



Review Article

NEGATIVE CAPABILITY IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S LORD JIM

*Saffeen N. Arif

Dept. of English, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Koya University, Erbil, Iraq

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900), which is one of his masterpieces, is examined in relation with what has been critically termed as *negative capability*. In addition to showing how analyzing the phenomenal aspects of that capability helps in supporting and developing the novel's organic unity, emphasis is put on character's steady movement from ignorance to self-destruction by the end of the novel. It is likewise laid on situations where such a capability is put to the question and shown to have none of the advantages earlier assigned to it.

Keywords:

Capability,
Ambition,
Romantic,
Daydreaming,
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INTRODUCTION

In its broadest sense, *Negative Capability* refers to a writer's capability of losing themselves or being selfless as much as self-expression in a literary work is concerned. This entails the writer's negative response to logic or reason and his abnegation of "his mental identity by immersing it sympathetically and spontaneously within the subject described" (Baldick, 2000: 167-68). In a letter written in Dec. 1817, John Keats (1795-1821), the well-known Romantic poet, talks about a literary quality "which Shakespeare possessed so enormously . . . Negative Capability, that is, when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." On the other hand, "with a great poet the sense of beauty [overcomes] every other consideration, or rather obliterates all considerations" (quoted in *ibid*), though S. T. Coleridge (1772-1834), Keats argues, would be "incapable of remaining content with half knowledge" (quoted in Abrams, 1999: 174). *Negative Capability* is often considered to be a desirable quality in a poet, since it implies a "judicious self-assurance," as well as the power to "refrain from adhering to customary standards of fact" (Mikics, 2007: 201).

The Romantic poet, and the man-of-letters by implication, secures, presumably . . . enough space to examine the validity and viability of the emotions he feels, not on the grounds of fact and reason but rather on the basis of experiencing their joy and ecstasy. It is, therefore an indispensable part of the Romantic experience. Capability becomes negative when artistic beauty is extremely sought at the expense of logic and reason. The Romantics always held reason to be secondary to art. This renunciation of 'fact and reason' can be depicted as contesting a second important sense of agreement or accord. With this strategy of exploring the literal foundation of meaning and the factual status of belief, Keats:

. . . undermines an empirical topos whereby correspondence is held to be the key relation underpinning meaning and truth – respectively, between the referring sign and its referent, and between the idea and its object. Through the 'correspondence' of letters, then, Keats subverts the 'correspondence' of epistemological harmony (Milnes, 2010: 66).

Particularly, there is an unexpected convergence between traditional readings of *Negative Capability* as a species of skepticism, and postmodern–historicist detections of relativity (Milnes, 2010: 72). When departing from a skeptical point of departure with the intention of building factual evidence, the

*Corresponding author: Saffeen N. Arif,
Dept. of English, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Koya University, Erbil, Iraq.

Romantic thinks first of keeping his beliefs intact no matter how different or impractical they seem to prove to be throughout the process of putting to test what has been held as sacred emotions and feelings. The term has been borrowed here in an attempt to account for the reason why Conrad's major character, Jim, loses the capability of logical reasoning when it is mostly called for.

Lord Jim: Conrad's Quest for Truth

The reason why *Lord Jim* (1900) is sometimes viewed by critics as Conrad's greatest novel, or at least his least sea tale, is that it is a psychological insight into Jim, the eponymous hero of the novel, providing Jim's motivations and searching and probing "in meticulous detail" his inner life. In doing so, Conrad extensively and successfully employs two techniques, namely, the multiple points of view and the flashbacks (Rollyson, 2001: 212). The surface structure of *Lord Jim* as a novel of sea adventure is in direct contrast to its more complicated narrative framework concealing beneath it, as it were, skeptical handling of such traditional moral notions as heroism or the value of sympathy or that of a code of conduct simply by obliterating the conventional narrative structures underlying these ethics (Larson, 2004: 14). Jim's inner struggle is pitted against such universal values as man's capability to overcome conceit, error, and guilt (Watt, 2004: 104). Jim's pursuit of truth proves in no way feasible as it is basically carried out in isolation from his true self, let alone from the entire real world. Thus, the form of the novel seems to be in keeping with Conrad's complicated perspective of truth.

Lord Jim, as largely told from the impartial perspective of Marlow, follows the story of, Jim, a wandering English sailor, in part to determine the truth of Jim's "moral cowardice" of abandoning passengers behind to die. Strangely, Jim neither denies it nor does he give any satisfactory explanation for it (Galens, 2002: 51-52). In *Lord Jim* is skillfully combined Conrad's full scope of skepticism and romanticism. The basic error that Jim makes is that the power of his imagination always takes control of his action. As a result, the very thing that ultimately brings about his downfall is his fatal sense of identification (Bloom, 2005: 217-218). Broadly, the Conradian hero is a dreamer, a quester in possession of qualities that raise him high above the level of his ordinary peers. He is fine, gentle, well-mannered, and chivalrous, yet, in practice, he proves a failure, not due to his lack of courage, but because he, as Conrad textually puts it, "possesses Ability in the abstract" (*Lord Jim*: 3).

Much of the action in Conrad's novel revolves around the scandalous and widely notorious desertion of a pilgrim ship (the *Patna*) made by Jim, along with a few of his companion sailors, which, actually, leaves in him an indelible mark of shame and disgrace. Jim's initial failure as a sailor overshadows much of his later career and culminates in his final self-destruction. The *Patna* incident illustrates how the young sailor falls short of rising to the challenge of taking control of a steamship (the *Patna*) and delivering 800 pilgrims to Mecca. Quite contrary to how sailors should behave and what they should exactly do when their ships appear to be at risk, Jim and his fellow crew just lower a lifeboat to save their own lives. Although Jim, at first, hesitates to join the other sailors, he impulsively jumps to the lifeboat.

Conrad registers skillfully what it feels like for his protagonist to respond instantly to something towards which his mind, as well as his soul, is by no means prepared:

[The *Patna*] seemed higher than a wall; she loomed like a cliff over the boat . . . I wished I could die . . . there was no going back. It was as if I had jumped into a well, into an everlasting deep hole . . . (*Lord Jim*: 82).

There are two explanations for Conrad's image of Jim's act of jumping down the seemingly sinking ship. The first is the possibility of the lifeboat as becoming like a personal dungeon made up of Jim's own fears and feelings of guilt and remorse. The second, on the other hand, links the boat to a deep well out of which there is no conceivable way and that is because it is a metaphorical reference to the lifelong consequences of deserting the ship. To be publically disgraced is the thing that Jim's mind, conditioned, as it were, by imaginary heroic deeds, finds it extremely unbearable, for it abrogates entirely any prospects for magnificent glory. Hence, what disturbs Jim most is "to find the nature of his burden as well known to everybody as though he had gone about all the time carrying it on his shoulders" (*Lord Jim*: 146). His grand romantic vision has no place for errors or shortcomings whatsoever to disrupt his daydreaming or spoil the idealized image he has earlier formed of himself.

Contrary to what has been expected, the ship survives. Having lost his certificate on account of an Inquiry, Jim passes through a harsh trauma before he, with the help of his close friend Marlow, takes on the trading post of Patusan, In Patusan where Jim has come for self-redemption, he finds himself once more in an impasse caused by a British looter named Gentleman Brown. Feeling responsible for the Chief's son's death, Jim accepts the death penalty from the Chief who shoots him in the chest. To Marlow, Jim's death is heroic, resulting in Jim's redemption. Since the truth about this is vague and unclear, it is in keeping with the moral ambiguity that characterizes Conrad and modernist fiction in general (Galens, 2002: 51-52).

Lord Jim and the Problem of Relativity

Based on his indulgence in reading adventure fiction whose outcome persists in his boyish and imaginary bravados, Jim is extremely enchanted by his adolescent daydreams (Collits, 2005: 125):

On the lower deck in the babel of two hundred voices he would forget himself, and beforehand live in his mind the sea-life of light literature. He saw himself saving people from sinking ships, cutting away masts in a hurricane, swimming through a surf with a line; or as a lonely castaway, barefooted and half naked . . . (*Lord Jim*: 5).

Part of Jim's unfruitful and "unregenerate adolescence," as Collits would like to call it, is his boyish ambition to become a hero (2003: 136). What Jim cannot comprehend, however, is that such immature fantasies suspend his power of sound judgment. His sense of romantic heroism, even though it stands against the boring realities of everyday life, blocks his recognition of his psychological flaw (Collits, 2005: 129).

His sense of hubris almost blinds him to his essential defects; he thinks of himself as "pretty safe," and it all depends upon him: "I have lots of confidence in myself" (*Lord Jim*: 239). Dramatic irony serves as an indicator of the wide gulf between the hero's heightened view of his abilities and the bitter reality he has chosen to set aside. Jim's "missed opportunity" to achieve heroism is practically equivalent to the absolute disgrace he has to face as a result of the central "Patna" event. The glory Jim has been ardently seeking is therefore ascribed to someone else, the French lieutenant, who brings the ship safely to its port (Collits, 2005: 129). The French lieutenant is a foil to Jim; by remaining calm and doing what is proper, he keeps order aboard the *Patna* in time of danger. He sees Jim as man whose main motivation on the *Patna* is fear. Thus, to him it is by no means shameful to be a coward, as cowardice is an inborn characteristic (Paris, 2005: 116). Chester, another man whose action measures the degree of Jim's success, survives and succeeds because he (Chester) sees "things exactly as they are" rather than in terms of social prejudice (Paris, 2005: 113). In the shadow of his own persistent inadequacies, Jim misses the other opportunity for redemption. In Patusan is provided "answers to [Jim's] need to gain honor by his own efforts" (Collits, 2005: 137). It is in Patusan, however, that Marlow's initial negative impression of Jim as a person lacking in discipline, restraint and devotion to duty is amended. Initially, Jim, Marlow thinks, has been motivated by a magnified self-image which he refuses to give up for one of trite insufficiency (Paris, 2005: 112).

At Patusan, the fact that "... in the emergency, Jim sees with his imagination rather than with his eyes" renders him completely vulnerable to the treachery of Gentleman Brown (Rollyson, 2001: 214). Jim's impending failure is due to his error of judgement. He is confident that the "worst thing he [Brown] could do would be to kill me, I suppose. I don't think for a moment he would" (*Lord Jim*: 239). Stein, the one who has given Jim an entrée to Patusan, sees in him an incurable "romantic" whose idealized conception of himself and of his goals never matches reality, the matter which explains his notorious jump from the *Patna* into the lifeboat. Yet, equal to Jim's lofty image of himself are the severe frustrations that are bound to happen. For a man like Jim, living out of the dream is unbearable. Therefore, since daydreaming is integral to Jim's personality, the only cure as prescribed by Stein, is to follow the dream (or "the destructive element") even with closed eyes to avoid seeing the ugly reality, no matter what the outcome would look like (Paris, 2005: 120-122): "In the destructive element immerse ... That was the way. To follow the dream, and again to follow the dream ..." (*Lord Jim*: 156-157).

In Stein's Perception, dreaming is as destructive as immersing in the "destructive element." So intricate is Stein's image involving such phenomena as birth, dream, and death. Figuratively, dreaming is like falling into the sea climbing out of which, paradoxically, results in drowning: "A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavor to do, he drowns ..." (*Lord Jim*: 156). The statement exemplifies Jim's case. What Stein must have meant is the negative rather than the positive side of being romantic. In commenting on the dangers of excessive indulgence in romantic dreams, Bowra argues that the worst state is that of illusion or self-deception to which the inattentive dreamer might be dragged by the power of his imagination.

Thus, he might be deluded about the facts of the external world in support of his private version of them. Bowra's argument goes on as follows: Because the Romantic outlook sets so high a value on the individual self, it runs the risk of allowing men to live in their private universes without paying sufficient attention to what happens outside them. In this condition they make their own laws and try to apply them to the common world. (1961: 274). Apart from any commitment to social or moral responsibilities, the focus of Stein's philosophy is on Jim's relationship to himself.

As a spokesman for romantic individualism, Stein diagnoses the trouble with Jim as lying not in the human community where Jim lives, but rather in "an existential condition from which Jim suffers in an especially intense way" (Paris, 2005: 119). Stein stands as another foil to Jim, and the butterflies and beetles Stein collects reflect and symbolize both Stein's romantic and practical sides. Unlike Jim, Stein is prepared to react instantly when action is called for (Rollyson, 2001: 214). Such species of insects reflect man's lack of power to overcome his fundamental fragility and fatal flaws:

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 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 (*Lord Jim*: 155).

Digging for another reason behind's the failure of Jim's ability, one may find it out in Jim's isolation. Isolation which is one of the prominent issues in *Lord Jim* plays a vital role in Jim's experience as far as the Patusan episode is concerned. In Patusan, Jim thrives in such seclusion that even his success is marked by egotism. His isolation proves to be fatal (Rollyson, 2001: 214). Jim's physical isolation from the world is indicative of a spiritual one, the matter which intensively reduces his chances of success and even survival. Therefore, another possibility of Jim's being taken unawares is most likely to occur so much as Jim's own world is fragile and vulnerable. As long as he feels shut up from the outside world for something he did in the past, it is in no way feasible, for those who are close to him, to get to his inner world which remains largely unexplored. After being in close contact with him, neither Marlow nor Jewel, the woman that Jim has come to love sincerely in Patusan, is capable of knowing who Jim really is and what really he needs from life. This is how Marlow sees Jim in the last stage of the novel:

... he appears no longer to me as I saw him last—a white speck catching all the dim light left upon a somber coast and the darkened sea—but greater and more pitiful in the loneliness of his soul, that remains even for her who loved him best a cruel and insoluble mystery. (*Lord Jim*: 290).

Jim who fails to act like a gentleman is ironically set against Gentleman Brown who is full of contempt for morals and for those who are unmanly: "Standing at the gate of the other world in the guise of a beggar, he [Brown] had slapped this world's face, he had spat on it, he had thrown upon it an immensity of scorn and revolt at the bottom of his misdeeds" (*Lord Jim*: 282). Brown stands for the return of Jim's repressed guilt. Jim is bound to Brown by means of "secret sharing" (Collits, 2005: 134): "And there ran through the rough talk a vein of subtle reference to their common blood, an assumption

of common experience; a sickening suggestion of common guilt, of secret knowledge that was like a bond of their minds and of their hearts. (*Lord Jim*: 285). Despite his momentary lapse, Jim is a real gentleman, a 'Tuan' or lord who cannot compete with the villainy of a buccaneer. Therefore, the villain (Brown) is bound to win (Peck, 2001: 172). Jim's final suicidal action links him with Brierly, another captain whose marine career overshadows his entire life. Whereas Jim's suicidal death is a symbolic gesture for heroism of which he is in a desperate need, Brierly's is a symbol of his dedication or allegiance to the code of social honor and standard of conduct (Collits, 2005: 131-133). In contrast to Jim, Brierly could bridge the gap between the imaginary and real worlds. According to Rollyson, Jim's death can be seen in the light of two explanations. It is Jim's acknowledgement of his capability of failure, or it is no more than a "desperate act of a man who has simply run out of options" (2001: 213). As long as Jim always "takes too much to heart the mere consequences of his failure" (*Lord Jim*: 129), and if "the earth wouldn't be big enough to hold [Jim's] caper" (*Lord Jim*: 143), as Egstrom believes, then ". . . let him [Jim] creep twenty feet underground and stay there!", according to Brierly, because "[t]hat sort of courage is of no use to keep a man straight, and I don't care a snap for such courage" (*Lord Jim*: 49). When fate turns its back on Jim, he feels he has no chance to recuperate. Even when he is offered help by Stein and his loyal servant Tamb' Itam, Jim still feels taken aback and unsettled on anything other than easing his pain over what he has lost once and for all. In the end, Jim "passes away under a cloud, inscrutable at heart, forgotten, unforgiven, and excessively romantic" (*Lord Jim*: 306).

While struggling hard against his obsessive fears of failure, Jim sees no point in putting out of his mind the belief of the inevitability of guilt and redemption that is acquired through an act of retribution. Hence, Jim's first going to an Inquiry, which foreshadows his final submission of his life to Chief Doramin, reveals the acute lack of flexibility in Jim's mode of thinking.

Jim's romantic immaturity ties him up to his wish to set out journeys that are characteristically eventful. From his ivory tower, Jim sees life, with all its pros and cons, as if formulated to get along harmoniously with his immaterial visions. What has never occurred to him is that if there is a hero inside of him, he is no more than a lukewarm figure, a shadow that has no substance or entity of its own. It has no courage to face up to the real world, and so it remains confined to its fancy world of dreams.

Conclusion

Man has always been held as the shaper of his destiny based on the fine and unique qualities he has developed in himself. Lord Jim, the hero of Conrad's novel of the namesake, is a misfortunate romantic who insists on refusing to admit his inadequacy as a dreamer living in his own world of fantastic idealism.

The capabilities that Jim has envisioned in himself turn out to be ineffectual once they are tested in reality. In like manner, his concept of chivalric heroism proves no longer valid in a world whose reality shows the power of fate as sealing one's destiny in advance. The thing to be mentioned here is that capability always remains a merit except when it is in no way coupled with sufficient motivation for action, the matter which causes Jim's final downfall. Though in concept the idea of capability as put in the negative seems hardly applicable, it is evident that Conrad's protagonist loses himself in his own unimaginable, personal vagaries the outcome of which can never be anything but destruction. In addition to the impact of his romantic imagination, Jim is socially and culturally conditioned by certain codes that fetter much of his potential ability.

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