



## Fiction on Nature

### FICTION SUR LA NATURE

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#### Abstract

Joseph Conrad's 'Youth' is significant and considerable in that it is a novella which is built on the author's personal experiences along with drawing on the interaction between Man and Nature. Conrad's tenth story 'Youth' revolves round Marlow who is both a narrator and a central character. He undertakes a sea journey in which the adolescent Marlow becomes a man. 'Youth' is a story of discovery and development, of revelation and revolution vis-à-vis man and nature and their sociality. Conrad delineates this sociality through the English people and the sea. The direct engagement of natural elements, water and wind, as adversaries to man is revealed by the author. This engagement makes man not just an object of more or less accidental fate, but a protagonist, a fighter in the battles of his existence. What kind of a community gets surfaced in 'Youth' vis-à-vis Sea? Marlow starts his narrative by addressing five people at the beginning of the story. He says "between the five of us there was the strong bond of the sea, and also the fellowship of the craft" (69). Such beginning speeches direct us to get involved in a fiction which is a mirror of man and nature community.

**Key words:** Fiction; Joseph Conrad; 'Youth'; Man; Nature; Sociality.

#### Résumé

La «Jeunesse» de Joseph Conrad est importante et considérable en ce qu'elle est une nouvelle qui se construit sur des expériences personnelles de l'auteur ainsi que par le dessin sur l'interaction entre l'homme et la nature. «Jeunesse» dixième étage de Conrad tourne autour de

Marlow qui est à la fois un narrateur et un personnage central. Il entreprend un voyage en mer dans lequel l'adolescent Marlow devient un homme. «Jeunesse» est une histoire de la découverte et le développement, de la révélation et la révolution vis-à-vis de l'homme et la nature et leur socialité. Conrad délimite cette socialité par l'intermédiaire du peuple anglais et de la mer. la participation directe des éléments naturels, l'eau et le vent, comme des adversaires à l'homme est mis en évidence par l'auteur. Cet engagement fait de l'homme n'est pas seulement un objet de sort plus ou moins accidentelle, mais un protagoniste, un combattant dans le batailles de son existence. Quel genre d'une communauté se fait surface dans vis-à-vis de «Jeunesse» de la mer? Marlow commence son récit en abordant cinq personnes au début de l'histoire. Il dit: «entre les cinq d'entre nous il y avait la forte discours des obligations de la mer, et aussi la communion de l'artisanat» (69). De commencer ces diriger nous de s'impliquer dans une fiction qui est un miroir de l'homme et de la communauté de la nature.

**Mots-clés:** Fiction; Joseph Conrad; «Jeunesse»; L'homme; La Nature; La Socialité.

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#### INTRODUCTION

Joseph Conrad's 'Youth' is significant and considerable in that it is a novella which is built on the author's personal experiences. More importantly, Marlow appears here for the first time, a character and a story-teller who is also present in Conrad's later works such as *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, and *Chance*.

In the author's note to the collection, Conrad observes:

'Youth' ... marks the first appearance in the world of the man Marlow, with whom my relations have grown very intimate in the course of years. The origins of that gentleman (nobody as far as I know had ever hinted that he was anything but that) – his origins have been the subject of some literary speculation of, I am glad to say, a friendly nature. (3)

Conrad also highlights that he is not the person well equipped to cast light on the matter, and avers:

he was supposed to be all sorts of things: a clever screen, a mere device, a 'personator', familiar spirit, a whispering 'demon'. I myself have been suspected of a mediated plan for his capture. (3)

Conrad emphasizes that he made no plans for Marlow's presence in his works. He also points out that Marlow is not an intrusive person and that he is haunted by him in his hours of solitude. The author proclaims:

Even before appearing in book-form 'Youth' was very well received. It lies on me to confess at last, and this is as good a place for it as another, that I have been all my life – all my two lives – the spoiled adopted child of Great Britain and even of the Empire; for it was Australia that gave me my first command. I break out into this declaration not because of a lurking tendency to megalomania, but, on the contrary, as a man who has no very notable illusions about himself. I follow the instincts of vain-glory and humility natural to all mankind. (4)

He also insists that 'Youth' is a feat of memory and a record of experience rooted in its facts, its inwardness, its outward colouring, beginning and ending in himself. To him, *Heart of Darkness* is also an experience while being pushed a little beyond the actual facts.

Conrad's tenth story 'Youth' revolves round Marlow who is both a narrator and a central character. He undertakes a sea journey in which the adolescent Marlow becomes a man. Their ship *Judea* sails up the English Channel on the way to load the cargo of coal. *Judea* is damaged by a blow from another ship and it takes almost one month to be repaired. Then the ship receives its cargo and sets sail to the East. The crew comprising Captain Beard, Mahon, Marlow, and other ship workers, find out that *Judea* still leaks. They go back to the port for another repair. After setting out, again they find it necessary to approach the bank for more repairs. Then they chose to return to the loading dock and unload the cargo of coal. Reloading *Judea*, they are certain to enter the sea and start their journey towards East. However, their cargo of coal catches fire and they spend time on pumping water in and out of the coal bins. Their attempts seem to be of no use for an explosion of coal gas generates an uncontrollable fire on the deck. Their ship is towed by a passing ship for a short time and they are advised to leave the fateful *Judea* to save their lives. The reluctant Captain and other crew take to the life boats and observe the sinking ship. Then they set out for Java with three life boats, one of which is supervised by Marlow to be his first experience of commanding. They reach the Asiatic mainland after days of rowing and sailing while Marlow could beat the other two life boats commanded by others. Quite young

and enthusiastic, Marlow confronts the East at the age of twenty for the first time.

'Youth' is a story of discovery and development, of revelation and revolution. Marlow is in search of something more desirable than his youth and this is revealed to him through a voyage to the East. That is why it is a 'memorable affair' to him and hence he tells his audience "[i]t was my first voyage to the East, and my first voyage as second mate ... You'll admit it was time" (69). Such a discovery becomes essential to his existence and Marlow is aware of that. He states "[y]ou fellows know there are those voyages that seem ordered for the illustration of life, that might stand for a symbol of existence" (69).

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## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

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Now the question is what does Marlow get out of this voyage or which element of life could he discover that was fundamental for him to have a meaningful existence? When Marlow speaks of the ship *Judea*, he tells, "there was on it, blow her name in big letters, a lot of scrollwork ... with motto "Do or Die" underneath ... There was a touch of romance in it, something that made me love the old thing – something that appealed to my youth!" (70). Apart from showing that life equals *Hara-kiri*, the word 'Do' stands for 'being' and 'existence' while 'Die' represents immobility and death. Therefore, 'to do' means to be dynamic and to exist while 'to die' refers to the state of paralysis. That is why Marlow sees it as a source of appealing to his youth. In fact, the story displays the struggle of this young man among adult and old people, to achieve a bigger realm of experience of manhood. Marlow's discovery can be a revelation of his potency and privilege, of his capability and competence, or in other words, of his inner and manly power. In his book *Conrad: The Psychologist as Artist*, Paul Kirschner envisages, "'Youth' presents the self, not striving for power, but enjoying it as a passing gift of life ... a prose ode upon this feeling of power conferred by the strength and imagination of unconscious youth" (41). However, whether Marlow enjoys this inner power as a gift of life or is it his 'self' which is identified with power is central to the fiction, as Marlow's search is for something which gives meaning to his life. Speaking of his youth, Marlow observes: "I remember of my youth and the feeling that will never come back any more - the feeling that I could last for ever, outlast the sea, the earth, and all men" (91). This declaration and his other announcements reveal some aspects of this power. First, it is a power which leaves him with a feeling of immortality. Second, perhaps such power surfaces when it is fronting other modes of power such as power of the Nature and the physical and psychological power of other men.

Elements of Nature are described and portrayed by

Conrad's skills of the vision and the spatial in writing. The frame narrator starts the story by saying:

This could have occurred nowhere but in England, where men and sea interpenetrate, so to speak – the sea entering into the life of most men, and the men knowing something or everything about the sea, in the way of amusement, of travel, or of bread-winning. (69)

Such a statement stresses on the superiority of men's power over sea. Although both sea and men interpenetrate, it is the man who knows many things about the sea; about how to use it in terms of fun, travel, and a necessity for sustenance. Hence, this knowledge of the sea leaves him with a power of superior feeling.

Further, Conrad delineates this interaction between English people and the sea, perhaps giving such a privilege to the English. This aspect becomes more and more obvious toward the end of the story through Marlow's eagerness to see the Asian mainland and to visit the East. Speaking of Bangkok, he says "[m]agic name, blessed name. Mesopotamia wasn't a patch on it. Remember I was twenty ... and the East was waiting for me" (77), and refers to the East as "the land of palms, and spices, and yellow sands, and of brown nations raced by kings more cruel than Nero the Roman and more splendid than Solomon the Jew" (78). This new experience of young Marlow to see the East for the first time shows that he does not know much about those nations and their lives. He views the East as esoteric and that is why he points out "the mysterious East faced me, perfumed like a flower, silent life death, dark like a grave" (91). He looks at himself like a conqueror "sleepless and entranced as if before profound, a fateful enigma" (91). To him, the East is enigmatic, mysterious, death-like, and dark. As a Western man, it seems, Marlow tends to discover this land of forgetfulness and neglect and to experiment his power at arriving in such a land. However, this power is not merely the power of his youth, it is also the eclipsed power of colonialism rooted deeply in Western nations when examining Eastern nations. Incidentally, the Eastern land speaks to Marlow in a Western voice on his first arrival at the East, thus "... before I could open my lips, the East spoke to me, but it was in a Western voice. A torrent of words was poured into the enigmatical, the fateful silence" (92).

In *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*, Edward Said observes:

Upon awakening in Bangkok to find all dark, inscrutable East facing him, he [Marlow] must decide whether he is to accept this immensely strange world to which his brash youth has finally allowed him to penetrate, or return to the West, to conventional society, retaining only an image of his encounter. There is no real alternative, and he chooses the latter". (146)

And Said concludes "Marlow ... becomes a stolid Englishman, welcoming, at the end of 'Youth', a crew of his compatriots, leaving the East and returning to the ways of the West" (146).

In his article 'The Call to Imperialism in Conrad's *Youth: An Historical Reconstruction*', Todd G. Willy suggests:

The political atmosphere was an overheated one characterized by spasms of patriotic fervor and a dramatic increase in popular support for England's imperialistic foreign policy. And this general political ambience helps account for the fact that Conrad's ubiquitous Marlow, in both "Youth" and *Heart of Darkness* ... endorses English imperialism as much as he questions it – and in the case of "Youth", far more. (41)

The writer insists in the article that Conrad's reference to Fredrick Gustavus Burnaby's *A Ride to Khiva* is a sign of his Imperialistic mind, because Burnaby's book is a "heavy-handed political tract which outlines his opinions on what was known then as the 'Eastern Question', the problem of imperial rivalry and a possible war with Russia" (42). In the opening pages of his book, Burnaby avers:

Russia ought to be clearly given to understand that any advance in the direction of Kashgar, Balkh, or Merve, will be looked upon by England as *casus belli* ... At the present moment Great Britain, without any European ally, can drive Russia out of central Asia. If we allow her to keep on advancing, the same arms which we might now employ will one day be turned against us. (viii)

Then Willy concludes that Marlow's praise of Burnaby in 'Youth' when he says "I read for the first time *Sartor Resartus* and Burnaby's *Ride to Khiva*. I didn't understand much of the first then; but I remember I preferred the soldier to the philosopher at the time" (72) is to memorialize the Englishmen's fallen hero. Marlow's association with Burnaby reveals the Imperialistic politics prevalent in nineteenth century England.

Cardinal elements of Nature namely water (the sea), air (the wind), and the fire play a pivotal role in 'Youth'. *Judea's* crew starts their combat with the Nature by facing "the howl of the wind, the tumult of the sea" (74). They are involved in pumping the water out of *Judea* after they are trapped in a world which "was nothing but an immensity of great foaming waves rushing at [them], under a sky low enough to touch with the hand and dirty like a smoked ceiling" (74). However, Marlow is pleased by such an infuriated sea and cruel wind. Exhausted pumping day and night to survive, Marlow reveals, "we forgot the day of the week, the name of the month, what year it was, and whether we had ever been ashore" (74, my emphasis), and goes on, "I would not have given up the experience for worlds. I had *moments of exultation*" (75, my emphasis). Two points are important here, one is his sense of timelessness and the other is his 'moments of exultation'. In fact, both lead him to discern the ways of immortality through his power of existence and also the compulsion of 'Doing' rather than 'Dying'.

According to Zdzislaw Najder, in *The Mirror of the Sea* Conrad shows that a sailor's duty is similar to creating a work of art, as there is a bond between the sailor and the

vessel he is working in; a sentimental relationship. The other factor that makes a sailor's work particularly art-like is:

The direct engagement of natural elements, water and wind, as adversaries. This engagement makes man not just an object of more or less accidental fate, but a protagonist, a fighter in the battles of his existence. (97)

Again, in *The Mirror of the Sea* Conrad remarks: "the sea has never been friendly to man" (as cited in Najder).

The crew's next encounter is with the fire where "of the other twelve men, eight worked while four rested" (80) to extinguish it. At first, the fire is invisible to them like enemies waiting for an ambush at an appropriate hour. Marlow says "and still the air, the sky – a ghost, something invisible was hailing the ship" (84). This invisibility and potentiality of the nature to do whatever it desires shows an unlimited and chaotic power which is unpredictable and latent. On the other hand, man's will or power is controlled and shaped. In fact, man knows how to realize and when to use his power in confronting other sources of power. In all their attempts to survive, Marlow, Mahon, and Captain Bear leave *Judea* and take to the life boats when they find out the old ship is captured by fire. Thus, they abandon the ship and look at its magnificent death and "the surrender of her weary ghost to the keeping of stars" while "the sea was stirring like the sight of a glorious triumph" (89).

The other source of power that helps Marlow to fulfill his discovery and achieve his development is power of one man over another, as an intrinsic part of man's nature and behaviour power corresponds to a man's status and position in a community. What kind of a community gets surfaced in 'Youth' vis-à-vis Sea? Marlow starts his narrative by addressing five people at the beginning of the story. He says "between the five of us there was the strong bond of the sea, and also the fellowship of the craft" (69). This community in which one is the narrator and the others are audience is shown sharply only in the second and last paragraphs of the fiction. The frame narrator who is also among the audience is a passive one like other listening to Marlow. They have no intrusion in the course of the story and narration. Therefore, these submissive and receptive listeners, not even characters, are placed in the story for the sake of Conrad's specific narrative. Marlow is objectifying them as his listeners and this force of keeping his audience to sit and hear is Marlow's power of narration and monologue, an instance of one individual powering over another or a group. The status of these passive hearers is as close as that of readers too. That is why perhaps they should not be called characters but as puppets suitably used by the writer. They are manipulated to be a tool at the hands of the author, perhaps to render a documentary and factual text, something which persuades the readers to believe and trust his words.

The other community in 'Youth' is the seamen and

sailors who accompany Marlow on *Judea*. They are Captain Beard, Mahon, and other sea workers and hands. Marlow is the youngest among these and also the most ambitious one. He insists "... I was just twenty ... It was one of the happiest days of my life. Fancy! Second mate for the first time" (70). In depicting his colleagues, Marlow repeatedly emphasizes that the fellows are old. Referring to Captain Beard, Marlow avers: "He had blue eyes in that old face of his" (70), and Mahon "was also an old chap" (70). Again at the time of fighting the fire he stresses, "it struck me suddenly poor Mahon was a very, very old chap. As to me, I was as pleased and proud as though I had helped to win a great naval battle. O! Youth!" (81). Such a comparison and other references which are given to the age of these figures as being old or in their last days refer to Marlow's privilege of being young, having powerful sinews and capabilities to endure.

In his book *Joseph Conrad: A Study in Non-Conformity*, Osborn Andreas suggests "Marlow, as narrator as well as central character of the story 'Youth', is Conrad's alter-ego" (44). In the view of Andreas "he [Marlow] had played a man's part in helping to bring, if not the ship itself, at least the entire crew, without the loss of a single sailor, to its objective on the mainland of Asia" (45). However, in his book *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*, Edward Said envisages:

The voyage of the *Judea*, another pilgrim, is explicitly made 'the symbol of existence' – English existence, that is. Because it is the ship's actual task and motto to 'Do or Die', devoted action is the simple meaning of the *Judea's* voyage. It is the special English relation to the sea, and not merely youth, that enables the continuance of a voyage so beset with innumerable, even absurd, obstacles". (145)

Said continues:

Unlike the men in the performance of their duty, Marlow's youth guarantees him the power to assert his emerging individuality. He *will* be the commander of a vessel (even though the *Judea* goes down) because he has always imagined himself as a ship's master". (146)

The difference between Ulysses and Marlow as sailors lies in the fact that for Ulysses, the sea journey with all its adventures and vicissitudes is not his real wish and yearning but his cardinal hope is to return home. However, for Marlow, the sea, the ship, and all his duties on the board become his ultimate goal. Even the cruel sea is to him lovable and friendly; it shapes his challenges and helps him to demonstrate his strength and power; that is why Marlow "preferred the soldier to the philosopher; a preference which life has only confirmed" (72) after he read *Ride to Khiva*. To him the soldier is a real man for he is engaged in a battle.

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## CONCLUSION

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Conrad's 'Youth' resembles, to some extent, Stephen Crane's 'The Open Boat'. Both texts demonstrate the

authors' lives and experiences aboard a sinking ship and their attempts on some open boats. This resemblance is not limited to these two short-stories, but it can also be found in *The Red Badge of Courage* and *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, something which persuaded the critics in 1897 to notice Crane's influences on Conrad. However, Conrad denied any such influences. Yet, the two novellas share a thematic point; an ordeal is undertaken by young fellows in both and there are communities of men struggling to survive to find ways to resist their suffering and tough tasks.

Indeed, the entire story revolves round Marlow's reminiscence of his youth and the responsibility put on him. In fact, he gives a good picture of himself and his duty on both *Judea* and the life boat. On the *Judea*, he is a second mate and on the life boat he fits in as a skipper of a small boat. After the old *Judea* sinks they take to the life boats and head for Java. Managing the small boat, the exhausted Marlow remarks: "the feeling that I could last for ever, outlast the sea, the earth, and all men" (91), and then he achieves "the triumphant conviction of strength"

(91) because of his maturity and manhood after he could overcome the nature with its mercilessness and other men.

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