

# The sea as mirror in the shadow line and lord jim



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D'autres fois, calme plat, grand miroir de mon dsespoir-C. BaudelaireThose acquainted with the works of Joseph Conrad know well enough that the author had a grand affinity for the sea. Certainly, this should be expected from a man who had spent his formative years on various vessels, traversing the eastern waters in the capacity of mate and captain. During these years, Conrad formed a relationship with the sea, based on equal parts, fear, reverence, and love, which would transcend his writing and shape his characters. Conrad, of course, learned much from the sea, and we, in turn, learn much about it from him. Based on the collective themes of his sea novels, it would seem that Conrad, were he to impart just one facet of his nautical knowledge on his reader, would want him to appreciate the long and sacrosanct tradition of command, to understand the cult of the seaman. In these works, Conrad paints a collective picture of the true seaman: stoic, strong, and equanimous in the face of peril. As Captain Giles of *The Shadow-Line*, an exemplar of the code, put it, " a man should stand up to his bad luck, to his mistakes, to his conscience, and all that sort of thing" (*The Shadow-Line*, 131). The true seaman, though, is also afflicted by a profound solitude. He alone is responsible for the safe passage of his vessel; " Such is the loneliness of command" (*Typhoon*, 40). The seaman has one friend and one adversary, the sea, and it is only through the sea, the ' mirror of his despair' that he may find himself and recognize the honor and burden of command. Two of Conrad's maritime novels, *The Shadow-Line* and *Lord Jim*, introduce us to two characters who adhere variably to the code of the seaman. The narrator of *The Shadow-Line* begins his first command as a headstrong and immature novice but through the self-reflection demanded by trying times, comes to appreciate his role as captain and embrace the

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proud tradition of command. The titular protagonist of Lord Jim, in stark contrast to the aforementioned young captain, is unable to stand up to his mistakes, as Captain Giles most earnestly prescribes. Jim does not use the sea as a mirror for his own self-reflection, but rather as a vehicle for his own promotion. As such, he cannot take a place in the pantheon of the seaman. A study of MacWhirr is an appropriate addendum to any evaluation of the narrator of *The Shadow-Line* and Jim as, contrary to the others, he is established immediately as a true seaman. We have, then, three, remarkably different characters who deal with their mistakes to varying degrees; *The Shadow-Line*'s young captain matures markedly through his ordeal, and, more subtly, Captain Mac Whirr acknowledges a fatefully wrong decision, while Jim runs away from a reflection he does not want to face. Conrad alludes, in *The Shadow-Line*, to the mirror of the sea. It is in this mirror that the narrator of the story is able to discover his own shortcomings and recognize the magnitude of his position as captain. The narrator begins his tale having abandoned a position as first mate on a comfortable steamer in an action that "had the character of divorce—almost of desertion" (*The Shadow-Line*, 4). His resignation, his desertion, comes as a result of his realization that his youth is waning aboard a ship on which he describes his time as a "dreary, prosaic waste of days" out of which "there was no truth to be got" (*The Shadow-Line*, 7). The 'truth' that the narrator seeks can be found only within himself and only through self-reflection. He is fortunate enough to be afforded the opportunity for such reflection aboard an ill-fated vessel, his first command. The young captain embarks on his journey with the same cockiness that led him to abandon his previous ship. Without yet proving himself, he believes he is some sort of superior individual, already an

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esteemed member of the fellowship of the sea. In his immaturity, he does not understand the futility of accosting and threatening the Steward and is incredulous when the esteemed Captain Giles tries to comfort the shaken man. Walking with Giles to the port where he will embark to meet his ship, the new captain deliberately quickens his pace in an effort to 'out-walk' the elder man, a vain attempt at dominance that befits the irreverent and self-interested nature of the narrator at the story's beginning. It is this cockiness that discolours the narrator's character as he sets out on his first command. The young captain is overly assured of himself: "One is a seaman or one is not," he remarks, "And I had no doubt of being one" (The Shadow-Line, 44). Here the captain assumes a title that he has not yet earned through necessary reflection or tribulation. That he has 'no doubt' of being a seaman does not by any means imply that he is one. Indeed, the self-confidence that the narrator feels regarding his post and his place in the cult of command has not to do with any viable experience but merely with the sheer thrill of his appointment: A sudden passion of anxious impatience rushed through my veins and gave me such a sense of the intensity of existence as I have never felt before or since. I discovered how much of a seaman I was, in heart, in mind, and, as it were, physically – a man exclusively of sea and ships; the sea the only world that counted, and the ships the test of manliness, of temperament, of courage and fidelity – and love (The Shadow-Line, 40). This from a man who had, just days earlier, deserted his ship and the sea, itself. The captain certainly reconciles with the sea expeditiously. What is more, he comes to trust it with such a naively high regard that, knowing what lay in store, one cannot help but feel sorry for him. Hoping to escape the disease and heat ridden Asian shore with all possible alacrity, the narrator identifies

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the sea as the “ only remedy for all [his] troubles” (71). On the surface, this supposition could not be further from the truth. The sea and her paucity of winds provide no assistance to this captain who had scoffed at steam and embraced the mast. Though the sea does not provoke the outbreak of fever aboard the vessel, she nonetheless intensifies it. After the narrator discovers that the prescribed antidote for the fever, quinine has been emptied of its vials by the ship’s nefarious late captain, the voyage becomes a race with death, and the sea does little to expedite the living. The Captain’s discovery that the antidote is not available to the ships crew is the seminal moment in the story. It is at this moment when he first realizes the magnitude and solitude of his position as captain. He, alone, is responsible for the health of all his men and he, alone, will be blamed for the mishandling of that responsibility. The guilt he feels for not having checked the medicine’s supply before departure is merely reinforced by the sea’s stubbornness. The lack of wind makes the passage painfully slow and emotionally trying for the narrator. The sea, though not responsible for the outbreak of the fever, is entirely unforgiving. She isolates the narrator in his capacity as captain and forces him to take responsibility for everything that has happened on the journey thus far and everything that must be done to get the ship out of her present situation. In isolating the narrator with his guilt, the sea acts as the ‘ mirror of his despair.’ He is forced to reflect upon his situation and face the reality that he must confront his own dilemmas, mistakes, and bad luck. I became aware of what I had left already behind me – my youth. And that was indeed poor comfort. Youth is a fine thing, a mighty power – as long as one does not think of it. I felt I was becoming self-conscious (The Shadow-Line, 55). Having to bear the burden of command alone, the captain is forced

to mature through reflection on his condition and consciousness of what he needs to do to improve it. And, after several days and nights on deck without sleep and with only the constant companionship of the ailing cook, Ransome, himself a consummate seaman, the captain manages to guide the ship to shore losing no men and earning an entire new sense of dignity and pride. Having crossed his own shadow-line, the captain has finally proved himself worthy of joining the ranks of the fellowship of the sea. In many ways, the narrator of *The Shadow-Line* and Jim are quite similar. Both are vain and headstrong, both have at one time or another positions as first mate, and both are faced with devastatingly trying situations. Unlike the former, though, Jim is unable to reach the conscious state of self-reflection necessary to overcome his trials and take his place among the great seamen who came before him. Considering the length and depth of *Lord Jim*, its protagonist, Jim, is not a very complicated character. Indeed, one need not look far beyond the first four chapters for the most solid explanation of who Jim is. It is in these preliminary chapters that an omniscient narrator tells the story of Jim, a young dreamer who, at an early age, leaves his father's 'abode of piety and peace' to pursue a life at sea. Jim's greatest character flaw is revealed during his time on the 'training ship for officers of the mercantile marine' where he worked "with the contempt of a man destined to shine in the midst of dangers" (*Lord Jim*, 9). It is a flaw that will plague his character throughout the entire book. Jim is a dreamer in the negative sense of the word. His fancies are romantically self-serving, not idealistic. His dreams, wherein he "saw himself saving people from sinking ships, cutting away masts in a hurricane – always an example of devotion to duty, and as unflinching as a hero in a book," are the dreams of an egoist, not an idealist

(Lord Jim, 9). Jim's only veritable ideal is his own promotion in the eyes of himself and others. The disparity between this ideal and that of the true seaman ensures that Jim will remain outside the great maritime tradition, 'one of us' but not one of them. Throughout the course of the novel, Jim proves, through his actions, to be unworthy of the title of seaman. His daydreams, though focused on his own promotion, are none-the-less harmless but his actions, in some cases quite harmful, reveal the most about his true character. If actions speak louder than words, they certainly sound out high above thoughts and from the beginning there is a troubling inconsistency between Jim's reveries and his deeds. The young Jim is awakened from his dreams of quelling mutinies and confronting savages by a call for help. Here, he has the chance to realize his dreams and yet he balks. Hesitating from fear of a storm, Jim misses his first chance to be a hero. He is untrue to himself, but more importantly, he is untrue to the code of conduct of the seaman. This hesitation to act heroically, though, is far from Jim's most damning sin. Rather, that sin comes from his near unconscious decision to abandon the damaged Patna, a vessel whose appeal to Jim rested largely on the fact that he would have the benefits of "short passages, good deck-chairs, large native crews, and the distinction of being white" (Lord Jim, 13). Upon learning that the ship has been punctured and that the seas are pouring into it at an alarming rate, Jim panics. His lack of the sort of equanimity demanded of a seaman is shown when he strikes a pilgrim who, unaware of the fate of the ship, begs him for water. This panic, of course, is eclipsed by a more immediate desire for survival which causes him to leap overboard in a desperate and fateful attempt to save his own life. Though the decision to jump is not entirely a conscious one for Jim, it is a

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choice that no true seaman would ever make. Paramount among the tenets of the seaman's code is that no officer shall ever, under any circumstances, abandon ship. Jim not only abandoned the ship; he left 800 innocent and unsuspecting pilgrims for dead. The act of abandoning ship, alone, is enough to bar Jim from the ranks of the true seaman. However, even more troublesome than the desertion is Jim's reaction to it afterwards. While the other officers who jumped with him rationalize their course of action, Jim scowls, yet he, too engages in rationalization. He, too, makes excuses for his actions, blaming the others, even as he insists he does not. Explaining the circumstances to Marlow, Jim insists, "-they were too much for any man. It was their doing as plainly as if they had reached up with a boat-hook and pulled me over" (Lord Jim, 77). Of course, he is plagued by remorse, but Jim's guilt is not towards the pilgrims but towards himself. He is ashamed of his act not because it was immoral or contrary to the code but because he had once again failed to be a hero. It is for this reason that Jim so desperately wants the ship to finally sink. He is initially filled with horror that the ship has not yet submerged. " I was saying to myself, ' Sink - curse you! Sink!' - It terrified me to see it still there," (Lord Jim, 63, 70). When he finally feels sure that the boat has, indeed, gone down, he is overcome by a sense of relief that his 800 possible accusers are dead. In the end, knowing that the ship had not, in fact gone down, the most telling remark Jim makes regarding the ordeal is his lament, " Ah! what a chance missed! My God! what a chance missed!" (Lord Jim, 53). Indeed, Jim did miss his chance, not at self-promotion, but at self-reflection. He, like the narrator of *The Shadow-Line*, is confronted with a grave situation. Unlike, the narrator, Jim is unable to use the sea to reflect upon his situation and act according to the code of



command he is meant to embody. Jim's flights of fancy hold very little water if they are not backed by definite action. Here Jim is faced with one last chance to prove himself worthy of his own dreams. He fails. One is tempted to maintain that another man, perhaps the young captain of the Shadow-Line, most definitely Singleton of *The Nigger of the Narcissus* or Typhoon's Captain Mac Whirr, would have recognized the waters below him as his companion and adversary and, within these waters, would have recognized himself as a seaman and stayed with his ship and her cargo. These men are worthy of the great dynastic tradition of seamanship; Jim is not. Furthermore, Jim fails entirely to adhere to Captain Giles' definition of maturity. At no time does he "stand up to his bad luck, to his mistakes, to his conscience-" (*The Shadow-Line*, 132). Yes, he stands trial and is condemned by the magistrate, but after that point, Jim makes a habit of constantly running away from his past. "When the fact broke through the incognito he would leave suddenly the seaport where he happened to be at the time and go to another 'generally farther east,'" (*Lord Jim*, 8). He continues to run from his past until he cannot even bear the civilized world any longer and begins his time on the island of Patusan where he comes to be known as Tuan Jim. It is here, in his isolation, where Jim is allowed some time for self-reflection, albeit not through the sea. And here, on the island, Jim regains some degree of dignity. However, his death, though ostensibly honorable, is merely another instance of his record of self-serving actions. Ignoring the pleas of his wife, Jim leads himself to execution, "tearing himself from the arms of a jealous love at the sign, at the call of his exalted egoism. He goes away from a living woman to celebrate his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct," (*Lord Jim*, 246). The reader ought not be mistaken; this 'shadowy ideal of conduct'

refers not to the code of the seaman but rather Jim's blurred realization of it. The ideal code of conduct, which, to Conrad, is perfectly clear, holds that a seaman should espouse the virtues of hard work, patience, and equanimity. Moreover, this grand tradition demands that its disciples accept responsibility for their actions and stand up to their shortcomings without making excuses. In Jim and the narrator of *The Shadow-Line* we see two similar personalities who react differently to adverse scenarios. The narrator, through the glass of the sea, is able to reflect upon himself and his condition and, through such reflection and subsequent action, earns his place alongside the esteemed seamen who have gone before him. Jim, on the contrary, does not avail of his chance at self-reflection. His last chance to be a hero is also his last chance to prove himself worthy of the fellowship of the sea and on both fronts he falls short. It seems evident in the examination of these two works, that real seamen are made and not born. The captain of *The Shadow-Line* begins his command as a naive but self-assured young man. It is as a result of the tribulations he faces at sea and the necessity for self-reflection found there that the captain crosses his shadow-line. Neither was Jim born a seaman by any means. The difference between him and the young captain lies in Jim's inability to engage in self-reflection during his dilemma at sea. The example of Captain MacWhirr, of *Typhoon*, does well to illustrate this assertion as well. MacWhirr is the consummate seaman, stoic in his carriage and heroic in his courage. By no means an egoist, his concern lies solely with getting his vessel from one port to another with the greatest possible expedition and care. It would seem that MacWhirr, of all people, was born a seaman. However, even he is not complete. His lack of experience with severe weather prompts him to ignore the directions of a nautical book

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and take a fierce hurricane head on. This is a grave error, and one that MacWhirr pays for in injury, fatigue, and damage to the ship and its cargo. MacWhirr is proof, then, that the process of self-reflection and improvement is not a finite one. The sea portrayed in Typhoon is a sort of howling mirror, constantly reminding MacWhirr of his mistake and forcing him to reconcile with himself and his trade. This he does, in his act of supreme fairness at the story's end. Conrad uses MacWhirr to show the reader that there is no one lesson to be learned from the sea but that with every voyage a seaman must be open to the reflection offered by that maritime mirror, the sea.