

Foreshadows and Symbols in The Brussels Company's Main Office in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract

Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness unveils a story about a journey to the inner self to find the mysteries of human mind. The way the writer presents his story is very intriguing in that he makes use of many foreshadows and symbols. This paper attempts to examine the foreshadows and symbols which Conrad uses in this novella; however, the discussion is limited to the ones that appear in The Brussels Company's Main Office.

Keywords: foreshadows, symbols, The Brussels Company's Main Office

A. Introduction

Heart of Darkness literally tells a story about a journey to the center of Africa. Beyond that, the novella reveals a recount of one's journey to self-discovery. Conrad believes that art works including novels should employ symbols rather than plain narratives. He proposes "...that a work of art is very seldom limited to one exclusive meaning and not necessary tending to a definite conclusion" (Conrad in Kimbrough, 1971). He also suggests that, "...symbolic conception of a work of art has this advantage, that it makes triple appeal covering the whole field of life, gain complexity, in power, in depth and in beauty" (Conrad in Kimbrough, 1971).

In one of his work, *Heart of Darkness*, he uses layers of symbols that make his novel full of symbolic messages. Without understanding these symbols readers would not be able to benefit as much; they will only enjoy reading it, without being able to learn, moreover to be moved. By understanding the symbols used by Conrad, readers can understand the binary oppositions of the common beliefs and his. Moreover, they can further make their own binary oppositions towards Conrad's that will make reading more fascinating.

Since the beginning Conrad has given the description of places in such a symbolic way that they foreshadow the story. One of the places that he describes through Marlow, one of the main characters, in such a symbolic way is the Company's Main Office in Brussels. This paper attempts to describe the symbols and events in the office and how they foreshadow the story.

B. Review of Related Literature

This section presents theories about foreshadowing and symbolism.

1. Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing is a literary device which commonly occurs at the beginning of a story or a chapter. Foreshadowing is defined as "a way of indicating or hinting at what will come later" (in http://udleditions.cast.org/craft_elm_foreshadowing.html). It can be done directly or in a more subtle way. The role foreshadowing plays in literature is unique in each text. It depends on the story type and the way it is analyzed. Normally it is used to "create suspense or to convey information that helps readers understand what comes later" (in http://udleditions.cast.org/craft_elm_foreshadowing.html). It actually prepares the readers for the

events that are about to happen. It spices up the story by creating dramatic tension or building a mystery. The readers are made to guess what might happen next. In addition, foreshadowing may also be used to shock the reader with a final revelation. For whatever reasons foreshadow is used, it serves its job to unify the plot by making the development and structure of the plot more logical.

Common methods for shadowing are through the use of dialogue, events, actions, and images to give hints about the future. Sometimes it may even use the name of a work or the title of a chapter. Foreshadowing can be done by mentioning an upcoming event or explaining the character's plan which is depicted in the text. This is shown through phrases about the future. It may also be done by portraying the characters' subtle reaction to something in their environment to show that it may play an important role in the event that is to come. It is usually done by describing objects or scenic elements that reveal among others happiness, sadness, danger, excitement. Besides, foreshadowing may also be done by using the change in weather, setting, or mood to give clues whether what follows is either good or bad fortune. Thus, to identify foreshadows the readers should watch over any signs of potential conflicts between characters, search for any unusual details or things bearing emotional significance.

2. Symbolism

Symbolism refers to "the use of symbols to signify ideas and qualities by giving them symbolic meanings that are different from their literal sense" (in <http://literarydevices.net/symbolism/>). It is also one way to foreshadow in a story. The forms of symbolism are various. An object may be used to represent another object and assign a new meaning which is completely different.

The new meaning is commonly more significant. Besides, writers may also use an event or someone's word to show symbolism. The meaning of a symbol depend very much on the context where the symbol is used. This means to say that the the meaning of the symbols is determined by people who read them and they can only be understood by people who read "when, where, and how they are used." Writers may develop symbolism through figures of speech, such as metaphors, simile, and allegory.

Symbolism is normally employed by writers to intensify the strength of meaning to his work. In addition to stating the literal meaning, he also reveals the symbolic meaning which is deeper. As a conclusion, symbolism "in literature evokes interest in readers as they find an opportunity to get an insight of the writer's mind on how he views the world and how he thinks of common objects and actions, having broader implications." (in <http://literarydevices.net/symbolism/>)

C. METHODOLOGY

Poststructuralist approach is used in interpreting the foreshadows and symbols in the story. This approach is used because it is in line with Conrad's idea that there is no single meaning of an artwork. Although it only gained its recognition formally in 1960 but Conrad's had already had a deconstructionist manner earlier in 1918 when he wrote a letter to one of his colleagues (Kimbrough, 1971). The deconstructionists believe that a text has many meanings and therefore no definite interpretation; a text has an almost infinite number of possible interpretations (Bressler, 1999). When such a principle is applied to literature interpretation, then the consequence is that there are no such things as correct meaning. The meaning lies in the interaction between the reader and the text.

D. DISCUSSION

This section discusses the foreshadows and symbols which are found in The Brussels Company's Main Office in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The foreshadows and symbols were portrayed through the setting of the Main Office, the women, the doctor, and some minor characters Marlow meets in the office.

1. The Office

Conrad is a critical writer if not cynical. Through Marlow and other characters he criticizes the European conducts and manners in colonizing other regions. It is true that he is also criticizing the Africans but the novella was written for the European. Therefore, his criticism is more directed to the Europeans, European business enterprises as well as governments. In a broader sense it also observes the very basic nature of human being, i.e. the capability of conducting evil practices.

He uses one of the settings, the Main Office in Brussels to foreshadow the story. The descriptions of the office, the people and the events in it give clues to the readers as to what will happen in the rest of the story. They give hints of what Marlow will encounter in his journey to the heart of Africa.

The first remark that foreshadows the story is on the buildings in the city itself: "...I arrive in a city that always makes me think of a whited sepulcher" (Conrad in Charters, 1991, p. 289). Sepulcher is a grave. It is usually in the wall. Obviously, Conrad here is referring to the Bible. The parable in the Bible employs sepulcher to criticize the hypocrites. Sepulcher looks white and clean from the outside but inside is the dead body, rotten and smelly. Conrad creates a similar parable that the European enterprises are hypocrites. They state that they have noble missions in civilizing the colonies but they actually commit corrupt and malevolent practices. Therefore here the statement

foreshadows what Marlow will be dealing with in Africa.

Another remark that gives a hint to the readers is the description of the street where the office is located. Conrad describes it as deadly quiet and gloomy. The map inside the room signifies how the journey will be.

"... on one end a large shinning map, marked with all the colors of the rainbow." "I was going into the yellow. Dead in the center. And the river was there-fascinating-deadly-like a snake." (Ibid, p. 289).

Traditionally yellow signifies glory; however, Conrad adds "Dead in the center." The journey is meant for glory, conquering the uncivilized world, but it may also become a deadly mission. In addition, Conrad, through Marlow, describes Congo by comparing it to a snake. It also gives an indication that the journey along the river will be fascinating but also deadly and dangerous like a snake. Snakes traditionally are depicted as malicious creatures and represent evil force. It is possible that Conrad refers to the Bible, i.e. the Genesis chapter three, when Eve was seduced by the serpent to eat the forbidden fruit. Here Conrad describes the new continent as evil yet fascinating just as the jungle and its inhabitants. Conrad is hinting that Marlow does not know what he is going to encounter but is intrigued with the unknown and what he will eventually come to find out.

2. The Women

Apart from the setting, the events and characters also foreshadow what Marlow will come across in Africa. The prominent characters in the Main Office in Brussels are the two women and the doctor. The two women do not say anything but their appearances and actions have significant symbol and lead readers to the understanding of what the story will be. Conrad describes

them in such a way that they bear important symbols.

“Two women, one fat and the other slim, sat on straw bottomed chair, knitting black wool.” (Ibid, p.289)

“...and a cat reposed on her lap.” (Ibid, p.290)

“...I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall...” (Ibid, p.290)

Conrad describes them as the guardians of the door of darkness. This gives indication that Marlow's journey is a trip toward darkness. He also describes them as wearing black dresses, which creates such an eerie feeling. It symbolizes fate or death. The woman in black with a cat is conventionally interpreted as a witch. The impression of the darkness is more striking because the “witch” is knitting a black pall, the cloth to cover coffin.

3. The Doctor

Different from the two women who foreshadow the story by their behavior and appearance, the doctor gives clues as to what will happen through his conversation with Marlow. His words indicate that the trip Marlow is about to take is an arduous one.

The Doctor measures Marlow's head before he embarks on his journey to Africa. When Marlow inquires whether the doctor also measures the crania of the Company's staff upon their return from Africa, the doctor says, “Oh, I never see them” (Ibid, p. 291). We can imply from the doctor's remark that those who left never return. The accounts of the doctor: “...the changes take place inside...” and “interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals” (Ibid, p. 291) reveal that people going out to the new Continent will experience mental changes. The doctor also suggests that Marlow should stay calm if he wants to keep his sanity.

4. The Minor Characters

Besides the prominent characters above, there are also minor characters in the Main Office in Brussels who give clues as to what happens later in the story. The secretary whom Marlow encounters is described as full of desolation and sympathy. It reveals that something bad is about to happen. Marlow also talks about not disclosing any trade secrets. It indicates that what he is going to do in Africa is related to secret practices that most possibly will be illegal.

Another foreshadow from the minor character in the office is when he meets the young shabby clerk. Marlow asks why he does not go out there and his remark is “I'm not such a fool as I look, ...” (Ibid, p. 290). This remark shows that even the shabby young clerk knows about what is going on in Africa and what happens to those going out there.

E. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Conrad has carefully and beautifully used the settings, events and characters to foreshadow, i.e. giving clues as to what will happen in the story. He even creates symbolism by employing minor details and minor characters to enrich the story by adding complexity. The detailed descriptions and the symbolic conception in the Main Office in Brussels have foreshadowed the story and have led readers to foresee the whole story. Conrad has assigned new meaning to the practices of European Company in Africa even in the early stage of the journey. However, he leaves the possibility open to the assignment of another meaning to the new meaning.

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