

Mirages of
misconception: the
influence of illusion in
joseph conrad's the
lagoon...



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It is impossible to maintain a completely objective outlook on life, unaffected by personal needs, desires, and biases. Individual perceptions, no matter how grievously mistaken, strongly influence both trivial and crucial decisions. In Joseph Conrad's "The Lagoon", Arsat bases the momentous betrayal of his brother on the seemingly realistic yet devastatingly empty dream of a pure and blissful life with Diamelen. He emerges from this shattered illusion only to sink into another; even his hope for redemption by a heroic act of vengeance is but a tragic misconception. Arsat's inability to escape the deceptive trap of his own mind effectively dramatizes the idea that life is a "world of illusions" (Conrad 6). Arsat possesses the noble characteristics of "love... strength and courage" (Conrad 3) as well as their inevitable counterparts of selfishness, greed, and cowardice. Before the emergence of these less honorable traits is catalyzed by desire, Arsat demonstrates "the faithfulness of [his] courage" (Conrad 3) to his leader and the fierce devotion of his love to his brother. However, these apparently unshakable loyalties weaken when Arsat is enticed by the mirage of love. His passion for Diamelen burgeons under a furtive cloak of secrecy where Arsat cannot openly be with her. Instead, he and Diamelen "[speak] to one another though a scent of flowers, through the veil of leaves, [and] through the blades of long grass" (Conrad 3). Despite the inadequacy of this relationship, Arsat is able to "see nothing but [her] face and hear nothing but [her] voice" (Conrad 3). His infatuation with Diamelen becomes so powerful that it suppresses all other emotions and induces him to "forget loyalty and respect" (Conrad 3). Consequently, when his brother is beset by the Ruler's men, Arsat selfishly abandons him for Diamelen. His judgement is stained by the illusion that love conquers everything - even the most shameful betrayal.

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Moreover, Arsat does not “ care who die[s]” (Conrad 6) because all he “ want[s] [is] peace in [his] own heart” (Conrad 6). He disregards the fact that it is only through his brother’s selfless devotion that he is united with Diamelen. Ignoring his brother’s ensuing cries and the “ voices shouting ‘ Kill! Strike!’” (Conrad 5), Arsat paddles away, because with Diamelen in his grasp, the mirage of his envisioned utopia appears to be close at hand. However, he never finds it; even though “ a country where death is forgotten [and]... unknown” (Conrad 5) seems to “ lie before [him] like a land of dreams [-] so various, so beautiful, so new [-]” (Matthew Arnold, “ Dover Beach”) Arsat painfully discovers that his life “ hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light” (Matthew Arnold, “ Dover Beach”), because it is plagued by his guilt. In an attempt to efface the tarnish of this guilt, Arsat decides to fulfill the moral obligation towards his brother. Yet, embedded in this presumably valiant gesture of atonement, there lies another selfish motive. Arsat seeks to reenter the human community in order to fill the lonely void of his life now that “ there is nothing left” (Conrad 6). By an irrationally courageous act of vengeance, he hopes to prove that he is not a coward who is willing to forever evade responsibility. Foolishly, Arsat believes that more “ death – death for many” (Conrad 6) will reconcile the villagers with him. In reality, it will only cause them to regard him with even more loathing and condescension. Arsat does not consider the fact that murder will neither abate the enormity of his betrayal nor resurrect his brother and Diamelen. The consequences of his decisions and the memory of his betrayal hounds Arsat. Yet, he stubbornly clings to life instead of seeking death. Despite all the agony and hardships, he finds something attractive about life. If

selfishness and greed cause suffering while love and heroic gestures produce
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illusions, then illusions are the pleasant aspect of life which people live for; people are willing to bear the dire consequences of their actions in order to savor the beatitude of illusions. Ironically, the illusions which trick, deceive, and hurt humans are also what sustain them by providing respite from the grimness of reality. As Matthew Arnold suggests in "Dover Beach", if the mirages of life were to withdraw, there would be nothing except the painfully "naked shingles of the world".