

Short Study on Conrad's "Youth" and Heart of Darkness

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Abstract

Both "Youth" (1898) and Heart of Darkness (1899) are frequently anthologized marvelous masterpieces by the Polish-British writer Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), and both of them contain the autobiographical elements. To enhance the comprehension of Conrad's life and his art, this article does a further study concerning two journeys of same protagonist Marlowe-his first journey to the East and his perceptions of youth at different stages of his life in "Youth;" his experiences in Africa with a profound exposure to the colonialists' abhorrent practices in Heart of Darkness.

Keywords

Conrad; Autobiographical; "Youth"; Heart of Darkness.

1. Introduction

Both "Youth" (1898) and Heart of Darkness (1899) are frequently anthologized marvelous masterpieces by the Polish-British writer Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), and both of them contain the autobiographical elements. Conrad went to France as a sailor in 1874, to his appointment as captain in 1888, and then to his last voyage as the first mate in 1893, the sea accompanied him for almost 20 years (San, 2021; Britannica, 2023). To Conrad, "Sailing was not about trial and experience, it was about real-life" (Zhao, 2015, p. 36). Nautical experiences enriched his life, opened him up to different cultures, and, more importantly, provided him with a solid foundation for his later works. "Youth" is such an autobiographical short story and depicts a young man—Marlow's first voyage to the East as a second mate and his feelings through the voyage. In this story, youth is full of fascination, and at the same time it is full of regrets. Conrad was a novelist of Polish descent, whose family once paid a heavy price for the independence and freedom of Poland—for national liberation, and finally his parents gave their precious lives. Conrad was forced to leave the motherland and set off for France in 1874 to begin his 20-year seafaring career. Hence, He had an ambivalent attitude towards colonialism. This is fully revealed in Heart of Darkness, which is of criticism and exposure of European colonialism and imperialism, based on his trip to the Congo in 1889 (Liu, Mao & Tian, 2008, p. 162). It is a short novel centred on the theme of colonialism and racism and a clash between barbarism and civilization, in which the author slowly relates, through reminiscence, a memory from his youth, when Marlow first goes to Africa and is sent to the Congo River in search of Kurtz who is "the chief of the Inner Station" (Conrad, 2018, p. 1214. Hereafter only the page number of this textbook referred to in parenthetical citations), and learns by accident that Kurtz has degenerated from an idealist "for the guidance of the cause intrusted to us by Europe" (pp. 1214-1215) which is aimed at bringing progress and civilization to Africans" to an insatiable colonizer. Concerning with the life journeys of the hero Marlow and Conrad himself in the two fictional narratives, the following sections will do a further study.

2. A Short Study on Conrad's "Youth"

To recreate a profound prospect and express his admiration of youth, the narrator accumulates several special items on both the lexical and syntactic levels from the starting point of the journey, which combine to set us in an aesthetic situation promptly. Take an extract from the short story for instance:

In two days it blew a gale. The Judea, hove to, wallowed on the Atlantic like an old candlebox... She was working herself loose, and leaked badly... the bulwarks went, the stanchions were torn out, the ventilators smashed, the cabin-door burst in... and I am only twenty... I was pleased. I would not have given up the experience for worlds... "O youth! The strength of it, the faith of it, the imagination of it! To me she was not an old rattle-trap carting about the world a lot of coal for a freight-to me she was the endeavour, the test, the trial of life. I think of her with pleasure, with affection, with regret... (pp. 1167-1168).

Looking through the material, we can see the sentences: "it blew a gale," "and leaked badly." These two verbs reflect that Judea-this old ship-was in a very bad condition. Her "bulwarks", "stanchions", "ventilators" and "cabin-door" were all with varying degrees of damage. During the whole voyage, the wrecked Judea survived storms and fires, returned to rest, and then sailed on, helped by an occasional steamer on the way, a sight that reminded me of the exhausted boat in *The Old Man and the Sea*, hauling back a set of fish bones. Later the mast fell down and the ship spontaneously combusted, leaving the wrecked hull floating alone in the vastness of the ocean. Perhaps this is the unique quality of youth: "Do or Die" (p. 1168). It is just like the protagonist, Marlow, who at first thinks that the captain's recruitment of him as the second mate is "a wonder" (p. 1163).

Later on in the voyage, when the ship has problems, Marlow still has high hopes for her. Unlike the other members of the ship, he was "I was pleased. I would not have given up the experience for worlds" (p. 1168). The sailors complained that "pumping eight hours out of the twenty-four" (p. 1170). And the ship's cook was so frightened by the storm that they were forced to return, and this time they stayed in Falmouth for nearly six months, during which time they tried to regroup but soon returned because the ship was leaking even more. During this time, it seemed that everyone was unconvinced that Judea had made it to Bangkok, and even treated it as a joke. The children laughed at her, the owners and customers of the hairdressers and tobacco shops asked unkind questions, while at the same time the owners of the boat were arguing... In the face of all this pressure, although "I" was not responsible for anything, he was still distracted because he was still looking forward to the Judea's successful arrival in Bangkok. Marlow saw these hardships as opportunities, as pleasures, as glories, and he enjoyed the pleasures of life in his youth as he fought against them (Fan, 2007, p. 73). It was after his first victory over the storm that he uttered this exclamation: "O youth! The strength of it, the faith of it, the imagination of it" (p. 1168).

After temporarily extinguishing the fire on board, he was "pleased and proud" (p. 1175) and felt pity for his elderly first mate-Mahon. Then later, when the old ship exploded, he even tried to command the small boat alone, because he wanted to reach land and the East faster than the captain's and the first mate's lifeboats. Youth is what motivates Marlow to keep moving forward. There seems to be nothing that cannot be overcome in the face of youth. It may seem silly, but the beauty of youth is that it is fearless and courageous (Fan, 2007, p. 73).

3. A Short Study on Conrad's Heart of Darkness

To recreate a profound prospect and express his point of view on colonisation, the narrator accumulates several items on both the lexical and syntactic levels at the beginning of his trip to Africa, which bring us quickly into the situation. Take an extract from the essay for instance:

Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world... the big trees were kings. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish... no joy... The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances... The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on that river... and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once -somewhere-far away-in another existence perhaps. (pp. 1223-1224).

Looking through the material, we can clearly see the anti-colonialist tendencies of the narrator, Marlow, as he experiences what he has seen on this journey. Colonialism is a practice or policy of control by one people or power over other people or areas, often by establishing colonies and generally with the aim of economic dominance (Wikipedia, 2021). One of the more insidious forms of colonization is through cultural invasion, which makes the colonized people respect the colonizing country, its culture, and traditions, from the inside out, from the consciousness to the surface, believing that the "white" men are superior. The "blacks" are born inferior. That is to say, the colonizers penetrate their ideological into the minds of the colonial people and force the colonial people to accept it (Dong, 2008, p. 16). Above, when his boat riding up is surrounded by what resembles a primitive world: dense forests, shining sunlight, everything so quiet and peaceful. He seems to cherish the memory of a time when "the big trees were kings" (p. 1223), rather than the European colonists who now hold the power as the "king" of the land. Marlow's disapproval of what the European colonists have done and his skepticism of colonial rule when Marlow makes this statement can be clearly seen here. The air he feels is warm because Africa is blessed with unique terrain and the abundance of sunlight; but he also says that the air is "heavy and sluggish" (p. 1224), why the air carries so many emotions is down to the indigenous people, who are heavy-hearted and whose various behaviors seem stagnant and lifeless from the perspective of the white man-Marlow. In the novel, the English merchant-Kurtz, through his unequal trade with the local population, he "sends in as much ivory as all the others put together" (p. 1208). Just as Marlow later discovered: the superior weaponry was the reason why he could get the ivory without anything to trade with (Dong, 2008, p. 19). With the powerful assistance of guns and ammunition, he maintained the export of ivory by forcing the exchange of ivory and gold from Africa. And this is the real situation of colonial exploitation-The colonizers went into Africa with guns and cartridge and went out of Africa with ivory (Dong 2008, p. 19). And those poor African people are not only plundered of resources but also assigned to work by the colonists. Since then, they have repeated the boring mechanical work-building railways, as the book states: "I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope" (p. 1204). It can be clearly seen that these black men are as lean as a rake. Why is this? The answer is given in the following article: "unless they swallowed the wire itself, or made loops of it to snare the fishes with, I don't see what good their extravagant salary could be to them" (pp. 1231-1232). Those black people who work are only given three lengths of copper wire, which might have been a substantial payment in exchange, but in uncivilized Africa is far less attractive than a full meal. However, it is irony that the railway built by the British people is used to transport the ivory plundered by the European colonists from the inland to the coast (Zhao, 2019, p. 35). The advancement of science and technology was not used to bring advancement in the lives of the African people, but to increase the pace of plundering by the colonists. As the plot progresses, Marlow learns more about Kurtz. In a chat with Kurtz's followers, he says: "He declared he would shoot me unless I gave him the ivory and then cleared out of the country, because he could do so, and have a fancy for it" (p. 1248). The aura of heroism that Kurtz has in Marlow's mind is totally broken when he perceives his indifference and cruelty, as well as his desire for power and lust.

In the above discussion, we can fully feel Conrad's sympathy for what the people of Africa have suffered. But a closer look reveals that this kind of sympathy is the affection of a high-ranking,

so-called civilized man with a so-called civilized man to the so-called uneducated, ignorant, and incompetent primitive barbarian (Liu, 2006, 63-64). He is not on the same level as the black man, with heartfelt respect and empathy, but rather the superficial sympathy of the superior, who does think these colonial methods are very inhumane, but who also does not try to stop the colonial process. His stereotypes and discrimination against black people can be seen in the terminology used, and the neutral term black people are rarely found in the text, rather, derogatory terms such as savages (p. 1194), animal-ants (p. 1203), black shadows (p. 1206), cannibals (p. 1225) and brutes (p. 1242) were used to refer to blacks. At the same time, white people are also highly praised in the novel: "I met a white man, in such an unexpected elegance of get-up that in the first moment I took him for a sort of vision" (p. 1206). However, people who see this kind of costume in Africa, where food is not enough to eat, should have been astonished, but Marlow is very surprised and even had a sense of exalted glory. When Kurtz was seriously ill and needed to return, the black leaders who supported him were so sad that they even gathered on the shore and shouted in groups (Gui, 2015, p. 61). There is a girl who behaves more abnormally: "Her face had a tragic and fierce aspect of wild sorrow and of dumb pain mingled with the fear of some struggling, half-shaped resolve" (p. 1253). Is the girl falling for Kurtz? It isn't clear, but she certainly trusted him a great deal. Was it not a willing slave to the colonists themselves that they should show so much trust and concern for an intruder, that they should believe the intruder's trumped-up lies? And during that period Marlow and others in Africa have been trying to indoctrinate the blacks, and even at the beginning of the novel, Conrad makes it clear that the only way to atone for the European conquest of other peoples and the colonization of other peoples is to spread the "sacred fire" of European civilization to other so-called "inferior" peoples to indoctrinate them, to bring them to progress and light (Liu, 2006, p. 64). Behind this kind of thinking is the discrimination against the African people, thinking that colonization has brought them benefits. As for the resources plundered, by the way, it is nothing more than the tuition required for teaching.

4. Conclusion

At the end of "Youth," Marlow returns from his memories to reality and exclaims: There is nothing more wonderful in the world than the ocean. But whether it is youth that makes the ocean more wondrous is anyone's guess. Perhaps this is the unique charm of youth, which allows one to marvel at the infinite beauty and imagination it brings even after it has passed, and to sigh at the same time. In this novel, we can see not only the praise of youth without regret but also the sadness of its passing. But just like the protagonist in this novel, even if we are forced to stop moving forward, again and again, we still have to "set sail" to the place we have always wanted to go, even if we have nothing, even if we have nothing to gain, we still have to "set sail" again and live up to our youth! Let our beautiful youth leave its mark on us. As for Heart of Darkness, we can see the contradictions in it. On the one hand, Conrad, as a group of people who had been hurt by colonial rule, was very distressed by the sufferings of the Africans and had doubts about colonization when he saw them working hard but not getting a secure life. After weighing the pros and cons, his anti-colonial ideas waned and his pro-colonial ideas took over. Therefore, when we look at the problem in the future, we must analyze the problem from multiple aspects and don't be dazzled by momentary dominant thoughts.

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