

DISCERNING THE NEED FOR GOD IN YOUNG MEN

A Study of Joseph Conrad's "Lord Jim"

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The conventional interpretation of Lord Jim casts Jim as an intelligent, competent young officer in the British merchant marine service. After several promotions he has an established reputation and bright prospects for a ship of his own. But a turn of bad luck results in an injury serious enough to require hospitalization in a south Asian port, and he is left behind to recover.

When his recovery is complete he accepts the assignment of Chief Mate on the tramp steamer, PATNA, which is scheduled to transport 800 Muslims on their pilgrimage to Mecca. Several days into the journey and in the black of night, the PATNA hits an unseen, partially submerged object that causes serious damage to the bow of the ship. Only a secondary, unsound bulkhead prevents the ocean from immediately rushing into the main cargo hold and sinking the ship, "like a rock." The 800 Muslim passengers are mostly asleep on the deck during the hot night, and are not disturbed by the accident.

The officers of the ship face a serious ethical challenge. They are certain the secondary bulkhead will give way any second and when it does the ship will immediately sink. There are only a few lifeboats and when the ship sinks most will drown. Once the 800 Muslims become aware of the situation, chaos is certain to follow in the fight over who will be in the lifeboats, and who will die.

All of the officers but Jim quickly decide to abandon the ship and the Muslims and escape in a life boat. Jim at first remains on the bridge as duty requires, but is convinced the ship will soon go down with, "all hands." At the last second, and just when the other officers are about to pull away in the life boat, Jim jumps over the side and joins them. Later they are rescued by another ship and learn that the PATNA did not sink, but was spotted by another ship and towed into port. None of the Muslims were hurt or lost.

A formal inquiry into conduct of the ship's officers is convened. All the other officers disappear in the vast expanse of southern ocean and leave Jim alone to stand before the

inquiry. He is stripped of his merchant marine license, and thereafter runs from his perceived act of cowardice to one port and then to the next, and from one insignificant job to another. Then, quite unexpectedly, he is given the opportunity to run a trading outpost in the remote jungle village of Patusan.

The isolation of Patusan insures knowledge of Jim's act of cowardice will never become known to the locals, and thus he embraces it as another chance at life and an opportunity for redemption. The locals are so surprised by his arrival they view him as an apparition. He soon learns the Malays are being victimized by the Muslims led by Rajah Allang and Sherif Ali. In a series of heroic feats, and near miraculous accomplishments, Jim ends the victimization, establishes peace between the two groups, and thereafter rules as "Tuan Jim," that is, "Lord Jim." He is a benevolent and effective "Lord," until evil visits the community in the person of a desperate pirate named Brown. Jim makes the mistake of responding to Brown with compassion which allows Brown to carry out the execution of the local king's son.

Jim knows his rein as "Tuan Jim," is over and that there is no place to go. He walks up to the local king with a nobility of spirit and is shot dead.

Did he find redemption? The common interpretation of the story says yes. But Conrad begs us to look beyond the simple assumption of redemption for a man who was guilty of one act of cowardice. Marlowe, who is the narrator of the story, and the person who supports Jim through all of his tribulations, says of Jim the last time he saw him alive:

"For me that white figure (Jim) seemed to stand at the heart of a vast enigma." (Page 172)

And Conrad says repeatedly, "he is one of us." (Pages 2, 23, 40, 48, 115, 166, 169, 185, and 213).

". . . but then he was one of us . . . and yet the mystery of his attitude got hold of me as though he had been an individual in the forefront of his kind, as if the obscure truth involved were momentous enough to affect mankind's conception of its self . . ." (Page 48).

THE PATTERN

Marlowe, in an effort to understand Jim's character consults with Stein, an old and very wise man. Stein says of men:

"We want in so many different ways to be,' he began again. 'This magnificent butterfly finds a little heap of dirt and sits still on it; but man he will never on his heap of mud keep still. He want to be so, and again he want to be so . . .' He moved his hand up, then down . . . 'He wants to be a saint, and he wants to be a devil - and every time he shuts his eyes he sees himself as a very fine fellow - so fine as he can never be . . . in a dream . . ." (Page 109),

"And because you not always can keep your eyes shut there comes the

real trouble - the heart pain - the world pain, I tell you my friend, it is not good for you to find you cannot make your dream come true, for the reason that you not strong enough are, or not clever enough . . .” (Page 110).

The first manifestation of the pattern described by Stein in Jim’s life occurred when young Jim was sent to a training ship of the mercantile marine:

“Having a steady head with an excellent physique, he was very smart aloft. His station was in the fore-top, and often from there he looked down, with the contempt of a man destined to shine in the midst of dangers . . .” (Page 4).

“He saw himself saving people from sinking ships, cutting away masts in a hurricane, swimming through surf with a line; or as a lonely castaway, bare-footed and half naked; walking on uncovered reefs in search of shell-fish to stave off starvation. He confronted savages on tropical shores, quelled mutinies on the high seas, and in a small boat upon the ocean kept up the hearts of despairing men - always an example of devotion to duty, and as unflinching as a hero in a book.” (Page 4).

Jim was lost in heroic fantasies when the call went out to, “Man the cutter!” Jim was disoriented just long enough to enable other boys to get to the cutter first and was not allowed on the boat. Later on the lower deck the bowman described his heroic experience rescuing a man in the water. Jim withdrew and brooded over his failure to make his dream come true. Gradually he reasserted his heroic self-image:

“The gale had ministered to a heroism as spurious as its own pretense of terror . . . he was rather glad he had not gone into the cutter, since a lower achievement had served the turn . . . when all men flinched, then - he felt sure - he alone would know how to deal with the spurious menace of wind and sea . . .” (Page 6).

Though Jim quickly reasserted his heroic sense of self, it is important to note a grander vision of heroism was necessary. Whereas initially Jim’s heroic fantasies are not comparative to other potential heroes, they mutated into heroic fantasies wherein, “. . . all men flinched . . .”

Conrad reminds us several times that opportunities for heroism do not come of themselves, and, indeed, do not come at all for many. Life settles down to a common and predicible rhythm. It does for Jim. His career at sea is satisfactory, and his future prospects are promising. His life, like most, could have easily run its course without further incident. But that is not to be Jim’s destiny.

The incident on the PATNA provided an event wherein, “all men flinched.’ Jim had the opportunity to realize his heroic dream. But there is a big problem. Any reasonable man would conclude the PATNA will sink like a “lump of lead” at any second. More important, there is no way for the world to know of a potential act of heroism. There is not another ship nearby to witness the event. The officers who abandon the ship will

most certainly not relay a tale of Jim's heroism. Rather they will judge him stupid, perhaps deranged. Jim jumps overboard. (*Chapters 7 & 8*).

Is there a grander vision of heroism that can yet again establish a path for Jim's redemption? Yes . . . one. To be a god. Patusan provides Jim the opportunity to play god. He is received in Patusan as an apparition, and after a series of heroic acts, and near miraculous accomplishments, revered as "Tuan Jim." But his divine stature crumbles when he fails to respond appropriately to the evil incarnate in the desperate pirate, Brown. Playing god is the last possible fantasy, and with that failure his life ends.

ANALYSIS

In repeatedly referring to Jim as "one of us," Conrad is trying to avoid characterizing Jim's experience as unique, or markedly different from other men. Conrad clearly intends the pattern of Jim's life to be applied to other characters in his story. What Conrad knew by instinct and experience must be translated into a more objective analysis. In generating a succession of increasingly dramatic fantasies of a heroic self, Jim does not rely on objective knowledge of self, nor any objective assessment of recognizable attributes that are unique, and would lead other persons to the conclusion that he could rightfully expect heroic accomplishment. Rather, the heroic fantasy arises solely from within Jim and represents an expression of need. Jim needs to be heroic . . . why? Jim's most important needs are not being met and his fantasies represent his subconscious assessment of the kind of person he'll have to become in order for those needs to be satisfied. In effect he is saying to himself . . . "the only way I can expect the kind of recognition and significance for which I yearn is to rescue people in distress, single handedly save the ship in a hurricane", etc. Failure of the dream does not eliminate need, for that need is an immutable fact of the human male. Failure can produce only three outcomes: death, or a more grand fantasy are two of the possibilities. Before we discuss the third possible outcome, we must look at other characters in the story. The two that appear on the surface to be radically different from Jim are the very successful and highly regarded Captain Brierly, and the despicable Brown.

As mentioned above, Stein said:

" . . . man . . . He want to be so, and again he want to be so . . . He wants to be a saint, and he wants to be a devil - and every time he shuts his eyes he sees himself as a very fine fellow - so fine as he can never be . . . in a dream . . ." (Page 109).

The need to "be somebody," to feel significant and respected . . . in short, to feel loved, is the deepest characteristic of the human male. And it is utterly without morality. Morality is derivative behavior . . . the response to a loving mother, a loving father . . . to an institution, culture or god that bestows meaning, significance, and love. A human male, aware of the inner need, and bonded to only one source, will do anything, whether heroic or evil, for the apparent satisfaction of that need. To be a saint . . . or a devil are equally attractive. Brown, when he arrives at the same state of disillusionment as Jim, chooses a life as an evil pirate. (Pages 176 - 206).

Jim instinctively understands the similarity between himself and Brown, and as a result

of the perceived redemption of his own life, extends compassion to Brown. But letting him escape with his life, is a big mistake. Brown does not appreciate the compassion. Rather he judges Jim weak and stupid, and seizes the opportunity to execute the king's son.

Captain Brierly, on the other hand, is a hero in the eyes of many. He is given command of the finest ship in the south pacific fleet at the earliest possible age. He wins medals and awards, and certainly believes himself to be a superior person. After acting as one of the assessors at a formal inquiry into Jim's conduct on the PATNA, he expresses exasperation to Marlowe and then methodically commits suicide. (Pages 29-35).

Why? Brierly sees in Jim a man like himself, and understands fully the impossibility of the situation on the PATNA, and the likelihood of the ship going down like "a lump of lead." He realizes Jim had been caught in an impossible ethical dilemma, and that he would likely make the same decision. That forces him to concede his own heroic accomplishments are a product of chance, and not the expression of inherent superiority. His disillusionment ends in a death little different than Jim's demise as, "Tuan Jim."

Jim, Brierly, and Brown act out their adventure in the oceans of Southeast Asia at end of the 19th Century. Hardly a region of interest for modern young men seeking fulfillment of heroic dreams, but the patterns set forth by Conrad are surprisingly consistent through time.

The following are modern examples of Jim:

- ✓ Young men dream of becoming famous professional athletes, and spend billions of dollars reinforcing that fantasy idolizing current famous athletes, attending athletic contests, and buying sports memorabilia.
- ✓ Young men dream of saving the world from aliens, mutant criminals, and evil thugs and spend billions of dollars reinforcing those fantasies by repeatedly attending their favorite action thriller movies. The movie industry in the United States knows full well their target audience is the 16 to 25 year old males, and spend nearly all their resources catering to that target audience. The formula for all movies and television programming directed at this audience of young men is: hero finds himself in trouble, hero gets into deeper trouble, hero gets out of trouble through his own efforts.
- ✓ Young men dream of becoming rich in the American technology industry first through invention, business acumen, or, lastly, just plain luck. They work for stock options and no salary in the belief that one day their dream will be real.

Examples of Brown:

- ✓ Desperately needy young men not bonded to a positive value system are devoid of morality and without an identity. When they face the critical moment when they must choose to be, "a saint . . . or a devil," rage propels them toward the dark side and a dream emerges of power and the ability to exterminate life at will. They spend millions of dollars on weapons, and hundreds of hours devising shocking and cataclysmic events to make known their rage, to become a feared tyrant.

- ✓ Desperately needy young men who are taunted and ridiculed by peers for lacking the intelligence and/or physical qualities required to become a professional athlete, a brilliant technology innovator, or an action hero who will save the world. These young men are pushed into the “devil” fantasy and dream of deadly revenge against their tormentors.

Examples of Brierly:

- ✓ Men with a successful career and a nice family who abruptly walk away from their career and their family, and run off with a young woman.
- ✓ Men who made fortunes in the American stock market during the 1920's, and when the stock collapsed in October of 1929 committed suicide.
- ✓ Men with important and lucrative positions in corporate management who are suddenly dissatisfied with their wealth and position and devise schemes to defraud stock holders, other corporations, friends, and family.
- ✓ Men with trusted positions as investment advisors or managers with lucrative compensation who decide it is not enough and exploit they clients and/or the funds they manage for their own benefit.

The pattern established by Conrad and oft repeated in the modern period is always self-destructive. Yet the behavior is so pervasive as to beg the question . . . why? Is man meant to self-destruct? Is the modern culture, which has developed the atomic bomb, landed on the moon, and developed the technology to track every human on the planet, completely ignorant of man's deepest and most enduring nature?

THE THIRD WAY - CHRIST

A young man at the juncture of good and evil longs for significance and meaning and spends nearly all of his time and energy imagining the person he will have to become to be worthy. It is a haunting and lonely endeavor. As we have already established, if left to his own devices the young man will embark on a self-destructive path. What to do?

The need felt by the young man is a need for Christ. How can we say it is a need for Christ? Because the dream held obsessively in the young man's mind always portrays the most spectacular behavior and the most heroic consequence that can be imagined. And left unsatisfied over time that need will generate more spectacular dreams until he dreams of being a god.

We know that need is a need for Christ because no matter the degree of success or wealth it is never enough. The wealthy corporate executive is not wealthy enough and chases a corrupt delusion in a effort to obtain more wealth. The young man did rescue a person in distress and finds the emotional reward marginal. Jim's dream steadily becomes more

grand because deep within he feels that's what it will take to be noticed, loved, esteemed.

We know that need is a need for Christ because an identity built on a comparison to other men will collapse, often quickly and unexpectedly. Like the star athlete who receives media attention and public accolades until he retires and discovers he is quickly forgotten. Or the Jim who really believes he is "Tuan Jim," only to discover he does have the wisdom to deal with evil and that evil quickly destroys him. Or the Brierly who really thinks he is superior to other men when an unexpected insight into Jim's experience exposes his identity to be a "house built on sand," (Matthew 7:26) which quickly washes away and causes his suicide. Or the famous writer who realizes in his older years that he is surrounded with "pilot fish" who yearn to feed off of his fame and really care little about him, and the revelation leads to his suicide.

We know that need is a need for Christ because every young man's dreams contain the most divine like qualities and accomplishments he can imagine.

A young man at the critical juncture of good and evil does not understand his need for God or his need for love and will not understand unless he is told.

"But they will not ask his help unless they believe in him, and they will not believe in him unless they have heard of him, and they will not hear of him unless they get a preacher, and they will never have a preacher unless one is sent . . ." (Romans 10:14, New Jerusalem Bible).

The young man at the critical juncture of good and evil will not bond to good unless to do so renders his life significant.

*"Lord, you examine me and know me,
you know me if I am standing or sitting,
you read my thoughts from far away,
whether I walk or lie down, you are watching,
you know every detail of my conduct.*

*The word is not even on my tongue,
Lord, before you know all about it;
close behind and close in front you fence me around,
shielding me with your hand.
Such knowledge is beyond my understanding,
a height to which my mind cannot attain.*

*Where could I go to escape your spirit?
Where could I flee from your presence?
If I climb the heavens, you are there,
there too, if I lie in Sheol.*

*If I flew to the point of the sunrise,
or westward across the sea,
your hand would still be guiding me,
your right hand holding me.*

*If I asked darkness to cover me,
and light to become night around me,*

*that darkness would not be dark to you,
night would be as light as day.*

*It was you who created by inmost self,
and put me together in my mother's womb;
for all these mysteries I thank you:
for the wonder of myself, for the wonder of your works.*

*You know me through and through,
from having watched my bones take shape
when I was being formed in secret,
knitted together in the limbo of the womb.*

*You had scrutinized by every action,
all were recorded in your book,
my days listed and determined,
even before the first of them occurred . . . “
(Psalm 139:1-17)*

The morality of the young man before the bond with Christ is established means nothing for all morality is derivative behavior. That is, the willingness to appropriate the prescriptive behavior termed “moral conduct” must be preceded by the gift of love. That is why Christ died for us while we were still sinners.

God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have always, since the being of creation, taking the initiate in communicating love and meaning.