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The Mirror of Despair: a Reading of Conrad's "The Shadow Line"

Conrad's novel *The Shadow Line* has been differently assessed by the critics. Their attitudes can be subsumed under two basic attitudes. At the one pole there are Jocelyn Baines and Douglas Hewitt who take it for a straightforward story of action concerned with man's fight with external circumstances. Douglas Hewitt speaks of the "limitation of scope in *The Shadow Line*", and proceeds:

... everything is of the most concrete. ... the issues with which Conrad is concerned in yet another crossing of a shadow line — that of *Heart of Darkness* — are not raised ... only a certain range of feelings is brought into activity and this does not include that preoccupation with evil from which, in his later work, Conrad sought refuge. (117—118)¹

At the other pole there is Albert Guerard who interprets *The Shadow Line* as a "small masterpiece of psychological symbolism",² yet another exploratory voyage into the self, resulting in the growth of self-awareness. Taking issue with those critics who see only an outward story in *The Shadow Line* Guerard draws attention to Conrad's insistence on the states of mind of the young captain whose confession the novel purports to be, maintaining that, among other things, the novel seems to be concerned with the projection of the state of "an immobilizing neurotic depression"³ to which the young captain falls a prey.

¹ Douglas Hewitt, *Conrad: A Reassessment*, Bowes and Bowes, London, 1969, pp. 117—118.

² Albert J. Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1958, p. 254.

³ *Ib.*, p. 30.

An independent line is taken by Ian Watt in a fine article "Story and Idea in Conrad's *The Shadow Line*". He interprets the novel as a powerful realist tale whose symbolist connotations result from the "expansion of particular narrative implications".⁴ Ian Watt's general position is "that Conrad is a symbolic writer only in the sense that his narratives have a larger meaning, though one which is not a matter of obscure and esoteric secrets, but only of extending and generalizing the implications of his "things, events and people".⁵

While embracing Guerard's interpretation of *The Shadow Line* as a »masterpiece of psychological symbolism« and his contention that the central experience of the novel is a symbolist projection of the state of acute neurotic depression, this article will try to define a little more closely the nature of the crisis through which the young captain goes. It is a contention of this article that *The Shadow Line* is a multi-layered work, where several different narrative levels blend and interact, enriching one another. The article also contends that this novel is much more closely connected with the central spiritual and moral preoccupations of Conrad's best work than has been realized so far and that the crisis which lies at the heart of this novel strikes down to the roots of some basic dilemmas underlying the Conradian fictional world.

In *The Shadow Line* there are two vital cores of action. The one belongs to the story of outward action and is bound up with the central dramatic situation of a ship becalmed in the Gulf of Siam and the efforts of the young captain and the crew to find the way out. This narrative level is grouped round a core of hard dramatic facts with tension mounting all the time until it reaches culmination before the rain falls, and its narrative reality is made up of the relation between men and Nature and the interrelationships of characters on board the ship. The mode of presentation is realistic, the tale being told in bare, taut language, as far removed as possible from Conrad's grand style.

There is another level of the novel which interlinks with the former one but is of a distinctly different nature and can be isolated for analytical purposes. This narrative level is related to the inward drama taking place in the young captain's mind as his ship lies immobilized in the becalmed waters and all action is rendered impossible. Here language operates

⁴ Ian Watt, *Story and Idea in Conrad's The Shadow Line*, Modern British Fiction, ed. by Mark Shorer, Oxford University Press, New York, 1961, p. 133.

⁵ *Ib.*, p. 133.

through a closely structured pattern of interrelated symbolist imagery. This inmost drama of the mind is rendered chiefly through the confrontation of the lonely hero with the symbolic landscape surrounding him, the great emptiness of the sea and sky, the "still void", embodying perfectly the idea of Nothingness. It is the experience of Nothingness that is the central datum of the young captain's consciousness all throughout his ordeal. It is in the shadow theatre of his mind that the battle between Being and Nothingness is enacted in specifically Conradian terms.

Although submerged by outward happenings this inmost drama unfolds itself all the time, contributing powerfully to the haunting quality of *The Shadow Line*. Maybe it works on the reader all the more for never emerging fully in the forefront and operating mostly through imagery and symbol. While interacting subtly with other narrative levels it provides the innermost core of the novel. *The Shadow Line* draws its extraordinary novelistic vitality from the interaction of these narrative levels. Owing to Conrad's masterful handling of the tale the double thematic and structural pattern is perfectly fused into organic unity, the hidden meanings being all the time played off against the more obvious ones.

The central dramatic situation of *The Shadow Line* is that of a ship becalmed in the waters of the Gulf of Siam. This dramatic situation embodies an archetypal Conradian psychological crisis; with "the closing in of a menace from all sides" the lonely hero passes through a fearful ordeal of an inner order, under the pressure of which the inmost man is forced to come out into the open. After the slow preliminary movement of the initial chapters from the moment the ship sails out from the port of Bangkok until it finally reaches the port of Singapore the young captain is immersed in a nightmarish experience, with the gradual intensification of psychic torment. As time passes the fundamental situation does not change but with the turn of the screw both the outward and the inward tension mount until they become unbearable. Conrad's complex presentation of the crisis is such that the tale can be legitimately read on several levels:

- a) as a sea story full of dramatic suspense.
- b) as a moral initiation story unfolding on the level of "character in action".
- c) as a primary drama of being, taking place in the mind of the main protagonist.

This inmost drama of the mind is rendered primarily through the intense, though wordless, communion of the young captain with the "still void", the glittering mirror of nothingness.

After sunset I came out on deck again to meet only a still void. The thin, featureless crust of the coast could not be distinguished. The darkness had risen around the ship like a mysterious emanation from the dumb and lonely waters. I leaned on the rail and turned my ear to the shadows of the night. Not a sound. My command might have been a planet flying vertiginously on its appointed path in a space of infinite silence. I clung to the rail as if my sense of balance were leaving me for good. How absurd. I hailed nervously. (73—74)⁶

With her anchor at the bow and clothed in canvas to her very trucks, my command seemed to stand as motionless as a model ship set on the gleams and shadows of polished marble. It was impossible to distinguish land from water in the enigmatic tranquillity of the immense forces of the world. (76)

A great overheated stillness enveloped the ship and seemed to hold her motionless in a flaming ambiance composed in two shades of blue. (81)

The stilled sea took on the polish of a steel plate in the calm. I went below, not because I meant to take some rest, but simply because I couldn't bear to look at it just then. (87)

The sparkle of the sea filled my eyes. It was gorgeous and barren, monotonous and without hope under the empty curve of the sky. The sails clung motionless and slack, the very folds of their sagging surfaces moved no more than carved granite

For a long, long time I faced an empty world, steeped in an infinity of silence, through which the sunshine poured and flowed for some mysterious purpose. (91)

The profound silence returned ... The intense loneliness of the sea acted like poison on my brain. (92)

The deadly stillness met me again. (95)

The ship had no steerage way. She lay with her head to the westward, the everlasting Koh-ring over her stern, with a few small islands, black spots in the great blaze, swimming before my troubled eyes. And but for these bits of land there was no speck on the sky, no speck on the water, no shape of vapour, no wisp of smoke, no sail, no boat, no stir of humanity, no sign of life, nothing. (95—96)

I remain on deck, of course, night and day, and the nights and the days wheel over us in succession, whether long or short, who can say? All sense of time is lost ... The effect is curiously mechanical; the sun climbs and descends, the night swings over our heads as if somebody below the horizon were turning a crank. It is the pettiest, the most aimless! ... and all through that miserable performance I go on, tramping, tramping the deck ... and as I emerge on deck the ordered arrangement of the stars meets my eye, unclouded, infinitely wearisome. There they are: stars, sun, sea, light, darkness, space, great waters; the formidable Work of the Seven Days, into which mankind seems to have blundered unbidden. Or else decoyed. Even as I have been decoyed into this awful, this death-haunted command. (97—98)

⁶ References are to page numbers in Joseph Conrad, *The Shadow Line*, Collected Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad, J. M. Dent and Sons, London, 1969.

I had been standing looking out over the rail, saying nothing, feeling nothing, not even the weariness of my limbs, overcome by the evil spell. (105)

The "still void" constitutes the young captain's central experience at this narrative level. As usual, Conrad excels in vivid presentation of natural phenomena, but the powerfully subjective slant which the first person narrative gives to the described phenomena invests them with a symbolic significance. The filter-consciousness projects a profoundly subjective image of reality. It is not a case of the creative distortion or dislocation of the outer reality for the sake of expressing the inner reality but of a powerful amalgam of objective facts and the profoundly subjective response to them.

What strikes the reader's eye is the curious lifeless quality of this sea. It is not the vital matrix of life, on the contrary, through profoundly significant imagery it is assimilated to cosmic spaces, empty, cold, utterly lifeless. (*"My command might have been a planet flying vertiginously on its appointed path in a space of infinite silence"*.) There is no movement in this sea but only an illusion of movement with the oscillatory forward and backward movement of the ship. The frozen movement of life implies an analogy with death, the final silence, the final immobilization. The landscape is featureless (it is *"impossible to distinguish land from water"*); there is no trace of individuated life anywhere (*"no speck on the sky, no speck on the water, no shape of vapour, no wisp of smoke, no sail, no boat, no stir of humanity, no sign of life, nothing"*.) With the onset of darkness at the culmination of crisis all distinctions will be completely blotted out, signifying the final decomposition of all forms into the primal matter, the primal nothingness. Conrad builds up a very sharp sense of disparity between the young captain's little spark of resistance and the immense outer forces, seemingly bent on absorbing him into their own inertia. At this level the basic opposition is between the principle of individuation and the "still void", the homogeneity of nothingness.

The nightmare in which the young captain is immersed does not allow for a sense of time. There is a curious timeless quality about it. It is unrelated to anything he has previously known, having swallowed up the past. It is an enormity incommensurable with anything else. While at first the "still void" gives him a kind of mental vertigo (*"I clung to the rail as if my sense of balance were leaving me for good"*),⁷ as time goes on

⁷ Certain images used by Conrad such as being suspended in the void or hanging over the bottomless pit directly recall images with which E. A. Poe symbolically represented mental states of extreme anxiety.

he seems to be benumbed by the great silence and emptiness which anaesthetize consciousness and will. By and by the nightmare sucks him in, which results in a curious entranced state.

For a long, long time I faced an empty world, steeped in an infinity of silence, through which the sunshine poured and flowed for some mysterious purpose. (91)

I had been standing looking out over the rail, saying nothing, feeling nothing, not even the weariness of my limbs, overcome by the evil spell. (105)

The passage shows him benumbed, indifferent, all but assimilated to the inertia of the outer scene. The "still void" has a hypnotic effect on him ("*The intense loneliness of the sea acted like poison on my brain*"), disrupting the will, awakening in him an obscure wish to merge with it, to stop offering resistance as a separate, individuated being. The "still void", embodying the idea of Nothingness, seems to contain within itself the principle of the annihilation of Being.

What Conrad describes here through a closely related pattern of symbolist imagery is a condition of Death-in-Life, an inner decomposition of being, the dissolution of the will to live. A feeling of hopelessness does not result so much from a sense of fighting against the heavy odds as from an overwhelming sense of the futility of all action, the general purposelessness of things.

With the image of the cosmos as a mechanical and wholly purposeless circling of matter a sense of the absurd asserts itself ("the awful Work of the Seven Days into which mankind seems to have blundered unawares"). Moral nihilism, stemming from an overwhelming recognition of the absurdity of existence, gnaws away at the will to live. From this perspective all action is seen as utterly futile, purposeless, absurd, death and nothingness being the ultimate realities.

And so both the highly charged descriptions of the natural setting where the extremely subjective response of the protagonist colours the presentation of objective reality and the diary entries where this theme emerges for the first time into the captain's consciousness, though even then not fully, testify to the young captain's "ennui de vivre", which in fact constitutes "the obscure weakness", "the secret disease" of his soul, of which he himself speaks vaguely in several places without defining it.

The sea becomes "le grand miroir de mon désespoir". The Baudelarian motto "D'autres fois, calme plat, grand miroir/De mon désespoir", points out the correlation between the outer

and the inner. All throughout *The Shadow Line* Conrad consistently uses the mirror symbolism.

In one of the early scenes he describes the self-communing of the young captain, just aboard his first command, while he is sitting quietly in the saloon, looking at his face in the mirror. The mirror reflects the image of self-confidence he is then presenting to himself and to the world. He has no doubt about his professional capacity and no inkling of the possibly destructive forces dormant in his soul. The mirror and the perfectly polished gleaming furniture, the whole interior of the saloon (it is full of reflecting gleams), in their own way reflect order and the strict exigencies of the seaman's life. The mirror reflects a secure social world of stable interrelationships and strict hierarchy, where everybody knows his place and station and has a clear-cut duty to fulfil.

This gleaming world of order and security is later on sharply contrasted with the profoundly disturbing mirror of the sea whose terrifying emptiness mirrors the emptiness within, flashing back at him the image of his own despair. The empty immensity mirrors only itself in all directions. This is of the essence of its horror, implying the idea of the homogeneity of Nothingness and the denial of the principle of individuation.

This partly explains the intensely neurotic reaction of the young captain to the "still void", the glittering surface of the sea which hurts the eyes and, much more importantly, hurts the soul with its implication that death and nothingness are the ultimate realities.

The intense loneliness of the sea acted like poison on my brain. (92)

I went below, not because I meant to take some rest, but simply because I couldn't bear to look at it just then. (87).

His being on deck all the time is motivated by several different kinds of motivation, each of which belongs to a different layer of the narrative:

- a) his adherence to the professional code.
- b) his fulfilling a self-imposed penance for the guilt incurred towards the sailors ("*... it was then that I allowed myself to drop into my deck chair for a couple of hours of real sleep*").
- c) his hypnotic fascination with the "still void", which strikes fear and terror into his soul and at the same time,

paradoxically, holds him spellbound, rousing in him an obscure wish to merge with the primal matter.

This mirror will also reflect an important progress in self-knowledge the young captain is making. It will flash back at him an entirely different picture from the one reflected by the mirror in the saloon. As utter immobilization is imposed on him by the external situation, he turns his attention inwards, exploring the limits of his being. This search after the inmost self seems to be motivated by the same irresistible compulsion that characterized the protagonists of *Heart of Darkness* and *The Secret Sharer*.⁸

Through a confrontation with the inmost self the young captain becomes aware of the forces of disruption lying dormant in his own soul.

The long introduction of the initial chapters serves as an introduction to the central dramatic situation, as a pointer on the road. Although Guerard is very critical about these initial chapters, interpreting them as a sign of Conrad's creative uncertainty as to what the main subject of his novel was going to be, they in fact belong to a typical Conradian narrative device for which Guerard elsewhere uses the term "situational prefigurations".

At the beginning of the novel the captain suffers from boredom, weariness, general dissatisfaction with life. In his "rebellious discontent" he sees life as a "dreary, prosaic waste of days". Becoming aware of the "universal hollow conceit" he throws up his berth for no reason unless it be to "flee from the menace of emptiness". He is already in the grip of the mood which may be vaguely called general dissatisfaction with life ("this stale unprofitable word of my discontent"), which owing to its very nature precludes any form of action.⁹ His seeming obtuseness in conversations with the well-meaning Captain Giles resulting in some comical cross-talk shows a disguised reluctance to take up any hint which may force him to take some action. There is already in him an indefinable psychological barrier which precludes any action. He is already

⁸ The mirror image is used by Conrad in *The Secret Sharer* to describe the arrival of the disturbing double: "The shadowy, dark head, like mine, seemed to nod imperceptibly above the ghostly gray of my sleeping suit. It was, in the night, as though I had been faced by my own reflection in the depths of a somber and immense mirror" (Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer*, A Signet Classic, New York and Toronto, 1950, p. 27).

⁹ Cf. *Heart of Darkness* where Marlow speaks of "the playful paw-strokes of the wilderness, the preliminary trifling before the more serious onslaught" (*ib.*, p. 112).

dangerously drifting away from action and towards the deadly still core of things.¹⁰

I had *never* in my life felt more *detached from all earthly goings on*. Freed from the sea for a time, I preserved the sailor's consciousness of *complete independence from all land affairs*. (19)

Whereas I, in comparison, felt myself a mere bird of passage in that port. In fact, it might have been said that I had already broken off my connection. (27—28).

He has already cut himself adrift from all activity, heading towards the no man's land of absolute indifference. Sinking into despondency, he finds it difficult to rouse himself for action. Captain Giles brings him out of it as later on Ransome will bring him out of a much deadlier mood. In both cases it is through a contact with another human being that he is saved.

This mood of weary disillusionment anticipates the much deadlier mood dominating the captain during the crisis. Thus the introductory chapters, seemingly a dead weight to the novel, fulfil a clear-cut function in the structural design of *The Shadow Line*.¹¹

The story of the late captain to which much attention is given also plays its part in the structural articulation of the thematic pattern. It shows with concrete force the danger of anarchic forces dormant within being. The late captain (who "*had made up his mind to cut adrift from everything*") became so much absorbed in his inner crisis that he stopped paying attention to the outer world. Not caring about anything he ended up by forfeiting his responsibility towards the ship and the men on board the ship.

The story of the late captain serves as a structural anticipation of the crisis through which the young captain will go himself, although the terms of his crisis will be entirely different. The disruptive forces within his own being are of an entirely different nature but they might have had equally disastrous consequences for the ship if he had not mastered them in time. Responding so profoundly to the temptation of stillness, emptiness and immobility ("*dulled into complete indifference*"), he is almost rendered incapable of action at the height of the crisis. His form of evil is apathy, indifference, radical disease of the will to live, moral despair stemming from the recognition of the human condition. Here as elsewhere in his best fiction Conrad studies the many

¹⁰ Would it be too far-fetched to detect in the phrase he is using to describe his state of mind, "a spiritual drowsiness", an echo of Keats' great ode about death?

¹¹ See also Ian Watt's defence of the early chapters in the already quoted article.

forms evil can take, some of them subtly disguised and changed out of all recognition.

As in *Heart of Darkness* and *The Secret Sharer*, in *The Shadow Line* Conrad imaginatively explores a menace from within the self. While in *Heart of Darkness* and *The Secret Sharer* the menace comes from the unconscious self, the whirling of libido, in *The Shadow Line* he explores the crippling, paralysing effect of thought, the menace of rational scepticism corroding the will to live.

There is already a precedent in Conrad's fiction for a crisis not only similar in kind but taking place in the same natural setting. The dissolution of the will to live under the impact of the realization that the "still void" is the ultimate reality has already been staged in Martin Decoud's drama in *Nostromo*. There we find the same sort of moral nihilism stemming from an awareness of the futility and purposelessness of things, the same seductive possibility of succumbing to Nothingness, which in his case results in suicide. Death as temptation which is actually enacted by Martin Decoud in *Nostromo* is implicitly contained in the young captain's hypnotic fascination with the "still void", his being forever on deck and his inability to tear himself away.

This constitutes the captain's "subtle moral disorder" and the unforgivable sin he commits. It lies at the root of his intense feeling of guilt which Conrad powerfully projects.

The guilt complex figures very prominently in *The Shadow Line*. At first glance it seems to belong entirely to the narrative level expressed by the traditional structural formula of "character in action". When there is a return of tropical fever on board the ship, laying low all the sailors except Ransome and himself, the young captain makes the appalling discovery that there is no more quinine in the medicine chest. The explanation seems to be that the wicked old captain has sold the whole lot, substituting a sort of white powder for it. As far as the young captain is concerned there are all sorts of mitigating circumstances for what he supposes to be his negligence. Before the ship sailed out the British legacy doctor had inspected the medicine chest. Besides, as the young captain himself says: "The fittings were in order and the medicine chest is an officially arranged affair". Yet, on making the appalling discovery, the captain feels intense guilt and torments himself with remorse forever after. The fact that the suffering sailors never reproach him but bear up splendidly makes his remorse worse.

The young captain's feeling of guilt stems from his sense of moral responsibility towards others and as such it has

morally positive connotations. Yet Conrad is too subtle an analyst of the convolutions of guilt to leave it at that. He shows how inner torment induced by guilt undermines the young captain's self-possession and makes him close in upon himself. Getting more and more immersed in his private world of introspective brooding he erects a barrier between himself and the outer world. This leads him into isolation, threatening with the rupture of the bond with his fellow-men. Brooding on his guilt, he augments it, tormenting himself with his remorseful thoughts ("... if it had not been for *the sense of guilt which clung to all my thoughts secretly*"). Not only his thoughts but his actions, too, seem to be coloured by a guilt feeling. For instance, his endless vigilance on deck, forgoing rest and sleep, ("*... it was then that I allowed myself to drop into my deck chair for a couple of hours of real sleep*"). does not seem to be motivated by practical exigency so much as by the captain's need to devise various forms of self-punishment to expiate for what he considers are his sins.

Thus in Conrad's subtle analysis of the guilt complex he incurs yet another guilt. In preoccupying himself so much with his guilt he becomes guilty of self-absorption which paralyses him for action.¹²

Finally, there is a "subtle moral disorder" the young captain is guilty of. It belongs to a different level of the narration, having to do with the obscure crisis going on in his mind. Guerard objects to the fact that "the narrator's sense of guilt is not attached, as it was in *The Secret Sharer*, to a significant human action. It is instead a state of being — which may be true enough to life but is unrewarding for fiction".¹³ But this sense of guilt ("*which clung to all my thoughts secretly*") must remain vague by its very nature as it is bound up with the shadowy spiritual crisis taking place in the narrator's mind. Obscurity is of the essence in the crisis the captain goes through. Existential nihilism to which the captain falls a prey, forfeiture of the will to live, implies the breach of the human bond. This is the young captain's ultimate guilt, the unforgivable sin in the Conradian universe. As the whole obscure spiritual crisis does not emerge into the captain's consciousness until the diary entries written by him at the height of the crisis this ultimate guilt is never fully defined.

¹² Cf. Albert Guerard's interpretation of Dr. Monygham's guilt in *Nostromo*: "The sense in which Dr. Monygham made an "ideal conception of his disgrace" is dark and elusive, but at least it involves the "imaginative exaggeration of a correct feeling" (*Conrad the Novelist*, pp. 191—192).

¹³ *Ib.*, p. 33.

But it is there by implication and suggestion, vaguely diffused over everything and all the more oppressive to the young captain for not being clearly understood.

How else to understand the crucial passage in the second diary entry:

There is something going on in the sky like a decomposition, like a corruption of the air, which remains as still as ever. After all, mere clouds, which may, or may not, hold wind or rain. Strange that it should trouble me so. I feel as if all my sins had found me out . . . And what appals me most of all is that I shrink from going on deck to face it. It's due to the ship, it's due to the men who are there on deck — some of them, ready to put out the last remnant of their strength at a word from me. And I am shrinking from it. From the mere vision. My first command. Now I understand that strange sense of insecurity in my past, I always suspected that I might be no good. And here is proof positive. I am shirking it, I am no good. (106—107).

With the crisis coming to a head the interaction of the external and the internal reality becomes more and more intimate. Their fusion becomes complete at the climactic point just before the rain comes. Descriptions of the outer reality become a perfect metaphor for the inner reality so that although we know that the external reality is a substratum of everything else we are more and more tempted to take it as a perfect symbolic embodiment of the inner reality.

Thus at the nadir of the depression into which the captain has sunk the outer universe "gives him back the image of his mind". "A decomposition" which he reads into the sky reflects his inner decomposition, "a corruption of the air" reflects a corruption of his own will. It is here that he becomes aware that this state of mind which abhors all action may have disastrous consequences for his ship.

The obscure feeling of guilt which has previously "clung to all his secret thoughts" here crystallizes into thought. The statement "I feel as if all my sins had found me out", explicitly links his "sins" with his shrinking from action.¹⁴

With the coming of darkness the captain goes through a sort of curious private Apocalypse, enacting the death wish in his imagination. Again the external and the internal fully

¹⁴ For a contrary opinion see Douglas Hewitt: "As in *Typhoon*, Conrad is concerned with situations and problems which can be perfectly dealt with in action; the narrator is concerned only with his fitness to command. The seed of everlasting remorse and the sense of guilt which he feels are due to his having omitted to examine the contents of the medicine chest before setting sail, and to doubts of his courage . . . But this can be, and is, overcome. He sees it at the end as "that episode which had been maturing and tempering my character". (*Conrad: A Reassessment*, pp. 116—117).

coincide. The culmination of the external danger coincides with the culmination of the suicidal drift of the will, noticeable in the captain all throughout the crisis.

Here is a crucial passage:

I thought that all my feelings had been dulled into complete *indifference*.¹⁵ *But I found it as trying as ever to be on deck. The impenetrable darkness beset the ship so close that it seemed that by thrusting one's hand over the side one could touch some unearthly substance. There was in it an effect of inconceivable terror and inexpressible mystery. The few stars overhead shed a dim light upon the ship alone, with no gleams of any kind upon the water, in detached shafts piercing an atmosphere which had turned to soot. It was something I had never seen before, giving no hint of the direction from which any change would come, the closing in of a menace from all sides.*

There was still no man at the helm. The immobility of all things was perfect. If the air had turned black, the sea, for all I knew, might have turned solid. It was no good looking in any direction, watching for any sign, speculating upon the nearness of the moment. When the time came, the blackness would overwhelm silently the bit of starlight falling upon the ship, and the end of all things would come without a sigh, stir, or murmur of any kind, and all our hearts would cease to beat like run-down clocks.

It was impossible to shake off that sense of finality. The quietness that came over me was like a foretaste of annihilation. It gave me a sort of comfort, as though my soul had become suddenly reconciled to an eternity of blind stillness.

The seaman's instinct alone survived whole in my moral dissolution (108—109).

The death wish latently concealed in the captain's consciousness, culminates with the assault of darkness. Dense darkness is the obverse of the intense glitter of the void, which "acted like poison on (his) brain". It is only another facet of the "still void" possessing the same essential attributes of silence, stillness, emptiness, the difference lying in the fact that while earlier the "still void" seemed to be passively waiting for its victim, here it is heaving to swallow him up. This is, at least, how the young captain experiences it. His reaction, made up of the same mixture of terror and fascination with which he has been contemplating the glittering mirror of nothingness is intensified in proportion to the intensification of the external danger so that here he even fully acquiesces in the annihilation of his own being.

¹⁵ The first sentence of this passage recalls an earlier description: "I had been standing looking out over the rail, saying nothing, feeling nothing, not even the weariness of my limbs, overcome by the evil spell" (105).

The earlier passage describing a total lapse anticipated the imaginative enactment of death wish during the onslaught of darkness.

The quietness which came over me was like a foretaste of annihilation. It gave me a sort of comfort, as though my soul had become suddenly reconciled to an eternity of blind stillness.

His imagining the end of all things, the end of time (the "still void" is equated with the "universe" in several places, the intense darkness is likened to the darkness before creation and the darkness of the end) represents the final modulation of a pattern of interrelated imagery working upon our consciousness all throughout the crucial parts of the novel.

In the inward spiritual drama that we have been tracing this moment represents an apparent triumph of Nothingness. The captain's secret death wish, manifesting itself as a hypnotic enchantment with the "still void", goes through a sort of imaginative completion here. Immediately afterwards the positions are completely reversed and it is Being that is finally triumphant. Immediately after fulfilling his secret death wish in the shadowy projections of the imagination the young captain is fit for action again as the last part of the novel demonstrates fully. He strains his will to the utmost in the effort to bring the ship with the sick crew into port. The central statement about him that gets repeated time after time is that he steered. ("*I steered*".) And when the ship is finally brought into port he is ready to put out to sea to complete the voyage as stipulated as soon as he gets the new crew.

There is a core of resistance in his own being which never gives in to the temptation of Nothingness. This irreducible core of being is represented by the characteristic Conradian phrase: "*the sailor in me*".

The sailor in me alone survived whole in my moral dissolution.

"The sailor in me" means, of course, the trained professional but this implies a social reality, a reality beyond the self, made up of human interconnections and interdependencies. "The sailor in me" acts as a powerful check to the latent death wish and a crippling sense of the fundamental absurdity of existence.

Yet the crisis has not been weathered only with his own forces. There is also an interrelationship with an outside moral force embodied in Ransome, "the consummate seaman". Here as well as elsewhere the symbolist level of the narrative merges and interacts with the other level of the narrative expressed by the traditional formula of "character in action".

For purposes of analysis I have isolated the inward drama. But, of course, the captain did not exist on his ship alone and Conrad's powerful tale builds up a self-contained microcosm

on board the ship, consisting of a subtle network of human interrelationships. I have not dwelt on it as it has been extensively analysed by the critics, especially by Ian Watt. All along the crisis the captain has been aware of his crew, their fortitude, courage and the power to endure. And, of course, all the time he has been intensely aware of Ransome, the cook, "the consummate seaman" with a weak heart. One of the most touching things in the novel is the warm human relationship that develops between the two. On the level of the initiation story Ransome is the bearer of the code which the young captain has to learn. On the more imaginative level of the novel dealing with the inmost man he represents the integrative forces in the psyche which successfully resist the assault of anarchic forces from within. At the height of the inner crisis when the captain is almost submerged by despair it is the saving presence of Ransome that helps him to rouse himself from the state of utter prostration of the will.

Ransome lingered in the cabin as if he had something to do there, but hesitated about doing it. I said suddenly: — "You think that I ought to be on deck?"

He answered at once but without any particular emphasis or accent: "I do, sir".

I got to my feet briskly, and he made way for me to go out. (107—108)

Ransome's arrival gives the final impetus to the other self dormant in the young captain, the self subtly responsive to an interhuman reality made up of dependencies and connections. With Ransome's arrival in the cabin the process of rallying of his inward energies begins. He pulls himself together, goes on deck and starts giving orders for the necessary preparations to be made to give the ship a chance to withstand whatever was coming.

In the pattern of the inner drama Ransome provides the answer to the question "To be or not to be", resounding as a subdued accompaniment all throughout the crucial parts of *The Shadow Line*.¹⁶

¹⁶ In the already quoted article Ian Watt notices quotations from *Hamlet* that occur all throughout *The Shadow Line*: "This ("mortal coil") is, appropriately, but one of the many phrases from *Hamlet* in *The Shadow Line*; e. g. "undiscovered country", p. 3; "stale, unprofitable world", p. 28; "out of joint", p. 84 ("Story and Idea in Conrad's *The Shadow Line*", *Modern British Fiction*, p. 136). The *Hamlet* quotations are not there by chance. The phrases from *Hamlet* must have come naturally to Conrad during the writing of *The Shadow Line* which is, like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, centred on the inward crisis of the protagonist placed in an extreme situation where he must fight a lonely battle not only with outward circumstances but primarily with himself. Like *Hamlet* he is thought — entrapped and pursued by an intense sense of the

The sense of the fundamental absurdity of human existence, of Nothingness as the ultimate reality, which dominated the young captain, is opposed by a moral construct exemplified by Ransome. Ransome has learnt the final secret of disciplining the fear of death. The young captain who hears the Siren's song of death all the time finally learns through Ransome how to contain the fear of death, the terror of being. He also learns what the values are with which to oppose an awareness of the ultimate absurdity of the human existence.

Thus in the basic diagram of the drama of spiritual and moral disintegration and re-integration we have been tracing existential nihilism is replaced by stoicism, implying fortitude and endurance in the face of hard facts, and, above everything else, an awareness of others and an acknowledgement of moral responsibility towards them.

An intellectual recognition of the fundamental absurdity of Being is the thing the young captain with his introspective, meditative bent has to live with. On the moral level this is equated with the knowledge of constant physical danger that Ransome has to live with, ordering his inner being accordingly. Thus *The Shadow Line* embraces the concept of personality as a moral construct. It is this moral construct that the young captain must build up for himself — and he does it through action.

The central question that the novel poses — how to reconcile the radical intuition of the absurdity of existence and the pessimistic conclusion to which this realization leads with a warm feeling of human solidarity — gets an answer. An opposition between Being and Nothingness is resolved by an ethical construct. It does not bring order and meaning back into the universe but creates order in the world of man. It structures a man-made universe by creating a framework of values within which it is possible for man to live. Thus an ethical construct acts as a powerful antidote to the temptation of Nothingness.

Within the structural design of *The Shadow Line* the characters who surround the main protagonist reflect, on the symbolic level, the facets of the self, and, more profoundly, the facets of the theme. By figuring as potential selves they embody the possible approaches to the basic dilemma the main protagonist is facing.

fundamental absurdity of existence which renders all forms of action futile. His awareness of the absurd plunges him into despair, which echoes the despair of his great prototype. In the extreme situation in which he finds himself, the shadows of madness and death fall on him too. There is also an analogy of the guilt complex, very powerful both.

In the structural articulation of the theme of the opposition of Being and Nothingness Ransome stands as a dramatic image of the integrated self. The deceased captain and partly Mr. Burns and the second mate may be envisioned as dramatic images of the dissolution of the self. The young captain is a dramatic image of the divided self.

Yet, in summing up, it must be stressed that the crisis this article has traced is all of an inner order. The young captain of *The Shadow Line* never once goes wrong objectively. If we look at his outward conduct his record is impeccable. He never fails in his vigilance, always takes right decisions at the right moment and never risks his ship.¹⁷ His crisis is all of an inner order and never leaves an imprint upon facts. Ransome testifies to that. The best seaman on board the ship says towards the climax of the crisis: "*You are holding out well, sir*". This could be taken, among other things, as an objective proof of his measuring up to the fearful circumstances of his first command. Even at the climactic point of the crisis when sitting all alone in his cabin he is made impotent by despair he immediately responds to a most delicate and discreet pressure by Ransome, not even uttered verbally, to go on deck. He gets up "*briskly*", goes on deck, speaks to the men "*quietly*", giving orders which will enable the ship to come through.

I got to my feet briskly, and he made way for me to go out... The starlight seemed to die out before reaching that spot, but when I asked quietly: "Are you there, men?" my eyes made out shadowy forms starting up around me, very few, very indistinct and a voice spoke: "All, here, sir". Another amended anxiously:

— "All that are any good for anything, sir".

Both voices were very quiet and unringing; without any special character of readiness or discouragement. Very matter-of-fact voices.

— "We must try to haul this mainsail close up", I said. (109)

If the reader is impressed by Ransome's quiet heroism, he is even more touched by the young captain's humanity and may judge his outward performance more justly after measuring it against the inner torment, pain and insecurity.

Conrad's rare achievement in *The Shadow Line* is to give a powerful narrative account of an obscure psychological crisis which is difficult to articulate, all the more so as the protagonist never formulates clearly to himself the terms of the inner conflict going on in his mind.

¹⁷ In this he is sharply contrasted with the young captain of *The Secret Sharer* who in facing out the inner crisis falters in his outward conduct.

In order to suggest this crisis Conrad went much beyond the realistic mode, discovering the narrative procedures which enabled him to embody his non-discursive meanings with sensuous immediacy. Owing to his subtle handling of the multiple interpenetration of the self and the world, he created a powerful symbolic landscape in which he staged an invisible drama of the spirit. Thus he gave form and utterance to areas of psychic life which are difficult of access, to dim, obscure regions of the mind which are difficult to articulate. In finding powerful narrative means to suggest this obscure inner crisis Conrad opened up new possibilities for modern fiction.¹⁸

Thus a symbolist poem arises quite naturally out of the taut prose of the realist tale. What seems to be a triumph of the realist mode harbours within itself a subtle existential fable about the battle between Being and Nothingness within the mind of the main protagonist.

The Shadow Line is closely organized around some fundamental psychological and moral issues that underlie the Conradian fictional world and it presents a highly organized structure within the framework of which spatial form is opposed to the linear form with constant and subtle interactions between the two structural patterns. Thus, both thematically and structurally, *The Shadow Line* is closely related to Conrad's best and most profoundly original fiction which represents creative exploration of the human condition.

¹⁸ Cf. Herbert Read: "Art, as Goethe had said, is formative long before it is beautiful; it gives form to feelings that are otherwise obscure or inchoate, and that is its main biological and cultural function" (*Art Now*, Faber and Faber, London, 1960, p. 41).