THE METAMORPHOSIS OF IMAGINATION IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S FICTIONS

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Abstract

Imagination and concepts pertaining to it are at the core of Conrad's fiction and theories. Conrad, in A Personal Record, asserts that the imaginative should grasp what is "all human" and based on "experience". Nevertheless, he introduces various kinds of imaginations to his readers when it comes to fiction. For instance in Nostromo and Victory he respectively explains moral imagination and criminal imagination. The most outstanding point is that Conrad considers a very thin line between the "imaginative" and the "real". In fact, he represents imagination as a faculty that helps people to predict future and stay alert. Typhoon, The Secret Agent, and Amy Foster best exemplify this idea. However, Conrad, as in Lord Jim, suggests that over-reliance on imagination might be dangerous. Moreover, he sometimes interweaves an aura of mystery around imagination, a view clearly noticeable in The Nigger of Narcissus. Conrad presumably is more outspoken about imagination and its nature in Youth. Therein, Conrad provides connections between imagination, youth, and sea. For him, while imagination impregnates the vigour of youth, it also embodies its ignorance and inexperience. Yet, it is impossible to draw a clear and constant picture of what Joseph Conrad meant by imagination.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, Imagination, reality.

0. Introduction

Webster English dictionarydefines "imagination" as "the faculty of imagining, or of forming mental images or concepts of what is not actually present to the senses," and also "the faculty of producing ideal creations consistent with reality, as in literature, as distinct from the power of creating illustrative or decorative imagery." This concept along with its derivations and its antonyms are central to Conrad's life and texts. He hated theatre and movies because, according to him, they kill imagination (Ray, 2007: 4). However, it does not mean that he permits his imagination fly uncontrollably. As he says about Nostromo, although his imagination was very helpful to construct an entire republic but at the same time he keeps his realist eye open not to build Utopias because, as Conrad says, he always controls of his imagination (Ray, 2007: 5).

The fascination with imagination manifests itself more in the corpse of his work. Almost in Conrad's every major work, there is an amusement with the nature of imagination and the study of the function of imagination. Conrad in each of his stories wears a new mask on this concept and tries to give a new bend to its significance. He depicts his super-human characters as imaginative, but, at the same time, this faculty might become fatal and bring about the protagonist's ruin.

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1. Discussion

In each of his fictional or theoretical works, Conrad offers a different explanation on what imagination is and what modifications it might take. It seems that there are various kinds of imaginations to Conrad's mind. To begin with, *In Nostromo*, Conrad points out thatthere is,

> a certain kind of imagination—the kind whose undue development caused intense suffering [...]that sort of imagination which adds the blind terror of bodily suffering and of death, envisaged as an accident to the body alone, strictly—to all the other apprehensions on which the sense of one's existence is based. (2007: 242)

In this work, Conrad anticipates the consequences of having a wild imagination, which ruminates wherever it pleases. However, in "The Duel", Conrad describes imagination as "a faculty which helps the process of reflective thought." (1908: 17). In fact, hereby, he raises the status of imagination to an entity that can boost the process of reflection. In general, two terms "Imaginative" and "realist" might not necessarily be opposites. The imagination of a realist character might be as active as that of a romantic, idealist one.

In *A Personal Record,* he celebrates novel over documentary history because in the former, "imagined life [is] clearer than reality and whose accumulated verisimilitude of selected episodes puts to shame the pride of" the latter (1924: 15). In effect, only in imagination, Conrad believes,

> does every truth find an effective and undeniable existence. Imagination, not invention, is the supreme master of art as of life. An imaginative and exact rendering of authentic memories may serve worthily that spirit of piety toward all things human which sanctions the conceptions of a writer of tales, and the emotions of the man reviewing his own experience. (1924; 25)

The above-mentioned definition bears some resemblance to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's differentiation between primary and secondary imagination. He defines fancy (primary imagination) as "no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space, and blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will which we express by the word choice" (1836: 173). Coleridge celebrates the secondary imagination as a faculty that "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order tore-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify" (1836: 172). Conrad, too, distinguishes between inventiveness and imaginativeness. Unlike in Coleridge, for Conrad, the higher and much revered faculty of imagination incorporates one's "experience" in order to render authentic "memories". As Purdy interprets, "The inventor creates from nothing and goes, Conrad's avian image suggests, to nothing. [On the contrary] the imaging novelist observes what is and interprets it, puts sensations into words" (1984: 22-23). In addition, Mayhead notes that "a work produced by the imagination cannot, by definition, merely express the self-born fantasies of the mind; it has to do justice to the reality of a world that exists beyond the self" (1978: 9). In fact, this faculty, in Conrad's opinion, intends to creep out of the

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aristocratic cage of indifferences and convey the spirit of "all thing human" and is far away from Coleridge's apolitical view to imagination. In other words, Conrad prefers what Coleridge calls fancy or primary imagination to the secondary orderof imagination, which tries to detach itself from the phenomenal world as much as possible.

In his earlier oeuvres written before *A Personal Record (1912)*; that is in works such as *The Nigger of the Narcissus (1897)*, *Heart of Darkness (1899)*, *Lord Jim (1900)*, *Youth (1898)*, *Typhoon (1898), and Nostromo (1904)*, the downfall of or the pessimistic reorientation of many characters is the result of their unbound imagination. Wait, Kurtz, Jim, and Marlow in Youth are the prominent protagonists who see their demise or are disillusioned after a period of fascination with the imaginative. Moreover, in *Typhoon*, Captain MacWhirr – who is absolutely a realist and has "just enough imagination to carry him through each successive day, and no more" (4) – although responsible for the catastrophe, saves his ship mainly through his literal-mindedness. In effect, in the above examples, Conrad sees the solution in a realist and truthful understanding of the world.

However, Conrad does not usually use the word imagination and imaginary as antonyms to commonsensical and true-to-life objects. Imagination has so widerange of implications in Conrad that it is difficult to nailit down to a few lines. Imagination may sometimes predict danger and put the person on the right path but sometimes may distort one's understanding so fiercely and intensely that the character, in a surge of imagination, falls into a bigger trouble in order to avoid a threat.

In *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, imagination represents itself in the form of prophesy and vision. Wait is a visionary. He knows how his life is to end. Conrad explains: "he would talk of that coming death as though it had been already there, as if it had been walking the deck outside, as if it would presently come in to sleep in the only empty bunk; as if it had sat by his side at every meal. It interfered daily with our occupations, with our leisure, with our amusements" (1897: 36). The story has streaks of surrealism persuading the readers to believe that Wait and his unacknowledged disciple, Donkin, enact extraterrestrial power on the ship. More to the point, in many instances, Conrad illustrates imagination as a faculty, which helps to predict future, albeit without granting this faculty with anysupernatural quality. In the same novel, in addition to Wait, Captain Singleton possessed the same power and had a "sharper vision, a clearer knowledge" about what was going to happen (1897: 129).

Conrad sometimes effaces the halo off the concept of imagination to match the most mundane and commonsensical feelings of human beings. Imagination sometimes simply means the anxiety about the future. For example, in The Secret Agent, the faculty of imagination only gives Mrs. Verloc's mother some premonition about future: "What will happen, she asked herself (for Mrs Verloc's mother was in a measure imaginative), when I die?" (2009: 150). In *Amy Foster,* Conrad explains Mr. Smith's negligence of the estranger's life in the locked hut to be the result of his lack of imagination: "He had done his duty to the community by shutting up a wandering and probably dangerous maniac. Smith isn't a hard man at all, but he had room in his brain only for that one idea of lunacy. He was not

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imaginative enough to ask himself whether the man might not be perishing with cold and hunger" (1991: 219). In addition, in *Typhoon*, Mr. Rout's cautionary measures are linked to his power of imagination: "Mr. Rout likewise wrote letters; only no one on board knew how chatty he could be pen in hand, because the chief engineer had enough imagination to keep his desk locked" (Conrad, *Typhoon,* 2008: 15).

The faculty of imagination would often help to sharpen the senses and make them more sensitive. Conrad describes Lena in *Victory* as a person in want of imagination: "if awakened from a drugged sleep, with heavy, downcast, unseeing eyes, her fortitude tired out, her imagination as if dead within her and unable to keep her fear alive" (1957: 247). Imagination in fact keeps feelings of anxiety and fear alive. Some other instances represent imagination as a faculty that helps people to survive.This is most notably observable in Lord Jim, whose power of imagination first saves his life and forces him leave the steamboat. Conrad explicates the role of imagination in Jim's escape as follows:

> If his imaginative conscience or his pride; if all the extravagant ghosts and austere shades that were the disastrous familiars of his youth would not let him run away from the block, I, who of course can't be suspected of such familiars, was irresistibly impelled to go and see his head roll off." However, this faculty turns its coat and becomes "the enemy of men the father of all terrors. (1965:121)

In the second half of *Lord Jim*, however, imagination brings about Jim's fatal destiny. Jim who toys with imagination finally sees his end because of it. Marlow, Conrad's narrator, illustrates this fact:

> Yet there is to my mind a sort of profound and terrifying logic in it, as if it were our imagination alone that could set loose upon us the might of an overwhelming destiny. The imprudence of our thoughts recoils upon our heads; who toys with the sword shall perish by the sword. This astounding adventure, of which the most astounding part is that it is true, comes on as an unavoidable consequence. Something of the sort had to happen. (1965: 258)

"Patusan's imagination magically coincides with reality" (Greaney, 2004: 93).Imagination metamorphoses and turns from the saviour of humankind to a devil directing its victim to the Hades.

In some of his novels, Conrad explains that imagination may take criminal bends. For instance in *Victory,* he talks about "men of tormented conscience, or of a criminal imagination" who "are aware of much that minds of a peaceful, resigned cast do not even suspect. It is not poets alone who dare descend into the abyss of infernal regions, or even who dream of such a descent" (1957: 181). Conrad describes Shomberg, the antagonist of the novel, as a person whose imagination is quite active and sensitive: "For Schomberg had been overpowered, as I were, by his imagination" (1957: 122) and "his imagination being very sensitive to the unusual, he collapsed as if indeed his moral neck had been broken – snap!" (1957: 127). Moreover, in *Nostromo*, Conrad describes a kind of immoral imagination, which tramples any sense of "truth, honour, [and] self-respect" under its feet (2007: 267).

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However, there is a bigger difference between the sort of imagination noticed in Lord Jim and the ones explained in *Victory* and *Nostromo*. They are, in fact, two extreme poles of the same spectrum. Lord Jim's imagination, because of his overestimation of his self, is heroic. Conrad describes him before the catastrophe at the beginning of the novel as a man whose thoughts would be full of valorous deeds and who loved these dreams and the success of his imaginary achievements (Conrad, 1965: 21). On the other hand, the "immoral imagination" described in the latter examples denotes anti-heroic and antagonistic imaginative forces in a story. In comparison, Conrad does not seem to favour either types of heroic or antagonistic imagination. These forces should, at the end, synthesize, in order to come up with a balance that neither let you soar high up to the sky to have your wings burnt by sunbeams nor so close to the sea and earth to drown or fall prey to others.

The concept of imagination sometimes takes outward manifestations. That is, an imaginative person may wear, for instance, a different hairstyle and if anybody lacks imagination, he or she may have a distinct physique. In *Il Conde*, the narrator describes the Count as a person whose "white hair brushed upwards off a lofty forehead gave him the air of an idealist, of an imaginative man" (Conrad J., 2010: 333). Moreover, in *Amy Foster*, Kennedy after explaining Amy's appearance concludes that her posture indicates her lack of imagination and dullness: "She is very passive. It's enough to look at the red hands hanging at the end of those short arms, at those slow, prominent brown eyes, to know the inertness of her mind—an inertness that one would think made it everlastingly safe from all the surprises of imagination" (1986: 205).

Moreover, Conrad's narrators or characters essentialize the concept of imagination to the extent that it becomes a decisive factor determining one's stratum. Some of Conrad's characters associate imagination with specific social classes. In *Nostromo*, Conrad says, "business men are frequently as sanguine and imaginative as lovers" (2007: 57) and Martin Decoud is described as "the imaginative materialist" (2007: 261). Conrad, however, in *The Secret Agent* puts forth a contradictory view towards businesspersons or, in other words, the middle class. Although Mr. Vladimir is one of the bourgeoisies, he defines them as a group of people who lack imagination: "they have no imagination. They are blinded by an idiotic vanity. What they want just now is a good jolly good scare" (2009: 58). Vladimir implies that the sense of imagination helps people to see the reality and the truth of life.

To see the reality is sometimes the prerequisite of reaching a moment of epiphany to obtain the "complete knowledge" of something. Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* "during a moment of complete knowledge" and "at some vision" cried outconceivably the most popular phrase in Conrad's entire oeuvre: "the horror! The horror" (1990: 251).

Perhaps dubious about the nature of earthly love, Conrad depicts imagination as anindispensablefactor for a person to fall in love. In Nostromo, as the quotation in the previous paragraph shows, Conrad explains that lovers are imaginative and possess the same kind of imagination as businessmen. In *Amy Foster,* Amy fell in love because she was imaginative enough: "for you need imagination to form a notion of beauty at all, and still more to discover your ideal in an unfamiliar shape" (1991: 207). Imagination helps to

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produce an ideal image to fall in love. This impression runs counter to realism. That is, imagination becomes a property that stops people short of seeing the truth in life. Yael Levin highlights this condition in *Almayer's Folly* and describes it as "psychological blindness" (2008: 25). Levin defines this story as "a novel of passivity, futility, and stasis" because he notices that Almayer is entrapped by an illusion –which in the same context Levin rephrases as "imaginative obsession" – that creates an incongruity between his actions and ideals (2008: 24). Levin underlines this "psychological blindness" in *An Outcast of Island*. Because of Willems's projection of his imagination, he is unable to see the reality. His false delight in his "moral superiority" leads him to misrecognize Mr. Vinck's, Joana's and her family's hatred of him. Also, his false conviction to the imperviousness of his career makes him betray Mr. Hudig'strust. Levin, further, explains that Willems misapprehends his craving for Aïss and identifies this as"a false image, afantasy" that pushed him to betray Lingard and finally himself (2008: 25).

Moreover, the vigour of imagination is connected to youthfulness and its inexperienced-ness. Jukes, the character in *Typhoon* possesses too much imagination, which Watt associates with the "inexperience of youth, and its disregard of ordinary realities (2004:109). Conrad notes the most important remarks on the relation between youthfulness and imagination in *Youth*. In *Youth,* where the narrator marks, "O youth! The strength of it, the faith of it, the imagination of it!" (1990: 102), Conrad clearly announces the relation he believes to exist between youth and imagination. In fact, the loss of imagination and youthfulness knell the death toll of optimism. In line with this view, Greaney postulates that *Youth* anticipates some of the key traits of the bleaker Marlow tales (2004: 62). Further, the narrator explains that his youthfulness and the consequent idealism lets create anidyllic image of the East. Conrad seemingly draws parallels between the three elements of sea, imagination and youthfulness. He finds youthfulness active for as long as the characters are in the sea and their imagination is active mostly when they are on board. When the narrator disembarks from the ship at the end of Youth, his imagination fails him and he faces the reality of the East. In *Youth*, the narrator says, "Ah! The good old time—the good old time. Youth and the sea. Glamour and the sea! The good, strong sea, the salt, bitter sea, that could whisper to you and roar at you and knock your breath out of you" (Conrad, 1990: 132).

However, youth, and subsequently imagination are at the roots of ignorance. Youth is "the deceitful feeling that lures us on to joys, to perils, to love, to vain effort—to death; the triumphant conviction of strength, the heat of life in the handful of dust, the glow in the heart that with every year grows dim, grows cold, grows small, and expires—and expires, too soon—before life itself" (Conrad, 1990: 127). The last sentence of *Youth* describes youth as the source of "strength" but at the same time the "romance of illusions" (1990: 132). It seems that imagination, which is a source of energy and dynamism, is antithetical to pessimism. In Purdy's words, youth, along with imagination, embodies both "ignorance," and "hope" (1984: 35).The more imaginative you are the less pessimistic you might be! At least this is true in *Youth*.

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Youthfulness purports the quality of being adventurous. Lord Jim is the most prominent character who began his adventures in his youth motivated by his imagination. Yanko, the Amy's unfortunate husband stood in contrast with a bare unimaginative society where he had to live. Conrad writes, Yanko was "aware of social differences, but remained for a long time surprised at the bare poverty of the churches among so much wealth. He couldn't understand either why they were kept shut up on week days. There was nothing to steal in them. Was it to keep people from praying too often?" (1991: 229).

In Amy Foster, Conrad illustrates Yanko's difference from the society by introducing him as "a real adventurer at heart" (1991: 157). His imagination took him far away and made a romantic character out of him. The contrast between the adventurous and Byronic Yanko and the philistine community in which he had to live is manifest in the following lines:

> They wouldn't in their dinner hour lie flat on their backs on the grass to stare at the sky. Neither did they go about the fields screaming dismal tunes. Many times have I heard his high-pitched voice from behind the ridge [...] on another occasion he tried to show them how to dance [...] but when suddenly he sprang upon a table and continued to dance among the glasses, the landlord interfered. He didn't want any 'acrobat tricks in the taproom.' They laid their hands on him. Having had a glass or two, Mr. Swaffer's f ̂oreigner tried to expostulate: was ejected forcibly: got a black eye. (1991: 230)

2. Conclusion:

Imagination and concepts pertaining to it are at the core of Conrad's fiction and theoretical speculations. Although it is difficult to configure the shape of this billion-footed being in Conrad, what seems to be Conrad's general view to imagination is his ideas expressed in *A Personal Record*. In this work, he questions imagination as a faculty free to fly wherever it craves. Parallel to this idea, Conrad introduces various kinds of imaginations to his readers. In other novels and short stories, Conrad talks about characters who have not mastered their imagination. Else where, he speaks of an imagination that assists the process of cerebral reflection when it is on the side of "moral imagination". This is opposite to the imaginative quality that sometimes Conrad refers to as "criminal" and thus destructive. Conrad' impressionistic tendencies dissuades him frombuilding any walls between the "imaginative" and the "real". Moreover, he introduces imagination as a faculty, which helps people predict and stay alert to the reality of life. In fact, Conrad in this work has woven an aura of mystery around their faculty of imagination.

In spite of all these, the over-reliance on imagination might sometimes end up insad if not tragic happenings; as what happens to Lord Jim, Willems, Almayer, Marlow in *Youth,* and even Yanko in *Amy Foster*. However, Conrad presumably is more outspoken about imagination and its nature in *Youth*. Therein, Conrad provides connections between imagination, youth, and sea. For him, while imagination impregnates the vigour of youth, it also embodies its ignorance and inexperience. In general, for Conrad, imagination is Janus-faced which metamorphoses in each work and has the characters fate in his hand and thus

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it is it is impossible to draw a clear picture of what Joseph Conrad intended by the word imagination.

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