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Significance of the Internal Lives of Conrad and Hardy's Protagonists

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Abstract:

This paper analyses Joseph Conrad's *The Shadow Line* and Thomas Hardy's *Two on a Tower* and focuses on the changing narrative style and techniques seen in the depiction and usage of the protagonist. Conrad's depiction of the 'consciousness' and Hardy's foray into the 'subjective' resonates with the burgeoning modernist movement brought on by the rapid advancement in technology for the time. These works, among many others, mark the shift from Victorian objectivity in literature to the emergence of subjectivity and its prioritisation in literary writing.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, Thomas Hardy, Subjectivity, Consciousness, Protagonist, *The Shadow Line*, *Two on a Tower*, Modernist.

The advent of the 20th century saw significant progress in the fields of science and technology that was indicative of the forthcoming changes in society. As such, the scientific discoveries and technological inventions (that followed) invariably reconfigured the very foundations of social conventions by introducing new and radical perspectives on subjects like human history, reality, life, the universe, etc. Hence the modern group of artists, as Pericles Lewis states, were aware of 'the inadequacy of earlier means of representation [...] [in] their attempt to represent a new reality' (11). This artistic enterprise to depict 'a new reality' - particularly with regards to the art-form of narrative - has, as Lewis remarks, involved experimenting 'with new styles and techniques as well as subject matter that had not been treated seriously by artists and writers in previous generations' (3). On that account, one of the major developments in the narrative form (from previous approaches) has been the shift of focus from the philosophy of realism to subjectivism. Therefore, this article will explore the significance of 'the subjective' in Joseph Conrad's *The Shadow Line* and Thomas Hardy's *Two on a Tower* as quintessential modernist narratives.

Conrad's belief that the novelist's great privilege is 'freedom of expression and the freedom of confessing his innermost beliefs' (Ophir 345) is thoroughly reflected in his approach to narrative in *The Shadow Line*. The narrative of this novella is structured on two

levels of temporality where the older narrator recounts his younger days of receiving his first command and captaining a vessel. From the start, Conrad's narrator identifies his narrated accounts more as a reflection of his 'early youth' (contrasted to his older self) than an eventful 'story' ('this is not a marriage story' (10) he remarks), peremptorily establishing the protagonist as the central focus of the narrative. Moreover, this mode of 'dual narrative' deployed in the novella imparts an extensive focalisation on the protagonist in his journey from an impulsive youth to his current self as an older, wiser man. As such, the very mode of representing the story in *The Shadow Line* inclines toward the character study of its protagonist. Furthermore, with the narrator operating on the same plane as that of the story-world (first-person focalisation), the events narrated in *The Shadow Line* fundamentally emanate from the consciousness of the protagonist. Hence, the 'internal life' of the protagonist occupies a prominent station – as it determines the events narrated- in the narrative.

Conrad's distinctive approach to narrative where he delves into the consciousness of his protagonists have led critics like Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan to read it as his 'attempt to reinstate a Ptolemaic universe, a universe essentially endowed with human coherence and value, against the indifference and amorality of the Copernican universe he inhabited' (Vulcan 19). Considering the status of the protagonist in Conrad's *The Shadow Line*, aspects of Vulcan's thesis can be traced in the narrative. For instance, the protagonist's quest for the 'truth' that prompts him to quit his job as 'there was no truth to be got out of them' (Conrad 13) or even the fact that the narrative is an act of contemplation to comprehend his past events demonstrates a genuine attempt to find some kind of meaning in his (the protagonist's) life.

Vulcan further states that the highly subjective technique of narration used in *The Shadow Line* by Conrad reflects his 'hostility to the spirit of modernity, precisely because he understood it so well' (21). There are various aspects in *The Shadow Line* that is used to represent the alienating aspects of the 'outer world' as such. Conrad alludes to the sense of meaninglessness of existence, embraced and reinforced by 'modernity', through the supernatural occurrences depicted in the narrative. As such, the protagonist functions as the investor of meaning in an otherwise meaningless existence. Therefore, the composite of the narratorial technique – the reflective mode of narration, the subjective approach to narration (discussed above) - in representing the 'inner life' of the protagonist is a crucial feature in the narrative of *The Shadow Line*.

Having discussed the mode and the rationale behind Conrad's approach to narrative, the following paragraphs will consider the effects conceived by subjectivising the focalisation in *The Shadow Line*. As mentioned earlier, due to the fact that the events narrated stem forth from the consciousness of the narrator/protagonist, the narrative is induced with a certain personalised mood that is responsible for the sense of mystery and uncertainty as the protagonist tries to make sense of his recollections. Instances such as the episode where, the protagonist feels that 'Giles had been making fun of [him]' (Conrad 30) or his assumption of Giles as 'simply the most tactless idiot on earth' (Conrad 28), only fall into context subsequently as an illustration of the protagonist's youthful immaturity. Hence, the portrayal of the protagonist's subjective/ his internal life is central to the narrative process in terms of themes discussed as well as the technique of the narrative.

There is also a close correlation between the 'constituent' and the 'supplementary' events throughout the narrative of *The Shadow Line* as a result of the predominating subjective focalisation. To delineate, the representation of the protagonist's consciousness (which functions as the supplementary aspect) is inextricably linked to the events that constitute the story in the narrative (the constituent events). For instance, the description of the storm at the end of the narrative as 'different [...] [transpiring] with no preliminary whisper or rustle, without a splash, and even without the ghost of impact', elicits the feeling of a mystical phenomenon. Consequently, the internalised perspective contrives, as Vulcan articulates, a 'nightmarish context [...] formed by the narrator's use of adjectival tags suggesting a sense of unreality and absurdity'(131). Moreover, Conrad's narrative extensively reflects Roland Barthes' statement that 'a nucleus [constituent event] cannot be deleted without altering the story, but neither can a catalyzer [supplementary event] without altering the discourse'(Abbott 23).

With the internal life of the protagonist considerably influencing the narrative in Conrad's *The Shadow Line*, the aspect of the story derives significance and meaning only through the act of reflection by the protagonist. Without the protagonist infusing the events of the story with the subjective angle, the narrated events would lose its significance. For instance, the declaration of 'exultation' at receiving his first command and its meaning to the protagonist as a seaman induces the subsequent events with significance. As Vulcan states, 'the novella is concerned with the all too human need to read experience within the significant ethical framework, with the 'saving illusion' of order and meaning, which is all we have to live by' (138).

Unlike the works of Conrad - recognised for its complexity of technique and the use of language - Thomas Hardy's body of literature, as Penelope Vigar states, 'is simple [containing] little in thought or reference that needs elucidation, his language is unambiguous, his themes readily comprehensible' (3-4). For that reason, Vigar further states, 'the reader feels uncomfortable rather than illuminated'(4). Vigar's comments effectively highlight the ingenuity, which is broadly perceived as a weakness, of Hardy's literature. However, a closer analysis of Hardy's narrative reveals an intricate structure that balances the aspects of character development and plot to procure an original approach to the narrative form. Hence, the following paragraphs will examine the subtleties in the technique of Hardy's narrative, with particular emphasis on the effects and significance of the 'internal life' of his protagonist, by analysing his novel, *Two on a Tower*.

In reading Hardy's novels – *Two on a Tower* in this instance – the reader is gradually but notably acquainted with the notion of a story unfolding with the progression of the narrative. As E.M. Forster states, 'Hardy arranges the events with emphasis on causality, the ground is the plot, and the characters are ordered to acquiesce in its requirements'.(Vigar 7). Such an approach to narrative by Hardy considerably differs from the style deployed by Conrad in his novella. That is not to suggest that the aspect of the 'internal life' of Hardy's protagonist drops in significance – it functions as an integral component in terms of themes and the narrative technique (discussed later) – it is just used for a purpose that differs to Conrad's. Whilst portraying the subjective of Conrad's protagonist induced the events of the story with greater personal significance, the representation of the internal life of Hardy's protagonist functions as a crucial component in the development of the story in *Two on a Tower*.

It is at this point necessary to note that although Forster's statement emphasises the importance of plot in Hardy's narratives, there is also as F.R. Southern articulates, 'the refusal to treat his figures [the characters] only as imaginative revivals' (38). Hence, notions of tragedy, love, desire, companionship that make up the themes in the plot of *Two on a Tower* are fundamentally conceived from the conflicts and resolutions in the 'internal lives' of the characters. For instance, the element of tragedy in the budding relationship between Lady Constantine and Swithin St Cleve emerges in the private reflections of Lady Constantine. Moreover, this sense of anxiety is prolonged and heightened for thirteen chapters by manoeuvring the aspect of the 'internal life' of Constantine and St Cleve where, the Lady's 'true sentiment toward St Cleve' is perceived as a 'naturally demonstrative

kindliness' (Hardy 66 -69) by Swithin. The aspect of the 'internal life' of the characters, in terms of plot, induces the vital element of twist, suspense, expectations that Hardy builds on in his narrative. As observed, the aspect of the 'internal lives' of the characters serves a different philosophy of narrative than Conrad's under Hardy's artistry. Hence, the next point will analyse the effects of Hardy's narrative style on the aspect of the internal life of his characters.

It is well known that Hardy was greatly influenced by the visual arts, ranging from architectural designs to the more traditional forms like portrait and landscape paintings. Vigar states that his interests spanned, 'with equal familiarity to Greek sculpture, Etruscan friezes, Dutch Masters and French Impressionists' (16). His approach to the narrative form is thoroughly moulded by the philosophies of the visual art. Hardy states that 'my art is to intensify the expression of things, as is done by Crivelli, Bellini, etc., so that the heart and inner meaning is made vividly visible' (Vigar 25). As such there is a tendency in Hardy's narrative to express, above everything else, the 'impression' of a place, situation or a person. He selects 'his detail with an instinctive feeling for the total emotional effect' (Vigar 24). Vigar's statement that Hardy's 'approach to reality, his ideas on the concept of art, tally strongly with those of the Impressionists' (43) rings true for the narrative of *Two on a Tower*.

This impressionistic approach to narrative by Hardy elicits great effect when combined with the aspect of the internal life of his characters in *Two on a Tower*. In this novel, Hardy applies his narrative approach of depicting the impression of a situation to illustrate the theme of man's dual existence in the social and the private realms of one's life. The notion of an established social impression of a person and its capacity in defining one's inner self is explored through the character of Lady Constantine by Hardy. She is bound by the expectation of 'liv[ing] in solitude till' (Hardy 23) her husband returns from his lion-hunting expedition by society which, turns her into a social recluse. Moreover, her social stigma forces her to resist her innermost feelings for Swithin even though, 'inexpressibly dear to her deserted heart he was becoming' (Hardy 69). However, Hardy stresses the significance of one's private self – one's most natural desires and emotions – by juxtaposing the private life of Lady Constantine to her constrained, shackled idea of herself on the public front. Her social person of a lady wearing 'heavy dress of velvet and lace [...] [purposively to look] small and isolated' is contrasted with her 'soft dark eyes [...] [providing a glimpse into her inner] natural indices of a warm and affectionate, perhaps slightly voluptuous temperament, languishing for want of something to do, cherish, or suffer for' (Hardy 21- 22). The treatment

of characters in Hardy's narratives thoroughly reflects his belief that 'men were unique, above all in their capacity for sympathy and their capacity for pain' (Cockshut 145).

The significance of the internal lives of Hardy's characters in his narratives operates in a more complex manner than is evident at first glance, especially considering the fact that the impressionistic style of narrative (distinctive of Hardy's writing) denies an exclusively personalised perspective (in the manner used by Conrad in his novella). Vigar observes that although 'we gain a fairly detailed impression of what the characters are like, [...] it is entirely an external impression. Seldom, in any of the novels, do we gain an "inside" knowledge of what these people think or feel or see' (Vigar 38). Hence, even in the portrayal of 'the subjective' of the characters in his narrative, Hardy maintains an impersonal distance in the act of narration. The usage of the third-person omniscient narrator by Hardy, therefore, has been likened to the way focalisation operates in the cinematic medium. Especially, the 'transition from the general to the particular (a distinctive feature of his narratorial technique) [...] can perhaps best be explained as being similar to the techniques now used in the cinema' (Vigar 34).

Such a mode of incorporating the element of the subjective in his narrative induces the story world with a certain aspect of objective/neutral aura, much like reality itself. Hence, through the portrayal of the internal lives of his characters, Hardy explores the way that the notion of 'reality' varies for different individuals and their subjective outlooks in *Two on a Tower*. The most notable instance of this in the novel is in the portrayal of the characters of Lady Constantine and Swithin St Cleeve. Whereas the character of Lady Constantine – due to her unfavourable circumstances of being trapped in an unhappy marriage and her eminent social status - is predominantly occupied with the thoughts of dishonour and falling into scandal, St Cleeve is more focused on the subject of astronomy as a youthful enterprise for fame and glory. Moreover, the impartial mode of portraying the personal lives of his characters heightens the sense of impending tragedy in the relationship between the Lady and St Cleeve. By conferring an element of objectivity in the portrayal of the internal lives of the two characters, Hardy manages to impress a realistic feel of life in the real world. As he states in *Life*, 'Art is the secret of how to produce by a false thing the effect of a true' (Vigar 23).

Underlying all the points discussed about the significance of the 'internal lives' of Hardy's characters is perhaps, as A.O.J. Cockshut states, his need to 'endow man with a soul'

(145). There is considerable depth and complexity in the characters that Hardy depicts in *Two on a Tower*. The aspect of the internal life of his characters depicted, illustrates the trivial nuances of human nature that reaffirms the humanity that Hardy believed in. Instances of irrational behaviour, impulsive moments, uncontrollable emotions that make up the character of Lady Constantine endows a certain aspect of humanity to her. And it is her conflict with this thoroughly human condition of desires and emotions that elicits the poignancy of her circumstances. Although she is aware of the gross injustice of her personal situation, there is no other remedy except toleration.

Moreover, it is not so much of what Lady Constantine does in the novel, but how she justifies it to herself that matters. For instance, although she becomes aware of the romantic inclinations in her feelings for Swithin early on, she justifies it as her enterprise to help him (in his quest for fame) in order to continue their liaisons. As mentioned earlier, the gradual development of the central themes such as the clandestine nature of their relationship, social barriers, etc. primarily emanate from the internal life of Hardy's protagonist. Feelings and emotions are therefore central elements in the structuring of the story in Hardy's novel. There is an almost symbiotic pattern to the correlation between the character development and the themes – where the development of the former leads to the formation of the latter- that develop as the narrative progresses. As Vigar state, 'in effect Hardy lead[s] both his readers and his characters through the darkness, real and metaphorical'(33).

The shift in approach to the art of narrative by the 'modern writers' entailed the system of imparting intensive focus on the subjective or the internal lives of their characters. Whilst Victorian literature embraced the mode of descriptive writing to depict an objective reality in their elongated passages of detailed descriptions, the literature of Conrad and Hardy attempt to shed a subjective perception on reality as seen and experienced by their characters. Hence, the aspect of the characters' internal lives function as a central point through which various other aspects of the narrative – the themes and the story – progressively take shape.

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