

*Revision Notes: I tried to sound less French, since my intention was not to be unnecessarily pretentious but natural.*

### **Enchantment of Youth in *The Shadow-Line***

In *The Shadow-Line*, Conrad draws on the imagery of fairy tales to reveal the illusions of youth, setting up an enchantment progressively dismantled by experience. In this story of coming of age, the old narrator looks back on his younger self with an impartial and affectionate distance.

The first chapter sets the narrative and psychological stage for the crossing of the shadow-line, the hazy area between the “enchanted garden” of youth “that holds so many possibilities” only one of which will freeze in adulthood. Unconsciously afraid of locking himself in a line of work, the young sailor quits his job on an impulse. Conrad introduces this “rash moment” with a witty juxtaposition: “This is not a marriage story. It wasn’t so bad as that with me. (3)” By playing with the reader's expectations, Conrad anticipates the playing with his younger self.

The imagery of fairy tales is most vivid when the young man gains his first command. The narrator, unable to explain his reaction, compares himself to Cinderella.

“And first I wondered at my state of mind. Why was I not more surprised? Why? Here I was, invested with a command in the twinkling of an eye, not in the common course of human affairs, but more as if by enchantment. I ought to have been lost in astonishment. But I wasn't. I was very much like people in fairy tales. Nothing ever astonishes them. When a fully appointed gala coach is produced out of a pumpkin to take her to a ball, Cinderella does not exclaim. She gets in quietly and drives away to her high fortune.”

Later, he pictures himself as the charming prince of his ship: “She was there waiting for me, spell-bound, unable to move, to live, to get out into the world (till I came), like an enchanted princess.” The imagery is not just a narrative device to amplify the forthcoming wave of disillusion, but a tender attempt to recapture the enchanted feelings of a youth long past.

The narrator tries again to revive the wonder of youth in his rendering of the meeting with Captain Ellis. The newly invested commander sees Captain Ellis as deputy-Neptune. Conrad dramatizes the superposition of the two points of view, decades apart, the younger solemn, the older witty: “A subtle

change in Captain Ellis' manner became perceptible as though he had laid aside the trident of deputy-Neptune. In reality, it was only his official pen that he had dropped on getting up.” Conrad resorts again to a humorous juxtaposition, this time to allow the narrator to objectively rectify the scene experienced in his youth.

At sea, shattered are the young commander's expectations of “perhaps nothing else than that special intensity of existence which is the quintessence of youthful aspirations (69)”. He finds himself “bound hand and foot to the hopeless extent which was revealed to me as days went on.” His paralysis is represented by the ship's stillness. Like him, the ship is passive, and moves through external impenetrable forces. “Not that the evil spell held us always motionless. Mysterious currents drifted us here and there, with a stealthy power made manifest by the changing vistas of the islands fringing the east shore of the Gulf. And there were winds too, fitful and deceitful. They raised hopes only to dash them into the bitterest disappointment, promises of advance ending in lost ground, expiring in sighs, dying into dumb stillness in which the currents had it all their own way – their own inimical way. (69)” With a passion typical of his age, the commander swings from extreme high to extreme low, as if out of a lamp conjuring up an entire universe conspiring either for or against his fortune.

Conscious of a drama of the remembering, Conrad chooses to include verbatim entries from the youngster's diary, which “saved me from the crazy trick of talking to myself. (87)” In an entry resonating with the citation that introduces *The Shadow-Line*, Baudelaire's line – *D'autre fois, calme plat, grand miroir de mon désespoir* – from *les Fleurs du Mal*, the formation of clouds “in the sky like a decomposition, like a corruption of the air (87),” reflects his nascent maturity: “It seems to me that all my life before that momentous day is infinitely remote, a fading memory of light-hearted youth, something on the other side of a shadow.” The young man has crossed the shadow-line, the gloom of hardship separating him from his childhood, his clouded mind blurring his memories. The note ends in dejection: “I am shrinking from it [going to the deck]. From the mere vision. My first command. Now I understand that strange sense of insecurity in my past. I always suspected that I might be no good. And here is proof positive. I am shrinking from it. I am no good. (88)” As he is about to give up, the young man becomes

“aware of Ransome (88).” Like the godmother in Cinderella, Ransome sees the commander’s despair. By his presence, Ransome impels him to go to the deck – and to his calling.

Back on land, Captain Gilles tries to warn the commander against the youthful tendency to “make too much of anything in life, good or bad (108)”. Like in the opening chapter, where Captain Gilles wants him to find out about the command, the youngster responds with impatience, an impatience alluded to by Captain Gilles in the remark, “A man has got to learn everything – and that's what so many of them youngsters don't understand.” Finally, the commander’s restlessness to return to sea triggers another reflection immediately suppressed in the old Captain: “Precious little rest in life for anybody. Better not think of it (109).” For the young, the passage of time announces maturity; for the old, it announces death.

As part of his maturation, the new commander finds a vocation – or rather, it finds him – and loses his illusions – or rather they leave him. The imagery of fairy tales plays a crucial role in approximating the enchantments of youth past. As a story of coming of age, *The Shadow-Line* is necessarily also a story of paradises lost – the lost paradises of childhood.

“Oui, si le souvenir grâce à l'oubli, n'a pu contracter aucun lien, jeter aucun chaînon entre lui et la minute présente, s'il est resté à sa place, à sa date, s'il a gardé ses distances, son isolement dans le creux d'une vallée, où à la pointe d'un sommet, il nous fait tout à coup respirer un air nouveau, précisément parce que c'est un air qu'on a respiré autrefois, cet air plus pur que les poètes ont vainement essayé de faire régner dans le Paradis et qui ne pourrait donner cette sensation profonde de renouvellement que s'il avait été respiré déjà, car les vrais paradis sont les paradis qu'on a perdus.”  
(Proust, *Le Temps Retrouvé*, *A la recherche du temps perdu* VII)

“Yes: if, owing to the work of oblivion, the returning memory can throw no bridge, form no connecting link between itself and the present minute, if it remains in the context of its own place and date, if it keeps its distance, its isolation in the hollow of a valley or upon the highest peak of a mountain summit, for this very reason it causes us suddenly to breathe a new air, an air, which is new precisely because we have breathed it in the past, that purer air which the poets have vainly tried to situate in paradise and which could induce so profound a sensation of renewal only if it had been breathed before, since the true paradises are the paradises that we have lost.”

(as translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff, *Time Regained*, *Remembrance of Things Past*)  
[v. 3 p. 903]