UNIT 2 LITERARY ANALYSIS-I

Structure

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In 1.1, I quoted two recollections: one by Marlow, the other by Conrad himself; each recalls half-regretfully, half-wistfully his childhood fascination with maps. I wanted you to see the obvious parallels between them. In the meantime, you may have discovered some more similarities between the two of them. Does it mean that there is no essential difference between the two; and that there was no need for Conrad to invent Marlow? Was the need to invent Marlow in any way tied up with deeper questions related to race and nation? If yes, were there further ramifications in terms of style and narrative technique? In Unit 2, we shall explore these questions within the broader context of modernism.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Modernism was largely a reaction against romantic subjectivity. How effective the reaction was, has been a subject of many a debate between literary historians; but the issue is not of our immediate concern here. Rather, we are concerned with the role that Conrad was to play in this reaction or revolution. The chief protagonists of the revolution were yet to occupy centre-stage when Conrad's writing career got under way; and he was to be drawn into active modernist circles later. However, early on, he had started cultivating a literary friendship with the English editor-novelist-collaborator-friend, Ford Madox Ford (1873-1939), an instigator of modernism who was to cast a decisive influence on younger contemporaries.

Yet it was not Ford but T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) who gave the formulation of impersonality the vogue it soon acquired. This was to result in various distancing techniques, the dramatic monologue, for example. Prior to this, however, Conrad had presciently and consciously felt the need for distancing the narratorial voice from the personality of the author. This is where his fictional technique of impersonality connects him to the French realists, and looks forward to similar thrusts among the younger modernists. Distancing could be effected, he realised, multi-dimensionally: spatially, temporally, and through the use of multiple points of view. But Conrad's need was not merely aesthetic; i.e., it was not as if he wanted to make stylistic experiments for their artistic effect (not because of what has been called, in Nietzchean terms, the artist's "will to style"). (Nietzsche (1844-1900), as you know was a German philosopher who believed that only the strong ought to survive and his doctrine of the superman is expounded in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, *The Will to Power* etc.).

You will have to think of Conrad's situation at the time he began writing. He was a displaced Pole, with the experience of two great Empires—the Russian and the British—behind him. Having repudiated a past of the first he embraced the present of the second just as he had turned his back upon his successful sailing career in favour of an uncertain writing career in England.

Does the telling of a story have anything to do with these personal minutiae of the author, his life and times, and the larger social and political issues? As we have seen in the last unit, his ideological orientation is certainly governed by these. Questions of technique too, I shall insist, are inseparable from questions of ideological issues concerning the author. Consider the following observation of Frederick Jameson, the well-known Marxist critic:

> In such a situation [Jameson has been talking about the sociological history of the novel, the alienation of the printed book from the Flaubertian moment], it is abundantly clear that the Jamesian invention of point of view (or better still, Henry James's codification of this already existing technique, his transformation of it into the most fundamental of narrative categories, and the development around it of a whole aesthetic) is a genuinely historical act. The subject having been by the logic of social development stripped from its textual object, the latter must now be constructed in such a way as to bear the place of the former within itself.... What is perhaps less understood, even today, about the Jamesian aesthetic is the degree to which point of view is also part and parcel of a whole ideology.

Jameson's context is different even though he is discussing Conrad. But his thesis is no less relevant in the case of Conrad. We shall see this by and by.

2.2 TIME AND DISTANCE

2.2.1 Point Of View : A Point Of View

In your reading of the theory or technique of the English novel (especially in the early theorisation of the novel in say Henry James or Percy Lubbock) you may have already become acquainted with the concept of "point of view". In a realistic novel, generally speaking, the narrative voice is omniscient. The identification between the omniscient narrator or the implied author and the historical author is almost complete. He is the reliable narrator whose point of view is God's eye view, which decides what is right or wrong. Very little is left in terms of open-endedness and ambiguity. Some novelists departed from this and innovations are not unknown: a narrator introducing another who tells a tale. Even before, innovations can be noticed in such pre-novelistic works as the narrative poetry of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The epistolary novels, such as *Clarrisa*, also shift points of view. But even in those exceptions there seems to be an organising consciousness. By the time we get to such modernist texts as Joyce's or Woolf's, the stability of such a narratorial / all-embracing consciousness has disappeared. Appearing in its place is a fractured consciousness and the techniques now employed would be variously called "stream of consciousness" or "*monologue interieur*". The shift/change was, however, not abrupt. There were transitions and mediations. Two key figures in this regard are Henry James and Conrad. You may already be familiar with James's technique of allowing his characters to "speak their minds" as it were; allowing the reader to delve deep into the mind of each character. So I shall not dwell upon James's aesthetic principles here. I shall, much rather, deal with the subject of how Conrad innovates and moves the novel form closer to its modernist *avatar*.

His early tales follow the conventional point of view technique, though he experiments with symbolist and impressionist devices. It is here that I recommend to you the sections in Frederic Jameson's chapter "Romance and Reification" (*The Political Unconscious*). Jameson's remarks about the multiple shifts in a Conrad narrative highlight the fact that

these shifts can be taken as textbook exercises in point of view. Then they are "point of view" conceived as being inseparable from speech. Conrad's kind of thinking "has discovered the symbolic." His practice of style is a literary and textual equivalent of the impressionist strategy of painting "hence his kinship with the greatest of all literary impressionists, Proust".

2.2.2 Point Of View : A New Point Of View

Conrad uses for the first time the third person narrator Marlow in "Youth", a short story. Marlow eventually becomes a transtextual character in many of his novels. The need to use this mask may have arisen because of Conrad's anxiety to adopt an English point of view otherwise denied to him. The anxiety is evident in his initial and inadequate attempt to pass himself off as an Englishman by anglicising his own name. We shall look at this aspect in some detail in the next sections; but suffice it to mention here that had he spoken in his own voice and not ventriloquised through Marlow, questions about the English author-ity of the narrator would be raised. After all, he was a Polish émigré. His self-consciousness becomes evident in many of his early letters and prefaces, where he would ponder over questions of point of view. For example, he would write to a correspondent on 6 September 1897 "This necessity from my point of view is fascinating". On 2 November 1895 he writes again, "When I speak about writing from an inward point of view—I mean from the depth of our own inwardness." Much later, in 1907, he was still writing about treating the subjects of "war, peace, and labour" from the "modern point of view". So what angle to see from, what to write from was one of the obsessive strains in his discussion of literature. Beginning with "Youth", he ensured that through Marlow he could present his own complex experiences and ideas, even while maintaining an appropriate ironic distance.

2.2.3 Marlow Outside The "Heart of Darkness"

In his early novels, such as *Almayer's Folly*, *An Outcast of the Islands*, and *The Nigger of the Narcissus,* Conrad employs the voice of the traditional omniscient narrator. In these, particularly in the third, he had no difficulty with the point of view as he did not see the need to distance himself from the narrating subject. His expressed ideology at that time was very close to the official British ideological stance: reactionary and imperial as most of it was. Writing for the imperialist paper *New Review* then edited by W.E. Henley he dedicated the story to Edward Garnett, who had advised him to write sea fiction if he wanted to succeed commercially in England. The novel's version of social and political England was coloured by Conrad's anxiety to please the editor. Unsurprisingly the tale was anti-sentimental, masculine, even oligarchic. However, the Englishness of the tale is awkward; the awkwardness springing largely from the lack of distance between the narrator and the author. Conrad failed to reconcile the viewpoint of the narrator who has immediate but limited knowledge with that of a narrator who has the reflective scope of hindsight.

The decisive change in his fictional technique occurred during his "*Blackwood* phase" (1898-1902). For this was when he tried to negotiate with his English cultural identity and audience. One after the other he contributed three tales ("Youth", *Heart of Darkness,* and *Lord Jim,* which were serialised) to *Maga*, as *Blackwood's Magazine* was familiarly known. It was in the first of these that Marlow made his debut as the chief narrator-protagonist, and the aforementioned reconciliation was now possible.

John Galsworthy once made the perceptive remark that "though English in name" Marlow is not so in nature. This is very close to Conrad's description of himself as someone whose "point of view is English" both on sea and on land; but "the conclusion should not be drawn that [he] has become an Englishman." Thus Marlow appears to be at first sight his alter ego. But on closer scrutiny the two emerge as separate entities. The invention of Marlow is because of Conrad's felt need for distancing himself from his narrator-persona. This helps the author to control and organise his experience without sentimentalising it. Charles Marlow is unmistakably an English name, which fact enables the contemporary English readers of *Maga* to identify themselves chauvinistically with

the seeing and experiencing eye of Marlow (for Conrad's motto to make his reader *see*, see a later section). Conrad too had shed his English name when he started writing; yet "Conrad" gave him away. As Zdzislaw Najder comments perceptively about the difference between the two :

> Marlow, a model English gentleman, ex-officer of the merchant marine, was the embodiment of all Conrad would wish to be if he were to become completely anglicised. And since that was not the case, and since he did not quite share his hero's point of view, there was no need to identify himself with Marlow, either emotionally or intellectually. Thanks to Marlow's duality [different from his own status as homo duplex], Conrad could feel solidarity with, and a sense of belonging to, England by proxy, at the same time maintaining a distance such as one has toward a creation of one's imagination. Thus, Conrad, although he did not permanently resolve his search for a consistent consciousness of self-identity, found an integrating point of view that enabled him, at last, to break out of the worst crisis of his writing career.

When Conrad started writing for *Maga* he did so with the awareness that "There isn't a single club and messroom and man-of-war in the British Seas and Dominions which hasn't a copy of *Maga*...." So, when he wrote "Youth" for the first time for the magazine, he narrated the story from the point of view of Marlow, a typical British seaman, and as someone who could explore his reader's cultural traits and values by indirection, and as an insider. The narrator who introduces Marlow does so as an outsider, who has an idealised view of England, to win over the English reader, as it were: "This could have occurred [nowhere] but in England, where men and sea interpenetrate". Thus Conrad uses a double vision for a very complex response to British imperialism, and by implication, to European imperialism.

His ambiguity had already been in display in the way he would treat his Congo experience in a tale, "An Outpost of Progress" a year before the publication of the *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. The irony occurs not only in the title but also *technically*: through the difference between how the two characters Kayerts and Carlier regard themselves and what the narrator thinks of their "mission". There also seems to be an intended pun on the word "progress"; both as advancement in terms of civilisation, as well as movement forward as an adventure or action. This propensity to pun on the word remained with Conrad until he gave it up to Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*.

Its narrator is sardonically relativistic, as becomes evident from the following comment on his part:

> few men realise that their life, the very essence of their character, their capabilities and their audacities, are only the expression of their belief in the safety of their surroundings. The courage, the composure, the confidence; the emotions and principles; every great and every insignificant thought belongs not to the individual but to the crowd; to the crowd that believes blindly in the irresistible force of its institutions and of its morals, in the power of its police and of its opinion.

When they move towards self-destruction under the silliest possible circumstance, Kayerts shoots Carlier before committing suicide himself. The narrator posits:

> His toes were only a couple of inches above the ground; his arms hung stiffly down; he seemed to be standing rigidly at attention, but with one purple cheek playfully posed on the shoulder. And, irreverently, he was putting out a swollen tongue at his Managing Director.

Conrad perhaps wants us to see in this image his own response to imperialism; and the tale sticks out its tongue irreverently, mocking at Belgian imperialism in "Free State Congo", at imperialism generally, and at the *hubris* of civilisation. Hubris, as you know, is a Greek word that means arrogance, pride. It is an important term in the discussion of

Greek tragedy. The Europeans in spite of their "civilisation" are not necessarily the fittest race. It is the natives who maintain their sanity. The final irony, however, seems to lie in the actual, physical context of the story. For, alongside Conrad's story people must have read the essay by Henry Norman, a well-known political commentator for the same magazine in which both had appeared: "We are Imperialists first, and Liberals or Tories afterwards. I said this, for my own part, years ago, when the sentiment was not quite so popular. Now it has happily become commonplace." The tale effectively gets an opportunity to cock a snook at such cocky points of view. Conrad knew that such an ideological thrust will not be an attractive proposition for the *Maga* people, neither the editor nor the readership. So when he came to contribute "Youth" to it, he deliberately makes Marlow elaborate on the national character of the English. This was a well-directed strategy aimed at co-opting the readership of the magazine, exploiting their ideological mindset. At this point two things are to be kept in mind. **One** is the cultural context: an ongoing debate about whether the so-called English spirit was on the wane, a weakening of the spirit, body and the will. Most discussions in newspapers would insist that they *were* indeed on the wane. "Youth" on the other hand, inveighed against the argument. **Secondly**, Conrad would change the emphasis in drafts for serial publications.

Marlow praises the crew for their exemplary discipline and will: "That crew of Liverpool hard cases had in them the right stuff", as if to reassure the English reading public. "It's my experience they always have", he repeats for emphasis. This sentence was an exclusive addition for the magazine. He effected significant and suitable alterations in matters of detail when he came to fictionalise his 1892 experience: the cosmopolitan crew were turned into an all-English crew for the same reason, as critics have not failed to notice. Such partisan Englishness was to change, as I have said before, as Conrad became more confident of his success in literary England.

2.2.4 Marlow And The Heart Of Darkness

Yet, he continued to be cagey, when he wrote about *The Heart of Darkness* (the definite article was part of the original title) to the great publisher William Blackwood. Conrad was worried whether the subject would commend itself to him. As you read the following extract from the letter, mark the apologia on the way:

> The title I am thinking of is *The Heart of Darkness* but the narrative is not gloomy. The criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilising work in Africa is a justifiable idea. The subject is of our time distinctly—though not topically treated. It is a story as much as my *Outpost of Progress* was but, so to speak "takes in" more—is a little wider—is less concentrated upon individuals.

But this apologia is prefaced by a reference to another of his earlier works, "Youth", which was ideologically congenial to Blackwood. The intention again is obvious:

> It is a narrative after the manner of *Youth* told by the same man dealing with *his* [my emphasis] experience on a river in Central Africa. The *idea* in it is not as obvious as in *Youth*—or not at least so obviously presented. I tell you all this, for tho' I have not doubts as to the *workmanship* I do not know whether the *subject* will commend itself to you for that particular number.

The "particular number" was the thousandth issue of the magazine. You must notice Conrad's confidence about the workmanship, by which I suppose he means the technique. For his experiments begin by being traditional. He uses the convention of the "frame narrator", a convention that was especially popular with *Maga*, already popularised by such writers as Wells, Kipling and Stevenson. This again had its cultural roots in the club culture in which travellers or adventurers would relate their stories or spin a yarn. You may have encountered such a storyteller relating his strange adventure in Wells' *Time Machine*. Conrad's tales are removed from the comfort and security of the club, and are situated symbolically on decks with endless waters around. Thus the convention is followed in the breach of it. Another aspect of the conventional trick was

that in such tales you may notice the writer's anticipation of the reader doubting the story's veracity, the element of disbelief, such was the strangeness of the tales. Even here Conrad intensifies the common air of incredulity. Look at Marlow's problem and compare it with any other narrator's:

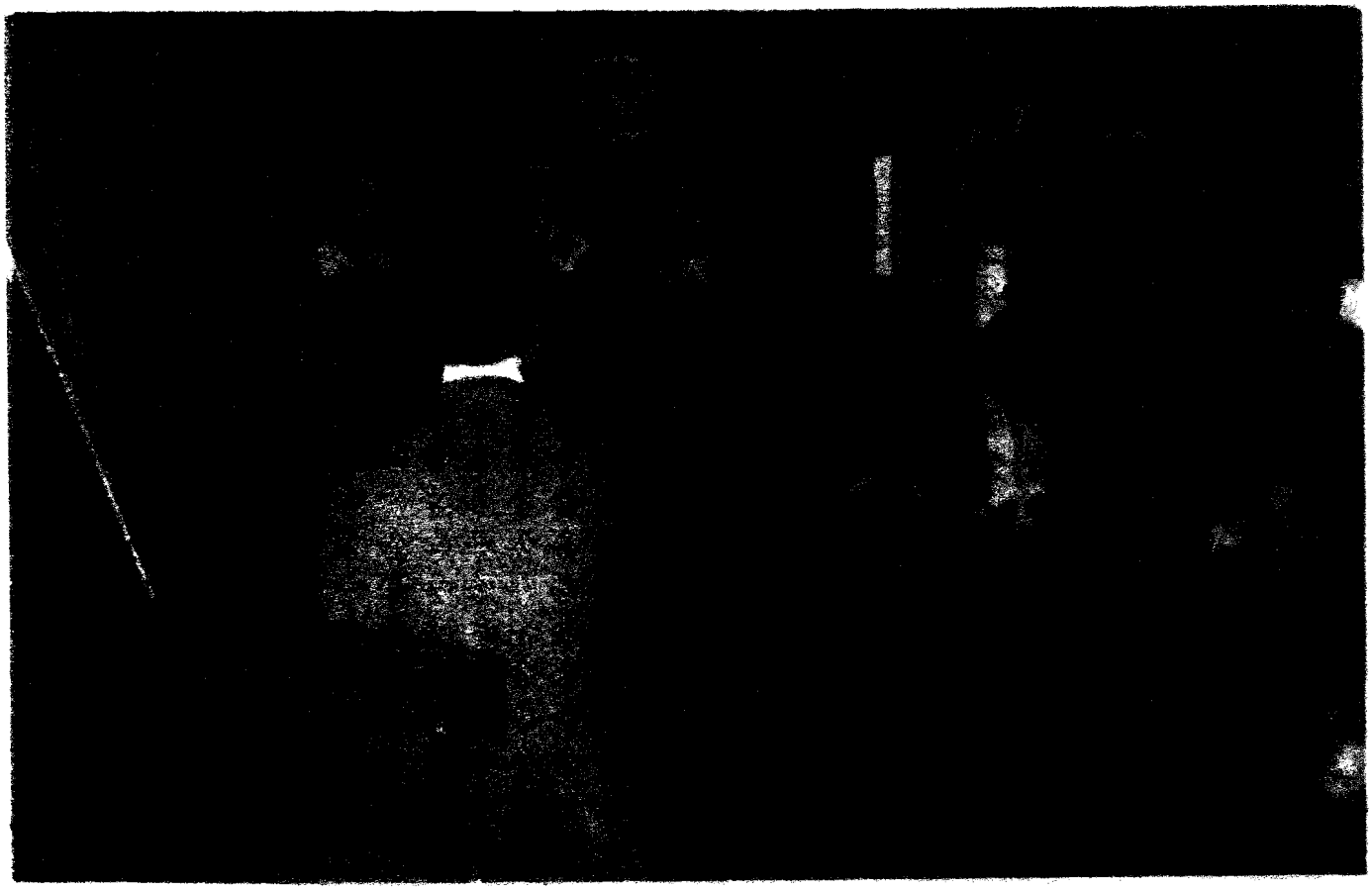
> This is the worst of trying to tell.... Here you all are, each moored with two good addresses, like a hulk with two anchors, a butcher round one corner, a policeman round another, excellent appetites, and temperature normal—you hear from year's end to year's end. And you say, Absurd!

2.2.5 Marlow Framed

Here, of course, Marlow is the narrator-protagonist, whose story is being exactly retold by the "frame narrator". Here I must digress a little to illustrate the point about the frame narrative. The metaphor is that of a framed picture; a picture representation of reality cut off from the real world by the frame, and meant for the seeing eye. But there may be variations and complications of such frames. I shall try to explain the concept in more concrete terms by drawing your attention to the picture here.

This is a photograph of an exhibit in Madam Tussaud's wax museum in London. The three ladies who are sitting for the portrait painting are wax figures of the Bronte sisters. You can see the back of the portrait painter, another wax figure, whose half-finished portrait is in the inner frame. Now look closely and see how many frames are there. One is the frame of the photograph framing the scene of some real-life spectators looking at the exhibit. The painting in the frame is supposedly drawn by the imitation artist; but the real artist is missing from the scene; he and the wax sculptor may have been two different artists. The framed portrait painting is thus an attributed one, with the actual artist having vanished from the scene. Had the picture been simply a painting of a painter painting, it would have been an exact equivalent of the classic frame narrative. But Conrad's complex frame narrative is rather more like the one you are looking at here. In *Heart of Darkness* in particular, the frame narrator introduces Marlow to the reader, the narratee. When Marlow takes over and starts spinning his yarn, the anonymous frame narrator becomes one of the narratees. But then Marlow himself retells other minor narrators' tales about Kurtz. And so on.

Frame within a frame



There are other differences as well. In the classic frame narrative, the frame narrator is often the most authoritative and knowledgeable of the narrators. But in *Heart of Darkness,* though the frame narrator passes on Marlow's story and appears to be reliable, he is Marlow's intellectual inferior, as is implied in Marlow's low opinion of and impatience with his audience. We can also see this in the beginning of the narrative, before he introduces Marlow. He describes the Thames, and England's past with undisguised adoration: "the great spirit of the past upon the lower reaches of the Thames...." He offers a catalogue of the English sea heroes. "What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth!...." This is reminiscent of what I have told you about "Youth"; except in that here Marlow begins by speaking his anti-imperial meditation aloud: "And this also...has been one of the dark places of the earth...." Thus Conrad employs counter-discourses within the framework of the same narrative by subverting the traditional genre. The method is dialogic as well as dialectical. Marlow's remark exposes the relative naiveté and limited insight of the frame narrator, and alerts the reader as to the complexities that they might encounter in the point of view that is being presented. And the unreliability of any of the several narrators within the story's narrating frames.

2.3 NO BOYS' ADVENTURE

2.3.1 Action In Adventure

I have drawn your attention to the other convention that Conrad used—only to subvert it—when he took to *Maga*—that of the adventure story. Blackwood continued to publish the stories of a relatively unknown entity with the hope that one day he would with his kind of background produce significant (popular) adventure stories such as Stevenson's and Kipling's. Little did he realise that he was expecting what Conrad would not and could not give.

Action is central to an adventure story. In Conrad, the adventure story is predicated on inaction and lethargy. As Frederick Karl has pointed out, while we must "recognise how Conrad depended on certain conventions of the adventure story, we must stress his departure from melodrama and a debased romanticism. His reliance on passivity, inertness, immobility is one of his major achievements in reshaping the romantic sense of adventure." As a result, the focus of such tales as *Heart of Darkness* is never where the reader expects it to be. Further, action in his kind of "adventure stories" is always undermined by the manner of telling them. The narrator stops, comments, alerts the inner listeners of his yarn: the narrative gets halted and is even infinitely regressed. As Allan Ingram says:

> the action comes to seem almost incidental to the true point of the story, which is something or somewhere, between the self-consciousness of the narrator and the self-consciousness of Conrad himself, hiding behind walls of narration, behind the dislocation of time, denying, almost, that he has anything to do with the creation at all—losing himself, in other words, in the exercise of his craft.

Yet, Conrad would have Blackwood believe that his stories were action-oriented. Read the following extract from his letter to the editor. In its essence his work

> is action ... nothing but action—action observed, felt and interpreted with an absolute truth to my sensations... action of human beings that will bleed to a prick, and are moving in a visible world.

Was he here trying to hoodwink the editor? Or, do you think, he was redefining the very concept of "action"? I think the answer to the question would have to be a complex one. Conrad's scepticism towards action must have sprung from, on the one hand, the lost cause of the Polish freedom fighters; on the other, the sham "civilising mission" of the African adventurers. So the adventure, if it can be so called, that he portrays is the

adventure inwards—the journey into the inner heart of darkness, and not the literal kind, as displayed in conventional adventure tales. As the character in one of Conrad's later tales says, "we are not living in a boy's adventure tale".

2.3.2 Action With A Difference

There are times when Marlow is on the verge of some action, but the nature of the problem he confronts is such, owing to its metaphysical nature, that no "action" on his part can redeem the situation for him. Hence his propensity for inaction and evasion. His dilemma is almost Hamletian in its unnaturalness. Hamlet, as you know, is the protagonist in shakespeare's play of the same name, whose words "To be or not to be" symbolise his perpetual dilemma. Action is suitable or possible only under normal, worldly circumstances. But not in the kind of situation he finds himself in. As he says at one such conjuncture:

> I fretted and fumed and took to arguing with myself whether or no I would talk openly with Kurtz; but before I could come to any conclusion it occurred to me that my speech or my silence, indeed any action of mine, would be a mere futility. What did it matter what anyone knew or ignored? What did it matter who was manager? One gets sometimes such flashes of insight. The essentials of this affair lay deep under the surface, beyond my reach, and beyond anyone's reach, and beyond my power of meddling.

This is not a special but typical situation for Marlow. Soon he takes to his more usual mental posture: that of meditation. He has now become Buddha-like. This is indeed no boys' adventure.

Marlow continues to play a passive role, preferring to meditate than act. He sees and hears. But his work begins when he is confronted by the wilderness. He starts by such apparently insignificant acts as taking off his boots, blowing the two-penny whistle, and throwing the dead body overboard. You will notice the suspenseful action typical of an adventure story when Marlow approaches Kurtz, and tries to rescue him. From now on he exercises a choice, even if it be a choice of nightmares. His final action is the telling of the lie to the Intended, more of which we shall have occasion to examine.

2.4 LET US SUM UP

Conrad's invention of Marlow then is indissolubly linked with his desire to accommodate his stylistic and ideological needs. This successful technique of distancing needs also to be seen in the broader context of modernist experiments. Technique is inseparable from ideology.

2.5 QUESTIONS

1. In the opening section of the story what differences and similarities do you notice in the points or view of Conrad, the frame narrator and Marlow?

2. What is meant or implied by the term "efficiency" in the context of imperialism?

3. Try to rewrite the opening section of the novel employing the conventional point of view of the omniscient narrator.

2.6 SUGGESTED READING

Frederick Jameson *The Political Unconscious*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.
Frederick Karl *Joseph Conrad:The Three Lives: A Biography*. New York : Farrar Straus, Giroux. 1979.
Ian Watt. *Conrad in the Ninteenth Century*. Berkley: University of California Press 1979.