

“TWIXT LAND AND SEA” IN CONRAD’S *YOUTH*: A NARRATIVE AND TWO OTHER STORIES

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Abstract: The article aims at discussing the interdependence of the marine and the land spaces in Conrad’s works. Although they serve the same purpose—they constitute the background, and set the scene for Conrad’s tales, the marine space works quite frequently as a catalyst for human actions. The *Youth: A Narrative and Two Other Stories* volume is analysed in order to present the image of land and sea as created by the writer. Moreover, the voyage, the element joining the tales, will be considered from the perspective suggested by Juliet McLauchlan in her inspiring article *Conrad’s ‘Three Ages of Man’: The ‘Youth’ Volume*.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, *Youth*, *Heart of Darkness*, *The End of the Tether*, sea space, land space

A discussion of the interdependence of the marine and the land spaces in Conrad’s *Youth: A Narrative and Two Other Stories* is impossible without mentioning “that gentleman” who appeared for the first time in Conrad’s life and letters in the title story of the volume, namely Charles Marlow (or, “at least [the frame narrator] think[s] that is how he spelt his name”¹), and without considering the relations between Conrad-the author, and his narrator-protagonist. For it is Marlow who narrates two stories of the volume, and it is he who guides the reader through both sea and land as the creator and the protagonist of the narrative space. According to Conrad himself:

The origins of that gentleman [...] have been the subject of some literary speculation [...] but apart from that he was supposed to be all sorts of things: a clever screen, a mere device, a “personator,” a familiar spirit, a whispering “daemon.” [...] That is not so. [...] He haunts my hours of solitude [...] but as we part at the end of a tale I am never sure that it may not be for the last time. Yet I don’t think that either of us would care much to survive the other. [...] Of all my people he’s the one that has never been a vexation to my spirit. A most discreet, understanding man [...].²

¹ J. Conrad, *Youth: A Narrative and Two Other Stories* [in:] “*Heart of Darkness*” and *Other Stories*, ed. G. M. Moore, Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1999, p. 3.

² J. Conrad, “Author’s Note to *Youth: A Narrative...*” [in:] *Conrad’s Prefaces to His Works*, ed. E. Garnett, a biographical note on his father by D. Garnett, London: J. M. Dent, 1937, pp. 71-72.

Conrad was right as to the critics' speculations concerning Marlow's role in his fiction: "[t]he best known of Conrad's storytellers" has been seen "as Conrad's autobiographical alter ego, since his narratives are based on Conrad's own experience."³ Keith Carabine claims that "Conrad employs Marlow as a persona in order to distance himself from the actions and facts of his life and to observe, shape and interpret the 'bit of life' surveyed: and he enables Conrad himself of a flexible conversational voice that combines the 'intimately felt' and the lyric intensity of poetry."⁴ Zdzisław Najder describes Marlow as an Englishman, "the embodiment of all that Conrad would wish to be if he were to become completely anglicized."⁵ Belonging to English society and culture, Marlow likewise enables Conrad to enter the "circle of Englishness." Najder also claims that "Marlow the story-teller is at the same time a model image of the implicit recipient of the works of fiction in which he is a protagonist."⁶ While discussing "Conrad, English and Englishness," Allan Simmons, who analyses Marlow's figure in detail, states that "Marlow is English and so designed to present an English perspective,"⁷ and "[w]hatever else Marlow contributes, he brings an Englishman's perspective to bear on Conrad's colonial fiction."⁸ However, as Simmons notices, John Galsworthy perceives Marlow differently: "'though English in name', is not so in nature."⁹

Simmons points out that we—readers—do not know much about Marlow, for "we are given only incidental details" about him. We do not know his background, or education: "In the absence of answers [...] one is tempted to argue that Marlow is defined by an absence. [...] It would seem that, in Conrad's view, it is not the externals—accent, social class, comportment, even a shared sense of history—but rather a commitment to tradition that counts." According to this British Conradian, Marlow is "less a character than a style."¹⁰ In my opinion this is the most accurate description of Marlow's role in Conrad's life and letters, as well as the *Youth: A Narrative and Two Other Stories* volume. For Conrad desperately needed a style, an English style at the time.

In 1885 Conrad wrote: "When speaking, writing or thinking in English the word Home always means for me the hospitable shores of Great Britain."¹¹ However, he did not, strictly speaking, become an Englishman. In a letter to Kazimierz Waliszewski,

³ O. Knowles, G. M. Moore, *The Oxford Readers Companion to Conrad*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000, pp. 219-221.

⁴ K. Carabine, Introduction [in:] J. Conrad, *Selected Short Stories*, Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1997, p. xiii.

⁵ Z. Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Life*, transl. H. Najder, Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2007, p. 267.

⁶ Z. Najder, "For Whom Did Conrad Write?," *Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)* 2007, vol. III, p. 12.

⁷ A. H. Simmons, "The Art of Englishness: Identity and Representation in Conrad's Early Career," *The Conradian* 2004, vol. 29(1), p. 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ J. Conrad to S. Kliszczewski, 13 Oct. 1885 [in:] *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 1, eds. F. R. Karl, L. Davies, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983, p. 112.

the writer says: “Both at sea and on land my point of view is English, from which the conclusion should not be drawn that I have become an Englishman. That is not the case. Homo duplex has in my case more than one meaning.”¹² For Conrad was “both an outsider and an insider.”¹³

As Simmons notices, “the years from 1897 to 1902 constitute [Conrad’s] ‘English period,’ when his focus becomes [...] England.”¹⁴ Almost the same years represent the writer’s Blackwood period as all three stories *Youth*, *Heart of Darkness* and *The End of the Tether* were published in the *Maga*. Najder thus answers the question about the identity of its readers:

The subscribers were mostly male Britishers, dispersed all over the world; the majority of copies was distributed in the colonies and dominions. Certainly, Conrad saw copies of the *Maga* in the hotels of Singapore and officers’ messes in Australia. One can describe those readers as the colonial intelligentsia. Or, using a socio-cultural term, as gentlemen. Hippolyte Taine writes about them that they are financially independent, have a decent education in the humanities and good manners, care about their honour, possess a knowledge of the world acquired while travelling, and adopt the attitude of responsibility for others; by the same token they regard themselves as natural members of the ruling class.¹⁵

Writing for the English reader, Conrad must have been perceived as an English writer—“one of us,”—rather than “that bloody amazing foreigner.”¹⁶ He had to justify his writing in English, to find a perspective for his storytelling to this kind of audience, and it was Marlow, who, to use Najder’s words, helped the writer to create „a splendid piece of literary mythology.”¹⁷ Marlow became his alibi. In both stories in the volume, Conrad remains “a figure behind a veil,”¹⁸ ‘hiding’ as if behind his narrator. Thus Marlow tells stories which could be identified as stories from Conrad’s real life. Even if in his “Author’s Note” the writer admits that he himself is a foreigner, the persona who tells the stories is an Englishman. With some facts from Conrad’s real life identifiable as those experienced by Marlow, Conrad himself may thereby be perceived as “more” English.

In “Author’s Note” Conrad says: “It lies on me to confess at last, and this is a good place for it as another, that I have been all “my life—all my two lives—the spoiled adopted child of Great Britain and even of the Empire; for it was Australia that gave me my first command.”¹⁹ At the same time he thus describes the volume:

¹² J. Conrad to K. Waliszewski, 5 Dec. 1903 [in:] *Conrad’s Polish Background: Letters to and from Polish Friends*, ed. Z. Najder, transl. H. Carroll-Najder, London: Oxford UP, 1964, p. 240.

¹³ A. H. Simmons, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁵ Z. Najder, “For Whom Did Conrad Write?”, p. 12.

¹⁶ J. Conrad to Edward Garnett, 4 Oct. 1907 [in:] *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 3, eds. F. R. Karl, L. Davies, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988, p. 488.

¹⁷ Z. Najder, *Conrad in Perspective: Essays on Art and Fidelity*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997, p. 104.

¹⁸ J. Conrad, “A Familiar Preface” [in:] *A Personal Record*, eds. Z. Najder, J. H. Stape, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008, p. 12.

¹⁹ J. Conrad, “Author’s Note to *Youth: A Narrative...*,” p. 72.

Youth is a feat of memory. It is a record of experience, too; but that experience, in its facts, in its inwardness and in its outward colouring, begins and ends in myself. *Heart of Darkness* is experience, too; but it is experience pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts [...]. This story [...] I brought out from the centre of Africa, where, really, I had no sort of business. More ambitious in its scope and longer in telling, *Heart of Darkness* is quite as authentic in fundamentals as *Youth*.²⁰

This is how *Youth* begins: “This could have occurred nowhere but in England, where man and sea interpenetrate, so to speak—the sea entering into the life of most men, and the men knowing something or everything about the sea, in the way of amusement, of travel, or of bread-winning.”²¹ Berthoud claims that “by the end of the nineteenth century the sea had become a national obsession,”²² and Simmons rightly suggests that “by reinforcing and celebrating England’s maritime association, Conrad certainly contributes to the tradition of the sea as a defining national myth. More than this, Conrad links it to his own personal myth of self-definition when, at the close of *A Personal Record*”²³ he writes about his arrival upon the English coast and becoming an English seaman, about his choosing the English language as a medium of literary expression as well as about his British citizenship as matters of choice, on the one hand, but, on the other hand, presents all those choices as his destiny.

Thus in *A Personal Record* Conrad-the narrator is absolutely convinced that his choice was the only one he could have made: “I had thought to myself that if I was to be a seaman, then I would be a British seaman and no other. It was a matter of deliberate choice.”²⁴ Continuing in the same vein, Conrad elaborates:

A few strokes brought us alongside, and it was then that, for the very first time in my life, I heard myself addressed in English—the speech of my secret choice, of my future, of long friendships, of the deepest affections, of hours of toil and hours of ease, and of solitary hours, too, of books read, of thoughts pursued, of remembered emotions—of my very dreams!²⁵

In 1918 Conrad repeats his conviction about English as the only language in which he could write, stressing the correctness of his original choice. In a letter to Hugh Walpole, he writes: “You may take it from me that if I had not known English I wouldn’t have written a line for print in my life [...] there was never any alternative offered or even dreamed of.”²⁶

Thus Conrad employs Marlow not only to ennoble the seafarer profession but also to express his own devotion to the adopted country, for Empire and Sea are synony-

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

²¹ J. Conrad, *Youth: A Narrative...*, p. 3.

²² J. Berthoud, “Introduction: Conrad and the Sea” [in:] J. Conrad, *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984, p. viii. Cited in A. H. Simmons, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

²³ A. H. Simmons, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

²⁴ J. Conrad, *A Personal Record*, eds. Z. Najder, J. H. Stape, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008, p. 106.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

²⁶ J. Conrad to Hugh Walpole, 7 June 1918 [in:] *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 6, eds. L. Davies, F. R. Karl, O. Knowles, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002, pp. 227-228.

mous.²⁷ As stated further by Simmons, in this way Conrad „contributes to the tradition of the sea as a defining national myth”²⁸ (i.e., British), as well as, indeed, a personal one. In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow “had been no more [...] than a voice”²⁹; Conrad, one of the greatest marine authors, “embarrassed by the quality of his spoken English,”³⁰ made Marlow tell his stories. And, despite lack of a clearly defined background, Marlow not only inspired confidence in his listeners in *Youth* and *Heart of Darkness*, but also in the *Maga* readers, for he was introduced by the frame narrator as “one of us”:

We were sitting round mahogany table that reflected the bottle, the claret-glasses, and our faces as we leaned on our elbows. There was a director of companies, an accountant and a lawyer, Marlow, and myself. [...] We all began life in the merchant service. Between the five of us there was the strong bond of the sea, and also the fellowship of the craft, which no amount of enthusiasm for yachting, cruising, and so on can give, since one is only the amusement of life and the other is life itself.³¹

And in *Heart of Darkness*:

He was the only man of us who still “followed the sea.” The worst that could be said of him was that he did not represent his class. He was a seaman, but he was a wanderer, too, while most seamen lead, if one may so express it, a sedentary life. Their minds are of the stay-at-home order, and their home is always with them—the ship; and so is their country—the sea. One ship is very much like another, and the sea is always the same. In the immutability of their surroundings the foreign shores, the foreign faces, the changing immensity of life, glide past, veiled not by a sense of mystery but by a slightly disdainful ignorance; for there is nothing mysterious to a seaman unless it be the sea itself, which is the mistress of his existence and as inscrutable as Destiny.³²

As narrator and protagonist, Marlow presents the image of land and sea as created by the writer. Following Juliet McLauchlan’s inspiring text *Conrad’s Three Ages of Man*, I would like to have a look at the image of land and sea in the *Youth: A Narrative and Two Other Stories* volume because each of its stories presents Conrad’s image of both from the perspective of one of the “three ages of man,” as Conrad wrote to F. N. Doubleday: “Take the volume of *Youth*, which in its component parts presents the three ages of man [...]. I can’t somehow imagine any of those stories taken out of it [...].”³³

Despite Conrad’s prefatory words that “[t]he three stories in this volume lay no claim to unity of artistic purpose” and that— “[t]he only bond between them is that of

²⁷ A. H. Simmons, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ J. Conrad, “Heart of Darkness” [in:] *Heart of Darkness with The Congo Diary*, ed. R. Hampson, London: Penguin Books, 1995, p. 50.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³¹ J. Conrad, *Youth: A Narrative...*, p. 3.

³² J. Conrad, “Heart of Darkness,” p. 18.

³³ J. Conrad to F. N. Doubleday, 7 Feb. 1924 [in:] *Joseph Conrad: Life & Letters*, vol. 2, ed. G. J. Jean-Aubry, London: Heinemann, 1927, p. 338.

the time in which they were written,”³⁴ I would like to treat the volume as a whole because all three stories are connected by the motifs of voyage and darkness. In *Youth* and *Heart of Darkness* Marlow tells about his past experiences at sea: in the former his voyage is “the endeavour, the test, the trial of life,”³⁵ while in the latter it is „a renewed encounter with the wilderness.”³⁶ In both, Marlow-the narrator describes his younger self encountering darkness. In *Youth* darkness is merely a physical phenomenon, and it is kept away from Marlow-the protagonist by virtue of his youth. However, in each story darkness becomes more and more powerful and spectral, ceasing to be merely physical. In *Heart of Darkness* it almost devours Marlow, who manages to escape, if only physically so, for he is being pursued by its spectre probably to the end of his life. In the case of *The End of the Tether*, with Marlow’s absence from the story and nobody to guide the reader, darkness is all—pervasive: “It is in every sense a voyage into darkness,”³⁷ especially that for the main protagonist it is his last voyage.

McLauchlan points to Richard Curle’s opinion about the epigraph to the volume as one that enables the reader to understand Conrad’s message in the book:

Allowing for his devotion to artistic integrity, it was human beings who fascinated him—did he not give as motto of *Youth* these words from Grimm’s *Fairy Tales*, “But the dwarf answered: No, something human is dearer to me than the wealth of all the world”—and almost every word he wrote about any of his characters had a bearing on its interpretation and development.³⁸

Human beings, their choices and decisions were Conrad’s, and at the same time, Marlow’s main fascination. Conrad needs the marine and the land spaces to portray people, to observe their life on land and sea. The marine and the land spaces in Conrad’s stories serve as the background, the scene for Marlow’s tales; they also work quite frequently as a catalyst for human actions. Being on board a ship intensifies experience and helps one to survive all the adversities, what with the clear-cut rules and regulations to follow, the seaman’s code and dedication, and the crew’s daily duties.

Youth, as the most optimistic of all three stories, gives hope in spite of the actual situation, the motto on the ship’s stern being “Judea, London. Do or Die,” which becomes young Marlow’s motto for life:

You fellows know there are those voyages that seem ordered for the illustration of life, that might stand for a symbol of existence. You fight, work, sweat, nearly kill yourself, sometimes do kill yourself, trying to accomplish something—and you can’t. Not from any fault of yours. You simply can do nothing, neither great nor little—not a thing in the world [...].³⁹

³⁴ J. Conrad, “Author’s Note’ to *Youth: A Narrative...*,” p. 71.

³⁵ J. Conrad, *Youth: A Narrative...*, p. 9.

³⁶ J. Conrad, “Heart of Darkness,” p. 103.

³⁷ J. McLauchlan, “Conrad’s ‘Three Ages of Man’: The ‘Youth’ Volume” [in:] *Joseph Conrad: Commemorative Essays*, eds. A. Gillon, L. Krzyżanowski, New York: Astra Books, 1975, p. 192.

³⁸ R. Curle, *Joseph Conrad and His Characters*, London: Heinemann, 1957, p. 13. Cited in J. McLauchlan, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

³⁹ J. Conrad, *Youth: A Narrative...*, p. 3.

In *Youth* the sea is a space where Marlow gets to know himself, while the land only arouses his irritation, for remaining on land means not going to the East, but waiting, in limbo, in suspense: “It was horrid. Morally it was worse than pumping for life. It seemed as though we had been forgotten by the world, belonged to nobody, would get nowhere; it seemed that; as if bewitched, we would have to live for ever and ever in that inner harbour [...]”⁴⁰

The sea gives Marlow a chance to discover “how good a man [he] was”⁴¹ and how great sailors the *Judea* has. Carabine points out that *Youth* is evocative of Conrad’s voyage on board the *Palestine* in 1881. However, “Conrad changed the *Palestine*’s multinational crew to an all-British one in the story”⁴² in order to praise “‘something inborn and subtle and everlasting’ that characterises English as opposed to ‘French or German merchantman,’”⁴³ to paraphrase Marlow’s words.

Looking at his younger self, Marlow realises that the sea empowers one: “I remember my youth and the feeling that will never come back any more—the feeling that I could last for ever, outlast the sea, the earth, and all men [...]”⁴⁴ The sea is inseparably connected with Marlow’s past, with the memories of his first command, and it is the place where his dreams come true. In the long run, despite Marlow’s ironic attitude to his younger self, that proved to be an invaluable experience:

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. [...] By all that’s wonderful it is the sea! I believe the sea itself—or is it youth alone? Who can tell? [...] Wasn’t that the best time, that time when we were young at sea; young and had nothing, on the sea that gives nothing, except hard knocks and sometimes a chance to feel your strength—that only—what you all regret?⁴⁵

To paraphrase Shakespeare’s words: “all the sea’s a stage, and all the seamen merely players.” The sea does not participate in human actions, but is an indifferent element, which enables man to judge himself. The sea is neither good nor bad, it is only a space where people can prove to be either.

In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow is older and not as sentimental about his past as in *Youth*: in fact he is not sentimental at all, but rather weary, sceptical, and cynical. He believes that the only reward that life offers is “some knowledge of yourself.”⁴⁶ His story here is completely different from his previous one, which “had the additional advantage of seeming to fit into the familiar Victorian genre of boys’ adventure stories.”⁴⁷ *Heart of Darkness* takes Marlow’s tale back to the heart of Africa. He “did once turn fresh-water sailor for a bit” when he “had [...] just returned to London after

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴² K. Carabine, *op. cit.*, p. xiii.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ J. Conrad, *Youth: A Narrative...*, p. 25.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴⁶ J. Conrad, “Heart of Darkness,” p. 113.

⁴⁷ G. M. Moore, “Introduction” [in:] J. Conrad, “*Heart of Darkness*” & *Other Stories*, p. ix.

a lot of Indian Ocean, Pacific, China Seas—a regular dose of the East—six years or so, [...] hindering you fellows in your work and invading your homes, [...]. It was very fine for a time, but after a bit I did get tired of resting.”⁴⁸

Going up the river, Marlow is moving inland, leaving the sea behind. There is no space, no horizon, no fresh air, but only the claustrophobic experience, or a feeling of being lost in time and space. It is impossible for Marlow to escape from “heart of darkness,” for he is trapped by the space that surrounds him:

Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world. [...] The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. [...] The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert [...] 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. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. [...] We could not understand, because we were too far and could not remember [...].⁴⁹

Marlow says: “You can’t breathe dead hippo waking, sleeping, and eating, and at the same time keep your precarious grip on existence.”⁵⁰ However, he does keep his integrity: he stays on board the ship, and he is working hard. It is his connection with his past, his previous seaman’s life, that allow him to survive: “I don’t like work—no man does—but I like what is in the work—the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself not for others—what no other man can ever know.”⁵¹ And he explains:

...I didn’t go ashore for a howl and a dance? Well, no—I didn’t. Fine sentiments, you say? Fine sentiments, be hanged! I had no time. I had to mess about with white-lead and strips of woolen blanket helping to put bandages on those leaky steam-pipes—I tell you. I had to watch the steering, and circumvent those snags, and get the tin-pot along by hook or by crook. There was surface-truth enough in these things to save a wiser man.⁵²

The land space in the Belgian Congo is dangerous: it is spectral *terra incognita* which triggers the worst human instincts in those colonising it, making them, in Marlow’s eyes, less human than the natives:

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. [...] but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend. The mind of man

⁴⁸ J. Conrad, “Heart of Darkness,” p. 21.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 59, 62.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 63.

is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future. What was there after all? Joy, fear, sorrow, devotion, valour, rage—who can tell?—but truth—truth stripped of its cloak of time. Let the fool gape and shudder—the man knows, and can look on without a wink. But he must at least be as much of a man as these on the shore. He must meet that truth with his own true stuff—with his own inborn strength. Principles won’t do. [...].⁵³

When Marlow comes back to “the sepulchral city,”⁵⁴ darkness follows him; Kurtz’s spectre dogs him all the time. Thus, even this is not the place for Marlow to rest, for it is as much of a haunted space as is the Congo: “The vision seemed to enter the house with me—the stretcher, the phantom-bearers, the wild crowd of obedient worshippers, the gloom of the forests, the glitter of the reach between the murky bends, the beat of the drum, regular and muffled like the beating of a heart—the heart of a conquering darkness.”⁵⁵

The sea is visible only at the beginning of the story; at the end, there is only immense darkness, hence Marlow’s story lacks the glamour of “the good, strong sea, the salt, bitter sea,” as cited before. In his narrative in *Heart of Darkness* there is a longing for the “Do or die” motto of *Youth*, the seaman’s code, dedication of the crew; there is a longing for “something inborn and subtle and everlasting,” which characterises the English (as opposed to “the pilgrims”): a longing for the open sea.

The End of The Tether is the bitterest of the three stories. Where *Youth* brought hope and curiosity, *Heart of Darkness* brings horror and disillusionment, while *The End of the Tether* brings only despair, disappointment, and helplessness. The marine space, so promising and challenging in *Youth*, is only a distant memory here, for it changes into a dangerous trap (the land space is no friendlier either). Marlow—the narrator and the protagonist, who guided the reader through the first two stories of the volume, in the last one disappears altogether: as Morton D. Zabel puts it, “Marlow now withdraws.”⁵⁶ Hence the reader can feel abandoned and lost in the narrative perspectives, even though Marlow has not always been reliable. As David Mulry suggests, the reader does not know how to judge Captain Whalley and his “corrosive love, the collapse of faith, and [...] nihilistic betrayal of duty.”⁵⁷ The responses are contradictory: for some he is “a heroic figure, one of Conrad’s stalwart sea-captains tested to the limits of his endurance, noble and tragic to the end,” and for others a “hollow, posing dummy behind the [...] façade.”⁵⁸

The presentations of the marine and land spaces are similarly very misleading. Reading the tale for the first time, one is in danger of taking all the details presented

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁵⁶ M. D. Zabel, „Introduction” [in:] J. Conrad, *Youth: A Narrative and Two Other Stories*, ed. M. D. Zabel, Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1959, p. 22.

⁵⁷ D. Mulry, “Untethered: Conrad’s Narrative Modernity in ‘The End of the Tether,’” *The Conradian* 2008, vol. 33(2), p. 19.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

by the narrator for granted. It is only on the second reading that one notices the irony, sarcasm or ambiguity of the narrative.⁵⁹

For a long time after the course of the steamer *Sofala* had been altered for the land, the low swampy coast had retained its appearance of a mere smudge of darkness beyond a belt of glitter. The sunrays seemed to fall violently upon the calm sea—seemed to *shatter themselves upon an adamantine surface into sparkling dust, into a dazzling vapour of light that blinded the eye* and wearied the brain with its unsteady brightness (emphasis mine).⁶⁰

This is only the beginning of the tale, the point when the reader does not know Whalley's secret and does not realise that the picture is misleading. The fragment is not only a description of the sun shining upon the sea, and the sea water glittering in the sun, but also of the process of Captain losing sight.

Neither marine nor land space is a safe place for Captain. Whalley feels trapped and lost everywhere. Losing sight, he becomes helpless and lonely as he is convinced that he cannot reveal his secret for his daughter's sake. He is trapped into keeping up appearances, and there is no hope or future for him. The contrast between his past and present positions is also represented by the contrast between his appearance and his mood. He looks, misleadingly, as if he were still in good shape, while in fact he is ill and in despair. He is isolated in his emotions, and the space around him creates his awareness of the isolation. The environment surrounding him is indifferent to his personal tragedy, thus his loneliness is absolute. These are "typically Conradian qualifiers: the lack of personal place and a sense of exile."⁶¹ He does not fit into any place on Earth, trapped between his splendid past and miserable present, and, what's more, he realises that.

Captain Whalley was not dwarfed by the solitude of the grandly planned street. He had too fine a presence for that. He was only a lonely figure walking purposefully, with a great white beard like a pilgrim, and with a thick stick that resembled a weapon. On one side the new Courts of Justice had a low and unadorned portico of squat columns half concealed by a few old trees left in the approach. On the other the pavilion wings of the new Colonial Treasury came out to the line of the street. But Captain Whalley, who had now no ship and no home, remembered in passing that on that very site when he first came out from England there had stood a fishing village, a few mat huts erected on piles between a muddy tidal creek and a miry pathway that went writhing into a tangled wilderness without any docks or waterworks.

No ship—no home [...]

[...] and Captain Whalley, substantial and dignified, left well-nigh alone in the vast hotel by each light-hearted scurry, felt more and more like a stranded tourist with no aim in view, like a forlorn traveller without a home. In the solitude of his room he smoked thoughtfully, gazing at the two sea-chests which held all that he could call his own in this world. [...] Captain Whalley reflected that if a ship without a man was like a body without a soul, a sailor without a ship was

⁵⁹ G. M. Moore points to the necessity of a second or more readings of the tale (G. M. Moore, *op. cit.*, p. xv).

⁶⁰ J. Conrad, "The End of the Tether" [in:] *idem, Youth: A Narrative...*, p. 165.

⁶¹ A. M. Purssell, "'The End of the Tether': Conrad, Geography, and the Place of Vision," *The Conradian* 2008, vol. 33(2), p. 32.

of not much more account in this world than an aimless log adrift upon the sea. The log might be sound enough by itself, tough of fibre, and hard to destroy—but what of that! And a sudden sense of irremediable idleness weighted his feet like a great fatigue.⁶²

It does not matter whether Whalley is right or wrong, for he creates for himself a nightmare he has to live in, and for him this is the only choice, for he is possessed by the idea of helping his daughter. His present existence is only a sham; the only valuable and precious thing in his entire life is his past. Thinking about it, about the glorious life he used to live, he cannot accept the situation in which he has put himself; he knows that he is destroying his reputation and his past, that he is losing his face. Now, the bitter irony of the words uttered at the beginning of the story becomes apparent:

[...] Henry Whalley, otherwise Dare-devil Harry—Whalley of the Condor, a famous clipper in her day. [...] a man who had served famous firms, who had sailed famous ships (more than one or two of them his own); who had made famous passages, had been the pioneer of new routes and new trades; who had steered across the unsurveyed tracts of the South Seas, and had seen the sun rise on uncharted islands. Fifty years at sea, and forty out in the East (“a pretty thorough apprenticeship,” he used to remark smilingly), had made him honourably known to a generation of shipowners and merchants in all the ports from Bombay clear over to where the East merges into the West upon the coast of the two Americas. His fame remained writ, not very large but plain enough, on the Admiralty charts. [...] This was the clearest gain he had out of life. Nothing could rob him of this kind of fame. [...]

He had never lost a ship or consented to a shady transaction; and he had lasted well, outlasting in the end the conditions that had gone to the making of his name.⁶³

The famous Captain ends his life in infamy, for he has sacrificed not only the seaman’s code and the “fellowship of the sea” but everything he used to believe in:

And Captain Whalley, half-averted, in a deadened, agitated voice, muttered—
“Esteem!”

“And I may add something more,” Mr. Van Wyk, very steady-eyed, pronounced slowly.

“Hold! Enough!” Captain Whalley did not change his attitude or raise his voice. “Say no more! I can make you no return. I am too poor even for that now. Your esteem is worth having. You are not a man that would stoop to deceive the poorest sort of devil on earth, or make a ship unseaworthy every time he takes her to sea.”⁶⁴

The land and the sea in the *Youth* volume are only a background for human actions. However, land space in all three stories becomes a trap, endangering somehow the protagonists’ existence. While the marine space is a place for understanding human nature and the real meaning of life, the sea is the space where a man undergoes

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 177-178, 180, 185-186.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 167, 168.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 272-273.

“the endeavour, the test, the trial of life,” in the midst of fellowship and clear-cut rules and regulations. Although, when the fellowship is betrayed, the sea also becomes a trap and punishes a sailor who has failed it, for there are values which cannot be betrayed with impunity, as Conrad writes: “Those who read me know my conviction that the world, the temporal world, rests on a few very simple ideas; so simple that they must be as old as the hills. It rests notably, among others, on the idea of Fidelity.”⁶⁵ Whalley’s secret “can also be seen as a counterpart to Marlow’s famous ‘lie’ to the Intended”⁶⁶ for also Whalley’s lie is followed by pervasive and overwhelming darkness.

The sea in the *Youth* volume is associated with good memories and a glorious past, and it is also Conrad’s tribute to “the good old days” of his youth spent at sea. In both *Youth* and *The End of the Tether* the best memories are connected with sailing ships and the merchant service of the time. In *Youth* the frame narrator says:

The director had been a *Conway* boy, the accountant had served four years at sea, the lawyer—a fine crusted Tory, High Churchman, the best of old fellows, the soul of honour—had been chief officer in the P. & O. service in the good old days when mail-boats were square-rigged at least on two masts, and used to come down the China Sea before a fair monsoon with stun’-sails set alow and aloft.⁶⁷

While in *The End of the Tether*:

[Whalley] had formally declared himself tired of the sea the year preceding his daughter’s marriage. But [...] he found out that he could not make himself happy on shore. He was too much of a merchant sea-captain for mere yachting to satisfy him.⁶⁸

As Maya Jasanoff says: “ANYTIME Conrad sets a story on a steamship, you can be pretty sure something will go wrong.”⁶⁹ This happens in the *Youth* volume: all disasters happen on board the steamships. Thus Conrad’s sentiment for the sea is connected with the past: sailing ships and the “fellowship of the sea.” By presenting the sea in this way, Conrad expresses devotion to his adopted country (“for Empire and Sea are synonymous”) and to her glorious past. Land space opens vistas for the longing for the sea, as adulthood and old age bring a sense of nostalgia for youth—the most beautiful period of human life.

⁶⁵ J. Conrad, “A Familiar Preface” [in:] *A Personal Record*, eds. Z. Najder, J. H. Stape, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008, p. 17.

⁶⁶ See: G. M. Moore, *op. cit.*, p. xvi. However, I perceive it as a counterpart of Captain’s lie rather than Whalley’s daughter’s lie.

⁶⁷ J. Conrad, „*Youth*”: *A Narrative...*, p. 3.

⁶⁸ J. Conrad, “The End of the Tether,” p. 169.

⁶⁹ M. Jasanoff, “At sea with Joseph Conrad,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/09/opinion/sunday/at-sea-with-joseph-conrad.html>.

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