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A micro-ebook from *Master Narratives*

Liking or Disliking: Woolf, Conrad, Lawrence

Michael O'Neill

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Chapter 13

Liking or Disliking: Woolf, Conrad, Lawrence

Michael O'Neill

To the Lighthouse and *Women in Love* are remarkable for avoiding adverse judgements of figures who might seem, and have been seen as, the villains of their respective pieces. The figures I have in mind – Mr Ramsay and Gerald Crich – are the beneficiaries of fictional visions and devices that preclude final verdicts: the presentation of these two figures constitutes the first and third sections of the current piece. *Heart of Darkness* also gives us, in Kurtz, a figure whose apparent glimpse into ‘all the hearts that beat in the darkness’¹ ambiguously offsets that ‘surrender’ to corrupt ‘desire’ and ‘temptation’ (3.68) which invites unambiguous condemnation. In this work, a – to my mind – more fascinating inability to arrive at a final verdict concerns Marlow, narrator of and possible participant in Kurtz’s moral degradation, and the subject of a brief discussion in this essay’s second section. Certainly, for all their reaction against the Victorian novel, Woolf, Lawrence and Conrad share George Eliot’s dislike for work that lapses from the picture to the diagram. In Lawrence’s words from ‘The Novel’, ‘the novel contains no didactic absolute. All that is quick, and all that is said and done by the quick is, in some way, godly’.²

Analysis of all three works reveals a capacity – showing itself differently in each – to create an artistic illusion of the ‘quick’, especially in relation to human thoughts, feelings, and relationships. Traditional notions of characterization

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1. *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough, Norton Critical Edition, 3rd edn (New York: Norton, 1988), 3: 69.
 2. *Selected Critical Writings*, ed. Michael Herbert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 183.