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Duality, Paradox and Confusion in Joseph Conrad's "Freya of the Seven Isles"

Susan Stringer-O'Keeffe¹

This paper examines Conrad's use of duality in "Freya of the Seven Isles" in relation to fundamental aspects of the text such as setting, narrative voice, characterisation and themes, and it explores the way in which the play on opposites creates a tension from the beginning between comedy and tragedy. The exotic setting in the Dutch East Indies, far from the rules of ordered society, in shallow waters between land and sea where sudden tropical storms are common, makes this account of diabolic revenge seem credible. The first-person narrator, whose ironic tone serves to free him from responsibility, as well as to distance him emotionally from the catastrophe, reassures us and alarms us in turn, revealing the contradiction between his original light-hearted view of events and his knowledge of their terrible outcome. Main characters form interchanging pairs, and all characters are paradoxical, so that they often misjudge each other and themselves. Although "Freya" is a love story, love and pride are inseparable, and pride perhaps has a greater role in the unfolding drama than love. There is also a close connection between pride and humour, with constant references to smiles and laughter, but little genuine mirth. Laughter has multiple functions, being used as a weapon or a defence mechanism reflecting ignorance, shame, fear and embarrassment. At the end nobody is laughing, except conceivably the scorned lover who precipitates the tragedy, and the reader is left ruminating causes and consequences in a tangle of possibilities.

KEYWORDS: DUALITY, PARADOX, COMEDY, TRAGEDY, LOVE, PRIDE, HUMOUR

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“Freya of the Seven Isles” is a compelling tale that remains in the reader’s mind when other Conrad stories have faded. This impact comes of course partly from the shocking dénouement, but it is also a result of the tension created from the beginning by a delicate balance between a sense of the absurd, helping to maintain the possibility of a happy end, and a foreboding of unavoidable impending doom. Duality extends to all aspects of the narration, being sometimes expressed through paradox - the conflict between appearances and reality - and at other times dissolving into mere confusion. In my opinion, it is Conrad’s ability to sustain this pattern of duality through the power and poetry of his language, without it becoming simplistic or annoying, that constitutes the brilliance of the story. We accept and even take pleasure in the play on opposites, admiring what would have been clumsy melodrama and caricature in the work of a lesser writer.

Conrad tells us in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* that “the true peace of God begins at any spot a thousand miles from the nearest land”, so it is only logical that “Freya”, “twixt land and sea”, should offer us the contrary: a nightmarish fairytale of a passionate romance culminating in death. The setting plays a major role in the story. Although Conrad is capable of weaving his magic in the most banal of settings, his penchant for the exotic location, be it Africa or Asia, gives him a free rein to develop unusual characters and situations that the reader finds fully credible. In the Dutch East Indies everything seems possible, at least to the English. The normal rules of conduct do not necessarily apply, and colonial rivalry, prejudices and inefficiency allow Heemskirk to carry out his terrible vengeance with little fear of punishment. Furthermore, within this isolated setting, the main characters are presented in greater seclusion, with almost no significant contact with other people. As Mark Larabee has pointed out, Conrad pays special attention to geographical and physical detail, within which an important dramatic element is the above-mentioned confusion between land and sea. Freya lives on the smallest of the Seven Isles in a house on a point of land, so that Jasper can anchor close enough to listen to her playing the piano. Yet “nasty, shiny, black rock-heads” (294) also exist close by and prefigure the final resting place of the *Bonito* on a reef, both on land and in the sea, for this is a story of “shallow waters”. Although the Seven Isles is normally calm, the narrator warns us at that it is occasionally assailed by a sudden violent thunderstorm. The tragedy unfolds, however, in bright sunshine: “that sunshine which, in its unbroken splendour, oppresses the soul with an inexpressible melancholy more intimate, more penetrating, more profound than the grey sadness of the northern mists” (354). This contrast is reinforced when the narrator meets old Nelson again in London on a cold, wet, grimy January day. As he approaches the boarding house, he is profoundly disturbed by a sudden vision of the Seven Isles bathed in sunshine in a glittering blue sea.

It is the first-person narrator who creates the tension between the comic and the tragic that disconcerts the reader. He alarms us and reassures us in turn, perpetuating our vacillation between optimism and pessimism. This dual attitude on the part of the narrator may reflect the conflict between his original confidence in Freya and the calamitous outcome of the story, which he already knows at the moment of telling, for he states in the first line that the events took place many years ago. In addition, despite the rather crude narrative strategy at the end when the narrator says that

Nelson gave him “the whole story of the Heemskirk episode in Freya’s words” (381), in effect he is transformed into a third person omniscient narrator in the second half of the narrative, allowing him to reveal a multiplicity of viewpoints normally denied to a first-person narrator, and he only returns to a true first-person role in the conclusion.

This blurring of identity is shared by the other characters. Silvère Monod says they are all guilty and calls them “a bevy of mediocrities and fools”. In a purely legal sense guilt attaches only to Schultz and Heemskirk, but in a wider sense the characters are all doubtless guilty of misjudgement, both with regard to themselves and to others. Yet it would have been difficult for anyone to predict the extreme form of Heemskirk’s revenge. Although all the characters are flawed beings, unlike Monod I feel that Conrad succeeds in giving at least the three protagonists an epic touch that is essential to the tragic dimension of the story.

The opposition between male and female is clearly a significant element, already examined by Monika Elbert. The narrator twice refers to Freya’s struggle with three men’s absurdities, and he reverses the stereotype of the rational man and the emotional irrational woman. But the characterization is actually much more complex. The narrator himself overestimates Freya, being clearly entranced, if not slightly in love with her. Although not as blind as old Nelson with respect to his daughter, he sets Freya up paradoxically both as a goddess and a down-to-earth woman. In reality she is highly vulnerable, having grown up largely without a mother and with an apprehensive and indecisive father, living mostly at sea and on the island. These apparently open surroundings are in fact forms of enclosure that deny her the possibility of social experience. Because she can manage her father, she mistakenly thinks that she can manage everyone. Ironically, her ideal is another enclosed environment, that of the brig, “the great free world” to the lovers, but a potential prison for the narrator (298). However, that is a future never realised and Freya dies for love like a classic romantic tragic heroine. Yet the real tragedy is that she comes to “doubt her own self”, suffering from an anaemia that symbolises her lack of substance.

Jasper is also an emotionally defenceless orphan. He grew up without a mother, went to sea early and has been rejected by his half-siblings in England. Because of their family situation, he and Freya have problems assuming male and female roles, respectively. As a seaman and trader Jasper is practical and competent, but his susceptibility in personal relationships leads him to yield to Freya’s mothering instinct and desire to control. His love for her is his life and he behaves “as if the magic of his passion had the power to float a ship on a drop of dew or sail her through the eye of a needle” (311). Unlike Freya, he misunderstands Heemskirk’s attitude and only fears him as a representative of the Dutch authorities, not as a rival in love. On the surface Jasper is the epitome of masculinity, a romantic handsome pirate figure, but with Freya he accepts the role of the “kid”, “the happy child”. In addition, he merges his and Freya’s identity and love with the brig. Freya goes further, eliminating Jasper, verbally at least: “It will be no man who will carry me off - it will be the brig” (334). The loss of the *Bonito* turns them into twin ghosts, each as hollow-eyed as the other.

Heemskirk has a dual nature, too. He is presented as a comic figure, but there is nothing comic about his malevolence, which destroys all the main characters except the narrator. Even his appearance is paradoxical in relation to the Dutch stereotype, as he is short, fat, swarthy and black-haired in contrast to Jasper, Freya and Nelson, "all three tall, fair, and blue-eyed". (307) His villainy is revealed in what Monod calls the piling up of "insulting epithets". Although we may sympathise with him, we cannot accept his revenge. He and Jasper form another pair because "Freya haunted them both like an ubiquitous spirit" (356). In their final clash both are likened to Prometheus: Heemskirk as "a sort of Prometheus in the bonds of holy desire, having his very heart torn by the beak and claws of humiliated passion" (353) and Jasper feeling "as if . . . his very heart were being taken out of his breast" (361).

Other characters also participate in Conrad's play on opposites. Freya's father is almost always referred to as "old Nelson (or Nielson)", underlining his paradoxical situation as a Dane who has allied himself with the English in the Far East, but who lives in Dutch-controlled territory. Fearless in dealing with cannibals, he is reduced to jelly by the thought of the Dutch authorities. He is a strange combination of timorousness and hardhearted selfishness, which makes him reject Jasper and toady up to Heemskirk. The most mentally and emotionally limited character in the story, he misjudges his daughter, certain that she is far too sensible to fall in love. Although a "comedy father" for the narrator, who finds his naivety endlessly amusing, Nelson's misplaced dread of Heemskirk's power, based on the latter's position and not on his manhood, causes him to sacrifice the one person he loves for an island that he then no longer wants. Schultz also has two faces. When sober he is an honest man, but, in his own words, "a vile, low, cunning, sneaking thief" (376) when drunk. His greatest quality is a hypnotic, angelic voice, contrasting with his pathetic appearance and wayward behaviour. At the moment of crisis, however, this magic voice is reduced to a raven's croak.

Although "Freya" is a love story, love and pride are inseparable, and pride perhaps has a greater role in the unfolding drama than love. Heemskirk is described as "just a common middle-aged lieutenant" (302), but he appropriates Freya mentally, convinced that he is a Dutch gentleman conferring honour on an inferior being. He desires to possess rather than love Freya. After the climactic slap he is tortured by the idea that it will make him the laughing stock of the region. In this case, hell has no fury like a man scorned.

Freya's treatment of both Heemskirk and Jasper is partly dictated by pride, too. Even if her love is not in doubt, she sets herself above Jasper by calling him a "lunatic" and a "perfect idiot" (315). When Jasper wants to carry her off, she asserts her authority, saying "No one could carry me off . . . I shall come of my own free will. You shall wait for me on board" (333). Both Antonia and Jasper are right in suggesting immediate escape from a situation that is unbearable even before the initial catastrophe, but Freya thinks she knows better. When her father relays Jasper's final words, she admits "Yes! I would never allow him any power over me" (383). Normally wary with Heemskirk, after the crucial episode she allows her pride to dominate. Her extravagant goodbye kisses over the sea to Jasper are really designed to infuriate the other man, who is watching: "Take

this - and this - and this”, she murmurs. (349). She continues to “fire shots” at Heemskirk by playing the same love music as the previous evening. This arm turns against her later, however, because the Dutchman’s desire for revenge is increased by the sound of the piano that he cannot get out of his head. Pride is also vital in Freya’s relationship with her father. As with Jasper, she treats him like a child, not trusting him with her plans, a mistake she recognises before she dies.

Jasper is perhaps the greatest victim of pride. It is natural that his consciousness of being loved should make him feel superior to Heemskirk, “for what evil could touch the elect of Freya?” (364). But his pride in the *Bonito* merged with Freya is pathological, because it is inextricably related to his selfhood. Thus, when the ship is lost, so is his sense of identity. On a lesser scale, but important in terms of the plot, Jasper overestimates his power to influence Schultz, so that it never occurs to him to closely supervise the mate, especially with objects as easily exchangeable as the rifles. Finally, the narrator is not free from the temptations of pride either. In general he attributes to himself a superior understanding of people and events, and in one particular instance he cannot resist claiming unique powers of perception: “My eyes alone could detect a faint shadow on the radiance of her personality” (304).

This attitude of self-congratulation on the part of the narrator is allied to one of ironic amusement, which sets the tone of the opening sections and is symptomatic of the close connection between pride and humour in “Freya”. The narrator’s relish for the absurd in human nature leads him to underestimate the danger and to mislead the reader into thinking that all will be well. He looks on old Nelson, Jasper and Heemskirk as a source of entertainment, encouraging Freya in their “joke to speak of Jasper abusively” (305). His descriptions of old Nelson as “pathetically comic” (320) and of Antonia as “the faithful camerista of Italian comedy” (327) create the genial atmosphere that makes the ensuing events more devastating. Ironically, Antonia is not always the faithful servant, bolting in terror at the decisive moment of Heemskirk’s approach. If she had carried out her duty to warn Freya, the tragedy could have been averted. Yet the narrator’s condescending, ironic tone also serves to free him from responsibility, as well as to distance him emotionally from the catastrophe. After all, he tells us, Freya and Jasper were his friends.

The narrative tone is only one aspect of the fascinating use of humour, central to the creation of paradox and confusion. Monod refers to the “misplaced mirth” and “exaggerated gaiety” in “Freya”, but in truth there is little genuine merriment. Laughter is mostly used as a weapon and a defence mechanism. Even the light-hearted fun made of Heemskirk by Freya, Jasper and the narrator, based on the difference between his idea of himself and the reality of his appearance, is overshadowed by his sinister aura. As in other works by Conrad, characters laugh when the situation is not amusing. One thinks of Lord Jim’s terrible laugh when recounting the story of his disgrace to Marlow. In “Freya” incongruous laughter is common. As in *Lord Jim*, it is sometimes a manifestation of horror, expressing shame or fear or embarrassment. It may be a revelation of character, too. The first comment made about Heemskirk is that his malice is betrayed in his laugh: “Nothing gives away more a man’s secret disposition than the unguarded ring of his laugh” (301).

Sometimes laughter serves to disguise or to allay anxiety. When the narrator talks to Freya about the last visit of Heemskirk and Jasper, she does not mention the slap; but when he refers to the Dutchman “her eyes expressed something like distress, while she bit her lip as if to contain an explosion of laughter” (317). A moment later she and the narrator laugh together about the grotesqueness of that “unhappy black beetle”, but then Freya runs to her room, leaving the narrator puzzled and despondent. From what we know later, it is likely that Freya is subject to a whole gamut of emotions at the memory of that evening: a confusion of amusement, pride, mortification and fear. At dinner she no longer has the desire to laugh, the narrator commenting: “The look she gave me in exchange for my discreet smile had no hidden mirth in it. Her eyes seemed hollowed, her face gone wan in a couple of hours. We had been laughing too much” (320).

Smiles and laughter play a major role in the full account of the Heemskirk visit in Part IV. Schultz's grin when asked if his master is on board infuriates the Dutchman even before he has seen the two lovers. Antonia, with no illusions about the threat from Heemskirk, is “half inclined to laugh” as she watches him enter the house, and she later tells her mistress about his attack on her, “laughing nervously with frightened eyes” (331). Her apparent mirth is clearly an indication of fear. At dinner the smiles and laughter do not reflect conviviality either, but a power struggle in which each character expresses something different. Aware that a smile can be a challenge or a declaration of superiority, Freya quickly transforms her smile at the “comically moody” attitude of Heemskirk into a conciliatory act that mollifies the lieutenant. He responds, however, with “a smile of surly and ill-omened amusement”, in anticipation no doubt of sexual favours. Despite her indignation, a moment later, Freya cannot help laughing at his ridiculous demeanour and he participates “with a harsh 'Ha,ha,ha!'”, joined by Nelson who is relieved to see the Dutchman in good humour. This ostensibly merry exchange is a disquieting overture for what follows when Freya and Heemskirk are alone. After the slap, Heemskirk's response to Nelson's attempt to alleviate his toothache is “a short insane laugh” (343), obviously reflecting his frustration and fury. The scene certainly has its comic aspect for the reader, primarily because of Nelson's misunderstanding, yet at the same time we dread Heemskirk's revenge. The ensuing private laughter of Antonia and Freya, so shocking to the old man, is more an outburst of hysteria than of amusement, as is evident in the text.

In obedience to Freya, Jasper avoids unnecessary contact with Heemskirk at the bungalow, and is both absent from and ignorant of the crisis. In the unavoidable showdown on the *Neptun*, smiles and laughter are again significant. It is the thought of Freya laughing while recounting his humiliation to her lover that arouses in the Dutchman “the sudden desire to annihilate Jasper on the spot.” This desire is so strong that “he lost the power of speech, of vision” (359). Jasper's unawareness of Heemskirk's loss of face and resulting hatred leads him to find the latter's eye-rolling so funny that he cannot help “a broad smile” (363). Little does he know that this is the precise moment that Heemskirk conceives the perfect revenge. Jasper calls the seizure of the brig “the beetle's little joke” (364) and thinks it will soon be over. He is right, but not in the way he imagines. After the grounding of the brig on the reef, Heemskirk is gloomy and thoughtful, but he has achieved his aim. Looking at Jasper, he comments: “Here he was, the favoured vagabond, the only man to whom that infernal girl was likely to tell the story. But he would not find it funny. . . No, he

would not laugh at it. He looked as though he would never laugh at anything in his life” (366). The same juxtaposition of the comic and the tragic is exhibited in Schultz’s behaviour during Jasper’s downfall. He also knows something that Jasper does not know and his desperation at his own betrayal turns him into a comic figure: “Mein Gott, he is one very funny man”, says the warrant officer (363). Schultz’ suicide, however, is not funny.

In the first part of this story the narrator implies that the “common cudgel-play of fate” controls events (310), and at the end he refers to “the irony of fate” wearing “the aspect of crude and savage jesting” (377). In a review of “Freya” in the *Daily News* in 1912, Robert Lynd also ascribes the end result to fate. In the same year, however, John Masefield blames “the blindness of an old, kindly father”. Who or what is responsible? Freya is convinced that the danger lies in Jasper’s impulsive nature, and at the Seven Isles, where the two rivals meet. She wishes her lover many miles away, but that is exactly where Heemskirk can grab him. She believes her role is to prevent disaster, but it is her pride that perhaps precipitates it. Ironically, Jasper’s obedience and self-control contribute to his ruin. He thinks that by following orders and behaving rationally he will be reunited with his ship and therefore his love. Even if Jasper knew about Heemskirk’s disgrace or Shultz’ theft, as a true seaman he could never envisage the destruction of a beautiful ship to silence laughter about love scorned. Thus the mind of the reader ruminates on causes and consequences, the constantly shifting views in “Freya” demonstrating the impossibility of reaching final truths. Conrad’s writing, focused as it is on character, keeps us pondering motivations and accountability long after the end of the story.

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