his vision of the ever present 'wilderness,' hidden even in the name of the center of British culture."



moment in time quickly becomes apparent when one considers his use of adjectives: "luminous estuary," "brooding gloom," "exquisite brilliance," "gauzy and radiant fabric," "diaphanous folds," "glowing white," and "dull red." The technique of the passage is unmistakably impressionist, and this hazy, yet almost palpable atmosphere will remain dominant throughout "HoD," blurring boundaries and causing shapes to appear indistinct, thereby emphasizing the themes of surface appearance and hidden reality, and the process of interpretation and understanding in which Marlow has been trapped and into which he lures the reader.

The elementary colour opposition of light vs dark used with such great effect in NN is repeated, with the same symbolic connotations found in that text as well as in Dickens's quagmire: man-made locations (Gravesend, London) are depicted in dark colours with negative connotations ("The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and greatest town on earth," and: "the monstrous town" (my emphasis)). The river and sun, in contrast, are described in graphic visual terms with strong positive connotations: "luminous estuary," "exquisite brilliance," "diaphanous folds," "glowing white," and so forth. The insistence on the visual is borne out by the way in which the reader's eye is guided on a horizontal axis, along the Thames which stretches "before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway," out into the horizon where the "sea and sky were welded together without a joint." Conrad here makes extensive use of Watts's "dwarfing perspective" ("Techniques" 143) referred to

earlier, to emphasize the stark contrast between man's feeble and insignificant activities and the immensity of space which serves as a backdrop to these activities.

The phrase "dark places of the earth" not only reinforces the connotations of the title and the insistence on a physical space, but leaves it open to a variety of interpretations, thereby establishing one of the major themes already suggested by words such as "seemed to stand still," "seemed condensed," "resembled," and "as if angered." The introduction of the captain, who is not a real captain but a representative of the world of commerce, who is employed in the City of London, is done within the ambience of "the brooding gloom." This false appearance of the "captain" foreshadows the misleading appearances of the clerk and Kurtz's encampment which will thwart both Marlow and the reader's attempts to penetrate, interpret and understand the essence of the "heart of darkness."

Having established the horizontal axis of this fictional space, Conrad then moves to reinforce the immensity of the picture created by focusing on the vertical axis as the narrator describes the sunset, where the inevitable sunset is seen as an "imperceptible fall" which colours this world in a "dull red." As in Dickens, the same image of the death of the sun is used, but with different emphases: whereas the "civilized" legal system caused the sun of justice to set in Bleak House, the symbolism in "HoD" is still not nearly as overt. More importantly, the inversion of traditional symbolic oppositions (black vs white; civilization vs barbarism) has still not been effected at this point. Using two maritime symbols, the pilot -- "seaworthiness

personified" -- and the Chapman lighthouse -- spreading the light of civilization into the darkness of the wild space "out there" -- Conrad not only reinforces the motif of the journey or quest, but also sketches the outlines of the symbolic space already hinted at in the title.

A comparison between the first narratorial contributions of each writer also indicates how Conrad is able to extend the symbolic space of his universe far more than Dickens is. Dickens delimits and restricts the symbolic framework to the world of the Lord Chancellor, whereas Conrad's hazy, yet almost palpable atmosphere will remain dominant throughout "HoD," permeating the world of Marlow and the reader.

#### IV

Vidan (186) has observed that Conrad's descriptive passages do not function merely as the setting for the action, but contribute actively to the creation of a larger thematic whole because of the symbolic connotations generated by the narrative. This is especially true of the narrative of "HoD," in which the sequence of impressions, flashbacks, and incomplete narratorial attempts at interpretation paradoxically create the impression of an a-chronological narrative. The nature and sequence of the descriptive passages underpin the

disjointed rhythm of the narrative and enhance the thematic notions of isolation and interpretation in "HoD."

Given the specific focus of this thesis, it is obvious that these descriptive passages also have ontological and epistemological functions as was the case in NN. On the one hand, they create the spatial dimensions and the strange, mysterious atmosphere of Conrad's fictional world. As such these passages can be seen as fictional manifestations of T.S. Eliot's notion of the "objective correlative," involving the reader in the interpretative process by transforming the description of space into an spatial experience for the reader.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand it soon becomes clear that descriptive passages have an epistemological function as well: individual passages, as well as the "sequence" of these descriptive passages, contain within them the cues to their individual interpretation, as well as to the interpretation of their position within a larger thematic whole.

There is also a significant link between these descriptive passages, narrative progression and the theme of "reading" or interpretation, or put in Ambrosini's words: "Conrad plays on the illusory qualities of an impressionistic recreation of memory to discuss the question which orders the tale's critical discourse: how to...read a story?" (86). Each descriptive passage retards the halting flow of the "sinuously progressive" (Guerard 44) narrative even further, thereby fulfilling an epistemological function as each

<sup>7</sup> Elliott (162) makes this point even more emphatically when she states that "Few works of modern literature, in fact, demonstrate so explicitly the process of transmission of experience from teller to hearer as does Heart of Darkness."

of these "frozen" vignettes forms a stumbling block on Marlow's -- and the reader's -- journey of understanding, a process which is made doubly difficult by the apparent paradox between the demand for interpretation on the one hand, and the vague and mysterious atmosphere which, on the other hand, seems to defy interpretation. Each description or impression must first be "processed" and made sense of before there can be progress on this journey towards understanding. However, this progress is hampered constantly by the vagueness and intangibility of the mood and atmosphere of the work, and the debilitating effect which the reader experiences when trying to pierce this fleeting atmosphere. In a sense, it can almost be prefaced by Marlow's statement: "Nowhere did we stop long enough to get a particularized impression, but the general sense of vague and oppressive wonder grew upon me. It was like a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares" (152).

Despite Marlow's impression, it is clear that there are, to use an idea mentioned earlier in connection with NN, Jamesian "stopping places" which allow for a reassessment of the reader's progress in this process of interpretation. While running the risk of being repetitive, it must be emphasized that these "stopping places" graphically illustrate the interactive dynamics between narration, description and thematics in constituting the "geography of the mind" while at the same time foregrounding the distinctive role played by impressionistic motifs and techniques.

The first narrative "stoppage," near the beginning of the novella, describes Marlow's first "impression" of Africa and uses a

familiar Conradian technique of fusing a mimetic account with a subjective rendering of experience so that "fact and impression, objective reality and the meaning it assumes in the mind of the observer, mingle together in the creation of a fictional world" (Anderson, "Technique" 7). The illusive atmosphere of this passage sets the tone for the cumulative effect of the impressions-to-follow:

'I watched the coast. Watching a coast as it slips by the ship is like thinking about an enigma. There it is before you -- smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering, Come and find out. This one was almost featureless, as if still in the making, with an aspect of monotonous grimness. The edge of a colossal jungle, so dark-green as to be almost black, fringed with white surf, ran straight, like a ruled line, far, far away along a blue sea whose glitter was blurred by a creeping mist. The sun was fierce, the land seemed to glisten and drip with steam. Here and there grayish-whitish specks showed up clustered inside the white surf, with a flag flying above them. Settlements some centuries old, and still no bigger than pinheads on the untouched expanse of their background' (150).

The implication of the rapid transition from "grayish-whitish specks" to "settlements" and its relevance to the interpretative process is easily missed. It represents an early example of what Watt calls the technique of "delayed decoding" used so effectively in Lord Jim and Nostramo. The reader's "gaze" is focused extensively on the visual impression, before being guided to the interpretation thereof.

The stark contrast between "pinheads...clustered" together, and the "untouched expanse" effectively underlines the sense of isolation already hinted at by Marlow and suggested by the opening paragraphs of the tale. Despite its immensity, the invulnerability of nature to humankind's attempts to penetrate, claim, and exploit it, is

introduced at the outset of the description by the use of emotive words such as "mean," "insipid," and "savage."

The passage is punctuated with colour symbols that intensify the effect of the symbolic substructure established thus far: "dark-green" and "black" are contrasted to the "white surf" and the "fierce" sunlight. Note that the overt symbolic implications of this colour framework are subtly tempered by words such as "almost," "seemed," "steam," and "featureless," underlining not only the impressionistic nature of this observation, but introducing at the same time the complex theme of understanding to be pursued in the novella.

The obvious distance between viewer and object creates an impression of the land "still in the making" and graphically illustrates the basic impressionistic tenet of capturing a moment in time. The favourite Conradian technique of providing the reader with the spatial "co-ordinates" of his or her position resurfaces here: the reader's eye is guided from the "centre" of the narrator's vision, to the "edge," "straight" along the coast and its "fringes," into the unknown and unseen horizon, "far, far away."

The sheer immensity of this coastline is emphasized by the minute size of the settlements, despite the many centuries which these have had to make inroads into the "untouched expanse." The futility of the colonial exercise, which will become more apparent as the narrative unfolds, is already suggested here:

In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would

disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech -  
- and nothing happened (151-152).

Cedric Watts's term for and description of this technique -- "Cart-before-horse-Presentation" ("Techniques" 142) -- is in some ways similar to Ian Watt's concept of "delayed decoding" in that the eventual explanation may not erase the strong initial impression of the event's strangeness, illogicality or even absurdity. The absurd appearance and actions of the characters recur at crucial stages in the narrative, adding a bizarre element to Conrad's criticism of colonial exploitation, which will culminate in its grotesque human embodiment -- Kurtz. Edward Garnett's review, published in the Academy and Literature on 6 December 1902, is worth noting in this respect:

...the art of 'Heart of Darkness' implies the catching of infinite shades of the white man's uneasy, disconcerted, and fantastic relations with the exploited barbarism of Africa...the weirdness, the brilliance, the psychological truth of this masterly analysis of two Continents in conflict, of the abysmal gulf between the white man's system and the black man's comprehension of its results, is conveyed in a rapidly rushing narrative which calls for close attention on the reader's part (Sherry documents 132; my emphasis).

The subtle focus on the minute elements in effect highlights the intimidating expanse of the space surrounding the ship, as the immense cosmic space not only dwarfs it and the actions of the humans on board, but almost seems to create a stoppage in time as well. Conrad here builds on expertise gained in creating the earlier storm scenes in NN and "Typhoon." All these scenes have a similar effect on the characters as they seem so overwhelmed by the immensity of the event that, paradoxically as it may sound, time seems to be frozen and



fused with space, creating the impression of stasis. For example, compare the "HoD" passage discussed above with the following passage from NN:

The ship began to dip into a southwest swell, and the softly luminous sky of low latitudes took on a harder sheen from day to day above our heads: it arched high above the ship vibrating and pale, like an immense dome of steel, resonant with the deep voice of freshening gales (NN 48-9; my emphasis).

The opposition between the immensity of the sea and sky on the one hand, and the implied insignificance of both ships on the other, strongly support the theme of alienation, as the observer implicitly finds himself cut off from human contact because of the overwhelming impact of cosmic space. This subtle blending of description and narrative into theme is achieved through Conrad's use of juxtaposition, as oppositional categories with a more tangible ring, such as "man" and "nature," are soon replaced by more abstract opposites such as emotional and intellectual concepts. Marlow feels isolated amongst all the men "with whom I had no point of contact" (151), and deludes himself that he "belonged still to a world of straight-forward facts" (151). But soon, after his first encounter, Marlow's stated contact with the world of facts becomes a series of pitiful and stuttering utterances, describing his inability to understand and, ultimately, to experience a sense of belonging. He clings to his work -- that "civilized" entity which creates the borders of his living space -- as this is his only means of keeping "my hold on the redeeming facts of life" (165). The futility of these attempts is poignantly foregrounded by Marlow's interruption of his own narrative and his direct address to his listeners:

'Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream -- making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, the notion of being captured by the incredible which is the very essence of dreams...'

He was silent for a while.

'...No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence -- that which makes its truth, its meaning -- its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream, alone...' (172).

Bombarding the reader with a number of rhetorical questions at the beginning of a text or chapter is a recurrent technique in "HoD," and has a number of important functions in the narrative. First, it addresses and actively involves the reader in the reading process, preparing him or her to find possible answers, and, in so doing, learn to "decode" a technique which will become increasingly more difficult to understand as the information provided with the questions becomes more and more fragmented and ambiguous; secondly, this technique provides a link between various episodes in the narrative as it is primarily used in episodes in which Marlow attempts to understand the enigmatic Kurtz; thirdly, it introduces the reader to the mechanics of Marlow's thought process, to the general movement from "centre" to "edge" and even beyond. The questions move from concrete categories such as "him" to categories which become increasingly more abstract ("story"), and, finally, to the vague and intangible "anything." Lastly, this technique reinforces the major theme of the need to understand and interpret the space in which one finds oneself.

It is important to note that Conrad weaves these descriptive "stoppages" into strategic points in the narrative structure as they form focal points in the heightening of tension in each of the three parts of the novella. The second significant stoppage which occurs after Marlow's first glimpse of Africa deals with his arrival at the Company's station, the starting point of his journey up-stream (152-160).

Marlow's arrival at the Company's station and his experience of the bizarre and "earthy atmosphere ...[of the] overheated catacomb" (152) are relayed to the reader in a series of "moving perspectives" or "verbal painting[s]" (Gillon, "Painter" 254) which gives a strong sensory description of the surroundings:

At last we opened a reach. A rocky cliff appeared, mounds of turned-up earth by the shore, houses on a hill, others with iron roofs, amongst a waste of excavations, or hanging to the declivity. A continuous noise of the rapids above hovered over this scene of inhabited devastation. A lot of people, mostly black and naked, moved about like ants. A jetty projected into the river. A blinding sunlight drowned all this at times in a sudden recrudescence of glare (153).

His attempts to establish a "pattern of consistency" are replaced by a debilitating inertia resulting from his inability to connect his visual observations with the lofty ideal of "civilized" values. As such the passage captures in condensed form all the central issues of spatial disorientation, epistemological frustration and existential isolation. The impression created is that of a view through a wide angle lens, swiftly scanning the horizon and briefly focusing on all the salient features of the landscape before "zooming" in on small detail, thereby creating a sequence of impressions, as it

were. The active sequence of sensations involved: concrete visual ("rocky cliff appeared,") aural ("continuous noise,") and abstract visual ("blinding sunlight,") not only echoes Conrad's dictum of making his readers "hear...see...feel," but also constitutes the elements which make up what Bock (3) has called "Conrad's sensationist epistemology." The spatial connotations of this fictional world are emphasized and supported by the spatial axes given only a few lines later: "To the left a clump of trees made a shady spot...I blinked, the path was steep...A horn tooted to the right...A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head" (154).

The imbalance which exists between natural phenomena ("rocky cliff," "declivity," "rapids," and "blinding sunlight") and man-made objects (houses "hanging to the declivity," the projecting jetty, and the people who are compared to ants) reinforces the impressions of the minuteness of man's activities when compared to nature. The notion of decay and devastation, as well as that of technological inappropriacy and disjunction are introduced by the image of the boiler in the grass and the railway truck lying upside down (153), which, in turn, blends into the more abstract and thematic issues of displacement and entrapment. This is quite clear from Marlow's attempts at surveying the atmosphere, movements and sounds around him, attempts in which the echoes of Wait's entrapment in the narrow confines of his cabin on the Nigger are unmistakable. Suddenly the neat and ordered sections of red, blue, green and yellow on the map in Brussels (145-46) -- the bold naturalistic conventions of nineteenth-century cartography -- seem very far removed from reality.

The passage creates a perception of being overwhelmed and overpowered by forces greater than oneself. This same perception is evoked later in the second part of the novella by comments such as "...you lost your way on that river...[and] thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known" (183); and: "Trees, trees, millions of trees, massive, immense, running up high...It made you feel very small, very lost..."(185). This feeling is rapidly enhanced by the second "impression" which arrests the reader's attention, Marlow's description of the six black prisoners:

Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind wagged to and fro like tails. I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking...They were called criminals...All their meagre breasts panted together, the violently dilated nostrils quivered, the eyes stared stonily up-hill. They passed me within six inches, without a glance, with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages (154).

In this passage the "camera" focuses on small detail: "head," "loins," "rib," "joints," "neck," "breasts," and finally, "eyes." This protracted description effectively foregrounds the terrible fate and dehumanization of the "unhappy savages" in the reader's mind, leaving the reader -- along with Marlow -- puzzled by the incongruity between the "civilized" world he has left and the absurdity and inhumanity of this scene, poignantly underlined by the appearance of the "reclaimed" in his "uniform jacket with one button off..."(154). Conrad's technique of "piling up" of visual detail and its debilitating effect on the reader is in some ways similar to the

postmodernist technique of excess, which Lodge (237) describes as follows: "But an overloading of the discourse with specificity will have the same effect: by presenting the reader with more details than he can synthesize into a whole, the discourse affirms the resistance of the world to interpretation." The echoes of this statement reverberate through "HoD."

This passage is quite a vivid example of Watts's notion of "empirical hyperbole" ("Techniques" 141) in action, as the picture of these unhappy characters is built up impression by impression, slowly foregrounding the various thematic elements in the same way in which Wait's "Otherness" and "isolation" is foregrounded in the central passage in NN describing Wait's second appearance. The insistence on making the reader "see" in both these passages is very evident as his or her total visual experience of what Wait and these black men look like, is built up impression by impression; slowly each feature comes into focus, is briefly highlighted, and then fades from the mind's eye as the next impression is conjured up.

The third impression ("Instead of going up [155]...which died out slowly" [156]) in this sequence of impressions is quite obviously symbolic. It is structured by a familiar spatial opposition emphasizing the "centre vs edge" opposition discussed earlier: "Instead of going up, I turned and descended to the left...I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno." It seems as if nature takes some revenge on Marlow as he nearly falls down a ravine in his efforts to side-step the "vast artificial hole." The sensory

evocation of the atmosphere inside the "Inferno" is typically impressionistic in nature:

'My purpose was to stroll into the shade for a moment; but no sooner within than it seemed to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno. The rapids were near, and an uninterrupted, uniform, headlong, rushing noise filled the mournful stillness of the grove, where not a breath stirred, not a leaf moved, with a mysterious sound -- as though the tearing pace of the launched earth had suddenly become audible...The black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree, and slowly the eyelids rose and the sunken eyes looked up at me, enormous and vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs, which died out slowly. The man seemed young...He had tied a bit of white worsted round his neck -- Why? Where did he get it? Was it a badge -- an ornament -- a charm -- a propitiatory act? Was there any idea at all connected with it?' (156-157).

This passage describing the white worsted around the young man's neck, and Marlow's response to this impression is of central importance to the line of argument, not only in this chapter, but also in the thesis, as it presents the reader with a cameo of the very important problem of interpretation.

The notion of absurdity mentioned earlier is graphically etched on the reader's consciousness through the surreal effect created around the emaciated bodies ("half effaced with the dim light"), the use of a Donne-like conceit in the "black bones" reclining against the tree, and the "blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs" (156).

Questions are a means to gaining knowledge, and understanding. Marlow keeps on asking questions, addressing them both to himself, as if musing about the events in retrospect, and to his listeners on the Nellie. These questions play a vital role in establishing the theme of interpretation at the "centre" of "HoD" as it were. Marlow's

immediate response to this unusual phenomenon -- the white worsted around the man's neck -- is to try and understand it: "Why? Where did he get it?". This emphasizes humankind's interpretative need to understand the world which confronts it, graphically enacting and simulating the process following from this need, as it propels Marlow's first and random impressions into a next phase, that of consciously trying to make sense of these impressions. Notice the interpretative vigour and resourcefulness with which Marlow pursues his goal of attaining meaning. He goes through his repertoire of possibilities: "Was it a badge -- an ornament -- a charm -- a propitiatory act?" Marlow is trying to "read" or "decode" this impression by using the known/Western/"civilized" categories or frames of interpretation available to him. As he gets closer to the edge (or "centre," depending on one's perspective) it becomes quite obvious that his repertoire of categories is not applicable to this new environment. The increasing failure of his interpretative frame is illustrated by the spatial movement in the categories, from known to unknown, from Western to African, from reason to superstition: the "badge" becomes "an ornament," which in turn becomes "a charm," or "a propitiatory act." The final category has no boundaries: "Was there anything at all connected with it?". The epistemological frustration is clearly evident in the almost desperate tone of these questions.

The full effect of the failure of this process of superimposing an interpretative frame on new phenomena and impressions is driven home after only a few pages when the technique of questioning is employed once more:



They were big powerful men, with not much capacity to weigh the consequences...I looked at them as you would on any human being, with a curiosity of their impulses, motives, capacities, weaknesses, when brought to the test of an inexorable physical necessity. Restraint! What possible restraint? Was it superstition, disgust, patience, fear -- or some kind of primitive honour? (195)

The need to interpret and understand is still as strong as ever. Only this time the impinging of atmosphere and impression is so overwhelming that there is no neat and orderly sequence of categories presented to the reader; there is no linear movement from "civilized" to "uncivilized" anymore. The failure of Marlow's interpretative frame is given a spatial manifestation in the circular movement of the process, from "superstition" through a range of more universal categories -- "disgust," "patience," "fear" -- only to return to a category which has "uncivilized" connotations -- "primitive honour." As Marlow is sucked further into Wagner's (72-73) claustrophobic "funnel" of interpretation, so his interpretative categories are proven to be inadequate and incoherent.

This cameo is once more an example of how dense this novella is, of how easy it is for the reader to miss the full implications of the passage. The dramatic enactment of larger issues is emphasized by Watt's commentary on this episode: "The bit of white thread is an eloquent example of how effectively Conrad animates objects with the life of their symbolic meanings, and thus provoke larger questions in the reader" (Century 220).

To return to the sequence of impressions in the episode: the inversion of known entities and qualities continues in the fourth and final "impression" in the sequence:

When near the buildings I met a white man, in such unexpected elegance of get-up that in the first moment I took him for a sort of vision. I saw a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clear necktie, and varnished boots. No hat. Hair parted, brushed, oiled, under a green-lined parasol held in a big white hand. He was amazing, and had a penholder behind his ear (157).

The motif of deceptive appearances, introduced at the beginning of Marlow's "yarn" in the person of the captain-cum-businessman, is reintroduced into the narrative in a much more dramatic fashion. The disruptive and destabilizing effect this "vision" has on Marlow's neat categories of "civilization," "order," and "propriety," is perhaps best understood when one compares this description with that of the clerk in Brussels: "He was shabby and careless, with inkstains on the sleeves of his jacket, and his cravat was large and billowy, under a chin shaped like the toe of an old boot" (147). The clerk in the "civilized" environment of Brussels does not seem to adhere to the strict dress code of his time, and could be described as uncultivated and "uncivilized." This strange phenomenon -- introduced to the reader at a point in the narrative where this episode is yet another strange and unconnected "impression" -- gains meaning only when the reader is confronted with Marlow's description of the clerk in Africa who, in complete contrast, adheres strictly to conventional European dress codes in an "uncivilized" environment. This inversion of roles supports the general and multilayered process of inversion in the novella, especially evident in the inversion of colour symbolism: "white" is really "black." This process ultimately leads to confusion, forcing the reader over the "edge" as the "civilized" values of propriety and "moral" behaviour are taken to absurd extremes

by the clerk who finds it "difficult to guard against clerical error" (159) when he hears the sick person groaning. Or, as Watt so eloquently puts it: "The heartless priorities of the Western administrative order have helped the accountant to maintain his professional efficiency, but they insulate him from the darkness only at the cost of insulating him from everything else" (Century 221).

Marlow is faced with a choice similar to that which confronted the clerk in Africa: he can either try and maintain a level of "professional efficiency" and turn a blind eye to the horrendous injustices perpetrated by his fellow Europeans, or he can reject the aims and methods of the colonizing companies. Paradoxically, the outcome of both options is isolation -- isolation from humanity in the first instance, and isolation from his own group in the second. This implicit choice plays an important role in preparing the reader to understand the choices which faced Kurtz, and to appreciate more fully the total significance of Kurtz' (in)famous cry -- "The horror! The horror!" -- on his deathbed. Marlow does not make an immediate choice, but also cannot cope mentally or emotionally with the "muddle" (158) and is isolated, partly by choice, to live in a hut in the yard in order to "be out of the chaos" (158), on the "edge" of the activity. This process of physical isolation and separateness is graphically manifested in the second part of the novella through Marlow's awareness of the "Otherness" of the crew. The ultimate point of existential isolation is reached when he can do no more but repeat the lie to Kurtz's "Intended."

Albeit in rudimentary form, this key scene with its sequence of smaller impressions captures the interaction of some of the major impressionist techniques favoured by Conrad, while at the same time preparing the reader for the rest of the interpretative "journey." When compared to other impressionistic passages in NN, it is clear that there is already a movement -- away from merely seeing visually -- towards cognitive perception and understanding. This is a significant development and should be borne in mind when considering the other texts discussed in this thesis.

The second part of the novella, starting with Marlow's overhearing fragments of a conversation between the manager of the station and "the uncle" (179), and ending with Marlow's meeting with the Russian, further develops the themes of interpretation and isolation. The techniques which have now become familiar are all there in one form or another: the significant presence of a strange and pervasive atmosphere, the shaping and unshaping, materializing and dematerializing of material objects and human features, the process of conceptualizing visual and aural "impressions," the delay between impression and interpretation, and so on. Significantly, the cumulative effect that these techniques will have is already implied and enacted in the first two pages of this section, which will have its climax in the attack on the boat.

The introductory passage of this part of the novella is charged with enigmatic phrases and an unanswered question which do not bring Marlow closer to the truth or "centre," but which lead him to the "edge":

'The two below me moved away then a few paces, and strolled back and forth at some distance. I heard: 'Military post -- doctor -- two hundred miles -- quite alone now -- unavoidable delays -- nine months -- no news -- strange rumours.' They approached again, just as the manager was saying, 'No one, as far as I know, unless a species of wandering trader -- a pestilential fellow, snapping ivory from the natives.' Who was it they were talking about? I gathered in snatches that this was some man supposed to be in Kurtz's district, and of whom the manager did not approve' (181).

Marlow's attempts at understanding the conversation are impeded by the vague, impressionistic and piecemeal rendering of the "facts." This leads to a "blurring" of his understanding, and to an incorrect conclusion. As is the case with visual impressions, these snatches of conversation can almost be seen as miming the process of understanding. One sees in the passage a continuation of the process of applying interpretative categories discussed earlier, but with one noteworthy difference, however: this time, Marlow does not look to his rational and logical categories to deal with this situation; he now turns toward the "uncivilized" world for answers:

I saw him extend his short flipper of an arm for a gesture that took in the forest, the creek, the mud, the river, -- seemed to beckon with a dishonouring flourish before the sunlit face of the land a treacherous appeal to the lurking death, to the hidden evil, to the profound darkness of its heart. It was so startling that I leaped to my feet and looked back at the edge of the forest, as though I had expected an answer of some sort to that black display of confidence (182).

The tone of uncertainty, exacerbated by Marlow's implied feeling of helplessness and his apparent inability to deal with his surroundings, soon changes to that of fear, as the unknown world of the forest is penetrated:

The smell of mud, of primeval mud, by Jove! was in my nostrils, the high stillness of primeval forest was before

my eyes; there were shiny patches on the black creek. The moon had spread over everything a thin layer of silver -- over the rank grass, over the mud, upon the wall of matted vegetation standing higher than the wall of the temple, over the great river I could see through a sombre gap glittering, glittering, as it flowed broadly by without a murmur...I wondered whether the stillness on the face of the immensity looking at us two were meant as an appeal or as a menace. What were we who had strayed in here? Could we handle that dumb thing, or would it handle us?...What was in there? (171).

The "sensationist" epistemology mentioned earlier is clearly evident in this passage: in the process of trying to understand and interpret, Marlow has to move through a series of steps using various "instruments" to help him make sense of his impressions, from smelling the "primeval mud" to seeing the moon and the "layer of silver," to hearing the "stillness." None of these categories leads him to "process" these impressions to the extent of fully "understanding" them, and thereby enabling him to dispel the underlying fear. The need to interpret, so colourfully illustrated in the passage with the white worsted, forces him to change his categories; he employs his now familiar battery of questions, moving from the known entity -- "we" -- to the unknown -- "dumb thing" -- and, finally, to the open-ended: "What was in there?". The failure of this repertoire of questions once more leads to the "edge," rather than the "centre."

Marlow's experience of the impinging of the physical world as a strange enveloping space and atmosphere evidently affects his understanding and is nowhere as profound as in the second part of the novella, describing his journey into the interior:

Going up that river was like travelling 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 the sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances. On silvery sandbanks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off from everything you had known once -- somewhere -- far away -- in another existence perhaps. There were moments when one's past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare to yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence. And this stillness of life did not on the least resemble a peace. It was a stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect. I got used to it afterwards; I did not see it anymore; I had no time. I had to keep guessing at the channel; I had to discern, mostly by inspiration, the signs of the hidden banks; I watched for sunken stones; I was learning to clap my teeth sharply before my heart flew out, when I shaved by a fluke some infernal sly old snag that would have ripped the life out of the tin-pot steamboat and drowned all the pilgrims; I had to keep a look-out for the signs of dead wood we could cut up in the night for the next day's steaming. When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality -- the reality, I tell you -- fades. The inner truth is hidden -- luckily, luckily. But I felt it all the same; I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey tricks (183-84).

This journey recalls a technique used earlier in NN, namely that of presenting the reader with the spatial axes of the journey in the implied "backward" and "downward" movement; backward in time, to "the earliest beginnings of the world," and downward, into the primitive world of the primordial jungle. The customary Conradian theme of creating an overwhelming space is employed here to great effect: "the big trees" are seen as "kings" and stand in sharp contrast to the absurd actions of Marlow, who -- with his "monkey tricks" -- tries to make sense of it all. Trying to understand this

"strange world of plants, and water, and silence" leaves Marlow "bewitched and cut off from everything you had known once." The dominant Conradian sub-texts of existential isolation and epistemological frustration experienced so profoundly here by Marlow, are vividly foregrounded in this passage by descriptive techniques which "shade into" the thematics of the novella.

The passage has a retarding effect on the narrative as it "freezes" a moment in time, echoing the historical excursion into Rome in the first part of the novella and recalling the opening of Bleak House discussed earlier. The space which envelops Marlow is defined in terms denoting the sensory "processing" thereof: "empty stream," "great silence," and "an impenetrable forest." There is a constant reminder of the "dumb thing" mentioned earlier: "an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention...[looking] at you with a vengeful aspect."

Having evoked the mysterious atmosphere through sensory description, the passage goes on to develop graphically the theme of interpretation. Marlow has to rely on a "map" of sorts, Towson's An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship, and on the "signs" in the river, to guide him safely through the treacherous waters. This process of interpretation is marked with verbs which underscore the complexity of the attempts to draw distinctions between surface reality and "inner truth": "trying to find a channel," "keep guessing," "to discern," and "keep a look-out." There is no certainty, only the memory of something you "had known once -- somewhere -- far away -- in another existence."



The pattern established at the beginning of the second part of the novella, of hearing and seeing only partially, of not being able to "see" and "understand," gains momentum through passages like these, and culminates in the central passage of the second part of the novella, the attack on the boat in the much discussed episode with the arrows (199-204) in which the first impressions of "Sticks, little sticks...flying about" are decoded as "Arrows, by Jove."

The third "major" impression which needs to be examined is the one dealing with Marlow's sighting of and arrival at Kurtz's encampment (211-220). Having been delayed several times, Marlow is tantalizingly close to meeting Kurtz when they arrive at the station:

'I saw in the distance a clearing on the river-side and the outlines of some sort of building. 'What's this?' I asked. He clapped his hands in wonder. 'The station!' he cried. I edged in at once, still going half speed.

Through my glasses I saw the slope of a hill interspersed with rare trees and perfectly free from undergrowth. A long decaying building on the summit was half buried in the high grass; the large holes in the peaked roof gaped black from afar; the jungle and the woods made a background. There was no enclosure or fence of any kind; but there had been one apparently, for near the house half-a-dozen slim posts remained in a row, roughly trimmed, and with their upper ends ornamented with round carved balls. The rails, or whatever there had been between, had disappeared. Of course the forest surrounded all that. The river-bank was clear, and on the water side I saw a white man under a hat like a cart-wheel beckoning persistently with his whole arm...As I manoeuvred to get alongside, I was asking myself, 'What does this fellow look like?' Suddenly I got it. He looked like a harlequin' (212-213).

Structurally the passage leads to the close of the action and narration in the second part of the novella and runs on into the beginning of the third part, in which the end of the physical journey

is reached. In contrast to the fog, the darkness of the forest, the difficulty experienced with "seeing" what lies hidden under the water, Marlow apparently has no difficulty in "seeing": there is a "clearing" and a hill "perfectly free from undergrowth." There is no enclosure which obscures his sight; only a few poles remain. The river bank is also "clear." The questions now arise: Why this sudden clarity? What is Conrad trying to achieve with this inversion of the pattern which has been developing up to this point in the tale?

The only part of the pattern which remains the same is the absurd epithet with which Marlow describes the white man, "He looked like a harlequin," emphasizing the idea that the white men are out of place in this world in which they find themselves. Conrad's main pretext for changing the pattern seems to be to enact the process of interpretation by forcing the reader to draw certain conclusions. What are these? If one considers the readers of popular fiction at the time this tale was first published in serial form and the nature of fiction written by Conrad's contemporaries such as Kipling, Wells<sup>8</sup> and Bennett, one can fairly safely assume that many readers would, at this point in the narrative, start "adjusting" the focus of their cameras, expecting an answer to the many questions raised, an unravelling of the plot, as it were. One would not be mistaken in assuming that many of the original readers would be expecting a full "description" of the "heart of darkness." Yet quite the opposite is true. As Marlow's authority is undercut by his continuous misreading

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<sup>8</sup> See Ore1 (160-183) for an overview of the different directions in which Wells and Conrad steered the short story.

of the various "signs" and "legends" on the "map" presented to him, the reader's own "misreading" of the map is foregrounded in a grotesque and horrifying passage which stuns the reader when he or she realizes the full meaning of the words. Yet this "revelation" only comes in the third and final part of the novella, delaying the interpretation of the episode:

And then I made a brusque movement, and one of the remaining posts of that vanished fence leaped up in the field of my glass. You remember I told you I had been struck at the distance by certain attempts at ornamentation, rather remarkable in the ruinous aspect of the place. Now I had suddenly a nearer view, and its first result was to throw back my head as if before a blow. Then I went carefully from post to post with my glass, and I saw my mistake. These round knobs were not ornamental, but symbolic; they were expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing -- food for thought and also for the vultures if there had been any looking down from the sky; but at all events for such ants as were industrious enough to ascend the pole. They would have been even more impressive, those heads on the stakes, if their faces had not been turned to the house (220).

In very dramatic terms, the reader is confronted here with the Conradian cameo which renders the essence of the theme of the "heart of darkness" through impressionist techniques. The "interpretation" of the first impressions left by the poles and carved balls is consciously delayed as Marlow first describes his own reaction, before drawing his listeners' attention to the importance of his first sighting of these balls, next developing the characteristics of the object and only then intimating that all is not well through his reference to "vultures" and "ants." At this point, having built up the reader's expectations, he quite matter-of-factly states that these are human heads. The effect of this understatement is a heightened emotional response to this grotesque scene on the reader's part. Even

more chilling and paradoxical than the idea of the severed heads (after all, one has been led to expect the "uncivilized" and "savage" in Africa) is the difference in Marlow's response when he arrives at the first station discussed earlier, and now. Marlow's initial disgust with the regression which he observes during his first stop at the Central Station is in stark contrast to his behaviour now: there is no doubt that he himself has regressed -- his initial shock and implied outrage has become a "rational" and matter-of-fact description of savage behaviour of unmentionable character and proportion. Gone is the shock and disgust; in its place are the pitiful attempts of Marlow -- like the immaculately dressed clerk -- to hold on to something that will assist him in retaining his sanity, which, in Marlow's case, is to accept the changed "norms" of European behaviour out here in the "heart of darkness."

To summarise: the discussion of these key scenes and "impressions" clearly indicates that -- in Conrad -- form and content are inseparable. The mysterious and illusive atmosphere of these episodes results from the cumulative effect of the series of smaller "impressions" which constitute each passage. The theme of understanding is graphically illustrated through these and other similar passages. An important point to note is that the delay between impression and interpretation is extended each time this method is used. The reader's "gaze" is focused extensively on the visual impression, before being guided to the interpretation. This process is repeated a number of times in the narrative as Marlow observes objects, people, events, and tries to make sense of them. As

the period is extended and the explanation delayed, the reader arrives at the point of "decoding" only after having been exposed to a number of other, irrelevant bits of information, scenery, and events. The superimposition of first impressions and subsequent revelations doesn't merely emulate the order of perception, but presents the reader with an interpretative tangle as he (or she) tries to make sense of the (sometimes contradictory) aspects that simultaneously confront him or her. As the period of delay is extended, the reader's "grasp" of the facts becomes all the more tenuous, so that increasingly almost nothing can confidently be read; traditional meanings and values no longer function (Johnson, "Impressionism" 57). The effect of this technique is, of course, to enhance the feeling of confusion and disorientation which results from this fragmented narrative. It seems as if Conrad used the first half of "HoD" to initiate the reader step-by-step into the mechanics of this technique, just as Kurtz and Marlow have been initiated into the heart of darkness, so that its application in the episode when Marlow reaches Kurtz' encampment is all the more striking and effective. As in so many instances, Conrad here proves his originality and standing as a forerunner of the many experimental novelists who came after him. This Conradian procedure of experimenting with various techniques that would prepare the reader to deal with particular scenes and their implications, paved the way for other important Modernist and modern writers such as James Joyce in Ulysses (1922), and Anthony Burgess in A Clockwork Orange (1962).

## V

An important aspect of Conrad's rendering of the voyage motif is Marlow's use of "maps" to "read" and negotiate the space of his perilous journey. Having been forced as readers to rely on Marlow's maps in our reading of "HoD," it is now necessary to reflect on the reader's process of interpreting these maps.

The term "map" should be seen in a context broader than the literal meaning of the word. It will be used in conjunction with the term "text" to refer to any "set of signs, symbols, verbal or non-verbal gestures and actions housed in a pattern of linguistic meaning" (Rose, "Geography" 124). Marlow -- and then through him, the reader -- encounters various such "maps" or "texts" which will signpost the shared journey of interpretation, maps which all have to be deciphered and decoded during the journey. And it is through the illusory quality of Marlow's impressionistic recreation of memory that his attempts to "decode" these various "maps" graphically render the problematic process of interpretation. These "maps" include the map in Brussels (145), the sailor's manual (189-190), Kurtz's tract commissioned by the "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs" (207-208) and, finally, Kurtz's sketch in oils (211).

What is significant about these "maps" is that they all share characteristics on a micro-level which simulate or re-enact the

process of interpretation on a macro-level.<sup>9</sup> In fact, "HoD" as a novella can be seen not only as a map of the colonial crisis, but -- especially relevant within the parameters of this thesis -- as a "map" which, through its very structure, asks (and tries to answer) Ambrosini's question posed earlier namely, How does one read?

Consider, for example, Marlow's first "reading" of the map in Brussels (145) which can be regarded as a representative example of the shared qualities of these maps:

Deal table in the middle, plain chairs all round the walls, on one end a large shining map, marked with all the colours in the rainbow. There was a vast amount of red -- good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there, a deuce of a lot of blue, a little green, smears of orange, and, on the East Coast, a purple patch, to show where the jolly pioneers of progress drink the jolly lager-beer. However, I wasn't going into any of these. I was going into the yellow. Dead in the centre. And the river was there -- fascinating -- deadly -- like a snake (145).

The map enables Conrad to define the area that the narrative will traverse and offers clear-cut -- red, blue, purple -- categories and demarcations to its reader, rendering spatially what the text will render temporarily. This map visually creates "point, line, plan and distance...[while] verbally creating the real object of a map...[which will, in turn, incorporate] the reader into the spatial reality of the text" (Boyd 88). Everything seems to be in its place, and Marlow's

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<sup>9</sup> This view is implicitly also held by Elliott, who provides the following perspective: "Thus Heart of Darkness becomes a metafictional statement: it dramatizes the differing responses of its own readers" (175).

jingoistic<sup>10</sup> interpretation of the colours seems to emphasize his support for the process of colonialism embarked upon by the European powers. The map, and Marlow's interpretation seem to support the idea of a tale of adventure in the expansion of the British colonial empire, and indeed creates this kind of expectation in the reader. Yet this "first impression" is soon overturned. As is the case with the inversion of the symbolic structure in the novella, the categories suggested by this initial map will be rudely and ironically inverted, as will Marlow's initial position. The allusion to "centre" reinforces the title, and creates certain expectations in the reader. Yet the implicit warnings are there for the reader who has by now come to realize that Conrad "forces" the reader to enter the atmosphere and space of his fictional worlds through a particular route only to realize later that it was a misleading route: "rainbow" and "snake" have clear echoes of a Garden of Eden-like setting, with all the multivalent meanings attached to it.

The most significant trait of all these "maps" is revealed when Marlow comes face to face with the physical qualities of the

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<sup>10</sup> Some late nineteenth century maps of the world used red to indicate British territories, blue for French, orange for Portuguese, green for Italian, purple for German and yellow for Belgian territories. Marlow's apparent fervour for the imperialist project is given another perspective when one considers the statement by Cedric Watts, made in his introduction to the Penguin edition of Lord Jim, in which he argues that Blackwood's Magazine took a gamble in publishing an anti-imperialist tale such as "HoD" while its readership was generally racist and pro-imperialist (9). The same point is also made by John Batchelor when he argues that the person addressed by Marlow in LJ is a "'privileged' man who is, clearly, himself a typical Blackwood's reader, a man who believes in action and adventure and has the simple attitudes of the Victorian white imperialist" (Introduction xxii).



geographical area represented on the map. The contrast between the "neat" and "orderly" categories indicated on the map and the implied activities of the colonial forces is exemplified in the absurd actions of the French ship firing shells into the immensity of Africa; the disorder of the station with its dying natives, its aimless dynamiting, its broken machinery, the accountant "keeping up appearances" in the jungle, the stout man trying to put out a blazing warehouse fire with a pail with a hole in it, and many others. The map in Brussels is exposed as being imprecise, not at all as clear-cut as the demarcations on the surface suggested. The journey towards the "centre" forces Marlow to re-examine the known categories depicted on the map and replace them with the blurred and hazy outlines, not only of the physical reality but also of the ideological bias and moral behaviour with which the map of Africa has been "encoded." As such the map in Brussels is shown to contain, hidden within it, the potential for "false" or even multiple interpretations.

The same holds true for Towson's manual, An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship (189-190). It is supposed to be a guide to the finer points of seamanship with "illustrative diagrams and repulsive tables of figures" (189), but it also contains notes pencilled in the margins. On closer examination these notes are revealed to be in Russian, which are consequently of no help to Marlow. So what appears to be a straightforward manual is complicated by indecipherable comments on the text, perhaps some kind of coded supplement necessary to convert and apply Towson's text. The manual therefore doesn't seem

much help when Marlow travels upriver as he literally cannot "read" the notes.

Kurtz's tract written for the "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs" (207-208) also holds within it the seeds of "misreading," as the tone and register of the document differs greatly from the sentiments expressed in the note scrawled on the last page -- "Exterminate all the brutes!". The sense of ambiguity is heightened further as it seems as if Kurtz adhered to his sentiments rather than the logic of the tract in his professional and personal capacity. The novella deals overtly with his professional conduct, but the nature and quality of his personal relationship with the black woman remain undisclosed, another mystery to baffle the reader. In a sense, the ambiguity of this "map" can be seen when it is taken as a literal declaration of intent in his professional life, while a relationship of sexual convenience and exploitation could also be seen as a form of "extermination." The mystery and ambiguity remains, as it is never disclosed whether or not the woman's devotion is reciprocated. This is also confirmed by the "signal" sent out by Kurtz's sketch in oils:

Then I noticed a small sketch in oils, on a panel, representing a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch. The background was sombre - almost black. The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the torch-light on the face was sinister (169).

Sexton (387-392) raises a number of points about the importance of the sketch which are relevant to the argument presented thus far. The most important of these is the fact that both the history of the sketch, and the subject matter itself, are shrouded in mystery,

suggesting that this indicates Kurtz's significant inner complexity. I think it also has consequences for Marlow's attempts to understand Kurtz. The strong symbolic evocations of "light" vs "darkness" support the clear-cut moral bias suggested at the beginning of the novella, with the torch of civilization being carried blindly into the "darkness" by the European powers.<sup>11</sup>

The discrepancies between the "maps" and their objects all serve to foreground the issue of "knowing" and "understanding" throughout the novella, and represent an interesting modification of the narrative technique of delayed decoding: the map (or first "impression") creates a particular picture in Marlow's mind's eye, as it were, and its physical counterpart (or the decoding of the impression) often gives an ironic inversion to the original map. For example, the impression which the sketch in oils creates for Marlow is modified by the many subsequent impressions which confront him before he sees the subject of the painting himself (225-226).

Maps are representations of real geographical locations with the primary function of guiding and directing one's journey, or assisting one in understanding the physical characteristics of a particular area or location. Accuracy, sufficiency and verisimilitude are vital attributes of adequate maps. Maps are not supposed to "mislead" or lead one astray. Above all, they should not be

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<sup>11</sup> Cedric Watts, in the Explanatory Notes to the Oxford World's Classics edition of "HoD" underscores this aspect of multiple readings (but within the context of the symbolism of the sketch) when he says that "it lends itself to partial decipherment, it holds a residue of the indeterminable" (271).

ambiguous. The subject of most of these maps, what they represent, is also represented in the novella. For example, the map of Africa in Brussels has its physical counterpart in the contours of the wild and inhospitable jungle through which Marlow travels. Kurtz's tract, expressing his attitudes towards the Africans, his role as colonizer, and his precious ivory has a more abstract counterpart in the many references to him, his actions and the effect he has on people. The two are very different. Again, Kurtz's sketch in oils has a real-life subject which seems very much at odds with the sketch itself.

The major contribution of these maps to the theme of interpretation therefore lies in the discrepancy between the subject and its representation, and the apparent failure of these "maps" to perform their function effectively. Contrary to the usual function of maps, the maps or texts which Marlow uses to "read" the landscape, the characters and their actions tend to displace, frustrate and alienate him even more, thus contributing to the developing pattern of spatial dislocation, epistemological frustration and existential isolation. As these maps are found not to represent the "reality," or the "truth," they serve no purpose of confirming or defining the phenomena which confront the characters. The discrepancy between "map" and "reality" has an unsettling and dislocating effect.

Each map or text represented in "HoD" has been created by a character in some attempt to "grasp and interpret experience" (Sexton 387). Subsequently, Marlow's readings of these maps are also attempts at grasping and interpreting experience and the world which contributes to this experience. Again with Marlow the effect is

different from that which is desired. What he "reads," and what he is confronted with, are totally different entities. His arduous attempts at interpreting the various comments about Kurtz and the picture he tries to build up in his mind, are shown to have been hopelessly inadequate by the discrepancy between the painting and Kurtz's scribbled addendum. The final result of all his attempts at interpretation is a sense of alienation and feeling of being overpowered:

'We have lost the first of the ebb,' said the Director, suddenly. I raised my head. The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway...seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness' (252).

The reader is confronted with both "map" and Marlow's subjective interpretation thereof, or, as Huggan states "Marlow's reading of the landscape...is carefully framed so as to accentuate certain details and blur or exclude others"(28). Each "map" and its interpretation must in turn be "read" and interpreted by the reader. The function of this method of presentation strongly emphasizes the epistemological nature of the narrative and the ontological elements of the world to which these maps refer.

Given this cursory discussion of these maps, I wish to argue that each of these "maps" -- paradoxically as it may seem -- leads Marlow not to the "centre," not the "edge," but even beyond the edge. Hillis Miller (Poets 23) implies something similar when he states that

["HoD"]...is structured as a passing of portals, a traveling through states which leads the reader ever deeper into the darkness. The method of this presentation is to put in question whatever Marlow reaches, to show it as a misleading illusion, something which must be rejected for the sake of the truth behind it (my emphasis).

The reader does not find any easy answers to the question posed at the beginning of this section, How do we read? "HoD" ultimately implies that there are many ways of reading, and that the reader will constantly be in search of the "truth" behind the "misleading illusion." Seen in this light, Conrad's impressionistic treatment of both the fictional world and the processes of interpreting this world in "HoD" already points towards a significant development of the theme of "reading" to be explored in Lord Jim, and that of "writing," which will be examined in Nostramo.

Phrased in more theoretical terms, this development in these texts seems to render impotent and untenable McHale's argument developed in his much quoted book, Postmodernist Fiction (1987), namely that, on the one hand, the dominant of Modernist fiction is epistemological, focussing on questions such as, "How can I interpret this world of which I am a part?" (9), while on the other hand, the dominant in Postmodernist fiction is ontological, asking, "Which world is this?"(10). It is clear that the central role played by the various maps in Conrad's "HoD" not only emphasizes his keen interest in space and geography, but that his concern with simulating the reading process by involvement of the reader in processing his or her impression of Marlow's impressions contains within it the germ of important "postmodernist" fictional techniques.<sup>12</sup> These preliminary conclusions will be revisited in the final chapter of the thesis.

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<sup>12</sup> See Teets ("Ruminations" 10-19) and Cunningham (256-57, n.1) for further discussion of Conrad's centrality to both modernism and postmodernism.

## Chapter Four

### Lord Jim: (Re)Constructing Psychological Space

He wanted to go on talking for truth's sake, perhaps for his own sake also; and while his utterance was deliberate, his mind positively flew round and round the serried circle of facts that had surged up all around him to cut him off from the rest of his kind: it was like a creature that, finding itself imprisoned within an enclosure of high stakes, dashes round and round, distracted in the night, trying to find a weak spot, a crevice, a place to scale, some opening through which it may squeeze itself and escape.

Conrad: Lord Jim (1900)

### I

The years preceding the publication in 1900 of Lord Jim (LJ) saw Conrad devoting a great deal of time and energy to attempts at constructing a kind of fictional cosmos that could, in retrospect, be seen as reflecting the major characteristics of the fin-de-siècle, especially its focus on the perception and representation of "reality." The cosmos in LJ, with its "spatial dislocations, material instabilities, and temporal discontinuities" on the one hand, and its "darkness, light and pervasive atmosphere" (Benson, "Physics" 138-39) on the other, is largely the end result of these attempts, as well as being an exemplary fictional representation of the salient

intellectual, artistic and stylistic concerns of the period during which it was written.

LJ is, however, much more than just a "mirror of its time." It brings to a close a distinctive phase in Conrad's oeuvre, a period of "intense experimentation which began in 1896 and ended in 1900...[in which] Conrad was most deeply involved in presenting the obdurate incompatibility of the self and the world in which it exists" (Watt, Century 356). At the same time LJ also represents the beginning of a new phase in Conrad's career, as Darras (30) argues that "Lord Jim is [also] a prophetic novel in the sense that it reveals for the first time in Conrad's writing an abstract conception of time and space, composed equally of fragmentation and continuity, which ... [would] eventually become the hallmark of his work."

The majority of critics, among them Beach (346), Guerard (126), Watt (Century 286-304), Jameson (242-269) and Krajka (55-62) focuses on the dialectic between these notions of fragmentation and continuity and generally regards LJ as the most "impressionistic" of Conrad's works, largely because of its "modernist obfuscation, where subjectivism and an experimental form generate a mist of evasions" (Zelnick, Carabine documents 2, 243). Concepts such as "experimental form" and "a mist of evasions" were dominant elements in Conrad's thinking during the period he was working on the sketch that would eventually become LJ. This observation is borne out by the tone and atmosphere emanating from a letter Conrad wrote to Edward Garnett in September 1899:



I am writing -- it is true -- but this is only piling crime upon crime: every line is odious like a bad action. I mean odious to me -- because I still have some pretences to the possession of a conscience though my morality is gone to the dogs. I am like a man who has lost his gods. My efforts seem unrelated to anything in heaven and everything under heaven is impalpable to the touch like shapes of mist...Even writing to a friend -- to a person one has heard, touched, drank with, quarrelled with -- does not give me a sense of reality. All is illusion -- the words written, the mind at which they are aimed, the truth they are intended to express, the hands that will hold the paper, the eyes that will glance at the lines. Every image floats vaguely in a sea of doubt -- and the doubt itself is lost in an unexpected universe of incertitudes (CLJC 2, 198).

Like the elusive state described in the letter, the atmosphere in LJ is mysterious and vague; its world is a "universe of incertitudes...impalpable...like shapes of mist." Echoes of the state of being evoked in this letter reverberate through LJ and are unmistakable, capturing what Guerard (171) calls the "particulars of place and person...[with] the finely evoked atmospheres and brilliant minor vignettes." One could list numerous examples from the novel to illustrate this point, but two will suffice:

...we had watched the moon float away above the chasm between the hills like an ascending spirit out of a grave; its sheen descended, cold and pale, like the ghost of dead sunlight. There is something haunting in the light of the moon; it has all the dispassionateness of a disembodied soul, and something of its inconceivable mystery. It is to our sunshine, which -- say what you like -- is all we have to live by, what the echo is to the sound: misleading and confusing whether the note be mocking or sad. It robs all forms of matter -- which, after all, is our domain -- of their substance, and gives a sinister reality to shadows alone (245-46).

and:

We landed on a bit of white beach. It was backed by a low cliff wooded on the brow, draped in creepers to the very foot. Below us the plain of the sea, of a serene and intense blue, stretched with a slight upward tilt to the

thread-like horizon drawn at the height of our eyes. Great waves of glitter blew lightly along the pitted dark surface, as swift as feathers chased by the breeze. A chain of islands sat broken and massive facing the wide estuary, displayed in a sheet of pale and glassy water reflecting faithfully the contour of the shore. High in the colourless sunshine a solitary bird, all black, hovered, dropping and soaring above the same spot with a slight rocking motion of the wings. A ragged, sooty bunch of flimsy mat hovels was perched over its own inverted image upon a crooked multitude of high piles the colour of ebony (332).

These passages are interesting examples of precisely the oppositional concepts of fragmentation and continuity. It is as if space and time no longer exist - all that remains is "something haunting...[an] inconceivable mystery," and misleading echoes, robbing "all forms...of their substance." The narration seems suspended by the emphasis on visual perception, by the narrator's attempts to capture the essence of each fleeting moment. The rhythm of each passage suggests a kind of timelessness, strengthened by the illusory nature of sense impressions and their ephemeral suggestiveness so clearly recorded in these evocative passages. The oscillation between a fragmented perception of reality (exemplified by the first passage), and the sense of continuity (implied in the second) contributes to, and indeed complicates, the general sense of vagueness and mystery permeating the whole novel. Add to this elements like the strong focus on sensory impressions, the play with contrasting colours, and illusive and impalpable quality of descriptions, and it is small wonder that critics emphasize the impressionist design of LJ which, in turn, so strongly prefigures what Ordonez (110) calls the "great renderings" of other Conradian masterpieces, such as Nostramo, The Secret Agent, Under Western Eyes, and even Chance (1913).

Having started out with, and having worked through, the somewhat crude spatial and thematic contrasts between the worlds of East and West in Almayer's Folly and An Outcast of the Islands, progressing to the almost excessive and overpowering representation of cosmic space in NN, and the much more sophisticated and multifaceted presentation of symbolic space in "HoD," Conrad's concern with creating a richly atmospheric space culminates in LJ and, in a sense, changes quite dramatically in Nostramo with its emphasis not so much on the "reading" of space, as on the inscription of a mythical space. Conrad uses all his familiar techniques to constitute Jim's psychological space, and adds to this catena that of multiple "readings" or narratives which present a much more abstract and fragmented experience of the novel. In a sense, LJ cannot be read on its own but must be seen in the light of these two predecessors, a view underscored by an important critic like Berthoud, who argues that there is a continuity of similar themes and techniques in the works published after "HoD": "The four grand novels of that period [Lord Jim, Nostramo, The Secret Agent, and Under Western Eyes] are richly, even extravagantly textured. Yet for all their mimetic range and stylistic variety they remain part of a single, comprehensive exploratory process" (64-65). Conrad had, in fact, hoped to publish the three Marlovian tales, "Youth," "HoD," and LJ together in one volume and expressed this view in a letter to David Meldrum on 19th May 1900: "It [LJ] has not been planned to stand alone. H of D was meant in my mind as a foil, and Youth was supposed to give the note" (CLJC 2, 271). The very fact that these works were not published together, says Watts, has obscured and retarded "recognition of the

magnitude of Conrad's discussion of modes of romanticism, problems of interpretation and varieties of colonial enterprise, and it may impede our recognition that a major narrative in Conrad's work is a 'transtextual narrative'" (Introduction - Lord Jim 17-18; my emphasis). Based on these observations, it would not be too far-fetched if one were to assume that these texts are conceptually related in approach and design, and that they offer important interpretative cues with which to approach the other impressionist texts in Conrad's oeuvre.

It is against this background that the central focus of this chapter -- the reconstruction of Jim's psychological space -- must be examined.

The psychological space of an individual -- be it a living person or a complex fictional character -- is shaped by both external and internal influences combining to form an intricate web which constitutes that person's "reality," or, in Marlow's words, "the brooding rancour of...[one's] mind" (105). The fictional recreation of this complex dynamics can assume many forms. In Realistic novels like, for example, the works of George Eliot, a character's internal motivations are largely revealed by the comments of the omniscient narrator and -- to a lesser extent degree -- by the character's individual response to particular situations. The psychological novels of the proto-Modernist and Modernist period, from Pater's Marius the Epicurean (1885), through to Henry James's The Ambassadors (1903), Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1914), Ford Madox Ford's The Good Soldier (1915), up to Virginia Woolf's seminal

novel To The Lighthouse (1927), with their dominant representation of the self through the stream-of-consciousness technique and its many variations, have somewhat reversed this "imbalance" by rendering the multiplicity and subjectivity of a character's psychological motivations through subtle vignettes of the character's internal experience of and response to certain situations in "reality."

As an early Modernist straddling the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and experimenting with new fictional forms and techniques, it is not surprising to find that Conrad chose to combine these two approaches. This new method -- which Watt calls the "scenic method" -- accentuates the transference of the "mood" of the passage to the reader's subconscious mind. Watt confirms this when he states that "the scenic method's combination of the autonomy of the narrative with the fullness with which each scene is described makes the novel seem to be taking place in what can be called the reader's psychological present" (Century 287). The dominant mood and psychological space in LJ results from the merging of a number of spatial and atmospheric attributes present in both NN and "HoD" on the one hand, and a new rendering of attempts at reconstructing Jim's psychological space by the various characters on the other.

One such technique is the use of the journey or voyage motif which not only functions on various levels such as characterization, narrative, and symbolism, but almost replaces the traditional notion of plot by providing continuity. The journey motif has been read and interpreted in many ways. Baines (242) focuses on the metaphysical level of "Jim's spiritual Odyssey [which] explores the theme of guilt

and atonement," while Morgan (Carabine documents 1, 112) suggests that Conrad was the first writer to transcribe the voyages of archaic myth as voyages of self discovery, and classifies the various journeys in Conrad's oeuvre as journeys out of time (NN, "HoD"), voyages to the underworld (NN, "HoD," "Falk"), and -- of interest to the argument here -- journeys to the isle of death or transfiguration (An Outcast of the Islands, LJ, Nostramo, "The Planter of Malata," Victory, and The Rescue). Darras (25) again argues that there are elements of chivalric initiation rites in Jim's romantic quest in the closed world of Patusan. Seen in this context the journey motif clearly fulfils an important intertextual<sup>1</sup> function as it reinforces themes, motifs and ideas already introduced in other works.

I wish to extend the argument presented in the earlier chapters by showing that the voyage motif has important symbolic implications represented in the narrowing spatial perspective of the novel. Jim's journey from the wide expanse of the ocean to the claustrophobic island of Patusan also serves to develop two central motifs of these "transtextual narratives," namely entrapment and the reading of space. In typical Conradian fashion, these motifs are closely interrelated and form the essence of what Hillis Miller calls the "textuality of ...[the] text...the meshing of its filaments" (Repetition 23). It is important to note that the journey motif runs parallel with those of entrapment and enclosure, first introduced in NN and developed further in "HoD." For example, in "HoD" the dominant impact of the journey is

<sup>1</sup> Intertextual is used to refer to the dialogue between various works in a writer's oeuvre and even beyond that, while intratextual is used to refer to the links within a particular text.

symbolic and can be plotted on a symbolic continuum, from "civilization" to "barbarism," from "positive" to "negative," from (spurious) "understanding" to "confusion," and vice versa. Alternatively, it can also be seen as a circular movement through space and time, from the opening of the narrative on the Nelly, through a period of stasis to the dark space of Africa and Kurtz, and back again to the Nelly. Marlow's physical and spiritual journey leads him through -- to use Wagner's (72) phrase -- a "funnel-like" structure, from the wide open ocean through the narrow and claustrophobic enclosure of the boat on the river, and the suffocating atmosphere of Kurtz' encampment. Spiritually he moves from "light" -- albeit used ironically -- to "darkness." Marlow does not, however, remain trapped in the funnel. He returns to civilization, and recognizes his complicity in the lie. Yet he can never escape from the horror, and even though he is back in "civilized" space, he will always be trapped by this knowledge.

In LJ, the journey motif, although interrelated with the other "journeys," primarily becomes a psychological journey as it links both the various characters' and narrator's attempts to re-create Jim's psychological space. There are many "journeys" presented in the novel: there is Jim's physical journey Eastward as well as his psychological journey -- albeit somewhat unconscious and unmeditated -- into his own self. Marlow undertakes several journeys, the most obvious being his "psychological" journey which tries to "reconstruct" Jim's psychological space and motivation. However, this "journey" also has personal implications for Marlow as he is forced to delve

into his own psyche in search of his motivations for befriending Jim. In this context the journey motif has a specific characterizing function, revealing almost as much about Marlow as it conceals about Jim; and then, finally, there is the reader's own epistemological journey into the intratextual labyrinth of the novel and the intertextual links with its predecessors.

Jim's journey Eastward can be plotted on a continuum and is marked by a similar funnel-like movement through various kinds of constricting space. Physically, he moves from the wide and mysterious tropical sea through various ports, from "Bombay...[to] Calcutta...[to] Rangoon...[to] Penang" (5), each with its multi-coloured perspective. Driven by some hidden motivation, Jim steadfastly continues on this journey until he ends up in Patusan with its images of engulfing forests and gloom, a space that is "carefully bordered, a space that captures" (Mongia 6). Irony plays an important part here as the otherwise positive connotations of womb as "life-giving" are subverted to negative connotations of "life-taking." An important similarity with "HoD" can be found in the fact that in each text, the central character starts off on a physical journey but which eventually becomes a psychological journey into the secret depths of his own self. As Jim continually moves Eastward in search of a new life, in search of the rising sun, he begins a journey which will paradoxically and ironically lead to what might be thought of as the setting of the sun in his life. Instead of creating space for himself, he retreats into a claustrophobic enclosure in which he once more cannot cope with his own unrealistic demands on himself, thereby



underscoring the tragic undertones of the journey as highlighted by Berthoud when he states that Jim can only discover the meaning of the code to which he has committed himself by breaking it: "Hence he becomes caught in a vicious circle. The more he values lost honour, the more he regrets its loss; the greater his regret, the greater his valuation. This cycle must inevitably accelerate towards a conclusion in which, honour having acquired an absolute importance, its forfeiture becomes absolutely irretrievable" (84).

Structurally the motifs of voyage and entrapment fulfil an intratextual function in LJ because they provide important, but often overlooked, links between the Patna and Patusan sections. Spatially, Jim's romantic quest comes full circle because it is on Patusan that he is finally able to live like the romantic hero of his dreams, as intimated by Schwarz when he states that "Patusan fulfils the vision of Jim's fantasies by seemingly providing a realm that is outside of time and space and immune to the mutability and relativism that haunted Jim's life in the 'home world'" (Folly 77). Conrad's predilection for irony is manifested once more in the inversion of the motif of entrapment: Jim -- trapped in various kinds of space -- becomes the trapper on Patusan, having "caught" Jewel in a "marriage" between East and West, a union which leads to isolation and death.

The voyage motif is irrevocably linked to the narrator and -- through him -- to the theme of interpretation. Marlow's narration is an epistemological journey, a process of telling and re-telling in order to "make sense," not only of the enigmatic Jim, but also of the ethical and metaphysical possibilities of the world in which both

Marlow and Jim find themselves. Phrased in the metaphor used in the previous chapter, it is a process of mapping, traversing and trying to interpret events which helped to shape the space which had such an influence on Jim. The process is accentuated by remarks such as: "All this happened in much less time than it takes to tell, since I am trying to interpret for you into slow speech the instantaneous effect of visual impressions" (48), and: "I put it down here for you as though I had been an eyewitness. My information was fragmentary, but I've fitted the pieces together, and there is enough of them to make an intelligible picture" (343). These remarks are spread throughout the novel and, seen together, highlight "reading" as an interactive process between the functions of narrator and reader. In a sense these statements implicitly become -- as was the case in the previous two chapters -- a central metaphor in LJ, inextricably linking the notions of epistemology, ontology and existential isolation.

The reader's intimate involvement with Marlow's narrative also makes this an interpretative journey for the reader, a journey which seems to continuously frustrate the reader's desire to create a satisfying and logical order through the reading process. The fractured form of the narrative journey not only simulates Marlow's journey of understanding, of "making sense," but also simulates the epistemological problems encountered by the reader who has to "read" and "interpret" the anachronous presentation of "impressions." In more general terms, the many journeys in the novel are all part of mankind's search for and journey towards the essence of what it means to be human, "one of us."

The theme of interpretation is the central thread linking the various characters' narratives as they all try to "read" Jim and reconstruct his inner space. In contrast to "HoD," where Marlow was the principal "reader" and "interpreter," here the central character, Jim, is not only primarily a (mis)reader, but a "text" that is read and misread by the various narrators. Jim misreads his world and its expectations by trying to act like a romantic hero. The end result is that Jim himself, through his misreading of the social and cultural space in which he finds himself and through his subsequent actions, becomes isolated and alienated. As a "text" Jim is "read" by other "readers." Lothe (135-137) distinguishes four distinct groups of "readers" or interpreters, apart from Marlow: there is Jim himself who -- in his conversations with Marlow -- attempts to recreate his own experience by "translating" it into words; the second group consists of the novel's minor characters, while the third group is constituted by important characters such as the French lieutenant and Stein. The last "group" with an interpretative function consists of only one "character," the omniscient authorial narrator.

The common denominator in all these groups is that each narratee tries to "read" Jim's actions and motives, trying to classify and categorize events by using a particular set of interpretative categories which do not "fit." Consequently, the narratees are frustrated in their efforts to understand Jim. The end result is what Berthoud (66) calls a "collage of verdicts" produced by a great variety of readers: a friend, a lover, an objective professional, a

cynic, and a group of enemies<sup>2</sup> whose "readings" and "misreadings" of Jim are "like those glimpses through the shifting rents in a thick fog -- bits of vivid and vanishing detail." (76). This chapter will attempt to demystify some of these "glimpses" by analysing their constitutive elements.

## II

The argument developed thus far has been based on the premiss that descriptive passages, with their strong reliance on sensory perception, are integral components of the dynamics which propel and energize the geographical, psychological, cosmic and symbolic spatial modes in the major works written between 1897 and 1904. This view is underscored by an important critic like Frederic Jameson, who contends that Conrad's descriptions "virtually fashion a new space and a new perspective, a new sense of depth...[because in] such descriptive passages, the function of the literary representation is...to authorize and reinforce a new representational space" (230).

One way in which Conrad reinforces this "new representational space" is through his favourite technique of simulating the difference and distance between "impression" and "reality." In order to

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<sup>2</sup> This categorization was suggested by an Honours student at the Potchefstroom University, Henri Laurie, after a lecture based on the ideas presented in this chapter.

"deconstruct" common perceptions of space and time, Conrad foregrounds the notions of unstable space, subjective interpretation and the relativity of momentary impressions by framing key episodes in the novels and tales with descriptive passages which not only create a particular mood and atmosphere, but also leave initial impressions on the reader's mind which invariably turn out to have been incorrect, misdirected and even false. For example, Marlow's initial "impressions" of Kurtz are made up of hearsay, anecdotes, and, finally, his "reading" of Kurtz's tract and painting. These all (mis)lead him to construct a false, almost romantic and idealized picture of Kurtz. It is only when he penetrates Kurtz's physical space that the impression of "round balls" is seen to have been false when these "balls" turn out to be skulls. The short circuit between "impression" and "reality" inverts and even invalidates the initial impressions, "pulling the rug" as it were from under the narrator and reader, leaving both unsettled and insecure, and unable to form definitive views on a character or situation.

This narrative methodology contributes to the perennial sense of mystery and vagueness, the difficulty of capturing momentary impressions, the suspension of time and place, and the threatening possibilities of an inhospitable space which are all mediated to the reader through the evocative and impressionistic descriptions. Moreover, these descriptions provide the framework for the development of both characterization and the themes of interpretation, entrapment and isolation. As in the preceding works, the descriptions in LJ rely heavily on visual elements, and create a mood which oscillates between

serenity and stability on the one hand, and fear and mystery on the other:

She cleared the Strait, crossed the bay, continued on her way through the 'One-degree' passage. She held on straight for the Red Sea under a serene sky, under a sky scorching and unclouded, enveloped in a fulgor of sunshine that killed all thought, oppressed the heart, withered all impulses of strength and energy. And under the sinister splendour of that sky the sea, blue and profound, remained still, without a stir, without a ripple, without a wrinkle -- viscous, stagnant, dead. The Patna, with a slight hiss, passed over that plain luminous and smooth, unrolled a black ribbon of smoke across the sky, left behind her on the water a white ribbon of foam that vanished at once, like the phantom of a track drawn upon the lifeless sea by the phantom of a steamer.

Every morning the sun, as if keeping pace in his revolutions with the progress of the pilgrimage, emerged with a silent burst of light exactly at the same distance astern of the ship, caught up with her at noon, pouring the concentrated fire of his rays on the pious purposes of the men, glided past on his descent, and sank mysteriously into the sea evening after evening, preserving the same distance ahead of her advancing bows. The five whites on board lived amidships, isolated from the human cargo. The awnings covered the deck with a white roof from stem to stern, and a faint hum, a low murmur of sad voices, alone revealed the presence of a crowd of people upon the great blaze of the ocean. Such were the days, still, hot, heavy, disappearing one by one into the past, as if falling into an abyss for ever open in the wake of the ship; and the ship, lonely under a wisp of smoke, held on her steadfast way black and smouldering in a luminous immensity, as if scorched by a flame flicked at her from a heaven without pity.

The nights descended on her like a benediction (15-16).

There is a strong semblance of a stable space present in this passage; it exudes an atmosphere of stasis and stillness, creating an almost perfect picture of what Benson calls "Euclidian space" and "Newtonian time" ("Physics" 138). The first paragraph creates the impression of order and clear direction, of serenity and control, a stillness "without a stir, without a ripple, without a wrinkle." The

subtext of the first paragraph already hints at the idea of "reading" space: there is a note of uncertainty, an awareness of potential danger which is somewhere "out there," but which cannot quite be clearly delineated, "read," "captured," and fully understood. This is suggested by words such as "viscous," "stagnant," "enveloped," "fulgor," "sinister," and the repetition of "phantom."

The second paragraph reinforces the impression of an apparently stable cosmic space by accentuating the constant rhythm of the sun through the repetition of the comforting phrase "the same distance." The magnitude of the cosmic space serves to establish the opposition between a great and benign force and a group of small, insignificant individuals in much the same as way as in NN. The similarities between the immense dimensions of cosmic space are so striking in these two novels that it is well worth the effort of comparing the passage quoted above with a similar one in NN:

Outside the glare of the steaming forecastle the serene purity of the night enveloped the seamen with its soothing breath, with its tepid breath flowing under the stars that hung countless above the mastheads in a thick cloud of luminous dust. On the town side the blackness of the water was streaked with trails of light which undulated gently on slight ripples, similar to filaments that float rooted to the shore. Rows of other lights stood away in straight lines as if drawn up on parade between towering buildings; but on the other side of the harbour sombre hills arched high their black spines, on which, here and there, the point of a star resembled a spark fallen from the sky. Far off, Byculla way, the electric lamps at the dock gates shone on the end of lofty standards with a glow blinding and frigid like captive ghosts of some evil moons. Scattered all over the dark polish of the roadstead, the ships at anchor floated in perfect stilness under the feeble gleam of their riding-lights, looming up, opaque and bulky, like strange and monumental structures abandoned by men to an everlasting repose (NN 14-15)

Both passages have an atmosphere of stability and immobility, creating the impression of a vast cosmic space with intimidating proportions which completely overwhelms and dwarfs the actions of the men on both the Patna and the Nigger. In contrast to the passage from NN, the sinister potential of the apparently serene world in which the Patna finds itself is everpresent, subtly suggested by the phrase "a luminous immensity, as if shrouded by a flame flicked at her from a heaven without pity" (my emphasis). The important point to note in these examples is that the vast atmospheric void, so spellbinding in its variability, seems to fulfil the role of an "objective correlative" for the mental space experienced by humanity as a condition of its being.

Conrad's fondness and use of colour contrasts was raised in the chapters on the NN and "HoD," mainly with a view to showing how Conrad sketched the vast atmospheric space in which the characters in these works find themselves. In LJ, colour contrasts are deployed for climactic emphasis within the total repertoire of descriptive elements. Colour is also used to expound the theme of "reading" and interpretation by reinforcing the opposition between distinct and clearly distinguishable categories on the one hand, and the blurred, vague and indistinct nature of Marlow's -- and all the other readers' -- impressions and "readings" on the other hand. For example, in the first four chapters of LJ, colour is used to illustrate how Jim is able to "read" and distinguish the body parts of the sleeping pilgrims without any difficulty, as, for instance, in this passage from chapter three in which Jim "reads" the mass of bodies on board the Patna:



The draught of air, fanned from forward by the speed of the ship, passed steadily through the long gloom between the high bulwarks, swept over the rows of prone bodies; a few dim flames in globe-lamps were hung short here and there under the ridge-poles, and in the blurred circles of light thrown and trembling slightly to the unceasing vibration of the ship appeared a chin upturned, two closed eyelids, a dark hand with silver rings, a meagre limb draped in a torn covering, a head bent back, a naked foot, a throat bared and stretched as if offering itself to the knife...the Arab's belongings, piled right aft, made a heavy mound of broken outlines, with a cargo-lamp swung above, and a great confusion of vague forms behind: gleams of paunchy brass pots, the foot-rest of a deck chair, blades of spears, the straight scabbard of an old sword leaning against a heap of pillows, the spout of a tin coffee-pot (18-19).

The interplay between clear-cut visual categories such as "black" and "white," "dark" vs "silver," and "brass," and vague and blurry impressions, represented by words and phrases such as "long gloom," "dim flames," "blurred circles of light," "broken outlines," and "confusions of vague forms" adds a Rembrandtesque quality to the dominant impressionist ambience of the descriptions in the novel. More important to note, however, is the sub-text of the passage, which has ironic undertones, especially when read in the light of the statement in the paragraph which precedes this description, and which begins with the following sentence: "Jim on the bridge was penetrated by the great certitude of unbounded safety and peace that could be read on the silent aspect of nature like the certitude of fostering love upon the placid tenderness of a mother's face" (17; my emphasis). The certainty of this statement is almost immediately subverted by the tension between seeing clearly and seeing only vaguely. Introduced here in the third chapter, these passages introduce the development of interpretative obfuscation on the thematic level, a development that can be traced in similar passages throughout the narrative, moving

from "reading" clearly distinguishable entities to being confronted with vague forms and blurred boundaries. This process reaches its climax in Marlow's last glimpse of Jim:

'For me that white figure in the stillness of the coast and sea seemed to stand at the heart of a vast enigma. The twilight was ebbing fast from the sky above his head, and the strip of sand had sunk already under his feet, he himself appeared no bigger than a child -- then only a speck, a tiny white speck, that seemed to catch all the light, let in the darkened world...And suddenly, I lost him...' (336).

As Jim's psychological space that Marlow tries to "read" during the course of the novel becomes more and more vague and problematic, so the reader finds that the anachronous narrative sequence and atmospheric descriptions only lead deeper and deeper "into..[the] abyss" of the text, blurring these clear-cut categories, so much so that "reading" and "interpretation" become a dangerous and unsure process, with no guaranteed conclusions.

Conrad's use of colour symbolism also has a second thematic function in LJ, namely that of supporting the interconnected themes of entrapment, isolation and alienation. The presentation of these themes grows in intensity as the novel progresses and shows a similar development to the use of colour contrast to foreground the theme of interpretation. For example, in the passage describing the sleeping pilgrims on board the Patna discussed above, the opposition between the "whites" and the "human cargo" is established through the use of colour images. At this early point in the narrative, Jim is still part of the "whites," but as the novel progresses his racial "Otherness" -- like that of Jimmy Wait and Kurtz -- will serve to

underline his existential isolation and alienation. During the struggle to get on the lifeboat described in chapter nine, the emphasis falls on Jim's growing "otherness" and isolation from his fellow whites:

He wanted me to know he had kept his distance; that there was nothing in common between him and these men...Nothing whatever. It is more that probable he thought himself cut off from them by a space that could not be traversed, by an obstacle that could not be overcome, by a chasm without a bottom (103-4).

This isolation and "Otherness" reaches its climax during Jim's stay on Patusan, where the racial "distance" -- presented in terms of colour symbolism -- remains one of the main elements which characterize his existential isolation:

Their dark-skinned bodies vanished on the dark background long before I had lost sight of their protector. He was white from head to foot, and remained persistently visible with the strong hold of the night at his back, the sea at his feet, the opportunity by his side -- still veiled (336).

These examples clearly illustrate the way in which Conrad -- by building upon shared elements in the so-called transtextual narratives -- shades description into theme and narration in LJ, and by doing so, indeed -- to use Jameson's words quoted earlier -- "fashions," "authorizes," and "reinforces" a "new representational space," a space that would become one of his most distinguishing characteristics.

## III

The motif of entrapment is presented in various forms in the two main parts of the novel and can be seen as an index of the increasingly claustrophobic space in which Jim finds himself, presented nowhere as poignantly as in the epigraph to this chapter. Just as his journey Eastward is characterized by a spatially contracting movement from the wide ocean to the tomb-like enclosure of Patusan, so the physical, symbolic and psychological space in which Jim finds himself becomes increasingly claustrophobic, exacerbating his frustration at his inability to marry his romantic idealism with the harsh realities of life in the merchant marine, thereby adding to his isolation and alienation. Jim is trapped in diverse kinds of space. For example, he is physically confined to the Patna on her journey to Mecca during her voyage or movement through cosmic space. In contrast to the limited mobility implied by this position during the journey, the space of Patusan is frozen and immobile. Symbolically, Jim is trapped in the physical space of the witness box by public opinion and its demand for justice; while psychologically, he is imprisoned by his romantic and imaginative disposition which prevents him from reconciling private and public "space."

Jim's private space as a young man is constructed through a misreading of the expectations of society, and a too-high self-esteem

resulting from his reading of romantic fiction. This impression is established in an early passage in the first chapter which describes his training as an officer in the mercantile marine:

Having a steady head with an excellent physique, he was very smart aloft. His station was the fore-top, and often from there he looked down, with the contempt of a man destined to shine in the midst of dangers, at the peaceful multitude of roofs cut in two by the brown tide of the stream...

On the lower deck in the babel of two hundred voices he would forget himself, and beforehand live in his mind the sea life of light literature. He saw himself saving people from sinking ships, cutting away masts in a hurricane, swimming through a surf with a line; or as a lonely castaway, barefooted and half naked, walking on uncovered reefs in search of shellfish to stave off starvation. He confronted savages on tropical shores, quelled mutinies on the high seas, and in a small boat upon the ocean kept up the hearts of despairing men -- always an example of devotion to duty, and as unflinching as a hero in a book (6).

Notice how subtly Conrad transposes descriptive elements like the spatial opposites of "high" and "low," and the accompanying visual perspective of "wide" and "narrow" to support the thematics of the novel. At first, these elements seem to be a rather insignificant part of the description. Yet there is much more to them than at first meets the eye: these spatial co-ordinates mimic the symbolic outlines of Jim's own "movement" in the novel: from occupying the "high" moral ground (that of a ship's officer who does not want to violate one of the most basic codes of seamanship and desert the passengers), through jumping into "an everlasting deep hole" (111), to being thought a traitor and being killed by the people who worshipped him. The same "movement" -- from an apparently straight-forward character with a romantic disposition to that of a very enigmatic and complex

individual -- can be traced in the reconstruction of Jim's psychological space as the novel develops.

His first fall from grace is not long in coming, as the very next scene documents Jim's first major "misreading" and failure:

It was the dusk of a winter's day. The gale had freshened since noon, stopping the traffic on the river and now blew with the strength of a hurricane in fitful bursts that boomed like salvos of great guns firing over the ocean. The rain slanted in sheets that flicked and subsided, and between whiles Jim had threatening glimpses of the tumbling tide, the small craft jumbled and tossing along the shore, the motionless buildings in the driving mist, the broad ferryboats pitching ponderously at anchor, the vast landing-stages heaving up and down and smothered in sprays. The next gust seemed to blow all this away. The air was full of flying water. There was a fierce purpose in the gale, a furious earnestness in the screech of the wind, in the brutal tumult of earth and sky, that seemed directed at him, and made him hold his breath in awe. He stood still. It seemed to him he was jostled around.

He was jostled. 'Man the cutter!' Boys rushed past him.... 'Lower away!' He saw the boat, manned, drop swiftly below the rail, and rushed after her. He heard a splash. 'Let go; clear the falls!' He leaned over. The river alongside seethed in frothy streaks. The cutter could be seen in the falling darkness under the spell of tide and wind, that for a moment held her bound, and tossing abreast of the ship. A yelling voice in her reached him faintly: 'Keep stroke, you young whelps, if you want to save anybody! Keep stroke!' And suddenly she lifted high her bow, and, leaping with raised oars over a wave, broke the spell cast upon her by wind and tide.

Jim felt his shoulder gripped firmly. 'Too late, youngster.' The captain of the ship laid a restraining hand on that boy, who seemed on the point of leaping overboard, and Jim looked up with the pain of conscious defeat in his eyes. The captain smiled sympathetically. 'Better luck next time. This will teach you to be smart' (7-8).

The notion of a great and overwhelming force threatening to destroy a group of seemingly insignificant individuals is strikingly similar to that used earlier in NN and to that which would later

follow in "Typhoon." More significant, however, is the fact that this passage introduces a number of important thematic elements which will recur throughout the novel to form the cumulative thematic meaning, and which will -- in the words of Hillis Miller -- invite "the reader to think of it as a simultaneous set of echoing episodes spread out spatially like villages or mountain peaks on a map" (Repetition 35).

The first point to be foregrounded in this passage is that recurrent features of the Conradian world, such as the instability of space and time, and the dislocating effect that these have on an individual caught in a hostile environment, are all present. The apparent surface stability of Jim's world is threatened by a force with cosmic proportions and, quite unexpectedly, Jim finds himself in a "new" space which he has to "read" and respond to. He has "threatening glimpses" of the tide which seem to "blow all this away." He only has his senses with which to "measure" the dimensions of this new space: he hears, he sees, and is confronted with a choice. Yet he seems frozen, trapped in a moment of stasis between action and inaction. Physically, he is caught in the claustrophobic space of the storm. Misreading the event and its required action, his failure is poignantly driven home by the captain's words. This passage quite vividly illustrates Jim's inability to distinguish between his romantic reveries and the realities of life at sea. Conrad succeeds in presenting in vignette form the fact that Jim -- because of his "otherness" and the individualism which isolates him from his fellow sailors -- is also "trapped" by the value system of the sailors, their code of ethics which esteems unity and eschews individualism and,

above all, cowardice in the face of danger. Instead of the value system providing a secure space within which he can operate as a sailor, it becomes a suffocating and claustrophobic space precisely because of his "misreading" of it and his romantic notions of heroism.

In this scene, Jim's response to the situation which confronts him is completely inadequate and inappropriate: he does not jump into the lifeboat as he should. The ironic inversion of the colour symbolism in "HoD" foregrounded the symbolic impact of the tale; here, the function of foregrounding is fulfilled by the ironic inversion of the jump. There will be a number of "jumps" in the novel after this one: Brierly will jump to his death; Jim will desert his duty and jump when he shouldn't, jump into the "everlasting deep hole" (111) and into ignominy; and when he leaves for Patusan, he will symbolically jump into oblivion. The introduction of the jump at this point is one of the many ironic clues which Conrad inserts into his tale for the reader's benefit. The end result of this episode is that Jim's "otherness/Otherness" is highlighted and rendered in graphic terms; he is isolated from the bond which unites sailors. The pattern established in "HoD" is reiterated here, and in later episodes in LJ in which the character is confronted by a new space which he has to read and interpret. Because he uses the wrong categories to help him interpret the space, his reading becomes a "misreading" and, consequently, he is isolated as a result of his actions.

By now something of Conrad's impressionistic method -- particularly the way in which this method and its constitutive techniques are deployed to "lead" the reader -- has become more



obvious. The cumulative effect of the many "jumps" is to foreground the interconnected web of thematics and narrative, while at the same time highlighting the essential moral implications of recognizing that Jim is "one of us." The same applies to Conrad's representation of the crucial storm scene, stretching from chapters seven to nine. Here his method is twofold: in contrast to the episode describing Brierly's jump -- which acts as a synthesis -- Conrad first presents the reader with a small cameo in which all the essential elements of space, reading and misreading, and entrapment are presented in compact form, thereby preparing the reader for later scenes. He then presents a similar scene in which the larger and more encompassing framework of epistemology and interpretation is foregrounded. Within this context, it is instructive to note how Conrad uses these techniques to predispose his readers. For example, such a cameo appears early in the second chapter:

Jim would glance at the compass, would glance at the unattainable horizon, would stretch himself till his joints cracked with the leisurely twist of the body, in the very excess of well-being...From time to time he glanced idly at a chart pegged out with four drawing pins on a low three-legged table abaft the steering-gear case. The sheet of paper portraying the depths of the sea presented a shiny surface under the light of the bull's eye lamp lashed to a stanchion, a surface as level and smooth as the glimmering surface of the waters. Parallel rulers with a pair of dividers reposed on it; the ship's position at last noon was marked with a small black cross, and the straight pencil-line drawn firmly as far as Perim figured the course of the ship...while the pencil with its sharp end touching the Somali coast lay round and still like a naked ship's spar floating in the pool of a sheltered dock. 'How steady she goes,' thought Jim with wonder, with something like gratitude for this high peace of sea and sky. At such times his thoughts would be full of valorous deeds: he loved these dreams and the success of his imaginary achievements. They were the best part of life, its secret truth, its hidden reality. They had a gorgeous virility, the charm of vagueness, they passed

before him with a heroic tread; they carried his soul away with them and made it drunk with the divine philtre of an unbounded confidence in itself. There was nothing he could not face. He was so pleased with the idea that he smiled, keeping perfunctorily his eyes ahead; and when he happened to glance back he saw the white streak of the wake drawn as straight by the ship's keel as the black line drawn by the pencil upon the chart (19-20).

This scene seems to epitomize peace, order and stability. Benson ("Physics" 139-40) offers an illuminating analysis of this passage which is particularly relevant to the argument presented thus far in the thesis. He suggests that the frame narrator provides an account of the ship's voyage through the ordinary dimensions of Euclidian space and Newtonian time, with its "wake drawn as straight by the ship's keel as the black line drawn by the pencil upon the [ship's] chart" and the "days disappearing one by one into the past" (16). The apparent surface reality presented here is that of stasis and stillness which creates an atmosphere and "assurance of everlasting security"(17). The sea is on a "perfect level" to the "eye" (17), and the space and time of the voyage "gradually assume the ideal, geometric stasis of the chart itself, as the sun daily maintains its exact relation to the ship, and the ship its exact relation to the ring of the horizon, 'everlasting in its centre'"(Benson, "Physics" 139). Up to this point, both Jim and the reader are comforted by the familiar and rational dimensions of the setting. Yet, argues Benson, there are hints "to undermine both the physical description and the physical security it implies": The days disappear "into an abyss" (16); the sea is "profound" (15); and the chart, which confidently "portrays" the sea's "depths" is, in fact, only the "shiny surface" of a sheet of paper; and, finally, the ship's

actual wake is "like the phantom...track" of a "phantom steamer" (16). In short, says Benson, "Jim's complacent sense of security depends on an illusory stasis as abstract as that of a planet in the 'dark spaces of ether' (22), whereas the ship's true life runs in its passengers, the amorphous mass of pilgrims who have 'overflowed' the ship 'like water rising' to its rim (14), and above whose restless sleeping bodies float the 'exhalation[s]' of 'troubled dream[s]' (19)" ("Physics" 139).

Jim's romantic disposition is emphasized, as is his inability to deal with the reality "below the surface." Jim reads the "surface" impression, but when the time comes to "read" the reality below the surface, he once more fails to comprehend its dimensions. The echoes from "HoD" are unmistakable, especially if one considers the rich and evocative passage describing Marlow's journey upriver:

I had to keep guessing at the channel; I had to discern, mostly by inspiration, the signs of the hidden banks; I watched for sunken stones; I was learning to clap my teeth sharply before my heart flew out, when I shaved by a fluke some infernal sly old snag that would have ripped the life out of the tin-pot steamboat and drowned all the pilgrims; I had to keep a look-out for the signs of dead wood we could cut up in the night for the next day's steaming. When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality -- the reality, I tell you -- fades. The inner truth is hidden - - luckily, luckily. But I felt it all the same; I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey tricks ("HoD" 183-84).

To return to LJ: having drawn the reader's attention to Jim's inability to "read" the space through various scenes which highlight the opposition between "surface" and underlying "reality," Conrad then

proceeds to drive home their impact and implications forcefully in the dramatic and fateful storm episode during which Jim abandons ship.

The storm, stretching over three chapters, consists of a number of smaller incidents which are recounted in piecemeal fashion as Jim tries to reconstruct the event for Marlow and his friends. While it is far too long a passage to quote in full, it has certain important characteristics. A familiar pattern can be discerned: Jim's first experience of an almost placid immersion in the atmosphere of his surroundings quickly becomes a threatening physical disorientation when the stasis and tranquility described earlier is disrupted by a "faint noise as of thunder, of thunder infinitely remote, less than a sound, hardly more than a vibration" (26). This ominous sign is enhanced by the "silent black squall" which advances "behind the straight edge of vapour," "swallowing the stars in whole constellations," and "confound[ing] sea and sky into the abyss of obscurity" (101-102). As it becomes darker, the "shadow of the silent cloud" falls on the ship, "extinguish[ing] every sound of teeming life" (105). The changing space calls for a readjustment in the mode of "reading" in response to it. By having encountered similar scenes earlier, the reader is quite prepared to expect Jim's misreading when he is sent to inspect the bulkheads and finds himself trapped among the pilgrims, "overburdened by the knowledge of imminent death"(85):

'I tell you it bulged. I was holding up my lamp along the angle-iron in the lower deck when a flake of rust as big as the palm of my hand fell off the plate, all of itself...The thing stirred and jumped off like something alive while I was looking at it'(84).

Shortly afterwards, Jim misinterprets the plea of one of the pilgrims:

'The beggar clung to me like a drowning man,' he said, impressively. 'Water, water! What water did he mean? What did he know? As calmly as I could I ordered him to let go...He would not keep quiet; he tried to shout; I had half throttled him before I made out what he wanted. He wanted some water -- water to drink' (90; my emphasis).

Not long after this incident, Jim is mistakenly identified by the chief engineer as "one of them niggers" (91), thus adding another "misreading" to that perpetrated by Jim. The quick succession of events finally leads to the decision to abandon ship, in contrast to the conventions of seamanship. And it is in this passage that the physical disorientation becomes inseparable from the moral disorientation accompanying it:

He saw a silent black squall which had eaten up already one-third of the sky. You know how these squalls come up there about that time of the year. First you see a darkening of the horizon -- no more; then a cloud rises opaque like a wall. A straight edge of vapour lined with sickly whitish gleams flies up from the southwest, swallowing the stars in whole constellations; its shadow flies over the waters, and confounds sea and sky into one abyss of obscurity. And all is still. No thunder, no wind, no sound; not a flicker of lightning. Then in the tenebrous immensity a livid arch appears; a swell or two like undulations of the very darkness run past, and suddenly, wind and rain strike together with a peculiar impetuosity as if they had burst through something solid. Such a cloud had come up while they weren't looking...

'It was black, black,' pursued Jim with moody steadiness. 'It had sneaked upon us from behind. The infernal thing!...It maddened me to see myself caught like this. I was angry, as though I had been trapped. I was trapped!' (101-102).

The evocative impressionistic rendition of this spatial dislocation with its "opaque" clouds, its "vapour" and "tenebrous

immensity," its stillness and darkness sets the scene for the second jump:

'I had jumped...'

[He] saw vaguely the ship he had deserted uprising above him, with the red side-light glowing large in the rain like a fire on the bow of a hill seen through a mist. 'She seemed higher than a wall; she loomed like a cliff over the boat...It was as if I had jumped into a well --- into an everlasting deep hole...' (111).

It is only as the other versions of what really happened that night begin to emerge that the full implication of these passages becomes clear to the reader. Jim misreads the "signs" which he encounters on the voyage: he misreads the potential of the storm, he misreads the bulkheads, and, by jumping when he should have stayed, shows that he has misread the unwritten code of the sea. The immediate result of the jump is self-torture and isolation: his fellow officers call him names because he did not want to jump (117). Jim himself feels "cut off from them by a space that could not be traversed, by an obstacle that could not be overcome, by a chasm without bottom" (103-104). In the broader thematic matrix of the novel, the second jump adds a symbolic importance to the action, an importance that will increase with each subsequent "jump." At the same time the motivations for each jump become more difficult to understand, and as such also become a kind of instrument against which the growing complexity of Jim's psychological space can be measured.

The third important scene in the Patna section of the novel that ties together the various thematic and spatial elements is the court scene which represents -- after the jump from the Patna -- the

second phase of Jim's regression, that of his fall into the "everlasting deep hole." It is also in this phase of the novel that the theme of isolation is developed more strongly. In a description similar to the one dealing with Jim's exalted position in the fore-top (6), Jim is isolated and trapped in the witness box:

He stood elevated in the witness-box, with burning cheeks in a cool and lofty room: the big framework of punkahs moved gently to and fro high above his head, and from below many eyes were looking at him out of dark faces, out of white faces, out of red faces, out of faces attentive, spellbound, as if all these people had been enslaved by the fascination of his voice (28).

This isolation is underlined by the difference in appearance between Jim and the other accused: the captain is a "monstrous bulk" whose "large purple cheeks quivered" (40); then "[t]here was a sallow-faced, mean little chap with his arm in a sling" and "a long individual in a blue flannel coat, as dry as chip and no stouter than a broomstick...who looked about him with an air of jaunty imbecility"(40). Then there was Jim: "The third was an upstanding, broad-shouldered youth, with his hands in his pockets, turning his back on the other two who appeared to be talking together earnestly. He stared across the empty Esplanade...[he] just stared into the sunshine" (40).

But Jim's "otherness" and isolation are also underlined by the court's insistence on facts, and Jim's belief that facts cannot explain everything:

He wanted to go on talking for truth's sake, perhaps for his own sake also; and while his utterance was deliberate, his mind positively flew round and round the serried circle of facts that had surged up all around him to cut him off from the rest of his kind: it was like a creature

that, finding itself imprisoned within an enclosure of high stakes, dashes round and round, distracted in the night, trying to find a weak spot, a crevice, a place to scale, some opening through which it may squeeze itself and escape (31).

Jim's predicament here in the witness box is a more subtle, but no less important scene of entrapment than that of Wait caught in his cabin during the storm, and Marlow's experience of the attack on the boat as they journeyed towards Kurtz. In all three instances, the main characters are trapped in claustrophobic spaces which not only have to be "read," but which serve to enhance their difference and isolation from their fellow-travellers.

The events surrounding the court scene provide interesting parallel perspectives on the theme of reading and interpretation within the framework of impressionistic stimuli and decoding of these. In the famous yellow-cur and pink-toad episodes, in which Jim and the engineer both "misread" certain codes (Jim thinks that the spectator refers to his cowardice when, in fact, it is a reference to a dog, while the engineer is terribly afraid of the pink toads which he "sees" in his hallucinations) the reader is presented with two typical examples of "misreadings," subtly revealing how one interprets



"reality" by superimposing one's own framework of reference and interpretative categories on the particular experience.<sup>3</sup>

A last intriguing aspect found in the Patna section of the novel which is particularly relevant to the argument, is found in chapter six and centres on Captain Brierly's jump. The obvious question to ask is, Why does Conrad need Brierly? Structurally, this chapter presents a summary in Conradian "short-hand" of all the issues and themes introduced and developed within the first ten chapters, thereby adding an important tangential perspective on Jim's "reading" of his space and his jump in response to that. The parallels between Captain Brierly and Jim are quite obvious: both are naval officers and both are romantic "heroes," Brierly in real life -- "He had saved lives at sea, had rescued ships in distress, had a gold chronometer presented to him by the underwriters, and a pair of binoculars with a suitable inscription from some foreign Government, in commemoration of these services" (57) -- while Jim, on the other hand, dreams of doing the exact same things. They also share a similar psychological trait -- they both read their own projections of guilt in someone else, Brierly in Jim (Shires 22), and Jim in the world which only wants

<sup>3</sup> Ian Watt's commentary on these episodes provides a succinct summary of the nature and function of these episodes: "As in the pink-toad episode, Marlow's deciphering of Jim centres on moral self-revelation through a grotesque kind of comedy; and in both passages the words of the symbolic puzzles are themselves misleading. The deciphering process contains at least three elements: first, Jim overhears the words but doesn't see their referent, the dog; secondly, the established symbolic connotation of 'cur' affects the transition from the visual to the moral meaning; and thirdly, because these meanings, in turn, are, like the pink toads in the engineer's mind, triggered by the obsessional pressures of Jim's inner self, they offer clues by which Marlow can decipher something of Jim's subjective world" (Century 284).

"facts." In a sense, both "misread" their own private space: Brierly, that "most beribboned pillar of society" (Watt, Century 280) is not able to deal with the claustrophobic space of his own fear. Much like the French lieutenant, he interprets the notion of honour in accordance with what Pratt (164) calls the "Kantian imperative," or, in the terms used in this argument, "misreads" the notion of honour, acts according to his interpretation thereof, and suffers the consequences. Jim, on the other hand, finds the demands which reality makes on his own romantic dream-world and his idea of honour excessively claustrophobic and suffocating. His response is to "jump" from the world of "facts," of firm substance, bright light and clear sound, into what Tanner (Lord Jim 45) calls "an unreal world...where appearances are subservient to the dreaming imagination."

It is clear then that these three key episodes in the Patusan section of the novel -- Jim's early career as a sailor, the storm scene and the court scene -- are structured in such a way that they contribute to the cumulative meaning of the themes of entrapment, reading and interpretation, and isolation.

## IV

As readers, we have followed Jim through the "funnel" of constricting space, from the wide cosmic expanse of the ocean, through the various ports, and have perhaps -- like Jim and Marlow -- also been intoxicated by the "bewitching breath of the East" (12) on this continuous journey Eastward. The Patusan section of the novel is the last leg of this journey to what has earlier been referred to as the isle of death or transfiguration (Morgan, Carabine documents 2, 112) .

However, this part of the novel -- in contrast to the Patna section which evoked praise from the initial reviewers -- has been the source of some controversy, being criticized for its excessive length as well as its lack of intensity. There is a marked change in the complexity of the Patusan section when compared to the Patna section, as Watt explains: "In the first half of Lord Jim, the narrative techniques -- the chronological complexities, the thematic appositions, and so on -- all enact a process of prolonged moral and psychological probing; but such a probing is impossible when we get to the 'other' world...of Patusan" (Century 308).

Using deconstructionist terminology, Seidel (75-76) in turn argues that the difference between the two sections of the novel lies in the fact that Patusan is only a "supplement,"<sup>4</sup> and maintains that

<sup>4</sup> The work of Jacques Derrida has imbued the word "supplement" with a special currency. I will use the word as adhering to the Derridean definition thereof, namely that it repairs a loss and fills a breach, "it intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of; it fills, as if one fills a void" (Derrida 145).

it would retain only a supplemental status, "...[slipping] out of existence, to live only in my [i.e. Marlow's] memory till I myself passed into oblivion" (323). Despite these, and other well-known reservations about the division of the novel into two parts, the Patusan section does, however, achieve a successful progression d'effet<sup>5</sup> by reinforcing the reader's "first impressions" established in the chapters dealing with the Patna episode, especially as far as the motifs of entrapment, reading and interpretation, and existential isolation are concerned.

Patusan represents a new "space" in which Jim finds himself, "a new sort of reality" (230) which he has to "read" and traverse; it is a "totally new set of conditions for his imaginative faculty to work on" (218). This new space is a multi-faceted construct: it is at the same time a geographic, cultural, political, personal and symbolic space which confronts Jim, Marlow and the reader, a space which these agents all have to "read," "interpret," and "reconstruct" on their interpretative journeys. In fact, Hans Lippe has argued that, in order for the reader to "achieve a successful penetration into the gloomy shades of its psychological landscape it seems advisable to provide the literary interpreter with as many physical landmarks as are available" (135).

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<sup>5</sup> Watt summarizes the basic notion of the concept progression d'effet as follows: "[I]f the novel is a work of conscious and unified literary art, then all its constituent elements must obviously avoid anything repetitive or irrelevant; but the word effet places the emphasis on a progression in the effect which the narrative produces on the reader, rather than on the way the action develops itself" (Century 306). Ford Madox Ford also commented on this aspect some detail in his account of Conrad's technique in A Personal Remembrance (210-211).

The space of Patusan is symbolically resonant and imbued with a dominant atmosphere of oppressiveness, death and absurdity and is quite rightly described by Darras as the "Enclosure of Death" (23). This atmosphere is created by impressionist techniques similar to those used in NN, while the thematic and symbolic significance of the atmosphere is remarkably similar to that found in "HoD." As so often in Conrad, the mood generated by the descriptions forms an integral part of the thematic structure of the novel.

This atmosphere or mood is created by a fusion of concrete and abstract entities with a strong emphasis on sensory perception. Conrad establishes the cosmic dimensions of this new space by focusing attention on a fixed point in the universe to determine one's "new position" in the narrative, as it were. For example, soon after Marlow inquires from his audience, "I don't suppose any of you have ever heard of Patusan?" (218), the moon is described on its first appearance as a "nearly perfect disk, glowing ruddily" (220), but when it later appears in a similar dramatic setting, it is seen floating "away above the chasm between the hills like an ascending spirit out of a grave; its sheen descend[ing], cold and pale, like the ghost of dead sunlight" (245-46). And later still, it becomes part of an abstract landscape:

I saw part of the moon glittering through the bushes at the bottom of the chasm.<sup>6</sup> For a moment it looked as though the smooth disc, falling from its place in the sky above the earth, had rolled to the bottom of that precipice: its ascending movement was like a leisurely rebound; it disengaged itself from the tangle of twigs; the bare contorted limb of some tree, growing on the slope, made a black crack right across its face. It threw its rays afar as from a cavern, and in this mournful eclipse-like light the stumps of felled trees uprose very dark, the heavy shadows fell at my feet on all sides, my own moving shadow, and across my path the shadow of the solitary grave perpetually garlanded with flowers. In the darkened moonlight the interlaced blossoms took on shapes foreign to one's own memory and colours indefinable to the eye, as though they had been special flowers gathered by no man, grown not in this world, and destined for the use of the dead alone. Their powerful scent hung in the warm air, making it thick and heavy like the fumes of incense. The lumps of white coral shone round the dark mound like a chaplet of bleached skulls, and everything around was so quiet that when I stood still all sound and all movements in the world seemed to come to an end (322).

In this passage Conrad brings to bear the full battery of impressionist techniques and devices in his arsenal. The "reader's internal eye" (Faris 308) moves between areas of light and dark and is directed up and down, and outwards -- "on all sides" -- and then fixed on the moon's spatial movement, first "falling from its place in the sky," then moving on to "the bottom of the precipice," before ascending again as it follows the moon's movement. The general motifs of entrapment and the death-like atmosphere, as well as the notion of Jim's jumping into "an everlasting deep hole" (111) are amplified by

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<sup>6</sup> The image of the ascending moon repeatedly rebounding off the two-headed mountain has significant structural and symbolic implications for the motif of the "jump" and Jim's inability to distinguish between appearance and reality discussed earlier. Yelton argues that "symbolically...[the cleft peak] seems to figure the split in Jim's consciousness between dream and reality, the ideal and the actual -- perhaps also the corresponding cleavage effected in his life by his leap from the Patna and his subsequent jump from the stockade into the affairs of Patusan" ("Imagery" 480).

words like "chasm," "cavern," "grave," and "mound." Especially important to note is the fact the all movement and sound "in the world" seem to come to an end, thereby symbolically foreshadowing Jim's imminent death. The progression d'effet in the notion of vagueness is suggested by "shapes foreign" and "colours indefinable," while the interplay between the rays of the moon and the dark shadows manifests the impressionist predilection for the contrast between light and dark. Note that the impressionist focus on sensory perception is maintained by the use of visual and olfactory notations. The passage represents a momentary impression, but with a lasting effect on the mood transferred to the reader's mind, lingering because of the subtle change-over from direct visual observation to reflection. Traces of the sub-text of absurdity, which have been developing in the "intertextual narrative" of the works discussed so far, and which underpins much of the action in the Patusan section, are rendered more vividly by the images of the moon disentangling itself from the "bare contorted limb of some tree" and another Donne-like image of "white coral...[shining] round the dark mound like a chaplet of bleached skulls." Of particular importance is the development towards the end of the passage of an insistence on the "powerful scent" which "hung in the warm air, making it thick and heavy like the fumes of incense." The words "incense" and "chaplet" add the connotation of a burial ritual with religious undertones, thereby complementing the implied symbolism of Jim's pending death.

Conrad continues to use atmospheric passages as a "filter" through which the reader has to interpret the world of Patusan,

thereby developing further the notions of "reading" and "perceiving." Consider, for example, the distinctive atmosphere and mood of the following extract:

I felt he was going to say more, and come no nearer to the root of the matter. The sun, whose concentrated glare dwarfs the earth into a restless mote of dust, had sunk behind the forest, and the diffused light from the opal sky seemed to cast upon a world without shadows and without brilliance the illusion of a calm and pensive greatness. I don't know why, listening to him, I should have noted so distinctly the gradual darkening of the river, of the air; the irresistible slow work of the night settling silently on all visible forms, effacing the outlines, burying the shapes deeper and deeper, like a steady fall of impalpable black dust...

'My dear chap,' I cried, 'you shall always remain an insoluble mystery' (305-306).

In this passage the atmospheric obfuscation and visual displacement of spatial boundaries strongly support the indeterminacy of meaning. There is a merging of space and object as the outlines are "effaced." Foreground and background become indistinguishable, leaving the observer with some unease. It is not possible to "read" an object when its outlines have been buried by an "impalpable black dust." Vision, and -- by implication -- interpretation, become problematic and confusing. Description and thematics are two sides of the same coin in Conrad's fiction, and this episode is just another one to add to the panoply of passages which reinforce this notion, two of the most famous ones being the descriptions of the storm in NN, and Marlow's journey upriver in "HoD."

The geographical space of Patusan is not only imbued with a distinctive mood and atmosphere; it is also filled with many echoes of motifs such as that of entrapment and the journey, thereby



strengthening the intertextual web with works like NN and "HoD," and at the same time building upon the cumulative effect of narrative and descriptive techniques used in these works.

Patusan is an isolated island where "nobody desired to go...in person" (218). It has an appeal of regions "beyond earthly boundaries...a space for ghouls and terrors, a region both haunted and haunting" (Mongia 6). It consists of

[t]hirty miles of forest [which] shut it off from the sight of an indifferent world...The stream of civilisation, as if divided on a headland a hundred miles north of Patusan, branches east and south-east, leaving its plains and valleys, its old trees and its old mankind, neglected and isolated, such as an insignificant and crumbling islet between the two branches of a mighty stream (226).

Throughout the novel, Jim has found himself in isolated spaces, be it up in the station in the fore-top, the dock in the court house, or the range of ports through which he fled from his past. The geographical isolation of Patusan, passed by the "mighty stream" is the perfect arena for Jim's "exile." Yet it is much more than merely the setting for the final part of the novel; it plays an integral part in bringing the development of the important themes to a climax.

Many critics, from Dorothy Van Ghent, in her influential but dated work The English Novel: Form and Function (1953), up to more recent critics such as Darras (1982) and Mongia (1993), have commented on the dominant effect of closure and entrapment and the grave-like quality of Patusan. Van Ghent states that it is only in the "grave of Patusan" that "Jim's dream does come true" (Novel 243). Darras observes that "Patusan is a religious tomb, a kind of purgatory where

the moral rehabilitation of the hero takes place after his initial confession. Consequently, it is an enchanted place, a mythical enclosure which the chivalric commercial order preserves secretly in order to mend and amend its models" (27), while Mongia sees it as a space which is "carefully bordered, a space that captures...a space of womb-like enclosure" (6-7). Marlow himself suggests that "I can only guess that once before Patusan had been used as a grave for some sin, transgression or misfortune" (219). There is a fissured hill at the heart of Patusan, whose chasm is like "a yawning grave" (221). The reader is prepared quite subtly for this attribute by the linguistic slips of the master of the ship which brings Jim to Patusan when he states that "the gentleman was already 'in the similitude of a corpse...Already like the body of one departed'"(240). This linguistic foregrounding amplifies Marlow's impression that Jim's sentence was like "a sentence of exile" (158). Put in another way, the figurative implications of the Patna sentence will be literally enacted on Patusan (Seidel 76-77).

But it is not only a "grave" for Jim; Marlow also experiences it as a region of enclosure, and the echoes of his symbolic journey in search of Kurtz in the primeval "heart" of the African jungle are quite audible in a passage describing his departure from Patusan. Note that the departure is described as an emergence from a confining space into a wide cosmic expanse:

'The boat fairly flew; we sweltered side by side in the stagnant superheated air; the smell of mud, of marsh, the primeval smell of fecund earth, seemed to sting our faces; till suddenly at a bend it was as if a great hand far away had lifted a heavy curtain, had flung open an immense portal. The light itself seemed to stir, the sky above

our heads widened, a far-off murmur reached our ears, a freshness enveloped us, filled our lungs, quickened our thoughts, our blood, our regrets -- and straight ahead, the forests sank down against the dark-blue ridge of the sea... 'I let my eyes roam through space, like a man released from bonds who stretches his cramped limbs, runs, leaps, responds to the inspiring elation of freedom' (331-32).

The synergy between the by now familiar combination of narration, description and theme reaches a climax in this passage, which can, together with other similar extracts, in a sense be regarded as one of the Jamesian "stopping places" discussed earlier in the chapter dealing with NN. This is so precisely because its function is to foreground preceding actions, the progressive effect of impressionistic descriptive techniques, and the enhancement of themes and motifs. It presents a direct contrast between the incremental constriction of Jim's private space (which can, in turn, be seen as a supplement to his increasingly problematic and incomprehensible psychological space), and Marlow's narrative space which, as was the case in "HoD," is characterized by a circular movement, here reaching its climax as it emerges from the claustrophobic space of Patusan. This contrast between the two kinds of contrasting space not only serves to focus the reader's attention on the importance of space in Conrad's work in general and in LJ in particular, but also -- through its evocative description of the idea of freedom -- foreshadows the development of this and related motifs, one of which is that of entrapment.

The motif of entrapment and enclosure presented so graphically here has a protean nature, functioning on a cultural and political level as well. In the same way that Jim was trapped by the code of

conduct of the sailors during the aftermath of the Patna episode, he soon finds his private space which he has slowly and painfully reconstructed on Patusan encroached upon by the expectations of the islanders. Jim is a white man, and finds himself in a curious position: at first, he is seen as an intruder, a representative of some imperial force: "'Were the Dutch coming to take the country? Would the white man like to go back down the river? What was the object of coming to such a miserable country?'" (252). As time goes by, however, he establishes himself as a brave and courageous man, "the visible, tangible incarnation of unfailing truth and of unfailing victory" (363). In a sense, Jim finds himself in no-man's land, with both Brown and the natives laying claim to Jim's loyalty; Brown, because of Jim's race, and the natives, because of their support and trust. Jim is -- as was the case in the Patna section of the novel -- "trapped" by the expectations of other people; his personal space is fenced in, as it were, by outside expectations; and it will be Jim's "misreading" of these "boundaries," Brown's deviousness and the people's trust in his invincibility, which will ultimately lead to his destruction.

Conrad's inclination towards ironic inversion is evident in the frequency with which he uses this technique, ably illustrated by Berthoud (91) who shows how Jim's actions in Patusan systematically reenact and reverse the events described in the Patna section. There are numerous instances of this technique at work: Marlow, in his search for the "real" Jim, has to delve into his own motivations for befriending him. It is significant to note that during this process,

Marlow uncovers much of his own psychological space, thereby assisting the reader to look for similar motivations, inhibitions and repressions in him or herself. Another important inversion is the fact that Jim is both the "reader" of space, and the "text" that is read as a supplement to expose the various readers' own fallibility, their own humanity.

In contrast to his experiences leading up to and after his jump from the Patna, Jim is simultaneously "trapper" and "trapped" on Patusan. After having penetrated Jewel's private space, he becomes the "controller" of that space, "trapping" her in a web of uncertainty and insecurity, in a "marriage" of unfulfilled promises and failed commitments. Various critics, among them Sullivan, Mongia and Stott, have focused on this aspect of the novel using a feminist or gender paradigm. Sullivan (59-60), for example, feels that Conrad's landscapes reflect "internal conflicts and ambivalences" and that the various struggles against the sea, river and jungle "correspond symbolically to repressed conflicts with the feminine matrix in general."

Mongia (1-6) and Stott (43-44) have interpreted this aspect of the novel in terms of the interaction between colonialism and patriarchal power relations. Mongia (1) suggests that the Patusan section relies on a subtext of the Gothic with its "[h]elpless women in need of rescue, threatening masculine figures...and the terrors associated with enclosing spaces" (1), adding further that Conrad invests in Jim "not just the heroic stuff of adventure and romance -- virile agency that finds its fulfilment in masculine action -- but

also the features of the colonized, helpless "feminine". Jim is as much the figure in white -- virginal, helpless, in need of rescue by the master story-teller Marlow -- as he is the masculine god who orders the chaos of Patusan" (1).

Stott (43-44), on the other hand, is less sympathetic towards Jim and reads Conrad's use of the trope of mastery against a tradition in the late nineteenth century of characterizing the Orient as essentially feminine and enigmatic. She also argues that Freud's infamous equation of the enigma of woman and the dark continent emerges from this tradition, and presents a survey of the non-European women "of transracial sexual encounters" (43) in Conrad's fiction to substantiate her argument. These women are all depicted as "spectral brooding presences, alluring and deadly fleurs du mal" (43).

Within the context of the argument developed in this and preceding chapters, I wish to argue that Jewel's entrapment need not only be seen within a feminist or gender paradigm like that used by Sullivan, Mongia and Stott, but that it should also be seen against the wider context of the epistemological "dominant" of modernist fiction (McHale 9), and especially as an integral part of the epistemological, ontological and existential problems which Conrad tried to work out in his fiction, presenting the symbiotic relationship between these notions in his fiction in cameo form. Consider, for example, the following encounter between Marlow and Jewel:

'What is it he told you?' I [Marlow] insisted.

'Do you think I can tell you? How am I to know? How am I to understand?' she cried at last. There was a stir. I believe she was wringing her hands. 'There is something he can never forget.'

'So much the better for you,' I said gloomily.

'What is it? What is it?' She put an extraordinary force of appeal into her supplicating tone. 'He says he had been afraid. How can I believe this? Am I a mad woman to believe this? You all remember something! You all go back to it. What is it? You tell me! What is this thing? Is it alive? -- is it dead? I hate it. It is cruel. Has it got a face and a voice -- this calamity? Will he see it -- will he hear it? In his sleep perhaps when he cannot see me -- and then arise and go. Ah! I shall never forgive him. My mother had forgiven -- but I, never! Will it be a sign -- a call?' (314-25).

Jewel's space has been invaded by Jim, an influence "coming from the outside, as it were, irresistible, incomprehensible -- as if brought about by the mysterious conjunctions of the planets" (317). She is trapped by "her own unreasonable and natural fear" of this "unknown [so] infinitely vast" (309), caught in a relationship which is threatened by a force from the outside, as well as by his unwillingness to remove her fear by telling her his secret. This passage is of major importance, both in the way in which narrative and theme interact to develop the motif of entrapment, and in the way in which it brings into focus the central theme of reading. It reminds one very strongly of the compelling passage in "HoD" dealing with the white worsted around the young man's neck. To ask questions, or, as we shall see when dealing with Nostramo, to create myths, is to conquer the foreign space surrounding you, and a way of gaining knowledge, and understanding. Jewel has been trapped by Jim, kept in the dark about what exactly it is that keeps on haunting him. Her natural response to this "cage" of secrecy is to try and determine its

qualities, emphasizing humanity's interpretative need to understand the world which confronts us. Notice the interpretative vigour with which Jewel tries to unmask and conquer the unknown. Systematically, she goes through a repertoire of possibilities: "'Is it alive? -- Is it dead?...Has it got a face and a voice -- this calamity? Will he see it -- will he hear it?'". She is trying to "read" or "decode" this space in which she has been trapped by using those categories or frames of interpretation which she has applied successfully in the past. Only this time, they do not work; as she gets closer to the "edge," it becomes quite obvious that this repertoire of categories is not applicable to this new space. The epistemological frustration is clearly evident in the almost desperate tone of the questions, as foregrounded by the frozen immobility of the atmosphere:

I stopped; the silence over Patusan was profound, and the feeble dry sound of a paddle striking the middle of the river seemed to make it infinite. 'Why?' she murmured... 'Why?' she repeated louder; 'tell me!'... 'Why?' 'Speak.'... Without raising her voice, she threw it into an infinity of scathing contempt, bitterness, and despair (318).

The notions of "otherness/Otherness" have already been explored in some detail in dealing with the characters of Wait in NN and Kurtz in "HoD." Jim's "Otherness" is given a new dimension by this episode. Not only is Jim isolated by it, but his "otherness/Otherness" clearly has an adverse effect on those characters who try to delineate and penetrate the space of the "Other" without a clear knowledge of the culture to which that "Other" belongs.

One of Conrad's favourite methods is to use narrative techniques to support and reinforce the thematics of a novel by



introducing graphic vignettes which depict minor characters who re-enact the often protracted scenes involving major characters. In this way, the cumulative effect of the series of vignettes provides a different perspective on the central issues involved. For example, this parallelism is evident in NN in the scene which describes Wait's entrapment in his cabin, a scene which clearly has implications for the reader's interpretation of the crew's helplessness when confronted with the cosmic forces which batter the ship during the storm. The same is true of Conrad's use of vignettes in "HoD," where the absurdity of the activities of the colonial officials and the immaculately dressed accountant at the Central Station is strongly prefigured by the other absurd scene in which the French battleship fires shells into the vast expanse of the African coast in "HoD."

Conrad also uses this method in the Patusan section of LJ. Brierly's jump -- by acting as a foil to Jim and his many "jumps" -- pulls together a number of important thematic threads developed up to that point in the narrative, while at the same time foreshadowing similar future developments. A similar strategy is followed in the presentation of the sequence of scenes involving Jewel's attempts at "reading" and "interpreting" her "space" and the force which has intruded into her "safe" space, Jim. These scenes not only support the larger intertextual motifs of "reading" and "misreading", but are also, in turn, given an added urgency and a new perspective by the contracted form in which Tunku Allang's difficulty in "reading" the captured Jim, is presented. Jim is a new element in the familiar surroundings, almost like

'...an apparition, a wraith, a portent. What did it mean? What to do with it? Was it too late to conciliate with him? Hadn't he better be killed without more delay? But what would happen then? Wretched old Allang went nearly mad with apprehension and through the difficulty of making up his mind' (251-52).

In a technique which has strong echoes in "HoD," Conrad here repeats a series of possibilities -- "apparition," "wraith," "portent" -- which is strikingly similar to that with which Marlow tries to "read" the white world. However, in contrast to Marlow's first using "European" and "concrete" categories before reverting to something more "African" and "abstract" ("badge" -- "an ornament" -- "a charm" -- "a propitiatory act" ("HoD" 156-157)), Tunku Allang relies solely on categories which reflect the way in which he "reads" the world around him. He uses metaphysical concepts, highlighting not only notions of the interaction between epistemology and ontology, but also emphasizing his own "Otherness" when compared to Jim and the world that he represents. All these scenes emphasize the one major theme, that of the misreading of or inability to read the space in which the characters find themselves, eventually resulting in epistemological frustration and existential isolation.

The "misreading" of space is not restricted to Jewel or minor characters like Tunku Allang. The Patna section of the novel clearly establishes Jim's own penchant for misreading the space in which he finds himself. He is as prone to misreading as Jewel is, and as trapped by his repertoire of possible answers. He is confronted by various kinds of "space," be it natural, political, or cultural. Jim's excessive imagination and romanticism will lead him to misreading and misinterpretation on most of these levels, with each

misreading underlining his "otherness/Otherness," and adding to his isolation. At the same time his actions, misreadings and misinterpretations each contribute to presenting the reader with Jim's increasingly complex and ambiguous psychological space.

Jim's journey upriver provides the reader with important, albeit unpronounced, clues with regard to the notion of reading and provides another striking example of the intertextual links which exist between "HoD" and LJ:

'He sat in [the dug-out]...on his box, nursing the unloaded revolver on his lap. He sat with precaution...and thus entered the land which he was destined to fill with the fame of his virtues...At the first bend he lost sight of the sea with its labouring waves for ever rising, sinking, and vanishing to rise again -- the very image of struggling mankind -- and faced the immovable forests rooted deep in the soil, soaring towards the sunshine, everlasting in their tradition, like life itself...[Between] whiles he speculated hazily as to the size of the blister the sun was raising on his back. For amusement he tried by looking ahead to decide whether the muddy object he saw lying on the water's edge was a log of wood or an alligator. Only very soon he had to give that up. No fun in it. Always alligator' (243-44).

Jim is travelling away from the wide open space of the ocean, the space which he felt confident that he could "read." The night of the dreaded jump, Jim found himself on the bridge, "penetrated by the great certitude of unbounded safety and peace that could be read on the silent aspect of nature like the certitude of fostering love upon the placid tenderness of a mother's face" (17). This new space which he now enters is hostile, with the sun burning a blister on his back. The trees are similar to those encountered by Marlow in his journey upriver, great big forests which seem to reach to the sun, enclosing everything underneath. The "reading" of the logs echoes Marlow's

"reading" of the muddy river on the journey towards Kurtz, foregrounding in yet another vignette the central theme of reading.

In continuation of the pattern established thus far, the theme of reading and interpretation is given a cumulative momentum and appears at regular intervals in the narrative. An important episode in this regard appears in chapter twenty-three -- which deals with the ring which Doramin had given Jim -- where the reader finds echoes of the various kinds of "maps" in "HoD." The ring is a kind of "map," a kind of "credential" (233) which leads him out of his isolation, as "[i]t meant a friend; and it is a good thing to have a friend"(234-45). The ring is the talisman that would open "for him the door of fame, love, and success" (415). Jim's lack of understanding of the culture of the "Other" and his belief in the totemic power of the ring makes him misread the full implications of what being a white man among the natives really means. His interpretation of the ring, namely that it would always safeguard him, just as it had allowed him to be received "into the heart of the community" (258), extends the theme of misreading to the discourse between cultures, to a patronising appropriation of the cultural goods of the "Other." Yet Jim misreads the power of its charm, just as he misinterpreted the events during the Patna episode. Only when it is already too late, is Jim able to correct his own "misreading" of the conventions attached to the ring and its guarantees. After Dain Waris had been killed,

Jim understood. He had retreated from one world, for a small matter of an impulsive jump, and now the other, the work of his own hands, had fallen in ruins among his head...Everything was gone, and he who had been once unfaithful to his trust had lost again all men's confidence...Loneliness was closing on him (408-9).

Just as Marlow was allowed to "peer over the edge," Jim is brought to the "edge." He finally understands, but only when it is too late. He tries to write down this understanding in the unfinished letter which Marlow quotes from in chapter thirty-six. And this time, Marlow is able to "read" Jim correctly, precisely because of his own experience: "The pen had spluttered, and that time he gave it up. There is nothing more; he had seen a broad gulf that neither eye nor voice could span" (341).

The poignant irony of Jim's faulty belief in the ring and all it stands for, is driven home by his final rejection, when he goes to Doramin, "ready and unarmed":

...the ring which he [Doramin] had dropped on his lap fell and rolled against the foot of the white man, and that poor Jim glanced down at the talisman that had opened for him the door of fame, love, and success within the wall of the forests fringed with white foam, within the coast that under the western sun looks like the very stronghold of the night (415).

Misreading leads to isolation and, eventually, to death. Just as Jim "misreads" the ring and what it stands for, so his enigmatic character makes it impossible for the people of Patusan to "read" him and what he represents.

Jim's isolation is not merely the result of his stay on the remote island of Patusan, or his misreading of the various kinds of space. It is an existential isolation which inevitably results from his racial "Otherness." Just as Wait and Kurtz found themselves isolated because of their race, Jim is isolated because of his race. One of the greatest ironies in the novel is found in chapter twenty-

seven which describes his success in the attack. Jim finally gets the chance to be the romantic hero of his dreams. The adoration of the crowd was "immense" (371). Yet his racial and psychological "Otherness" keeps him from becoming one of "them":

'I can't with mere words convey to you the impression of his total and utter isolation. I know, of course, he was in every sense alone of his kind there, but the unsuspected qualities of his nature had brought him in such close touch with his surroundings that this isolation seemed only the effect of his power. His loneliness added to his stature. There was nothing within sight to compare him with, as though he had been one of those exceptional men who can only be measured by the greatness of their fame' (272).

There are also other readers in the novel who contribute to and indeed extend the pivotal theme of reading present in all three of the transtextual narratives discussed thus far. The sailors on the Nigger have to "read" two primary "texts": first, they have to read the vast cosmic space in which they find themselves, and, secondly, they have to "read" Jimmy Wait's "Otherness." Marlow, on his journey in search of Kurtz has to read and interpret a number of "maps," but his primary concern is to "read" Kurtz. In LJ, the number of readers multiplies: it is no longer a case of a group of sailors or readers, or a single narrator who has to read. Conrad foregrounds the subjective nature of the process of interpretation by presenting the reader with various readings of the same "text" or "space," Jim. The fractured narrative of the novel is essentially a "collage of verdicts" (Berthoud 66) or "readings" produced by a great variety of readers: a friend (Marlow), a lover (Jewel), an objective professional (the French lieutenant), and a cynic (Stein). LJ presents the reader not with one reading of

many texts, but with many readings or "reconstructions" of Jim's psychological space or "text."

Each of the readers "reads" Jim and tries to understand his actions by employing a different interpretative matrix. Marlow tries to help Jim and in a sense becomes his only friend. Yet Jim continually does things which place this bond under strain: each time that Marlow finds him a position of safety and security, Jim leaves it. Marlow is continually forced to "readjust" his "reading," but is never able to reach a satisfactory reading. For Marlow, Jim remains

'...like those glimpses through the shifting rents in a thick fog -- bits of vanishing detail, giving no connected idea the general aspect of a country. They fed one's curiosity without satisfying it; they were no good for purposes of orientation. Upon the whole he was misleading' (76).

Jewel's reading of Jim's has already been touched upon. Suffice it to say here that, because she reads Jim as a lover, she cannot see any reason why he cannot trust her with his secret. She cannot see why he does what he does, and eventually why he has to leave.

The French lieutenant "reads" Jim through the spectacles of a professional sailor and fellow-officer. He explains his own actions in a similar situation: "'I stayed on that ship thirty hours'" (140) because it "'was judged proper'" (141). Jim is measured against the standard conduct expected of a ship's officer in times of crisis. This perspective is based on a procedure of ascertaining the "facts" of Jim's conduct and testing these against what he should have done. The end result of the French lieutenant's "reading" is again the

difficulty of understanding the mystery: "Impossible de comprendre -- vous concevez'" (138).

The cynical Stein offers one of the "best" readings of Jim, precisely because, as Lothe (162) has indicated, there is such a "strong kinship between himself and Jim." It is clear from the context of the conversation between Stein and Marlow that Stein sees Jim as another "specimen" which has to be classified and categorized. Of all the readers, Stein is the most perceptive: "I understand very well. He is romantic" (212). The significance of Stein's reading perhaps lies in the fact that he comes closest, albeit still very unsatisfactorily, to grasping the most dominant element of Jim's psychological space. He is able to do this because -- in the framework of the argument developed thus far -- the distance between the categories which function in his interpretative paradigm and the object which they have to describe -- in this case, Jim -- is the smallest of all those used by the various readers<sup>7</sup>.

While these readers share the problem which Marlow first encountered in "HoD," namely of trying to "read" a particular space with an inappropriate interpretative matrix, there is also a major difference between Marlow's various "misreadings" in "HoD" and the various readings of Jim: Marlow gets to readjust his interpretative mode in "HoD," as the discussion of the delayed decoding of the "sticks" (arrows) and "carved balls" (skulls) indicated. The various

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<sup>7</sup> For detailed discussions of Stein's role, see Watt (Century 323-330), Lothe (160-164), Shires (23-26), and Stevenson ("Prescription," Carabine documents 2, 231-241).



readers in LJ never get to readjust their focus; the decoding of the fractured and anachronous readings is not merely delayed until a later stage in the novel, but is delayed permanently, leaving the reader with a blurred picture of Jim as the interpretative categories of each reader fail to present a unified picture. Instead of creating a coherent picture of Jim's psychological space and providing the reader with clarity about the reasons for his conduct, Jim "disintegrates" as a character and becomes the impenetrable and impalpable atmosphere which permeates the novel: "...the reality of his existence...[is like] an overwhelming force...[as] he passes from my eyes like a disembodied spirit astray amongst the passions of this earth'" (416). Just as Jim is left bewildered and isolated at the end of his life, the reader's inability to "read" Jim and reconstruct his psychological space leaves him frustrated and confused.

It is evident from the argument presented in this and the previous two chapters that there is an obvious pattern which emerges from a reading of NN, "HoD," and LJ. While continuing to use spatial and atmospheric elements as a "filter" which conditions the reader's response, it is obvious from this analysis of LJ that the reader's task becomes more complex and involved than in any of the preceding works. The "postmodern" qualities -- of forcing the reader to become involved in creating meaning, of frustrating the reader and leaving him or her bewildered at the end of the novel -- are all part of the reading experience of any reader of LJ. Seen in this context, one can fully agree with Jameson when he says that "[a] case could be made for reading Conrad not as an early modernist, but rather an anticipation

of that later and quite different thing we have come to call variously textuality, écriture, post-modernism, or schizophrenic writing" (219). LJ not only shares important characteristics such as the motifs of the journey and entrapment, and the themes of reading and interpretation as transtextual and intratextual devices with its predecessors, but creatively employs these elements to achieve the most active reader involvement thus far, namely by forcing as it were the reader to recreate Jim's dominant psychological space. As such it provides a clear indication of what was to come in Nostramo, a novel in which both character and reader become involved in "transcribing" and "inscribing" the mythical space which constitutes the imaginary world of Costaguana.

## Chapter Five

### Nostramo: "Transcribing/Inscribing" Mythical Space

[Conrad] confronts history as myth without, at the same time, neglecting the material conditions contributing to mythology. The whole novel and the way it is written, the shifts in time perspective, the chronological looping, the switching of the point of view, bring to perfect fruition this process of history transforming itself into myth.

John Orr: Tragic Realism and Modern Society (1977)

### I

Nostramo (1904) is an intimidating synthesis and complex interfusion of the representation of various modes of perception, the rendition of "impressionistic" atmosphere, and, lastly, the "reading" of space, all aspects which occupied Conrad between the years 1896 to 1904, and which have also been at the centre of the argument developed thus far. As such it provides a fitting topic for this final chapter of the thesis.

When one deals with a series of texts both thematically and chronologically, exploring the often peculiar and idiosyncratic ways in which certain fictional techniques, motifs, and themes are employed and developed within a particular writer's oeuvre, or when tracing the intertextual dialectic between a number of texts against the backdrop of a particular theoretical framework, it is inevitable that a certain

pattern, or groups of related patterns displaying the interaction of these aspects will emerge. For example, the preceding four chapters have indicated that Conrad repeatedly employed a limited number of particular fictional and thematic elements in each novel, but that he varied the combination of these elements, or added a different nuance to the configuration of these elements in each subsequent novel, the combined effect of which has generally been described by the terms "mysterious atmosphere," "vague," "intangible," "impressionistic," and so forth.

These patterns can be seen from various perspectives: on the one hand, they create an awareness of the stylistic and often eccentric peculiarities which make a particular writer unique, and which act as "signposts" for a reader to follow as he or she delves into a writer's oeuvre; on the other hand, these patterns are useful instruments on which literary critics can base their arguments. However, more often than not, it is not so much an adherence to an established pattern which is the most significant aspect of a group of works, but rather a deviation from the pattern which opens up new interpretative possibilities.

The most noteworthy pattern which has emerged is that the reader's complex and daunting task of engaging with, and interpreting the text is simulated by the way in which characters attempt to penetrate the atmosphere evoked by their surroundings and "read" and "interpret" the "space" which confronts them. The replication and simulation of this intricate process has been shown in the previous chapters to be foregrounded through the various configurations of

atmospheric descriptions, narrative disjunction and thematic obfuscation, and need not be belaboured again. Suffice it to say that in N, Conrad in a sense "breaks free," and moves away from the dominance of richly descriptive passages to a more balanced presentation of these elements, with the emphasis perhaps tilting towards thematic issues.

A second prominent pattern is the way in which the dominant spatial mode in each novel or novella informs the plot, action and thematics of that particular text. More particularly, Conrad's use of variegated spatial modes also creates a pattern which implies that there is both a "centre" and an "edge" between which movement, either physical or metaphorical, is possible. At the same time, it implies a "summit" to be reached, or "depths" to be plumbed. For example, on the level of description and theme, the experiences of the crew of the Narcissus, along with the narrator's interpellations serve, among other things, to invoke the vast cosmic dimensions of the hostile natural world which humanity has to "read" and "decode" if it is to have any chance of survival. The immensity of this cosmic space is foregrounded by several richly atmospheric evocations which focus the reader's attention on the great distance between the "centre" and the "edge." Within the larger philosophical debate centring on the nature and fictional representation of modernity, discussed and dissected by Levenson (Genealogy), Erdinast-Vulcan and Perloff among others, the combined evocation and invocation of the dominant mode of cosmic space in NN can thus be seen as indicative not only of Conrad's awareness of what Erdinast-Vulcan has described as "the collapse of the mythical

anthropomorphic (i.e. Ptolemaic) view of the universe, and its succession by the Copernican vision of a vast and indifferent cosmos" (2), but also of his pioneering attempts to find new fictional forms that could represent this emerging and multivalent world-view.

The third chapter of the thesis has described the ironic doubling of the spatial notions of "centre" and "edge" in "HoD": on the level of plot, the reader is initially duped into believing that it is a journey from the "edge" of Africa into the dark "centre"; he or she soon realizes, however, that it is actually a representation of the process of "decentring," as the novella is actually concerned with the ironic inversion of the journey from the "centre" of the "civilized" world to the "barbaric edge" of the jungle. On a more abstract and philosophic level, the novella engages in a typical Modernist procedure in its implied search for the "centre." However, this search for the "centre" -- Kurtz -- also turns out not to lead to the "centre," but to the "edge." Kurtz has no real "centre" -- like the world he represents, he is shown to be, to borrow from T.S. Eliot's famous poem, "hollow."

The reading of LJ has shown that the various attempts by the many "readers" -- Marlow, the French lieutenant, Brierly, Jewel, and Stein -- to locate Jim at the "centre" of their interpretations all fail precisely because of Jim's illusive nature and his uncanny knack of evading being "centred"; Jim constantly skirts around the "edges" of the various "readings," never coming quite close enough to be "trapped" in the "centre." In contrast to Erdinast-Vulcan, who argues that Conrad only became a "proto-deconstructionist" in the phase

commonly referred to as that of his "decline" (6-8), I would argue that, on a meta-critical level, Conrad's intuitive awareness of the Nietzschean view of the indeterminate nature of reality and the concomitant absence of one truth, underlies the many readings of Jim's "space." As such, LJ already signals the birth-process of a new set of intertextual relations based on impressionistic techniques, developed further in N, and which resurface in some of the later works, like Chance (1913), and Victory (1915).

The third pattern concerns the reader and his or her knowledge of Conrad's use of impressionistic devices and methods. All the major works dealt with are shot through with the congruity between the eye, to which things are "imperceptible," and the mind, to which things are "incomprehensible" (Leech and Short 85). A brief survey of some of the comments regarding the reader's position in the reading of N shows that this is indeed a difficult and baffling text. Virginia Woolf (Carabine documents 2, 555) described it as "a difficult book to read through," while Berthoud (97) calls it a novel "that one cannot read unless one has read it before." A mammoth tome of almost six hundred pages, its sheer volume, scope and complexity challenge the reader like no other Conrad novel does, engaging him or her in a "battle" of "interpretation" in which the various novelistic techniques and thematic concerns do not represent "neutral" ground, but are, to employ Darras's (110) idea -- "strategically" deployed, in much the same way that a general would position his troops for maximum effect. Guerard -- in a passage referred to earlier, but which bears repetition -- makes a similar observation about the engagement between

N and the reader when he argues that "[w]e have, as in Lord Jim, a combat between author, material, and reader. But the reader's main effort is now largely to gain some foothold, assume some habitual stance, put himself in a less vertiginous relationship to what he observes" (215). The same theme of conflict and tension between reader and text is apparent in Watts's argument, namely that "the novel's techniques throw us about, ambush and exercise us" (Preface 153). The obvious question to ask is, of course, why this is so.

There are a number of reasons for this apparent difficulty, and it is necessary to explain these as they will form the basis of the argument to be developed in this chapter. The first reason lies in the compact textuality of the novel, consisting of the variegated array of spatial configurations, such as cosmic, symbolic, psychological, and political space. The sheer density of this interwoven textuality is simply too overwhelming for the reader to process readily and synthesize into a whole, or, employing Iser's terminology referred to earlier, "to create a Gestalt." Instead, the reader is confronted with a "series" of "texts" "transcribed" and "inscribed" into the many "worlds" of Costaguana. What eventually emerges from the reading process is not a monolithic Gestalt, but rather a number of Gestalts. Add to this its shifts in time perspective, chronological "looping," and, to use Edward Said's description, "the often startling disparities between action and record" (Beginnings 106), and it is small wonder that N seems to affirm what David Lodge calls "the resistance of the world to interpretation" (237).



A second reason for the fact that N is not exactly "reader-friendly" can be found in the interactive dynamic which exists between the notions of "reading" and "writing" space. This dynamic lies at the heart of the mythical space of N: there is no single dominant space which has to be "read," no single "text" which needs to be deciphered, no "master" narrative which has to be interpreted. Instead, there is only, in Terry Eagleton's words, an "absent centre" (138). Eagleton argues from a Marxist point of view, but his concept can be employed fruitfully by epistemological critics as well. This notion of an "absent centre" is presented to the reader through the description of the landscape and setting. Because of its dominant position in the opening chapters, the reader is in a way lead to believe that the magnificent Higueroa is at the "centre" of Sulaco. It is "tangible," a fixed point from where he or she can plot the journey ahead, just as one is lead to believe from the early pronouncements by Captain Mitchell that Nostromo is "known," "fixed," and a "clear-cut" character. As the reader progresses, however, the landscape, which creates an impression of massive solidity, does not seem so solid anymore; what really lies at the centre of the geography of Sulaco, says Roussel, is not Higueroa, but "the darkness of the Golfo Placido" (109), a space which "confounds the objects of everyday life into one homogeneous obscurity" (109). In the same way, the "profusion of 'authors' who use the land as a slate on which to inscribe their personal narratives" (Fisher 16-17), and their resulting "inscriptions" of Nostromo, do not create the impression of solidity, but rather that of insubstantiality, of a mythical figure roaming a vast mythical space. Given the dense textuality of the

novel, it takes some time for the reader to realize that there is not one Nostromo, who dominates everything like Higueroa dominates the landscape; there are many "Nostromos," all of whom have been "inscribed" into the "absent centre," into the dark and intangible space of Costaguana.

The third, and more thematic reason for this apparent "difficulty" of N is because the intricate interdependence between the descriptive, narrative and thematic components is pursued so dramatically that the epistemological principles become thematic. Paul Armstrong explains: "...by exposing the epistemological processes that make representation work, James, Conrad, and Ford often sacrifice in their novels the traditional illusion of immersion in a lifelike world. When the impressionist wager pays off, the gain resulting from this sacrifice is greater self-conscious understanding of the processes of interpretation..."(Bewilderment 16).

This chapter will argue that, if one is to deal successfully with this interwoven textuality, penetrate the wall of "uninterpretability," and arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of Conrad's aim -- "to make you see!" -- then one must at least have a knowledge not only of the kinds of fictional devices that he uses, but particularly of the close interdependence which exists between these devices and the way in which they are combined to create the desired effect. Or, phrased in the theoretical terms used throughout the argument: a lack of understanding of the interaction between the epistemological and ontological aspects of Conrad's fiction leads to the kind of response offered by critics like Guerard and Darras.

Indeed, one of the central points which this thesis has argued is that a clearer understanding of the constitutive elements of Conrad's impressionism (notably that of space and atmosphere) and a more sensitive awareness of their interaction in foregrounding the interdependence between the epistemological and ontological aspects of his fiction will, in fact, ensure that Conrad's "impressionist wager...comes off," with a resultant gain in understanding "the processes of interpretation."

Coming as it does at the "end" of the texts grouped as the transtextual narrative, which has the problematization of interpretation as one of its main distinguishing features, N is the one text which perhaps best illustrates the dynamic between "reading" and "inscribing" space. This is so because of its pivotal position in Conrad's oeuvre. Reaching back to its predecessors on the one hand, with its development of narrative concerns already evident in "HoD" and LJ, narratives which interpret and construct reality, it also unites the private and psychological elements in "HoD" and LJ, merging what Fisher (16) has termed "the psychological world of the individual with the social world of the group by presenting and evaluating the variety of narratives that comprise Costaguanan history."

On the other hand, N is a novel that shows a clear progression and development. Darras (114-5), for example, has argued that it is a transitional text, both in Conrad's oeuvre and in the development of the British novel in general as it presents Conrad's "discovery" of "new veins in the mine of fiction which he cannot exploit fully but which...[would] soon be exploited by others." Or, to put it in

Jameson's words, "[N]...opens up a space beyond the world itself [to] mark the attainment by Conrad's impressionism of its own outer limit, the working through of the dialectic of sensory registers to the point at which the latter virtually abolish themselves" (241).

Instead of revisiting the method followed in the previous chapters which elaborated on the interaction between description, narrative, and theme, this chapter will not focus on the description and interpretation, or "reading" of space, but will focus on the "opening up of a space beyond the world itself" by examining the way in which N -- through its "inscription" and "transcription" of space - - explores these "new veins in the mine of fiction."

## II

Why do people create myths?<sup>1</sup> Historically, various peoples have created myths as a means of interpreting and explaining their world (or "space") and various natural and historical phenomena, often

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<sup>1</sup> Because the word myth varies considerably in its denotation and connotation, it must be pointed out that I am not using the word myth in exactly the sense used by Van Ghent in her Introduction to the Rinehart, Holt and Winston edition (1961, rptd. in Karl, Collection 43-58), Rosenfield's Paradise of Snakes (1967), John Orr's Tragic Realism and Modern Society (1978), or Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan's Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper (1991). I will use the word mainly to denote the "movement" in the works under discussion from "centre" to "edge," from descriptions of a realistic, "real-life" character like James Wait, down the "continuum" of increasingly "illusive" characters like Kurtz, and Jim, finally ending with Nostromo, who can, in a sense, be seen as a mythical figure, not "real."

strange and threatening, which appear in that world in such a way that these myths contain popularly-held beliefs about these phenomena in order to make them less terrifying or daunting. In this context, myths are what Josiane Paccaud-Huguet (70-71) has called "fixed, stable, [and] unfailing construct[s] of the imagination which...function as a guarantee to our desire for stable origins and meanings."

A second important characteristic of mythmaking which underscores the ontological element in this process has to do with the element of controlling or "domesticating" one's environment by "inscribing" it with one's own values, and endowing it with meaning, thereby exerting power and controlling it.<sup>2</sup> It is in this context that Conroy can argue that it "is true, of course, that any description of a landscape, by encompassing through discourse what is described (or more correctly, what is created), will by definition 'textualize' what it describes (or creates) and so transform it. But it is the specific way the Sulaco setting is textualized, and the way in which that textualizing process is foregrounded, that is crucial" (149).

This "textualizing process" is illustrative of the way N deviates from strategies used in earlier texts by adding the ontological aspect of "constructing" reality, of mythmaking, of

<sup>2</sup> Kolakowski's central ideas presented in his book The Presence of Myth are worth noting, albeit not in their primary form. He argues that myth is "man's refusal to accept the arbitrary, random quality of reality, and his need to see the world as a continuum, to 'domesticate' ['inscribe'] empirical reality and endow it with meaning (quoted from the original Hebrew by Erdinast-Vulcan 29).

"transcribing" and "inscribing" public and private myths into the narrative space usually dominated by epistemological questions. Jakob Lothe emphasizes the centrality of space when he states that setting is "exceptionally important in N: it might be suggested that in spite of the large number of important characters the protagonist proper is the town of Sulaco" (177). While in agreement with the importance that Lothe ascribes to setting, I wish to suggest that the setting of N is important not only for its contribution to narrative progression and shifting perspective, but that it is particularly important for the thematic structure of the novel, as setting and landscape provide the "mythical space," Eagleton's "absent centre," or Fisher's "slate" into which, and onto which, the public and private space will be inscribed.

"Transcribing" and "inscribing" are alternative meanings which can be assigned to the word "writing," and can be used to "sub-divide" the metaphorical process of "writing" in N into two categories, the attempts at transcribing public myths, rewriting them as the various "writers" go along, or of the efforts to inscribe private myths into the narrative space. Collectively, these public and private myths constitute what I will call the "Nostromo myth."

What exactly is the difference between public and private myths? The phrase "public myth" will be used to refer to any narrative or counter narrative which concerns the interplay of broader social forces, groups and institutions in constructing the socio-political history of Costaguana and its riches. These groups include the cargadores, the miners, the Europeans and the Blancos, the mine

and the railway, and so forth. "Private myths" will be used to describe the way in which isolated individuals construct their own myths, as well as the way they are confronted with the myths which other people construct around them. In this group one finds characters like Charles Gould, Decoud, Dr. Monygham, and, of course, Nostromo.<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that, as in the case of most critical and analytical exercises, these "categories" and "definitions" are not absolute, and that a degree of overlapping could naturally be ascribed to any category.

One common denominator among these groups and individual characters is highlighted by Bonney (111), who points out that most of the characters in N "find it remarkably easy to project their respective needs onto the landscape of Costaguana, a landscape unique in its receptivity, for the degree to which it invites reformation." Already in the opening chapter this procedure of "reformation" is illustrated through the "framing" -- to recall Lotman's concept employed earlier -- of the narrative with the myth of the Americans who set off to find the treasure in the mountains and who, caught up in a frenzy of greed, found themselves trapped for ever, their souls tied to the gold. The echoes of this myth permeate the whole novel, and will eventually be "reformed" and "transformed" to become part of the "Nostromo" myth.

The myth of the Americans underscores two relevant points central to the argument. First, it illustrates the way in which a

<sup>3</sup> See Visser (272-284) for a detailed and rigorous analysis of the social networks in Nostromo.

story is transcribed into folklore, becoming a powerful charm that will dissuade anybody from having ideas of plundering the gold deposit. Secondly, this procedure illustrates how individual or group myths are "projected" onto or inscribed into a space, thereby becoming the power which "transforms" the old space into something new.

The public myths in the novel cannot, of course, be wholly divorced from "private" myths. This is clearly illustrated by the intermingling of the private "myth" of the Gould family with that of the public myth of Sulaco, the implicit attempts of Guzman Bento to "mythologize" himself, in contrast to Don José Avellanos's attempts to "rewrite," or "demythologize" the history of Costaguana in his book, Fifty Years of Misrule. Montero's attempts at gaining power, and Martin Decoud's "transcription" of the political developments in his letter to his sister, and the "inscription" of his own political agenda into the journalistic discourse of Costaguana also interweave public and private myths.

The representation of the Gould myth is constituted by many of the thematic elements and motifs used in the earlier works in Conrad's oeuvre, such as the motifs of reading and misreading, entrapment and isolation. The most significant development is that it introduces into the transtextual narrative the important new motif of "writing." This is done through the analeptic and piecemeal introduction of Nostromo and the history of Sulaco, a process which simulates the reader's own process of "reading-as-writing," as he or she perforce has to construct the Gould myth on the basis of the information at his or her disposal at a particular point in the narrative. Both Guerard



(175) and Armstrong (Bewilderment 166) argue similarly that the reader participates in the "writing." The point that Armstrong makes is particularly relevant with regard to the ontological dimension of Conrad's fiction, when he states that "the novel's readers must emulate Conrad's own work of constructing an entire society."

Consider, for example, the first passages in which both the Goulds are introduced into the narrative:

The only lady of that company was Mrs. Gould, the wife of Don Carlos, the administrator of the San Tomé silver mine. The ladies of Sulaco were not advanced enough to take part in the public life to that extent. They had come out strongly at the great ball at the Intendencia the evening before, but Mrs. Gould alone had appeared, a bright spot in the group of black coats behind the President-Dictator, on the crimson cloth-covered stage erected under a shady tree on the shore of the harbour, where the ceremony of turning the first sod [of the National Central Railway] had taken place. She had come off in the cargo lighter, full of notabilities, sitting under the flutter of gay flags, in the place of honour by the side of Captain Mitchell, who steered, and her clear dress gave the only truly festive note to the sombre gathering in the long, gorgeous saloon of the Juno (34-35).

Charles Gould is introduced a few pages later in the fifth chapter:

The engineer-in-chief had used the phrase ['We can't move mountains!'] in answer to the chairman's tentative suggestion that the tracing of the line could, perhaps, be altered in deference to the prejudices of the Sulaco landowners. The chief engineer believed that the obstinacy of men was the lesser obstacle. Moreover, to combat that they had the great influence of Charles Gould, whereas tunnelling under Higueroa would have been a colossal undertaking.

'Ah, yes! Gould. What sort of man is he?'

Sir John had heard much of Charles Gould in Sta. Marta, and wanted to know more. The engineer-in-chief assured him that the administrator of the mine had an immense influence over these Spanish Dons. He had also one of the

best houses in Sulaco, and the Gould hospitality was beyond all praise...

'I stayed with them for a month. He helped me to organize the surveying parties. His practical ownership of the San Tomé silver mine gives him a special position. He seems to have the ear of every provincial authority apparently, and, as I said, he can wind all the hidalgos of the province round his little finger...' (41-42).

It is quite obvious from even a superficial reading of these passages that there seems to be a special aura surrounding both the Goulds, an aura which is not only the result of their wealth. It appears as if both exude an almost abnormal influence over their fellow-citizens. They are revered and honoured, and have been given places of honour, almost as if they were mythical figures themselves. One could almost argue that the people of Sulaco have "inscribed" the Goulds into a space of honour, never to be "erased" again.

In constructing his or her own version of Sulaco, the reader obviously has to ask why they have been "set apart" and categorized in this way. The answers as to why the Goulds are treated in this special way are provided in the sixth chapter of the first part of the novel, where the Goulds' family history is relayed to the reader. It is a history of political power and intrigue, near economic ruin, and, finally, of unworkable and illusive dreams. If one were to read this chapter in the context of the rest of the thesis, one could argue that the chapter deals with all the factors which lead the Gould family, and Charles Gould in particular, to "misread" their own position, and consequently to attempt the "construction" of their own world and myth based on false assumptions.

One of the main reasons for the Gould family's rise and fall is symbolized by Father Roman's reverence toward Europe. In a vignette picturing him as he celebrates daily Mass before a sombre altarpiece representing the Resurrection, he is heard to describe the picture to his congregation as follows:

'This picture, my children, muy linda e maravillosa [very pure and marvellous], Father Roman would say to some of his flock, 'which you behold here through the munificence of the wife of our Señor Administrator, has been painted in Europe, a country of saints and miracles, and much greater than our own Costaguana' (103).

The sub-text of this scene is that Father Roman "reads" Europe -- and in particular the dominant role played by the Catholic Church in its history and affairs -- from his position and perspective as a simple village priest, endowing it with almost magical powers. Or, put in other words: he "transcribes" the powerful European myth into the "wild" space of Costaguana, hoping that some of its charm will be transferred to his world, and that it will, through him, also exert a powerful and benevolent influence over his people. In this sense he is, in fact, doing here what the Gould family -- and the majority of the Europeans in Costaguana -- did, and do, overestimating its influence, and "misreading" the power and qualities of Europe. Seen in this light, the whole history of the Gould family can be described as a history of "inscribing" the "myth" of Europe and all it stands for, ingrained as it is at the most fundamental levels of their psyche -- "the Gould family, established in Costaguana for three generations, always went to England for their education and for their wives" (46) -- into the "centre" of their new space in Costaguana. This process of inscription underlies most of the actions of the

foreigners in the novel, and resurfaces in a more symbolic way in the description of the square of Sulaco, which is dominated by the statue of an actual European ruler, Charles IV. The impotence and existential isolation which result from the inscription of the European myth are mirrored, as Rosenfield (47) points out, in the "marble ineffectuality [of the statue which] reminds us of the real Rey of Sulaco, the stony presence of Charles Gould."

In the Author's Note, Conrad commented on the "passions of men short-sighted in good and evil" (xlii). Juliet McLauchlan (9-10) has argued that this notion of short-sightedness functions within the ambit of those for "material interests" like Charles Gould, Nostromo, Holroyd, Sir John, Hirsch, Montero, Mitchell, and so on, while those free from material interests like Dr. Monygham, Mrs. Gould, Father Roman, Decoud, and Hernandez are, by implication, not "short-sighted." I wish to extend this line of argument and open up these connotations given to "short-sighted" by using it as a metaphor with epistemological and ontological implications in N. The whole history of the Gould family and of Charles Gould in particular can be seen within the context of short-sighted as "misreading," leading to inappropriate constructions of their "space." In presenting the Gould family saga to the reader, Conrad makes use of the same sub-text which he used in "HoD." The way in which the Goulds deal with their symbolic "exile"<sup>4</sup> from Europe, and the way in which they misread their new environment, especially as far as its politics and economics

<sup>4</sup> While Charles is a native of Costaguana, I think that one could argue that his "Otherness" in a sense qualifies him as an exile, symbolically at least.

are concerned, lead to their many attempts to transcribe their European myths and inscribe these "into" Costaguana. These actions have their earlier fictional counterparts in Kurtz and Marlow's attempts to "inscribe" their individual versions of the "European myth" into the dark void of Africa. The echoes of Kurtz's tract commissioned by the "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs" ("HoD" 207-208) are nowhere as audible as in the scene in which Charles Gould, to use John Orr's words (107), puts "an empty materialist myth in the place of all other values":

'What is wanted here is law, good faith, order, security. Any one can declaim about these things, but I pin my faith on material interests. Only let the material interests once get a firm footing, and they are bound to impose the conditions on which alone they can continue to exist. That's how your money-making is justified here in the face of lawlessness and disorder. It is justified because the security which it demands must be shared with an oppressed people. A better justice will come afterwards. That's your ray of hope' (84).

Gould here has clearly "read" the space of Costaguana and found it in need of "law, good faith, [and] order." The way to solve this "problem," is to "inscribe" these very values into this space of "lawlessness and disorder," despite the implications of such an action. The rest of the novel is a protracted indictment of Gould's misreading, of his mistaken inscription of his own values and ideas into the world of Costaguana, with all the disastrous effects thereof.

Seen within the larger thematic context of colonialism, Holroyd's position is somewhat different from Gould's, in that he represents the expanding American supremacy over British imperialism (Orr 106). But as far as the central epistemological-ontological

dynamics of the novel is concerned, he fits into the pattern of "inscribing" external myths into the world of South America. He is not only a physical embodiment of the "European myth" -- "His hair was iron grey, his eyebrows were still black, and his massive profile was the profile of a Caesar's head on an old Roman coin. But his parentage was German and Scotch and English, with remote strains of Danish and French blood, giving him the temperament of a Puritan and an insatiable imagination of conquest" (76) -- but clearly shares the desire for power and control, the desire to "inscribe" his own myth into the world in which he finds himself:

'We can sit and watch. Of course, some day we shall step in...But there's no hurry. Time itself has got to wait on the greatest country in the whole of God's Universe. We shall be giving the word for everything: industry, trade, law, journalism, art, politics, and religion, from Cape Horn clear over Smith's Sound, and beyond, too, if anything worth taking hold of turns up at the North Pole. And then we shall have the leisure to take in hand the outlying islands and continents of the earth. We shall run the world's business whether the world likes it or not' (77).

An important difference between N and the preceding texts is the way in which setting takes on a much more animate<sup>5</sup> role than in any of the previous texts (except, perhaps, in NN with its vivid evocation of the cosmic space underpinning the tale). As mentioned earlier, the centrality of setting in N as a supporting agent for the narrative has been underscored by both Bonney and Lothe. I wish to suggest that another reason for this important role played by setting

<sup>5</sup> Erdinast-Vulcan notes in this regard that a central aspect of the mythical mode of discourse is the "uninhibited animistic treatment of nature...[in which the] sun, the forest, the mountain, and the ocean are treated as active agents in the epic narrative" (30).

can be attributed to the fact that the setting of Costaguana is as much a "writing" agent as are those who attempt to "inscribe" their own myths into it. Setting in N also "writes" the characters into "space." This animate nature of setting is nowhere as pervasive as in the descriptions of the mine and the effect it has on the people of Sulaco, as well as on the reader, a sentiment echoed by Darras (109) when he states that "the mining activity around which the fiction is conceived, and which leaves an indelible imprint on the novel's form, is essential to our understanding of the book as a whole. Like the very refining process which it describes so well, the writing splits the text to extract the ore which will be transformed into the precious metal of fiction." This statement brings to the fore two important aspects which deserve attention, the centrality of the mine and the reader's interaction with the text.

The history of the mine is documented almost like that of the Gould family, revealing how generations of people -- slaves, Indians, English companies, the Costaguanan Government -- had all been caught in its spell. The San Tomé mine is at the "centre" of all the action in the novel. But it also echoes the symbolic idea of an "absent centre." The mine is a hole with a "dark centre," leading the mineworkers ever deeper into its labyrinth in search of its hidden "ore." And when it has been reached, the search continues for new veins which will yield more silver. Seen in this context, it has no real "centre" in which all the silver is to be found; it constantly defers the search for the "centre," for finality, for closure.

It is in this sense that the mine becomes a metaphor for the reading process: the reader is constantly trying to find the "centre" of the novel -- trying to "inscribe" Nostromo into the centre of the narrative space -- only to find that there is no fixed centre to be located as Nostromo can only really be "placed" in the immense darkness of the Golfo Placido.

The mine's agency is not merely restricted to the action of deferral, but also provides a geometrical opposite to the dominant heights of Higuerota. It is an active force, "entrapping" people in its darkness, both physical and symbolical. It is a "paradise of snakes" (105) whose destructive influence over nature is symbolized by the drying up of the waterfall (105-6) and of the way in which it warps and distorts the common sense of those who work it. The history of the Gould family's involvement with the mine mirrors this process of entrapment: Charles Gould's father always wrote to his son of "abandoning everything and making his escape" (73), while Mrs. Gould's relationship with her husband is barren precisely because he has been trapped and dehumanized -- "inscribed" into its irresistible dark space:

The fate of the San Tomé mine was lying heavy upon her heart. It was a long time now since she had begun to fear it. It had been an idea. She had watched it with misgivings turning into a fetish, and now the fetish had grown into a monstrous and crushing weight. It was as if the inspiration of their early years had left her heart to turn into a wall of silver-bricks, erected by the silent work of evil spirits, between her and her husband. He seemed to dwell alone within a circumvallation of precious metal, leaving her outside with her school, her hospital, the sick mothers and the feeble old men, mere insignificant vestiges of the initial inspiration (221-222).



But the mine has not only separated Mrs. Gould from her husband; its continued effect on the Gould family is also clearly indicated in the last part of the novel, entitled The Lighthouse, poignantly driving home Charles's eventual failure: "The mine had got hold of Charles Gould with a grip as deadly as ever it had laid upon his father" (400). Charles Gould's misreading of the benefits that the mine might hold for the people and the hostility and anger which it arouses on the one hand, and his consequent failed attempts to transcribe it into the space which he -- Gould -- had envisaged for it as atonement for his father's failures, on the other, are illustrative of a much larger and more complex pattern in Conrad's fiction discussed in the earlier chapters of the thesis, the "dramatization of the necessary entrapment of the human psyche as it assigns meaning to the phenomenal world in the act of perception" (Bonney 171).

In short: the interactional dynamics between description and thematics is underlined by the mine and its active involvement in transforming the myth of Sulaco -- that of the Americans who lost their souls to the silver -- into the reality which frames and shapes the barren space in which the Goulds, and the other Europeans, are eventually trapped. As such it is an active agent, making its own myth, and inscribing itself into the narrative. It is because of this pervasive mythic force that I have to disagree with Darras (116) when he states that "there is no room for myths in Nostromo."

But the public myths in N do not all centre on the Gould family. While this thesis is not concerned with Conrad's depiction of political themes, like state legitimacy, various forms of democratic

and autocratic rule, political expediency, and so forth, it cannot be denied that the political underpinnings of the action of the novel have epistemological and ontological implications relevant to the argument pursued thus far. Conroy provides a concise explanation of these implications which is worth noting in full:

In the depiction of Sulaco, one sees a political entity whose very formation and reformation -- whose ontological status itself -- is dependent on ...[a] process of legitimation. As it suffers the various changes of government within the larger state of Costaguana, from Guzman Bento's dictatorship to Ribiera's parliamentarism and Montero's revolt, the region gradually constitutes itself as a legal entity, a state. In *Nostromo*, the legitimation process is starkly dramatized as a struggle for legitimation, a struggle which generates political space. This political space is also a narrative space (150-1).

A brief summary of the political motivations and actions of Guzman Bento, Don José Avellanos and Montero clearly illustrates the way in which political space is transcribed and circumscribed in the narrative. The descriptions of Bento's dictatorial rule can be translated as representations of his attempt to "inscribe" himself into the political centre of the world of Costaguana. The irony underlying his intervention in the affairs of the people of Costaguana is sharply brought into focus by the terms used to describe him, "Citizen Saviour of the Country"(138), and the description of his cruel and humiliating actions:

There was no other way left now to enjoy his power but by seeing his crushed adversaries crawl impotently into the light of day out of the dark, noisome cells of the Collegio. Their harmlessness fed his insatiable vanity, and they could always be got hold of again. It was the rule for all the women of their families to present thanks afterwards in a special audience. The incarnation of that strange god: El Gobierno Supremo, received them standing, cocked hat on head, and exhorted them in a menacing mutter

to show their gratitude by bringing up their children in fidelity to the democratic form of government, 'which I have established for the good of the country' (139).

Don José Avellanos's book, Fifty Years of Misrule, is an attempt to "decentre" Bento from the public myth of Costaguana, and inscribe his -- Avellanos's -- own version of it into the void, or, put in other words, it is yet another perspective on the epistemological-ontological dialectic, as he tries to "construct" a new history based on his "reading" and understanding of events. These attempts are not without effect, as they -- for a while at least -- place Avellanos's influence at the centre of the world of Sulacan politics: "He was too old to descend personally into the centre of the arena at Sta. Marta. But the men who acted there sought his advice at every step" (140).

Montero's reading of books leads him to construct his own version of what should be at the "centre" of Sulacan politics, and results in his naive and egotistical efforts to repeat, or "recentre" the past, while at the same time "inscribing" himself into the "centre." By using the strategy of parallel vignettes, which initially appear to be "insignificant" scenes, Conrad not only "punctuates" the main narrative thrust of his text, but also builds up the underlying thematic structure. Two other smaller examples which support the political process of "centring" and "decentring" are found in other attempts at inscribing the space of Costaguana with myths from outside that world, namely Gould's grandiose attempts to rehabilitate the mine, and what Fisher (23) calls Holroyd's "missionary ambitions."

The last creator of a public myth is Decoud, who, both in his capacity as public journalist and private letter-writer, again illustrates the thematic notion of transcribing and inscribing space. Conroy's description (154-155) of Decoud's ambitions and methods is particularly persuasive and underscores the central thrust of the argument presented thus far. He suggests that Decoud has dreams of political power and influence "within the geographical space of Sulaco, but in order to bring about these dreams...[he] must create a space...for himself." Decoud's weapons as a journalist are the interplay of opinion, polemics and hearsay, which all contribute to fashioning the "rhetorical space." By deliberately "re-inventing" the political myth of Costaguana in a way that would suit his own political desires, Decoud's actions correspond with Cassirer's (Symbol 253) idea of the exploitation of the need for myth by those who wield power. Decoud's attempts at inserting himself into the centre of this rhetorical space are summarized in his long letter to his sister in Paris, which, incidentally, can also be read within the paradigm of transcribing European political myths into the space of Sulaco. These constructions of "public" myths are, however, only "one side of the coin," as it were, and are complemented by the various "private myths" which also contribute to the construction of the mythical space of N.

### III

Making sense of the numerous inscriptions of the various characters' private versions of the "Nostromo myth" is a complex process, compounded by the time shifts and complicated narrative

strategies. It is interesting to note that Conrad once more, as was the case in LJ, creates a mystifying and elusive title character, who should be at the "centre" of the novel, but who appears to be absent from that "centre." The central dilemma which faces the reader in this regard can be summarized by one question: Who, or what exactly lies at the centre of the Nostromo myth? Is it the Italian sailor, the Capataz de Cargadores, Gian' Battista, Giovanni, or "Nostromo"?

Curiously enough, this is a problem not only for the readers to solve, but also seemed to be a problem for Nostromo's creator himself. In a letter dated 31 October 1904, Conrad responded to Cunninghame Graham's qualified praise of Nostromo, dismissing his central character, Nostromo as "nothing at all -- a fiction -- embodied vanity of the sailor kind -- a romantic mouthpiece of the 'people'" (CLJC 3, 175). As indicated in the earlier chapters of this thesis, it is clear from this letter, and many others, that there is some kind of symbiosis between the ideas expressed in Conrad's letters and those represented in the fiction. The idea of a character being "read" as "a fiction" by other characters and readers is one which has been explored at length in the chapter dealing with LJ. Marlow, Stein, Jewel, and Doramin all try to "centre" the illusive Lord Jim. I wish to argue that, while the central thrust in LJ is an epistemological one, in N this element is played down somewhat while its concomitant aspect, that of ontology, of "constructing," or "writing" a character, is foregrounded. Nostromo is not so much "read" as "written" into various roles and spaces, almost used as a "charm" to achieve certain effects. In this sense Conrad's own impression of him rings true, as

each "writer" in turn inscribes Nostromo into his or her own mythical space, appropriating whatever qualities are deemed necessary to justify their "use" of him.

The "Nostromo myth" is written by a range of writers, from the obtuse and naive Mitchell, the idealistic and romantic Violas, to the shrewd and cynical Dr. Monygham. These "inscriptions" are not all detailed, or elaborated upon, but they all share the same characteristics. Captain Mitchell's comments about Nostromo in the second chapter of the first part, and the ninth chapter of the third part, are illustrative of the way in which Nostromo is "written" into space:

'A crazy mob, sir, does not discriminate. Under providence we owed our preservation to my Capataz de Cargadores, as they called him in town, a man who, when I discovered his value, sir, was just the bos'n of an Italian ship, a big Genoese ship, one of the few European ships that ever came to Sulaco with a general cargo before the building of the National Central. He left her on account of some very respectable friends he made here, his own countrymen, but also, I suppose, to better himself. Sir, I am a pretty good judge of character. I engaged him to be the foreman of our lightermen, and caretaker of our jetty. That's all he was. But without him Señor Ribiera would have been a dead man. This Nostromo, sir, a man absolutely above reproach, became the terror of all the thieves in the town. We were infested, infested, overrun, sir, here at that time by ladrones and matreros, thieves and murderers from the whole province...[but they] quailed before him, sir. That's what the force of character will do for you' (13).

And:

'The equestrian statue that used to stand on the pedestal over there has been removed. It was an anachronism,' Captain Mitchell commented, obscurely. 'There is talk of replacing it by a marble shaft commemorative of Separation, with angels of peace at the four corners, and bronze Justice holding up an even balance, all gilt, on top...Names are to be engraved all around the base. Well!

They could do no better than begin with the name of Nostromo. He has done for Separation as much as everybody else, and, 'added Captain Mitchell, 'has got less than many others by it -- when it comes to that...Devotion, courage, fidelity, intelligence were not enough. Of course, he was perfectly fearless and incorruptible. But a man was wanted that would know how to succeed. He was that man, sir' (482-83).

One of the most important developments which highlight the crucial difference between the way in which Nostromo is "inscribed" into myth, and the way in which Jim is "read," is perhaps best illustrated by comparing Captain Mitchell's comments here with Jewel's frantic questioning of the forces which drive and motive Jim:

'What is it? You tell me! What is this thing? Is it alive? -- is it dead? I hate it. It is cruel. Has it got a face and a voice -- this calamity? Will he see it -- will he hear it? In his sleep perhaps when he cannot see me -- and then arise and go. Ah! I shall never forgive him. My mother had forgiven -- but I, never! Will it be a sign -- a call?' (LJ 314-25).

In contrast to Jewel's questioning, Mitchell is confident that he has "read" Nostromo correctly -- "I am a pretty good judge of character." Nostromo is valorized by the attributes and qualities -- "above reproach," "the terror of all the thieves in the town," "[he] has...[d]evotion, courage, fidelity" -- which Captain Mitchell ascribes to him in order to "write" him into the space of "hero," or "saviour." In contrast to Jewel's anguish and uncertainty about her "reading" of Jim, there is not the slightest hesitation in Captain Mitchell's mind that he might be wrong, or that he is not quite sure of his judgment. And it is in this confident attitude of Mitchell's that Conrad again exhibits his penchant for ironic twists, so central a part of all the narratives discussed, as Mitchell is even prepared to immortalize Nostromo as an "incorruptible" hero by literally

"writing" him into the central space of Sulaco, by suggesting that his name be engraved on the marble shaft that will replace the statue of the European ruler in the square of Sulaco. This action in a sense echoes the implications of the larger political developments, as the "European" myth is replaced by the local "Nostromo myth."

This action acutely highlights Mitchell's "misreading" and consequent "inscription" of Nostromo, a misreading that is confirmed by the far more perceptive "reading" and "writing" of Nostromo by Dr. Monygham. In the scene describing Nostromo as he greets the Violas before leaving with the silver, the tone and sub-text of Dr. Monygham's replies -- "'Why, Capataz! I thought you could never fail in anything," and: "You gamble too much, and never say 'no' to a pretty face, Capataz...That is not the way to make a fortune. But nobody that I know ever suspected you of being poor. I hope you have made a good bargain in case you come back safe from this adventure" (258-59) -- clearly offset Captain Mitchell's hero worship of Nostromo. Dr. Monygham has "written" Nostromo into a different kind of space from that of Captain Mitchell, not that of "hero", but of "philanderer, egotistical and deceitful schemer," and it is for the reader to weigh and consider these and other Nostromo "myths" as he or she engages with the text. As an aside, it is interesting to note Berthoud's comment on the "multiplication of ironies" which arises from the conflict between Nostromo -- "an athlete, an egoist, a doer" -- and Dr. Monygham -- "a cripple, a self-denier, a doubter" (121-122) with the inversion of their roles, as Nostromo, fearing that he has failed, is in need of assistance and recognition, and Dr. Monygham is



preparing to risk his life for the sake of an unrequited love. In terms of the line of argument pursued thus far, one could argue that they write themselves into each other's space by assuming each other's roles.

Perhaps the best examples of the process of inscription into a private myth are the ways in which the members of the Viola family -- Giorgio, Theresa, Giselle and Linda -- all "inscribe" Nostromo into their own mythical space. Giorgio -- the dreamer and idealist, inspired by the exploits of his hero Garibaldi -- writes Nostromo into the space left by the death of his own son. To him, Nostromo becomes the embodiment of masculinity and daring, a brave hero. Giorgio's responses to Nostromo can be seen as writing him into the role of "the Capataz," the "new" Garibaldi, contributing to the general myth about Nostromo circulating among the people.

Theresa, on the other hand, rejects the way in which the "English" appropriate Nostromo for their own purposes, but, ironically, does exactly the same as they do. For her, he is not "our Nostromo," but her Gian' Battista. In contrast to Giorgio who writes his Capataz into the more "public" myth, Theresa writes Nostromo into her own private myth, and assigns to him the roles of protector of her family and perhaps even that of a future son-in-law.

The two daughters' responses to Nostromo, and the contrasting ways in which they weave their own personal myths around him, are presented by means of descriptive passages which are highly symbolic. Giselle excites his masculine instincts and "writes" him into the

space of a passionate lover, allowing him freedom to roam and explore her body. To her, he is "Giovanni, my lover" (544). Consider, for example, the bright colours and the suggestion of new life embodied in the passage describing their meeting:

Giselle Viola, with her head resting against the wall of the house, her eyes half closed, and her little feet, in white stockings and black slippers, crossed over each other, seemed to surrender herself...He stood before her in the red sash and check shirt as he used to appear on the Company's wharf -- a Mediterranean sailor come ashore to try his luck in Costaguana... 'You have got to hear,' he began at last, with perfect self control. 'I shall say no word of love to your sister, to whom I am betrothed this evening, because it is you that I love...' The dusk let him see yet the tender and voluptuous smile that came upon her lips shaped for love and kisses...(537).

In contrast to this freedom and promise of life, Linda's repression of Nostromo's manhood is symbolically illustrated by the motif of entrapment and enclosure which imbues most of the scenes in which they are together. For example, consider the following passage:

Linda had gone straight to the tower. It was time to light up. She unlocked the little door, and went heavily up the spiral case, carrying her love for the magnificent Capataz de Cargadores like an ever-increasing load of shameful fetters (552).

This passage vividly and graphically portrays the claustrophobic space of her relationship with Nostromo, and the way in which she forces him into the cramped "space" of her suffocating affection for him.

Each of the Violas constructs his or her own myth by appropriating Nostromo and "inscribing" him into that "absent space." Each of these myths, through their particular perspectives, contributes to the construction of the "Nostromo myth."

Decoud's "reading" and "writing" of Nostromo interweaves the public myth with the construction of his private myths. In a sense, Decoud's "inscription" of the "Nostromo myth" almost functions on a metaphorical level, with echoes of Marlow's moment of insight when he has finally met Kurtz and when he is allowed to "peer over the edge." In "HoD" this is the closest that Marlow ever gets to the "centre," and the same holds for Decoud. Just as Marlow's initial impressions of Kurtz are tempered by the epiphany revealing the "horror," so Decoud's initial impression of Nostromo, relayed to his sister in his letter -- "He is more naive than shrewd, more masterful than crafty, more generous with his personality than the people who make use of him are with their money" (248) -- is stripped of its superficiality, and the "centre" of the "Nostromo myth" revealed for a brief and fleeting moment of truth:

The Capataz, extending his hand, put out the candle suddenly. It was to Decoud as if his companion had destroyed, by a single touch, the world of affairs, of loves, of revolution, where his complacent superiority analyzed fearlessly all motives and all passions, including his own. He gasped a little. Decoud was affected by the novelty of his position. Intellectually self-confident, he suffered from being deprived of the only weapon he could use with effect. No intelligence could penetrate the darkness of the Placid Gulf. There remained only one thing he was certain of, and that was the overweening vanity of his companion. It was direct, uncomplicated, naive, and effectual. Decoud, who had been making use of him, had tried to understand his man thoroughly. He had discovered a complete singleness of motive behind the various manifestations of a consistent character. This was why the man remained so astonishingly simple in the jealous greatness of his conceit (275).

Decoud is, in a sense, forced here to "reconstruct" his version of the "Nostromo" myth because of this encounter. But at the same time, this moment also forces him to reconstruct his own "space" as it

were, as it reveals a discovery flowing from the recognition of his consciousness of its own nature and position in the world (Roussel 113). This scene has echoes in Marlow's encounter with Kurtz, in which the "heart" of darkness is revealed to Marlow through Kurtz's words, "The horror! The horror!", while it also reminds one of Stein's moment of truth when he describes Jim as "romantic."

Complementary and contradictory, these many attempts to "write" Nostromo into one or another kind of space are all attempts to capture the pervasive influence of Nostromo in some form or another, which, along with the reader's construction of his or her own version, all constitute the "Nostromo myth."

#### IV

Where then does N fit into the larger picture regarding Conrad's presentation of space and atmosphere? Guerard's use of mountaineering terms such as "foothold," "vertiginous," and "summit" (215) provides one with a useful metaphor with which to gauge N's relative position in the corpus of Conrad's oeuvre under discussion. On reaching the summit of a mountain, it affords the mountaineer the opportunity to survey the route he has taken, and to take time to plot the possible route or routes that could be used in the descent. "Transcribed" into literary-critical terms, it is clear from the

preceding discussion that N is a pivotal novel in Conrad's oeuvre in a number of ways. First, there is no doubt that it should be included in Watts's "transtextual" narrative grouping, as it shares all the important characteristics of this group of narratives which this thesis has dealt with in detail, including the use of impressionistic descriptive techniques to evoke cosmic and symbolic spatial modes. Because this aspect has been dealt with in some detail in the earlier chapters of the thesis, this last chapter has only focused on the thematic issues in N. Without discussing it in any detail, the atmospheric qualities infused into the many atmospheric passage by impressionistic devices clearly prove this kinship with N's predecessors. One need only to examine one such passage to "hear," "see," and "feel" the echoes, evading shapes and illusiveness of NN, "HoD," and LJ in N:

Sulaco had found an inviolable sanctuary from the temptations of a trading world in the solemn hush of the deep Golfo Placido as if within an enormous semi-circular and unroofed temple open to the ocean, with its walls of lofty mountains hung with the mourning draperies of cloud.

On the one side of this broad curve in the straight seaboard of the Republic of Costaguana, the last spur of the coast range forms an insignificant cape whose name is Punta Mala. From the middle of the gulf the point of the land itself is not visible at all; but the shoulder of a steep hill at the back can be made out faintly like a shadow on the sky.

On the other side, what seems to be an isolated patch of blue mist floats lightly on the glare of the horizon. This is the peninsula of Azuera, a wild chaos of sharp rocks and stony levels cut about by vertical ravines. It lies far out to sea like a rough head of stone stretched from a green-clad coast at the end of a slender neck of sand covered with thickets of thorny scrub. Utterly waterless, for the rainfall runs off at once on all sides into the sea, it has not soil enough -- it is said -- to grow a single blade of grass, as if it were blighted by a curse...

On crossing the imaginary line drawn from Punta Mala to Azuera the ships from Europe bound to Sulaco lose at once the strong breezes of the ocean. They become the prey of capricious airs that play with them for thirty hours at a stretch sometimes. Before them the head of the calm gulf is filled on most days of the year by a great body of motionless and opaque clouds. On the rare clear mornings another shadow is cast upon the sweep of the gulf. The dawn breaks high behind the towering and serrated wall of the Cordillera, a clear-cut vision of dark peaks rearing their steep slopes on a lofty pedestal of forest rising from the very edge of the shore. Amongst them the white head of Higuerota rises majestically upon the blue. Bare clusters of enormous rocks sprinkle with tiny black dots the smooth dome of snow.

Then, as the midday sun withdraws from the gulf the shadow of the mountains, the clouds begin to roll out of the lower valleys. They swathe in sombre tatters the naked crags of precipices above the wooded slopes, hide the peaks, smoke in stormy trails across the snows of Higuerota. The Cordillera is gone from you as if it had vanished into thin air all along the front before the blazing heat of the day. The wasting edge of the cloud-bank always strives for, but seldom wins, the middle of the gulf. The sun -- as the sailors say -- is eating it up. Unless perchance a sombre thunder-head breaks away from the main body to career all over the gulf till it escapes into the offing beyond Azuera, where it bursts suddenly into flame and crashes like a sinister pirate-ship of the air, hove-to above the horizon, engaging the sea.

At night the body of clouds advancing higher up the sky smothers the whole quiet gulf below with an impenetrable darkness, in which the sound of the falling showers can be heard beginning and ceasing abruptly -- now here, now there. Indeed, these cloudy nights are proverbial with the seamen along the whole west coast of a great continent. Sky, land, and sea disappear together out of the world when the Placido -- as the saying is -- goes to sleep under its black poncho. The few stars left below the seaward frown of the vault shine feebly as into the mouth of a black cavern. In its vastness your ship floats unseen under your feet, her sails flutter invisible above your head. The eye of God Himself -- they add with grim profanity -- could not find out what work a man's hand is doing in there; and you would be free to call the devil to your aid with impunity even if his malice were not defeated by such a blind darkness (3-7).

A second shared characteristic is to be found on the level of theme and motif. N also employs the themes and motifs used in the larger transtextual narrative to develop its own particular thematic structure, as can be seen from its use of motifs such as the journey, entrapment, and (mis)reading.

What is perhaps more important is that N is a novel that shows a clear progression and development within this intratextual paradigm, a development that is not to be found so much on the level of description, but rather in the combined effect of narration and thematics. One of the points of the departure for this thesis has been that part of the problem arising from the critical response to Conrad's impressionism, can be attributed to the fact that the majority of critics who have written on this aspect, have tended to focus their attention mainly or only on the atmospheric qualities of his writing and the concomitant epistemological problems which these raised. Phrased in more theoretical terms, and particularly in the terms used by McHale referred to earlier, these critics all read Conrad's impressionism from the perspective of the "epistemological dominant" of Modernist fiction.

Seen in this light, and taking into consideration the development in N of the narrative strategies found in their rough and early stages in NN and "HoD," and developed more fully in LJ, the thematic focus on the construction of myths in N clearly develops this "postmodernist" element of Conrad's fiction, as it specifically foregrounds ontological questions such as "What world is this?" "What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they

differ?". These questions are all identified by McHale as "typical postmodernist questions [which] bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself, or on the ontology of the world which it projects" (10; my emphasis).

This reading of N -- and indeed of all the major texts written between 1896 and 1904 -- suggests that focusing only on one of these aspects, restricts one's interpretative options. If anything, this chapter has indicated that N -- and some of its predecessors -- also implicitly deals with these ontological questions, and as such refutes McHale's clear-cut designation of the epistemological dominant of modernist, and ontological dominant of postmodernist fiction. Only by taking a more holistic view and considering the interaction between the epistemological and ontological components of Conrad's fiction as a dynamic, a dynamic in constant flux, will one be able to understand and appreciate the intricate reciprocity of the descriptive, narrative and thematic elements which constitute his fictional space and atmosphere.

In exploring this interaction, the intertextual reading of N illuminates and emphasizes three other important aspects perhaps not always associated with Conrad's fiction: first, that, from NN up to and including N, and because of the impressionistic nature of these tales, there is an increasing need for reader participation in "writing" the texts, illustrating perhaps that these could even be considered to be "writerly" texts in the Barthesian sense of the word.



If this is indeed the case, then the second point that needs to be highlighted is that Erdinast-Vulcan's claim, namely that Conrad only became a "proto-deconstructionist" in his phase of "decline" (6), does not hold water. N clearly exhibits a strong and creative use of so-called "postmodernist" strategies. The underlying assumptions of critics like Guerard, Berthoud and Darras, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, can be located within a broad modernist framework. This "framework" -- in as far as it can be said to exist -- is characterized by a number of elements, one of which is the typical manoeuvre of "reading" for the "centre." This chapter has shown that N is not predominantly concerned with "reading maps" or "reading for the centre," but rather that it simulates reader's involvement in the process of "mythmaking," of "writing." Or, using the polarities of "centre" and "edge," N shows how successful Conrad has been in representing the postmodernist process of "decentring." Consider for a moment the central characters in the texts discussed thus far: there is a definite "movement" from a clearly defined "centre" to an unknown "edge": from James Wait, who is at the centre of the moral questions developed in NN, to the elusive Kurtz, ending up with the enigmatic Jim. N brings an additional element of freedom into this process, as it is, among all the other things implied by the text, a novel about "writing" the centre as the characters can clearly be seen as "writing" their "space," "transcribing" preferred myths into the "centre" in such a way which transforms them into new myths, thereby becoming supplements with which both character and reader "inscribe" his or her own myth into the space in which we live.

The third aspect highlighted by N is its entry into the "metafictional" category of postmodernist fiction. Linda Hutcheon, in her important book Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox (1981, 25) -- in which, incidentally, she does not mention Conrad -- describes fiction that explicitly foregrounds the basis of its own interpretation in the following way: "A text may self-consciously present its own creative processes...in order to make a specific demand upon the reading that entails a parodic interpretation of back-and fore-ground elements." While not all these characteristics are present in N, it is clear that N does present its own creative processes and makes significant demands on the reader to follow its analeptic and proleptic narrative. As such it definitely qualifies as "metafiction."

The same line of argument with regards to the postmodernist quality of the novel is evident in Edward Said's closing remarks in his commentary on Nostramo, in a passage worth noting in full:

[Nostramo is a] fiction by an author for whom writing is a form of exposure or investigation...Conrad's exceptional status thus lies in having produced a novel (and novels) implicitly critical of the beginning premises of all earlier novels. Instead of mimetically authoring a new world, Nostramo turns back to its beginning as a novel, to the fictional, illusory assumption of reality; in thus overturning the confident edifice that novels normally construct, Nostramo reveals itself to be no more than a record of novelistic self-reflection. What had once been the novel's creative abundance becomes here regressive production: the metaphors, the method, and the attitudes have changed radically, as the beginning premise has become more problematic and more intrinsically a function of the novel's textual ontology (Beginnings 137).

Given this background, and seen within the larger context of the problematic interpretations of Conrad's impressionism, this

chapter with its focus on the "transcription" and "inscription" of a mythical space in N, read alongside the preceding chapters, provides sufficient proof to suggest that the way out of the impasse around Conrad's impressionism described in the introductory chapter of the thesis, is to shift attention away from the epistemological ingredient thereof to the interaction which exists between the epistemological and ontological components of Conrad's fiction. In doing this, one not only contributes to the rereading programme of Conrad's works suggested by Benson ("Physics" 146), but also gains entry into the theoretical debate regarding the limits and definitions of the rubrics "modernist" and "post-modernist," a debate<sup>6</sup> that looks set to dominate critical discourse for a number of years still, and a debate that will ensure that Conrad maintains his position as a seminal novelist in the English language.

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<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that the "postmodern" qualities are not restricted to Conrad's fiction, but that these are also evident in his critical comments. Teets ("Ruminations" 10) makes a very significant observation regarding the resemblances between Conrad's critical theories and practices, and those of the post-structuralists when he states that "Conrad not only preceded the current critics [i.e. those writing in the mid-nineteen eighties] in time but also, by means of his knowledge of and experiments in both critical theory and writing fiction, provided methods and materials which have been useful to modern critics."

## Conclusion

This thesis set out to discuss Conrad's representation of space<sup>1</sup> and atmosphere in the "impressionistic" works published between 1897 and 1904, notably The Nigger of the "Narcissus" (1897), "Heart of Darkness" (1899), Lord Jim (1900), and Nostramo (1904).

Prompted by the diverse and sometimes conflicting critical statements about the nature and elusive quality of his impressionism, and the lack of any systematic attempt at investigating the so-called "atmospheric" qualities of these texts, it has attempted to answer two fundamental questions: What exactly constitutes this strange and elusive phenomenon collectively known as "Conrad's atmosphere," and how does it bear upon interpretation?

To find satisfactory answers to these questions, three aims were stipulated: first, to work towards defining the elusive quality of Conrad's work by investigating and assessing the contribution of impressionist techniques in the creation of a pervasive space and atmosphere in each of the works under discussion; secondly, to investigate how the various constituent elements interact with, and complement one another to form a dominant mode of fictional space in

<sup>1</sup> When this study was in its final stages, I became aware of a work entitled Space, Conrad, Modernity by Con Coroneos. All attempts to trace this work in electronic databases on books in print failed, and one can only assume that this work is due to appear shortly. It will be interesting to compare the views expressed in it with the those developed in this thesis. What it does seem to indicate, however, is that Conrad's representation of space is at last beginning to attract the attention it deserves.

each work; and, thirdly, to indicate the possible impact that these particular Conradian notions of space and atmosphere might have upon the interpretation of these, as well as other impressionist works.

In the works dealt with in this thesis, Conrad's central characters all find themselves isolated and exiled in strange and hostile spaces: in NN, Wait is isolated by his race and exiled to the narrow and claustrophobic confines of his cabin, mirroring the crew's isolation by the cosmic forces and subsequent confinement on the ship during the tempest. A similar pattern can be observed in "HoD," as Kurtz is enclosed by the African jungle, trapped in the void resulting from the interface between "civilization" and "barbarism" and the paradoxical inversion of these forces, while the ambiguous hermeneutic encounters between Marlow and Kurtz, and the Africans lead to a general sense of isolation. Jim's sense of deep isolation is exacerbated by the contrasting sets of values represented in his violation of the sailor's code of ethics. Jim is trapped morally and emotionally by his betrayal of the "space" or value system of the brotherhood of the sea, and enclosed physically on Patusan. Decoud isolates himself because of his skepticism -- he has "no faith in anything except the truth of his own sensations" (229); Nostromo is isolated by his vanity and greed; and Gould is alienated from reality by his belief in the mythical heritage of the mine which he inscribes into the "centre" of Costaguana.

Given this set of facts, the basic points of departure were formulated as follows: the existential condition of isolation experienced by Conrad's heroes and narrators results from the

epistemological frustration and fragmentation, which, in turn, is a function of impressionist ontology. There is a definite relationship between each of these notions and they constantly complement one another in Conrad's fiction. The mysterious atmosphere in his works results from the interplay between various configurations of the triad of theme, narration and description, and these novelistic elements correspond roughly with the notions of existential isolation (the dominant theme), epistemology (narrating, telling and (re)telling as a method of knowing and understanding the space in which the characters find themselves) and, lastly, the ontological dimensions of the various kinds of fictional space (as realized in description).

Based on these assumptions, certain answers to the central questions can perhaps now be formulated. On the surface level, Conrad's texts employ the full ensemble of impressionistic devices such as episodic scenes, sensory image clusters, shifting narrative stance, and the irony of illusionary perception. All these devices are obviously not present in all the works discussed, or employed to the same extent in each text. By considering the works in chronological order, certain patterns have become evident. The general progression and development of Conrad's representation of space and atmosphere can perhaps best be illustrated by considering it as a movement on a continuum, with NN at the one end, and N on the other.

The readings of Conrad's evocation of cosmic space in NN, the mapping of a dominant symbolic space in "HoD," the various reconstructions of Jim's psychological space; and, finally, the

"transcription" and "inscription" of a mythical space in N, clearly indicate that the majority of critics cited in the introductory chapter who have commented on the epistemological qualities of Conrad's fiction, with the notable exceptions of Donald Benson and Paul Armstrong, have perhaps overemphasized the epistemological side of the equation, and have either paid too little attention, or completely disregarded the ontological element. This is borne out by the development which takes place from NN up to N. Initially, there is a strong reliance on descriptions and sensory perception, with, as its main feature, the oscillation of the observer's field of vision between claustrophobic spaces on the one hand, and the vast cosmic expanse on the other. In each of the subsequent texts the general movement is from "reading" and "understanding" space, to the "writing" and "construction" thereof. For example, in NN this movement underlines the dialectic between invoking and evoking cosmic space, as the vast atmospheric emptiness surrounding the ship, so spectacular in its variability, seems to be some kind of objective correlative for the mental space experienced by humanity as a condition of its being. The emptiness is unresponsive to human volition, yet hugely influential in determining the course of events and registering the cosmic, and perhaps even metaphysical, dimensions of the story. Part of the reason for Conrad's evoking cosmic space is precisely to invoke this particular notion of human ontology and destiny. As such NN already shows how description shades into narrative and theme.

This "pattern" of movement between epistemological concerns on the one hand, and ontological concerns on the other, becomes more

evident in "HoD," where the ways in which the characters "read" the "maps" emphasize humankind's interpretative need to understand the world which confronts it, graphically enacting and simulating the process following from this need as it propels both character and reader from first and random impressions into a next phase, that of consciously trying to make sense of these impressions by applying the interpretative frame known to the characters. "HoD" ultimately implies that there are many ways of reading, and that the reader will constantly be in search of the "truth" behind the "misleading illusion." Seen in this light, Conrad's impressionistic treatment of both the fictional world and the processes of interpreting this world in "HoD" points towards a significant development of the theme of "reading" which Conrad explored more fully in LJ, and that of "writing," which underpins much of the narrative of N.

In LJ Conrad presents his real readers with the efforts of a number of other "readers" who try to "read" Jim. It is important to note that, while these readers share the problem which Marlow first encountered in "HoD," namely of trying to "read" a particular space with an inappropriate interpretative matrix, that there is also an important difference between Marlow's various "misreadings" in "HoD," and the various readings of Jim: Marlow gets to readjust his interpretative mode in "HoD," whereas the various readers in LJ never get to readjust their focus; the decoding of the fractured and anachronous readings is not merely delayed until a later stage in the novel, but is delayed permanently, leaving the reader with a blurred picture of Jim as the interpretative categories of each reader fail to



present a unified picture. Instead of creating a coherent picture of Jim's psychological space and providing the reader with clarity about the reasons for his conduct, Jim "disintegrates" as a character and becomes the impenetrable and impalpable atmosphere which permeates the whole novel.

N takes up where LJ has left off, and shows the most significant development in the epistemological - ontological dialectic. N has been shown not to be predominantly concerned with "reading maps" or "reading for the centre," but rather with the process of "mythmaking," of "writing." Or, using the polarities of "centre" and "edge," N shows how successful Conrad has been in representing the postmodernist process of "decentring." This is especially evident if one considers the main characters: there is a definite "movement" from a clearly defined "centre" to an unknown "edge": from James Wait, who is at the centre of the moral questions developed in NN, to the elusive Kurtz, ending up with the enigmatic Jim. N brings an additional element of freedom into this process, that of "writing" the centre as the characters can clearly be seen as "writing" their "space," "transcribing" preferred myths into the "centre" in a way which transforms them into new myths, thereby becoming supplements with which both character and reader "inscribe" his or her own myth into the space in which they exist.

Phrased in more theoretical terms, this development is a movement from asking predominantly epistemological questions like "How can I interpret this world of which I am a part?", "What is there to be known?", "Who knows it...and with what degree of certainty?", to

asking predominantly ontological questions, such as "Which world is this?", "What kinds of worlds are there...and how are they constituted?". Conrad's texts have shown that these questions, categorized by McHale as the dominant characteristics of Modernist and Postmodernist fiction respectively, are already present in them, and thus refutes any clear-cut division between these broad categories. Indeed, what this thesis has shown is that these categories are tenuous and highly problematic, and that they should perhaps be used heuristically, rather than definitively. This finding is confirmed by Conrad's repeated use of narrative techniques classified by David Lodge (220-245) as typical postmodernist techniques, like circularity, short circuit, excess, discontinuity and randomness.

The blurring of distinctions between the categories of modern and postmodern also results from the way in which the reader becomes increasingly involved in the reading process. The dominant "atmosphere" of the works is an aspect of the experiential interface between reader and text through which the narrating consciousness mediates his impressions. Conrad uses the beginnings of the works to "set up" the atmosphere as the "filter" through which the reader must perforce enter into the fictional world. There is no immediate apprehension of space; the reader is confronted with visual and oral impressions of the various kinds of space as these appear in the novels. The atmosphere presented at the beginning of these works drenches character and action, thereby complicating both the act of narration for the narrative consciousness and the interpretation thereof for the reader. It is almost as if the atmosphere presented

to the reader seduces him or her into joining the kind of interpretative struggle in which the characters of the fictional world are engaged. The result of this interactive process is that the reader never really gets through the atmosphere and impressions to an objective, verifiable and non-problematic understanding of space. This process becomes increasingly involved and complex as the reader in effect becomes the "co-writer" of the texts. Just as the characters are left bewildered and frustrated by their inability to "read" the space which surrounds them, so the difficulties which the reader has to face also leave the reader dissatisfied and confused.

If one were to use the idea of the continuum used earlier, the pattern of reader involvement is one which "opens" up, as it were, as if the reader passed through various states which lead the reader away from the "centre," becoming increasingly more demanding as the reader is required to -- in Hillis Miller's words -- "...[circle] from one word or image to another within the text...[as it is only] in this movement of interpretation ...[that]...meaning exist[s]." It has been indicated that only through a thorough understanding of the "technique" of merging description, narration and theme, can the elusive term "atmosphere" be understood. What has been perceived as Conrad's conscious obstruction of the reader's interpretation by delaying information, giving multiple and relative views of an event or character, and by mediating his tales through unreliable narrators, can -- as the thesis has shown -- be overcome by a thorough knowledge of the way in which Conrad deals with space and atmosphere. Armed with such knowledge, the reader is enabled to cope with these delaying

and obfuscating tactics, as he or she is now able to "read" the placement of strong atmospheric evocations at central points in the narrative, and to register the repeated use of certain techniques such as the piling up of adjectives, episodic scenes, and a strong reliance on sensory images, not as obstacles to the reading process, but as central "signposts" and "markers" in the process of interpreting impressionistic works of literature.

Conrad's impressionism, and more specifically his treatment of space and atmosphere with its empirical isolation, contains within it the seeds of existential alienation, and the resultant despair and anguish, while the interpretative obscurity of his impressionism foreshadows much of the absurdity of postmodernism. If anything, this thesis intimates that -- almost a century after these major works were written -- Conrad might even be ready to enter a "second" career, that of a "postmodernist" writer.

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