

## JOSEPH CONRAD AND EXPERIENTIAL NARRATION<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article argues that Joseph Conrad routinely employed a narrative of immediacy (one where the narrators chronicled events as if they were unfolding at that very moment), rather than a narrative of retrospect (one where the narrator looks back on prior events, often attempting to clarify or comment on them along the way). Conrad chooses various methods to achieve this effect, especially what Ian Watt once coined “delayed decoding,” where a character experiences phenomena one way, only to revise that perception shortly thereafter. Other techniques Conrad uses include limited angles of view, where a narrator presents only the limited range of a character’s individual view of phenomena, and distinctions between the narrator and the narrator as character, where what is narrated represents not what the narrator knows at the time of narration but what the character did not know at the time of experience.

**Keywords:** Joseph Conrad, immediacy, narration, delayed decoding, limited angle of view

Early in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), the frame narrator famously characterizes Marlow’s uncharacteristic chronicles:

The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical [...], and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.<sup>2</sup>

This passage has been much discussed, suggesting, for instance, the impressionist and symbolist nature of the tale,<sup>3</sup> its parabolic meaning embedded within its atmosphere,<sup>4</sup> or its counter construction of the conventional frame form.<sup>5</sup> Edward W.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this essay appeared as part of my book *Joseph Conrad and the Narration of Silence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. John G. Peters (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2019), p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 169-170, 180.

<sup>4</sup> J. Hillis Miller, “Heart of Darkness Revisited,” in *Conrad Revisited: Essays for the Eighties*, ed. Ross C. Murfin (University: University of Alabama Press, 1985), pp. 33-35.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), pp. 256-257.

Said echoes the frame narrator when speaking of Conrad's narrators: "Their subject is illusory, or shadowy, or dark: that is, whatever by nature is not easy to see. So much at least is ascertainable by the sheer telling of the tale, for what the tale usually reveals is the exact contours of this obscurity."<sup>6</sup> Such views (along with others) have been quite insightful, but I would like to investigate instead the way Marlow supplements his words with his experience.

The contrast the frame narrator asserts challenges the trend that the meaning of the typical sailor tale exists solely in the tale itself: that is, in what is said (the shell of the nut); in contrast, much of Marlow's meaning meanders amongst the atmosphere evoked by the tale (the haze surrounding the nut). The frame narrator later reinforces this insistence: "I listened, I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me a clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips,"<sup>7</sup> but any "clue" to a tale that shapes itself "without human lips" emerges not in what is said but in what is unsaid.

Late in part two of *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow is recounting his Congo experience, when one of his listeners responds, "Absurd."<sup>8</sup> This comment causes Marlow to break off from his tale, and when he starts speaking again, he laments, "This is the worst of trying to tell. [...] Here you all are, each moored with two good addresses, like a hulk with two anchors, a butcher round one corner, a policeman round another, excellent appetites, and temperature normal – you hear – normal from year's end to year's end."<sup>9</sup> Marlow fully recognizes the difficulty of communicating his nearly incommunicable experience and points to a primary reason for this failure when he declares, "You 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."<sup>10</sup> All of this, he insists, allows them to understand their experience in England but prevents them from understanding Marlow's experience in the Congo.

Marlow (like so many of Conrad narrators) seeks collapse the gap between what one says and what one wishes to say by narrating events so that his listeners participate (at least in part) in what Marlow participated in, and thus they are not left solely with Marlow's words to apprehend his unsettling ordeal. Marlow recognizes that he can communicate his Congo encounter only if his listeners can, in some way, encounter that "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."<sup>11</sup> Marlow signals this struggle to express his experience through his words, while conversely signalling that words can only approximate experience and must instead be encountered in that "particular region" outside words

<sup>6</sup> Edward W. Said, "Conrad: The Presentation of Narrative," *Novel 7*, no. 2 (Winter 1974), p. 120.

<sup>7</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, pp. 83-84.

<sup>8</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 108.

<sup>9</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 108.

<sup>10</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 109.

<sup>11</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 110.

(the haze surrounding the shell). Ultimately, the experience itself, which resides largely outside the words which attempt to describe it, can convey more conclusively than can words alone how the Congo controverted Marlow's conception of the cosmos.

The narrator of "Karain" (1897) similarly complains that to conclusively communicate the experience of Karain's tale,

One must have seen his innate splendour, one must have known him before – looked at him then. The wavering gloom of the little cabin; the breathless stillness outside, through which only the lapping of water against the schooner's sides could be heard; [...] Karain's upright and motionless pose, his tone – all this made an impression that cannot be forgotten.<sup>12</sup>

For the narrator, Karain's story is a memory that is "undying,"<sup>13</sup> but, like Marlow, he believes that only by engaging the accoutrements associated with the tale's telling (the haze surrounding it) could his audience fully feel its effect. Neither the influence of Karain's tale on the narrator nor the influence of the Congo on Marlow can be conveyed wholly through words but must somehow be suggested through the event itself.

The narrator of "Karain" bemoans his inability to communicate his experience conclusively and accepts his rendering as "imperfect," but Marlow attempts to transcend the very limitations the narrator of "Karain" acquiesces to. To do so, Marlow, and so many other Conrad narrators, must narrate their tales so that they allow their audience to participate (wherever possible) in what his narrators have witnessed. To be sure, these narrators are still limited by the limitations of language, and they still address their audiences by means of words (the shell of the nut), but the closer they can come to translating the event itself into the way they speak the words they speak (the haze surrounding the nut), the closer they can come to complete communication. Consequently, such narrators regularly employ what I term a narrative of immediacy.

In the conventional narrative, the narrative of retrospect, narrators relate past experiences less as they were experienced originally than as they are now perceived, or they are recalled from the vantage of hindsight, while interpreting them along the way. In contrast, a narrative of immediacy presents events as if they were being lived at that very moment.

This narration of immediacy is in closet keeping with Conrad's artistic manifesto, which mandates transmitting experience itself:

And art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe[.] [. . .] It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colours, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter and in the facts of life, what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential – their one illuminating and convincing quality – the very truth of their existence.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph Conrad, "Karain," in *Tales of Unrest*, eds. Allan H. Simmons and J. H. Stape (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 29.

<sup>13</sup> Conrad, "Karain," pp. 29.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* in Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Sharer and Other Stories*, ed. John G. Peters (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015), p. 139.

Conrad goes on to suggest that for art to be effective it “must be an impression conveyed through the *senses*; and, in fact, it *cannot* be made in any other way.”<sup>15</sup> Ford Madox Ford corroborates Conrad’s contention and contends himself that he and Conrad “saw that Life did not narrate, but made impressions on our brains. We in turn, if we wished to produce on you an effect of life, must not narrate but render impressions.”<sup>16</sup> To achieve this effect, Conrad famously seeks “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.”<sup>17</sup> The focus of Conrad’s aesthetics then lies in transmitting the actuality and materiality of every episode. He seeks to transmit this materiality by placing the reader (and listener where present) into a state of immediacy, in effect into a position to partake of an event through sensory impressions, as if the reader were standing next to the experiencing individual. In other words, his narrators attempt to recount events in such a way that the audience at least approximates or perhaps – ideally – replicates those events in their mind’s eye. In this way, during Conrad’s narratives of immediacy, his readers “hear,” “feel” and “*see*,” and that, Conrad insists, is “everything,” because when they “hear,” “feel” and “*see*,” they participate in the experience, and the character’s experience becomes the reader’s experience.

Conrad constructs narrators who of course already know the outcome of the events to be narrated (with third-person narrators) or who have already experienced the events to be narrated (with first-person narrators), and since both first-person and third-person narrators know the outcome of the tales they tell, a gap materializes between what the narrator knows and what the characters know – even when the narrator is also a character.

When first-person narrators engage in a narrative of immediacy, they recount their past as if it were the present, while third-person narrators recount their characters’ past as if it were the present. Both present the phenomena of their stories as if they were evolving before them, but when both first-person and third-person narrators are present, in a frame narrative, the mode is augmented. In such narratives, immediacy appears in the space between the knowledge the frame narrators possess at the time of narration and the ignorance they experienced while discovering the nested narrator’s experience. Invariably, although completely cognizant of the nested narrator’s experience from inception to conclusion, Conrad’s frame narrators recreate their role as audience to the nested narrator’s tale and narrate primarily through immediacy, rehearsing events as they unfolded in front of them while listening to the nested narrator. At such narrative moments, the reader recognizes a tension between the narrators’ knowledge and that of the characters, and in these moments the reader must experience concurrently the narrators’ accumulated knowledge along with the characters’ accumulating knowledge.

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<sup>15</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”* p. 140; emphasis is mine.

<sup>16</sup> Ford (Hueffer), Ford Madox, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1924), pp. 194-195.

<sup>17</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”* p. 41; emphasis in the original.

Narrative immediacy is thus exponential among Conrad's many frame narratives. Both *Heart of Darkness* and *Chance* (1914) (to name just two) contain multiple layers of participatory narration. When Marlow chronicles his encounter with the Congo, he does so through immediacy. So too, though, does the novel's frame narrator. Just as Marlow could have translated his African adventure into a narrative of retrospect, the frame narrator could have done the same, giving his readers a different experience from that of Marlow's listeners, one that muted the mystery, bewilderment, and confusion that Marlow's listeners heard (including the frame narrator himself). But by maintaining Marlow's narrative of immediacy, the frame narrator replicates the experience of Marlow's listeners, and the reader too participates in Marlow's collision with Kurtz and the Congo.

*Chance* takes this effect still further. As in *Heart of Darkness*, a frame narrator rehearses Marlow's adventure, but unlike in *Heart of Darkness*, an additional narrative layer exists. In *Heart of Darkness*, a frame narrator relates the tale that Marlow tells him, but in *Chance* Marlow routinely rehearses the experience of other characters, such as Powell. In such scenes, not only does Powell, for example, relate his story through a narrative of immediacy, but so too do both Marlow and the frame narrator. Again, each narrator could have presented the scene through a narrative of retrospect, but each chooses immediacy instead. Consequently, Marlow (as listener of Powell's tale) participates in Powell's experience; the frame narrator (as listener of Marlow's tale) participates in Powell's experience (through Marlow's recounting of it); and the reader (as reader of the frame narrator's tale) participates in Powell's experience (through the frame narrator's recounting of Marlow's recounting of it). *Chance* and *Heart of Darkness* represent the rule rather than the exception, and Conrad's numerous other frame narratives maintain this same level of immediacy layering, each frame narrative presenting narrative immediacy at least two narrators deep.

All of this is complicated by what Jakob Lothe characterizes as a difference in *Heart of Darkness* between Marlow the narrator and Marlow the character: "In addition to the frame narrator, the most essential elements of the narrative method of 'Heart of Darkness' are constituted by Marlow's functions as narrator and character."<sup>18</sup> I would like to appropriate and augment this valuable dichotomy, as it appears in *Heart of Darkness* but also as it appears throughout Conrad's canon, in order to investigate the interchange between narrator and character – wherever his narrators are also crucial contributors to the occasion of the tale.

Among other effects, this relationship between narrator and character is crucial to the narrative of immediacy, because although Conrad's narratives of immediacy communicate as much through what is unsaid as through what is said, this communication is often delayed, and initially the reader may experience ignorance before insight. Conrad's narrators relate such scenes not according to the knowledge present in the narrator's mind but rather according to the knowledge absent from the character's mind; in other words, not according to what the narrator knows but according to

<sup>18</sup> Jakob Lothe, *Conrad's Narrative Method* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 22.

what the character does not know. These narrators (whether first-person or third-person) supplement their words with the character's experience and in this manner come closer to communicating the actuality that occurred. By doing so, rather than solely being told *about* an event, the reader (and listener when present) is permitted to experience the event and participate in the character's perception of it.

In *Heart of Darkness*, the scene where Marlow discovers the marginalia in *An Inquiry into Some Points of Seamanship* is one of immediacy. At the time he tells his tale, Marlow the narrator is of course fully cognizant that the marginal notes are Cyrillic characters, and so when he insists, "I couldn't believe my eyes"<sup>19</sup> upon finding that the marginalia "were in cipher!,"<sup>20</sup> he expresses Marlow the character's astonishment, not Marlow the narrator's, and in the same way that Marlow the character does not discover that the writings are in Russian until he later meets the Russian, Marlow's listeners do not discover that same revelation until Marlow the character meets the Russian. In the interim between Marlow the character's discovering the book and his meeting the Russian, Marlow the character and Marlow the narrator's listeners both believe that he has found a book containing coded marginalia because Marlow the narrator has engaged in a narrative of immediacy.

Given the staging of this scene, Conrad's first-time readers experience this same effect, because only through experiencing Marlow the character's bewilderment and mistake (as they too do not learn the true nature of the marginalia until they too meet the Russian) can Conrad convey Marlow the character's state of mistaken presumption. Had Marlow the narrator simply stated that he originally thought the marginalia were in cipher only to discover later that they were in Cyrillic, the audience (Marlow's listeners and Conrad's readers) would have learned the true nature of the marginalia and that Marlow mistook Cyrillic for cipher, but they would not have experienced – alongside him – Marlow the character's confusion and unwitting ignorance during the interim between finding the book and meeting the Russian. In this way, the immediacy of the narrative communicates what was unsayable solely through words.

In creating a narrative of immediacy, in contrast to a narrative of retrospect, Conrad works with various techniques. When Marlow, for instance, rehearses a conversation he overhears between the central station manager and his uncle, he marshals both modes – immediacy and retrospect:

I laid my head on my arm again, and had nearly lost myself in a doze, when somebody said in my ear, as it were: "I am as harmless as a little child, but I don't like to be dictated to. Am I the manager – or am I not? I was ordered to send him there. It's incredible." [...] I did not move; it did not occur to me to move: I was sleepy. "It is unpleasant," grunted the uncle. "He has asked the Administration to be sent there," said the other, "with the idea of showing what he could do; and I was instructed accordingly. Look at the influence that man must have. Is it not frightful?"<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>20</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 97.

<sup>21</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 88.

A traditional narrator would have merely rendered this experience in the manner of what Ford Madox Ford once called a “corrected chronicle,”<sup>22</sup> that is, Marlow the narrator, having long since processed this event based upon subsequent events, could have rendered what he heard in typical dialogue form – with no holes in statement or understanding. Instead, Marlow’s listeners participate in Marlow the character’s confused condition when he overheard this conversation, where he did not know whom the company ordered the manager to send where. Marlow the narrator eventually allows himself a small “correction” to the chronicle when he momentarily shifts to a narration of retrospect and divulges what he only later deduced: “They had been talking about Kurtz.”<sup>23</sup> Here Marlow narrates retrospectively through the distance of time (having long since left Africa), but he quickly resumes his narrative of immediacy:

The two below me moved away then a few paces, and strolled back and forth at some little distance. I heard: “Military post – doctor – two hundred miles – quite alone now – unavoidable delays – nine months – no news – strange rumours.” They approached again, just as the manager was saying, “No one, as far as I know, unless a species of wandering trader – a pestilential fellow, snapping ivory from the natives.”<sup>24</sup>

Once more, Marlow the narrator has long since pieced together this part of their palaver (again based on later events), but he allows his listeners to listen in, alongside Marlow the character, who hears less of the conversation when he dozes off and more when he wakes, and less when the speakers walk away and more when they approach again. In so doing, Marlow engages in a narrative of immediacy, recreating Marlow the character’s experience at that instant.

Marlow the narrator completes this passage with the query, “Who was it they were talking about now?”<sup>25</sup> In asking the identity of the “wandering trader,” then, Marlow the narrator is not asking for his own knowledge; rather he is asking the question that Marlow the character asked himself at the time, thus causing his listeners to ask the same question – only to leave their query unanswered until much later when Marlow the character meets the Russian. Marlow’s listeners endure a rift between the time Marlow asks this question and the time he reveals his conversation with the Russian, just as Marlow the character endured a similar rift, remaining ignorant of the identity of the “wandering trader” until he later met the Russian. The relationship between Marlow the narrator and Marlow the character, an example of narrative immediacy,

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<sup>22</sup> Commenting on how the conventional narrator chronicles events, Ford insists that fiction “is not a sort of rounded, annotated record of a set of circumstances – [...] it is the impression, not the corrected chronicle” – Ford (Hueffer), Ford Madox, “On Impressionism: Part 1,” *Poetry and Drama* 2, no. 6 (June 1914), p. 174. Ford accuses the conventional narrator of rearranging and clarifying events into a smooth chronology rather than chronicling them in the haphazard manner Ford claims individuals typically encounter the disparate elements of most events. See also Ford, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance*, pp. 136-137.

<sup>23</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 88.

<sup>24</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 89.

<sup>25</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 89.

results in a wholly different experience for Marlow's listeners than if they had only experienced Marlow the narrator's retrospective rendering of reality.

*Chance* includes a variation on this kind of narrative immediacy, but in this instance, limited angle of view determines the immediacy. Powell is sitting in the skylight seat on the deck of the *Ferndale* when he leans down to peer through the window. In this position, Powell discloses:

[M]y angle of view was changed. The field too was smaller. The end of the table, the tray and the swivel-chair I had right under my eyes. [...] The piano I could not see; but on the other hand I had a very oblique downward view of the curtains drawn across the cabin and cutting off the forward part of it just about the level of the skylight-end and only an inch or so from the end of the table.<sup>26</sup>

From this limited vantage, Powell suddenly sees "an unaccountable movement of the curtain" in the supposedly unoccupied room below. He initially assumes this movement is "a trick of imagination" but is then "startled to observe tips of fingers fumbling" with the drink Captain Anthony had left for later. The fingers then "grasped the edge of the further curtain and hung on there, just fingers and knuckles and nothing else."<sup>27</sup> Powell then discovers that de Barral has poisoned Anthony's drink, but instead of employing a narrative of retrospect and stating that from the start, Powell invites Marlow (his listener) to see the scene through Powell's eyes, so that Marlow sees only a portion of the room below, only an unexpected movement of the curtain, only the tips of fingers fumbling with the drink, and experiences a corresponding gap in knowledge until Powell later reveals what he himself only later learns of the situation. Marlow then recreates the immediacy of this scene when he recounts it to the frame narrator, who similarly recreates its immediacy to the reader. As a result, Marlow, the frame narrator and the reader see the same scene that Powell saw (or at least a near replica).

"The Brute" (1906) presents a more elaborate instance of this manner of narrative immediacy. The unnamed first-person narrator clearly indicates that he is about to recount events that unfolded decades previously. He mentions having exchanged smiles with Miss Blank when he entered the Three Crows bar, and then exclaims: "It's a shock to think that if still alive Miss Blank must be something over sixty now. How time passes!"<sup>28</sup> While telling his tale, however, he relates events as if he were experiencing them at the very moment he recounts them. After exchanging smiles with Miss Blank, the narrator as character in the story (the narrator-character) proceeds towards the parlour when he hears a voice that "rose so loudly that the concluding words became quite plain in all their atrocity," asserting, "That fellow Wilmot fairly dashed her brains out – and a good job too!"<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Chance*, ed. Martin Ray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 307.

<sup>27</sup> Conrad, *Chance*, p. 308.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph Conrad, "The Brute," in *A Set of Six*, ed. Allan H. Simmons and Michael Foster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 89.

<sup>29</sup> Conrad, "The Brute," p. 89.

The narrator-character is surprised that this “inhuman sentiment” did not “do as much as to check the slight yawn Miss Blank was achieving behind her hand,”<sup>30</sup> and when the narrator-character opens the parlour door, the voice continues: “I was glad when I heard she got the knock from somebody at last. Sorry enough for poor Wilmot, though. [...] Of course that was the end of him.”<sup>31</sup> The narrator, who hereafter assumes the role of frame narrator to the speaker’s tale, approaches the table where are seated two acquaintances, Jermyn and Mr. Stonor, along with the unknown speaker (Ned), who emphatically reiterates:

I was glad of it[.] You may be surprised at it, but then you haven’t gone through the experience I’ve had of her. I can tell you, it was something to remember. [...] She did her best to break up my pluck for me, though. She jolly near drove as fine a fellow as ever lived [Ned’s brother] into a madhouse. [...] It used to make me sick to think of her going about the world murdering people.<sup>32</sup>

At this instant, the reader may think that some woman “going about the world murdering people” explains Miss Blank’s apathetic response to Ned’s being glad of her death, but if so the reader, like the narrator-character, would be wrong. Jermyn then interrupts Ned’s story and interjects, “I’ve seen her once[.] She had a house...,”<sup>33</sup> to which the raconteur responds:

It was old Colchester’s notion, though he was always threatening to give her up. He couldn’t stand her racket any more, he declared; it was too much of a good thing for him; he would wash his hands of her if he never got hold of another – and so on. I daresay he would have chucked her, only – it may surprise you – his missus wouldn’t hear of it. [...] And Mr Apse shook both Mrs Colchester’s hands, he was so pleased to hear a good word said for their favourite. All these Apses, young and old you know, were perfectly infatuated with that abominable, dangerous.<sup>34</sup>

At this point (some twelve hundred words into the story), the narrator-character finally breaks in: “I beg your pardon, but who on earth are you talking about?”<sup>35</sup> Ned replies, “I am talking of the Apse family.”<sup>36</sup> This reply does nothing to enlighten the narrator, since he does not learn for several more minutes (and yet another three hundred words for the reader) that “the Apse family” is the name of a ship. Further facilitating immediacy, not until the narrator-character learns that this is the name of a ship does the narrator, in his position as frame narrator to Ned’s tale, record the ship’s name in italics (as he does subsequently).

Only now does the narrator-character’s perception and the reader’s perception of the preceding conversation shift dramatically, as both reassess Ned’s previous comments in the context of this revelation and thus now perceive very differently the events that had been chronicled. Upon finally learning that Ned speaks not of

<sup>30</sup> Conrad, “The Brute,” p. 89.

<sup>31</sup> Conrad, “The Brute,” p. 89.

<sup>32</sup> Conrad, “The Brute,” p. 90.

<sup>33</sup> Conrad, “The Brute,” p. 90.

<sup>34</sup> Conrad, “The Brute,” p. 91.

<sup>35</sup> Conrad, “The Brute,” p. 92.

<sup>36</sup> Conrad, “The Brute,” p. 92.

a woman but of a ship, the narrator-character's reaction and (presumably) the reader's reaction to Ned's tale alters, as does their horror at hearing of Wilmot's actions and their equally horrified reaction to the nonchalance of Miss Blank, Jermyn, and Mr. Stonor upon hearing of Wilmot's dashing "her brains out" and to Ned's repeated insistence that he "was glad of it." The responses of the narrator-character and the reader are now out of proportion with the actual situation. Instead, they may well come to concur with the responses of Jermyn, Mr. Stonor, and Miss Blank – and with Ned's sentiment.

More important, though, the frame narrator, who clearly indicated that these events occurred many years ago, knows when he begins his tale that "the Apse Family" is the name of a ship (unbeknownst to the narrator-character and the reader), but by relating events as he first experienced them, he recreates the bewilderment of his younger self and causes the reader to experience the same. Only by overhearing Ned, alongside the narrator-character, does the reader receive the emphatic effect of befuddlement where the narrator-character originally arrived when he thought that Wilmot had dashed the brains out of a woman. Because of the limitations of language, a narrative of retrospect could not have captured the narrator's confused condition. Had the narrator never asked of whom the storyteller had been speaking, or, more dramatically, had he been sitting at a nearby table and simply overheard the stranger's insisting that it was "a good job" that Wilmot had "fairly dashed her brains out" and that he was "glad" when he "heard she got the knock from somebody at last,"<sup>37</sup> and had the narrator rose in disgust at Ned's sentiment and the nonchalant responses of Jermyn, Mr. Stonor, and Miss Blank and exited the bar, he would have remained forever horrified at the memory, as would the reader, because the reader participates in the narrator's reaction to what he hears.<sup>38</sup>

One of Conrad's most well-known and most successful techniques for creating narrative immediacy is what Ian Watt first termed "delayed decoding."<sup>39</sup> With delayed decoding, narrators recount incidents in which they (in first-person accounts) or other characters (in third-person accounts) first perceives phenomena one way only shortly thereafter to perceive those same phenomena another way. Typically, revised perceptions come about once the experiencing character recognizes that a perception is at odds with context: natural laws, normal circumstances, or past experience. This technique has understandably engendered much discussion in terms of epistemology,<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Conrad, "The Brute," p. 92.

<sup>38</sup> Other incidents of narrative immediacy include: *The Secret Agent*, ed. Tanya Agathocleous (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2009), p. 48; "Freya of the Seven Isles," in *Twixt Land and Sea*, eds. J. A. Berthoud, Laura L. Davis and S. W. Reid (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 131; *Heart of Darkness*, p. 120; "Prince Roman," in *Tales of Hearsay*, Uniform edition (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page, 1925), p. 38; "A Smile of Fortune," in *Twixt Land and Sea*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>39</sup> "Pink Toads and Yellow Curs: An Impressionist Narrative Device in 'Lord Jim,'" *Joseph Conrad Colloquy in Poland, 5-12 September 1972*, ed. Róża Jabłkowska (Wrocław: Polish Academy of Sciences, 1975), pp. 11-31. Watt later expanded his discussion of this concept (see Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, pp. 174-180, 270-286).

<sup>40</sup> Along with Watt, see, for example, Bruce Johnson, "Conrad's Impressionism and Watt's 'Delayed Decoding,'" in *Conrad Revisited: Essays for the Eighties*, pp. 51-70; Johan Adam Warodell, *Conrad's*

but what interests me here is the phenomenon's relationship to the narrative of immediacy.

In one form, delayed decoding occurs as a consequence of perceptual interference: that is, when the physical, cultural, or personal context surrounding a character's perception is at odds with ordinary or anticipated circumstances. In these incidents of what I call circumstantial delayed decoding, unusual or unexpected circumstances bring about delayed decoding, final perceptions not arriving until the character has already experienced other discrete and different perceptions.

A dramatic demonstration of circumstantial delayed decoding occurs during the storm in *Typhoon* (1902), where delayed decoding is incited by an unexpected physical confrontation:

After a crushing thump on his [Jukes's] back he found himself suddenly afloat and borne upwards. His first irresistible notion was that the whole China Sea had climbed on the bridge. Then, more sanely, he concluded himself gone overboard. All the time he was being tossed, flung, and rolled in great volumes of water.<sup>41</sup>

The physical blow of such a great quantity of water causes Jukes initially to perceive "the whole China Sea" flooding the bridge. He quickly recognizes this to be impossible and then somewhat ironically perceives "more sanely" that he has been swept off the ship. Jukes then finally perceives that he is being "tossed, flung, and rolled in great volumes of water" but is still on board the *Nan-Shan*. Jukes does not perceive one thing and then correct that perception, though.<sup>42</sup> Instead, he actually perceives the whole China Sea (or a large portion of it) come crashing aboard; then he perceives that he has been washed overboard; and then he perceives he is still on board but being thrown about by the water on the bridge.

A conventional narrator would have simply said, "An enormous quantity of water crashed on to the bridge and Jukes mistakenly thought that he had been washed overboard, but he survived the wave, although he found himself tossed around by the water." By describing the scene instead through Jukes's perceptual stutterings, the narrator replicates Jukes's actual experience, while also delaying the reader's recognition that the water is battering Jukes about the bridge, because when Jukes sees "the whole China Sea" come aboard, the reader sees "the whole China Sea" come aboard, and when Jukes sees himself swept off the deck, the reader sees Jukes swept off the

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*Decentered Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 71-93; Hugh Epstein, *Hardy, Conrad and the Senses* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), pp. 34 and my *Conrad and Impressionism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 37-42. This concept, as Epstein notes (p. 34), also bears some similarities to Ramon Fernandez's discussion of Conrad's narrative processes – Ramon Fernandez, "The Art of Conrad," in *Messages*, trans. Montgomery Belgion (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927), pp. 137-151. While the term "delayed decoding" has become established nomenclature, several scholars (including myself) have questioned the accuracy of its representation. Bruce Johnson first balked at Watt's description of the epistemology involved (p. 53). Epstein has most recently questioned the term, recommending instead "delayed encoding," arguing that what occurs is an encoding process rather than a decoding process (p. 34; emphasis in the original).

<sup>41</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Typhoon*, in Conrad, *The Secret Sharer and Other Stories*, p. 285.

<sup>42</sup> See Johnson, "Conrad's Impressionism," p. 53.

deck, and not until Jukes sees himself still aboard the *Nan-Shan* but being buffeted by water does the reader see Jukes still aboard but being buffeted by water. In relating this event as it appears to Jukes at the moment he experienced it, the narrator has caused readers to experience, in their mind's eye, Jukes's ordeal alongside him, communicating in part through the experience itself rather than only through words.

*The Shadow-Line* (1917) includes a comparable bewildering progression of perceptions. The captain recounts the scene one step at a time before reaching his final perception. While walking on deck one night, the captain relates: "all of a sudden, I fell clean over something, landing full length on my hands and face. It was something big and alive. Not a dog – more like a sheep, rather," but the captain recalls that "there were no animals in the ship" and then wonders, "How could an animal. [...]" With no animals aboard, the captain then sees, "It – that Thing! [...] There It was!" At this point, the captain shifts to a moment of retrospect and narrates after the fact (as a conventional narrator would): "But I did not hit upon the notion of Mr. Burns issuing out of the companion on all fours till he attempted to stand up, and even then the idea of a bear crossed my mind first."<sup>43</sup> If the captain had continued his narrative of immediacy and recounted his actual sequence of perceptions, after noting his altered perception from "something big and alive" to a "dog" or a "sheep" to "It," he would have then revealed that he saw a "bear" and then "Mr. Burns," and the reader too would have seen first a bear and then Mr. Burns, whereas, in this moment of retrospect, the reader sees only Mr. Burns. Still, the captain achieves the effect of placing the reader in his place for the initial perceptual progression so that the reader sees "something big and alive" then a "dog" then a "sheep" and then "It," even though the captain fails to finish out the progression from "It" to "bear" to "Mr Burns." In fact, by shifting from narration by immediacy to narration by retrospect, Conrad dramatically displays the different influence on the reader's perception when narrating by immediacy rather than retrospect.<sup>44</sup>

Each of these incidents involves some degree of change (physical or personal) from normal circumstances and causes the perceiver to experience delayed decoding and thus places the audience in the position of the character. Another variation of delayed decoding, however, also appears in Conrad's works. Unlike incidents where abnormal circumstances cause characters to perceive through delayed decoding, in this variation, no direct physical, cultural, or personal context influences the perceiver's perception. Instead, the perceiver simply sees something one way only subsequently to see that same thing another way. We might call such incidents uncircumstantial delayed decoding.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph Conrad, *The Shadow-Line*, in Conrad, *The Secret Sharer and Other Stories*, p. 124.

<sup>44</sup> Other instances of circumstantial delayed decoding include: "The Return," in *Tales of Unrest*, pp. 117-118; *Almayer's Folly*, ed. Peter Lancelot Mallios (New York: Modern Library, 2002), pp. 125-126; *The Shadow-Line*, pp. 122-123; "Youth," in *Youth, Heart of Darkness, The End of the Tether*, ed. John Lyon (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 26; "The Secret Sharer," in *The Secret Sharer and Other Stories*, pp. 11-12; *Lord Jim*, ed. Cedric Watts (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2001), p. 275; "An Outpost of Progress," in *Tales of Unrest*, p. 96), and *Nostramo*, eds. Jacques Berthoud and Mara Kalins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 307-308.

An incident of uncircumstantial delayed decoding occurs in “The Idiots” (1896). Near the end of the story, Susan Bacadou is standing on the edge of a cliff while Millot is talking to her when she “at once vanished before his eyes as if the islet itself had swerved aside from under her feet. Millot rushed forward, and fell flat with his chin over the edge. Far below he saw the water whitened by her struggles.”<sup>45</sup> Millot’s physical, cultural or personal circumstances are not at odds with normal perceptual contexts, and yet he nevertheless experiences delayed decoding when he sees the islet swerve. This physical impossibility then forces Millot to view the incident as Susan jumping (or falling) from the cliff, but he first saw the islet swerve from under her feet, just as the reader first saw the islet swerve before seeing Susan disappear into the sea. In this way, the narrator has conveyed (at least in part) Millot’s perception through the event itself rather than through the narrator’s words alone.

A particularly well-known incident of uncircumstantial delayed decoding demonstrably displays Marlow’s movement from first to final perception. Nothing in Marlow’s physical, cultural, or personal context seems to suggest circumstances sufficient to evoke an episode of delayed decoding. Nonetheless, such an episode transpires. As Marlow attempts to navigate a narrow channel of the river, he maintains that “[s]ticks, little sticks, were flying about – thick: they were whizzing before my nose, dropping below me, striking behind me against my pilot-house,”<sup>46</sup> at which point his listeners also see sticks flying about the pilot-house. Marlow continues, “I could only hear the heavy splashing thump of the stern-wheel and the patter of these things,” as his listeners also hear the “thump of the stern-wheel” and the patter of little sticks. Only when Marlow continues, “We cleared the snag [in the river] clumsily. Arrows, by Jove! We were being shot at!,”<sup>47</sup> can his listeners now see arrows being shot. Consequently, the same circumstances that existed for Marlow the character (and which Marlow the narrator appears to be reliving as he recounts this scene) exist for his listeners: they see sticks until they see arrows and hence experience the immediacy of Marlow the character’s experience, something they could not have engaged with had Marlow the narrator employed a narrative of retrospect and simply said that those on shore shot arrows at them that he initially thought were merely little sticks.

*The Secret Agent* (1907) reveals an unusually unique instance of uncircumstantial decoding, where Mrs. Verloc perceives not a single physical entity successively differently but conflates one entity with another, and where the reader both participates in and anticipates Mrs. Verloc’s perceptual evolution. At one point, Mrs. Verloc suddenly hears “a ticking sound in the room. It grew upon her ear, while she remembered clearly that the clock on the wall was silent, had no audible tick.”<sup>48</sup> She wonders, “What did it mean by beginning to tick so loudly all of a sudden?” and concludes that it cannot be the clock. “She strained her hearing to locate the sound. Tic, tic, tic” and then notices the carving knife protruding from her husband’s chest and that:

<sup>45</sup> Joseph Conrad, “The Idiots,” in *Tales of Unrest*, p. 73.

<sup>46</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 105.

<sup>47</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 105.

<sup>48</sup> Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, p. 221.

[...] something dripped from it. Dark drops fell on the floorcloth one after another, with a sound of ticking growing fast and furious like the pulse of an insane clock. At its highest speed this ticking changed into a continuous sound of trickling. [...] It was a trickle, dark, swift, thin. [...] Blood!<sup>49</sup>

Mrs. Verloc employs past experience to reassess her initial perception that the clock is audibly ticking. But unlike so many who experience delayed decoding, her reassessment does not lead to a new perception of the sound's source. Only her happenstance glance at the knife's handle causes her to hear a different source, but even then she first sees merely something dripping. Only the irregular pace of the dripping causes her suddenly to see that the object is blood. Like Mrs. Verloc, the reader also first hears the clock ticking, then sees something dripping, and then sees blood, but in this instance the reader's perception from "something" to blood shifts more quickly than Mrs. Verloc's, as the reader, for an infinitesimal instant, anticipates Mrs. Verloc's final perception.<sup>50</sup>

The foregoing incidents represent many of the methods Conrad's narrators utilize to present phenomena through immediacy, and they also represent Conrad's consistent concern that his readers participate in the events his narrators recount, events that could not be conveyed through words alone describing them in retrospect, words which can only partially explain any event, because, as the narrator of *Under Western Eyes* insists, words are "the great foes of reality."<sup>51</sup> Through immediacy, Conrad emphasizes the different effect of narration by experience rather than by memory, narration by event rather than by statement. The gap between merely relating events to readers and conscripting them to participate permits Conrad's readers to come closer to living through his narrators' experiences and permits his narrators to come closer to communicating their experiences completely. In so doing, they communicate less through the words they speak (the shell of the nut) than through the audience's participation in the events they speak (the haze enveloping it).

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<sup>49</sup> Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, p. 221.

<sup>50</sup> Other incidents of uncircumstantial delayed decoding include: "The Inn of the Two Witches," in *Within the Tides*, pp. 163-164; *Lord Jim*, p. 66; *Heart of Darkness*, p. 106 and *The Shadow-Line*, p. 107.

<sup>51</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, ed. John G. Peters (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2010).

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