Light and Shadow in "The Lagoon" by Conrad

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Abstract. The works of British writer Joseph Conrad are usually full of sharp contrast in vision, and he is also famous for his symbolic scenery depiction, which often changes and directly reflects the characters’ inner thoughts. His writing skills are intensely employed in his short story titled “The Lagoon”. In this novel, large passages deal with the scenery in Malaysia where the intersection of light and shadow are described at great length. However, few studies focused on this work before. In this paper, through the analysis of all the contradictory parts about light and dark, the different psychological states of the two protagonists, the white man and Arsat, are deeply revealed, showing Conrad’s profound reflection into human’s inner world and his superb narrative skill.

Introduction

“The Lagoon” is a short story written by Joseph Conrad in 1896. The story has two main characters: the white man, referred to as “Tuan”, and his friend Arsat, an unpopular Malay in the local place. The story begins when the white man is travelling through an Indonesian rainforest and is forced to stop for the night in Arsat’s clearing, which lies in a lagoon in the deep forests. Upon arriving, he finds Arsat frustrated, for his lover Diamelen is dying. That night, Arsat tells the white man a story of his past about brotherhood and betrayal. The next day, Diamelen dies, the white man leaves, and Arsat makes his own mind to start a new life—to revenge. [1]

As a highly talented stylist, Conrad employs paragraphs of scenery description in this story, in which he tries to show the characters’ inner world and foreshadow the keynote of the story [2]. To better illustrate the conflicts and struggles of the characters and develop a gloomy atmosphere of “The Lagoon”, Conrad presents lots of corresponding imageries like forests and waters, yet the frequent use of contrasts are the most striking. The contrast of dark and light is the most significant one running through this story, taking up the largest portions. By analyzing this pair of contrast, the readers can have a better understanding of the sophisticated characters and a more profound feeling of the plot in the intersection of light and shadow.

Sunset: Shadow over Light

As Conrad draws the reader’s attention to the story, he sets the time as sunset. Sunset is a passage of time toward night when the sun is sinking, underlying an atmosphere of somber, gloom and sorrow for the whole story. It also implies that the following plot probably deals with something negative and the characters’ inner feelings are neither pleased nor joyful.

In the first half scenery description of “The Lagoon”, dark appears along with light, while dark plays the dominant role in this relationship; light is almost slim and weak [3]. Whenever Conrad describes light, he uses such verbs as “flash”, “glint” and “glitter” or such adjectives as “thin”, “a strip of” and “dim”, whereas the darkness is “mysterious” and “invincible” (Conrad 169).

In the beginning of the story, “the sun appeared unclouded and dazzling” while the forests are “somber and dull” (168). Such a sharp contrast shows the balanced relationship between dark and light, but the fact that the white man is gazing at the wake of the boat and “turning his back upon the setting sun” (168) implies the tendency toward dark, which accords with the gloomy keynote of this story. The scenery description here conveys the reluctance of the white man’s finding a lodge in Arsat’s clearing, for the reason that although he is Arsat’s friend, he still possesses the identity of “the
kinsman of colonists”. They cannot sincerely open their heart to each other. The following paragraph also contains such descriptions: “…and the slanting beams of sunset touched the broadside of the canoe with a fiery glow, throwing the slender and distorted shadows of its crew upon the streaked glitter of the river.” (169) Conrad uses “slender” and “distorted” to describe the white man’s shadow, embodying the psychological struggle in this person’s mind.

Therefore, as it is presented in the beginning of the story, the shadow is more written than the light in this part as being set during the sunset, implicating the complicated inner thoughts of the two men and also foreshadowing a gloomy and somber atmosphere for the following plots.

Night: Almost Dark

Then comes the main part of this short novel. As time passes by, the heaven becomes increasingly darker, and the boat slowly glides toward the deep forests—a much darker place. Conrad repeats the synonyms of “dark” for several times in the next paragraph, which symbolizes the darkness in Arsat’s heart this time [4]. Such phrases are “glistening blackness of the water”, “black and dull” and “thick and somber walls of vegetation”. Furthermore, Conrad uses the technique of repetition to emphasize Arsat’s dark heart: “Darkness oozed out from between the trees, through the tangled maze of the creepers, from behind the great fantastic and unstirring leaves; the darkness, mysterious and invincible; the darkness scented and poisonous of impenetrable forests.” (169) The word “darkness” is repeated three times in this short sentence, implying that the “darkness” in Arsat’s heart is intense. This also paves a way for the subsequent story told by Arsat himself.

Similarly, after Arsat hears the affirmative answer from the white man—a more civilized person—to his question “will Diamelen die”, Conrad安排s the end of the sunset subsequently:

The white man came out of the hut in time to see 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. (171)

This passage of scenery description corresponds to Arsat’s extinguished hope. Instead, he gets distraught and desperate, just like the heaven is taken place by “the hopeless and abysmal night of the wilderness” (171). These excerpts of contrast of dark and light exactly reflect Arsat’s desperate inner world, proving Conrad’s sharp insight into human’s inner world.

During Arsat’s narration, the contrast of dark and light also appears, but the dark almost takes the dominant position. When Arsat and his brother are waiting for Diamelen’s coming, Arsat recalls, “The lights blazed on the water, but behind the boats there was darkness.” (174) Here, the lights symbolize their bright future, and darkness symbolizes their previous life under the rule of the Ruler. And the next sentence reads, “The water swallowed our fire, and we floated back to the shore that was dark with only here and there the glimmer of embers.” (174) Water and fire form another pair of contrasts, but fire also stands for bright while water stands for the mighty power of the Ruler. That the fire is put out by the water means that they are still in danger, but they still hold the hope that they can chase their bright future because there remains “the glimmer of embers”. In this part, the contrast of dark and bright represents the situation they are facing and the positive attitude toward their escape, though the hope is so vague.

When Arsat finishes recalling his past, Arsat is caught in deep regret and guilty, and the scenery description about dark and bright properly reflects his inner world:

Over the lagoon a mist drifting and low had crept, erasing slowly the glittering images of the stars. And now a great expanse of white vapor covered the land: it flowed cold and gray in the darkness…Only far away the tops of the trees stood outlined on the twinkle of heaven, like a somber and forbidding shore—a coast deceptive, pitiless and black. (177)

Originally, Arsat pretends himself to be indifferent to his brother’s death, but he cannot cover up his true feelings in his innermost heart. Conrad chooses to uncover Arsat’s true feeling through scenery description of the contrast of dark and bright. Therefore in this passage, “the glittering images
of the stars” disappear, and the land is a complete darkness, implying that there is neither brightness nor hope in Arsat’s heart.

During this narrative passage, Arsat is the protagonist who is caught up with the desperation of his lover’s illness and the guilty of his brother’s death. To uncover his such psychological state, Conrad arranges nighttime as the setting and the contrasts of dark over light here are designed intently.

Sunrise: Light over Dark

The turning point follows accompanied with Diamelen’s death. In the latter part, Arsat’s lover, Diamelen dies at the sunrise. At this certain time, the real bright finally shows up in this story: “Then from behind the black and wavy line of the forests a column of golden light shot up into the heavens and spread over the semicircle of the eastern horizon. The sun had risen.” (178) That the morning light begins to drive out the darkness of the forest signifies a change in Arsat, which also signifies a liberation for Diamelen [4]. Their forest retreat comes to an end, just like the dark is dispersed by the sun. When Arsat finally announces Diamelen’s passing away, “… the sun showed its edge above the tree-tops rising steadily. The breeze freshened; a great brilliance burst upon the lagoon, sparkled on the rippling water.” (178) The sunlight here is just like a huge stirrer, stirring Arsat’s previous life and his heart and making a sharply contrast with his dark past. What’s more, the scenery implies the great shock in Arsat’s mind as well. Arsat totally changes himself. Before, he bears the loads as a defector and a murderer; now as Diamelen dies, he discharges all of his loads and the only thing he wants to do is to revenge for his brother—which is implied in the description as the “merciless” sunshine, referring to Arsat’s mercilessness.

In the end of this story, “Arsat had not moved. 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 illusions.” Here, light and dark again form the contrast. The “searching sunshine” symbolizes Arsat’s searching for the way to revenge. The sunlight indicates the direction in Arsat’s life; a clear objective makes his life “bright”. As he continues to live without his brother and his lover, his empty heart will be filled with “darkness”, just like a pool of stagnant water—the lagoon. However with time fleeing, the “great light” will probably disperse the “darkness” in his heart.

Although the whole story is depressive to a large extent, it can be seen from the implication of the final scenery description that Conrad mercifully leaves hope for Arsat and the readers. This is the reason why the story ends with the sunrise, where the light dominates dark, and the narration, the scenery depiction and the psychological description harmoniously integrates.

Summary

From the analysis, it can be seen that the contrast of light and dark run through the whole story of “The Lagoon”. Of course, there are many other contrasts such as black and white, sunrise and sunset, water and fire, movement and stillness, sound and silence and so on, but light and dark is the most important one. It not only serves to foreshadow the keynote of this story, but also reflects the characters’ inner world, offering the readers knowledge of Joseph Conrad’s brilliant technique of scenery description and its psychological reflection.

References