"I Am No Longer a Youngster": Representation of Time as a Narrative Device in Joseph Conrad's *The Shadow-Line*

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Introduction

While critics have regarded Joseph Conrad's later works, which start with *Chance* (1913), as exemplifications of the decline of his talent, they nonetheless evaluate *The Shadow-Line* (1917) as exceptional. In this novel the anonymous first-person narrator remembers how he won the first captaincy, and that his first command was challenging because of the shipmates' disease and the flat calm. Critics emphasize that the novel is based on Conrad's own experience as captain of the *Otago* sailing ship and therefore "comes out of experience that was intimately and urgently personal" (Leavis 99). Similarly, Gary Geddes claims that Conrad writes it "in a movingly personal, but aesthetically honest, manner about the art of work" (84).

Today, however, scholars attach more importance to the novel's self-conscious narrative structure and bracket the narrator's honesty. Riccardo Capoferro, for example, pays attention to the representation of "Providence" in the novel. He then stresses the "Gothic" aspects in the novel, which are based on the depiction of the late former captain of the narrator's ship: he is referred to by the narrator's first mate as a ghost whose curse delays the ship. The narrator is afflicted by the delay and comes to almost believe in the malediction. Accordingly, Capoferro argues that the novel suggests that "reality lends itself to be structured and mystified by human pattern" (33-34). On this matter, Kaoru Yamamoto claims that such Gothic or supernatural factors actually serve to shed light on the "textuality" of the narrative, so that the authority of the narrator is put into perspective (95).

Concerning the relationship between the "textuality" and the novel's narrative, however, critics have not paid sufficient attention to one point which exemplifies the self-consciousness of the narrative: the representation of time. There are exceptional studies that deal with the novel's treatment of time. They mainly focus on the role of the narrator's diary, which he keeps in the middle of the dead calm, and which appears twice in the novel. Jakob Lothe, for example, argues that, in the diary, "the distance between narration [i.e. the narrator at present] and narrated [i.e. the narrator in the past]" disappears. The diary, accordingly, represents "a unity of tone, pacing, and voice with the surrounding narrative which establishes a reciprocal relationship between them and enhances the plausibility and suggestiveness of both" (129). On the other hand, according to Nisha Manocha, the diary suggests that "one can strategically write oneself across the line." Thus the "symbolic restraint and careful consideration involved in the reiterations of the young narrator's diary complete the movement into the space of maturity" (197). In sum, Lothe and Manocha assert that the scenes of the diary not only impress the narrator's reflective and coherent character on the reader, but also reinforces his maturity as both a sailor and a man.

Lothe and Manocha, however, do not consider the relationship between two factors: the narrative structure and how the novel delineates the narrator's cognition of time. This paper, therefore, aims to investigate the novel's self-conscious narrative and textuality from the perspective of the representation of time. Taking into consideration the current critical tendency to emphasize the novel's self-conscious narrative, I would assert that the novel actually casts doubt on the captain-narrator's self-dramatization. He thereby attempts to impress his maturation to be a captain and consequent maturity on the reader, while his honesty is often stressed (Geddes 84; Lothe 124). Attention should be paid to the representation of time. *The Shadow-Line*, in reality, implies the narrator's failure to gain maturity, despite the novel's

ostensible Bildungsroman structure.

I. Delay as a Narrative Device at the Outset

To begin with the analysis of *The Shadow-Line*, this section focuses on the narrative function of the first two chapters of the novel. Although the novel certainly describes the process of how the narrator climbs the ladder to become a captain, it is not until the end of Chapter 2 that he gains the captaincy. He resigns his job as first mate at a steamer at the beginning of Chapter 1. He subsequently checks in at the Officers' Sailors' Home in Singapore, while planning to return home. He, however, comes across a notification letter from the Harbour Office that "a master is wanted for" some sailing ship (22). He then immediately visits the Office and is appointed captain at the end of Chapter 2. Albert J. Guerard regards this development of the story as too slow and states that the "first two chapters are seriously defective" (32).

In reality, these two chapters sow the seeds for the narrative strategy to represent the narrator's self-dramatization as an apparent Bildungsroman. The key here is the relationship of the description of two factors: the narrator's personality and time. These factors cast light on the textuality of the narrative, which suggests that *The Shadow-Line* is not a simple Bildungsroman from the very beginning.

Let us examine the narrator's representation. One point worth consideration is that the novel functions to underscore his eccentric and impulsive character. Before narrating his stay at the Officers' Sailors' Home, he reflects on why he has left his previous job. The narrative alludes to his dislike for steamships, which he considers "not entitled to that blind loyalty" shared among sailors on sailing ships (3). He even describes the "past eighteen months" on the steamer as "a dreary, prosaic waste of days" (6), although Captain Kent, his former superior, refers to the narrator as "a mate that suited him so well" (12). While, however, he thinks that the "green sickness" has "descended

on" him and "carried" him "off" (4), the narrator, after all, cannot or does not clarify the reason for this: "For no reason on which a sensible person could put a finger I throw up my job" (3).

More noteworthy is that the text implies that the narrator himself is confused by and attempts to close his eyes to his resignation. Immediately after checking in at the Home, the narrator meets Captain Giles there, "an expert" who is "very well known and appreciated in the shipping world" (10). As if resonant with his appearance as a "churchwarden" (10), Giles kindly listens to and mentors the narrator so that he eventually gains the captaincy. Nevertheless, the narrator at first feels strong resistance to Giles. Since being a friend of Captain Kent, actually, Giles asks the narrator why he has left the ship. Although Giles poses this simple question in "a benevolent, heavy-uncle manner," the narrator becomes so "angry all of a sudden" that he even thinks "I ought to shut up that moralist" (12). As Yamamoto says (99-100), although his youth and immaturity as a man should be taken into consideration, the narrator's reaction is so excessive that we can discern his mental confusion that causes his fruitless rivalry against Giles, a veteran sailor.

Here it is of great importance that the narrator's confused self-recognition leads to the delay of his new departure as captain. Giles informs the narrator that the Chief Steward at the Home has received a letter from the Harbour Office regarding a job vacancy for captain. Since feeling uncomfortable for Giles and the Steward, who has offended the narrator about how to check in at the Home, however, the narrator is only irritated by Giles and does not grasp his intention. As a result, it is not until Giles says "You [the narrator] missed my point" (18) that the narrator talks to the Steward and realizes the importance of the letter. The narrator's own prejudice has, accordingly, prevented him from smoothly obtaining the captaincy, longed for by himself.

The novel further indicates, because of the following two points, that the narrator's preconception would trouble him. First, his narra-

tion implies that he would have difficulty in fairly evaluating a person's character or a situation. Even after winning the captaincy, he still feels contempt for the Steward. Giles then tells the narrator "gravely," as if admonishing him, that the Steward is "not a bad steward really" and can find "a good cook, at any rate" (33). Giles's words suggest that the narrator is apt to be bound by his ideas, while he dislikes the "self-conscious complacency" shown by Giles, whose kindness the narrator has failed to notice. The narrator's narrow-mindedness echoes Captain Kent's warning to Giles that he is "a peculiar young fellow" (23). This peculiarity of the narrator forces the reader to be cautious with his fable-like phraseology to express his rapture when he is appointed captain. He feels as if his ship waited for him "spell-bound, unable to move, to live, to get out into the world [...] like an enchanted princess" in "a fairy tale" (33). In a word, his liability to stick to his idea predicts the fragility and self-consciousness of his self-dramatization.

Second, the narrator's peculiar character is more emphasized by the novel's representation of time. As Guerard claims, the novel spends no less than the first two chapters before the story about the narrator's captaincy begins. As the first point discussed above indicates, however, the two chapters serve to impress the novel's textuality on the reader. As Yamamoto argues (104), this impression is clarified most the moment when the narrator meets Captain Ellis, who is the "Harbour Master" (24) and romantically described as "the deputy-Neptune" by the narrator (26). As soon as the narrator enters Ellis's office, Ellis salutes him "by a nerve-shattering: 'Where have you been all this time?'" (25). Ellis's irritation echoes the frustration of the reader, who has had to patiently listen to the narrator's meandering story. More importantly, this slow development accords with the novel's later chapters, in which the narrator and his crew are frustrated by a dead calm and the delay in their sailing.

It is also noteworthy that this slowness of the narrative, which exemplifies the narrator's peculiar subjectivity, is juxtaposed with the

representation of objective time: Giles's watch with a "heavy gold watch-chain" (22). Conrad, an ex-sailor, undoubtedly understands the importance of objective time in society as well as for sailors. In *Lord Jim*, Captain Brierly in fact carries a chronometer until he commits suicide, while, in *The Secret Agent*, a terrorist attack is attempted at the Greenwich Observatory. In each of these works, objective time symbolizes the order of modern society. The importance of a chronometer, hence, should not be ignored in *The Shadow-Line*. In addition, Giles, the owner of the chronometer, is clearly a renowned sailor and, thus, a straightforward and respectable person. The combination of Giles and his watch consequently contrasts with the narrator and his meandering narrative. Despite Guerard's criticism, the first two chapters hence play an important role in indicating the novel's textuality, which serves to prepare for self-conscious characteristics of the later chapters.

II. The Narrator's Sense of Time on Board the Ship

Soon after parting with Ellis and Giles, the narrator sails on a steamer to Bangkok. There he embarks on a sailing ship to which he intuitionally refers as a "high-class vessel" (41). He feels lucky to be its captain and enjoys "the ideal completeness of that emotional experience" that had come to him "without the preliminary toil and disenchantment of an obscure career" (41).

Nevertheless, despite the narrator's "romantic reverie" (40), the novel indicates the flaw of his self-conscious dramatization, which continues until the end of the story. Emphasis should be placed on the relationship between the narrator's self-image and the representation of time. When he sits "down in the arm chair" immediately after entering the saloon, the narrator imagines that a "succession of men had sat in that chair," and that a "sort of composite soul, the soul of command" whispers "suddenly to him" (43). He feels that he is incorporated into "a dynasty," or a "line of men whom" he does not know. He is convinced

of his belonging to the "dynasty" by rapturously looking at his own "face" in the mirror in the "tarnished ormolu frame" (44). His ravishment, however, soon breaks up because Burns, the chief mate, enters the saloon.

A noteworthy point is the discrepancy between the narrator's subjective time and the actual time. The narrator notices that the "long hand" of the "clock" in the room has "hardly moved at all," and that he has not "been in the cabin more than two minutes altogether" (44). In spite of this shortness of time, he "regret[s]" that Burns has "been watching" his elated appearance (44). In emphasizing the narrator's taste for the "dynasty" and "a sort of composite soul, the soul of command," Nidesh Lawtoo (108-13) and Gary Geddes (89) assert the narrator's attention to the community and tradition of sailors. It is undeniable, however, that the narrator's plunge into his "unguarded daydreaming state" (44) exemplifies his strong self-consciousness and tendency to stick to himself. More emphasis should be laid on a point that his temperament to romanticize himself is clarified and contrasted by the objective and metrical time, "two minutes."

In fact, the narrator's romantic expectation about the ship and the captaincy is frustrated by two delays: he is unable to start sailing smoothingly and, even after going on a voyage, the ship does not sail fast because of a "'Dead calm'" (61). The narrator and his colleagues are threatened by the same factor in both cases: a disease, probably malaria. In spite of his responsibility as a captain, the narrator decides to bring Burns on board, whose infection of the sickness is one of the reasons for the first case. This is because the narrator is moved by Burns' entreaty, resonant with the former's romantic and ideal conception of the "dynasty": "'You [the narrator] and I are sailors'" (57). The narrator's decision contributes to the spread of the disease on board, so that the narrator and Ransom, a cook who also works as a steward despite his "heart" trouble (56), are the only two exceptional men who do not suffer from the disease. The narrator's care for Burns exempli-

fies his romantic recognition of his first command and eventually triggers his and his subordinates' danger.

The narrator, however, tends to dramatize this danger. The novel, accordingly, describes the problems of his self-narrative that serve to represent the discrepancy between his subjective time and metrical time. The first point to note is that the narrator loses "All sense of time" because of the flat calm and his uneasiness caused by the burden of his responsibility as a captain (79). This loss of "sense of time" is significantly sharpened by his excessively strong "sense of guilt" at not being able to provide his subordinates with quinine, a medicine for malaria. The narrator, actually, is not to blame: the contents of the medicine bottles have been secretly exchanged with "some sort of powder" (73), presumably because the late former captain has sold them for some money. The narrator is nevertheless overburdened with his responsibility according to which he has to admit his "limitation of any human attempt to control human destiny" (Hawthorn xxii). This uneasiness leads to his confusion, which, together with the ship's slowness, forces him to lose his sense of time. He is losing a realistic view and strengthening his romantic evaluation of his first command.

Consequently, he goes so far as to use hyperbolic words to represent his situation. He, for example, recalls the "formidable Work of the Seven Days" in seeing the sky at night (80), or imagines that the ship would be a "floating grave" (75), which echoes Burns' expectation that it would be "the Flying Dutchman" (77). In sum, the narrator's anxiety forces him to describe his experience as if it were a "Gothic narrative of curses and exorcism" (Capoferro 34).

More importantly, the narrator's confused sense of time functions to sardonically delineate his tendency to dramatize things around him. For example, soon after finding that the ship has no quinine and getting upset, the narrator rushes to Burns, the first mate, before he confesses the lack of the medicine to his subordinates. The narrator then

sees Burns flourish a "shining pair of scissors," which he apparently "trie[s] before my [the narrator's] eyes to jab at his throat." Burns actually attempts to "clip off the thick growth of his red beard" (74). This scene exemplifies Conrad's "delayed decoding," which is a literary technique that "combines the forward temporal progression of the mind, as it receives messages from the outside world, with the much slower reflexive process of making out meaning" (Watt 175). It is especially noteworthy that this narrative device "makes the reader experience" not only "horror" but also "sardonic assessment." In other words, the "delayed decoding" can produce "a gruesome comedy" (Watt 178). The gap between the narrator's recognition and Burns' true intention actually serves to comically portray the former' confusion, which has been caused by the lack of medicine and has produced his assumption about Burns' scissors. Here a noteworthy point is that the gap or "delayed decoding" is concerned with the novel's representation of time.

The "delayed decoding" and its comic effect, furthermore, appear in a crucial scene of the novel: as Asako Nakai points out (140-42), we should not ignore the scene in which a downpour hits the ship at night. The narrator has been so uneasy owing to the calm and the shortage of medicine that he fears that the "end of all things would come" (89). While regretting his "ill-starred first command" in the heavy rain, he falls "clear over something" that is "big and alive." When he wonders that there are "no animals in the ship" and is scared "like a little child," he eventually recognizes the "animal" as Burns, who gets on the deck despite his illness and delirium (95). Burns swears that the late former captain has cursed the ship. He then bursts "into such a loud laugh as" the narrator has "never heard before" (98), after which some "breeze" starts to push the ship forward, "[t]he first for ages" (99). The narrator, therefore, cannot help thinking that Burns' awful laughter has "exorcis[ed]" the "malicious spectre" of the late captain, and that now the narrator and his colleagues are "in the hands of a kind and energetic Providence" (103). Here the narrator attempts to reason that

Burns' "[b]oldness" against the late captain seems to have allegorically saved the ship (96).

The narrator's allegorical reasoning, however, is worth consideration. It is undeniable that the late captain's swear, "'If I had my wish, neither the ship nor any of you would even reach a port'" (50), has not come true in spite of its connotation of a Gothic curse. The fruitlessness and unreality of this swear, consequently, contrasts with its fear of the narrator, who almost believes in and interprets it as a decisive factor threatening his ship. The novel thereby sardonically reveals the narrator's temperament to make his self-narrative about his initiation to be a mature captain overly dramatic. The scene shows that he fears the situation like "a child," which serves to comically represent the narrator's misrecognition of Burns (Nakai 141-42). Most importantly, the key to making the scene impressive is the "delayed decoding," the narrative technique based on the representation of time.

III. The Narrator's Maturity Bracketed in the Last Scene

The narrator's ship gathers up speed and manages to arrive at a port. Its sick crew is taken to the hospital and no one dies, against the late captain's horrible "wish" (50) or Burns' worry about it. The narrator consequently demonstrates his effectiveness as a captain. Upon meeting Giles again, he says, "'I feel old'" and "'I am no longer a youngster'" (108): these words exemplify his sense of maturity.

Nonetheless, the novel does not unconditionally praise his growth as a sailor. Here, two factors related to the representation of time function to bracket his maturity: the number of days the narrator's sailing has taken; and the circular narrative structure, which is denoted by the course of his trip and Ransome's resignation.

Regarding the number of days, we should not overlook the words of Giles, who meets the narrator as soon as the ship arrives at the port: "'Twenty-one days from Bangkok?'" (107). On the surface, this shows Giles's surprise that such a short-distance sailing took no less than

three weeks. This length of the period, simultaneously, implies that the narrator becomes mature as both a captain and a man within such a short time, which the narrator has made efforts to impress on the reader. Critics, accordingly, tend to regard the novel as a Bildungsroman (Capoferro 21-22; Erdinast-Vulcan 127), and this tendency is resonant with Conrad's "Author's Note," in which he stresses his depiction of the "change from youth, care-free and fervent, to the more self-conscious and more poignant period of maturer life" (111).

Here, however, it is worth considering M. M. Bakhtin's theory of Bildungsroman. He contends that that genre depicts the "image of *man in the process of becoming*" (19; italics original). There, "man's emergence" is "inseparably linked to historical emergence" and is "accomplished in real historical time" (23). A person's maturity, or "emergence," thus takes much longer than twenty-one days. It is, therefore, more appropriate to think that the novel describes not the narrator's "bildungsroman [sic]," but rather his "crucial moment of initiation" (Capoferro 22). In other words, the critics' inclination to consider this novel to be a Bildungsroman indicates that *The Shadow-Line* depicts such a vivid narration that the captain-narrator succeeds in making the reader focus on and be impressed by his getting "old."

At the same time, the narrative shows a key to consider the narrator's sense of time: the "gold watch-chain," or Giles's chronometer (107). As argued in section I, the chronometer embodies the metrical and objective time. The watch, moreover, is owned by Giles, a captain renowned for his maritime skills and integrity. The chronometer thus symbolizes authority doubly because of the characteristics of its social function and its owner. The narrator's personal sense of time, as revealed in "'I feel old'" or "'I am no longer a youngster'" (108), is consequently contrasted by the above authority so that the novel alludes to the possibility that his assumption of his own maturity is indeed ineffective.

The doubt on the narrator's growth is furthermore consolidated

by the second factor: the circular narrative structure. The narrator has certainly managed to get the ship to the port, and this is his achievement. Attention should be paid, however, to which port he has reached. As the narrator's references to Giles and Captain Ellis, who has "retired" before the ship's arrival (107), indicate, the ship anchors in the same port from which the narrator has left to Bangkok to take his first command. As critics claim (Hawthorn xxix; Capoferro 34), it can be said that the narrator only comes back to his starting point notwithstanding his struggle for twenty-one days. This fact denotes that the time of his troublesome sailing might have been fruitless.

In addition, the circularity of the narrative structure is more reinforced by the other factor so that the novel serves to strategically contain the narrator's maturity. It is Ransome's retirement from the ship. Since there is "something wrong" with "his heart" (56), Ransome determines "to go and be quiet somehow," despite an entreaty of the narrator, who counted on him during the challenging sailing: "'I [the narrator] hate the idea of parting with you [Ransome]'" (106). As Nakai points out (136), this resolution of Ransome echoes a former scene: the narrator's sudden decision to resign from his former ship. The last scene thereby alludes to the possibility that there would be cases similar to that of the narrator repetitively. In such cases, young people suddenly or impulsively leave their jobs and try to climb the ladder of success, although they would later part with their trustable colleagues. This repetition and the circular structure thus work to treat the sailing of the narrator, whose subjective sense of time has made his story dramatic, as no more than an ordinary case that any young person experiences.

Conclusion

This paper asserted that the self-conscious narrative and textuality of *The Shadow-Line* greatly owe to the novel's representation of time. Emphasis was particularly placed on the narrator's subjective

sense of time, which functions not only to put his maturity as a sailor and a man into perspective but also to cast doubt on the novel's impression on the reader as a Bildungsroman.

The Shadow-Line was admired by influential Conradians, including F. R. Leavis and Ian Watt. Its narrative technique and structure, however, have not received critical attention for a long time; instead, the narrator's "honesty" has been stressed. Nevertheless, the "textuality" of the narrative should be taken into consideration, and one of the key points that the critics have failed to consider is the representation of time. The novel's narrative, in fact, indicates not only that *The Shadow-Line* is not as naïve as critics have tended to think. In other words, the apparently impressive "honesty" is a *tour de force* of the masterly narrative structure. *The Shadow-Line*, thus, is a crystallization of Conrad's masterstroke which actually portrays the limit of the young captain's sense of maturity, notwithstanding its apparent style of a Bildungsroman. *The Shadow-Line*, consequently, parodies such representation of time and brackets the self-conscious narrative that the narrator becomes mature as a sailor and a man.

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