

Language and Ethics in Joseph Conrad's Sea Prose

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Данная работа предлагает к рассмотрению вопросы философской этики Джозефа Конрада на основе анализа его морской прозы. Целью проводимого анализа является выявление некоторых типичных особенностей этических принципов автора, используемых им в создании морского образа. Базой данной статьи являются две ранние «морские» работы Конрада: "Typhoon" (1902) The Mirror of the Sea (1906), в которых морская тема сама по себе символична, и море – это символ. С морем автор связывает отношения между человеком и окружающей его действительностью. Через описания трудностей морской жизни Конрад пытается понять и представить этические проблемы человеческого поведения. Поэтому, море является метафорой, символизирующей замкнутый круг, бессмертие, зло. Для моряка море - это одновременно место перемен и новых опасностей. Меланхоличность стиля Конрада в характеристике морского образа, демонстрирует его увлечение морской темой и пессимистическое видение жизни. Его повествования о море выполняют двойственную функцию: с одной стороны, они возвеличивают моральные принципы человеческого бытия, а с другой, - ставят под сомнение их универсальность. Таким образом, этические правила в трактовке Конрада противоречивы, поскольку они одновременно служат для созидания и разрушения нашего понимания об этике. Таким образом, в центре данных историй сосредоточены проблемы связи отношений и конфликтов между человеком и средой, анализ которых эта статья предлагает для углубления понимания этических принципов автора.

Keywords: Conrad, sea, ethical principles, human being, nature

1 Introduction

Much has been written and debated about the greatness of Joseph Conrad's work. He has been traditionally singled out as a romantic writer, as a writer of psychological novels, a writer of sea prose in the genre of adventure stories (Bannikov 1959; Zhluktenko 1998: 160) or as even a creator of a whole sub-genre – the sea meditation (Foulke 1986: 155). In some monographs (Lothe 1991: 315), Conrad has also been seen as a founder of modern adventure stories, and his novels have been categorized as realistic with elements of traditional impressionistic techniques (Peters 2001). Yet my concern is neither to discuss the aesthetic principles of Conrad's literary production nor to define its genre. My concern is rather to view his work as the synthesis of all these categories and styles through which the writer's psychological, philosophical and ethical problems can be determined. Conrad's personal characterization of his literary career supports the idea of

his complex and multifaceted art which he parallels by the sea image – the writer's constant obsession and source of inspiration: "Everything can be found at sea, according to the spirit of your quest – strife, peace, romance, naturalism of the most pronounced kind, ideals, boredom, disgust, inspiration – and every conceivable opportunity, including the opportunity to make a fool of yourself, exactly as in the pursuit of literature" (2008: 67).

Therefore the discussion of Conrad's philosophical morality is realized in this study through the examination of his sea prose with the purpose of identifying some typical characteristics of the writer's ideals through his construction of the sea image. The study focuses on Conrad's two early 20th century "sea" texts: "Typhoon" (1902), and *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906), in which the representation of the sea is completed through the writer's "nautical" language, demonstrating Conrad's ethics, past experience and devotion to the sea theme. The image of the sea is formed in relation to the sailor, which functions firstly to establish moral codes and to question their universality. In other words, the ethical principles in Conrad's performance are ambivalent because they work both to construct and to deconstruct our understanding of ethics.

2 Conrad's Practical Knowledge

The peak of Conrad's career coincides with a period of transition and innovations in many spheres of human life. Victorian England was influenced by the industrial revolution and Darwinism as well as the evolution of ethics (Griffith 1995: 179). The idea of Christianity, the relation to God and human nature became central to many writers.¹ Narratives of guilt and confession, responsibility and irresponsibility as well as ethics and ethical criticism became central to English literature at the beginning of the twentieth century (Lemke 2009: 7). Therefore, to Conrad, as well as to many other of his contemporaries, such as H. G. Wells, Rebecca West, Rudyard Kipling, Henry James and Arthur Conan Doyle, problems of ethical standards became of particular interest. To study these issues is to understand the relation between some ethical codes and the

¹ See, for example, Herbert Spencer's *The Data of Ethics* (1879), H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1898) (with the narrator as a Victorian ethicist).

individual's self-knowledge and desire as well as their reflection in literature. In this sense, Conrad's writing is rewarding because it unusually poses some moral dilemmas and conflicts, and offers some solutions to them through the maritime context.

Conrad's career at sea brought him a variety of experiences, starting as a traveller and observer and later becoming seaman and master on many long voyages to distant lands (Isham 2004: 383). His nineteen-year sea history and reminiscences were most sensitively reflected in "Typhoon" (1902) and *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906) and represented an evaluation of the writer's ideas on what seafaring had meant to him. However, it would be wrong to treat these stories as strictly autobiographical, even though they include a proper part of the description of the sea life the writer spent during his maritime years. Apart from reminiscences, the stories offer some general knowledge about the seamanship and ships as well as propose the conflicting relation between Nature and humankind. The image of the sea represents the world with all its morality and iniquity. The sea is capable of providing a mariner with both pleasant and unpleasant feelings. It can be both a source of trouble and chaos, representing danger, as well as of human aspirations, providing the seaman with work, and challenges.

3 Through the Sea to the Meaning of Life

In Conrad's stories, the connection between the human being and the sea is striking. For most of his characters at sea, this huge aquatic void brings a meaning to life and a sense of order. It encourages their beliefs and reinforces their confidence. When at sea, they find unity and harmony, which are transcended into their individuality and wholeness. Conrad believed in the magic qualities of the sea which, through experiencing them, can never be left behind. For him, "the strong voice of the everlasting winds, and a whisper of a mysterious spell, the murmur of the great sea" were like a formula which entered his "unconscious ear" (2008: 68). As he himself expressed it, the sea was for him "all my world", which he tried to represent in his sea stories by rendering them with "the vibration of life in the great world of waters, in the hearts of the simple men who have for ages traversed its solitudes, and also that something sentient which seems to dwell in ships – the creatures of their hands and the objects of their care" (2008: 5). Therefore

Conrad's sea narratives can be understood as the writer's attempt to search for the meaning of life and a quest into his individual conception of ethics.

Through the sea, Conrad studies the human's psychic worth and his sense of existence. In the search for his ideals, Conrad on the one hand arrives at the point of dismay, sorrow and pessimism which reveal his tribute to the philosophy of Schopenhauer (1788–1860), while on the other, he models his personages on the spiritual imagery of the Bible.² Thus at the base of Conrad's ethics there lies a perpetual dialogical paradigm of the human struggle between God and the Devil. Conrad's claim of his moral values rests on his concern to retain his eternal perceptions of the inconsistency of experiences. Therefore the distinctive feature of all his sea narratives is an elaborate reciprocity between failure and salvage, or what Greaney calls "a complex interplay between breakdown and rescue, deconstruction and restoration, that finds its most literal expression in the narratives of nautical breakdown and heroic rescue, but also extends powerfully into questions of moral, psychological, and linguistic deconstruction" (Greaney 2002: 61).

4 Testing the Seamen's Qualities at Sea

The story of "Typhoon" written in January 1901 and published in the same year in the *Pall Mall Magazine* is categorized, as Conrad himself put it, "as a deliberately intended storm-piece" (1919: viii). The main character is Captain MacWhirr, who is in command of the *Nan-Shan*. He navigates the ship through the China Seas, which are, according to the narrator, "full of every-day, eloquent facts, such as islands, sand-banks, reefs, swift and changeable currents – tangled facts nevertheless speak to a seaman in clear and definite language" (Conrad 2007: 15). When the storm approaches, the Captain's main duty is to rescue the ship and his men. However, his task does not become as simple as that when he finds himself practically alone in the struggle with nature. Nevertheless

² Wollaeger (1990: 31–33) speaks of the influences of Schopenhauer's philosophy on Conrad. He identifies many common features in Conrad's and Schopenhauer's philosophical standpoints and literary implications, calling these two men "connoisseurs of futility" (1990: 31). In Wollaeger's opinion, Conrad draws heavily on Schopenhauer in his descriptions of nature, the human and in the lucidity of his prose. The English Bible also had a dramatic influence on the writer's prose style (Huneker 2010: 7).

MacWhirr is portrayed as a man with an unhesitant spirit and determination who triumphs over difficult conditions, gains more experience and also teaches his mate Jukes. Because of this, Ian P. Watt accurately calls "Typhoon" a story "completely dedicated to the triumph of facts" in which, as he continues, MacWhirr is represented as "the Innocent, the Natural, the Wise Fool, the man who is mocked by his fellows but finally surprises them with a quite unexpected exhibition of real wisdom" (2000: 109–110). Thus the Captain's endeavour and his survival can be viewed as an educating pathway through chaos to a better life, and can therefore have, in Conrad's words, a "definite symbolic intention" (Conrad 1919: viii).

Even though MacWhirr realises his mistake in sailing the *Nan-Shan* through a typhoon, he shows courage, good practical skills and persistent strength when dealing with this critical point. His philosophical morality in rescuing the ship and preserving his commitment whatever it might cost is juxtaposed with the Chinese workers, who are represented as mere cowards more concerned with saving their property rather than the ship. His mate Jukes also experiences doubts and fear. He is the opposite of the Captain in his youth and imagination. Jukes could be the embodiment of the young Conrad himself – childish and dreaming.³ When MacWhirr asks Jukes for help, his mate remains unconcerned, "as if rendered irresponsible by the force of the hurricane . . ." (Conrad 2007: 51). Jukes becomes so disturbed by the tempest that he forgets his long training and duties (2007: 53). Thus all MacWhirr's counterparts lack will, and refuse to aspire to anything heroic. Here Conrad's interest surely lies in studying the motifs of men's moral philosophy or ethics.

Yet the sympathetic figure of the Captain also has his own faults. When the fighting between the Chinese passengers starts because their boxes of money are broken by the storm, MacWhirr orders them to stop and the money be distributed equally between the travelers. With rising passion he exclaims: "Had to do what's fair, for all – they are only Chinamen. Give them the same chance with ourselves – hang it all. She isn't lost yet..." (Conrad 2007: 88). In this imperialistic conjecture ("they are only Chinamen") there lies

³ Batchelor argues (1996: 31) that many of Conrad's anti-heroes can be the portrayals of the young Conrad himself, who was irresponsible, infantile and ambitious.

what Batchelor calls "the limitations of unexamined late Victorian assumptions about race", which coexist in MacWhirr side by side with his moral courtliness and common sense (1996: 116). Thus, even though Conrad represents his character as an ethically stately and high-born gentleman of Northern Irish origin, he also describes his snobbish personality and xenophobic qualities. Yet despite his imperfection, MacWhirr brings to the sea the main principles of his character such as courage, heroism and self-discipline.

This duality was typical of Conrad himself. The writer's preoccupation with different careers affected his own perception of himself when he remained a Polish gentleman and a wordsmith reading Flaubert and Shakespeare, at the same time as he was a British merchant sailor (Batchelor 1996: 31). There are many different viewpoints why writing became Conrad's main calling. I suggest that for Conrad it was a way of concealing his many selves behind the mask of his creative expression. Through his own artistic performance, he conducted a long journey, which was similar to Kierkegaard's relation to God, which he called "a venture fraught with uncertainty, fear and trembling, lifelong striving, self-denial, and suffering on the part of the single individual" (Walsh 2009: 51). Therefore, the twofold characteristics of Conrad's sea personages can be viewed as a result of the writer's constant endeavour to search for his own ideals and to express his different selves through the images of his characters and their marine experiences.

5 Deconstruction of Ethics

Such an irresolute imagery is one of the characteristics of the sea picture itself, which Conrad creates to demonstrate that, like a sailor, the sea is also prone to changes of state. It is not only capable of cultivating good qualities in human beings and stimulating their right behaviour but is also endowed with sinister or even demonic properties. The sea changes its chameleon face from its monotonous flow of waters to storms and hurricanes which challenge human resolve, ambitions and morality. In *The Mirror of the Sea*, a collection of essays published in 1906, the writer traces the relations between man and the sea which metaphorically represent the relation between humans and nature. Conrad portrays the sea as an unfriendly and "too mighty for common virtues" void which "has never been friendly to man" (Conrad 1923: 227). The writer compares

its nautical temper with a "savage autocrat spoiled by much adulation", which has never ever had "generosity . . . courage, hardihood, endurance, faithfulness" (Conrad 1923: 230). Such a portrayal represents sinful and morally wrong qualities which Conrad seems to have tried to test in encounters with humans. In order to struggle with such a monster and to survive, a human being must be an adversary.

Through this malevolent representation of the sea Conrad also deconstructs ethics. He shows the sea as an inconsistent unity whose waters constantly flow and whose laws are therefore never fixed. At sea sailors can also be unsafe and vulnerable, which disrupts their ethical principles. Because, as Caputo expresses it (1993: 4), ethics "throws a net of safety under the judgements" that a human being is forced to make, the sea, in Conrad's writing, deconstructs ethics because it cuts this safety net. It is made to occupy a point of tribulation that works as a moral predicament, on account of which the rules of the sea cannot fall into any universal category of ethics. Here we can refer to Derrida's deconstruction of ethics when he speaks of the necessity to avoid any generalizations and universal approaches to ethics because of its comparative nature (Roffe 2004: 38).⁴ Conrad, too, seems to have stayed away from these sweeping statements, making his moral philosophy more specific and related to the circumstances. Thus the image of the sea in Conrad's sea stories not only works to construct correct ethical standards for a human being, but also functions to deconstruct the universal understanding of ethics.

The collective title of *The Mirror of the Sea* stories can be understood as the writer holding the mirror to the sea, and the sea itself as the mirror of life, the human soul and moral philosophy. Conrad represents the duty of the seaman as a craft or art which demands special skills and stamina. Its "moral side" includes "preservation of the highest possible skill on the part of the craftsmen". For Conrad, this skill is "more than honesty; it is something wider, embracing honesty and grace and rule in an elevated and clear sentiment, not altogether utilitarian, which may be called the honor of labor" (Conrad

⁴ According to Derrida, any ethical question functions in correspondence with some other argument. Derrida's general philosophy of the ethical rests on the relation of the self to an other when he claims that it is this otherness that lies at the very core of language and that establishes references between its small units such as words, and sentences, and the whole idea of context (Roffe 2004: 38).

1923: 36–37). According to Najder (1997: 97), this non-utilitarian vision of the social characteristics of work is a principle of Conrad's ethics. At sea, the sailor struggles with water, wind and other opponents that nature offers, exercising his will and becoming stronger. Thus the sea provides him with work which stimulates his mind, tests his personal qualities and improves his skill. This work, according to Conrad, which takes place entirely in the natural environment of the sea, makes the human being less morally corrupt and more virtuous.

6 The Hybridity of the Ship

The sea also provides the seaman with a home in the form of the marine vessel. Therefore, in *The Mirror of the Sea* Conrad devotes special attention to the image of a ship whose portrayal is, like that of the sea, completed in relation to the sailor. The writer characterizes the ship as a good-natured "individual" and a "sensitive creature", able to sail without ballast and not dependent on humans (Conrad 1923: 45, 75). It cannot be deceived and cannot betray its master, which illustrates fidelity between the ship and the seaman (1923: 46). Thus the seaman who really loves the sea and the craft of seaman-ship would think of nothing but of his true service to the ship, which, according to Conrad, can be a single solution for a seaman: "To forget one's self, to surrender all personal feeling in the service of that fine art, is the only way for a seaman to accomplish the faithful discharge of his trust" (Conrad 1923: 46). In "The Tremolino" Conrad expresses his praise for the ship and is indebted to its "awakened love for the sea" (1923: 265). In other words, the ship functions as that domicile which gives man a sense of stability and commitment, becoming for him his only home.

The ship has a hybrid identity: it can be self-sufficient and unmovable, and oscillating when it depends on the seaman. Casarino (2002: 20), who has studied the representation of spatial discourses in Conrad, suggests that the ship oscillates "ceaselessly between a completely autarchic and monadic condition . . . between two polar opposites", and therefore its space can be represented as two opposite and separate fragments. The paradox, in Casarino's view, lies in the space's "simultaneous becoming-monad and becoming-fragment", a place "that exists by itself and at the same time is given over to

an infinity". In Foucault's tradition, Casarino refers to such a place as "heterotopia" – a space which exists in relation to other spaces but is independent in itself (2002: 27). Thus the ship can be characterized as having a dialectic relation to the world and being endowed with solitude and isolation – an idea which reminds us of Conrad's personal state, and helps to understand the writer's motifs which lay behind his making the ship a central "character".⁵

As we have seen, the image of the ship is ambivalent: on the one hand it constitutes a home and something familiar for the seaman, while on the other it does not represent such security. Through such a state of existence, Conrad perhaps tries to formulate his own moral ideals about "home", which, similar to a ship, was for him a fixed place of residence where he spent about nineteen years of his life and which became, as the writer himself called, his "nursery" and "cradle" (Najder 2007: 187; Conrad 1923: 250, 264). In addition, it was probably Conrad's inability to fully associate himself with any of the three cultures to which he belonged, Polish, French, and English, that resulted in Conrad's impression of home as a drifting place which floated in-between and was suited to neither here nor there.⁶

7 In Conclusion

To conclude, through the sea theme Conrad tried to establish a connection with his past life and experience and to speculate over human ethical values and life. His choice of the sea and the ship as symbols of the universe and community are of particular importance. The sea, in Conrad's stories, is both welcoming and hostile but mostly indifferent towards the seaman. The ship is a place of community, which questions the laws of the universe and which collects people of different background and interests. Conrad makes the sea test these people's qualities: their endurance and morality, but he does not either criticize or sympathize with any of them. He gives them a chance to find their

⁵ During his marine service, it was often the case that Conrad did not have a home at all but lived in seamen's establishments which were like secluded homes, like a ship in the sea (Villiers 2006: 30).

⁶ Najder argues (2007: 456) that Conrad was a lonely figure, and solitude was his fate. Although multilingual and multicultural in his identity, the writer never established complete links with any of his different backgrounds.

own solution and meaning in life. Some of them, like Captain MacWhirr, with his heroism and commitment, stand as examples of human ideals of conduct; others such as Jukes are models of man's possible imperfections, which should be accepted and given a chance to be corrected. Conrad shows that in each person there is its double, its darker side which is given to him/her to learn from his/her own experience and to develop him/herself into a better individual.

Moreover, the significance of the doubleness of the sea image in that it is a place of spiritual revival, and the locus of danger is crucial for an understanding of the moral predicaments in Conrad's texts. The embodiment of the seaman's motives and dilemmas eventually results in a conflict both with his subordinates as well as with himself. Like Conrad's Jim in *Lord Jim*, MacWhirr is in conflict with himself because he wants to prove to himself and to his crew that he is not a coward. This dilemma is typical of Conrad's sea stories and shows his philosophical morality, which suggests the imperfection of humankind and the lack of universality in ethics.

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