The Motifs of Water and Death in Rudyard Kipling's and Joseph Conrad's Short Stories

Shane Peterson

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol7/iss2/7

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
The Motifs of Water and Death in Rudyard Kipling's and Joseph Conrad's Short Stories

Shane Peterson

Aside from the similarity of themes on European imperialism, Rudyard Kipling’s “Without Benefit of Clergy” and Joseph Conrad’s “The Lagoon” have similar motifs of life and death as shown through the natural surroundings of India and Southeast Asia. In both of these short stories, the descriptions of water in the monsoon and in the lagoon show how nature almost mourns for the deaths of the two female characters, Ameera and Diamelen. Kipling views water as bringing death because it is full of noise, fury, and sickness. Conrad’s descriptions of the river and the lagoon convey a sense of silence and immobility, reflecting the illusions of love and life that Arsat strives to attain. In either case, both authors seem to suggest that Nature is the true master of the Eastern provinces—rather than the British colonists, the local natives, or anyone in between—as shown in its manifestations of water, which give life and instill death simultaneously.

Conrad and Kipling had a large breadth of understanding of the water features and imperialist cultures in their respective settings of Southeast Asia and
India. Conrad gained some significant maritime experience from his travels with French ships that led him across the Atlantic, into Africa, and around the Far East (Watts). The symbol of water in the ocean or rivers becomes a major theme in some of his fiction. In Kipling’s case, he worked as a journalist in native India, particularly in the province of Lahore. He held this position for several years, which allowed him to “move freely among the different levels of Lahore society,” including the British military officials and the local Indians (Pinney). He also witnessed the rainy seasons throughout the year and how they affected the two different groups. For the British, times of flooding and famine were nothing but a loss of profits; for the Indians, they could bring either seasons of plenty and abundance or seasons of starvation and disease. These experiences of both authors may have helped them understand Nature’s prevalence over colonial power and influenced the narratives of these short stories as well as their natural settings and primary characters who stand above the colonized land and its inhabitants.

As part of the trope of white rulers in exotic foreign lands, both of these authors narrate their stories through the perspectives of two imperial white men who witness the beginning of the fall of colonialism. According to Kaori Nagai, both authors write their narratives from the viewpoints of white men who rule over the local natives in a way that “provides awe and respect among the inhabitants,” so that the natives see each one of them as “a protector, a champion, and sometimes a god” (90). In “The Lagoon,” Arsat addresses the white man as “Tuan,” a Malaysian term for a European lord that means “sir” or “mister” (“Tuan”). Similarly, Ameera often calls Holden her “whole life” and even her “god” (Kipling 1740). In both cases, these white men live out a real-life fantasy of a white ruler over the natives, which Pinney describes as “pleasant” at first because their rule “is not forced but spontaneously accepted: the natives immediately see in the hero qualities far superior to theirs, and . . . follow his orders as the Law” (Nagai 90). Despite their respect and command over the native population, these characters “become the sole witness to the collapse of the fantasy” when someone they are close to either passes away or suffers a severe loss in correlation to a natural event like a monsoon or the rising sunrise over a lagoon (90). In essence, Nature destroys this illusion of power.

Before these natural events occur, Kipling and Conrad display the natural settings of India and Southeast Asia as being more silent with only slight suggestions of a coming catastrophe. In “Without Benefit of Clergy,” before the outbreak of cholera that would ultimately kill Ameera, the powers of Nature
“had allowed...four years of plenty wherein men fed well and the crops were certain” (Kipling 1737). Despite this abundance of food and life that the supernatural powers of nature provide, Kipling describes it as more of a calm before a storm through his images of “the blossom of the blood-red dhak tree that had flowered untimely for a sign of what was coming” (1737). This sign of the dhak tree as “blood-red” easily signifies a coming death on a national or individual scale. Its early blossoming also indicates that harder times are approaching, both for the British colonists and the local Indians, in which the land would respond after a season of plenty with a season of famine, disease, pestilence, and flood on a Biblical scale. Holden even overhears the Deputy Commissioner at the club state that “Nature’s going to audit her accounts with a big red pencil this summer” (1738). Indeed, a “red and heavy” audit comes when Kipling personifies the land itself as being “very sick and needed a little breathing-space ere the torrent of cheap life should flood it anew” (1739). At that point, the seasonal rains disturb the peace that puts the protagonist Holden at ease, making him feel like everything in his life is still within his control.

This is similar but slightly different in Conrad’s “The Lagoon,” in which the land is predominately more silent and pensive until a white ruler’s coming correlates with an impending death. As Tuan travels upstream, the jungle stands “motionless and silent” on both banks of the river as if it had “been bewitched into an immobility perfect and final” (59). This silence is almost lifeless because the water itself appears frozen and immobile as if Tuan had entered “a land from which the very memory of motion for ever departed” (59). This silence and stillness does not break until the coming of the white man’s canoe, the oars churning up the water “with a confused murmur” and causing it to gurgle out loud in “the short-lived disturbance of its own making” (59). Conrad describes the land as silent and motionless to show how the coming of the white man disturbs the peace with his presence. The sounds that the boat is making bring chaos and disorder to a place at rest. It is as though Tuan sets in motion the events of the story that will eventually claim Diamelen’s life, as if he were bringing death into the scene, while the lagoon and the forest around them remain quiet before the sick woman perishes. However, within the context of the narrative, it is important to keep in mind that Diamelen had already contracted her illness long before Tuan arrived. Even though the narrator makes it appear that the white man’s arrival foreshadows death, the natural world still maintains its hold over the jungle and its inhabitants. His journey up the river merely causes another disturbance in a world already beset by the
sickness of an apparent matriarch. Until her departure, Nature keeps her peace while she still has life within her.

Interestingly enough, the two female characters lie at the threshold between life and death, passing out of reach from their lovers as Nature takes her course. In Conrad’s story, when Arsat steps out of the hut after attending to his wife one last time, the earth seems to have enfolded into “a shadowy country of inhuman strife, a battle-field of phantoms terrible and charming, august or ignoble, struggling and mysterious country of inextinguishable desires and fears” (63). This otherworldly description suggests that his existence has become hazy and incoherent when his wife begins to leave him. Death has not come yet, but the darkness in the lagoon grows deeper. Similarly, Holden sees how Ameera begins to pass on into “a misty borderland where the living may not follow” when her sickness begins to take her (Kipling 1740). He also becomes disillusioned to how tangible or lasting this world is, as manifested by his blurred perception of her death as she is “thrust out as though the Angel of Death had himself put his hand upon her” (1740). These powers of Nature and Death—which can be seen in the two stories as being one and the same—claim his woman as their own, leaving him behind without any comprehension of any meaning left in the natural world. As these two women remain at an in-between state before they die, they give the male characters time to wonder and grieve as their natural surroundings begin to mirror these broodings.

In other words, the natural surroundings of the two British officials and the Malaysian native both reflect and influence their emotional reactions to the deaths of Diamelen and Ameera. For example, Tuan’s indifference mirrors the stillness of the lagoon. He reveals no real emotions concerning Diamelen’s death; therefore, the water to him means little else besides the misery of his Malaysian host, whom he only likes “as a man likes his favourite dog” (Conrad 62). He does not care much for Arsat’s wife either, but he is concerned enough to stay with Arsat as he mourns his loss. Because of this, the lagoon becomes “silent” and “motionless” even though poor Arsat is in torment, as shown when the stars shine out from “above the intense blackness of the earth” and cause their reflections in the lagoon to resemble “an oval patch of night-sky flung down into the hopeless and abysmal night of the wilderness” (62). His inward feelings reflect the lagoon’s image as well, alluding to how Diamelen’s eyes “glittered in the gloom” (62). But instead of feeling peaceful like Tuan, Arsat only feels hopeless and miserable. His wife’s slow passing gives him time to observe
his surroundings, which both imitate these emotions and distill them upon him.

By the same token, Holden is also in misery and turmoil when his beloved dies so the rain outside is nothing but chaos to him. As he stays by Ameera’s side, the rain roars on the roof and he cannot “think connectedly by reason of the noise, though he made many attempts to do so” (Kipling 1740). The storm within him parallels the storm outside as he tries to grasp the reality that his beloved is dead. As he leaves the house, “the roaring wind” continues to howl, “driving the bolts of rain like buck-shot against the mud walls” (1741), again implicating the correlation between the turmoil the weather creates and his own personal torment. More specifically, the rain reminds him of warfare with the word choice of “buck-shot,” as if Nature is at war with the land while he is at war with himself—much like Arsat and his “battle-field of phantoms” (Conrad 63). Rather than seeing the beauty in a much-needed rainfall that will restore the land, he views it as nothing more than a cacophony of sounds that intensify his grief.

All the while Nature seems to mourn and pay tribute to the main characters’ lovers as they pass the threshold into the other world. When the sickness finally takes Diamelen, the entire lagoon seems to pass into a different world with her when the stars shine “paler as if they had retreated into the frozen depths of immense space” (70). Soon afterward, from out of the darkness, Tuan watches as “a column of golden light shot up into the heavens and spread over the semicircle of the eastern horizon” (70). This image of the rising sun brings new life into the world and finally sets the jungle into motion as it unveils the “polished and black” shadows of the lagoon (70). Even a “white eagle” rises into the air “in a slanting and ponderous flight” as it flies into the sunlight, “dazzlingly brilliant for a moment” before vanishing “into the blue as if it had left the earth for ever” (70). Naturally, this parallels Diamelen’s passing from the earth forever, even after the light of the sun fills the lagoon, the river, and the forest with life. Life begins in the lagoon when Diamelen’s life ends.

With Ameera’s death, the “long deferred rains” finally fall as the sky becomes “heavy with clouds” after a period of famine (Kipling 1740). Before she dies, she and Holden can hear “shouts of joy in the parched city” as the rains water the impoverished earth, causing its inhabitants to rejoice (1740). It rains “eight inches” that night and washes the earth “clean,” but what brings life to the community only signals death for Ameera and misery for Holden as he sits “still in his house considering his sorrow” (1741). Only he and Ameera are in a
state of trauma and mourning, even if her death occurs when Nature begins to act benevolently toward the people of India. These images of Nature bringing life do not necessarily cause the two women's deaths, but they do correlate with their passing. The rising of the sun over the lagoon and the falling rain in India bring life to each dead or dying land at the exact moments when Diamelen and Ameera pass away at last. This suggests that either Nature honors their deaths by giving life to the other inhabitants or that their deaths are what bring life back to the land in a symbolic sacrifice. Therefore, their deaths are arguably what bring life to a world filled with lifelessness.

But Diamelen and Ameera could not survive in their native lands for very long since they represented the last generation of native inhabitants that would not adapt to the rule of the English. Diamelen was the servant of a Rajah ruler who ran away with Arsat and his brother to escape their leader’s rule. Even though a sickness from the jungle was what killed her, Tuan’s approach up the river into the lagoon can be seen as a parallel to her demise. As aforementioned, his journey up river and into the lagoon metaphorically brings death into the story, as if the English overlords of Malaysia bring and perpetuate death under their rule. Similarly, Ameera refused to adapt to a British lifestyle despite her relationship with Holden. That being said, she did not survive the breakout of cholera, an epidemic outbreak—which is also representative of a natural phenomenon—that the British government did little to prevent or alleviate. Not even Ameera’s son could survive, probably because Ameera wanted him to live a Muslim lifestyle instead of a British one. These two situations show how, on a macrocosmic scale, Diamelen and Ameera could not thrive simply because they were not of the English ruling class. They were a part of two cultures that were dwindling under the influence of European colonialism, even if Nature ultimately gives or takes away all life in the provinces.

However, the British colonists are equally subject to the throes of Nature because they fail to consider that neither they nor the natives rule over the lands that they occupy; Nature is still the true master over the Asian waters, and only the creatures able to adapt to two different modes of life can survive. This is shown through the description of the frogs that remain after the storm at the end of Kipling’s story. After Ameera’s death, Holden steps out of the death-stricken house and sees that the “rain-lashed pond” outside is “alive with frogs” (1741). These amphibious animals that can survive both on land and on water seem to mock Holden for his loss when they begin “chuckling” as he passes. The storm does little to disturb or disrupt the frog’s way of life; rather,
they are able to thrive in these new conditions, much like the natives who are able to thrive in both the local and British cultures even after the monsoon. One example is Durga Dass, the landlord that plans to pull down Holden and Ameera’s house. Kipling describes him as wearing “white muslin” and driving a “C-spring buggy.” As “a member of the Municipality,” he has to power to pull down the house and sell what he can for salvage, as if he has become the conqueror of Holden’s estate (1741). In “The Lagoon,” Conrad describes the boat that Tuan takes upriver as “an amphibious creature” once it leaves the river and enters “its lair in the forests” (Conrad 60). Conrad labels the boat “juragan,” a Chinese type of boat with the prow and stem decorated with the figures of the head and the tail of a dragon (“Juragan”). Because the boat is shaped more like an animal than a man-made construction, it can seemingly pass from water to land and survive in either element. These dual beings, or those who can survive in two different environments, can escape any destructive changes that Nature may bring.

Of course, Nature still rules over the villages of India and the jungles of Southeast Asia instead of the native inhabitants or the British imperialists because she brings life and death to the characters of both stories, usually through the mode of water. She is impartial to any love that they feel for each other, and none of them can escape the impending doom she thrusts upon them. The governing powers of the English, such as the white men Holden and Tuan, cannot prevent the deaths of the two women, and their reactions to these deaths can only be fully understood through Kipling’s and Conrad’s descriptions of the water in each story. Perhaps the two authors do this to argue that not even the might of the British Empire can conquer Nature in all of her manifestations. She is what determines the fates of all creatures that live under her dominion. The white man may rule and the natives may understand her more, but ultimately she decides who dies or who lives. In this way, all human beings are equally mortal and susceptible to the powers that rule over the waters in the Eastern colonies.


