# Subjective Experiences:

# Representing the Modern Perspective in Joseph Conrad and Jean Rhys

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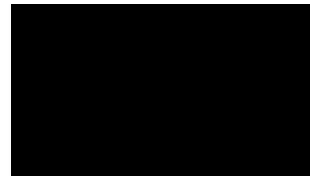
The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this, or at any other institution.



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# Abstract

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This thesis explores how philosophical developments in theories of epistemology at the turn of the twentieth century are reflected in modern literature. Through the close reading of three seminal works of literary Modernism it will illustrate how narrative form in the modern novel adapted to changing philosophical understandings of perception and knowledge; a movement that can be broadly conceptualised as a shift from a belief in objective, empirical, universal understandings of truth to an awareness of the subjectivity of perspective.

Chapter one will explore the foundations of literary Modernism in relation to theories of literary Impressionism. By discussing the theoretical similarities between the two I will highlight the challenges that modern writers and artists faced as the forms of mimetic verisimilitude that characterised nineteenth-century art became insufficient in the twentieth century. These challenges culminated in what is identified as a new realism: a form of representation that considers the inescapability of individual perspective.

Chapter two will show how these developing understandings of representation and knowledge began to filter into works of literature. Through an analysis of Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella, *Heart of Darkness,* I will argue that this new realism spoke to an inherent anxiety in Conrad about knowledge and truth: a conflict he expresses between a desire for universal truth combined with an awareness of the inescapability of individual perspective. As will be shown, the consequence of this anxiety was a shift away from traditional forms of narration.

Chapter three will develop these ideas to show, through a close reading of Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), how developments in narrative acted to change colonial perceptions of race and challenged imperial notions of authority. By identifying Rhys's use of modern narrative form and technique I explore the complications and opportunities that result from her decision to employ a Creole narrative voice to represent modern England.

Chapter four will consider how Rhys's 1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* extends her narrative experimentation in an attempt to escape the limitations of race that are imposed by the colonial world it is set in. I will show how Rhys, by rejecting both colonial authority and objective understandings of experience, links the technical developments of Modernism with those of Postcolonialism.

In conclusion, the thesis situates Modernism as a precedent to developments in postcolonial literature through its development of the technical means that allowed authors to deviate from the strict confines of nineteenth century realism and the associated normative standards of Imperialism.

# Introduction

## A Matter of Perspective: Modernity and the Modern Novel

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In the introduction to *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture,* Kevin J. H. Dettmar observes that "modernism was never really just one thing, never really unified."[1] However, modernism comprises a recognized set of aesthetic revolutions, transformations and changing philosophical views, so whilst the temporal parameters of modernism remain contested, its key figures debated, and even the definition of modernism itself inherently up for debate, one thing remains common to most critical appraisals: modernism moves in the direction of change. Substantiating this view, Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane describe modernism as one of "those overwhelming dislocations, those cataclysmic upheavals of culture, those fundamental convulsions of the creative human spirit that seem to topple even the most solid and substantial of our beliefs and assumptions, leave great areas of the past in ruins (noble ruins, we tell ourselves for reassurance), question an entire civilization or culture and stimulate frenzied rebuilding."[2]

This process of rebuilding is not only an inherent component of Modernism, but also a critical component of this thesis. In the European and British contexts, modernism can be understood as an aesthetic reaction to the philosophical conditions of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century modernity. As Jesse Matz asserts: "Modernity meant *change* – a perpetual departure from all tradition, formal inspiration, a fascination with the new, a hunger for the future rather than the past."[3] "Make it new," as Ezra Pound claimed in a catchcry that would come to define a generation of artists who sought to escape the confines of traditional means of representation.[4] Of course, these means of representation had served a purpose until this point, but they were invalidated by changing epistemologies that saw understandings of truth shift away from the positivism of the nineteenth century and into considerations of the subjective nature of perception and knowledge. These conditions were described by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who argued in *Will to Power,* "[a]gainst positivism which goes no further than the phenomenon and says 'there are only facts', I would say: no, facts are precisely what there is not, only

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[1] Detmar, "Introduction," 4.
[2] Bradbury and McFarlane, *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature: 1890-1930,* 19.
[3] Matz, "The Novel," 218.
[4] Pound, *Make it New.*

interpretation. We can establish no fact 'in itself'; perhaps it is nonsense to desire such a thing."[5] Nietzsche's claim gestures towards a philosophical climate that was beginning to challenge the positivistic foundations of knowledge that underpinned nineteenth-century positivist philosophy. What resulted was an overwhelming awareness of the subjective nature of perspective and experience; a realisation that, contrary to orthodox understandings of knowledge, our experiences of reality are influenced by subjective perception. As Nietzsche goes on to write in *Will to Power*:

> In so far as the word 'knowledge' has any meaning at all, the world is knowable. It may however be interpreted differently; it has no meaning hidden behind it, but rather innumerable different meanings which can be assigned to it. Hence 'perspectivism'. It is our needs *which interpret the world:* our impulses with their sympathies and antipathies. Every impulse is an ambition of sorts, each has its own perspective which it would like to impose upon all of the other impulses at their standard.[6]

The novel, as a barometer of social and philosophical conditions, is an appropriate subject by which these evolving themes can be considered and analysed, this is most directly confronted by questions of representation. For the modern novelist, the challenge was to find a way of representing this subjective perception of reality through means more effective than the verisimilitude that characterised nineteenth-century realism. Experience understood in such a way quickly became what Jesse Matz, in *The Modern Novel: A Short Introduction*, terms a "matter of specific individual perspective and circumstance, something a novelist would need to inquire into rather than presume […] all modern novelists, would now make reality itself no longer a given background to fiction but the object of its speculations."[7] This changing understanding of the nature of reality and how we come to know it and evaluate it, which is so central to Modernism, is critical to the following discussion. As Palko writes:

> In the literary arena, modernism prevailed aesthetically as experimentations with language and narrative structure reshaped literary representations of a new shattered reality; through breaking formalist imperatives, modernist writers signalled the aesthetic, social, and cultural break with the past.[8]

What followed can be broadly conceptualised by a changing understanding of what it meant to represent something realistically; a process of "[q]uestioning reality," that as Matz explains, "transformed realism into the modern novel, producing a *new* realism based strangely on doubt about reality itself."[9] The literary consequence of this shift

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[5] Nietzsche, *Will to Power,* 287.
[6] Nietzsche, *Will to Power,* 287.
[7] Matz, *The Modern Novel: A Short Introduction,* 6.
[8] Palko, "Colonial Modernism's Thwarted Maternity: Elizabeth Bowen's *The House in Paris* and Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark,"* 90.
[9] Matz, *The Modern Novel: A Short Introduction,* 33.

was a change in narrative point of view into a form that could more effectively represent the differences in individual perceptions of reality. As Matz notes, the subjectivity inherent in first-person narration "enables the modern writer to test different versions of reality – and to show how reality gets made up in particular cases."[10] Nietzsche's philosophy of perspectivism was one influence that precipitated this change. What is most evident in its manifestation in the modern novel is, Matz writes, an assertion "that 'realism' was arbitrary – not some sure, timeless, perfect way to describe life in action, but odd techniques dependent on the priorities and preferences of the moment."[11] By destabilising traditional understandings of truth, reality becomes shifting, not stable: "It is not something out there, for sure," as Matz goes on to say, but something "that the novelist must describe. It is a process of engagement, a set of subjective acts, a psychological performance, something always ongoing. And once it had shifted from thing to process, the novelist had a lot more to do, and a lot more to say."[12] Very quickly, with this modern understanding of experience, mimetic realism proved an inadequate means of representation in works of literary fiction. It was no longer effective in the context of an epistemology within which

> Truth became 'subjective': relative perspectives ruled out objective styles of seeing and speaking, debunking the faith that knowledge or judgement could be free from bias, motive or error. This shift from the objective to the subjective took place most prominently in the rejection of third-person omniscient narration. Traditional narration conducted in either objective impersonality as if from a comfortable and authoritative remove from the objects of narration had come to seem unrealistic, or at least ineffective in conveying the reality of limited human experience and knowledge. By contrast, the subjective narrator – speaking or overheard in the act of living, directly involved with the people, objects, and concerns of his or her narrative world, or aligned with some particular character's point of view – became the only way to achieve narrative verisimilitude.[13]

Of course, the subjectivity of experience is not a new concept, but what Modernism offered was a new way for art to express this. This transition had its own complications – something that Marlow, the primary protagonist of Joseph Conrad's seminal work, *Heart of Darkness*, observes:

> I've been telling you what we said—repeating the phrases that we pronounced,—but what's the good? They were common everyday words,—the familiar, vague sounds exchanged on every waking day of life.

[10] Matz, *The Modern Novel: A Short Introduction,* 36.
[11] Matz, *The Modern Novel: A Short Introduction,* 32.
[12] Matz, *The Modern Novel: A Short Introduction,* 36.
[13] Matz, "The Novel," 219.

> But what of that? They had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares.[14]

What Marlow expresses in this short passage is an evident doubt about the representative power of language, a view that reflects the modern philosophical climate from within which Joseph Conrad was writing. Discussing similar ideas, Kenneth Graham writes that the scepticism that Conrad conveys through this character – a lightly fictionalized, semi-autobiographical figure who reappears across many of Conrad's works – "looks back to Nietzsche […] whose assertion of the relativity of all values and privileging of the darker urges of human nature dates from the 1880s."[15] Similarly, Edward Said links Conrad and Nietzsche through what he terms their "radical attitude toward language."[16] Marlow's concerns gesture to the broader question regarding the capacity of language to adequately convey the human experience of reality, an issue that has engaged philosophers since antiquity. As Socrates observes in Plato's *Phaedrus*:

> The painter's products stand before us as though they were alive: but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words: they seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever.[17]

This mistrust in the representative power of language drastically altered the purpose of narrative within the modern novel. Said goes on to observe that the mimetic aims of verisimilitude that had characterised narrative in the nineteenth century now faced the drastic reality, a very modern reality, that "[n]arrative does not explain, it introduces plural meanings where none had been before—at the heart of darkness."[18] This concern persisted into the twentieth century, with Bergson, in *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* noting that:

> In short, the word with well-defined outlines, the rough and ready word, which stores up the stable, common, and consequently impersonal element in the impressions of mankind, overwhelms or at least covers over the delicate and fugitive impressions of our individual consciousness. To maintain the struggle on equal terms, the latter ought to express themselves in precise words; but these words, as soon as they

[14] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* 174.
[15] Graham, "Conrad and Modernism," 206.
[16] Said, "Conrad and Nietzsche," 72.
[17] Plato, *Phaedrus,* 158.
[18] Said, "Conrad and Nietzsche," 75.

were formed, would turn against the sensation which gave birth to them, and, invented to show that the sensation is unstable, they would impose on it their own stability.[19]

The dynamic nature of human experience and the inherently inflexible nature of the written word are conditions that necessitated the technical advancements that would come to define the period of Modernism. This is an awareness identified again by Matz when he writes that "[i]n modern fiction, there are few objective realities: little is permanently, universally the same for everyone who perceives it."[20] Hence the modern novel became a platform for experimentation, a dynamic realm that authors used to resolve the growing discrepancy between the subjective nature of modern understandings of experience and traditional forms of representation that sought an empirical account of experience that could be permanently enshrined in a work of literature.

What differentiated the modern novel was the ways in which it approached ideas of what characterises truth. It is the aim of this thesis to track the formal changes in narration across the turn of the twentieth century that facilitate this philosophical change of perspective, a shift, from traditional ideas of realism, to a new realism: from the universal, to the subjective. Continuing on from this introduction, the first chapter of this thesis will discuss the development of literary modernism from its origins in Impressionism. By illustrating the shared philosophy of the two movements in art, this chapter will work towards developing an epistemology of modernism that will identify the relevant aspects of what can be a multifarious concept. A primary focus of this chapter will be the theoretical 'gap' that developed between individual experiences of reality and the artistic representation of such experience. Exploring the relevance of this gap, the first chapter will establish the theoretical foundations from which the subsequent close readings will draw from.

Chapter two offers a close reading of Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella, *Heart of Darkness*, to explore how these philosophical changes manifested in works of literature. I argue that Conrad used focalization as a primary narrative technique to embrace the specificity? of perspective? whilst still maintaining a fidelity to truth that preoccupied Conrad's approach to art. This chapter will also begin to explore how these literary changes impacted view about? European imperialism. By unsettling the normative standards of representation in literature, I will posit that Conrad concomitantly challenged imperial ideologies concerning race.

Chapter three begins with a close reading of Jean Rhys's 1934 novel *Voyage in the Dark*. Developing on the questions of imperialism that *Heart of Darkness* begins to explore, Rhys's work directly confronts the immorality of

[19] Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, 132.
[20] Matz, *The Modern Novel: A Short Introduction*, 35.

imperialism by questioning its legitimacy. The fractured narrative voice of *Voyage in the Dark,* as well as Rhys's choice to employ a maginalised Creole perspective to describe and assess the heart of Empire (England), directly presents a contrast between the colonial and subaltern experience. Considering the postcolonial position of Rhys's novel, this chapter will address the complications she faced caught between the colonised and colonising space.

Chapter four focuses on Rhys's 1966 novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea.* By analysing a text published decades after *Voyage in the Dark* this chapter will apply a postcolonial lens to explore how developments in modernism manifest within narrative. The chapter will explain the significance of Rhys's intertextual engagement with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* to contrast narrative form across the century that separates them.

Conrad and Rhys are two modern writers with similar concerns and challenges regarding whether or not the modern writer can "discover adequate (persuasive, meaningful) modes of expression through which to address modern problems without succumbing to the very issues that are being explored". As Gasiorek notes, "[i]n many of the most celebrated modernist texts we find not aesthetic mastery but anxiety about loss of meaning, lack of control, and artistic failure."[21] This thesis will argue that such anxiety exhibits itself as a conscious, formal choice that modernists relied upon as a means of finding new ways to represent the multiplicity and complexity of modern experience. Such an anxiety can be understood, quite simply, as a reflection of the fractured condition of the modern world. While "'modernity' had been around for a long time; what was new was the way we now 'find ourselves' within it, how 'being modern' means keen and all-consuming awareness that life is change, that anything is possible, that destruction might be imminent, and that something new must be created through which to make sense of it all."[22] Such a philosophical climate (one that Erdinast-Vulcan describes as being characterised by "a sense of acute epistemological uncertainty"[23]) was merely the catalyst for the technical innovations of the modern novel:

> It means facing the problems and possibilities of modernity – the technological wonders, the social disorder, the psychological mysteries, the pattern of change – and making them fiction's main challenge and inspiration. It means facing modernity in new experimental forms of writing, and it tends to mean doing so with faith that aesthetic forms of writing, and it tends to mean doing so with faith that aesthetic forms can make a difference to the way people see, think, and live. It probably means something now paradoxically old – something that began almost two hundred years ago (when modernity first seemed to have become a total problem), peaked in 1922 with *Ulysses* and other modernist triumphs, and ended once

[21] Gasiorek, "(The Knocking) Has Never Stopped: Jean Rhys's (Post)colonial Modernism," 165.
[22] Matz, *The Modern Novel: A Short Introduction,* 8.
[23] Erdinast-Vulcan, *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper*, 12.

aesthetic idealism proved no match for post-war modern life. But it may mean something still: as we will see, novels might yet be modern, or the forms of the old modern novel might yet be vital to culture today.[24]

[24] Matz, *The Modern Novel: A Short Introduction,* 13.

# Chapter I

## Literary Impressionism and the Role of Perception

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'The proper stuff of fiction' does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss.[25]

– Virginia Woolf, 1919

"The truth is that above the sentence there is something much more simple than a sentence or even a word: the meaning, which is less a thing thought than a movement of thought, less a movement than a direction."[26]

– Henri Bergson, 1934

In 1874, a group of artists who were frustrated by their continual exclusion from the Académie des Beaux-Arts' annual *Salon,* held their own exhibition in defiance of the traditional standards of what was considered good European art. This group of artistic nonconformists included Edgar Degas, Paul Cézanne, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Claude Monet, who brought to this exhibition a work that would come to define the movement of art that would soon be known as Impressionism. *Impression, soleil levant (1874),* Monet's painting of a sunrise over the port of his home town of Le Havre was so different to the artistic norms of the time that it prompted the prominent critic Louis Leroy to comment that "[w]allpaper in its embryonic state is more finished than that seascape."[27] Leroy's critique of Monet's work centred around the idea that it was an *impression* rather than a fully formed *representation* of what a sunrise over the port at Le Havre should look like. But that was precisely the point; it was the individual, subjective perception of what Monet saw. In representing his impression, Monet departed from normative standards of representation as a way of moving away from the confines of verisimilitude. He was, as Alain De Botton observes,

[25] Woolf, "Modern Fiction," 164.
[26] Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 121.
[27] Dempsey, *Styles, Schools and Movements: The Essential Encyclopaedic Guide to Modern Art*, 14.

> willing to sacrifice a naïve realism in order to achieve a realism of a deeper sort, behaving like a poet who, though less factual than a journalist in describing an event, may nevertheless reveal truths about it that find no place in the other's literal grid.[28]

Impressionism in painting prompted a shift in literature towards Jesse Matz's notion of a new realism, a means of representation that began to express the subjectivity of perspective. Drawing on the philosophy of Nietzsche and the essays of Virginia Woolf, this chapter seeks to establish a conceptual foundation on which the close textual readings that follow will be based. This chapter will go on to posit that it was a philosophical impasse between understandings of experience and the ability of language to represent them that facilitate modernism as an aesthetic and philosophical shift.

## An Impressionist Foundation

In 1880, shortly after the scandal caused by the Impressionists, Vincent Van Gough, after painting for eight years in Paris, moved to Arles in Southern France. He left his mentors, the likes of Paul Gauguin and Henri de Toulouse Letrec, in search of solitude and a different perspective, but also "because he had wanted, through his work, to help other people to 'see' it."[29] This attempt to achieve an experiential response to his representation is central to the movement of Impressionism. And Van Gogh, "never wavered in his faith that the project was theoretically possible – that is, that artists could paint a portion of the world and in consequence open the eyes of others to it."[30] The capacity of the artist to represent an individual interpretation of the world and effectively share it with others, is an idea paramount to this thesis. Modernism began to illustrate that realism was more than an objective representation; it had to consider the subjectivity of perspective that was inherent to modern understandings of experience. Hence de Botton's consideration that:

> We are apt to call any painting realistic that completely conveys key elements of the world. But the world is complex enough for two realistic pictures of the same place to look very different depending on an artist's style and temperament. Two realistic artists may sit at the edge of the same olive grove and produce divergent sketches. Every realistic picture represents a choice of which features of reality are given prominence.[31]

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[28] De Botton, *The Art of Travel,* 208.
[29] De Botton, *The Art of Travel,* 189.
[30] De Botton, *The Art of Travel,* 189.
[31] De Botton, *The Art of Travel,* 192.

Of course, Monet and Van Gough were painters, not writers, but the philosophy behind Impressionism in the visual and literary arts is the same. As John Peters observes, "any similarities between impressionist art and literature result from similarities in philosophy – not technique."[32]

The philosophical underpinnings of visual and literary and Impressionism extend to Modernism. Max Saunders, in a study on the role of Impressionism within the work of Ford Madox Ford, goes as far as stating that "Impressionism was not just the fundamental antecedent to Modernism, but the ground on which Modernism is constructed."[33] This is a sentiment reinforced by Peters who notes that Impressionism's contribution to modernism was that it "sought to represent the interaction between human consciousness and the objects of that consciousness."[34] Impressionism, in other words, is the realisation that "reality itself is infinite and can never be wholly represented in art."[35] Rather than accepting the finality of such a conclusive idea, the Impressionists made use of the freedom that is facilitated by it: the Impressionist goal was "rendering life as it really seemed to individual subjective experience."[36]

But this liberation was met with an equally inhibiting sense of multiplicity. How was an artist to convey the significance of their individual interpretation when it is acknowledged as just one option amongst an infinite number of alternatives? Matz goes on to offer a solution to this impasse when he notes that "[a] proper definition of literary Impressionism needs to recognize the fact that good ambiguity has followed bad – to see Impressionism as this positive power to undefine."[37]

Ford Madox Ford, was a key figure in the development of literary Impressionism. He explores these ideas in his 1913 essay, "On Impressionism" when he states "that any piece of Impressionism, whether it be prose, or verse, or painting, or sculpture, is the record of the impression of a moment; it is not a sort of rounded, annotated record of a set of circumstances […] it is the impression, not the corrected chronicle."[38] Ford is not alone in his assessment, the early modernists keenly pursued similar ideas: Joseph Conrad stated that he "wanted to give a true impression, to present an undefaced image,"[39] while Virginia Woolf claimed that authors should "trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness."[40] But what

[32] Peters, *Conrad and Impressionism,* 14.
[33] Saunders, "Modernism, Impressionism, and Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier,"* 429.
[34] Peters, *Conrad and Impressionism,* 16.
[35] De Botton, *The Art of Travel,* 204.
[36] Matz, *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics,* 14.
[37] Matz, *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics,* 17.
[38] Ford, "On Impressionism," 41.
[39] Conrad, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad: Vol. 1,* 420.
[40] Woolf, "Modern Fiction," 161.

is a ‘true impression’? And how does one trace a pattern that is ‘incoherent in appearance’? Such questions will be explored below, but for now it is sufficient to note that it is the power of Impressionism to undefine that questioned standards of representation in art.

All this is not to say that literary Impressionism did not seek to represent experience realistically. Nor is it a postmodern rejection of reality in favour of simulacra. It is simply a shift in the foundations of what was understood to constitute a fidelity to real experience, to ‘reality’: it was, in short, a movement away from a faith in universality or one dominant perspective. Reality didn’t change, nor did individual perceptions of it, what differs in Modern art is an awareness that different individuals experience reality differently and that artists, if they were to accurately convey their interpretations of the world, would have to honour this. As Peters explains:

> Impressionism did not disagree with the realist attempt to portray the world realistically; it simply disagreed with realism’s fundamental assumptions about human experience. Whereas realism’s primary emphasis was to represent an object such that everyone experiences the same object, impressionism emphasized that all interaction between consciousness and its object is, by definition, dependent upon the existence of both subject and object.[41]

## The Conceptual Gap

Predictably, disagreeing with ‘fundamental assumptions about human experience’ led to its own complications. In the fortieth anniversary edition of *The Nature of Narrative,* Scholes, Phelan and Kellogg identify that in the mimetic verisimilitude of nineteenth century realism, these gaps were filled by the third-person narrator who would convey a series of events from a seemingly objective, omniscient position. [42] But in the new realism that characterised modern fiction, with its awareness of limited, subjective perception, this approach is no longer viable. It becomes much more difficult to represent experience in this way when, as Scholes, et al. aptly observe, there is a well established gap “between limited understanding which is real, and an ideal of absolute truth which is itself suspect.”[43]

What literary impressionism in fiction facilitated, and what tends to be privileged by the use of subjective perspective in modern narrative, is a distinct combination of the limited perspective of a subject that still pursues realistic descriptions of an objective reality, a position that acknowledges Bender’s assertion that “it is apparently

[41] Peters, *Conrad and Impressionism,* 21.
[42] Scholes, Phelan, and Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, 277.
[43] Scholes, Phelan, and Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative,* 277.

impossible to capture reality in a stream of words, which is a statement *about* experience, not the real thing."[44] By offering an account of both, literary Impressionism moves closer towards conveying the subjective nature of experience whilst still maintaining a fidelity to objective reality. As Peters notes,

> impressionist representation lies neither solely with the subject nor solely with the object but rather in the space between the two [..] Impressionism mediates these extremes and posits the necessary existence of both subject and object – but not from a dualist position; rather, the two merge such that their outlines blur.[45]

This led to a new consideration of point of view in the modern novel as ideas of omniscience gave way to a Nietzschean perspectivism:

> The point of view in a given novel controls the reader's impression of everything else. We do not perceive a novel with our eyes. The eye sees only the printer's inked shapes on the page. Yet a story impinges on our consciousness as a totality, with sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and feelings somehow smuggled into us through those inked shapes, and released into our perception without having passed through our sensory organs in the normal way. The ordering of this perspective data in our consciousness is not controlled by organs or by our will. We do not, in reading, create a story within ourselves. The story takes the shape its author has given it, a shape governed primarily by the point of view through which the characters and events are filtered. Because narrative point of view is so intimately and dynamically bound up with the reader's perception, it cannot be dealt with as a merely [a]esthetic matter. Just as psychological knowledge impinges on the novelist's choices and the reader's expectations with regard to characterization, epistemological knowledge and notions about how we perceive and what we perceive inevitably impinge, for the writer and reader, on the question of point of view.[46]

This relationship between point of view and its influence on narrative form is explored in Virginia Woolf's 1924 essay, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown." Woolf constructs an opposition between nineteenth-century realism and the modern novel: "You see one thing in a character, and I another." Woolf states, "You say it means this, and I that. And when it comes to writing, each makes a further selection on principles of his own."[47] In the context of early

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[44] Bender, *Literary Impressionism in Jean Rhys, Ford Madox Ford, Joseph Conrad, and Charlotte Brontë*, 66.
[45] Peters, *Conrad and Impressionism*, 18.
[46] Scholes, Phelan, and Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, 275.
[47] Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," 8.

Modernism and literary Impressionism, Woolf's observations centre around a movement away from universality in favour of subjectivism as she questions the validity of an apparently arbitrary understanding of what reality is: "But, I must ask myself, what is reality? And who are the judges of reality?"[48] The developing divide between nineteenth-century realism and the techniques of modern novelists is stark and Woolf observes the ways in which the former "have developed a technique of novel-writing which suits their purposes; they have made tools and established conventions which do their business. But those tools are not our tools, and that business is not our business."[49] Impressionism, with its focus on the subjective nature of point of view, offers a new set of tools to address the deficit that the modern novelist would have to overcome if they were to address the growing discrepancy between the understandings of modern experience and the literary forms available to literature to represent it. Impressionism showed a path beyond the limits of Edwardian literature:

> At the present moment we are suffering, not from decay, but from having no code of manners which writers and readers accept as the prelude to the more exciting intercourse of friendship. The literary convention of the time is so artificial […] that, naturally, the feeble are tempted to outrage, and the strong are led to destroy the very foundations and rules of literary society.[50]

Such a sentiment is similar to Woolf's observations in "Modern Fiction" when she notes that "Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill [fitting?] vestments as we provide."[51] Woolf's accusation against the Edwardians (whom she labels 'materialists') is that they focus on the wrong details – "you have to talk about the weather and nothing but the weather throughout the entire visit."[52] In their pursuit of objectivity the materialists miss the spirit, the humanity, the essence of fiction that contains the vivacity of life and experience: "they write of unimportant things … they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring."[53] Woolf's acerbic assessment encapsulates the general transition from the materialism of nineteenth-century realism into the experimental forms of literary Modernism:

> So much of the enormous labour of providing the solidity, the likeness to life, of the story is not merely labour thrown away but labour misplaced to the extent of obscuring and blotting out the light of the

[48] Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," 8.
[49] Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," 13.
[50] Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," 18.
[51] Woolf, "Modern Fiction," 160.
[52] Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," 18.
[53] Woolf, "Modern Fiction," 159.

> conception. […] 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. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? We are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity; we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it.[54]

Woolf's plea for patience and perseverance culminates in her prophetic request for readers to "[t]olerate the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure. Your help is in good cause. For I will make one final and surpassingly rash prediction – we are trembling on the verge of one of the greatest ages of English literature."[55]

[54] Woolf, "Modern Fiction," 160.
[55] Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," 21.

# Chapter II

## *Heart of Darkness*

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"Conrad's indictment of the English language was this, that no English word is a word; that all English words are instruments for exciting blurred emotions."[56]

– Ford Madox Ford

Early in 'Modern Fiction', Woolf expresses "unconditional gratitude"[57] to, amongst others, Joseph Conrad for establishing a literary precedent that she uses to foreground the insufficiencies of writers in her own time. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was published in 1899 – twenty years before Woolf wrote 'Modern Fiction' – and has been called "the most analysed narrative in history. It has been used to demonstrate everything in the narratological universe."[58] This establishes it as a valuable foundation for this thesis in terms of exploring how the epistemological changes of the period influenced modern fiction.

Opinions on *Heart of Darkness* are extensive and divisive. Conrad's long-time friend Ford Madox Ford was unfaltering in his praise, describing it as "the most impassioned unveiling of the hidden springs of human hypocrisy, greed, bloodlust—and of course heroism!—that the pages of any book have ever recorded."[59] The same text, however, famously lead Chinua Achebe to conclude that "Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist."[60] However, most relevant to this analysis is Mark Currie's determination that:

> Here was a text that was both a highly formal, self-conscious narrative which seemed to take the problems of narration and of seeing through words as a primary concern, and yet the manifest content of which was a critique of European Imperialism through the example of the Congo Free State.[61]

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[56] Ford, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance, 229.*
[57] Woolf, "Modern Fiction," 158.
[58] Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory,* 136.
[59] Ford, *Mightier Than the Sword: Memories and Criticisms,* 93.
[60] Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness," 21.
[61] Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory,* 138.

Through a close reading of Conrad's text, this chapter will posit that Conrad used Impressionist technique including a hypodiegetic narrative structure and focalization as a way of mitigating the insufficiencies of what he himself termed "old, old words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless use."[62] I will argue that Conrad's fidelity to an empirical, objective truth met this emerging philosophical subjectivism and led him away from the normative standards of nineteenth-century realism and the ideological and cultural norms that the positivist framework upheld. Consequentially, this chapter will suggest that *Heart of Darkness* destabilises imperial systems of thought and establishes an early counter-narrative to the authority and superiority of Imperialism.

Conrad wrote from personal experience. As a merchant sailor he captained a Dutch steamer up the Congo river in 1890, an area under the rule of King Leopold II of Belgium. Conrad's trip was to the detriment of both his physical and psychological wellbeing, however, his experiences formed the basis of *Heart of Darkness.* The story is told by the primary narrator Marlow, a quasi-autobiographical character who tells a tale that is ultimately conveyed to the reader through an unnamed frame narrator. Such conditions form a hypodiegetic narrative structure, a series of stories that fit within one another in a way that foregrounds the subjectivity of individual experience. As Lothe makes clear, "the time of traditional, simple narratives is over in 'Heart of Darkness'."[63]

## Focalization

Critical to this hypodiegetic narrative form and the novel's exploration of epistemological perspectivism is focalization. Focalization can be defined as "the perspective from which the narrated events are presented," offering a point of view that, as Herman et al. note, is "typically that of one or more individuals located at a particular point in space."[64] Focalization acts to foreground subjective perspective and offers an alternative to the objectivity of nineteenth-century realism. A primary narrative form in *Heart of Darkness*, focalization was an inevitable consequence of what Erdinast-Vulcan describes as Conrad's awareness "of the ultimate implications of epistemological and ethical relativism," that along with "a suspicion of the futility of art, [meant] Conrad was very much a man of the post-Nietzschean age. But he was, at the same time, deeply hostile to the spirit of modernity, precisely because he understood it so well."[65]

This conflict in Conrad's personal philosophy is reinforced by Matz who observes that his "aesthetic convictions are Impressionist while his feelings (ironically) demand absolutes."[66] Focalization then, can be understood as a technical

[62] Conrad, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, 9.
[63] Lothe, "Conradian Narrative," 167.
[64] Herman et al., *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates,* 108.
[65] Erdinast-Vulcan, *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper*, 21.
[66] Matz, *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics,* 154.

means for Conrad to mediate between his fidelity to truth (absolutes), as well as a Nietzschean awareness of the subjectivity of perspective. John Peters in *Conrad and Impressionism,* describes in some detail, how

> Conrad noted the impossibility of achieving the kind of objective truth many in the nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries sought. Throughout his writings, he rejects attempts to universalize truth and demonstrates that human experience is always individual. Both his philosophical concerns and narrative techniques point to an epistemology that presents human experience and knowledge originating from a particular source in space and time.[67]

Conrad uses the outer frame narrator to establish a realist, objective setting for the novel: a kind of real-life, third-person omniscient voice. It begins with the description of a small group upon The Nellie, a "cruising yawl" that awaits the turning of the tide on the Thames to assist its passage out to sea: "The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river, the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide."[68] The descriptions offered by the frame narrator are evocative and rich. They note how "The sea-reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of interminable waterway."[69] The use of inclusive pronouns puts the frame narrator's perspective into a position of representative authority for everyone on board. It is a tale that develops an ominous tone which increases with the text's progression. The frame narrator's focus on visual descriptions reinforces the impressionist nature of the text "In the offing the sea and the 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 spirits."[70] Conrad's descriptions are visual, gesturing back to the Impressionist foundations from which his style of writing developed. The 'tide seemed to stand still' he notes, as if represented in a painting, a visual theme reinforced by the reference to 'canvas' and 'gleams of varnished spirits,' that gesture to the foundations of Impressionism in painting.

The frame narrator's opening description is then given up almost exclusively to the first-person narration of Marlow, as his recount becomes the primary voice of the text. He is described by the frame narrator as he "sat cross-legged right aft, leaning against the mizzen-mast. He had sunken cheeks, a yellow complexion a straight back, an ascetic aspect, and, with his arms dropped, the palms of hands outwards, resembled an idol."[71] This sagacious, sage-like description of Marlow – who is shortly after described as a "Buddha" – lends an authority to what will soon

[67] Peters, *Conrad and Impressionism,* 3.
[68] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* 103.
[69] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* 103.
[70] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* 103.
[71] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* 103.

become *his* narrative. Interestingly, this authority is undermined by the disinterest of the remaining audience who, as the frame narrator observes, "felt meditative, and fit for nothing but placid staring."[72] As such, the first occurrence of Marlow's dialogue is dismissed as a random interjection typical to his erratic nature: "'And this also,' said Marlow suddenly, 'has been one of the dark places of the earth.' […] His remark did not seem at all surprising. It was just like Marlow. It was accepted in silence. No one took the trouble to grunt even."[73] Marlow's narrative reliability is further destabilised when the frame narrator asserts his difference: "The worst that could be said of him was that he did not represent his class. He was a seaman, but he was a wanderer too, while most seaman lead, if one may so express it, a sedentary life."[74] From the very beginning, the reader is introduced to Marlow as somewhat of an anomaly:

> Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him, the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.[75]

The frame narrator's subversion of the reliability of Marlow's narrative – "one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences"[76] – acts to establish doubt about the veracity of Marlow's account that extends to the unreliability of language – a theme that recurs through the novel and is a prominent cause of anxiety to Marlow himself. But this doubt regarding the inadequacy of language in conveying truth from one individual to another is extended by the hypodiegetic form of the narrative to the reader. As Jakob Lothe comments:

> The use of a narrator is a distancing device and 'Heart of Darkness' accentuates the distancing process by the use of two narrators rather than one. At the same time, the novella is also a good example of a text where distancing narrative devices paradoxically increases the reader's attention and interest.[77]

In other words, the hypodiegetic structure of the text asserts the fictionality of the narrative in what is essentially a metafictional caveat: a reminder that this is Marlow's point of view as recounted by someone who hears it – an account situated twice removed from the original events through the subjective perceptions of two individuals. This

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[72] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* 104.
[73] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* 105.
[74] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* 105.
[75] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* 105.
[76] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* 107.
[77] Lothe, "Conradian Narrative," 168.

complicates the reader's understanding of the text as the narrator is inevitably "always reminding their audience that what is being said can never capture the true essence of the action that took place."[78] As Bender rightly observes, "the unwary reader is soon entangled in a hopelessly confused web of shifting levels of 'reality' in the tale."[79]

## Unrecorded dialogue

The narrative ambiguity as it has been described is not isolated to the frame narrator and Marlow. The confusion is also compounded by the various other voices within the narrative that are regularly undifferentiated from either the frame narrator's voice or that of Marlow. The interjections from the small audience that listens (or doesn't) to Marlow's recount are often not even recorded in the dialogue of the text. This is evident in Marlow's description of the Thames, a perspective that notably occupies the point of view of a Roman soldier, seeing England for the first time:

> Imagine him here—the very end of the world, a sea the colour of lead, a sky the colour of smoke, a kind of ship about as rigid as a concertina—and going up this river with stores, or orders, or what you like. […] They must have been dying like flies here. Oh yes—he did it. Did it very well, too, no doubt, and without thinking much about it either, except afterwards to brag of what he had gone through in his time, perhaps. They were men enough to face the darkness.

Someone interjects throughout Marlow's musings, but the absence of their dialogue leaves the reader to deduce from Marlow's reported, one-sided interlocution alone who has said what. As readers, we are left with our own assumptions, furthering the ambiguity and increasingly destabilising the narrative. But, as Lothe observed above, this acts to engage the reader to a greater degree than if we were simply reading reported dialogue. On first reading, the seemingly incoherent, 'Oh yes—he did it' seems nonsensical, it is only after careful consideration that the reader realises Marlow is replying to the unrecorded interjections of one of his audience members. From here, the reader is left to their own devices to assume what was said. Thus, the narrative authority typically isolated to the author is extended to the reader, who is forced, willingly or not, into the role of narrative construction and to literally decide for themselves what the interlocutor has said. This ambiguity, described by Jeremy Hawthorne as "one of the most effective in all of Conrad's fiction,"[80] allows Conrad to actively question the reliability of any one person's account

[78] Said, "Conrad and Nietzsche," 74.
[79] Bender, "Jean Rhys and the Genius of Impressionism," 47.
[80] Hawthorne, "Joseph Conrad's Half-Written Fictions," 156.

of events and consistently address a key feature of modern understandings of representation, namely: “how can one know for certain what any other is seeing, hearing, or feeling?”[81]

They can’t, in short, hence the anxiety that lead Conrad to his use of focalization as a way of mitigating between the opposing philosophies. But this scene gestures towards another critical aspect of the text in that it shows Marlow pursuing an empathetic awareness for another perspective. By occupying the point of view of a Roman soldier experiencing England for the first time, Conrad foregrounds the limited nature of individual perspective and, importantly, relates his own experiences (via Marlow) on the Congo to a Centurion’s on the Thames.

## Questioning Standards of Morality

This gestures towards an important thematic concern: *Heart of Darkness* questions the legitimacy of imperialism. What occurs through Conrad’s use of focalization is a subversion – a destabilisation – of the traditional, hierarchical binary that sees the European perspective privileged over that of the colonised other. This is evident in Marlow’s notoriously racist descriptions of the Congo and its peoples:

> The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one.[82]

Relying again on unrecorded dialogue, Marlow begins to directly challenge the colonial perspective of African people as inhuman that is obviously suggested by someone in his audience. He goes on to describe – using the very language that led to Achebe’s accusations of racism – a shared sense of humanity:

> They howled and leaped and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—so remote from the night of the first ages—could comprehend.”[83]

[81] Herman et al., *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates,* 108.
[82] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* 139.
[83] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* 139.

The imperial position from which Marlow speaks leds to a degree of disavowal, limiting the extent of identification to which he will admit. As Achebe argues, "[i]t is not the differentness that worries Conrad but the lurking hint of kinship, of common ancestry."[84] Achebe disagrees with what many critics have described as the humanism of Conrad's writing using the term "liberalism," instead.[85] Achebe goes on to write that:

> Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth. But the victims of racist slander who for centuries have had to live with the inhumanity it makes them heir to have always known better than any casual visitor, even when he comes loaded with the gifts of a Conrad.[86]

Nevertheless, this passage, with its references to shared experience and 'remote kinship' form part of the broader shift in attitudes to imperialism and colonialism which Conrad's work reveals.

It is also precisely these considerations that differentiate Conrad from Woolf's materialists. In the preface to the *Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* Conrad exhibits a desire to communicate something similar to Woolf's ephemeral 'spirit' when he writes that:

> Fiction, if it at all aspires to be art – appeals to temperament. And in truth it must be, like painting, like music, like all art, the appeal of one temperament to all the other innumerable temperaments whose subtle and resistless power endows passing events with their true meaning, and creates the moral, the emotional atmosphere of the place and time. Such an appeal to be effective must be an impression conveyed through the senses; and, in fact, it cannot be made in any other way, because temperament, whether individual or collective, is not amenable to persuasion. All art, therefore, appeals primarily to the senses, and the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through the senses, if its high desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions.[87]

But the intangible nature of both Woolf's spirit and Conrad's appeal to temperament are problematic and Marlow is ineffective in his communication. This leads to a frustration at his inability to convey his experience that can be seen

[84] Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness," 15.
[85] Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness," 20.
[86] Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness," 26.
[87] Conrad, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus', 8.*

to represent Conrad's consciousness of the inadequacies of language to communicate his complicated position within the imperial system. Marlow has shown, through his consideration of the perspective of the Roman soldier – another representative of ruthless colonial expansion – an awareness of the perspective of others, but becomes hostile to an audience unable to do the same; to deviate from their narrow conception of the world. It is Marlow's journey down the Congo that offers him this alternate perspective and leads to his assertion that his audience, in his words,

> can't understand. How could you?—with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbours ready to cheer you or to fall on you, stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman, in the holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums—how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of solitude—utter solitude without a policeman—by the way of silence—utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbour can be heard whispering of public opinion. These little things make all the great difference.[88]

The above passage reinforces Marlow's uncomfortability as a colonial subject. It foregrounds his acknowledgement of an awareness of the moral deficiency of asserting the values of one aligned perspective – the colonial one – upon another – that of the colonised. Marlow makes clear that his experiences within Imperial modern European society and outside of it are so different, so diverse, that any attempt to perceive one with the perspective of the other is redundant. Through his experiences on the Congo, Marlow's perspective European colonialism has altered completely, along with his understanding of perspective.

## Inadequacy of language

A further contribution of this subversion of colonial authority is the inevitable destabilisation of narrative reliability that the focalized perspective affords. If the reader is presented not with an objective representation of experience – as is typical in nineteenth-century realism – but instead to a narrator's subjective interpretation of events, the focus of the text itself moves from reality to the processes that lead to an individual's perception of that reality. This phenomenon is what allows, for example, Marlow to describe his steamer as a "splashing, thumping, fierce river-demon beating the water with its terrible tail and breathing black smoke into the air," as Marlow imagines the impressions of the Congolese tribesman he sails past.[89] But as Marlow progresses up river, the complexities of such

[88] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* 154.
[89] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* 175.

an awareness unfold. As Mark Currie writes, "Marlow's narrative regularly falters in moments of fear that his words cannot convey his experience, and at such moments both the referential and the communicative models of language are explicitly questioned."[90] This can be seen in Marlow's reported dialogue:

> '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, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of 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,—which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live as we dream—alone. …' He paused again as if reflecting, then added— 'Of course in this you fellows see more than I could then. You see me, whom you know. …'[91]

Marlow's evident anxiety towards his own capacity to adequately convey the details of his experience can be seen as a reflection of Conrad's own philosophy of art:

> 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.[92]

Conrad's anxiety about the inadequacy of language to convey his intentions is unsurprising with such intentions for his art. And Marlow's distress is an obvious representation of such a position. Marlow's persistent reference to the impossibility of communicating his experience illustrates a Nietzschean awareness of the inescapability of perspective. Marlow, like Conrad, is aware that his reality is his own alone, and his failure to effectively convey it to his small audience aboard the Nellie is a testament to Conrad's distrust in the mimetic capabilities of language. The experiential nature of what Marlow calls a 'life-sensation' and what Conrad calls 'its inspiring secret' is something that cannot be wholly conveyed by the inflexibility of a Bergsonian conceptualisation of language as described above. The resulting impasse is a consistent theme not only of *Heart of Darkness,* but works of early Modernism more broadly. Conrad's reliance on ambiguity, unreliable narrators, and focalization all "challenge the notion" as

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[90] Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory,* 142.
[91] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* 129.
[92] Conrad, "The Nigger of the 'Narcissus", 9.

Bender observes, "that language is an adequate model to capture immediate sensation, particularly visual sensation." Conrad's reliance on such techniques can therefore be seen as a reflection of "the decay of the naïve realist's belief that language is a transparent medium through which we can see the world as it truly is."[93]

This returns us to Impressionism as a consequence of the declining belief in the transparency of language. Rather than pursuing a mimetic representation of reality, Conrad simply sought to convey impressions that readers are required to unpack for meaning. As Hawthorne writes: "the suggestiveness of his fiction is premised upon readers who are prepared to exercise their creativity."[94] Such a process is evident throughout the text and conveyed through the impressionistic nature of Marlow's narrative. Take, for example, Marlow's description of two men as they walk away from him and the setting sun: "leaning forward side by side, they seemed to be tugging painfully uphill their two ridiculous shadows of unequal length, that trailed behind them slowly over the tall grass without bending a single blade."[95] A focus on the men's shadows speaks to the impressionistic preoccupation with the play of light. The interpretive focus of Marlow's description is asserted by the qualifying 'seemed,' a term weighted with ambiguity that allows for the transgression away from the men themselves and onto Marlow's perception, what he terms their 'ridiculous shadows.' By noting that these personified shadows moved 'without bending a single blade' Marlow brings a liveliness to them and focuses his – and consequently, the reader's – attention on a more abstract perspective of the unfolding scene. It gestures towards the gothic, another subversive genre that extends upon the text's existing ominous tones. In a similar example, Marlow describes how "[a] dark figure obscured the lighted doorway of the manager's hut, vanished, then, a second or so after, the doorway itself vanished too."[96] This process of selection as to what Marlow chooses and perhaps more importantly, chooses *not* to describe, foregrounds the power he has over his audience's (and subsequently, the reader's) understanding of his tale. As Bender explains, the impressionist "must choose to present some [what?] as to suppress others from his writing."[97] Conrad's choice to represent Marlow's perception of shadows in the above two examples contributes to Marlow's unwillingness to conform to normative, contemporary standards of representation. Instead, he commits to what he appropriately terms "Your own reality—for yourself, not for others—what no other man can ever know."[98]

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[93] Bender, *Literary Impressionism in Jean Rhys, Ford Madox Ford, Joseph Conrad, and Charlotte Brontë,* 133.
[94] Hawthorne, "Joseph Conrad's Half-Written Fictions," 156.
[95] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* 136.
[96] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* 132.
[97] Bender, *Literary Impressionism in Jean Rhys, Ford Madox Ford, Joseph Conrad, and Charlotte Brontë,* 47.
[98] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,*

## Delayed Decoding

Perhaps the most overt instantiation of how *Heart of Darkness* foregrounds the subjective nature of individual experience can be found in the text's use of delayed decoding. Defined as "a technique whereby effects precede cause," delayed decoding, as Cedric Watts describes, "lends graphic vividness and psychological realism to the process of perception, but it also emphasizes an ironic disparity, or possible disparity, between the events that occur and their conventional interpretation."[99] Byrne conveys a similar understanding when he notes that delayed decoding as it is used in *Heart of Darkness* "is designed to show that meaning does not dwell in reality or in our impressions of it (insofar as such a theoretical distinction is possible) but that it is a precarious construct erected on the basis of what we perceive, or, properly, what we think we perceive, at a given time and place."[100] To further assert its significance in the context of this discussion, Bender acknowledges delayed decoding as "one of the chief characteristics of impressionist style,"[101] while Matz writes that it is "the best interpretation of Conrad's impressionism."[102] Delayed decoding is therefore well placed to offer a technical, textual exploration of exactly how Conrad overcomes, or at the very least, attempts to overcome, his anxiety concerning the insufficiencies of language's mimetic capabilities.

Consider the following example of delayed decoding that describes an attack on Marlow's steamboat as he approaches Kurtz's inner station:

> Then I had to look at the river mighty quick, because there was a snag in the fairway. Sticks, little sticks, were flying about—thick: they were whizzing before my nose, dropping below me, striking behind me against my pilot-house. All this time the river, the shore, the woods, were very quiet—perfectly quiet. I could only hear the heavy splashing of thump of the stern-wheel and the patter of these things. We cleared the snag clumsily. Arrows, by Jove! We were being shot at![103]

There are two notable ways of considering the functioning of delayed decoding in this passage. The first sees the changing perception of sensory data as representative of what Watt terms "the disparities between the realities of

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[99] Watts, "Heart of Darkness," 58.
[100] Byrne, "Heart of Darkness," 25.
[101] Bender, *Literary Impressionism in Jean Rhys, Ford Madox Ford, Joseph Conrad, and Charlotte Brontë*, 71,
[102] Matz, *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics*, 144.
[103] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 149.

experience and the inadequacies of conventional representations of it."[104] In the above example this is illustrated by what Marlow calls 'little sticks', that after consideration he comes to realise are in fact arrows. Understood in this way, the progression of perception evolves from an initial, false impression of an experience – "it is important to note that the first impression captured by Marlow, that there are little sticks flying through the air, is a false impression,"[105] – to a *delayed decoding* of the experience as it actually occurred. In the context of the example above, Marlow's initially false impression of the little sticks 'whizzing before my nose, dropping below me, striking behind me,' gives way, after the chaos of the incident has cleared, to a decoded reality of what were actually arrows the entire time.

More contemporary understandings of delayed decoding, however, argue that such understandings place too much emphasis on sensory perception and fail to consider the full influence of the consciousness's interpretative role in the process of perception.[106] In other words, the traditional explanation offered by Watt wrongly describes the initial perception as false, when it is in fact a valid interpretation of experience in its own right. Byrne makes this point clear by observing that "undecoded impressions are less the result of temporary misunderstandings than unmediated, or at least, 'minimally interpreted.' moments of perception."[107] Understood in such a way, the little sticks in the above example as they are perceived by Marlow *are* indeed little sticks and *then* they are arrows. By presenting impressions through the focalized perspective of a character narrator, delayed decoding seeks to achieve a more psychologically realistic representation of experience, something that comes closer to the new realism inherent to modern understandings of representation. Such a claim is substantiated by Bender who writes that "[w]hen the author attempts through a dramatic situation to foreground the immediate impressions of a character, giving priority to the way things seem to a particular mind in the act of encountering its environment, the text gains immediacy and validity."[108]

Another example of delayed decoding is offered further into the narrative when Marlow finally reaches Kurtz's highly anticipated inner-station. Marlow describes how "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."[109] This apparently innocuous description of a dilapidated fence is left with the reader for

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[104] Watts, "Heart of Darkness," 58.
[105] Bender, *Literary Impressionism in Jean Rhys, Ford Madox Ford, Joseph Conrad, and Charlotte Brontë*, 72.
[106] Matz, *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics*, 144.
[107] Byrne, "Heart of Darkness," 25.
[108] Bender, *Literary Impressionism in Jean Rhys, Ford Madox Ford, Joseph Conrad, and Charlotte Brontë*, 64.
[109] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 157.

a full seven pages before Marlow expands on his initial description and another instance of delayed decoding is unveiled:

> 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 make me throw my head back 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 stakes, if their faces had not been turned to the house. Only one, the first I had made out, was facing my way. I was not so shocked as you may think. The start back I had given was really nothing but a movement of surprise. I had expected to see a knob of wood there, you know.[110]

This scene raises interesting questions regarding the capabilities of symbolic representation. As Marlow states himself, the staked heads 'were not ornamental but symbolic; they were expressive and puzzling' and as a result they carry a higher significance than something merely ornamental. Not only does this distinction between ornamental and symbolic significance mirror the difference between verisimilitude and the impressionist methods employed here by Conrad but it also raises important thematic concerns regarding the disturbing nature of Marlow's colonial gaze. Not only is he entirely apathetic towards the fact that he is observing severed heads ornamentally arranged and staked on poles, but he tries to downplay his already minimal physical response by attributing it to misunderstanding and surprise. Such a foregrounding of the interpretive significance of delayed decoding is achievable only through the use of a focalised narrative voice. An omniscient narrator would never progress through the stages of perception that Marlow does and this allows Conrad to exaggerate the impact of Marlow's colonial perspective. He, and subsequently the reader, are so limited by the focalized voice that we perceive severed and staked heads as ornamental wooden carvings and deadly arrows as harmless little sticks. By directing the focus away from mimetic verisimilitude and towards an interpretation of real events as they are perceived by Marlow, Conrad portrays a characteristically troubled, split, colonial perspective. Marlow, ironically, suffers from the same narrow periphery of vision of which he was so sceptical earlier. This is a cultural conditioning that is, however, altered by his experience up the river that does act to change the perceptions of his place in an imperialist system to which he eventually returns:

[110] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* 164.

> I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams. They trespassed upon my thoughts. They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence, because I felt so sure that they could not possibly know the things I knew. Their bearing, which was simply the bearing of commonplace individuals going about their business in the assurance of perfect safety, was offensive to me like the outrageous flauntings of folly in the face of a danger is unable to comprehend.[111]

This revised perception of a so-called 'developed' Western society that Marlow conveys to his listeners departs from the typical, Eurocentric conceptualisation of the superiority of the white West. What Marlow describes is a condemnation of capitalism. He attacks the excess and inhumanity inherent to London life and once again troubles the well-established binary between coloniser and colonised. In this way, Marlow's perception remains in line with the wider tendency of the narrative – and Conrad's work more broadly – to deviate from normative standards, be that with respect to representation, or his position on the immorality of European Imperialism. The consequence is, ironically, that *Heart of Darkness,* a text that still stands as a canonical work of English literature, "serves to demonstrate … a profound ambivalence for an imperial literary inheritance."[112]

Another observation regarding Conrad's novel is in respect to the way in which it inverts the semiotic relationship between words and the objects they seek to represent. In the extended and highly anticipated lead up to his confrontation with Kurtz, Marlow repetitively tells his audience that "[h]e was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do."[113] By differentiating between the linguistic sign of 'Kurtz' and the real person, Marlow again expresses a doubt in the representative capacity of language. This is once again evident further into the narrative, when Marlow describes his reaction when he presumed Kurtz dead: "I made the strange the discovery that I had never imagined him as doing, you know, but as discoursing. I didn't say to myself, 'Now I will never see him,' or 'Now I will never shake him by the hand,' but, 'Now I will never hear him.' The man presented himself as a voice."[114] This is not an isolated incident: Kurtz is not the only character to be reduced to linguistic sign. One of the rare interjections from the unnamed frame narrator describes Marlow in a similar way: "For a long time already he, sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice."[115] The frame narrator's description

[111] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* 179.
[112] Marx, "Postcolonial Literature and the Western Literary Canon," 90.
[113] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* 129.
[114] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* 151.
[115] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* 130.

of Marlow as ‘no more than a voice,’ when he is, in fact, sitting directly opposite raises interesting questions regarding the text’s perspective towards the ontological status of words against objects. Is the linguistic sign of Kurtz or Marlow any less significant than either of them as a living being? Conrad subverts the typical semiotic relation of the signifier and the signified and refuses to differentiate between the two.

Regardless of the way that Conrad exploits modern uses of perspective and narration, the undertones of racist logic cannot be ignored. Achebe rightly asserts the “simple truth” that Conrad’s overt racism “is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked.”[116] But as this thesis will continue to argue, it is precisely these very *normal ways of thinking* as Achebe terms them, that Conrad’s work starts to unsettle, raising interesting questions concerning the (post)colonial position of *Heart of Darkness* and the literary works of Modernism that followed it.

[116] Achebe, “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness,” 21.

## Chapter III

## Where Does the Darkness Lie: *Voyage in the Dark* and the Subversion of the Colonial Perspective

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If Conrad's work begins to unsettle the normative standards of representation in Western European fiction, then that of Jean Rhys can be seen as the next step in challenging those norms. Building on the previous discussion, this chapter seeks to show, through a close reading of Jean Rhys's 1934 novel *Voyage in the Dark,* how the modernist techniques that Conrad began to explore are utilised by Rhys to subvert imperial structures of authority through literature. By discussing how Rhys's fiction centres on questions of identity, I will show that her use of Impressionist technique is an appropriate means of conveying the in-betweenness inherent to the Creole voice that Rhys chooses to narrate her story.

Born in Domenica in 1890 to a Welsh father and a white, Creole mother, Rhys spent the first sixteen years of her life in the West Indies where she experienced first-hand the inequity between races that would preoccupy her work. Sent to England to further her schooling, she lived the complexities of colonialism and struggled with an identity that was divided by two vastly different cultures situated at opposing ends of the binary hereto discussed.[117] These struggles landed her under the enthusiastic eye of Ford Madox Ford, with whom she had a complicated relationship but who provided a platform for many of her early writings in his publication *The Transatlantic Review*. Such conditions lead to a heavily introspective nature in Rhys's work. As Mary Lou Emery writes, "[l]ike many modernist works, Rhys's novels seem to present an intensely personal rather than social vision."[118] The personal nature of Rhys's fiction is based, as Johnson writes, on "her own fraught racial identity within a colonial rubric that defined her as white, but as 'not English'; as a British subject but one whose ethnic belonging was equally problematized by her Creole ad Celtic heritages."[119]

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[117] Wyndham, "Introduction to *Voyage in the Dark,"* 125.
[118] Emery, "The Politics of Form: Jean Rhys's Social Vision in *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea,*" 418.
[119] Johnson, "'Upholstered Ghosts': Jean Rhys's Posthuman Imaginary," 210.

In a letter to Francis Wyndham, Rhys wrote that she had "never read a long novel about a mad mind or an unusual mind or anybody's mind at all. Yet it is the only thing that matters and so difficult to get over without being dull."[120] Johnson and Moran in *Jean Rhys: Twenty-First Century Approaches,* acknowledge that

> Rhys's complaint may seem astonishing, given the publication in her lifetime of works by writers ranging from Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and Marcel Proust, to Vladmir Nabokov (whose writing Rhys claimed she found difficult to read). […] the type of mind Rhys wanted to read about is the type of mind she herself worked to represent: the mind of the isolated and socially marginalised woman whose very existence seems unreal and insubstantial, a woman whose mind is, to more socially integrated subjects, at best illegible and invisible, at worst, 'potty', neurotic and pathological.[121]

This notion of social integration is the foundational premise of *Voyage in the Dark.* Archetypical of her style, the narrative is loosely autobiographical, told through the perspective of Anna Morgan, a displaced young, white Creole woman and her literal voyage in the dark as she is sent to England and struggles to reconcile the memories of her past with the hostile realities of her present. Left financially ruined and socially isolated by her alcoholic father and unempathetic stepmother, the text traces Anna's social and psychological disintegration as she unsuccessfully attempts to navigate the imperial, patriarchal society in which she finds herself.

This sequence of events facilitates the text's primary concern: the troubled binary between the coloniser and the colonised and the shortcomings of a power structure dictated by understandings of race under the administration of an imperial system of patriarchy. Rhys, by employing an autobiographical style to her narrative, effectively conveys the struggles of Anna's personal voyage while simultaneously foregrounding the broader thematic concerns of postcolonialism. As H. Adlai Murdoch describes, "Autobiography has long been a primary discursive means of mediating identity and culture in the Caribbean context, illuminating and interrogating the compound, overlapping patterns produced by the regions complex historical experience."[122]

## Rhys and Conrad

But just as Conrad's representations of Africa were controversial, Rhys's relationship to post-colonialism remains a point of contention, "particularly" as Gąsiorek notes, "her right as a white woman from the colonial elite to address

[120] Wyndham and Melly, *The Letters of Jean Rhys,* 254.
[121] Johnson and Moran, "The Haunting of Jean Rhys," 10.
[122] Murdoch, "The Discourse of Jean Rhys: Resistance, Ambivalence and Creole Indeterminacy," 149.

the cultural, political, social, and historical legacies of colonialism."[123] Rhys's work approaches the intersection between the modern and the postcolonial. Or, as Urmila Seshagiri describes, "the point when the exhausted limits of modernist form revealed the lineaments of postcolonial fiction."[124] Still, her formal means of reaching this juncture are not dissimilar to Conrad – the title itself, echoing Conrad's work. This chapter will elucidate how Rhys and Conrad face similar thematic challenges as they both attempt to navigate the fraught conditions of an imperial world they struggle to come to terms with.

Rhys's rejection of imperialist power structures manifests formally in her work in various ways, but perhaps the most obvious is elucidated in an introduction to *Voyage in the Dark* by Carole Angier who writes that Rhys "cut every 'objective' description, every logical connection, every general idea. We are wholly inside Anna."[125] This is substantiated by the opening lines of *Voyage in the Dark*: "It was if a curtain had fallen, hiding everything I had ever known. It was almost like being born again. The colours were different, the smells were different, the feelings things gave you right down inside yourself was different."[126] Anna's overt preoccupation with difference establishes, from the opening lines of the novel, a relevant tendency for the text to digress from the established normative standards of representation. The scarcity of objective description acts to shift the focus of the text from what *is* to what *is not.* As Angier goes on to note, Rhys "put her meaning in what she does not say."[127] Like Conrad before her (and this is not the extent of their commonalities), "Jean Rhys was a writer who distrusted words."[128] But while Conrad's work was largely directed towards an anxiety regarding the mimetic limits of language, Rhys's distrust in the representative capacity of language is directly focused on a postcolonial crisis of identity as a consequence of her Creole heritage. Marlow conveyed a scepticism towards the capacity of words to convey different interpretations that were exacerbated by cultural difference, but Anna goes one step further: her focalized narrative offers a distinctly personal insight into the existential challenges she faces as a consequence of her Creole in-betweenness as she moves into the colonial space. Interestingly, this instability leads Anna – as it does Marlow – to describe her experiences of reality via references to dreamlike states that explicitly express her difficulty in coming to terms with life in England: "Sometimes it was if I were back there and as if England were a dream. At other times England was the real thing and out there was the dream, but I could never fit them together."[129]

[123] Gąsiorek, "(The Knocking) Has Never Stopped: Jean Rhys's (Post)colonial Modernism," 163.
[124] Seshagiri, "Modernist Ashes, Postcolonial Phoenix: Jean Rhys and the Evolution of the English Novel in the Twentieth Century," 487.
[125] Angier, *Voyage in the Dark,* viii.
[126] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 7.
[127] Angier, *Voyage in the Dark,* ix.
[128] Angier, *Voyage in the Dark,* viii.
[129] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 7.

## Creole In-betweenness

Anna's inability to fit these two identities together gestures to the inherent in-betweenness of Anna's Creole identity. It conforms to what Homi K. Bhabha termed "not white/not quite" and establishes an ontological ambiguity that preoccupies her work.[130] As Murdoch perceptively explains, any "close examination of the term 'creole' will show it to be an inherently unstable category, shot through with the ambiguities and essentialisms of its origins in the colonial period."[131] By utilising a racially ambiguous perspective as the primary narrative voice in her text, Rhys achieves an alternate point of view that she uses to effectively undermine the authority of colonialism more broadly. By accepting what Murdoch terms the "plural positionalities that such a definition [of Creole] implies" Rhys is able to subvert "the rigid binaries that Anna will be forced to countenance."[132] Consequently, *Voyage in the Dark* is infused with instances of miscegenation, that act to destabilise an imperial power structure that relies on difference to assert its authority. Murdoch offers a direct insight into the way in which Rhys's use of Creole identity relies on this miscegenation to subvert traditional notions of race, noting that:

> The suspect beginnings of the term 'creole' as embodying colonialism's repulsion for the fearfully unnameable and unreplaceable hybrid monstrosity, the undesired product of colonial *métissage,* ultimately overdetermined the ostensibly separate races of white and black, even as the boundaries and practices that presumably separated them were increasingly and unalterably blurred.[133]

By choosing to narrate her story through a Creole voice Rhys employs a novel perspective and manages to reverse the standard colonial conception of the superiority of Imperial culture:

> [t]his is London – hundreds thousands of white people white people rushing along and the dark houses all alike frowning down one after the other all alike all stuck together – the streets like smooth shut-in ravines and the dark houses frowning down – oh I'm not going to like this place –[134]

At other times cultural conventions are shamelessly mocked through caricature:

[130] Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and the Man: the Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," 132.
[131] Murdoch, "The Discourse of Jean Rhys: Resistance, Ambivalence and Creole Indeterminacy," 147.
[132] Murdoch, "The Discourse of Jean Rhys: Resistance, Ambivalence and Creole Indeterminacy," 150.
[133] Murdoch, "The Discourse of Jean Rhys: Resistance, Ambivalence and Creole Indeterminacy," 146.
[134] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 16.

> The waiter knocked a long, elaborate knock and came in to take away the soup.
>
> 'This wine is corked,' Mr Jeffries said.
>
> 'Corked, sir?' the waiter said in a soft, incredulous and horror-stricken voice. He had a hooked nose and a pale, flat face.
>
> 'Yes, corked. Smell that.'
>
> The waiter sniffed. Then Mr Jeffries sniffed. Their noses were exactly alike, their faces very solemn.
>
> […]
>
> I thought, 'Now then, you mustn't laugh. He'll know you're laughing at him. You can't laugh.'

The alternate perspective that Rhys's Creole heroine provides offers a critical account of culture that is only available to an outsider; someone who can identify not only the ridiculousness of many normative conventions, as shown above, but also – on a more serious level – the racisim in England at that time.

## Subversion of Race

Such a distinction between the two races is further conveyed through the text via Anna's consistent desire to be black, to be the other: "I wanted to be black. I always wanted to be black," she consistently claims, "Being black is warm and gay, being white is cold and sad."[135] Anna's dramatic subversion of the superiority of the English and the continual assertion of her Creole heritage acts to undermine traditional notions of racial hierarchies as they are constructed in a colonial context. Gąsiorek writes with respect to the conflict between Anna as a self-identifying Creole subject:

> The attempt to set racially conceived limits to a perceived blurring of boundaries discloses a profound anxiety about social and cultural hierarchies. Although she is white and belongs by background to a dominant plantocratic class, Anna is thought to be in danger of becoming indistinguishable from those against whom she should be defining herself.[136]

This point that refers back to ideas of *metissage* and miscegenation is reinforced by Anna herself and her continual reference to a colonial heritage: "'I'm a real West Indian,' I kept saying. 'I'm fifth generation on my mother's side.'"[137] By destabilising the strict boundaries of race set by traditional European standards, Rhys liberates Anna's

[135] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 27.
[136] Gąsiorek, "(The Knocking) Has Never Stopped: Jean Rhys's (Post)colonial Modernism," 170.
[137] Rhys *Voyage in the Dark,* 47.

subaltern voice; by expressing her desire to be black, Anna attempts to racially redefine herself irrespective of her family heritage. By stepping outside of Imperial understandings of race, Rhys acts to undermine the authority of colonial rule. As Seshagiri notes, Anna's assertion of her black heritage "reveals a dangerous desire to *be* the Empire's other, to locate subjectivity in what imperial discourse has relegated to object-status."[138]

Anna's attempts to transcend the opposition between the two races are rarely successful and she is unable to escape the ambiguity of her identity. Murdoch provides insight into this issue: "protagonists like Anna are representative of a social and cultural duality, highlighting an instability that suggests in turn colonialism's unequivocal imbrication in the very patterns of ambiguous difference it had sought to rationalise the colonial project itself."[139] Caught in the flux of racial ambiguity in between black and white, Anna is driven further and further into an identity based on a lack of belonging that she herself acknowledges as different: "'Oh I was always rum,' I said. 'When I was a kid I wanted to be black, and they used to say, "Your poor grandfather would turn in his grave if he heard you talking like that.'"[140] Anna's inability to be accepted within either cultural heritage leaves her displaced and experiencing the in-betweenness of the Creole category. As Murdoch writes,

> Anna is haunted by her own internal convictions of unbelonging; the complex social patterns of her native, colonial Dominica seem to drive her to disown the white world into which she is born, even as the black world she desires, and in which she is convinced she will feel more comfortable, insists on resisting her.[141]

## Perceptions: Past and Present

This existential ambiguity becomes characteristic of Anna's identity as she struggles to deal with her Creole indeterminacy. It is the impressionistic nature of the text that contributes to conveying this ambiguity, for example, through the juxtaposition of her memories of her Caribbean past against the focalized perceptions of her English present:

> There was always a little grey street leading to the stage-door of the theatre and another little grey street where your lodgings were, and row of houses with chimneys like funnels of dummy steamers and smoke the same colour as the sky; and a grey stone promenade running hard, naked and straight by the side of the

[138] Seshagiri, "Modernist Ashes, Postcolonial Phoenix: Jean Rhys and the Evolution of the English Novel in the Twentieth Century," 494.
[139] Murdoch, "The Discourse of Jean Rhys: Resistance, Ambivalence and Creole Indeterminacy," 152.
[140] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 45.
[141] Murdoch, "The Discourse of Jean Rhys: Resistance, Ambivalence and Creole Indeterminacy," 152.

grey-brown or grey-green sea; or a Corporation Street or High Street or Duke Street or Lord Street where you walked about and looked at the shops. Southsea, this place was.[142]

The repetition of innocuous details establishes a sense of bleak mundanity that for Anna, characterises her English life: the street names are generic and undifferentiated, the colours are muted and sombre. The name of the town itself, Southsea, is left until last, an inconsequential, obsolete detail that reinforces the tediousness of Anna's English reality, a monotony reflected in her description that is heavily juxtaposed as she recollects her past in the Caribbean. The tone of the text changes entirely as she describes

> The smell of the streets and the smells of frangipani and lime juice and cinnamon and cloves, and sweets made of ginger and syrup, and incense after funerals or Corpus Christi processions, and the patients standing outside the surgery next door, and the smell of the sea-breeze, and the different smell of the land breeze.[143]

The evocative description of Rhys's past contrasts to her perception of England. It centres on an olfactory response to sensory data. There is movement, colour and a liveliness that doesn't exist in her descriptions of Southsea. By presenting her two perceptions so differently, Anna undermines the traditional superiority of the imperial centre against its colonial outposts. As Gąsiorek notes, "The idea that the Caribbean is an absence to Europe's presence belongs to the colonialist context that Rhys's work dismantles, and she does this by showing how powerful a hold such assumptions have in both a colonial and postcolonial context."[144] But Gąsiorek describes how Anna's perspective is problematic, situated as it is between the binaries it occupies:

> it is formed within a racially conceived structure of power, a legacy of plantocratic violence and competing discourses about the rights and wrongs of colonial history. In its starkest form, this awareness of the ongoing effect of the past on the present manifests itself through familiar binaries: black/white, colonized/colonizer, master/slave. But when these terms are conceived as inalterable opposites a Manichaen structure is upheld, and no movement beyond is possible. Anna in *Voyage in the Dark* is shown to be trapped in this way of thinking. She is unable to reconcile her experience of England with her memories of the Caribbean because in her mind they represent utterly incompatible realities […] This

[142] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 8.
[143] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 14.
[144] Gąsiorek, "(The Knocking) Has Never Stopped: Jean Rhys's (Post)colonial Modernism," 166.

sense of irreconcilability is expressed through appeals to a primitivist understanding of racial difference, which again relies on fundamental oppositions.[145]

By employing Impressionist techniques Rhys manages to undo such oppositions and Anna can begin to attempt to transcend the power structures that suppress her efforts to forge an 'English' identity out of her Creole heritage. Anna tries to like England, but she consistently fails to identify with what it has to offer:

> 'I like it here,' I said. 'I didn't know England could be so beautiful.'
>
> But something had happened to it. It was as if the wildness had gone out of it.[146]

But her attempts are rejected by a society that doesn't trust her racial heritage and she is left, continually, in a state of ontological uncertainty with no sense of belonging: "I'm not going to like this place I'm not going to like this place I'm not going to like this place."[147] And so Anna's negative descriptions of England continue: "Looking out at the street was like looking at stagnant water. […] I began to feel depressed. I said, 'I don't like London. It's an awful place; it looks horrible sometimes. I wish I'd never come over here at all.'"[148] The outrageousness of Anna's position, understood from a colonial perspective is asserted by her friend, Maudie, who notes that she "must be potty, […] Whoever heard of anybody who didn't like London?"[149]

But Anna is not alone in her assessment of England and her perception is reinforced by a poem that she finds in the drawer of one of her lodgings.

This secondary perspective acts to reinforce Anna's representations in a social climate characterised by opinions such as Maudie's above:

> Horse faces, faces like horses,
>
> And grey streets, where old men wail unnoticed
>
> Prayers to an ignoble God.
>
> There the butcher shop stinks to the leaden sky;
>
> There the fish shop stinks differently, but worse.

[145] Gąsiorek, "(The Knocking) Has Never Stopped: Jean Rhys's (Post)colonial Modernism," 170.
[146] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 67.
[147] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 16.
[148] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 40.
[149] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 40.

> […]
>
> But where are they –
>
> The cool arms, white as alabaster?
>
> […]
>
> Loathsome London, vile and stinking hole…[150]

Such support however, is fleeting, as Anna notes that it was written by "the man who had these rooms before me. The landlady told me about him. She had to chuck him out because he couldn't pay his rent."[151] The fact that the only other perspective to align with Anna's comes from another individual that can't meet the expected standards of society reinforces Anna's perspective as an outsider.

Such incompatibility with English society is further communicated through a series of transient and psychologically abusive relationships that Anna relies upon for both financial and social support. One such relationship is with Walter, a rich businessman who momentarily liberates Anna from her sense of alienation and precarity. At the height of such times, Anna finds herself financially, socially, and emotionally supported. But even in this transient happiness, she still fails to come to terms with her present as she fails, again, to communicate her past to Walter:

> 'I wish you could see Constance Estate,' I said. 'That's the old estate – my mother's family place. It's very beautiful I wish you could see it.' 'I wish I could,' he said. 'I'm sure it's beautiful.' 'Yes,' I said. 'On the other hand, if England is beautiful, it's not beautiful. It's some other world.'[152]

Anna's consideration of beauty as mutually exclusive to either England or the Caribbean; to either the colonial or the colonised space, reinforces her preoccupation with the opposition established by an imperial epistemology in an impasse that is never fully resolved, as Anna notes: "It all depends, doesn't it."[153]

This impasse is explored by Gąsiorek who notes that

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[150] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 41.
[151] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 41.
[152] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 45.
[153] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 45.

> This dichotomy indicates that the two halves of a fissured identity cannot be fused together when a colonialist mentality holds the subject in its grip. Instead, they blot each other out: if one pole of the dichotomy is granted value, then by definition the other must be worthless.[154]

But Anna struggles to do so, prevented as she is by her mutually exclusive understandings of beauty. Caught between the two opposing identities, Anna's understanding of her identity is fractured by the incompatibility of the two cultures that form her sense of self, an idea made clear in another of her conversations with Walter:

> Walter said, 'Have you got flowers like this in your island? These little bright things are rather sweet, don't you think?' I said, 'Not quite like these.' But when I began to talk about the flowers out there I got that feeling of a dream, of two things that I couldn't fit together, and it was as if I was making up the names.[155]

By again referring to the dream-like nature of her experience, Anna undermines her understanding of her own existence in colonial England? and as a consequence, her narration deteriorates into inconsequential apathy? that reflects her tenuous position in the world. Anna's descriptions regularly falter into functional uselessness: "For a long time we didn't say anything. I was thinking how happy I was, and then I didn't think anything – not even how happy I was."[156] This kind of redundant narration is quickly filled by the overbearing patriarchal voice of Walter who draws on the multiplicity of perspective and indelicately informs her that:

> 'You're lovely from this angle.'
> 'Not from every angle?' I said.
> 'Certainly not, conceited child. But from this angle you're perfectly satisfactory, and I want very much to make love to you. There are a lot of holes where the deer shelter in winter and where nobody could see us.[157]

Again, Anna's contribution to the society she finds herself within is as the object of physical desire, left to satisfy the sexual desires of the men that find their way into her life and associate her with such parallels as children and deer.

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[154] Gąsiorek, "(The Knocking) Has Never Stopped: Jean Rhys's (Post)colonial Modernism," 171.
[155] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 67.
[156] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 67.
[157] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 67.

Anna's mistreatment by men who enter into her life gestures to another way that the modernist form of the text is used by Rhys: by isolating the reader within Anna's first-person perspective Rhys seeks to invoke an empathetic response from the reader. Cummins observes this, noting that "Rhys is extremely attentive to creating the conditions so that the reader *will* experience pain and suffering."[158] This is evidenced in the text by Anna and Walter's sojourn to the country that is abruptly cut short when Walter indelicately informs her that he is leaving for New York.[159] The shock of this abrupt realisation is affecting as Anna is destined for a return to the city, and with it, the isolation and precarity of her life. The reader empathises with Anna's fate as Walter's friends Vincent and Germaine make Anna the target of their cruel banter:

> 'She's on the stage, is she?' Germaine said.
> 'Yes, she is or was. You were in a show when you first met Walter, weren't you?' Vincent said.
> 'Yes,' I said.
> They looked at me as if they expected me to say something else.
> 'It was at Southsea,' I said.
> 'Oh, it was at Southsea, was it?' Vincent said.
> They began to laugh. They were still laughing when Walter came in.[160]

Vincent's condescension leads to Anna's violent retort that would probably be perceived as extreme if the reader hadn't been so engaged, on an emotional level, with Anna's experience. Instead, it offers an almost cathartic release in what becomes a justified response:

> I said 'Oh, stop laughing at me. I'm sick of it.'
> 'What's the joke,' I said. They went on laughing.
> I was smoking and I put the end of my cigarette down on Walter's hand. I jammed it down hard and held it there, and he snatched his hand away and said 'Christ!' But they had stopped laughing.[161]

From this point of the narrative on, Anna's mental state deteriorates as she returns to London, back to poverty and into a series of transient relationships, one of which culminates in an unwanted pregnancy. The subsequent

[158] Cummins, "Point of View in the Novels of Jean Rhys: the Effect of a Double Focus," 360.
[159] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 72.
[160] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 73.
[161] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 74.

miscarriage forms the final scene of the novel and the first-person form allows the coherence of Anna's narrative to decrease as her mental state deteriorates.

The scene begins once again with an impressionistic observation regarding the play of light: "The room was nearly dark but there was a long yellow ray coming in under the door from the passage."[162] Anna then begins to relate the extent of her isolation in an abstract commentary that conveys the indistinct events of her miscarriage:

> 'I'm glad it happened when nobody was here because I hate people.'
> I thought, 'Pain…' but it was so long ago that I had forgotten what it had been like. I was alright, except that every now and again it was as if I were falling through the bed.[163]

Through all of this, Anna's narrative is punctuated by the indifference of others: further evidence of their cruelty and her isolation and abandonment:

> Mrs Polo said, 'It was like this when I come this evening and I didn't know what to do, so I rung you up, miss. And I don't want to be mixed up in a thing like this.'
> 'But why ring me up? It's nothing to do with me,' Laurie said. 'You ought to have got a doctor.'[164]

Anna's description is an early moment of relative lucidity as her reality descends into a complicated and convoluted amalgamation of hallucinations, memories and a present that is distorted by the effects of alcohol and the trauma of her condition. Anna's confused perspective is conveyed through a stream-of-consciousness narration that becomes incoherent as all notions of time and space fall apart:

> And the clock was ticking loud, like that time when I lay looking at the dog in the picture *Loyal Heart* and watching his chest going in and out and I kept saying, 'Stop, stop,' but softly so that Ethel wouldn't hear. 'I'm too old for this sort of thing,' he said; 'it's bad for the heart.' He laughed and it sounded funny. 'Les émotion fortes,' he said. I said, 'Stop, please stop,' 'I knew you'd say that, he said. His face was white.[165]

[162] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 155.
[163] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 155.
[164] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 155.
[165] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 156.

The stream of consciousness narration expresses Rhys's erratic movement between temporal, geographical and cultural locations. As Seshagiri argues, Anna "journeys from colonial Dominica to London and then relives her journey through dreams, memories and hallucinations, the distinction between centre and periphery dissolves into a nightmarish unreality as the narrative breaks free of Anna's control."[166] This is illustrated by the erratic movement between Anna's present and the experiences of her past:

> *I was watching them from between the slats of the jalouises dancing along dressed in red and blue and yellow the women with their dark necks and arms covered in white powder – dancing along to concertina music dressed in all the colours of the rainbow and the sky so blue…*[167]

Anna's memories are again vibrant and evocative and contrast significantly with the sombre realities of England, but in addition to this, the fact that Anna remembers Carnival an – event suffused with colonial subversion – is critical. It liberates the scene from an incohesive representation of a traumatic event to a poignant commentary on the limitations of the false colonised-coloniser opposition to which Anna is subject and that preoccupies the entire text. As Murdoch observes:

> Carnival is inherently a postcolonial celebration of identity, multiplicity and ethnic and historical survival, in which subversion, parody and performance play equally critical roles in defining and disseminating a national sense of self. In this act of self-identification, then, Anna lays claim to the innate, unspoken creativity of her in-betweenness.[168]

The disorientating scene is brought abruptly back to the present by the recorded dialogue of Anna: " 'I'm giddy,' I said."[169] Meanwhile, a doctor arrives and condescendingly determines that "She'll be alright, […] Ready to start all over again in no time, I've no doubt."[170] His presumption of the recursive nature of Anna's life is reinforced by the closing lines of the text that see Anna reflect in a contemplative consideration of her future with a strong suggestion of her entrapment within a cycle imposed by the incompatibility of her place in an imperial cultural setting:

> When their voices stopped the ray of light came in under the door like the last thrust of remembering before everything is blotted out. I lay and watched it and thought about starting all over again. And about

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[166] Seshagiri, "Modernist Ashes, Postcolonial Phoenix: Jean Rhys and the Evolution of the English Novel in the Twentieth Century," 490.
[167] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 157.
[168] Murdoch, "The Discourse of Jean Rhys: Resistance, Ambivalence and Creole Indeterminacy," 154.
[169] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 157.
[170] Rhys, Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 159.

> being new and fresh. And about mornings, and misty days, when anything might happen. And about starting all over again, all over again…[171]

It is worth noting that the published ending of *Voyage in the Dark* was not Rhys's intended conclusion. It was mandated by publishers that deemed her original ending ("everything is blotted out and blackness comes…"[172]) too morbid. Nevertheless, the published version – with its reference to the beginning of the scene and the ellipsis with which it concludes – retains the uncomfortability between opportunity and repetition that the scene conveys. It is a final expression of an ambiguity inherent within the text more generally; a text, as Gąsiorek poignantly describes, that "grants authority to none and that calls the concept of closure into question."[173] Rhys had no closure to write from, she wrote from the perspective of a Creole, a colonial subject paradoxically at the margins of Empire, and her work is subsequently preoccupied with in-betweenness and questions of the indeterminacy of identity. Rhys wrote from the fractured epistemology of the modern world and as Lauren Elkin makes clear, she was subsequently "invested in the modernist project of representing consciousness on the page, of capturing the fragmented quality of modern life, and of formally expressing the alienated modern self."[174] It makes sense then, that she employs the formal standards of modernism to do so, for the rigid structures of nineteenth-century realism fail to represent what she sought to convey. As Gąsiorek writes:

> Rhys's work suggests, imaginative writing should acknowledge that the many different viewpoints in play cannot be arbitrated easily. Deploying a fragmentary and elliptical technique, eschewing a guiding metalanguage, using multiple narrators, and refusing closure—such writing foregrounds the unfinished interpretative work performed by Rhys's characters and, equally significantly, by her own writing. It thus invites readers to abide with uncertainty.[175]

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[171] Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark,* 159.
[172] Seshagiri, "Modernist Ashes, Postcolonial Phoenix: Jean Rhys and the Evolution of the English Novel in the Twentieth Century," 491.
[173] Gąsiorek, "(The Knocking) Has Never Stopped: Jean Rhys's (Post)colonial Modernism," 176.
[174] Elkin, "Getting the Story Across: Jean Rhys's Paranoid Narrative," 74.
[175] Gąsiorek, "(The Knocking) Has Never Stopped: Jean Rhys's (Post)colonial Modernism," 167.

# Chapter IV

# *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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"How can one discover truth I thought and that thought led me nowhere. No one would tell me truth."[176]

– Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Published in 1966, *Wide Sargasso Sea* perpetuates the difficulty in arbitrating different viewpoints and questions the legitimacy of any one voice that purports to objectively communicate experience. This chapter will explore how Rhys develops her use of the focalized narrative voice of *Voyage in the Dark* to develop a multiperspectival narration, as she seeks to represent the multiplicity of modern understandings of experience. *Wide Sargasso Sea* was Rhys's last completed novel. Released 32 years after *Voyage in the Dark,* it is the product of a significant development of her experimental narrative form. The text sits at a critical juncture in fiction, released at a time when the self-consciousness of postcolonial works began to gain prominence whilst the experiments with narrative that characterised Modernism earlier in the twentieth century had become established literary forms. These conditions allowed Rhys to focus more directly on the the thematic concerns she sought to address. In consequence, as Adlai Murdoch writes in *The Discourses of Jean Rhys,* "colonial issues of race and gender identity are arguably front and centre."[177]

Far from providing clarity, the foregrounding of these identity issues compounds the concerns that preoccupied Rhys's earlier works. In "Getting the Story Across: Jean Rhys's Paranoid Narrative," Lauren Elkin observes that "In Rhys's fiction, paranoia presents itself not as a common pathology but as an important textual mode."[178] In ways similar to Conrad's work, this 'paranoid narrative' shows that Rhys sought to foreground narrative instability within her work to address the wider thematic concerns of her narrative. Similarly to Marlow in *Heart of Darkness,* the narrative voice at the centre of Rhys's fiction is, as Elkin writes, "a subject who is terrified of being misread."[179]

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[176] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* 65.
[177] Murdoch, "The Discourse of Jean Rhys: Resistance, Ambivalence and Creole Indeterminacy," 159.
[178] Elkin, "Getting the Story Across: Jean Rhys's Paranoid Narrative," 70.
[179] Elkin, "Getting the Story Across: Jean Rhys's Paranoid Narrative," 73.

This paranoia is conveyed through the text chiefly by the shifting narrative point of view that it utilises to communicate the limited perspectives of the two protagonists: Antoinette Mason, a young Creole woman growing up on an island in the Caribbean and an unnamed English man that arrives to marry her. Whilst the narration of both *Heart of Darkness* and *Voyage in the Dark* are also heavily focalised through the first-person perspective, they are limited by the constraints of a single narrator. In contrast, *Wide Sargasso Sea* tells one story through the alternating perspectives of both Antoinette and the Englishman, a contrast that allows Rhys to foreground not only the inherent subjectivity of any one perspective, but also the plurality of it. The multiple perspectives that are offered by *Wide Sargasso Sea* is an insight unavailable to either *Heart of Darkness* or *Voyage in the Dark*.

## The Extension of Focalization: Double Focus

Marsha Cummins terms this form of narration a 'double focus': "Having two first person narrators in *Wide Sargasso Sea* elaborates Rhys's use of first person narrative to suggest that one has only partial knowledge."[180] The inevitable discrepancies between differing perceptions, and particularly, the inescapability of such perceptions, is something made evident early in the novel as the Englishman offers a description of Antoinette:

> She often questioned me about England and listened attentively to my answers, but I was certain that nothing I said made much difference. Her mind was already made up. Some romantic novel, a stray remark never forgotten, a sketch, a picture, a song, a waltz, some note of music, and her ideas were fixed. About England and about Europe. I could not change them and probably nothing would. Reality might disconcert her, bewilder her, hurt her, but it would not be reality. It would only be only a mistake, a misfortune, a wrong path taken, her fixed ideas would never change. Nothing I told her influenced her at all.[181]

Rhys's use of this double focus foregrounds both the multiplicity of perspective as well as the inflexibility of it. It asserts, in line with the quote above, that the story being told is just one of a number of possible interpretations of the events of the narrative and reminds the reader that there is always another point of view. What makes *Wide Sargasso Sea* so significant to this discussion is its capacity to afford equal consideration to these multiple perspectives. By telling Antionette's story alongside the Englishman's, the colonial perspective is acknowledged equally with that of Antoinette's as a colonised subject. Rhys shows the reader an insight into two individuals with different perspectives, rather than telling the events through either one. Antoinette's young servant conceptualises

[180] Cummins, "Point of View in the Novels of Jean Rhys: The Effect of a Double Focus," 369.
[181] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 58.

this idea well when she tells the Englishman that "I am sorry for you. But I find it in my heart to be sorry for her too."[182] It is only through the contrast of multiple perspectives, as they exist in *Wide Sargasso Sea* that an appreciation for the insufficiency of any one voice is adequately conveyed.

Whilst Rhys's use of this multiperspectival form of narration offers contrasting perspectives it does not escape the limited nature of individual experience. It also fails to overcome the existential threat of in-betweenness that was expressed in *Voyage in the Dark*, in fact, it acts to reinforce it. This is substantiated by title of the novel itself: a reference to a section of the North Atlantic Ocean between England and the Caribbean. Antoinette Mason, just like Anna Morgan finds herself caught between the cultural dichotomy of two contrasting cultures. This is a point succinctly communicated by Antoinette's childhood friend, Tia and her poignant commentary on the complicated social conditions of the West Indies: "Plenty white people in Jamaica. Real white people, they got gold money. They didn't look at us, nobody see them come near us. Old time white people nothing but white nigger now, and black nigger better than white nigger."[183] Tia's severe and oxymoronic description of race is confusing, almost nonsensical and acts to highlight the arbitrary nature of race. This is extended by Rhys as she shows that Antoinette's heritage is, just like Anna Morgan's, a point of consistent contestation and continues to break down the opposition between black and white – colonised and coloniser – through her use of the Creole trope. The ambiguity inherent in Antoinette's Creole identity is established as a negative one through the label "white cockroach", a derogatory term used against the European colonisers that lost their authority, wealth, and social dominance after the emancipation of slavery in 1833. As Antoinette herself describes,

> That's me. That's what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to slave traders. And I've heard English women call us white niggers. So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all.[184]

Once again the politics of identity, or lack thereof, establish an existential uncertainty in Antoinette that is conveyed through the text's narrative voice. By again choosing a white Creole heroine, Rhys is able to question traditional imperial ideas of race as determined solely by genetic lineage. Rhys goes as far to suggest that genetic lineage is not the defining feature of race and as a result, whiteness, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* has other determining factors. As Murdoch writes:

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[182] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 90.
[183] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 10.
[184] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 64.

> in the slave colonies, it is wealth that makes one white, with a capacity to mitigate both blackness and its creeping adulteration by the Creole. And so if a change in economic fortunes can concomitantly imply a shift in subjective inscription, Antoinette's creoleness, with its intrinsic social and subjective ambiguities, paradoxically delimits any capacity for certainty in self-definition.[185]

In other words, Rhys reflects the postcolonial world's assertion of affluence as a determining factor of race. This allows Rhys to challenge the inflexibility of the normative standards of race and suggests that its boundaries are not black and white.

J. Dillon Brown, in the aptly titled "Textual Entanglement: Jean Rhys's Critical Discourse" explores how *Wide Sargasso Sea* employs what he terms "a shifting, multiperspectival narration to portray its characters interior thoughts (and thus exposing their grounding in unreliable memories and misapprehensions) in order to address the narrative and ideological shortcomings of a Victorian fictional form."[186] Brown's discussion centres on a secondary character, Antoinette's Aunt Cora, who "is shown to have a perceptively critical attitude toward the semantics of everyday utterances, an alertness to the ways in which language can be unthinkingly used in ideologically motivated ways."[187] This is evident early in the novel as Antoinette's family estate is set alight by a rebellious group of emancipated slaves in an active resistance against the Mason family who are representative of the residual colonial authority on the island. Antoinette's father, Mr Mason ("so sure of himself, so without a doubt English,"[188]) reassures his family that "There is no reason to be alarmed."[189] His naivety towards his family's imminent danger is representative of the disconnected and outdated nature of the remaining colonial powers on the island. Dismissing the severity of the events, he claims that the group "will repent in the morning. I foresee gifts of tamarinds in syrup and ginger sweets tomorrow."[190] However, Mr Mason's premonition is wrong and the attack results in the death of his son and the permanent psychosis of his wife, Antoinette's mother. Through this all, it is Aunt Cora who speaks out as a rational voice of feminine authority against his ignorant goodwill: "Tomorrow will be too late," she asserts, "too late for ginger sweets or anything else."[191] Aunt Cora is reassuring to the children: "Don't be afraid, you are quite safe. We are all safe."[192] She also maintains an alert pragmatism when necessary: "This place is going to burn like tinder and there is nothing we can do to stop it. The sooner we get out the better."[193] Aunt Cora, as Brown

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[185] Murdoch, "The Discourse of Jean Rhys: Resistance, Ambivalence and Creole Indeterminacy," 160.
[186] Brown, "Textual Entanglement: Jean Rhys's Critical Discourse," 569.
[187] Brown, "Textual Entanglement: Jean Rhys's Critical Discourse," 577.
[188] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* 18.
[189] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* 19.
[190] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* 20.
[191] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* 20.
[192] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* 20.
[193] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* 21.

writes, is consistently shown "puncturing Mason's hollow rhetoric and illustrating its inadequate engagement with the reality that it purports to describe."[194] By ridiculing and subverting the authority of this colonial voice, Rhys challenges the authority of the dominant, colonial and patriarchal voice more broadly while offering a rational alternative in the feminine authority of Aunt Cora.

## Intertextuality: Writing Back at *Jane Eyre*

It is not only the narrative voice that questions imperial authority in *Wide Sargasso Sea.* The questioning of established voices of authority is further portrayed by the intertextual setting of the novel itself. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is written as a prequel to *Jane Eyre,* a canonical work of nineteenth-century realism that allows Rhys to overtly contrast the developments in representation that have occurred over the century that separates them. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* Antoinette Mason assumes the former identity of Brontë's Bertha Mason, while the unnamed Englishman assumes the role of Edward Rochester.

Bender explores this intertextuality in his 1978 essay, "Jean Rhys and the Genius of Impressionism," noting that "Jean Rhys saw that Brontë's representation of the mad-woman and the completely dead love of Rochester demanded a more fully flushed, more rounded treatment."[195] Bender's discussion inevitably leads to a critical assessment of the one-sided representation in Brontë's original work: "'Why is Jane so uncritical of Rochester?' We ask as we turn from *Wide Sargasso Sea* to *Jane Eyre.*"[196] By employing an intertextual setting and writing from the established foundation of a text as significant as *Jane Eyre,* Rhys not only sets out to ask such questions, but begins to formulate answers:

> Reading her work, we 'see round' Antoinette in a new way. Our sympathy comes into play and we are much more aware of the limitations of Brontë's Rochester. Those shortcomings in Jane Eyre's future husband are curiously ignored in Brontë's novel. Bringing Jean Rhys's characterizations to bear on Brontë's not only develops the blank character Antoinette, but converts Rochester into a much more interesting, equivocal figure. It counteracts his flatness in Brontë's version and questions the nature of Jane's judgment.[197]

[194] Brown, "Textual Entanglement: Jean Rhys's Critical Discourse," 578.
[195] Bender, "Jean Rhys and the Genius of Impressionism," 45.
[196] Bender, "Jean Rhys and the Genius of Impressionism," 45.
[197] Bender, "Jean Rhys and the Genius of Impressionism," 45.

By writing from an already established narrative, Rhys effectively shifts the focus of the text from the progression of the story itself, to the contributing factors that cause them: "The 'affair' at the centre of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is Antoinette's insane, suicidal conflagration, an event which has already 'happened'."[198] Similarly, as Murdoch makes clear, "the backstory of how this young Jamaican Creole became, or was made into, the madwoman in the attic becomes the novel's prime consideration."[199] The consequence of this retrospective, limited narrative perspective is, as Bender goes on to write, that

> [t]he story progresses in widening circles of understanding as the reader sees the scene through the eyes of one or more witnesses and tries to judge what the 'facts' of the case may be. In such stories, the reader struggles with multiple, limited, narrations in order to deduce and judge the true state of affairs. The plot is open to multiple or contradictory interpretations.[200]

Bender's determination is typical to works of Modernism broadly and this is a commonality that *Wide Sargasso Sea* shares both with *Voyage in the Dark* as well as *Heart of Darkness.* By presenting multiple perspectives on one central event, Rhys relies on some of the foundational strategies of Modernism to build ambiguity and reinforce the idea that there is no one unequivocal interpretation of truth. In doing so, Rhys reflects Matz's conceptualisation of the modern novel, "where doubt often leads to ironic reflection upon the elusiveness of truth and the failure of meaning, and styles of description and narrative often devolve deliberately into ambiguity and confusion."[201] Understood in such a way, Rhys's conscious choice to present her narrative within the intertextual foundations of Brontë's novel can be read as a calculated decision, to foreground the perspectives of specific characters, juxtaposing them in an attempt to bring attention to their individual perceptions.

## Dramatic Irony

Shifting the focus of the text in such a way is not the only relevant consequence of the intertextual setting of *Wide Sargasso Sea.* By writing within the existing narrative frame of *Jane Eyre,* Rhys is able to rely heavily on dramatic irony as a way of foregrounding the discrepancies between different perspectives. Several times throughout the text, Rhys relies on the reader's familiarity with the events of *Jane Eyre* to imply the unwritten consequences of her own work. This is evidenced in Antoinette's perceptions of England, a place she has not only never been, but one that is

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[198] Bender, "Jean Rhys and the Genius of Impressionism," 46.
[199] Murdoch, "The Discourse of Jean Rhys: Resistance, Ambivalence and Creole Indeterminacy," 159.
[200] Bender, "Jean Rhys and the Genius of Impressionism," 46.
[201] Matz, "The Novel," 218.

so different to the scope of her limited experiences within the Caribbean. As she prepares to return with her new husband to England she resorts to speculating via a text book to produce an impression of the place she is about to move to:

> England, rosy pink in the geography book map, but on the page opposite the words are closely crowded, heavy looking. Exports, coal, iron, wool. Then Imports and Characters of Inhabitants. Names, Essex, Chelmsford on the Chelmer. The Yorkshire and Lincolnshire wolds.

Antoinette's perception of England has no context. In an assertion of the insufficiency of words, Anna's description is itself 'crowded' and 'heavy looking'. It lacks the validation of lived experience and is subsequently short on detail. The absence of context and personal experience leads Antoinette to question her description as she asks questions that would be obvious to any European: "Wolds? Does that mean hills? How high?"[202] To address the lack of context she compares these words with her own lived experience as the narration oscillates in and out of stream of consciousness. She begins to make comparisons and contrast what she has read with what she has experienced on her island: "Half the height of ours, or not even that?"[203] As a result, Antoinette is incapable of experiencing England outside of her Caribbean lens and when she reaches a concept as foreign as snow she is forced to substitute her lack of experience with something entirely different: "After summer the trees are bare, then winter and snow. White feathers falling? Torn pieces of paper falling? They say frost makes flower patterns on the window panes."[204] Through the reference to common knowledge, 'they say', Antoinette introduces an unknown, outside perspective that acts to foreground the limits of her experience as she resorts to second-hand reports. Her descriptions illustrate the limits of subjective perception, a point reinforced by her assertion that,

> I must know more than I know already. For I know that house where I will be cold and not belonging, the bed I shall lie in has red curtains and I have slept there many times before, long ago. How long ago? In that bed I will dream the end of my dream. But my dream had nothing to do with England and I must not think like this, I must remember about chandeliers and dancing, about swans and roses and snow. And snow.[205]

The monologue's haunting premonition as Antoinette describes the conditions of her life in *Jane Eyre* acts to reinforce the dramatic irony in this passage. The knowing reader is aware of Antoinette's subtle nod to her future in

[202] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* 70.
[203] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* 70.
[204] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* 70.
[205] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* 70.

*Jane Eyre*. In contrast, Christophine – Antoinette's childhood nurse, lifelong friend and confidante – adopts a more abstract approach: "England […] You think there is such a place?"[206] She suggests that there is no experience without perception, essentially invalidating any kind of a priori form of knowledge: "I know what I see with my eyes and I never see it."[207] But Christophine's critical perception of England also amalgamates with the inadequacies of her own experience as she too, relies on second hand reports to form her own impression:

> I hear it cold to freeze your bones and they thief your money, clever like the devil. You have money in your pocket, you look again and bam! no money. Why you want to go to this cold thief place? If there is this place at all, I never see it, that is one thing sure.[208]

Christophine's consistent assertion that she hasn't experienced England and therefore doubts its existence reinforces the inadequacies of representation through words allowing Rhys to foreground the discrepancy between lived reality and representations of that reality; England objectively exists, but the two women's perceptions of it differ greatly.

This scene is not the only instance where dramatic irony is employed as a means of extending the reach of the text beyond the events that the narrative directly describes. It is again illustrated through a conversation between the unnamed Englishman and Christophine as he remarks

> loudly and wildly, 'And do you think that I wanted all this? I would give my life to undo it. I would give my eyes never to have seen this abominable place.' She Laughed. 'And that's the first damn word of truth you speak. You choose what you give, eh? Then you choose.'[209]

The Englishman's reference to losing his sight is reinforced by Christophine's affirmation of the event taking place Like Antoinette's premonition of her future this is another reference to the events of *Jane Eyre* and for the familiar reader, offers another level of meaning through the associated dramatic irony.

## Shifting Perspectives

[206] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 70.
[207] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 70.
[208] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 70.
[209] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 104.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* alternates perspectives with each section of the book. But in a further assertion of the inadequacy of any one perspective, Rhys disrupts this almost reliable alternation of narrative voice. In the middle of Part Two, for example, the unnamed Englishman's narrative is interrupted by an unsignalled shift to Antoinette's point of view. Brown flags this scene as "[t]he most interpretively challenging occurrence of the novel's shifting point of view."[210] It begins with the Englishman alone amongst the island's jungle, "lost and afraid among these enemy trees."[211] He sees a girl who screams and runs into the depth of the trees before the family's servant, Baptiste, eventually comes to find him. The Englishman questions what he describes as the malevolent nature of the jungle: "Is there something wrong about the place? Is there a ghost, a zombie there?"[212] But Baptiste refuses to answer his questions, increasing the sense of unknown and returns him to the house where the Englishman refuses food, takes a decanter of rum and isolates himself in his room with a book. He opens to a chapter on *obeah* (a form of Caribbean voodoo) and reads phrases such as "A zombi is a dead person who seems to be alive or a living person who is dead" that increase the almost gothic tone and gesture to the Creole occupation with in-betweenness.[213] Baptiste's refusal to answer the Englishman's questions is validated by further reading: "negroes as a rule refuse to discuss the black magic in which so many believe."[214] Such subject matter reinforces the already unsettling nature of his experience in the jungle. At this point, Antoinette's point of view unexpectedly takes over the narration. The purpose of this scene, as Brown explains, is not to convey the events that take place, but to focus the reader's attention on the unreliability of the voice recounting it:

> the novel itself seems more interested in foregrounding the uncertainty of the episode's origin. The scene's ambiguity highlights the difficulty of assessing narrative veracity and its origin that lies at the very heart of the novel's choice of form […] *Wide Sargasso Sea,* cautions against any presumptions of knowledge not sensitively attuned to the interests and modes of delivery instrumental in communicating it.[215]

The confusing and ambiguous perspectival shifts in this section of the narrative are a calculated decision by Rhys to highlight the breakdown of universal ideas of objectivity. This shows that the structure of the text is inherently linked to to the arbitrary nature of language and Rhys uses this unreliability to engage the reader into developing their own assessments of the events of the narrative as no single representation of them is in itself sufficient. The inaccessibility of any one objective representation of events is addressed by the Englishman: "[h]ow can one

[210] Brown, "Textual Entanglement: Jean Rhys's Critical Discourse," 579.
[211] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* 66.
[212] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* 66.
[213] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* 67.
[214] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* 67.
[215] Brown, "Textual Entanglement: Jean Rhys's Critical Discourse," 580.

discover truth I thought and that thought led me nowhere. No one would tell me truth. Not my father nor Richard Mason, certainly not the girl I had married."[216]

The Englishman's failing trust in an objective sense of truth is further conveyed through his perception of Antoinette. As the narrative progresses, he begins to disregard her name, referring to her instead as Bertha in another gesture toward her future in *Jane Eyre*. This act of relabelling has two consequences: firstly, it acts to further undermine the independence of Antoinette that is already threatened by her postcolonial condition. Antoinette is conscious of and sensitive to this change and she makes her concerns clear to Christophine: "When he passes my door he says, 'Good-night, Bertha.' He never calls me Antoinette now." [217] The Englishman persists, disregarding her requests to the contrary:

> 'Don't laugh like that Bertha.'
> 'My name is not Bertha; why do you call me Bertha?'
> 'Because it is a name I'm particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha.'[218]

The insistence of the Englishman's arbitrary renaming of Antoinette's contributes to her deteriorating mental state and forces her into submission as her name, one of her last assertions of self, is taken from her:

> 'Not Bertha tonight,' she said.
> 'Of course, on this night of all nights, you must be Bertha.'
> 'As you wish,' she said.[219]

By complying with her new name Antoinette gestures to the second consequence of of the act of relabelling. Antoinette accepts a reduction in her sense of self and is subsequently forced into a position of in-betweenness that threatens her existential condition. As Gregg writes, "In renaming Antoinette Bertha, the husband does not succeed in changing her, but in splitting her identity. This split subjectivity becomes a fate that she must confront."[220] Antoinette is conscious of the effects such a split subjectivity, noting that "[n]ames matter, like when he wouldn't call me Antoinette, and I saw Antoinette drifting out the window." [221] By witnessing herself leave "with her scents,

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[216] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* 65.
[217] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* 71.
[218] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* 87.
[219] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* 87.
[220] Gregg, *Jean Rhys's Historical Imagination,* 103.
[221] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* BOH.

her pretty clothes and her looking-glass,"[222] objects all closely aligned with aspects of her identity, Antoinette breaks down any distinction between her sense of self and the linguistic means of representing it. In consequence, Antoinette again foregrounds the role that language plays in constructing individual experience; in losing the semiotic signifier that is her name, Antoinette loses her self.

## Changing Perceptions

Names are not the only unreliable signifiers. The subjective link between language and experience is further conveyed by the Englishman's changing perceptions of the island itself. Upon first arriving he describes how "There was a soft warm wind blowing but I understood why the porter had called it a wild place."[223] It is a fitting observation that is shortly reinforced when he describes that it was "a beautiful place – wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness. And it kept its secret. I'd find myself thinking, 'What I see is nothing – I want what it *hides* – that is not nothing.'"[224] By gesturing towards a level of experience beyond those represented visually the Englishman foregrounds the subjective nature of individual perspective. As he familiarizes himself with the island, the enigmatic unknowns and curiosity of his first encounter develop into something more distinctly positive: "I watched the hidden mountains and the mists draw over their faces. It's cool today; cool, calm and cloudy as an English summer. But a lovely place in any weather, however far I travel I'll never see a lovelier."[225] But as the Englishman's life on the island and his relationship with Antoinette begin to deteriorate, so too does his perception of the place. His descriptions become increasingly sinister and malevolent. He notes how he "hated the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain. I hated the sunsets of whatever colour, I hated its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know. I hated its indifference and the cruelty which was part of the loveliness."[226] The very objects that were initially met with curiosity are now perceived with hostility.

The unreliability of linguistic representations of experience can also be seen in the Englishman's consistent inability to convey a written letter back to England. When he first arrives on the island he "thought about the letter which should have been written to England a week ago. Dear Father…" is as far as he gets.[227] His room at *Granbois* is even equipped with "a small writing-desk with paper, pens, and ink. 'A refuge' I was thinking."[228] A refuge that goes

[222] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, BOH.
[223] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 42.
[224] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 54.
[225] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 106.
[226] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 111.
[227] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 40.
[228] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 45.

unutilized as he still fails to compose his letter. After finally managing to write one, he is left to idly wonder "how they got their letters posted. I folded mine and put it into a drawer of the desk."[229] This failure of written communication, of the ability of words to convey meaning is typical to Rhys's paranoid narrative as the Englishman, without an effective form of written communication is left isolated within his own contemplations. The distinction between words and the objects that they purport to describe is subsequently foregrounded: "I spoke aloud as I walked. I spoke the letter I meant to write."[230] The Englishman's effective silence is a poignant reversal of the authority of voice as Rhys disempowers his colonial authority by limiting his access to the written word. But this shift in authority, comes too late for Antoinette who is already condemned to her fate as it exists in *Jane Eyre.*

[229] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* 46.
[230] Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* 104.

# Conclusion

"There is no finality, no finish line to cross in our ongoing attempts to think from the perspective of others."[231]

–Martin Woessner

The conclusion to *Wide Sargasso Sea* is inevitable. Predetermined by the events of *Jane Eyre* it can be read as a gesture to the inflexibility of the imperial project. A project that Rhys's work rejected by employing the modern literary techniques that have been explored in this essay, namely: a focalized narrative voice, a lack of objective description, multiperspectival narration and the intertextuality of the text's setting. By moving away from ideas of objectivity and focusing on the act of perception, Rhys was free to explore the moral deficiencies of an imperial epistemology that perpetuated an inherent inequality between individuals based on socially constructed notions of race. Taking *Jane Eyre* as one site where these constructions are so visible, Rhys was able to coherently centre her critique against these moral deficiencies using one of Victorian fiction's most prominent works. As Brown writes, "[t]he book's intertextual retort to Brontë's novel has been seen to represent a classic instance of writing back to the colonial centre, a paradigmatic postcolonial gesture intended to highlight the self-serving blind spots and ideological dispositions of imperial cultural production."[232] By combining these techniques with multiperspectival narration, the text elaborates "Rhys's use of the first person narrative to suggest that one has only partial knowledge."[233]

For whilst *Voyage in the Dark*, too, denies the authority of any one voice, it fails to provide an alternative, inhibited as it is by the singular nature of the single, first-person perspective it is told through. *Voyage in the Dark* is, however, essential in this broader discussion because it signals a shift that saw these technical advances in narrative used to overtly question the moral standards of the society that it was discussing. It is a text that relies, as Mary Lou Emery writes, on "[t]echniques of narrative intersubjectivity and shifting point of view [to] decenter the traditional 'character' as a unified self. This displacement challenges the status of the stable and unified ego that, in Victorian novels and experience, depends upon the organization of sex and gender in distinct separation of public and private

[231] Woessner, "Coetzee's Critique of Reason," 237.
[232] Brown, "Textual Entanglement: Jean Rhys's Critical Discourse," 569.
[233] Cummins, "Point of View in the Novels of Jean Rhys: The Effect of a Double Focus," 369.

worlds."[234] This link between Rhys's work and the social and moral concerns that it deals with is critical. It is Rhys's ability to link the intimately personal nature of her work with these broader cultural themes that make it so relevant to this thesis. Rhys lived the consequences of the postcolonial condition and whether or not her work classifies as distinctly postcolonial, it offers an important perspective that contributes to wider considerations of postcolonial theory. The modern, fractured world that Rhys presents is a consequence of her modern understanding of the incapacity of any one perspective to offer a comprehensive understanding of the complex, multifaceted nature of the human condition.

A condition that presented a problem for an artist, like Conrad, who maintained a fidelity to truth in a philosophical climate of subjectivism. Conrad himself writes that

> [a]rt is long and life is short, and success is very far off. And thus, doubtful of strength to travel so far, we talk a little about the aim – the aim of art, which, like life itself, is inspiring, difficult – obscured by mists. It is not in the clear logic of a triumphant conclusion; it is not in the unveiling of one of those heartless secrets which are called the Laws of Nature. It is not less great, but only more difficult.[235]

This difficulty developed an anxiety in Conrad and his works centring around a concern that words – "old, old words"[236] as he labels them – were incapable of conveying the individual nature of experience. This anxiety, in turn, led to an inevitable digression in forms of representation and the techniques of literary Impressionism were a fitting alternative. *Heart of Darkness* is a text that seeks to address the impasse between the limited and confined scope of words, and the unlimited, plural nature of individual experience. Whilst it may not always successfully do so, Conrad's text is punctuated by doubts and questions regarding the suitability of the standards of representation that it deviates from. In doing so, Conrad set a precedent for the works of literary Modernism that would follow it.

In the *Creative Mind,* Henri Bergson describes the impossibility of representation through language because of what he terms "the always imperfect translation."[237] A sentiment reinforced by Bakhtin when he writes, in *Discourse in the Novel* that "no living word relates to its object in a *singular* way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that it is often difficult to penetrate."[238] So difficult, that a new standard of

[234] Emery, "The Politics of Form: Jean Rhys's Social Vision in *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea,*" 419.
[235] Conrad, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus,'* 10.
[236] Conrad, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus',* 9.
[237] Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 162.
[238] Bakhtin, *Discourse in the Novel,* 276.

representation in art was required to provide the techniques necessary to attempt to do so. As a consequence, "[i]n the literary arena," as Abigail Palko writes, "modernism prevailed aesthetically as experimentations with language and narrative structure reshaped literary representations of a new shattered reality; through breaking formalist imperatives, modernist writers signalled the aesthetic, social, and cultural break with the past."[239]

This thesis illustrated how a philosophical awareness of the subjectivity of perception manifested in literature, how modern writers sought to represent the world in a philosophical climate where "[s]ufficient representation demands many tellings, and the story full story comes out only as alternative versions present its different sides." As Jesse Matz Writes, "[c]orrelative to this is a belief in the relativity of truth. Modern novels deal in no absolutes – moral, perceptual, or cultural. Rather, they take truth to be a relative thing, contingent upon circumstances, changing with time and place."[240]

This thesis situates the three texts discussed on a conceptual trajectory that links the objective aims of nineteenth-century realism with an awareness of the relativity of truth that characterise literary works of Modernism into the twentieth-century. But literary works in general need to be understood not merely as a passive description of the conditions of society that they exist within, but as an act, a work that intervenes in the social system, attempts to make sense of it and ultimately improve it. The three texts discussed in this thesis, are linked by their thematic preoccupation with colonialism and the imperial project. But as John Marx describes, "revisions of *Heart of Darkness,* have served not only to reconfigure interpretations of a key work in the Western canon but also to provide a medium for exchange among writers and critics."[241] In doing so – and the same can be said for Rhys's work – it contributes towards "postcolonial literature's effort to teach readers to understand how local culture is messy everywhere, and especially in the former seat of the British Empire."[242] Discussing more contemporary examples, Marx turns to Arundhati Roy and Zadie Smith, suggesting that "[t]he challenge confronting visitors to Smith's London neighbourhoods or Roy's Keralite homes is not one of distinguishing the colonizer's culture from that of the colonized in order to repudiate or rewrite it. The colonizer's culture, Smith assures us, will prove just as impure in its origins as the colonial situation it creates elsewhere."[243]

Marlow's anxiety is an early instantiation of this perspective. Marx's assessment had its origins in works such as the three discussed in this thesis, works that were willing to digress from the normative expectations of society at the

[239] Palko, "Colonial Modernism's Thwarted Maternity: Elizabeth Bowen's *The House in Paris* and Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark,"* 90.
[240] Matz, "The Novel," 219.
[241] Marx, "Postcolonial Literature and the Western Literary Canon," 90.
[242] Marx, "Postcolonial Literature and the Western Literary Canon," 94.
[243] Marx, "Postcolonial Literature and the Western Literary Canon," 94.

time in which they were written. *Heart of Darkness, Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* each address the insufficiencies of language in communicating the individual experiences of their respective protagonists and offer new techniques of addressing such a deficit. These techniques – Conrad's hypodiegesis and delayed decoding; Rhys's lack of objective description, multiperspectival narration and intertextuality – digress far enough away from traditional forms of representation that we now determine them works of literary Modernism. But such a retrospective label does not mean that they no longer contribute anything to art or contemporary cultural conditions. Whilst Modernism is understood as an aesthetic response to philosophical conditions around the turn of the twentieth century, it is still relevant today. Modernism's desire for change perpetuates a development that continues to exert its effect on the novel. As Jesse Matz writes, "novels might yet be modern, or the forms of the old modern novel might yet be vital to culture today."[244] Modernism's desire for change is integral to the contemporary pursuit of literature and its attempts to share the experiences and understandings of different perspectives. It is an imperative part of literature's attempt, just as Conrad determined in 1897, "by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see. That – and no more, and it is everything."[245]

[244] Matz, *The Modern Novel: A Short Introduction,* 13.
[245] Conrad, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, 9.

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