

AFTER THE INQUIRY: THE REPERCUSSION OF THE *PATNA* INCIDENT IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S *LORD JIM*

Yang, Yu-Miao, PhD (First and Corresponding author)

Assistant Professor,
Department of Applied English
I-Shou University
No.1, Sec. 1, Syuecheng Rd.
Dashu District, Kaohsiung City 84001, Taiwan
yyangp@isu.edu.tw

ABSTRACT

Conrad's *Lord Jim* is a story that depicts a man's trajectory from bright prospect to utter destruction. On board as a chief mate to the *Patna*, an ill-fated pilgrim ship, Jim, the protagonist, deserts the ship when it was in danger of submergence. Violating every ethical and moral code for a seaman and as a human leaves Jim a social outcast. The *Patna* incident is undoubtedly an event designed for Conrad to preach the values of codes of conduct. In the novel, the moral significance of the *Patna* is scrutinised by various characters who conduct inquiries of their own into the incident. Through their efforts to seek truth out, the *Patna* incident becomes a stage for them to reveal their own moral natures and their beliefs about the moral fibre – or lack thereof – of human nature. By examining the verdict made by various characters on the public trial of the *Patna* incident, this paper seeks to examine the destructive element as well as fragile morality that exists in all human being.

Keywords: Code of conduct, Morality, Humanity.

INSTRUCTION

Conrad's *Lord Jim* is a story that depicts a man's trajectory from bright prospect to utter destruction. On board as a chief mate to the *Patna*, an ill-fated pilgrim ship, Jim, the protagonist, deserts the ship when it was in danger of submergence. Violating every ethical and moral code for a seaman and as a human leaves Jim a social outcast. The *Patna* incident is undoubtedly an event designed for Conrad to preach the values of codes of conduct. In the novel, the moral significance of the *Patna* is explained, if not explained away, by various characters who conduct inquiries of their own into the incident.

DISCUSSION

Technically speaking, all the inquiry provides is an opportunity for testimony to become a matter of record and for a decision to be made as to the punishment to be inflicted. Indeed, the inquiry provides something far more important. It causes people hearing the testimony to conduct inquiries of their own: inquiries into facts and reasons, to be sure, but also inquiries into their own moral natures and their beliefs about the moral fibre – or lack thereof – of human nature (Murfin, 63). In *Lord Jim*, the public inquiry into the *Patna* incident is staged to exercise the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct, demanding confession and public repentance from the offender. Exacting the “facts” – “as if facts could explain anything” (Conrad, 18) – from the people involved, the public inquiry presents the *Patna* crew with a chance to spell out their accounts of

the accident. In the court of law, Jim offers himself up for honouring the fixed standard of conduct, yet for his disgraced fellow crewmember, it is an arena where they fight for survival.

Jim is the only *Patna* crewmember who is significantly affected by the outcome of the formal inquiry, and even he can be said to be affected only in a superficial way. Effectively, the experience of standing trial over the *Patna* incident actualises Jim's fear of being a moral outcast in that he witnesses the power of collective will being wielded against him. Such a traumatic event can serve as a cathartic happening for both the society at large and the offender. Jim might well be entitled to feel that he has "paid back" to the moral community with the public condemnation he receives. Unfortunately, his pride, his egotistical self-image would not allow him on the hook. Therefore, violating every ethical and moral code for a seaman and as a human and afterwards refusing to flee from a public trial, which results in the cancellation of his certificate, leaves Jim a social outcast. In a desperate attempt to atone for the wrong he had committed and prove his worthiness to the world that has witness his dramatic fall from grace, Jim begins a spiritual pilgrimage in search of second chance to redeem himself. The plot of the novel thus follows Jim's epic journey to recover his lost honour. However, the novel is more than just a sage of a young man struggling to abide by an imposed code of conduct.

Jim's unfading romantic heroism, his outward appearance as, and inward pain for being, a restless wanderer are beautifully elaborated in Marlow's intrusive narrative. However, for Chester, a realist who claims to be able to "see things exactly as they are" (Conrad, 99), Jim's unfading romantic heroism, his outward appearance as, and inward pain for being, a restless wanderer is simply a "pitiful display of vanity".

In Chester's view, one has better navigate sailing through the turbulences in life with a practical view on morality, because if you can't, in Chester's view, "you may just as well give in at once. You will never do anything in this world". In short, no one is better positioned to make the life-or-death decision than the person who is facing it. Such a practical philosophy persuades Chester to attribute Jim's leap from the *Patna* to his instinct for survival, a nature that is shared by the mankind.

Similar to Chester, who takes a lenient view of Jim on the ground of self-preservation, the French lieutenant also recognises the weakness that inheres in everyone and that "one is always afraid" (89). "Given a certain combination of circumstances, fear is sure to come", the French officer declares. Nevertheless, he insists that personal weakness cannot excuse Jim's abandonment of duty, for "after all, one does not die of being afraid". A seaman's desertion of his own ship means, quite simply, a grave violation of the code of conduct. And "when the honour is gone", says the lieutenant, he "can offer no opinion – because [he] knows nothings of it". Unlike Jim, whose idealism is the result of active imagination, the lieutenant's high-sounding statement is supported by courage he exhibits in action.

It is the French lieutenant who actually brings the *Patna* into the harbour. Staying onboard the *Patna* while she is towed to port, the courage the lieutenant displays stands in stark contrast to Jim's cowardice. More significantly, assigned to exactly the same job as Jim's on board the *Patna*, the officer is, in Marlow's opinion, well qualified to judge the performance of his civilian counterpart. In an interview with Marlow, the lieutenant elaborates his view on the event that leads

to Jim's dramatic fall from grace. In his opinion, every man will surely crumble in the face of imminent crisis, because "[m]an is born a coward" (90). All men are recreant, the lieutenant asserts, and are only forced into bravery by a sense of duty, by the eyes of their fellows upon them, or by the examples of others no better than themselves. Courage and fidelity are never inborn merits, but social functions that demand exemplary performance. Whilst self-discipline tends to surrender to fear, man can only rely on habit – "the eye of others" – to act properly. Recognising the fragile humanity in favour of self-preservation, the lieutenant gives emphasis to social restraint. Although the French accepts the fact that it is difficult circumstance that man is made most conscious of his imperfect nature, he shares no concern and sympathy for Jim's failure.

Chester and the lieutenant are introduced to amplify elements in Jim's flawed and very human nature. Their bifurcated views on Jim's betrayal of duty gives a three-dimensional depth to the moral implications of the *Patna* incident. Yet the real significance of the *Patna* goes beyond the moral implication it entails. In fact, viewed from Jim's perspective, it reveals to him that at the moment of paralysis, man's moral codes have no firm foundation in reality. The accident is not simply a moment of weakness.

It is in the lifeboat, under "the shadow of madness", that Jim finds himself floating in a vacuum world in which the codes of conduct, both professional and ethical, become truly nominal. Without the social restraints and expectations, what Jim discovers in this state of mental paralysis is a wild yet terrifying freedom. In the darkness, momentarily escaping from the eyes of others, Jim is lifted beyond the last, fragile checkpoint to discover that, with horror and self-reproach, that man's moral codes have only flimsy bearing in reality (Roussel, 1971).

After the [*Patna's*] lights had gone, anything might have happened in that boat – anything in the world – and the world no wiser. I felt this, and I was pleased. It was just dark enough, too. We were like men walled up in a roomy grave. No concern with anything on earth. Nobody to pass an opinion. Nothing mattered.... No fear, no law, no sounds, no eyes – not even our own, till – till sunrise at least (Conrad, 74).

Unlike Kurtz, who accepts the invitation from the other side of moral boundary without reservation, Jim is horrified by this annihilation. For a short period of time, Jim is given a glimpse of the feral state. Jim is conscious of the sensation of utter annihilation and its consequences; this becomes the drive behind his unceasing search for redemption.

The gravity of the codes of conduct is best exposed in Brierly's episode. Counter to the lieutenant who recognises the cowardice that exists in all people, Captain Brierly, one of the judges who sit on Jim's trial, exhibits difficulty in embracing human weakness. Praised as a man who "never in his life made a mistake, never had an accident, never a mishap, never a check in his steady rise", Brierly is "one of those lucky fellows who know nothing of indecision, much less of self-mistrust" (Conrad, 35). Having saved lives at sea, rescued ships in distress, and been given a pair of binoculars from some foreign Government as a token of recognition for his services, Brierly embodies an ideal seaman who Jim, in his naivete, would have wanted to emulate. Widely respected and admired for his integrity and talent, in the eyes of others, Brierly is deemed to be impeccable. Brierly's heroic achievement certifies him as the "right man" to try Jim's misconduct.

Similar to the French lieutenant, Brierly's dedication to the ethical code of conduct is at the heart of his criticism of Jim and, as expected, leads him to declare Jim guilty of immorality.

This is disgrace. We've got all kinds amongst us – some anointed scoundrels in the lot; but hang it, we must preserve professional decency or we become no better than so many thinkers going about loose. We are trusted ... We aren't an organised body of men, and the only thing that holds us together is just the name for that kind of decency (Conrad, 42)

Brierly's remark echoes Jim's credo that "in our own hearts we trust for our salvation in the men that surrounded us, in the sights that fill our eyes, in the sounds that fill our ears, and in the air that fills our lungs" (Conrad, 14).

Captain Brierly commits suicide soon after Jim's hearing by jumping from his ship into the sea – "He jumped overboard at sea barely a week after the end of the inquiry ... as though on that exact spot in the midst of waters he had suddenly perceived the gates of the other world flung open wide for his reception" (Conrad, 36) – a symbolic repetition of Jim's original leap from the *Patna*. Although beautifully delivered, the episode of Brierly's suicide is suffused with mystery. Deprived of any clear hints that helps to explain Brierly's dramatic act of self-destruction, we are forced to rely totally on Marlow's reflection of him, from which a series of descriptive details emerge, as possible clues to the nature of his being. As claimed by Marlow, who catches a glimpse of the "real" Brierly "a few days before he committed his reality and his sham together to the keeping of the sea" (Conrad, 42), under the surface of Brierly's seemingly self-contained existence inhabits a confounded soul:

The verdict must have been of unmitigated guilt, and [Brierly] took the secret of the evidence with him in that leap into the sea. If I understand anything of men, the matter was no doubt of the gravest import, one of those trifles that awaken ideas – start into life some thought with which a man unused to such a companionship finds it impossible to live ... (Conrad, 36).

In fact, Jim's trial presents Brierly with the seaman's worst nightmare. In trying Jim, Brierly is compelled to recognise the intrinsic fallibility that inheres in everyone, even those with most indestructible reputation and talent. Realisation as such leads Brierly to ponder his own shortcoming and probable failure in the future, thoughts that eventually push him to take his own life. The very success of Brierly's adherence to the code of conduct has made him desperate to hang on to his stature. Consequently, while playing God in the trial of Jim's misconduct, Brierly is "probably holding silent inquiry into his own case" (Conrad, 36). The mere thought of not being able to live up to his revered record condemns Brierly to incessant self-doubt, which ultimately leads to his suicide. Jacouse Berthoud is right in suggesting that "whereas Jim is undone by the accomplished fact, Brierly is indeed destroyed by its mere prospect" (75). Realising his possible fallibility, like a true perfectionist, Brierly resorts to the extreme action to keep his reputation intact. Indeed, Brierly's suicide is a poignant testimony to what Sartre proclaims in *No Exit* that "Hell is – other people". No matter if it is the other that we witness first hand, that we hear from folklore, or that we dread becoming.

Captain Brierly is not the only character in the novel who takes the *Patna* incident to heart. Like Captain Brierly, the *Patna* incident also bring a huge impact on Marlow. In fact, in observing Jim's

futile effort to pursue romantic heroism, Marlow comes to testify to the “destructive element immerse” that in all human being.

Marlow’s interests in Jim’s fate grow when he is apparently bewildered as well as intrigued by his first impression of Jim: prior to the beginning of the official inquiry, he expected to see a man “overwhelmed, confounded, pierced through and through” (Conrad, 26); instead, he saw Jim standing “clean-limbed, clean-faced, firm on his feet, as promising a boy as the sun ever shone on” (Conrad, 25). Recollecting his first view of Jim, Marlow confesses, “I watched the youngster there. I like his appearance; I knew his appearance; he came from the right place; he was one of us” (Conrad, 27). Described Jim as “one of us”, Marlow’s word of solidarity confirms Jim’s membership of the class of mariners, whom Marlow would “have trusted the deck to, on the strength of a single glance, and gone to sleep with both eyes” (Conrad, 28):

[Jim] was a youngster of the sort you like to see about you; of the sort you like to imagine yourself to have been; of the sort whose appearance claims the fellowship of these illusions you had thought gone out, extinct, cold, and which, as if rekindled at the approach of another flame, give a flutter deep, deep down somewhere, give a flutter of light ... of heat!” (Conrad, 78)

While this seemingly impeccable appearance of Jim’s confirms his fellowship in a society that is governed by ethical expectations, it also throws Marlow into a state of confusion: “[L]ooking at [Jim], knowing all he knew and a little more too, I was as angry as though I had detected him trying to get something out of me by false pretences. He had no business to look so sound. I thought to myself – well, if this sort can go wrong like that ...” (Conrad, 25). What could have led such a respectable figure to commit the horrendous betrayal? Because

He stood there for all the parentage of his kind, for men and women by no means clever or amusing, but whose very existence is based upon honest faith, and upon the instinct of courage ... I mean just that inborn ability to look temptations straight in the face – a readiness unintellectual enough, goodness knows, but without pose – an unthinking and blessed stiffness before the outward and inward terrors, before the might of nature, and the seductive corruption of men – backed by a faith invulnerable to the strength of facts, to the contagion of example, to the solicitation of ideas (Conrad, 27).

But Jim’s disgrace proves that something disturbing lies unseen and undetected: although Jim looks “as genuine as a new sovereign”, his failure indicates that there could be “some infernal alloy in his metal”. Indeed, whilst accepting Jim as “one of us”, Marlow’s frequent use of those phrase indicates his ambivalence and anxiety towards Jim, for Jim reminds Marlow of all the youngsters whom he has helped to train in his years at sea, but Jim also clearly reminds Marlow of himself (Mindrum, 172). However, the catch for such an identification is all too clear: if one of us can fall from grace in such a spectacular fashion, if all the apparent steeliness can evaporate under pressure, the how would we ourselves react in similar circumstances?

Trusting Jim for the unproven capacity as a standard bearer, it thus becomes vital for Marlow to find an excuse for Jim’s waywardness. If a reason can be found and an excuse can be made, then not only the standard of conduct can be restored, but Marlow’s confidence in the moral code can

also remain undefiled. But if no excuse can be established, then Marlow, and by extension, the observing public, will be forced to admit that there is some sort of moral weakness in our very nature as human beings – some “infernal alloy” – that may destroy *all of us*. After his brief encounter with the French lieutenant, and accepting his criticism on Jim as a definitive “professional opinion” (89), Marlow is made to admit that, despite his apparent heroic appeal, Jim is simply flawed. Jim may deserve our admiration for his tenacity, and our pity for his miserable predicament; but that in no way excuses his leap into cowardice. The disappointment Marlow feels overtly reflects in his response to the French officer’s criticism on Jim. Responding to it he says “[H]ang the fellow [the French officer]”, for he “had pricked the bubble” (Conrad, 90).

Marlow is drawn to Jim by the idealism he embraces, but he cannot be blind to the fact that, as “one of us”, Jim has an indelible stain to his name. Jim’s transgression indicates the fallibility of mankind, and in particular, he blemishes the reputation of the class of mariners Marlow himself identifies with. Indeed, the brotherhood Marlow generously offers to Jim represents his compassion to a fallen man. Seeing beyond the apparently clear-cut boundary of “the degenerated them” and the “virtuous us”, in Jim’s defence, Marlow bravely embraces the vulnerability of mankind.

CONCLUSION

Fragile morality is one of the themes debated constantly in literature. In *Lord Jim*, the fragile morality is examined through the inquiries various characters conduct, not just into the incident, but also into their inner self. Marlow’s inquiry into Jim, into himself, and his own cultural ideal suggests that human difference is possible, and therefore there is reason to believe some will do good when others succumb to temptation to do evil. The inquiry conducted by Brierly reveals that our moral idealism, our heroic accounts of human character, may be as paper-thin. Chester’s inquiry pricks the bubble that the beliefs we confidently offer in the light of day, in public spaces, are as false and thereof vulnerable to fact. In *Lord Jim*, the public trial is designed for Conrad to preach the values of codes of conduct; however, the imposed code of conduct remains flimsy after the public inquiry. Perhaps we are simply all too human.

REFERENCES

- Berthoud, J. (1978). *Joseph Conrad: The major phase*. Cambridge University Press.
- Conrad, J. (1968). *Lord Jim: An authoritative text, backgrounds & sources essays in criticism*. Norton.
- Mindrum, C. (1994). “*A kind of light: Joseph Conrad, ethics, literature*” (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis). The University of Chicago.
- Murfin, R. (1992). *Lord Jim: After the truth*. Twayne Publishers.
- Roussel, R. (1971). *The metaphysics of darkness: A study in the unity and development of Conrad’s fiction*. The Johns Hopkins Press.
- Satre, J. (1989). *No exit and three other plays*. Vintage International.