

JOSEPH CONRAD'S LORD JIM: SYMBOLIC INTERPRETATION

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ABSTRACT

The present paper is a modest attempt to offer a symbolic interpretation of Lord Jim by Joseph Conrad. Conrad has made use of symbols but he is a non-conformist as far as his use of symbols is concerned. Symbols are not only connotative but also evocative and emotive. He makes free use of symbols in Lord Jim. Conrad has made use of symbolic characters, actions and objects. The novel throws light on man's weakness and frailty as well as his recuperative and regenerative powers and thus reflects both the worst and the best in the complexities of human nature.

Keywords: *symbol, recuperative, regenerative powers, associationism, symbolism*

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The word symbol is derived from the Greek verb “Sumballein” meaning ‘to put together’. The Greek word ‘Sumbolon’ means ‘mark’, ‘token’ or ‘sign’. Symbol is “anything that stands for or represents something else beyond it, usually an idea conventionally associated with it” (Baldick 218). A symbol is anything used to mean more than its simple definition. Something that stands for something else. It may even stand for more than one thing and mean different things to different people. The depiction of symbols enables readers to view the reality of the real world. Symbols are not merely connotative but also evocative and emotive. Symbols make the language of literature rich and expressive. A symbol is a person, an object or an event that suggests more than its literal meaning. A ring is used in the wedding more than just piece of jewellery because it suggests the unity and intimacy of a closed circle. The bride’s gown may be white because we associate innocence and purity with the white colour. The national flag means the sovereign authority rather than a piece of cloth. The ring, the gown and the flag are symbolic because these expressions convey meanings that go beyond their specific qualities. Conventional symbols are widely recognized. The cross, the star are Christian symbols, white the crescent symbolizes Islam Winter/Spring, Black/Green/The rising/setting Sun suggest death and life.

A literary symbol can be a setting, character, action, object, name or anything else that maintains its literal significance while suggesting other meaning. Symbols are suggestive rather than definitive. A rose in Faulkner’s story, A Rose for Emily and the walls in Bartley, the Scrivener, and the story by Melville are illustrations of the use of symbols in the works of literature. Modern writers use symbols in order to convey complex mental states. Their interests are psychological and symbols increase the expressiveness of their work. Generally there is uniformity in the use of symbols. Certain objects and colours represent certain things. For example white is a symbol of purity. But Conrad is a non-conformist as far as his symbols are concerned. The symbols that he has used depart from the accepted usage. He makes free use of symbols in Lord Jim. The significance of various symbolic actions, characters and objects used by Conrad in Lord Jims is quite significant and highly meaningful.

Lord Jim is the central character in this novel. The whole novel moves around him. He is a romantic, good and ordinary young man. In a moment of weakness he deserts his ship and its passengers. This act of cowardice cuts him off from his social group. He is man of fine

conscience and exquisite sensibility. He is very much conscious of his cowardice therefore suffers from an acute sense of guilt. Afterwards he is haunted by a sense of guilt and so he tries hard to atone for it. Thus this novel is a deep study of man's guilty mind. The novelist has embedded deeper meanings of the guilt and its effect on the personality and the temperament of Lord Jim through symbolism.

Conrad has used symbolic characters in this novel. The central character Lord Jim is the most symbolic figure in the novel. He symbolizes romantic lofty idealist and a dreamer in pursuit of unattainable ideals. He is a symbol of our best illusions that guide our conduct. He has his own illusions and his conduct is determined by his romantic illusion. He thinks himself in his imagination a hero superior to others and capable of great achievements. But all this is a delusion, in reality he is no better than others. When an opportunity comes, he acts in a cowardly manner like the white officers of the Patna and disgraces and dishonours himself. He also symbolizes weaknesses, irrational instincts and impulses of everyman. Marlow the narrator repeatedly refers to Jim as "one of us" (Conrad 49). Weakness is common to all men. Jim's problem is everyone's problem. No man knows how he might behave under circumstances such as confronted by Jim on the ship Patna. What happened to Lord Jim, might have happened to anyone. Again one of Jim's sayings proves this point. "Nothing can touch me" (174). This is improper egoism but it is not an uncommon feeling of every man. Everyone feels the same as Jim feels – "Nothing can touch me".

There are some good characters like Marlow, Stein, Jim's first employer, Dain Waris and Jewel, who symbolize the forces that redeem the outcast like Lord Jim. Marlow symbolizes the basic values of life, practical idealism and the penetrating mind which judges, interprets and illuminates. He appreciates Jim's frank nature, his youthful appearance and seriousness and helps him as an intimate friend. Stein is a fine blending of idealism, reflection and contemplation and practical ability. He suggests a practical plan to Jim and appoints him in place of Cornelius. Denver, Dain Waris and Jewel symbolize goodness and brings out the love and trust which are the salvation of the outcast. All these characters are put in a separate group because of their positive and sympathetic outlook towards Jim.

There are some characters like the Patna Crew, the Patna Skipper, Chester, Robinson, Tungku Allang, Kassim, Sherif Ali, Cornelius and Brown who symbolize evil. Among them Chester, Cornelius and Brown symbolize the evil that is inherent in human nature as well as the evil within Jim himself.

The novelist has presented the two fat men the Patna skipper and Doramin in the novel. Marlow compares the Patna skipper with a baby elephant and Doramin with a cunning old elephant. The Patna skipper symbolizes evil in Jim's heart and the cowardice that leads him to abandon eight hundred helpless pilgrims. His guilt has enlarged into

tremendous size like Doramin. Doramin and the Patna Skipper symbolize Jim's guilt. Through these symbols Conrad suggests that a baby elephant has become a cunning old elephant. It means that Jim's guilt is gigantic, a colossus of stone. It will sink Jim in the end.

Briefly may be a symbol of that man who sin but never find out. Tamb Item is a symbolic name. Tamb Itam means black clerk, whose duty is to carry message. All his messages are those of mourning and black. He brings the news of Brown's treachery to Jewel and Lord Jim. Then he goes to Stein to report Jim's tragic end.

There are some symbolic actions in this novel. Jim's jump from the Patna ship is symbolic of the mistakes any man may make in a moment of fear or thoughtlessness. This is the central action in this novel. We realize that it is the mouth of hell that yawns before Jim and he jumps into it Jim tells that "it was as if I had jumped into a well ...into an everlasting deep hole ..." (68). This jump is symbolic. Jim disgraces and dishonours himself by deserting the Patna. He reveals the mind and character of man, who because of his own weakness falls from his place in society under circumstances that might shake any man. Jim suffers from extreme remorse, shame and guilt due to the jump. It also symbolizes the romantic idealist's fall into the base real world, the fall from the star, from the top of the proud tower. At the same time it symbolizes Conrad's own jump out of Poland.

The scene of the huge skipper of the Patna sitting in the frail little gharry and disappearing is symbolic as well as humorous. The frail little gharry symbolizes Jim and the enormous skipper crowding himself into it symbolizes the burden of guilt, shame and remorse passing into Jim's mind.

There is the storm after Jim's inquiry when Jim suffers from remorse. It is symbolic of the storm of grief within the man. There is also the colour symbolism throughout the novel. Jim is always dressed in spotless white and Jewel is also in white dress. Here Conrad has used white to symbolize purity, goodness and cleanliness. But then Conrad goes away from the usual use of white as a symbol of purity. Instead the white colour is used to portend death. The two examples of the white colour, the white choral on the garlanded grave of Jewel's mother shone round the dark mound like a chaplet of bleached skulls and Cornelius's wearing white shoes twinkled on the dark earth portend death.

Conrad has used black colour to symbolize evil, death and dark deeds. The black colour is used with symbolic significance through out the chapters describing the Patna affair. It symbolizes Jim's death. When Marlow leaves Patusan, he sees a black bird flying through the sky. The black birds, the sooty village, the dark people in the black canoe symbolize the tragedy of Jim. Conrad has used red to symbolize murder and death. In Patusan Jim has shot one of his murderers.

There are also other symbols like light and shade in the novel. Light suggests rationality, knowledge, self control, and awareness. Darkness suggests obscurity, ignorance, lack of self control, mystery and subconscious. The quiet voyage of the Patna in full sunlight and moonlight symbolizes the absence of mystery. Jim jumps into the darkness in a moment of confusion and blindness. The darkness suggests that Jim was in the control of his subconscious or some mystical force that compelled him to jump.

The moon in Patusan symbolizes the inner world of Jim and the fissure between the hills symbolizes the split in Jim's personality. He is not only an outcast from his social group but he is also an outcast from himself. He is unable to recognize his own identity. He is spiritually separated from himself as the two halves of the hills are separated.

In this novel we find many other symbolic meanings connected with both action and objects. The ring which Stein gives to Jim is a symbol friendship, confidence and fidelity. The garlanded grave of Jewel's symbolizes the hold of the dead upon the living.

Stein is a very practical and successful man. He is a famous collector of beetles and butterflies. The two types of insects symbolize the two types of human beings. Beetles symbolize ugly men devoid of dignity. Chester, Brown, Cornelius and the white officer of the Patna are the more important beetles. Butterflies symbolize the dreams of men, youth the zest of life and immortality. Jim is a butterfly pure, beautiful and innocent. He soars in imagination but is not fit for real life. The last word of the novel is "butterflies" (248) and Conrad has chosen his last word with special care to indicate symbolism.

Thus Conrad's use of symbolism enriches the texture and expressiveness of the novel and also reflects man's honour, pride, weakness, frailty and the worst and best in human nature. Lord Jim is the novel that relates the eternal problem of the expiation of sin, Jim feels guilty because his conscience pricks him inwardly. The entire novel is occupied by this pricking sensation and inner pains experienced by Jim. His life is like the life of The Ancient Mariner or Cain or Adam. Adam, the fallen sinner ultimately reaches the statue of the Son of cross, Jim becomes also Jesus like in the end and that reminds of Captain Ahab's crucifixion by the harpoon on Moby Dick's body. There is abundance of Christian symbolism attached to this story of crime-sin and punishment, expiation.

The two events are central to the symbolic overtones in the novel Lord Jim. The Patna incident and the Patusan incident are the two crucial points woven artistically in the fabric of the novel. The first incident is related to the saving of the skin but the second marks the sacrifice by life by the Lord among the natives.

The sea alternates its symbolic meanings between life and death. The darkness and light symbolism is significant in the novel. The name symbolism is clearly noticed in

expressions like Lord and Jewel, the Patna and Patusan. The characters do present more than their literal meanings.

These objects, events, persons, elements and places have taken on symbolical values in this novel. Symbolism is associationism. Less is said to express the most is the function of symbolism. Meanings are packed in symbols. Lord Jim is an early example of a work of modern fiction using symbols deliberately and meaningfully by a modern writer using innovative techniques as done by the master novelist- Joseph Conrad.

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