

Course Name: The Novel and Change

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Lecture 31

Heart of Darkness - Part 4

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course titled The Novel and Change. We will continue reading Joseph Conrad's novel Heart of Darkness. So, at the last session we stopped at the point where we started looking at the narrative method of delayed decoding and we will just continue from that point in this session. So, this should be on your screen. As you mentioned, so delayed decoding is a defamiliarization or a deceleration of the normal cognitive processes where senses get integrated and then function as a seamless process into finding out what the senses mean. So that meaning-making process, the process through which the signals become meaning, get delayed. So, hence the whole idea of delayed decoding and how Conrad achieves this very complex cognitive condition using a very unique narrative method. So, and this should be on the screen. As Bruce Johnson contends, Conrad's delayed decoding resembles, and this is a quotation, resembles the attempt of Hemingway and before him of Mark Twain to recognize that there is no such thing as an isolated and meaningful fact or event or object. Meaning is a function of connectedness.

It's a very, very important sentence. Meaning is a function of connectedness. So, no meaning-making process can operate in isolation. So, there is this very interesting way in which, you know, the core ontological method, functional method through which meaning is, you know, manufactured, created, processed, is underlined over here, right. And, you know, this particular passage also tells us before Conrad, we see this happening in Mark Twain as well as Hemingway, the whole idea of how the interconnectedness of meaning,

how objects and subjects and materials and mind and matter are all connected together, in a complex process of meaning making. So delayed decoding and Conrad dramatizes the disintegration in the act of perception but also mapping the same onto the act of narration. So how the narrative, narration or narrative method in Heart of Darkness for example very uniquely illustrates or reflects the fractured process of cognition and perception and anticipation. So how the act of representation, how the act of anticipation becomes delayed in quality and how it's almost like someone's holding you a magnifying glass to time. So sort of space and time begin to collide with each other, begin to merge with each other as it were.

And you get to see a slowed version, a close up as well as a slow motion movement of how meanings are made. And that there is a lot of camera technique happening here as well, as you can imagine. And Conrad was writing at the time, like the modernists, where the visual vocabulary was changing. So more and more cinematic elements were coming in in Modern writings which Conrad seems to appear to anticipate in many ways. So, it is a very magnified decelerated version of time that we can see. So, as a gap, as a gap, so delay decoding in Conrad dramatizes the disintegration in the act of perception while also mapping the same onto the act of narration. So, act of perception is fractured and the same fracture is mapped onto the act of narration. So, again, we see an element of unmapping going on. insufficient mapping and non-successful mapping and I use the word map again and again because map is such an important metaphor for imperialism the whole engine of imperialism relied on perfect mapping or meaningful mapping and we see how the exact opposite is happening in Conrad It is a struggle to make meanings, a struggle to map meanings and the struggle for mapping is also in a way deconstructing the fantasy of territorialization, the fantasy of cartographic constructs which had fueled the engines of imperialism. So, in a very fundamental functional way Heart of Darkness may be read as some kind of a meta text which deconstructs the empire narrative, right and we see that happening through different narrative methods including delay decoding.

So, as a gap between impression and understanding, this was what I was about to say, as a gap between impression and understanding, delay decoding and Conrad corresponds to

what modern cognitive psychologists classify as a distinction between simple awareness and reflexive awareness. So simple awareness is what you see around you and how an object or a sense or an event creates an awareness and reflects the awareness as the awareness of the awareness, right? So that the distinction is magnified in Conrad's novels, whereby the reflexivity associated with the immediate cognitive function of language is unsettled by the experience of cognition itself. How the experience of cognition over here, rather than seamlessly lending itself to self-awareness, actually fractures self-awareness, right? So the reason why we're using such a philosophical vocabulary over here Because this was also a time, late 19th century, beginning of 20th century, where the sense and experience and idea of the self begins to get more and more fractured in quality. So, there's less certainty, there's less knowledge, there's actually more confusion, fear, anxiety and panic about what the self may constitute. The delayed temporality characterizing Marlow's subjective awareness in *Heart of Darkness* supports the idea that increasingly interest researchers in cognitive psychology as well as phenomenology. And what is that? One that states that time comes into being as a function of our embodied interaction with the world. How time is a function of embodiment. It's a really radical phenomenon. claim, but then there is more and more evidence from neuroscience to back it, how the sense of temporality and how the sense of corporeality, sense of embodiment are connected together in very, very interesting organic ways.

So inhabiting time at a subjective level also relies on embodiment and how the embodiment is inactive in quality, extended in quality. There is a whole complex process of cognition, if you go back to the 4E model I mentioned embedded, embodied, extended, inactive and how that also corresponds to a temporal vocabulary. So in terms of how you correspond to time whether it is inner time or outer time or clock time or psychological time, it is a function of embodiment in certain ways. So as a cognitive condition that is unreliably reported in the retrospective narrative, delayed decoding in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* takes a reader directly into the observer's consciousness at the very moment of perception before it has been translated into his cause, right. So, the whole idea of the whole very seamless relation between cause and effect and meaning and sign is interrupted in *Heart of Darkness* right. So, the narrative method of delayed decoding causes this

interruption. Now the really radical thing that in Conrad is that how he looks at his interruption not as a problem but rather as something which must be foregrounded right. So of course Marlow struggles as a narrator in *Heart of Darkness*, he is frustrated, he is anxious, he almost has anxiety attacks the narrator because he realizes, acutely is aware of the fact that he's losing his audience, potentially. That makes him neurotic, that makes him anxious, that makes him melancholic. There's a lot of self-loathing happening in Marlowe because he does not really value himself as a storyteller because he realizes that his story is not really attracting attention, right. So all that is there but of course the entire thing is designed by Conrad. So it is a very deliberate strategy of unreliability, contingency, nervousness, anxiety etc. which makes the whole narrative method a very complex process, which is obviously part of the legacy of Conrad. The Conradian legacy of delayed decoding is very, very evident in *Heart of Darkness*.

Now, there's a quotation of David Lodge on your screen. And again, the whole idea of alienation and storytelling, the connection between alienation and storytelling is highlighted in this quotation. As David Lodge argues, In a world where nothing is certain, in which a transcendental belief has been undermined by scientific materialism, and even the objectivity of science is qualified by relativity and uncertainty, the single human voice telling its own story can seem the only authentic way of rendering consciousness, right? So the whole idea of the storytelling self becomes important over here. And again, as you can imagine, I'm using the word storytelling and self together as some sort of a coupling. So the sense of self is informed by the ability to tell stories by the agency of the storyteller. And how *Heart of Darkness* experiences or highlights how the sense of self is interrupted because the storytelling process is interrupted as well. So this constant self-reflexive process of interruption, you know, connects the interrupted storyteller as well as the interrupted subject in *Heart of Darkness*. Right. We will skip a little bit and come to the section in delayed recording again. And this is the famous iconic passage where Marlowe sees a series of sticks around him. He doesn't quite understand what those are and he gets a sensation. He gets sprit on his skin and only later, a few seconds later, he realizes those were arrows they were being shot at. So the delayed decoding, this should be on the screen. The delayed decoding so characteristic of Conrad's fiction is perhaps most famously

exemplified in Heart of Darkness, the iconic passage in Heart of Darkness. In Marlow's travel up in Congo, where the forests appear around him as effects even before the meaningful materiality is cognized by the perceiving mind.

So, the impression of these, of the forest come before the materiality of the forest, right. So there's something very impressionistic. If you look at impressionistic paintings of Monet, for example, Claude Monet, where the impressions are foreground rather than the objects, so the impressions of water lilies becomes more important than the materiality of water lilies, right. So we see something similar happening in Heart of Darkness as well, right. So even before we decipher and decode the meaningful materiality, we get a sense of the impressions. We get bombarded by impressions, almost like an assault of impressions, the Marlow experiences over here. This is spectacularly demonstrated as Marlow travels up through Congo between various telegraphic stations. Again, very, very symbolic. He travels from one telegraph station to another telegraph station and telegraph stations being metaphors or signs or symbols of connectivity, whereas in reality he is getting more and more disconnected, right. There is that interesting parallel of contrast going on. And he sees the effect of the shower of arrows on his senses before decoding their symbolic signification. The passage described thus illustrates the unsettled process of apperception. And how so? Then I had to look at the river mighty quick because there was a snag in the fairway. Sticks, little sticks were flying about. Thick, they were whizzing before my nose, dropping below me, striking behind me against my pilot house. All this time the river, the shore, the woods were very quiet, perfectly quiet. I could only hear the heavy splashing thump of the stern wheel and the patter of these things. We cleared the snag clumsily. Arrows by Jove! We were being shot at. Notice how the material thing comes right in the end and there's a sense of very dense description of the impressions that arrows cause, that come much later, right.

That is foregrounded, that gets more highlighted. So the entire temporal sequence is reversed because normally in normal situations we see the object first and then we get the impression, right. The impressions come in very dense, very overabundant manners and then much later, you know, we see the sort of temporal process being reversed and we see

the objects at the end of it all. So the cognitive process here in operation moves from effect to the cause, from the impression of the object to the materiality of the same. So, the reversal of the normal method. It thus depicts the manner of decoding that is a reversal of the normative process of cognition, where objects appear before the effect. Normally that's the case. This takes place through an economy of effect. and shock with the juxtaposition of a story that of what happened to Marlow and the tale of the effect of that those events had on him, right. So the impression becomes important and of course the whole idea of objects and materiality and the ontic quality of the objects they come much later. We'll skip a little bit. We'll begin to wind up now. And this should be on your screen. Marlow's struggle in Heart of Darkness to negotiate his narrative between the objective and the subjective, the real and the perceived order is analogous to the complex boundary crossing whereby emotions in response to imagined events collide with emotions in response to real world events, real world narratives, the report of those, that report those imagined events. So reality, imagination, phenomenality, experientiality all collide in different ways and there is that narrative violence a narrative tension that is there in Heart of Darkness where and this contributes to the contingency that is there the uncertainty the contingency whereby different temporal orders different epistemic orders different experiential orders are sometimes undercutting each other colliding with each other and creating this really chaotic misadventure narrative right so we see here, at a very structural level, how the manner of narration of Heart of Darkness, the entire delayed decoding, the crisis of narration, and the matter in Heart of Darkness, which is about the misadventure in the heart of the Empire, are very interestingly and very authentically corresponding with each other. Because if we had a neat narrative about chaos that wouldn't really make much sense at a structural, you know, narrative level, Just to conclude, Conrad's novel is characterized by a vocabulary of violence, which is what I just mentioned.

There's a sort of conflict going on all the time between different psychological, epistemic, experiential registers. It is a vocabulary of violence that is operative, not just at an immediate physical and political level, at the heart of European imperialism, but also at a cognitive and narrative level, whereby the report from the Heart of Darkness can only end in its own failure to convey its crisis and loss. So, there are two kinds of reports in Heart

of Darkness. One is a romantic report, which is a lie, as Marlow comes back from the Heart of Darkness, goes and meets Kurtz's fiancée, the intended, and he has to give a lie to the person because she asks him what were his dying words. And instead of saying what his dying words were, which were the horror of the horror, he lies to her essentially by saying he died with your name on his lips. So, there is that posthumous report which is given about Kurtz which preserves his legacy as a perfect empire agent because the romantic report reifies him in a certain way in memory. It is a very clever manipulative strategy to commemorate him as a great empire hero whereas in reality obviously Marlow has seen the opposite. Marlow has seen how Kurtz became this anarchic subject over here who essentially consumed his own self, right. So, there is that misreport, the false report going on in Heart of Darkness. It's also the incompetent report, as in it can't really talk about what took place. It can't really put that into the narrative, it can't really implot it, right. Okay, so we now come to the, the bit about Kurtz with which we'll wind up the session today, the voice of Kurtz, right. So this should be on your screen. how there is a sort of disembodied quality about Kurtz, almost fossil-like quality about Kurtz, something that is about to break if you touch him, something very intangible, something very spectral about Kurtz, hearing the voice, right.

So, this hearing of the voice of Kurtz appears in resonance to Freud's notion of traumatic reputations and dreams, the whole idea of the uh traumatic reputation the very uh ephemeral way uh phantom like way in which the dreams occur according to Freud's theory is something which we see uh happening in heart of darkness as well. And of course, along with the trauma, what is also important, what Freud also highlights, is the difficulty of reporting the thoughts behind them. So, it's the almost impossible nature of dreams and traumatic reputations to lend themselves into a neat narrative form. That incompatibility between the narrative form and the traumatic reputation is something which was highlighted in Heart of Darkness as well. The spectral quality with which Kurtz appears in Marlow's mind, one which furthers the novel's narrative indeterminacy, is underlined by his description thus. So, this is the disembodied bit in Heart of Darkness with which we will end. A voice. He was very little than a voice. I heard him it this voice so again look at the confused pronouns over here him it it's not quite sure whether Kurtz is human anymore

Kurtz has become a commodity Kurtz has become ivory this is whiteness sepulchral quality about Kurtz a phantom-like quality about Kurtz so the confused pronoun over here is a very interesting way to manipulate this or describe the confusion other voices All of them were so little more than voices. And a memory of that time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber. Silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean without any kind of sense. So, the senselessness that is there, this sort of savage quality. Again, the descriptions are very problematic, obviously, something primitive, something primal about this, which cannot be described in shared modern contemporary vocabulary. So, Marlow's voice, hearing and heart of darkness is characteristic of what Conrad himself had classified as a condition where the subject loses all sense of reality in a kind of nightmare effect produced by existence. So nightmarish quality about a subject whereby the subject loses the sense of reality and becomes phantom-like in quality as well. So Marlow ends up becoming a phantom storyteller, becoming a spectral storyteller because he's talking about specters essentially. The voice of Kurtz and his dying words, famous dying words of Kurtz, the horror, the horror, that come back and keep consuming Marlow with a haunted presence, almost hauntological, spectral presence, the traumatic reputation that Freud talks about.

He hears the whispered cry, the horror, the horror, stands to wait for Kurtz's intended by a Mahogany door. So again, the Mahogany door becomes important because the Mahogany comes from the materiality of the Heart of Darkness, that's the Empire commodity which is shipped back to the inside, to Europe and obviously Kurtz as Malu has seen how the entire traffic takes place. So the Mahogany door over here becomes important, very symbolically significant. So, he hears a whispered cry, the horror, the horror, as it stands to wait for, almost ghost-like quality, the planchet quality of ghosts' voices coming back, wherein figures of imperilous fantasy and guilt are plied with technological dreams and terrors scientific discoveries and speculations. So this is a quotation from Marina Warner, again a very good example of how the uncanny in modernism, the uncanny in modernist fiction, this sort of phantom like quality, spectral quality also in a very interesting way connects to the technological materiality of modernism. So we talk about disembodied voices, we have the inventions and the increase in domestication of the gramophone for

example. which can record a voice long after the person is dead. So the traumatic, uncanny, disembodied voice also finds its domestic devices through the grammar form. Again, if you look at the very skeleton-like quality that's happening in Kurtz, through which Kurtz is described, we also remember this is a time in which visual technologies such as a camera, the X-ray, were also coming into being, which have this cultural notion of seeing through the subject, right. So, penetrating the subject as it were, the X-ray quite literally penetrated the human body and gave us the core anatomical structure. And again, there is a sense of translucence, sense of seeing through that takes place in Heart of Darkness as well. Now, the whole idea of Kurtz becomes important, obviously. He is someone that we find that his mother was, he was educated partly in England, it should be on the screen, he was educated partly in England.

His mother was half English, his father was half French. all Europe contributed to the making of goods, a very metonymic, manufactured products. The whole Europe came together and made him into a final finished perfect product to be sent out to the empire and once he is there, he becomes a perfect empire agent till the point comes where he transgresses and becomes too perfect and after which he becomes a sort of monstrous creature which becomes a problem for the empire. So we can see how the how the Frankensteinian narrative also gets played out. We saw how that got played out in Great Expectations by Charles Dickens. We see they are getting played out in Heart of Darkness as well. How Kurtz becomes the ultimate fantasy subject, you know, the ultimate dream, the ultimate desire to be sent out to control the empire, control the engines of imperialism, except that it takes a step too many and becomes a problem and the empire has now to get rid of it. So we stop at this point today and we will continue and wind up this reading of Heart of Darkness in the subsequent sessions. Thank you for your attention.