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Revisions to Realist Representation in Far from the Madding Crowd and Heart of Darkness.

Keywords
Madding Crowd, Heart of Darkness, Realism, Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad
George Henry Lewes considers the aim of realism to be “the representation of Reality, i.e. of Truth” (37) and identifies its central mode as “sympathy with the internal life” (38). For George Eliot, this in turn initiates “the extension of our sympathies” and so cultivates “the raw material of moral sentiment” (29). Their views exemplify nineteenth-century literary realism, a genre which explores moral themes through a sense of “verisimilitude” in the representation of setting, character, and event, while
 retaining the “credibility” of a “potential reality, given that we apply our expectations...about the real world to fictional happenings” (Leech and Short 127). A range of formal conventions developed to achieve these effects. Realist narrative often features an omniscient, third-person narrator, who in largely non-figurative language offers an authoritative, objective view of events, using an empirical description of setting to convey a plausible world. Characters have recognizable names and social relationships, and they are individualized through appearance, behavior, and dialogue. However, many critics identify the assumption of conventional literary realism to be what Raymond Williams calls the ideology of the “knowable community” (125). Williams argues that realism presupposes an empirical perspective from which an objective “Reality” and “Truth” can be apprehended by writers and readers, that “knowable and therefore known relationships compose and are part of a wholly known social structure,” and that literary realism thereby assumes a “mutually applicable social and moral code” (123).

Both Thomas Hardy and Joseph Conrad express dissatisfaction with conventional methods of realist representation, an attitude both in response to, and symptomatic of, a wider scepticism in the 1890s for moral and political certainties. In “The Science of Fiction” Hardy challenges realism’s empirical representation, arguing that “sight for the finer qualities of existence...[is] not to be acquired by the outer senses alone” (“Science” 103). Focusing on the artist, he stresses formal innovation,
claiming that to represent societal change (and changing views of society) and to be artistically convincing, “narrative must adjust itself to the new alignment” (102), accomplished through a creative “faculty for selection and cunning manipulation” (101). Only then, Hardy believes, was fiction capable of “reproducing...the phantasmagoria of experience with infinite and atomic truth” (102), with the resultant art “more truthful than truth” (101). Similarly, in his “Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus” Conrad stresses the sensual over an empirical apprehension of reality, arguing that the writer appeals “through the senses...[to] that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom [or] temperament” (“Preface” 118-119). Focusing on the reader, he claims that his task “by the power of the written word [is] to make you hear...feel...before all, to make you see” (120). Anticipating modernist representation, he locates meaning in “the rescued fragment...[to] reveal the substance of its truth” (120) and, in turn, to convey the “conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts” (119). With these ideas in mind, a close-reading of selected scenes from Far from the Madding Crowd and Heart of Darkness reveals how each writer modifies the literary conventions of realism. Analyzing their respective narrative strategies and their use of literary conventions from non-realist genres such as pastoral and gothic literature illuminates, in turn, their representation of setting and character. Particular reference is made to the critical perspectives of Raymond Williams and Edward Said, both critics who explore the relationship between the formal and thematic strategies of the novels.
The opening chapter of *Far from the Madding Crowd* exemplifies Hardy’s subtle revisions to the conventional omniscient narrative of realist fiction. Initially, the description of Gabriel Oak suggests an empirical narrative perspective, where a range of adjectives such as “low,” “tight,” and “large” are used to catalogue details of Oak’s appearance, including the “diverging wrinkles” of his eyes and his “low crowned felt hat” (*Crowd* 9). In addition, narrative omniscience is suggested through authoritative generalizations such as the assertions that Gabriel Oak is “at the brightest period of masculine growth” (10) and that he is “a man of misty views...[who] thought of... dinner when he meant to be listening to the sermon” (9). However, this impression of a stable, reliable narrative point of view is undercut throughout the chapter in a number of ways. Firstly, as he considers “[Oak’s] character as it stood in the scale of public opinion,” the narrator reveals that “when his friends and critics were in tantrums, he was considered rather a bad man; when they were pleased...a good man” (9). The observation concedes both the presence of different perspectives within the world of the novel and the importance of social opinion in the construction of character identity, each emphasized through the range of signifying titles for Oak; “Farmer Oak...Gabriel...Mr Oak” (9). Secondly, the narrator goes on to undermine the authority of his own perspective by conceding that “some thoughtful persons, who had seen him...on a certain December morning...might have regarded Gabriel Oak in other aspects than these” (10). Here, the narrator accepts
the possibility of conflict between subjective points of view. Thirdly, the narrator reveals the illusory nature of his apparent omniscience as he questions Bathsheba’s motivation for peering into her looking-glass: “What possessed her to indulge in such a performance...whether the smile began as a factitious one...nobody knows” (12). This admission concedes the limitations facing any attempt to acquire an objective knowledge of reality. All that can be concluded is that “it ended certainly in a real smile” (12). Although this conclusion echoes the empirical description of Oak’s smile that opened the chapter, the word “real” here suggests that the roots of what constitutes “reality” lie within, in this instance available only to Bathsheba, and furthermore undermines the claims of knowledge gained from the presumably unadulterated empirical description that characterizes conventional realist narrative. Oak’s own inference from Bathsheba’s smile is conveyed through narrative focalization as he imagines “her thoughts...[of] likely dramas in which men would play a part” (12). Although the narrator subsequently concedes that “this was but conjecture” and that it would be “rash to assert that intention had any part in them” (12), the incident illustrates the possibility that a degree of creativity is present in any interpretation of reality. That this creativity is often an unconscious act is hinted at by the fact that Oak is at this point unaware of the prophetic nature of his inference. Finally, the narrator levels the perspectives of humans and animals, noting that Bathsheba’s actions have been performed “in the sight of the sparrows, blackbirds, and
unperceived farmer”; he simultaneously denies both his own perspective and that of the reader by claiming that Oak and the birds “were alone its spectators” (12). Overall, these varied revisions to omniscient narrative show how Hardy undermines the empirical perspective upon which realist representation operates and, in turn, establishes the spatial shifts in perspective which are then used throughout the novel to represent character.

The fracturing of perspective within the novel’s third-person narrative mirrors what Raymond Williams identifies as a conflict within Hardy himself, namely between “the educated observer and the passionate participant” (132). Instead of reading Hardy’s primary concern as “the impact of an urban alien on the ‘timeless pattern’ of English rural life” (129), he instead stresses “the problem of the relation between customary and educated life...feeling and thought” (126). Mirroring the rejection by omniscient realist narrative of idealism, Williams sees education as “needed urgently where custom is stagnation or where old illusions are repeated as timeless truths”; for Williams, education can provide “a way of looking at that life which can see other values beyond it” (127). However, he ultimately saw neither perspective as “sufficiently articulate...the educated...limited in humanity; the customary thwarted by ignorance” (133), a sentiment recognized by Hardy himself in his concession that “[n]o single pen can treat exhaustively of this” (“Science” 101).

Something of this conflict between custom and education is found in the description of Oak’s silver fob,
itself of ambiguous status: “a watch as to shape...a small clock as to size” (Hardy, Crowd 9-10). While the watch as object is aligned through age with the customary, “being several years older than Oak’s grandfather” (10), the clock as a recorder of measured “time” is aligned with the rational, educated perspective. This dichotomy is emphasized in the observation that the clock hands “had the peculiarity of going either too fast or not at all” (10). However, Oak overcomes the “stopping peculiarity...by thumps and shakes” and the fact that the “smaller of its hands...slipped round on the pivot” with recourse to “comparisons with and observations of the sun and stars” (10). Oak’s sensitive and varied approach to ensuring the reliability of his broken watch clarifies Hardy’s view of literary representation. Hardy considers the “sympathetic appreciativeness of life in all its manifestations” as the crucial gift of the “more accurate delineator of human nature” (“Science” 103). Such an artist he viewed as superior to those “with twice his powers and means of external observation, but without that sympathy” (103), an approach he saw as the basic methodology of realist representation. However, Oak also monitors time by “pressing his face close to...his neighbours’ windows when passing by their houses, till he could discern the...timekeepers within” (Hardy, Crowd 10), an activity which can be read as dramatizing realism’s reliance upon the “knowable community” (Williams 125). Either way, the image of Oak’s fob does foreground the complexity of conflict within the novel between “customary and educated life” (Williams 126) and, by extension, Hardy’s
dissatisfaction with the attempt by conventional literary realism to represent reality.

Despite a possible alignment of the customary with the non-empirical within the novel, Hardy is well aware that “real perception of tradition is available only to the man who has read about it” (Williams 134-135) and that “the sense of what is now called the ‘timeless’...the sense of history...is a function of education” (134). What Williams calls Hardy’s “complicated sense of past and present” (135) finds expression through temporal shifts in narrative perspective, a device which modifies the stable omniscience of conventional realist narrative and which was used in particular by Hardy to convey setting. In Chapter XXII of the novel, the Great Barn is described as a place where “the spirit of the ancient builders was at one with the spirit of the beholder,” with the educated perspective of the narrator suggested through his knowledge of architectural details, such as “lanceolate windows [and] the orientation of the axis” (143). Sensory description of the barn’s construction, such as the “dusky, filmed chestnut roof” (143), enliven the narrator’s own focus upon the immediate scene. At the same time, the narrator insists “the mind dwelt upon its past history” (143), evoking the shearing practices “which had suffered no mutilation at the hands of time” (143) and conveying the dual perspective suggested in the phrase “the barn was natural to the shearers, and the shearers were in harmony with the barn” (144). In this context, the narrator’s view that “[f]or once Mediævalism and Modernism had a common standpoint” can be read as the outcome to Hardy’s
modifications to the conventional realist narrative.

The strength with which the novel represents a living rural history partially explained the view of Hardy as a pastoral novelist. *Far from the Madding Crowd*, in particular, draws upon pastoral literature, a genre which offers a harmonious view of rural existence and the shepherd’s work, but was seen by conventional literary realism as idealistic. However, Hardy often uses pastoral incident in the novel to intensify his representation of character, principally through the depiction of Oak’s shepherding. Although the plot is broadly structured around the seasons of the shepherd’s calendar, for Hardy, “work...is not merely illustrative; it is seen as...a central kind of learning” (Williams 139). Indeed, it is through the frequent disruption of pastoral incident that Hardy conveys the development of character. Chapter V, entitled “A Pastoral Tragedy,” climaxes with Oak’s sheep spilling over the cliff. The event dramatizes the death of his romantic illusions about Bathsheba, with the symbolic dimension of the scene emphasized through the narrator’s doubling of the outcome, with “two hundred mangled carcasses representing in their condition just now at least two hundred more” (Hardy, Crowd 41). The event plays out Bathsheba’s earlier refusal of Oak’s marriage proposal, where the “direct practicality...of Bathsheba’s spoken thoughts...effectively destroy Gabriel’s vision of her” (Lucas 358). However, just as this pastoral event alters the course of Gabriel’s career, so too her refusal means that “as a result he [could] now deal with her at a practical level” (358), an outcome crucial to their relationship in the novel. Such
disruption might itself be read as dramatizing the tension between pastoral and realist conventions of representation within the novel.

Hardy’s use of Oak’s shepherding to convey character relations in Weatherbury is particularly suitable if we share Williams’ assertion that “the social forces within his fiction are deeply based in the rural economy itself” (137). This evocation of deeply rooted forces in turn echoes the perspective of Freudian critics, who read Oak’s sheep shearing in Chapter XXII as dramatizing the sexual tension between him and Bathsheba. Carpenter argues that contemporary censorship “resulted not in the abolition of sex but only in displacement” and that Hardy “must, if there is anything to Freud at all, have compensated for his inhibitions symbolically” (339). The description of Oak dragging the “frightened ewe to his shear-station, flinging it over upon its back...and [opening] up the neck and collar” (Hardy, Crowd 145) can be read as an enactment of his sexual desire for Bathsheba, emphasized by the initials B.E. being “newly stamped upon the shorn skin” (146). In turn, Bathsheba’s observation that “[s]he blushes at the insult” (145) foreshadows her own embarrassment—her becoming “red in the cheek...the blood wavering” (147), while suggesting an unconscious complicity in the response of the ewe that displays “a flush which was enviable...to any woman in the world” (145). Similarly, Oak’s snipping of the sheep’s groin after Boldwood’s arrival in the barn can be read as Oak “taking his jealous revenge symbolically and on a surrogate for...Bathsheba” (Carpenter 340), the
narrator claiming that “she had wounded the ewe’s shearer in a still more vital part” (Hardy, *Crowd* 147). Overall, Hardy modifies the pastoral convention of bucolic shepherd life to modify, in turn, conventional realist representation of character relations. What Williams criticizes as an “element of artifice...contrived picturesqueness” (134) in Hardy’s fiction seems instead a symptom of his subversive use of the pastoral genre.

Despite Hardy’s revisions to realist representation in the novel, his narrator retains a degree of omniscience. While this is used to represent the internal thoughts of the principal players (thoughts often unavailable to the empirical gaze of others), it relies upon a form of experience inaccessible to the wholly subjective perspective of individual characters. In contrast, Conrad’s anonymous narrator in *Heart of Darkness* addresses the reader in the first-person, whose narrative conveys a subjective point of view. This narrative, in turn, frames Marlow’s own narration of his journey into Africa. Presented in direct speech, this shows that neither perspective possesses the reliable omniscience of the third-person realist narrator. Yet despite this fragmented narrative, Edward Said argues that “the complicated and rich narrative form of Conrad’s great novella...[captures the] imperial attitude”, something he sees as “assum[ing]...the complete centrality of the West” (511). He states that “Kurtz’s great looting adventure, Marlow’s journey...and the narrative itself all share a common theme: Europeans performing acts of imperial mastery” (Said 512) and that, furthermore, “like narrative, imperialism has monopolized
the entire system of representation” which “allowed it to speak for Africans...Kurtz...Marlow and his audience” (514). Indeed, it is by considering Conrad’s subjective, conflicting narratives together as a single text that the novel conveys what Hampson calls “the discourse of imperialism” (504). Furthermore, Marlow’s assertion that “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, Darkness 105) echoed Conrad’s own hope that by “blending...form and substance...the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words” (“Preface” 119), in turn mirroring the way that Marlow’s tale is enveloped, and clarified, by the frame narrative.

Conrad commences his thematic strategy by employing symbolist techniques to establish the subjectivity of each perspective. The novel opens with the narrator resting aboard The Nellie at dusk. Description of the Thames estuary is impressionistic; his sensory, imprecise adjectives such as “tranquil...diaphanous...imperceptible” (Conrad, Darkness 104) foreshadow the metaphysical landscapes of Marlow’s own narrative, while casual nautical vocabulary suggests the narrator’s familiarity with the setting, as he notes the captain “stood in the bows looking to seaward” (103). Indeed, his calm is conveyed through his harmonious description of the yawl, which “swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest” (103); the estuary, where “[t]he flood had made, the wind was nearly calm” (103); and the day itself, which ends “in a serenity
of...exquisite brilliance” (104). These combine to create a symbolic backdrop to the narrator’s naïve belief that the men on board “felt meditative...fit for nothing but placid staring” (104). Conveyed indirectly through figurative language, the resonance of such imagery intensifies the direct expression prevalent in authoritative realist narrative.

Juxtaposed images of darkness and light are used throughout Conrad’s novel. Although the precise symbolic significance of each tone remains ambiguous, the opening narrative frame suggests a connection between light and the narrator’s own uncritical view of British conquests abroad, those “messengers of the might within the land” (105). His view of “the sky...[as] a benign immensity of unstained light” evoke in him “the august light of abiding memories” (104). These evoke those lives affected by the Thames, from the “race that peopled its banks...[to] the men of whom the nation is proud...the great knights-errant of the sea” (104).

The narrator’s historical knowledge of conquest ships combine with his jingoistic view of “the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth” (103) to emphasize his disregard of the actions of those men who “had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword,” those “bearers of a spark from the sacred fire” synonymous with “the great spirit of the past” (104). The scene here subtly undercuts the realist assumption that from knowledge of recorded history flows an empirical or enlightened knowledge of reality. Furthermore, Conrad makes clear that during these reflections “the sun sank low...as if about to go out...stricken to death” (104), foreshadowing the darkness of Marlow’s impending tale.
This encroachment by darkness upon light is expressed figuratively throughout the opening frame and indeed foreshadows what Robert Hampson sees as the ultimate purpose of Marlow’s narrative, namely that it “locates darkness at the heart of the ‘civilizing’ mission” (504). It also explains why at this point in the plot the narrator is unaware of the symbolic significance of “the brooding gloom” (Conrad, *Darkness* 103), an image foregrounded in the scene through assonance and repetition. Initially, the narrator records “a mournful gloom, brooding motionless” (103), but quickly “the gloom...brooding...[becomes] more somber every minute” (104). The narrator explains this through simile, with the gloom glowering “as if angered by the approach of the sun” (104), and unconsciously equates the “sun” with his “enlightened” reflections on imperialism. Similarly, his reflections cease as the sun disappears; and as “the dusk [falls] on the stream,” the narrator notes all the remaining sources of light, observing that “lights began to appear along the shore,” that the “lighthouse...shone strongly,” and that passing ships created “a great stir of lights” (105). However, this repetitive seeking of light dramatizes an unconscious clawing for defense against Marlow’s impending tale, whose declaration that “this also...has been one of the dark places of the earth” (105) introduces a conflicting first-person narrative. Formally, this interlacing of conflicting narratives and levels of perspective differs significantly from the stable omniscient narrative which dominates realist fiction.

*Heart of Darkness* combines symbolism with
conventions drawn from gothic literature to emphasize both the strangeness and the unsettling familiarity of Marlow’s experience. Conrad’s use of disorienting setting, dreamlike imagery, and the mysterious patriarch can be read as an attempt to revise the empirical perspective of realism through what Robert Heilman sees as the potential of gothic representation, namely, the opening of “horizons beyond social patterns” (215) to become “the great liberator of feeling...in the depths of the human being” (215).

But while the novel combines gothic conventions with narrative techniques such as defamiliarization to suggest a metaphysical dimension to Marlow’s journey, Said stresses the social implications of such revision. He argues that Conrad’s gothic techniques create “dislocations in the narrator’s language,” something he sees as continually “drawing attention to how ideas and values are constructed” (Said 515). Part of the novel’s overall strategy, these dislocations demonstrate “[the] discrepancy between the orthodox and [Conrad’s] own views of empire” (515), a discrepancy rooted in the conflicting first-person narratives of the novel.

Said’s detected discrepancy is neatly illustrated by Marlow’s narrative as he tells his audience of “when the Romans first came here” (Conrad, *Darkness* 106). His lyrical tone is conveyed through his rhetorical appeal to his audience’s senses, asking them to “[i]magine...a sea the colour of lead, a sky the colour of smoke,” which combines with unsettling references to time to convey sensory immediacy. This serves two purposes. Firstly, he tries to
unnerve his audience by asking them to envision the threat of an incoming invasion, to “imagine him here...a military camp lost in the wilderness” (106), thereby inverting the process of colonialism. Secondly, he attempts to defamiliarize their present surroundings by bringing the “darkness” to the Thames estuary. He conveys the perspective of the invading legionnaires, whose fate here is to “[l]and in a swamp, march through the woods, and in some inland post feel the savagery” (106). Playing upon the image of colonized countries held by the champions of imperialism, he evokes “that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs... in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men” (106). Marlow’s earlier comment “you say ‘knights’” (106) is addressed to the narrator and confirms that the latter’s eulogy of British “knights-errant” (104) formed part of an audible speech presented to the reader as free-indirect discourse. This suggests that Marlow’s Roman tale is told in direct response to the narrator’s reflections and that, in turn, his African tale ultimately refutes the same unchallenged assumptions implicit in the narrator’s celebration of imperialism. The novel’s concluding narrative frame confirms that Marlow’s African tale has indeed defamiliarized their surroundings. The narrator’s earlier ambivalence at having to “hear about one of Marlow’s inconclusive experiences” (107) has now been replaced with an unsettled view of his surroundings. The Thames now “seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness” (187), echoing Marlow’s earlier recollection of his African journey into “the heart of an impenetrable darkness” (152).
A further device used by Conrad in Marlow’s narrative is an innovative technique that Ian Watts has called “delayed decoding” (qtd. in Said 515). The technique mirrors that of gothic narratives which, to create suspense in relaying a scene, withhold crucial information from the reader for as long as possible, and features in Marlow’s narrative as he describes “the remaining posts of that vanished fence” (Conrad, *Darkness* 164) outside Kurtz’s jungle house. His dramatic description of how one post “leaped up in the field of my glass” is followed by a digression as he asks, “You remember I told you” (164). He creates intrigue as he states that “[t]hese round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic; they were...puzzling...disturbing,” only to digress once more onto “vultures...ants” (164). Only after a succession of subclauses does he reveal that “[t]hey would have been even more impressive, those heads on the stakes, if their faces had not been turned to the house” (164). The gothic horror of Kurtz’s house is just one example of the unsettling incidents which Marlow relates. Yet despite his probable shock at such a sight, Marlow seems at odds to stress that “[he] was not so shocked as [one] may think,” claiming in a droll tone: “I had expected to see a knob of wood there, you know” (164). Here and elsewhere in his tale, such understatement is combined with an attempt to root unsettling experiences in terms recognizable to his audience; for example, he uses the language of commerce when he reveals, “I am not disclosing any trade secrets...There was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there” (164). One interpretation of this tendency is that is creates the effect of the uncanny, “that
class of the frightening which leads us back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud 340), in turn hinting that western imperialism is responsible for such horror. Furthermore, it reminds the reader that Marlow’s narrative tale is an oral-linguistic representation of his experience, enacted through both the literary technique discussed and the “self-consciously circular narrative forms [that] draw attention to themselves as artificial constructions” (Said 515). However, this is not to suggest that just because he “(according to the logic of realism) knows the end of the story he is about to tell” (Hampson 498), that Marlow is in complete control of his narrative. His early assertion that the experience was “not very clear” (Conrad, Darkness 107) finds expression throughout the tale in references to “unapproachable silence[s]” (163), “unspeakable secrets” (169), and a land “impenetrable to human thought” (162). Said suggests that, in addition to the imperialist strategy of the novel, Heart of Darkness is not “just a straightforward recital of Marlow’s adventures: it is also a dramatization of Marlow himself” (512). However, Terry Eagleton holds that, if the novel implies that “beneath imperialism lies the eternal barbarousness of the human condition... there seems little that can be done about the imperialist system” (243), a view that challenges the view that the novel invites the reader “to sense the potential of a [post-colonial] reality” (Said 515). Either way, these observations show how Conrad revises realist conventions to convey both the psychological complexity of character and a radical reinterpretation of imperialism.
Despite the revisions by both Hardy and Conrad to the conventions of literary realism, it would be inaccurate to see the path from early realism through to the fin-de-
siècle and modernism as a linear progression of improving methods of representation. Instead, the modes suggest an engagement with the question of what constitutes reality itself, with literature developing a range of representational techniques. These ideas emerge in the novels, in particular through their modification of the realist convention of omniscient narrative. While Hardy’s novel from 1874 is read by Williams as encasing two distinct perspectives within a single third-person narrative: “customary and educated” (129), Conrad’s novel, published 25 years later in 1899, features multiple first-person narratives seen by Said to collectively express the “imperial attitude” (511). Similarly, each novel is distinct in its employment of non-realist genre conventions. While Hardy’s use of pastoral conventions and incident revises both realist representation and the original idealism of the pastoral genre, Conrad employs gothic techniques with an end similar to that of gothic literature itself. However, Conrad’s symbolism and impressionistic narratives radically diverged from realist representation, anticipating modernist depiction of character and setting.
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