

## Conrad's Lord Jim:

### A Modern Romance on the Tragedy of "How to Be"

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**Abstract:** Lord Jim is an attempt by Joseph Conrad to contemplate on the failure of the dreams of a man whose romantic beliefs in classical heroism and manner of conduct finally brings about his bafflement. In fact, this writer is trying to mirror that one's lack of knowledge in case of the "how to be of life", or his inability to vision the modern world practically from an authentic viewpoint holds him from being conscious enough about his real existence, resulting in a tragedy: a death associated with ambiguity, absent-mindedness and fury. To be more specific, the present study intends to investigate Jim's Romance, his character – as well as that of the other important characters – and the strategies or techniques applied by Conrad, to reflect the failures of such a romantic viewpoint.

**Key words:** Lord Jim; Joseph Conrad; Romance; Heroism; Tragedy

"To be, or not to be: that is the question:  
whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
and by opposing end them? To die: to sleep"

(Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1)

Among Shakespeare's memorable pieces, Hamlet's soliloquy has become one with an extraordinary philosophical weight, as it questions the most basic question of human life: man's quality of being, his existence and his struggle for bearing the contradictions: the conflicts and the threats came off by the very nature of his life in the process of making sense of it. As a matter of fact, this is a process in which he is to signify the notion of his being first of all, and then to ponder the distance between his "idealistic and realistic ego"; a distance capable of reflecting that one's "how to be" (Ghent 68), or the significance of life is far beyond being an ontological phenomenon, something that one can only grasp as a result of an equilibrium established between his idealistic and realistic ego. Conrad's *Lord Jim* as a work written in the herald of modern era is actually projecting on that process and portrays Jim as one overwhelmed by his inability to provide with such an equilibrium. In fact Conrad intends to show that in this modern world, one's obsessive concern with Romantic egoist ideals and his inability to vision the world

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practically from euthanized viewpoint will hold him from being conscious enough about the realities and complexities of his life, resulting in a tragic search for a sleep-like remedy as Hamlet utters.

In order to bring a proof to the claim that Conrad's *Lord Jim*, is a "Romance in Modern Sense" (Seeley 495), which explores "human aspiration not simply to the ideal, but to the admittedly impossible" (498) and that Jim's "Don Quixotic" manner brings about the failure of his dreams (499), a critic should look at the structure of this work from different viewpoints and have an eye for the mechanics, or better to say the strategies and techniques applied by the writer to put into exposure a Romance at different levels; and by the closure of the work, the enhancement of the intended theme that is the failure brought about by wrong worldview and self-understanding. Based on these assumptions, this paper approaches Jim's Romance from a different prospective and tries to investigate the way Conrad represents Jim's character, his psyche, his relation with other characters, his heroism – or his illusions of self-knowledge – and what finally leads him to meet his failure.

Jim is the protagonist of the novel, but it is very interesting that his character is to be investigated to a great extent, by what comes from the narrative of Marlow, who is absent in the first chapters of the novel, before the beginning of the scene of the inquiry. However, in the first four chapters of the novel, through the impressionistic descriptions of the omniscient narrator – which seems to be the voice of Conrad himself – the reader finds Jim to be a romantic "hero and a savior in an imaginary realm [as if] timeless and ordered, stemming from a chivalric and religious tradition", perhaps from "his background- his father being a British parson and of a faith in providence" (Wiley 49). In fact, Jim is a man who wants to act as a classical Christian hero; one whose dream has made him to look for a ground-sea voyage- as a field for doing heroic deeds, but unable to distinguish between the reality and the complexity of the modern world and the mismatch between an idealistic traditional manner of self-identification and the modern realistic "how to be" of life, he falls in a state of unconsciousness and cannot "withstand the turmoil of thought and the emotion"(48). That is why "at the moment of catastrophe on the deck of Patna, his mind creates an illusion of the total disaster from the incomplete evidence created by sense" (48-49); and because of the very mental obsession that results in the weakening of logic, he cannot convince the judges at the inquiry.

As mentioned above, the scene of the inquiry is of major significance to Conrad, in his representation of Jim's manner and mind. Jocelyn Brains, in a critical essay claims that Jim cannot do anything at the trial but to accept the judges' sentence at the end, simply because of the fact that he "does not jump; he discovers that he has jumped"(42); By this statement Brains emphasizes again on the issue of Jim's lack of consciousness both at Patna and on the day of inquiry; the first one caused by the rush of emotions and false mental visions and the second one by the unbelievable facts to face as the after shakes of the Patna tremor. Similarly, Thornburg in the epilogue to his *Conrad's Romanticism*, mentions the fact that Conrad has purposed Jim's nature to be the result of summation of two opposites, that is "the spritual, the interior testing mirrors,[and] the pressing physical ordeal that preceeds and triggers it"(165). Thornburn's statement can be related to the matter of inquiry in this way: the judges are the external testing mirrors, whose pressing physical ordeal, by no means permits Jim to justify his action on the basis of the impressions that reflect the distance between what has really happened and the action of his hallucinatory idealistic ego – always dreaming of heroism.

By relying on what Thornburn asserts, it becomes clear why Jim's illusion of self-knowledge – or his wrong understanding of the notion of 'how to be' of his life – is shattered by half, after the inquiry and why he is to feel a sense of guilt accompanying him then after, resulting in quitting jobs one after another. In fact, a romantic hero deprived of his honor is too much in disaster, as he can no more have the self-approval of his people and society. Having in mind what discussed up to this point, the reader is then to find Jim's reason for accepting Stein's offering of a job at Patusan: Jim is yet resolute enough to expiate what has happened in Patna – ignoring the epiphany that has come to him by that accident – and his absent-mindedness in dealing with the realities of what has occurred to him, holds him from pondering different aftermaths of Stein's offering and results in a blind acceptance. Consequently, Dorothy Van Ghent asserts that "two epiphanies", occur for Jim in the novel – the first one in the case of Patna and the second one in Patusan (Kuehn72), but his belief in heroic ideals causes him to ignore the first one and to wait for the second one. The first epiphany has been implicitly elaborated on here in

relation with Jim's character, and it is clear that if it was not for such a weakness in the character of Jim, structurally and thematically Conrad was unable to proceed in that narration.

Now before speaking about the second epiphany, one important matter should be discussed and that is the role of Stein and Marlow in shedding light on the elaboration of the Romance of Jim. In fact, Conrad tries to produce a kind of multi-perspectivism; and that is to emerge by reflecting the viewpoint of others – Stein, Marlow, the French Lieutenant, Gentleman Brown and even the different mute participants in Marlow's narrations of Jim. "Marlow has to exist", because Jim's case is not "absolute, but relative; and has a "being" only in relation to what man's mind can make of it (Kuehn 76). And this is that very relativism which brings a kind of modern subjectivity or impressionism to the context of the novel and makes Marlow dazzled, as he finds Jim to be 'one of us' - yet at the same time unable to explain the morality or self-knowledge which has brought about such a close bond or familiarity. Daniel Brudney introduces the term "aulturism", in his article and considers Marlow to be a "morally active" person who tries to understand the reality of Jim's character, to relate it to his own character in judgment (4-5), in hope of finding an interpretation of the significance of his own existence. By relating what Brudney says to what has been mentioned above, it becomes clear that Marlow is looking for a way to interpret Jim and to find the reason for his engagement in Jim's case, but he can not. The matter is very complex and Marlow is even unable to find out why he is helping Jim in finding jobs; that is why, he finally decides to consult with Stein – another important figure in the novel – who is to be analysed here.

Stein is also, very Romantic, but unlike Jim, he can establish "a balance between his own history and self-understanding, and is able to be "dreaming and awaking at the same time" (Seeley 502). This means that he is conscious enough about man's state of being and his relation with the world of existence. Two quotations from the conversation between Stein and Marlow can bring a good proof to the understanding of the difference between Stein and Jim. The first one is in fact Stein's answer to Marlow's question when he is looking for the remedy of Jim's malady; and the second one is a portrait of Jim's Romantic personality that besides reflecting his interior agents at that critical moment at Patna foreshadows his action and behavior at Patusan:

'There is only one remedy! One thing alone can us from being ourselves cure!' The finger came down on the desk with a smart rap. The case which he made to look so simple before, became if possible still simpler – and altogether helpless. There was a pause. 'Yes,' said I, 'strictly speaking, the question is not how to get cured, but how to live'. 'He approved with his head, a little sadly as it seemed. 'Ja! Ja! In general, adapting the words of your great poet: That is the question....' He went on nodding sympathetically.... 'How to be! Ach How to be.' (Lord Jim, Chap.20, p.153).

'We want in so many ways to be,' he began again. 'This magnificent butterfly finds a little heap of dirt and sits still on it; but man he will never on his heap of mud keep still. He moved his hands up, then down ... 'He wants to be a saint, and he wants to be a devil – and every time he shuts his eyes he sees himself as a very fine fellow – so fine as he can never be... In a dream...' (Lord Jim, Chap.20, p.153).

By focusing on Stein's statements, it can be inferred that he knows much about characters like Jim and is aware of the way they are to deal with life and the situations or ordeals which match their abilities and potentials. So Stein's proposal to Jim for his voyage to Patusan is not only an ordinary offering of a job. It is somehow a remedy that Stein proposes, the only possible solution for Jim, that is to "immerse himself in a completely secluded segment of the world, the hard realities of which could be metamorphosed [only] by his personal prowess and creative imagination" (Andreas 59). It is in fact that imagination's failure which will make for his second epiphany.

The second epiphany that occurs to Jim in Patusan, is his confrontation with Gentleman Brown. Jim has traveled to Patusan to revive those virtues that the inquiry judges had accused him of not possessing" (Andreas 59), and that new world to some extent fulfills him as the morality and worldview of the

natives – and the way they identify their own being – differ. But the fact is that his imagination finally leads him to “construct a fictitious and unreal Brown, a Brown based not on the realities of Brown’s face, but upon his false words” and what they recall Jim of his past experience of Patna (Andreas 62). *Tuan Jim* is too romantic to see the evil inside Brown and his recent success at Patusan has made him more confident and he is so sure that he will not bother himself with the fear that his negligence may put Dain Warris in danger. But the anagnorsis of his tragedy – or his second epiphany – finally occurs when he gets aware of Brown’s untruthfulness, the execution of Dain Warris and consequently his failure in fulfilling his promise to Doramin. In fact, at that point Jim finds his ideal self-image shattered again and a dilemma in front of himself: whether to listen to Jewel and to escape – in hope of another chance – or to stick to the heroic manner of conduct- which is to embrace his death by Doramin. Of the two possibilities, Jim accepts to undertake the second one, not only because he is too helpless to choose the first one, but also because the second possibility is romantic and idealistic enough to bring the honor of a heroic death to him and can provide him at least with a minimum self-approval – the illusion that he has found the true “how to be” of his life at the moment of death.

Having investigated Jim’s character at different levels, at this point it shall be reminded that Conrad’s novel is semi-romance which portrays the failure of the dreams of a man who is so romantic and unreal that he cannot vision the modern new world and what it demands of one capable of adapting himself with this new emerging complexities and paradoxes. Conrad’s aim is then to reflect the importance of the notion of ‘self-knowledge’ or the ‘how to be’ of one’s life and the way one’s conscious of such vital elements can rescue him from despair or a death associated with ambiguity, fear and absent-mindedness. That is why he presents Jim as a romantic man dreaming of heroism, and through his romantic narrative accompanied by the impressionistic narration of Marlow and the presence of characters like Stein and Brown, he tries to answer the most crucial question of a tragedy, a tragedy on the romance of modern life: How to be, and How not to be: that is the question.

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