

# Whose Youth? Whose Death?: Disrupting the Unequal Encounter Between an Ascending West and a Decaying East in Joseph Conrad's "Youth"

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In his survey of the significance of the maritime tradition in Joseph Conrad's life and writing, Mark Larabee singles out three aspects that had the greatest impact on the writer: trade, fidelity, and craft. In fact, these three dimensions were interlocking in the formation of the British Merchant Service that in turn strengthened the growth of the British Empire: the commercial trade consolidated the economic cornerstone of colonial enterprise; the fidelity of seaman-ship shaped the solidarity and loyalty of the British people to dedicate themselves to her imperialist cause; the technologies of craftsmanship empowered the overseas expansion of the empire's territories. When viewed through the lens of the British maritime tradition that formed the pillar of Conrad's sea fiction, the writer's works inevitably reflect the ethnocentric perspective of an empire in the heyday of its maritime hegemony. Accordingly, it could be anticipated that the early reviews of the short sea story "Youth" would focus on glorifying imperial maritime power and its representation of British heroism with a encomium of national supremacy (Middleton 53).<sup>1</sup> Its title seemed to implicate it in the imperialist project of myth-making celebrating the youth and strength of an "empire where the sun never sets," in contrast to the aging of its colonial land that had become the "white man's burden."

Since John Howard Will's 1962 article on Conrad's "Youth," which called for more critical attention and revaluation of this "neglected masterpiece," a number of critics have followed Will's steps to explore the themes of youth and aging, as well as the techniques of symbolism and allegory perfected by Conrad in this densely-written short story. Nevertheless, with the advent of post-colonial studies in the 1980s within the context of decolonization and redistributions of global power, Conrad criticism underwent a transnational

turn that introduced the perspective of colonized peoples, re-examined textual meanings, and re-thought interpretative possibilities. Recent critics such as Tom Middleton (49) and John Peters (52–4) in their introductions to the story are both concerned with how the text undermines the theme of youth and its glorification, while intertwining youth and old age in the figure of empire. In *Conrad's Trojan Horse*, Tom Henthorne borrows Bakhtin's concept of "intentional hybridity" to analyze Conrad's "postcolonial aesthetics" as an aesthetics that seeks to criticize imperialism implicitly and insinuatingly under the guise of expressing the very same ideology through the employment of "misdirection" and "subterfuge." His reading of "Youth" presents Marlow as exerting an alternative perspective to that of the frame-narrator, whose tribute to the empire and imperialism serves as the outer cloak to disguise the former's critique of imperialist ideology as well as his awareness of its true nature. Marliena Saracino starts from the postcolonial concept of "liminality" and the poststructuralist one of "aporia" to address the border-crossing nature of Conrad's works defined as a process of "becoming" rather than of "being" as represented in "Youth." Focusing on the points of transition and undecidability in the short story, Saracino elaborates on Conrad's fascination with the "finitude of human beings" (70), which is reflected in the text's unresolved tensions between youth and aging, life and death, and times of past and present. William W. Bonney, on the other hand, re-examines Conrad's relationship with the "Oriental" from the writer's appropriation of the Oriental philosophy based on Schopenhauer's elaboration of it in *The World as Will and Idea*. From Schopenhauer's book comes Conrad's knowledge of the Hindu-Buddhist philosophy of "cosmic absence" and the "void" that helps the latter criticize the Western metaphysics of linear progress as well as its certainty of the self. Accordingly, in his reading of "Youth," Bonney points out that the central problem of the tale lies in the title-word "youth" itself which reveals its obsession with the linear temporality and its blind value judgment of "the potentially integrated continuum of human growth" (25). Borrowing the Far-Eastern philosophy assimilated by Conrad himself, Bonney turns the Western metaphysics conveyed in Conrad's works on its head while adroitly giving credit to the writer.

Assuming a vantage point from a postcolonial age, my own reading of "Youth" will start with the surface of the story, which appears to be about an encounter between the West and East in which the West, as seen in the figure of the British Empire, evokes youth, growth, and vitality, while the East, as underscored by the discourse of Orientalism, is reduced to an image of decadence, aging, and decline. However, my paper seeks to challenge this presumed hierarchy and to show how the story also challenges the power-relation

between the ascending West and the decaying East by exposing the interstices within colonial discourse itself that might empower the colonized to undermine the ethnocentric discourse of the West, condescendingly defining and arrogantly authorizing the East. This reformulation of the power-relations between the West and the East is best illustrated by Marlow's own transformed awareness as a reflective British sailor who passes beyond his Eurocentric perspective to recognize the subversive force and old wisdom of colonized peoples. In my attempt to re-read Conrad's "Youth" through the lens of postcolonial theory, my approach draws upon Edward Said's study of the colonial discourse of Orientalism, and Homi Bhabha's counter-discourse concept of mimicry. In *Orientalism*, Said gives a thoroughgoing survey and critique of colonial discourse to examine the ways that colonial power—through the employment of language and words—works, prevails, and manages colonized peoples. From the perspective of orientalism, Conrad seems to be complicit with the imperialist power of the British Empire in his representation of the West and the East in "Youth," rendering him a mouthpiece of the imperialist ideology. Nevertheless, when looked from the angle of counter-discourse theory, the story suggests that Conrad instead challenges and questions colonial power, expressing the subversive voice of silenced, colonized people. I shall also draw on Bhabha's theory of mimicry, itself informed by Hegel's dialectical model of the Master/Slave confrontation, exploring how the oppressed, silenced, and colonized Other rises to subvert colonial power from within the colonial system. Mimicry becomes a potent way to challenge the mechanism of colonial discourse, a concept we shall detect at work in Conrad's text. We shall see that "Youth" cannot be simplistically reduced to a contemporary voice of imperialist ideology endorsing the British Empire, but rather that it also carries within it the possibility of subversion and revolt on the part of the colonized Other.

That the contemporary readers of "Youth" were spontaneously and unanimously inclined "to read it as an endorsement of bellicose conservative imperialism" is not surprising, considering the context of Victorian England in its prime era of overseas colonization and empire-building (Willy 40). The passage singled out here can serve as the most ostensible banner of British imperialism and its claim to racial supremacy as embodied in the incomparable strength and distinctive spirit of its seamen:

[ . . . ] it was something in them, something inborn and subtle and everlasting. I don't say positively that the crew of a French or German merchantman wouldn't have done it, but I doubt whether it would have been done in the same way. There was a completeness in it, something solid like a principle, and masterful like an

instinct—a disclosure of something secret—of that hidden something, that gift of good or evil that makes racial difference, that shapes the fate of nations. (“Youth” 19)

We can easily detect a sense of superiority in being the inheritor of the Anglo-Saxon race, culture and tradition. The writings of the adventure fiction tradition that thrived in the historical context of nineteenth-century imperialism draw upon Manichean hierarchies of “us” and “them,” hierarchies expressing a binary encounter between Europe and the Other (White 64–5).<sup>2</sup> Many contemporary critics and readers tend to interpret Conrad’s colonial writings as following in this tradition of adventure fiction and advocating a Victorian imperialist ideology. Nevertheless, as Andrea White observes, Conrad in his works “perceived a blur rather than a sharp distinction between them and us” (White 65). Indeed, we can see this blurring in the transformed perspective of Marlow, whose own narrative, far from contributing to the dissemination of imperialist rhetoric, drastically challenges its legitimacy.

If we are entitled to treat Marlow as the “ideal ‘surrogate author’” (Watts xiii), his narrative of the encounter with the East indeed reflects Conrad’s own fascination with the Far East conveyed in fiction and non-fiction writings, ignited by late-Victorian pseudo-scientific and popular writings on the topic. We could say Conrad’s representation of the East is included in the discourses of Orientalism, which are mainly derived from “works of history, travel accounts and scientific and anthropological studies” (Stape 142, 144) contemporary with Conrad, when the British Empire is preoccupied with her expansion of colonial territories to the Far East. Nevertheless, my postcolonial reading strategy is attentive to Conrad’s criticism and examination of that colonial discourse from within the power structure itself, which is represented in both Marlow’s and the frame narrator’s transformation from a Eurocentric worldview to their recognition of the subversive abilities of the colonized East to disrupt the unequal power-relation formulated by colonial discourse.

In *Orientalism*, Said argues that the representation of the Orient in Western discourse is “always-already” based on the unequal power relations of economics, politics, and cultures. Said concisely defines the colonial discourse of Orientalism as “the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3). We can see the construction of hierarchy in the relationship between Orientalist scholarship and the Oriental world, or between the Western subject and the Oriental (non-Western) object. Orientalist scholarship, in Said’s account, can be seen

as a will to power, to “dominate, restructure, and have authority over the Orient.” With the employment of “scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description,” the West, in the name of the scholarly study of Orientalism, “not only creates but also maintains . . . a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate what is manifestly different” (Said 12). He describes how a power-relation is ever at work, how Orientalism attempts to create prejudices, political power differences, and hierarchies of values. Western power does so under the banner of so-called “scientific objectivity” or “scientific knowledge,” under the disciplines of philology, psychology and sociology, when in fact what it is spreading and expressing is only a set of power discourses that aims to otherize, “to control, manipulate, even to incorporate” the Orient. We shall detect the workings of Orientalism in Marlow’s representation of the Western/Eastern worlds, where a binary hierarchy is formed that distinguishes the great, vital, and youthful British Empire from the decaying, aging, and mysterious Oriental world of “Bankok.”

In Conrad’s sea fictions, the ship is often personified and serves as the pivot where the caprice of the sea and the complexity of human motives converge (Foult 240). In “Youth” the ship *Judea* serves as a central figure in the tale as the embodiment of the British Empire and her imperial power to penetrate into Eastern lands and seas, and to explore the East’s mysterious fecundity. The motto “Do or Die,” written on the stern of the old ship, implies the inexorable will of the British Merchant Service to expand its colonial commercial outposts. From the very beginning of the tale, both the frame-narrator and Marlow set a nationalistic and patriotic tone. For the former, England is the great country “where men and sea interpenetrate” (“Youth” 93), while for the latter, the East-bound voyage onboard *Judea* has “a touch of romance in it . . . something that appealed to my [Marlow’s] youth!” (“Youth” 95). Both narrators endow England’s overseas enterprise with a sense of glamour and recognize England’s claim to maritime supremacy. It is the young Marlow’s first voyage as a second mate to the East, and he is a vigorous “adventurer” and a passionate seafarer—the embodiment of an ascending empire in its “race” of exploration and conquest. Nor does the ill-fated voyage entirely destroy Marlow’s youthful energy and his impassioned will to explore the East and its people. On the contrary, he likens his service to the flourishing British Merchant Navy to the growth and victory of an empire in her battle to conquer the natives’ land: “As to me, I was pleased and proud as though I had helped to win a great naval battle. O! Youth!” (“Youth” 112).

While depicting his own youth and active fervor when discovering the Eastern world on behalf of the flourishing British Empire, Marlow seems to

paint a very contrasting picture of the East, one that seems to culminate in the grave. His picture seemingly begins with a positive image: the planned destination of Judea is "Bankok," as Conrad spells it, the Eastern city that betrays the mysterious appeal of the Oriental world thrilling and intriguing the young Marlow—"I loved the ship more than ever, and wanted awfully to get to Bankok. To Bankok! Magic name, blessed name . . . Remember I was twenty, and it was my first second-mate's billet, and the East was waiting for me" ("Youth" 105). This passive East awaiting Marlow connotes a mystic mistress expecting the Western conqueror to penetrate and ravage her. Although the Eastern concubine embodies a lively woman full of erotic and amorous vitality, it also represents a passive and vulnerable image, a contradiction that might indicate the possibility of the transformed image of the East from a passive object to an active agent later in Marlow's mind, after he has encountered the people of the Eastern world in person. Nevertheless, the narrative continues here to develop Marlow's Orientalist vision of the East with increasingly negative images. The East is represented as a despotic land, its "brown nations ruled by kings more cruel than Nero the Roman" ("Youth" 108), as opposed to the West, where democracy dominates. The Oriental seascape—the Indian Sea—is portrayed as a mere commercialized (if beautiful) object competed for by Western colonial forces, "sparkling like a precious stone . . . one jewel, one colossal sapphire, a single gem" ("Youth" 110) that sits on the crown of the British Empire. Most importantly, the East is evermore silent and inert as an artificial object in its decaying and decomposing status that approaches its death: "The mysterious East faced me, perfumed like a flower, silent like death, dark like a grave" ("Youth" 128). The silent and aging East is incapable of speaking for itself and defining itself, remaining a static object under the gaze of the West: "I [Marlow] had faced the silence of the East. I had heard some of its language. But when I opened my eyes again the silence was as complete as though it had never been broken" ("Youth" 130). The binary distinction between West and East in Marlow's representation of the two worlds seems to echo one of the most salient features of academic Orientalism—its comparative framework (Said 149–50). He seems to distinguish between the Occident and the Orient as "us" and "other"—the former associated with everything civilized, advanced, bright, and good, the latter denigrated as backward, unregenerate, savage, or inhuman, and pinned to a type or stereotype. Its characters carry unchangeable traits without any signs of human development. This is very different from the Western self-recognition as individuals who are capable of development, change, and progress.

On the surface, then, the tale is gilded with the glamour and rhetoric of empire-building based on an ethnocentric ideology of the distinction between

us/them. However, when viewed more carefully with the critical insights of postcolonial and narrative theory, and the historical insights of decolonization, we begin to see that the jingoistic tone of “Youth” is also undercut by its textual ironies and associations of potential resistance on the part of the native Other, as seen in Marlow’s transformed representation of the East.

In his study of the relation between the issues of colonialism and the Marlow trilogy, Allan Simmons points out the “censorious” nature of Marlow’s narrative on the subject of Empire and imperialism, as well as his “Janus-faced” perspective on England which is “now questioning, now reverent” (Simmons *Joseph Conrad* 79). Indeed, the narrative voice of Marlow, as the “autobiographical alter-ego” (Simmons, *Joseph Conrad* 77) of the writer, reflects Conrad’s attitude and engagement with the adventurous writings and figures prominent in late-Victorian England. He perceives the “disparity” between the ideal of heroic adventure and the reality of the outposts that only made the colonial enterprise a downward “degeneration” (White 2). Conrad’s “critical irony” lies in the fact that he wrote from within the tradition of “adventure fiction” on the imperial subject only to subvert that tradition and “demythologize” the conception of heroism and racial superiority underpinning the generic tradition (White 5–7). In other words, Conrad’s works “lent instability rather than authority” (White 7) to the tradition of nineteenth-century adventure fiction, which makes it possible for me to dig into the text of “Youth” to unearth its potential for undermining the myth of empire-building from within, and disrupting the hierarchical power-relation between the West and the East taken for granted by critics as well as a general audience.

Counter-discourse theory also helps understand how Conrad’s narrative illustrates the inevitable resistance against the dominant power on the part of the silenced Other, and how Marlow perceives that resistance through his changed representation of the East. Counter-discourse theory shows how Conrad’s story of an unequal encounter between the West/East necessarily turns and twists to become a hard-won struggle by the marginalized East to reclaim her agency and answer back to the West, challenging the legitimacy of mastery in the latter. The theory grows out of Hegel’s understanding of a historical dialectic between “Master and Slave,” whose reconciliation or synthesis of opposition propels the progress of history itself (Kojève 9). In this dialectical process, it is only through the Slave having “dialectically overcome” his slavery that the reconciliation of mutual recognition between Master/Slave may be achieved and historical progress accomplished (Kojève 20–1). Accordingly, the Slave’s action of dialectically “overcoming” his slavery becomes an important and necessary part of the confrontation; the fighting back on the part of the Slave to negate the Master’s dominance drives history into motion to achieve

reconciliation. Inspired by this Hegelian model of reading the colonial history of the encounter between colonizer and colonized dialectically, I employ Bhabha's concept of "mimicry" to explore the resistance by the East in "Youth" as the negation on the part of the colonized Other necessary to "dialectically overcome" his subjugated situation.<sup>3</sup>

Although the title of the story is single-minded "youth," its content is bipartite: youth and death intertwined. On the surface, the tale seems revolves around the youthful adventurer in the service of a strong empire and the aging of the eastern world awaiting to be explored and conquered by the young imperial subject. However, the story is also about the death of the empire, emblemized by the old ship *Judea* exploded and sunk at the end of the journey, as well as the old captain dead by the time of the retrospective narrative. Although the British Empire is in her prime during Marlow's service, the narrative indicates her inevitable decline, as everything is doomed to age and die. The motto "Do or die" serves also as a strong indication of the foolhardy nature of adventure and exploration, each one a "dangerous illusion" that may shatter the dream of conqueror and destroy the harmony of the conquered (White 170; Simmons, *Joseph Conrad* 83). The most remarkable symbol of the death of the empire and the passing of its youth is the spontaneous combustion burning the ship—the fire becomes "simultaneously an image of youthful vigor *and* destruction" (Simmons, *Joseph Conrad* 83). The passage depicting the burnt ship is imbued with a tone of reproachful irony and judgment: "She burned furiously; mournful and imposing like a funeral pile kindled in the night, surrounded by the sea, watched over by the stars. A magnificent death had come like a grace, like a gift, like a reward to that old ship at the end of her laborious days" ("Youth" 125). The burnt and destroyed ship is symbolic of the British Empire that sows the seeds of its own demise. Her exploitation of the colonial land as well as her penetration into the Eastern seas shall inevitably produce backlash from her own violent imposition. Andrea White's suggestion of "the possibilities for ironic readings" (178) of Marlow's eulogy of youth and its heroism is best illustrated in the passage where he self-examines his "deceitful feelings" of adventurous ideals:

the feeling that I could last forever, outlast the sea, the earth, and all men; the deceitful feeling that lures us on to joys, to perils, to love, to vain effort—to death; the triumphant conviction of strength, the heat of life in the handful of dust, the glow in the heart that with every year grows dim, grows cold, grows small, and expires—and expires, too soon, too soon—before life itself. ("Youth" 127)

The "deceitful feeling" registered by Marlow can be associated with his distrustful attitude toward the colonial watchword of "civilizing mission" that in



reality may lead to not only the death of the native Other but also the death of the colonial power itself, entailed by native resistance through the interstice of a colonial discourse that sows the seeds of its own downfall.

In the Hegelian historical model, the perfected dialectic achieving the synthesis and completing the “dialectical” revolution “presupposes the ‘negation,’ the non-accepting of the given World in its totality” (Kojève 29). Because the force of “negation” must necessarily put into play by the marginalized Other in the dialectical process to achieve reciprocal recognition between the Self/Other, let us re-examine Marlow’s representation of the East to identify its resistance or “negation” as an indispensable part of the East/West confrontation in the historical microcosm of “Youth.” The East in its mystic and exotic existence exudes an air that is “impalpable and enslaving, like a charm” (“Youth” 127)—these impalpable and inscrutable qualities signify her potential to answer back the arrogant West in the latter’s incapability to comprehend or grasp this mysterious world. The Eastern land is “so old, so mysterious, resplendent and somber, living and unchanged, full of danger and promise” (“Youth” 131), its mature wisdom and unfathomable danger has reduced the Western colonizers in the three lifeboats from conquerors to pilgrims in quest of the serenity and healing power of the East. Most of all, “[t]he East *looked at them* without a sound” (“Youth” 131; emphasis added)—the returned gaze of the East enables Marlow to perceive the subversive or revengeful force of the colonized Other, whose willed but threatening silence seems to fight off the defining gaze of the imperial subject who attempts to objectify her. Allan Simmons also emphasizes the importance of this returned gaze of the East to overturn the unequal power-relation between the West and the East: “for every Western narrative of colonial adventure, a parallel narrative exists in which it is the Westerner who is perceived as ‘Other’” (*Joseph Conrad* 85). The revengeful and resistant East is incarnated in the image of “a stealthy Nemesis” who “lies in wait, pursues, overtakes so many of the conquering race, who are proud of their wisdom, of their knowledge, of their strength” (“Youth” 131–2).

In his encounter with the Eastern sailor of the *Celestial*, Marlow is struck by the fact that “the East spoke to me, but it was in a Western voice” (“Youth” 129). This is a rather confusing passage indeed. Most of the critics interpret this voice to be that of a racist “English” captain; but in my reading, I prefer to treat him as a “Eurasian” who is bilingual or a well-trained Eastern sailor capable of international language. Otherwise, what is “East” (“the East spoke to me”) about the voice? Accordingly, in light of my “twisted” reading, this Eurasian or Eastern sailor in command of “two languages” (“Youth” 129) vividly reflects the image of Bhabha’s “mimic man,” who is the product of the colonial desire to train a “reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that

*is almost the same, but not quite*" (126). The subversive force of the colonial mimicry or the mimic man comes from the interstices of the colonial discourse itself that endows the mimicry with a possibility of mockery or parody to threaten the authority of the colonial power, where "the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double" (Bhabha 127). I have already talked about the disquieting force of the "returned gaze"/ "displacing gaze" of the colonial Other; here I shall focus on the disruptive force of mimicry that comes from the ambivalence of colonial discourse which sows the seeds of its own destruction. In its desire to formulate a colonial double of the English subject that is "almost the same, but not quite," the colonial authority encounters the difficulty of disciplining the desired type and the limitation of its own strategy—"so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace" (Bhabha 127). Here the mimic man transgresses the intended distinction between mimesis and mimicry set up by the colonial power (Bhabha 128). The former is a disciplinary and regulatory imitation as well as a prohibition imposed by the colonial authority, while the latter is the unwanted effect of parodying and mocking attained by the colonized Other. In the failure of the colonial power to set a clear-cut distinction between the white subject and its imitating Other, the mimic man emerges as the subversive force that mocks and parodies the disciplinary practices of colonial discourse. In the face of the hybrid existence of the mimicking Eastern sailor, Marlow as the colonial subject is also disquieted and bewildered by the former's fury and resentment: "A torrent of words was poured into the enigmatical, the fateful silence; outlandish, angry words, mixed with words and even whole sentences of good English, less strange but even more surprising" ("Youth" 129).

If the colonial discourse of Orientalism investigated by Said shows the way that Marlow attempts to confirm the binary structure between colonizer and colonized, the counter-discourse of Bhabha's concept of mimicry helps Marlow to recognize the blurred hierarchical distinction between Self/Other. Marlow can feel the anger and violence emerging out of the resistance of the mimic man, whose "voice swore and cursed violently; it riddled the solemn peace of the bay by a volley of abuse" ("Youth" 129). Impressed and astounded by the Eastern sailor's register of his intense emotions—"a sincerity in his fury"—Marlow is induced to experience their reciprocal humanity and even feels a sense of guilt as if "[he] had, in some way, sinned against the harmony of the universe" ("Youth" 129). Although the Eurasian/Eastern sailor uses presumably racist language and seems to be cowed by Marlow's identity as an Englishman, he is no less powerful as a subversive "mimic man." On the contrary, his simultaneous weakness and strength shows the double nature of "mimicry," which aims to produce a racial type that is "almost the same, but not quite/

white.” The racist and cowering attitude of the colonized is desired by colonial discourse, which attempts to train an imitating and subordinate creature according to the regulatory discipline of the colonizer. Nevertheless, the product of regulatory discipline turns out to be a figure with parodic force and a displacing gaze, as demonstrated by the destabilizing tendency of the fury of the Eurasian sailor and the returned gaze of the Eastern land. In regard to Marlow’s sudden appreciation of the mutual recognition between the West/East, the Self/the Other, the mimic man serves not only as an “object of colonial surveillance” but also as “the subject of the scopical drive” that looks back into the defining gaze of the colonial power (Bhabha 130).

Not only is Marlow’s Eurocentric worldview changed by virtue of his youthful experience in the Eastern sea, the frame-narrator’s jingoist attitude at the beginning of the story—“This could have occurred nowhere but in England, where men and sea interpenetrate” (“Youth” 93)—is also transformed at the end of Marlow’s retrospective narrative. The frame narrator is at once complacent and cocksure about the glory of British overseas empire embodied in the British Merchant Service. However, after the impact of Marlow’s story about the old East that is able to “look back,” the frame narrator becomes aware of the illusory and transient nature of the pride and youth of colonial enterprise: “our faces marked by toil, by deceptions, by success, by love; our weary eyes looking still, looking always, looking anxiously for something out of life, that while it is expected is already gone [ . . . ] together with the youth, with the strength, with the romance of illusions” (“Youth” 132). Thus from the interstices and ambivalence of colonial discourse itself, we can see how a counter-discourse undermines hierarchical power-relations from within the problematic colonial structure itself, which enables Marlow the colonizer to perceive the inadequacy of the Eurocentric worldview and recognize instead the anti-colonial tendency of the colonized Other based on racial equality and common humanity.

Marlow further assumes an attitude of self-examination and even self-reproach at the arrogance and self-complacency of the “conquering race,” which is more like a naive novice than a full-fledged adventurer. “This was the East of the ancient navigators, so old, so mysterious, resplendent and somber, living and unchanged, full of danger and promise” (“Youth” 131). Eventually the unequal power-relation is undermined: the East is a wise, mature, old hermit who answers back to the impetuous exploration and challenge of a foolhardy West in its youth. The resistance and returned gaze makes Marlow experience a deep “sense of dislocation” (Simmons, *Joseph Conrad* 85) which in my view destabilizes the young adventurer’s perception of empire and its ideal heroism. Together with the frame-narrator’s reflection at the end of the

tale, both seem to confirm that “something out of life, that while it is expected is already gone—has passed unseen . . . together with the youth, with the strength, with the romance of illusions” (“Youth” 132). In this awareness of the illusory nature of the romantic ideal as well as the glory and ascendancy of the British Empire, the reader is reminded of the passing of Western imperial power in the long course of human history. Conrad’s adventure tale in this regard has become a potent prophecy of the downfall of Western imperialism, and the movement of Eastern decolonization after WWII that disrupts the binary hierarchy between an ascending West and a decaying East once imprinted upon the minds of the contemporary readers of this tale. In his study of Conrad’s colonial works in relation to the facts of colonial history, Christopher GoGwilt points out the works are imbued with the “disruptive effects of decolonization itself” that bring forth a marginalized perspective to re-examine the historical view of the center (138). Indeed, a great number of Conrad’s thematic concerns side with the point of view of the victims, making his works express an alternative to the mainstream Eurocentric and ethnocentric values of his times.

“Youth” is based on Conrad’s real-life experience as a second mate onboard the *Palestine* bound for an Eastern seaport between 1881 and 1883, a voyage long-delayed by bad weather and the poor condition of the old ship as truthfully described in the tale (Aubry 92–9). Although Jean Aubry argues the short tale faithfully records Conrad’s aspiration and passion in his days of youth to explore exotic lands (99), the message conveyed in the tale cannot be so simplistic and one-sided both from our postcolonial vantage point and taking into account the complexity of the writer’s own background. As an exilic Pole become a British subject, Conrad with his two careers as an officer in the British Merchant Navy and a writer on imperialist subjects seemed to be “wedded . . . to the life of his adopted nation” (Simmons, “Nationalism and Empire” 188). Nevertheless, Conrad’s Polish descent and his mother culture’s partition by the three Empires—Russia, Austria, and Prussia—makes him feel a life-long bitterness over imperialism. We could identify Conrad’s “janiformity” and “duplexity” of life and work in his complex engagements with Polish nationalism and British imperial expansion (Simmons, “Nationalism and Empire” 187). On the one hand, Conrad’s service in the British Merchant Navy helped further the consolidation of imperial power; on the other hand, he never hides his hostility to empire and imperial power that thwarted the nation-state’s quest for liberty and independence. The biographical study of Conrad sheds new light on our re-reading of “Youth” as “a tale of disillusionment” that “poignantly [contrasts] European colonial history with a vibrant world of local nationalism” (Simmons, “Nationalism and Empire” 191). J.H. Stape trenchantly points out the fact that

the tinges of Orientalism in Conrad's works only expose the inadequacy as well as insufficiency of Western readers' knowledge about the Other culture rather than strengthening a self-complacent worldview (145). Perhaps only with insights from both postcolonial discourse and Conrad's own vision of "irreconcilable antagonisms" in his life and work might we come to see the nuances and subtleties of cultural encounter beyond the expected rigid binary hierarchy of colonial fiction, as the short piece "Youth" has taught us.

## NOTES

1. See Norman Sherry's *Conrad: the Critical Heritage* (1973): Routledge & Kegan Paul, 129-42. For example, in *Academy and Literature* (1902) Edward Garnett acclaimed "Youth" as a "modern English epic of the Sea" (131). In the review of *Manchester Guardian* (1902), "Youth" is recognized as a tale of "great adventure of the spirit" which is capable to "enlarge our conceptions of heroism" (134, 35). *Athenaeum* (1902) said "Youth" as an epic "forms a valuable record, as well as a beautiful and vivid picture" (139).

2. White's use of the concept of "Manichean allegory" is based on Abdul JanMohamed's elaboration of it as a prominent and pervasive rhetorical technique in colonialist literature that sets up a binary hierarchy between the colonizer and colonized as good/evil, superior/inferior, civilization/savagery, scientific/ superstitious, etc. Manichean nature is in fact the main characteristic of Orientalism investigated by Said. See Abdul R. JanMohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: the Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature." *Critical Inquiry* (1985): 59-87.

3. In his essay on Conrad's relevance to the colonial history in the contexts of past, present and future, Christopher GoGwilt uses Bhabha's concept of "hybridity" to clarify the "in-betweenness" of Conrad's English situated on the border between the "language of anticolonial nationalism" and the colonial language of "lingua franca," which may assume a subversive force from the peripheral status outside the center of English or Dutch used by colonial authority (152-8). GoGwilt's appropriation of Bhabha's concept is different from mine, but we achieve the same end of teasing out the possibility of subverting the dominant force by the colonized Other in Conrad's texts.

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