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Interpretation and Experience: J. Hillis Miller’s Deconstruction of *Heart of Darkness*

Deconstruction is not a mode of criticism that is applied to a text, so much as it is the teasing out of conflicting meaning that is already within a text. Deconstructive criticism emerged out of the writings of linguist and philosopher Jacques Derrida, whose work emphasized the foundation of Western logic on a system of binary oppositions—pairs of mutually exclusive categories that preside over our understanding of a particular concept. Masculinity, for example, is commonly understood, as the absence of feminine characteristics. According to literary theorist Ross Murfin, these categories “are not simply oppositions; they are also hierarchies in miniature [...] they contain one term that our culture views as being superior and one term viewed as negative or inferior” (Murfin 206). It was Derrida’s aim to destabilize these binaries, Murfin continues, “and to do so in such a way as to throw the order and values implied by the opposition into question” (Murfin 207).

The potential for applying of Derrida’s theories to the field of literary criticism was realized soon after the delivery of his widely influential paper, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences” in 1966. In it, Derrida rejects structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss’s understanding of human discourse as a unified structure at the center of which lies a fundamental, universal truth. Instead Derrida argues for “the joyous affirmation of the freeplay of the world [...] without truth, without origin” (Derrida). Taking their cue from Derrida, literary critics began to question the existence of an indisputable center of meaning within a work of literature and began to identify incidences of a text contradicting itself, to demonstrate that its meaning was fundamentally undecidable.
One rhetorical move common in deconstructive criticism is to identify a binary opposition within a literary text and attempt to show that the boundaries that separate the opposing terms break down and create a conflict of meaning that renders the work uninterpretable. J. Hillis Miller, a long time colleague and friend of Derrida, employs this strategy in his article, “Heart of Darkness Revisited.” Miller begins his argument with the contention that Heart of Darkness, in its claim to shed light on an unseen human truth, falls into the genre of a parabolic apocalypse. In making his case for this classification, Miller identifies an “absolute distinction” that Conrad makes between the direct experience of the hidden truth that is supposed to be at the heart of the novel and the interpretation of it from a secondhand account (Miller 238). Ultimately, Miller’s argument demonstrates the indeterminate meaning of Heart of Darkness by disrupting Conrad’s privileging of experience over interpretation.

The first passage that Miller examines is the description of Marlow’s storytelling given by Conrad’s anonymous narrator, who tells us that to 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” (Conrad 20). In Miller’s reading, these stories of Marlow’s are not simply vehicles for delivering an obvious message that can picked out from the tale like a kernel. Rather, the meaning is obscured in darkness, and can only be perceived by the glow of Marlow’s narrative. Like parables, suggests Miller, Marlow’s tales are “in preordained correspondence or in resonance with the meaning. The tale magically brings the ‘unseen’ meaning out and makes it visible” (Miller 233).

Except, as Miller goes on to show, Marlow must necessarily fail in his task to unveil his hidden truth, because by his own admission, it is impossible for him to express what he calls the “life-sensation” behind his experience, “that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and
penetrating essence” (Conrad 42). *Heart of Darkness* thus becomes Marlow’s desperate attempt to convey to his audience his revelation—“the horror” that his experience in the Congo forced upon him. Negating the narrator’s claim that Marlow’s stories bring the meaning out of the darkness like a glow brings out haze, Miller points out that “darkness is in principle invisible and remains invisible,” and the best Marlow can hope to do is to “give the spectator indirect knowledge that the darkness is there” (Miller 237). In light of this failure, the reader of *Heart of Darkness*, in attempting to make sense of Marlow’s testimony; to uncover the truth that is everywhere concealed by darkness; and finally, to decipher Kurtz’s dying realization of “the horror”; in all of these attempts, the reader is at every corner checked by Conrad’s conviction that truth can only be experienced directly, and not through the interpretation of a second hand account.

The binary opposition implied by this conviction presents experience and interpretation as mutually exclusive. Of the two, experience is privileged as the more authentic avenue to truth. Marlow has experienced the darkness firsthand, and as such, has been given a privileged glimpse of the truth that it conceals from others. As Miller puts it, he claims “to know something no one else knows and to be qualified on that basis to judge and enlighten them” (Miller 243). Miller deconstructs Conrad’s distinction between experience and interpretation by showing that Marlow has not experienced his revelation directly, for, in attempting to convey it to his audience, he must defer to the experience of another—to Kurtz through whom he first learned of the darkness. Nor can it be said that the origin of the unseen truth can be traced to Kurtz. For, as Miller argues,

It is as though the story were spoken or written not by an identifiable narrator but directly by the darkness itself [...], just as Kurtz himself
presents himself to Marlow as a voice, a voice which exceeds Kurtz and seems to speak from beyond him (Miller 241)

So it is not from the direct experience of any one character that the unseen truth enters the novel, but rather from a disembodied voice that belongs neither to Kurtz nor to Marlow. For Conrad, Marlow’s failure to convey his revelation is a problem of linguistics: he has experienced the unveiling of a universal human truth, but it is impossible to communicate it through language to his audience. Miller’s analysis, however, shows that universal truth is not only inexpressible, but inaccessible to human experience, and therefore any claim to the contrary must finally be reduced to an interpretation.

Miller closes his argument with an admission of guilt. “By unveiling the lack of unveiling in Heart of Darkness,” he writes, “I have become another witness in my turn, covering over while claiming to illuminate” (Miller 244). In accordance with the deconstructive principle that all discourse, including a piece of deconstructive criticism, is indeterminate in meaning, Miller acknowledges that his reading of Heart of Darkness is far from closing the critical discussion surrounding the novel. Like Marlow, his attempt to offer insight only perpetuates uncertainty. So what, then, does Miller accomplish in “Heart of Darkness Revisited?” In short, he accomplishes exactly what deconstruction sets out to do—he prevents the reduction of a literary work to a final, unequivocal meaning. And, if in so doing, he perpetuates the darkness, he also perpetuates the unlimited possibilities for experiencing and interpreting literature.

Works Cited


Miller, J. Hillis. “Heart of Darkness Revisited.” Conrad. 231-244.