

Discuss the relation between narrative style and moral judgement in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

The relation between narrative style and moral judgement in literature is an issue in aesthetic philosophy that stretches back to Plato. 'Narrative style', I define as those formal literary aspects employed by the writer, in order to construct a narrative that is unique. By 'moral judgement', I refer to the message conveyed by a given text when referring to objects beyond itself. The above question presupposes a relation between narrative style and moral judgement, and as such, part of my analysis will be to determine whether such a presupposition is warranted. Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* has been celebrated for its detailed examination of European values and conduct. Ian Watt argues that '*Heart of Darkness* embodies more thoroughly than any previous fiction the posture of uncertainty and doubt.'¹ But is this reading accurate? And if so, what stylistic devices does Conrad use in order to convey this position of 'uncertainty'?

Heart of Darkness uses an oblique narrative style, that is to say, that an unnamed narrator relates the narrative as it is in turn related to him by Marlow, Conrad's main protagonist in the novella. It is thus we can be told that for Marlow:

'the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of those misty halos that are sometimes made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.'²

¹ Ian Watt, *Impressionism and Symbolism in Heart of Darkness* in Robert Kimbrough, ed. *Heart of Darkness: A Norton Critical Edition*, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 1988) p. 316

² Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Hampson (London: Penguin, 1995) p. 18. All quotations are from this edition.