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the lagoon — a study in imagery  
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## THE LAGOON - A STUDY IN IMAGERY

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The purpose of this paper is to prove that, through exuberant sensuous imagery - the strange tropical setting, the mystery of elements, light and darkness - Joseph Conrad, in his short-story "The Lagoon" describes and transmits impressionistically, the dramatic story of a man surprised by his own act of cowardice, a man divided between loyalty to his own blood and love.

This man, Arsat suffers a blocked feeling towards himself because he failed to act when he had the occasion, and he missed it: he left his brother to die in the hands of the enemy while he, Arsat, escaped with his love Diamelen, to live in the "shadows" of "The Lagoon" - his own psychological, subconscious guilty conscience. The story starts with a description of nature, as motionless, and undefined as the plot still is:

The forests, somber and dull, stood motionless  
and silent...  
.....  
In the stillness of the air .....  
... minute blossoms seemed do have been  
bewitched into an immobility perfect and  
final. Nothing moved on the river.....(1)

The "river" imagery stands far away into Arsat's mind to whom we have been introduced because nothing has happened yet: the forest is static, and the atmosphere

(1) Cline, C.L. Joseph Conrad: "The Lagoon", pp. 152 -  
166 - The Rinehart Book of Short Stories,  
Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc., New York, 1952.

prepares us for a sad story. The only change in the landscape is performed by the white man in his canoe. This flat character will be the vehicle through which we will learn of Arsat's story:

The white man's canoe, advancing upstream in the short lived disturbance of its own making<sup>(2)</sup>.

The writer conveys that we are entering a region - Arsat's mind - where action has stopped:

... seemed to enter the portals of a land from which the very memory of motion had forever departed (3).

The "river" is personified as:

... the wandering hesitating river, as if enticed irresistibly by the freedom of an open horizon flows straight to the east - to the east that harbors both light and darkness (4).

The river, a way to reach his mind, his subconscious, hesitates and seeks a way out. The east, with its connotation of mystery and exoticism, is where one finds both//darkness of the subconscious life, of sin, and light for consciousness and reasoning. The mind longs for liberation from darkness but the journey continues, and in this gloomy setting we only hear:

The repeated call of some bird, a cry discordant and feeble, skimmed along over the smooth water and lost itself (5).

This ominous bird creates a true feeling of anguish

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(2) Ibid. p. 153.

(3) Ibid. p. 153.

(4) Ibid. p. 153.

(5) Ibid. p. 153.

and unaccomplishment. As we approach the lagoon, we can notice the atmosphere becoming darker, denser... The canoe is given a ghostly aspect. "The carved dragon - head of its prow..." is compared to "some slim and amphibious creature, leaving the water for its lair in the forests"<sup>(6)</sup> that will glide towards the lagoon.

Then we have the creek which is narrow, like a ditch: it is "tortuous fabulously deep: filled with gloom"<sup>(7)</sup> The "narrow creek" is still another image as the river has been to penetrate into Arsat's mind. In the beginning, it was the river which performed this role but as the narrative proceeds, the way into Arsat's subconscious becomes harder and harder.

The darkness is: "mysterious and invincible, the darkness scented and poisonous of impenetrable forests"<sup>(8)</sup> like the labyrinths of mind.

We can see an analogy with this trip along the river in "The Lagoon" with Classical Mythology, where the river Styx separates the world of the living from the world of the dead. In "The Lagoon", however, the journey occurs but the trouble is that nobody is either "really" dead or living, only absent, away from life and action. Below the level of setting, the writer is concerned with mental processes and the dramatic experience of a human being, Arsat.

Contrasted with all this dark imagery we have "glimpses" of light - ... "the thin strip of pure and shining blue of the heaven"<sup>(9)</sup> - because nature is free to watch

(6) Ibid. p. 153.

(7) Ibid. p. 153.

(8) Ibid. p. 153.

(9) Ibid. p. 153.

impassively, the torments that assault mankind. The creek widens, the forest recedes as soon as the white man's canoe reaches the "lagoon". A plausible interpretation for this fact would be that we have finally come to the place where something is going to be revealed.

The creek broadened, opening out into a wide sweep of a stagnant lagoon (10).

The "stagnant" lagoon refers to Arsat's present attitude towards life. He will do nothing except hide from it and from himself. We may say that the "lagoon" is a symbol for isolation, not only physical but also moral.

The natives fear the "lagoon" and therefore avoid Arsat who lives in "this lagoon of weird aspect and ghostly reputation"<sup>(11)</sup>. Arsat is feared because he..."proclaims that he is not afraid to live among spirits that haunt the places abandoned by mankind"<sup>(12)</sup> and, "such a man can disturb the course of fate by glances or words",<sup>(13)</sup> We are led to think that Arsat has committed some wrong deed or has something mysterious to tell by the description of his isolation, as no man would live in such a place without having a powerful reason for it. While all the somber imagery presents Arsat and "The Lagoon", the sky above Arsat's dwelling is of a

... reflected blueness.....  
A fleecy pink cloud drifted high above (14).

The lotus is said to have "silvery blossoms".  
There is some light now, not total darkness as before

(10) Ibid. p. 154.

(11) Ibid. p. 154.

(12) Ibid. p. 154.

(13) Ibid. p. 154.

(14) Ibid. p. 155.

the presentation of the "lagoon". We enter Arsat's hut through the white man "in the dim light of the dwelling" (15).

With this dim light imagery, the writer conveys that we are going to learn more about Arsat; that the shadows are letting in some light that clarifies how and why he went to live alone in that "ghostly" lagoon.

In the hut, we watch Diamelen's - Arsat's mistress' death agony:

her big eyes, wide open, glittered in the gloom staring upwards at the slender rafters, motionless and unseeing (16).

Diamelen is unconscious and Arsat is in despair:

She hears nothing - she hears not me.  
She sees nothing. She sees not me - me. (17)

Arsat cannot live with the idea that Diamelen is abandoning him, and sense(see: eyes; hear: lips)imagery is repeated to show that, after she dies, only the conscious world will be left for him alone to face. And Arsat realizes this.

Red and Dark imagery - Life and Death - portrays, very dramatically, the parting daylight as Diamelen's parting from life.

The enormous conflagration of sunset put out by the swift and stealthy shadows, that, rising like a black and impalpable vapor above the tree-tops, spread over the heaven, extinguishing the crimson glow of floating clouds and the red brilliance of departing daylight. (18)

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(15) Ibid. p. 155.

(16) Ibid. p. 155.

(17) Ibid. p. 156.

(18) Ibid. p. 156.

Diamelen burns - "She breathes and burns, as if with a great fire. She speaks not; She hears not - and burns". (19).

As the fiery sunset that could not come out because of that black and impalpable vapor of superstition, of sin, of prejudice against her equals, for if she had not followed Arsat to that remote place - the isolation symbol - she would have been cared for and therefore would not have met death. So, Diamelen is to die unattended, because she has gone against her people's social traditions. She is to die burning. Before her death, red of life, of sin, is opposed to darkness and stillness of death:

The fire in the bows of the sampan shone faintly in the distance with a hazy red glow. There it died out. (20)

.....  
The land and the water slept invisible, unstimulating and mute. (21)

.....  
...as though there had been nothing left in the world but the glitter of stars ceaseless and vain, through the black stillness of the night. (22)

The writer is the "omniscient narrator" meditating upon how impotent man is when facing the mysteries of life and death. Death is only, "an unquiet and mysterious country of inextinguishable desires and fears" (23) insensitive to our grief and sorrow.

Sounds, stirring murmurs foreshadow that Arsat is no longer to keep silence about his past:

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(19) Ibid. p. 156.

(20) Ibid. p. 157.

(21) Ibid. p. 157.

(22) Ibid. p. 157.

(23) Ibid. p. 157.

A plaintive murmur rose in the night, a murmur saddening and startling... (24)  
.....  
Sounds hesitating and vague floated in the air round him, shaped themselves slowly into words..(25)

Through flashback technique, Arsat finally unfolds his story to the white man, his friend: before daylight (consciousness; reality) comes and the enchantment of love and passion are over with Diamelen's death "I shall speak to you of love. Speak in the night. Speak before both night and love are gone - and the eyes of day look upon my sorrow and my shame, upon my blackened face."<sup>(26)</sup>

His "blackened", sinful face expresses his tormented conscience. Here, Conrad also opposes the native to the white man not only by the color of their skin but by their reactions: the native, simple, sincere, and the white man, distant, ambitious:

You went away from my country in the pursuit of your desires, which we men of the islands cannot understand (27).  
.....  
He liked him (Arsat) - not so much perhaps as a man likes his favorite dog... (28)

Arsat's voice grows louder as he tells the white man that his brother and he were brave warriors; how he had Diamelen and everything had changed in his life. How he asked his brother's help and how he had helped him with advice and action. And Arsat was proud of his brother:

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(24) Ibid. p. 157.

(25) Ibid. p. 158.

(26) Ibid. p. 158.

(27) Ibid. p. 158.

(28) Ibid. p. 158.



We are men who take what we want and can hold it against many. (29)

The day in which the brothers are to kidnap Diamelen is all marked by red - for desire and passion - and darkness, for sin and treason imagery:

The lights blazed on the water, but behind the boats there was darkness. (30)

.....  
The water swallowed our fire and we floated back to the shore that was dark only here and there the glimmer of embers. (31)

Conrad describes their escape by means of very poetical imagery:

We skirted the sand beaches where the sea speaks in whispers to the land; and the gleam of white sand flashed back past our boat... (32)

Imagery of brightness is again used:

The sun rose..... (33)  
...We flew in the light and heat. (34)  
... The sun was high. The heat clung to my back...(35)

Everything is light, warm, sunny as are the three young people. Beautiful and healthy they were.... Courage was theirs, passion was his and Diamelen's...

Sounds are heard and the whole nature seems as if alert to what is to happen:

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(29) Ibid. p. 160.

(30) Ibid. p. 160.

(31) Ibid. p. 160.

(32) Ibid. p. 160.

(33) Ibid. p. 160.

(34) Ibid. p. 161.

(35) Ibid. p. 161.

...a murmur powerful and gentle, a murmur vast and faint; the murmur of trembling leaves... (36)

.....  
A breath of warm air... passed with a mournful sound - a breath loud and short like an uneasy sigh of the dreaming earth(37).

Nature foreshadows the mounting tragedy: "The sun was half-way down the sky already... (38)" and Arsat's brother's wife was drowning, too. The "river" image returns to the narrative: "I saw the water again; the mouth of a broad river (39)".

Arsat's desire for Diamelen was too strong for him to go back. So, he steps forward in his loss of identity and again, imagery helps to make the scene more realistic: "I saw a low hut above the black mud and a small canoe (40)".

The adjectives emphasize Arsat's descent to his private hell, and with the "small" canoe he will cross the "river" - entering his subconscious world of isolation from where he will only come out after Diamelen is gone - that will take him to his future "loneliness". The Climax is reached when Arsat, pressed by passion abandons his brother to the hands of their enemies to escape with Diamelen. He had made his choice:

Then I looked at her, Tuan, I pushed the canoe (41).

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(36) Ibid. p. 162.

(37) Ibid. p. 162.

(38) Ibid. p. 162.

(39) Ibid. p. 163.

(40) Ibid. p. 163.

(41) Ibid. p. 163.

He heard his brother call him thrice and yet he wanted  
to live for his passion:

Was she not there in that canoe?  
And could I not with her find a country  
where death is forgotten - where death is  
unknown (42).

Arsat betrays his brother three times, as Saint Peter  
has denied Jesus three times: a man who had been a brother  
to him, who had given his teaching and friendship to  
Peter. Like Peter, Arsat prefers life to death, and  
like Peter he repents from his deed and praises his  
brother's name. After telling his story, Arsat is only:  
"an indistinct and silent figure above the dying embers  
of the fire"<sup>(43)</sup>.

The "lagoon" image returns to the story: "Over the  
lagoon a mist drifting and low had crept, erasing slowly  
the glittering images of the stars"<sup>(44)</sup>.

The atmosphere is gloomy and speaks of death: "A breath  
of wind made him shiver... the drooping leaves of the  
palms rattled together with a mournful and expiring  
sound".<sup>(45)</sup>

and yet, Arsat confesses: Tuan, I loved my brother.<sup>(46)</sup>

And he proclaims his love alone, amidst the indifferent  
nature which surrounds him. And the reader is left with a  
problem to solve: Did he or did he not love his  
brother?

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(42) Ibid. p. 163.

(43) Ibid. p. 163.

(44) Ibid. p. 163.

(45) Ibid. p. 164.

(46) Ibid. p. 164.

Did he envy his brother's bravery or did he not?

This ambiguity is expressed when Arsat bursts out:

What did I care who died? I wanted peace in my own heart (47).

Death arrives for Diamelen and the natural elements are used to describe it: A breeze was coming in fitful puffs ..... After a chill gust of wind there were a few seconds of perfect calm and absolute silence. (48)

After she dies Arsat is slowly liberated from the spell of passion, and bright (light) imagery illustrates hope and renewal:

The sun had risen. The mist lifted  
.....  
..... the unveiled lagoon ..... (49)

The "lagoon" has lost its gloomy, weird aspect, isolation is now over. The subconscious is set free and consciousness comes painfully back to Arsat.

The writer uses an old symbol - the eagle - for the indomitable quest for liberation every man carries within him:

A white eagle rose over it (the lagoon) with a slanting and ponderous flight, reached the clear sunshine and appeared dazzling brilliant... (50)

But, does Arsat see the eagle? No, he was in the hut with his Diamelen, still wrapped up in sorrow and superstition. Only the white man sees it. Arsat,

(47) Ibid. p. 164.

(48) Ibid. p. 164.

(49) Ibid. p. 164.

(50) Ibid. p. 164.

although light imagery surrounds him, cannot "see" anything; he will not admit his reason for living has finished:

A great brilliance burst upon the lagoon,  
sparked on the rippling water.....  
In the merciless sunshine the whisper of  
unconscious life grew louder, speaking in an  
incomprehensible voice round the dumb  
darkness of that human sorrow. (51)

Arsat remains in the dark abysses of his conscious guilt while nature opposes its bright indifference to his suffering. He reassures the white man:

Now I can see nothing - see nothing.  
There is no light and no peace in the world;  
but there is death - death for many. (52)

And he makes his decision to go back and avenge his brother's death:

I left him in the midst of enemies, but I am  
going back now. (53)

and,

In a little while I shall see clear enough to  
strike - to strike - (54)

Arsat is puzzled; he cannot "see" yet, cannot understand himself but has hopes and stares at nature in search of an answer. He stays alone facing his conscience:

He stood lonely in the searching sunshine;  
and he looked beyond the great light of a  
cloudless day into the darkness of a world of  
illusion. (55)

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(51) Ibid. p. 165.

(52) Ibid. p. 165.

(53) Ibid. p. 165.

(54) Ibid. p. 165.

(55) Ibid. p. 166.

Thus Joseph Conrad ends his study on human character, his portrait of the man in crisis, driven by mysterious, obscure forces which divide and perplex him. Arsat has killed himself in his brother: he kills what is best in him.

When Diamelen dies, he feels empty and understands that everything had been an illusion and he had left his brother to die for nothing.

Arsat's absolute isolation took him to an almost complete loss of his own consciousness, resulting in a self-negation that asks for a compensatory act of re-equilibrium.

And here we come to the end of the process: abstention certainly corrodes the soul more than the imperfect contact with our fellow-men.

The exotic, remote setting, the superabundant imagery are basic to convey the atmosphere for this story of isolation and failure...