

## “The Lagoon” by Joseph Conrad: An Epic on Motion and Emotion

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### Abstract

### Review Article

This article studies the diverse manifestations of individual heroism inscribed in a more general framework which is epic as a genre and a text. The itinerary leading the hero from his community to a complete solitude is then brought in a critical relationship with the established order as well as the unknown in nature. In forms of rites of passage and real-life tests, the ordeals consecutive to the self-marginalization of Arsat do inform on his individual courage, and particularly on the permanent duel between man and his vital environment. Taking nature for a set of ecological elements in constant interaction with the solitary, the exotic and even the indigenous subject presented in “The Lagoon”, the current study unveils both the satiric and ironic sense of epic in the Conradian hero.

**Keywords:** Joseph Conrad – “The Lagoon” – heroism – epic – short-story – individual – mobility – solitude – memory.

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## INTRODUCTION

Out of free and bold love, two brothers decide to challenge the order established by a Malay community. Arsat and his brother are two sword-bearers who are nevertheless subjected to the Rajah and Inchi Mida. So is Diamelen, as a female servant. Yet, Arsat, fully assisted by his brother, takes far away Diamelen against the will and power of the Rajah and Inchi Mida. From the flight of the trio stems other incidents which still read as tests on their characters. The harsh pursuit undertaken by the Rajah’s men results in the death of Arsat’s brave brother. Indeed, Arsat himself is forced to experience a deadly isolation at the bedside of an agonizing Diamelen. Socially and emotionally affected, Arsat unexpectedly survives and tells *it* all to the white man, a former war-friend of his.

In fact, the white man plays more than a role of confidant in “The Lagoon”. Being a regular traveller over the river, he has a long experience and acquaintance with the Malays, and Arsat in particular. His unpredicted visit to Arsat heralds a displacement motif which opens doors to exotic issues. Man in the wilderness, man versus nature, to name but these two dualistic visions, echo far and wide during the white man’s crossing over the river surrounded by the dense forests. As a matter of fact, the panoptic narration on

that occasion represents the virgin space (florescent vegetation, a snaky creek, a borderless river, nameless streams, a secluded lagoon) as a condensed ecological force which permanently questions man’s self, audacity, liberty, mobility, etc.

The kaleidoscopic setting in “The Lagoon” mirrors back unstable characters whose seesaw words and manners end up framing a defiance discourse. Our analysis of the bits and pieces in the exotic context of this short-story first and foremost reposes on the deconstruction of the complicity between Arsat and his brother. Beforehand, we also assume that the noble and strong blood tying deeply together the two brothers falls apart once put under the tests of a love-impetus: Diamelen. Other driving forces such as the *call of the wild* followed by the exile of the self are focused on to study the Conradian self as a site of the epic.

### I. Arsat and his Brother: Two Fugitive Fighters

Brothers and sword-bearers for the Rajah and his influential Inchi Mida, Arsat and his brother form more or less a confidential duo whose “*source of ethical unease*” (Levin 211) becomes a fact with Arsat’s obsessive love for Diamelen. Subjects to the Rajah and Inchi Mida, Arsat, his brother and Diamelen have no way to live up their ideals or their ambitions. Instead of staying on the community side inferential of complete

subordination to the established rule of power, this trio decides to break free from the Rajah and his Inchi Mida. In all the process resulting into their flight, it is Arsat's brother who makes the decision and bears the highest responsibilities. Quite divided between a venture and an elopement, Arsat's and his brother's undertaken actions run against the community ones, which gives them the following epic significance: "*These ironic forms are not just a medium for epic concerns to reformulate themselves between monumental syntheses — the valleys between the peaks, as it were — but are often the mode in which an opening can be made by epics or by novels in the epic tradition*" (Griffiths et al. 40). The romantic source upon which ground the heroic fibre of the two brothers stands calls in the short-story spontaneous deeds to consolidate taboos and forbidden facts.

From a firm utilitarian point of view, "The Lagoon" offers a lot of negative apprehensions on the situations in which the dual brothers are taken. As a displacement motif, the travel being undertaken by the white man reveals an estrangement which unveils in mid-process Arsat's self-seclusion: A little house, perched on high piles...black in the distance. Near it, two tall nibong palms, that seemed to have come out of the forests in the background, leaned slightly over the ragged roof, with a suggestion of sad tenderness and care in the droop of their leafy and soaring head (Conrad 632).

That hermit living hides no better future for Arsat and Diamelen. As the culminating one, death is among the many other ill-omens following the absolute solitude of the cursed outcasts. But conform to the code of delay for such climactic incidents, the omniscient narrating voice still confers to the brothers and protagonists roles which, antinomic to the true Malay ways and conducts, fit in such a neo-heroism: "*Heroism manifests itself faster and more interestingly by its deformations than by its triumphs, which, narratively, must always be rare and climactic*" (Griffiths et al. 40). Mostly presented by the end of "The Lagoon" as flashbacked feats, the socio-romantic adventures proper to Arsat and his brother are undoubtedly steps that break over some set collective rules. Though responsive to an anti-conformism earlier installed in the short-story with the first and foremost presence of the white man in a Malay-dominant space, the aforementioned characteristics deeply dwell upon an anti-hegemonic narrative to serve an epic finality.

With its *in media res* story-line, "The Lagoon" demarks from a linear narrative to better shape out the epic contained in the characters' prompt actions, physical endeavours and individual undertakings. In the short-story bottom-up reading way, it is first and foremost given free way to the outsiders, and surprisingly enough, a traveller who used to boat up the river: the white man. Such a reversal of the writing and

reading poles anticipates oddities which altogether consolidate the upcoming epic in the narrative process. This eccentricity among the earlier depicted characters in the short-story keeps prevailing – not for long however – until the meeting between Arsat and the white man. It is through the steersman and the other paddlers present on board the canoe that the white man should be perceived as a hero. His will to step on Arsat's clearing for some refutable reasons hides in a quest for a refamiliarization with a dreadful and haunting past. During this man-to-man meeting, celebrations are made upon the vivid body-based motions which prove the boat-crew able and apt to face the unexpected: "*Nothing moved on the river but the eight paddles that rose flashing regularly, dipped together with a single splash; while the steersman swept right and left with a periodic and sudden flourish of his blade describing a glinting semicircle above his head*" (Conrad 630). The boat mobility exposes all the body and connoisseur skills of the Malay figures whose ease at travelling up and down the river sets aside the evil implicitly attached with the white man's stopover.

In keeping with the manly actions thoroughly identifiable with the steersman and the four other paddlers, the evident speed with which these true actors impact the white man's progress imprints a bellicosity to the short-story: "*The steersman dug his paddle into the stream, and held hard with stiffened arms, his body thrown forward*" (Conrad 631). Having a full grasp and control of the ongoing travel, the character of the steersman is at the forefront of a battle against, not only the fluid elements, but against the destination already set by the white man. Being a living compass whose experience of river-travelling helps and ensures, his physical manoeuvres square well with such heroic connotation: "*the carved dragon of its [the boat's] prow was pointing now at a gap in the fringing bushes of the bank*" (Conrad 631). The focus on the local actors and objects in "The Lagoon" seem to emulate both an indigenous nature and culture later discounted with the discourse of the marginal.

While proceeding in a restriction of its focus on a binary representation of Arsat and the white man, the narrating voice sounds more action-oriented in what can be considered the second-phase story. As a middle-passage in the white man's river-travel towards an unnamed destination, Arsat's clearing concentrates most of the vivid moments reported in "The Lagoon". On the very spot of the hut which serves Arsat and his love, Diamelen, as a room, a home and refuge take place long and somehow unending confessional breaks and bridges. Without deconstructing utterly the earlier presence of the white man as a precocious intrusion into some unknown, such nostalgic communications in times of loss and loneliness broaden the epic vision of the Conradian individual. In the company of the white man, Arsat finds full confidence in himself to break out a past he used to keep hidden as a shame, a failure, a

lost battle for self and autonomy. If represented in a psychoanalytical way, the white man's presence is necessary for the extrapolation of Arsat's id; his fixation on a past trauma: "*He [the white man] liked the man who knew how to keep faith in council [Arsat] and how to fight without fear [Arsat] by the side of his white friend*" (Conrad 634). However, the compassionate link which we can validly refer to the white man as Arsat's *white friend* is nowhere in the short-story sustained with an advisory voice. While staying with Arsat and keeping off away from the other Malays (the steersman and the paddlers), the white man stands with the former on the same challenging ground. As has epically done Arsat's brother.

Brotherhood in both blood and friendship rings out as solid ties which unexpectedly rime against authority in "The Lagoon". The way the latter shapes itself excludes any strong bond and mutual allegiance out of the individual Malay's faith and follow for the Rajah and Inchi Mida. This sums up as a form of rigidity in community leading to predictable revolts. As recurrent as ever in Conrad's writings, the individual-community confrontation weighs upon the former to accuse the latter. Fragmenting the discourse of the victims into regrets and self-reproach, such trends carry on within Arsat's past-present voices. Standing on a time-shifting battlefield for himself and his dead brother and funnelling ideals they both carry out without success, Arsat attempts to still resist: "*Arsat's voice vibrated loudly in the profound peace*" (Conrad 644).

A close paralleling between Arsat and his brother charismatically distance the former from the latter: "*My brother wanted to shout the cry of challenge – one cry only – to let the people know we were freeborn robbers who trusted our arms and the great sea. I [Arsat] begged him in the name of our love to be silent*" (Conrad 640). Very dualistic in a followed depiction of the two brothers, the short-story never fails however to put the 'suicidal' stamina and die-hard character of his brother over Arsat himself. Recalling the past actions of defiance he has undertaken under the lead of his brother, Arsat, as a vanquished, nonetheless tells the white man a story mostly spiced with victorious facts – "*an anti-epic, but with many features of the true epic*" (Cleary et al. 183). In the limited space and time of its narration, "The Lagoon" accords in that way a decisive dimension to the isolated actions which the self-marginalized characters carry out to break free from the community yoke: "*we [my brother and I, Arsat] were men of family, belonging to a ruling race, and more fit than any to carry on our right shoulder the emblem of power*" (Conrad 637). Bearers of community swords as well as personal ambitions which are not counted for what they signify within them, the two brothers, as "*complementary halves of a composite character*" (Cleary et al. 185), claim here above a collective power *stricto sensu* reserved to the Rajah.

In a complete mix and match of the past, primitive and retrospective narrative elements, "The Lagoon" declines the epic as stories revisited since "*memory is the epic faculty par excellence*" (Levin...). As experienced as the Malay actors who are almost silenced in the main story, the characters of Arsat and the white man constantly evoke their past to re-appropriate a void abandoned self. No doubt Arsat's flashbacks call back his dead brother (the most absent-present character) while invigorating him with the soul of a sterling warrior: "*We are men who take what we want and can hold it against many*" (Conrad 640). In fact, unmeasurable risks and perils peculiarise the actions of the self in the short-story under study. Additionally, the pitfalls, and even losses endured by this incorrigible individual altogether contribute to inculcating him with the most outstanding resistance sense: "*There is a time when a man should forget loyalty and respect. Might and authority are given to rulers, but to all men is given love and strength and courage*" (Conrad 639). The discourse here signals an epic mind-set Arsat self-confidently calls forth to relieve his pain of loss, absence, solitude, and isolation.

As stated above, human losses in the short-story function as impetuses; forces which enliven the solitary outcast. With a narrative propagated almost everywhere in "The Lagoon" by such a cornered solitary as Arsat "[with] *no more friends in the country of [his] birth*" (Conrad 640), the epic episodes in the short-story stream down into a monologue. As expected, Diamelen's death fills Arsat's cup of pain and sorrow to its brim. Though somehow acting as second brother, the white man's passive presence is an intensifier of Arsat's consciousness of death and decline. Therefore, the rage with which Arsat expresses his social and relational emptiness culminates. As a fixation on retrospective facts, this revenge discourse which Arsat tries to set up targets first his pursuers, then his oppressors and, last but not least, his family murderers. Circumscribed in such a vicious circle, the actions led by the ideal-bearing protagonists in "The Lagoon" oftentimes scaffold a quest imprinted with hard-won/lost selves.

Beyond the tight and closed confrontation between man and his community, a swift and short-timed openness is offered to the former dualist as an escape into a wider entity which the reader may refer to as nature in "The Lagoon"; a change into the initial challenge which, therefore, carries along more substantial transformations in the expected consequences. Once deep into the ecosystem of the forests and waters, the outside characters such as the white man and his boat-mates act as bearers of a mission whose accomplishment must face in a way or another some invisible forces from near and afar. Constructed as a battle lost in advance, this opposition between the micro and macro living elements in "The Lagoon" reinforces the latter in the epic trend: "*It is not*

*unprecedented in the epic tradition, or at least around it, for smaller to give birth to larger and mockery to spawn high seriousness, that is, for heterogeneous and "low" materials to coalesce into a larger hope*" (Griffiths *et al.*, 48). Resulting from an imbalance of human and vegetation entities omnipresent in the bipolar river-story, this narrative rejuvenation satisfies an encomiastic purpose in "The Lagoon".

## II. "The Lagoon": Love versus Nature

The alchemy looming throughout "The Lagoon" allows both nature and humans to bring up to life all the dead objects and sentiments present in a crowded, calm, green environment. The bygone past proper to the main characters still reposes upon the vivid background of a Malay space which is so dense to remind the reader of a virgin world of trees, and rivers. Endowed with a capacity of mobility already predictable with the lagoon setting, the river-dwellers as protagonists refer to the fluid and flora as sources of vividness. Life essence streaming off from Arsat's shrieking brother and an ill-on-bed Diamelen has its replica which profiles a silent nature murmuring with hidden tensions. All the quietude noticeable with the panoptic narrating eye reveals behind the green sceneries contacts and breaks of telluric effects.

The depictions of a rigid river-ecosystem omnipresent in "The Lagoon" follow up with a minute presentation of a "nature morte": "every tree, every leaf, every bough, every tendril of creeper and every petal of minute blossoms seemed to have been bewitched into an immobility perfect and final" (Conrad 630). As stated by Billy, this motionlessness of a visibly arborescent vegetation sums up a "poetics of stasis and inertia" (66) setting up in the short-story background to contrast with any human moves. With that unexpected suspension of vegetation-life, any mobility in the river surroundings becomes suspicious at the same time it instigates actions in this "dramatization of immobility" (Billy 2000: 66). Though monotonous, the up-river travelling of the white man and his crew invites in vain to a counter-motion. Exposed to the "stillness of the air" (Conrad 630), "the forests [that] stood motionless" (Conrad 64), and "bunches of leaves [...] that hung unstirring" (Conrad 630), follow a flow which emanates from "a murmur powerful and gentle, a murmur vast and faint; the murmur of trembling leaves, of stirring boughs...the tangled depths of the forests ...the starry smoothness of the lagoon..." (Conrad 642).

Blurring the lines between reality and memory, action and inaction, mobility and immobility, the omniscient narrating voice crosses the outside voices with the inside ones. Creative of a polyphonic ambiance, this imbroglia happens in "The Lagoon" while taking into much account the anthropologic aspects of man-nature interaction. Over the physical setting of the short-story stands a fluid setting which keeps together the nameless streams, rivers and lagoons

flowing everywhere in the Malay hydro-space. Without taking the formal aspects of a true rite of passage, the white man's displacement over those fluids helps in the display of man's dualistic perception of nature. As an impulsive and self-defensive mechanism of survival, the latter delineates the water surfaces into such offensive sources as "the wandering, hesitating river" (Conrad 631), "the water that shone like a band of metal" (Conrad 630), "the churned-up water frothed alongside with a confused murmur" (Conrad 630). Inapprehensible as swift-moving surfaces with bottomless depths, the hydric presences in "The Lagoon", on the one hand, conform with this eponymy while, on the other hand, they confront man with an inner man.

Arsat changes his perception of resistance while he conceives his existence as a struggle for survival, and social reintegration. He looks upon the surrounding objects, spaces and living greens as counterparts of ontological and physical significance: "the whisper of unconscious life grew louder, speaking in an incomprehensible voice round the dumb darkness of that human sorrow" (Conrad 64). Back from the exclusive solitude Arsat solely assumes in his battle for love and power, the story-line of "The Lagoon" digs here deeper into his character as a socio-individual case. In the latter case, incidents past and fought with the sword-bearer's soul hardly compare with his forces internal to Arsat's fragmented figure. Without any further consideration of this psychoanalytic perspective, our study rather emphasizes the personified sub-elements postulating "The Lagoon" as an eco-epic.

The precedence of the white man in the course of the river-narration anticipates and closes an inevitable conflict between the intrusive individual and an unwelcoming environment. His apparent difference (Whiteness) conditions a calling (the White man) and inspires fear and mistrust to the Malays. Prolonged into the perceptions the latter as well as the white man pin upon what they all encounter in the open and broad space of the lagoon, the natural macros and micros in the eponymous short-story reverberate an offensive ecosystem. Far from being immobile and quite static as insinuated by the river-narrator, the surrounding forests, and waters incarnate living beings since they do reflect through the eyes of the boat-crew images and forces we used to concentrate on humans and their society. As if controlled by the density visible everywhere in the space of the short-story, the resulting descriptions flow along with the visions or impressions of the boat-crew. Speedily uttered as prompts, the ecological lexemes in use immortalize the lagoon and its tentacles to the detriment of the boatmen: "The narrow creek was like a ditch: tortuous, fabulously deep; filled with gloom under the thin strip of pure and shining blue of the heaven" (Conrad 631). The geometry of the flat and fluid spaces in "The Lagoon" breaks the flowing matters into tiny and sophisticated bits of nature.

Adaptation of the self is one of the most recurrent question which the displaced characters in the short-story are subjected to. Their proximity and confusion with the nature shows up the limits the indigenous themselves find when placed in the infinite. The confrontation between the latter and the adventurous individual never really takes place as a square duel between a whole and a part. In fact, it is a sort of surrender the Conradian hero manifests as an eco-propagandist in "The Lagoon". Nowhere in the latter short-story is mentioned the white man's defeat towards the Immutable. Yet, his references to "*the straight avenue of forests [...] the forests, somber and dull*" with "*big, towering trees*" (Conrad 630) reveal one more time a weakness of his character as an entangled actor in a true green chaos. The effacement of all physical signs and spots in this case puts a "*temporal closure*" (Griffiths *et al.*, 45) to an ongoing fascination in nature.

From a tension of its narration set within a strong condensation of the unstable forms and fluids, the short-story progress reverts over and turns the sense of loss and domination of the boat-travellers or river-dwellers into some liveable conditions. Why is that shift occurring now in a time of utter confusion and concession among the outcasts in "The Lagoon"? No credible answer can be given to that unexpected fact even if we consider and reconsider the interpenetration between Arsat and the jungle. It is a magic switch in the ecological epic imposed by "The Lagoon": "*The creek broadened, opening out into a wide sweep of a stagnant lagoon. The forests receded from the marshy bank, leaving a level strip of bright green, reedy grass to frame the reflected blueness of the sky*" (Conrad 632). Two regimes can be identified within the course of the short-story about man versus nature in "The Lagoon". While the one goes up and down and seems closely stuck to the flow of fluids, the other sets on the discourse of a decadent self. This decline is quite noticeable throughout Arsat's complete marginalisation though it reveals once for all its very pitch in a voice which used to thunder out words and manners as "*a man must speak of war and of love*" (Conrad 637).

Binary oppositions carry on through the entire story on the white man entrapped in "*the breathless silence of the world*" (Conrad 631). After a persistent interfusion of micro and macro matters constitutive of the heart of the jungle, it is the acoustic referents which draw the attention of the reader. Besides the story factor combining the telling and listening paradigms, focuses on the voice-sounds in "The Lagoon" follow in the logic of a total epic. In other words, the characters make use of their ultimate vocal forces to fend for themselves. A capharnaüm in miniature is well under process with the Malays on the boat: "*The short words of the paddlers reverberated loudly...*" (Conrad 632), as well as "*the voices of the boatmen ringing fitful and distinct on the calm water*" (Conrad 636). We should concede

to these indigenous figures a habit of crying out loud without heeding the space they are in. But brought back into the river-space, the same normal and cultural comportment has an existential significance strengthened with a heroic pride.

Silence covers all the years Arsat lives in his secluded small island. Even worse, Arsat keeps silent a tragic brotherhood story during the same time span. As said before, the coming of the white man is the best occasion for Arsat to break open the past and give free way to his confessions. What however still keeps it all interesting is that Arsat's voice (next to a deadly mute(d) Diamelen's) seeks to fill in all the empty and voiceless moments past. A sort of divided discourse on a past trauma with a revenge connotation which he bursts out in the following way: "*You [Diamelen] came to the cry of my heart, but my arms take you into my boat against the will of the great!*" (Conrad 640). Romance and heroism go together in Arsat's case. Yet, the two seem some natural dispositions the lonely mourned Arsat has to put into actions. But no matter how delayed, and even suspended here and there in the process of self-fulfilment, the latter are always allowed to spring out in forms mostly verbal. The story-telling character of Arsat duplicates an epic actor – past and present – whose narrative confirms that: "*The language of epic is all history and no past — or rather, a past not remembered but spoken*" (Griffiths *et al.*, 47).

## CONCLUSION

"The Lagoon" cannot claim an "*epic fullness*" (Collits 6) from its main narrative which purposelessly shuttles between romantic confessions and rebellion remembrances. The epic tits and bits in "The Lagoon", if tightly jointed together, will still hold loose since the ego-story and the omniscient one overlap. The latter manifests a subtle resistance next to the egocentric echoes the former feeds itself with. In fact, nature as a principal ecological fact and matter in the short-story keeps disseminating far and large a whole sub-ecology which the reader cannot occult in the dualistic relationship between Arsat and the wilderness. Proximity between the protagonists and the forests in the jungle narration reverberates moments of slight but insistent friction between the two asymmetric presences. This is one of the reasons why "The Lagoon" can be typified as a parody of the epic. The fabric of the source-story pretexts a community incompatibility between Arsat and his brother to better propel these protagonists towards ventures irreducible to heroic actions, no matter how romanticized by Arsat's narration. A mix of romance and heroism, epic and non-epic which can be better apprehended in so far as "*in epic, a heroic figure can include all manner of contradictions — indeed must include them — as long as they are explosive contradictions*" (Griffiths *et al.*, 40).

The defeat of Arsat in the conflict of love and order closes one chapter at the same time it opens another. His life back in the community will inevitably remind Arsat the losses inflicted to him by the Rajah's men. A motive for a revenge which will, definitely, be taken in similar or more radical epic ways. The phoenix resilience runs in the Conradian characters who give another shape and extent to their challenges as they change their space and place of actions.

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