

Language and Characterization in Conrad's 'Typhoon'

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'Typhoon,' especially for schoolboys, can be an exciting adventure story. In his 'Forward' to *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century*, J. Hillis Miller tells us that the first Conrad work he read was 'Typhoon,' and that he was 'about 13 or 14 at the time' (9). Similarly, Haruki Murakami, a popular Japanese novelist, says in a book review of Conrad's translation that he read Conrad for the first time when he was in secondary school (Yoshioka 82).

Critical attention to 'Typhoon,' on the other hand, has often been focused on the character of Captain MacWhirr: 'The story opens and closes with the question of the captain's character; that question is thematically central' (Wegelin 45). Conrad himself states in his 'Author's Note' to *Typhoon and Other Tales* (1903) that in order to bring out the 'deeper significance' of the story of the typhoon, and as 'a leading motive' and 'a point of view,' what he needed was Captain MacWhirr (vi).

Until the late 1970s the standard view was that MacWhirr was stolid and unimaginative in contrast to Jukes who was intelligent and imaginative. Lawrence Graver refers to MacWhirr as 'a blunt and unimaginative captain' (95) and to Jukes as 'an energetic, reasonably imaginative man' (96). In the 1980s and the 1990s the critical standard shifted towards a more positive view of MacWhirr. Jeremy Hawthorn maintains that 'Typhoon gives us [a hero] whose lack of imagination does not render him immune to the educative powers of experience,

especially when this experience is of an extreme kind' (222), and Ian Watt, in comparing MacWhirr with Allistoun in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, states that 'Contrary to what some critics have said, MacWhirr also learns something from the typhoon, if only that he is mortal and may go down with the ship' (109). More recently, Amar Acheraiou examines the narration of the story and argues that 'the author's balancing of negative and positive qualities in MacWhirr's power of vision and his literal mind is...a first indication of the ambiguity his detached ironic narration can impart to his tale' (199), suggesting that the narration undermines any definite view of MacWhirr.

In this article, first, I consider the conditions that the narrating voice creates for the reader's reception of MacWhirr in Chapter I; second, I look at MacWhirr in Chapters II, III and IV in terms of his susceptibility to words and his perceptivity of objects, with references to figures of speech found in the narrating voice; and, finally, I examine MacWhirr in Chapters V and VI through the contrasting styles of everyday language and sailors' language.

I

In *Conrad's Narrative Method*, Jakob Lothe points out that 'In the first chapter...authorial prominence is striking (104),' but then he goes on to say that 'To emphasize the narrator's authority...is not to suggest that all his statements and views should be accepted uncritically' (105). If the narrating voice cannot necessarily be taken at its face value, what then are the conditions that it creates for the reader's reception of MacWhirr?

Conrad writes in his essay 'Confidence' that the work of merchant seamen is 'to take ships entrusted to their care from port to port across

the seas; and...to watch and labour with devotion for the safety of the property and the lives committed to their skill and fortitude through the hazards of innumerable voyages' (*Notes on Life and Letters* 197). The story of 'Typhoon' is comprised of six chapters, and Chapter I begins with the words, 'Captain MacWhirr, of the steamer *Nan-Shan*' (3); the unpersonified third-person narrator introduces MacWhirr as captain of a steamer, that is to say, he represents MacWhirr in the capacity of a merchant seaman.

According to the narrator, MacWhirr exhibits the appearance of being 'simply ordinary, irresponsive, and unruffled' (3), both in physical aspect and mental acuity. However, the credibility of this information is immediately undermined as the narrator goes on to confide to the reader that although MacWhirr sometimes gives the impression of being bashful by lowering his eyes (3), he is in fact quite capable of bestowing a direct glance. It bespeaks of MacWhirr's confidence rather than diffidence, and indicates that his appearance may be deceptive. The third paragraph suggests that MacWhirr has enough, if *just* enough, imagination to accomplish his job 'each successive day' (4); he has confidence without being conceited; and he even has the ability to retain 'harmony and peace' (4) in the ships he commands. The comparison of MacWhirr to a watchmaker is by no means deprecatory from the point of view of the ability to command a ship; it suggests, rather, that as long as he is given suitable means, he is quite capable of commanding a ship, just as a watchmaker can put together a chronometer as long as he is given proper tools. The only time that the narrator's appreciative tone changes is when, towards the end of the paragraph, he offers us the information that MacWhirr ran away to sea at the age of fifteen. The episode suggests that, despite his apparent composure, MacWhirr is capable of taking an impulsive action, which foreshadows his subsequent decision to face, rather than to steer clear of the typhoon. However, apart from the last episode, the

narrator consistently reports MacWhirr in his professional capacity.

The next three paragraphs look back on MacWhirr's earlier life leading to his first command and marriage, through the letters he sent to his parents. These letters demonstrate that MacWhirr's attention tends to be focused on professionally important details, such as the weather and qualifications. The first words quoted from his letters are: 'We had very fine weather on our passage out' (5). It goes without saying that, professionally, weather conditions signify much to a seafaring man. He also states that he has become an Ordinary Seaman because he can do the work, and reading the significance of the weather is included in his ability to do the work. His letters to his parents mention ships, skippers, ship owners, seas, ports, and islands, which are all words related to his profession and which are also suggestive of MacWhirr's commitment to his work.

Subsequently, there is a time shift and the following paragraph introduces a scene in the present. The low reading of the barometer portends turbulent weather. MacWhirr can understand that it indicates 'some uncommonly dirty weather' (6), but as his attention tends to be focused on actualities rather than eventualities, he is unable to comprehend the significance of the numerical information. 'Taking into account the excellence of the instrument, the time of the year, and the ship's position on the terrestrial globe' (6), the barometer indicates not *any* 'uncommonly dirty weather,' but, more specifically, a typhoon. There is a situational irony involved here, because there is a discrepancy between how MacWhirr regards the situation and the true nature of the situation suggested to the reader by the title of the story, 'Typhoon.'

The above scene is followed by another time shift, and the subsequent paragraphs focus on the ship that is 'entrusted to [the merchant seamen's] care' (*Notes on Life and Letters* 197). The *Nan-Shan* has 'the reputation of an exceptionally steady ship in a

sea-way' (7), because she has 'flat bottom, rolling chocks on bilges, and great breadth of beam' (7); and, moreover, it is said that 'the builders contemplated her with pride' (7) when the work was finished. When MacWhirr is summoned from London to command the ship, he is asked to go over her, and the only flaw that he could detect was 'a defective lock on the cabin door' (9). This episode of a defective lock confirms the oblique irony implied in the opening words of the narrator. MacWhirr may give the impression of being irresponsible, but that is only because he regards 'the more general actualities of the day required no comment – because facts can speak for themselves with overwhelming precision' (9), and he is in fact quite capable of responding to a situation, and even expressing irritation, when the significance of a specific fact has been overlooked and professional trust has not been met: '...his eyes happening at the moment to be at rest upon the lock of the cabin door, he walked up to it, full of purpose, and began to rattle the handle vigorously, while he observed, in his low, earnest voice, "You can't trust the workmen nowadays. A brand-new lock, and it won't act at all. Stuck fast. See? See?"' (8).¹

Likewise, the following episode of the Siamese flag also verifies MacWhirr's professional competence. Jukes' reaction to the Siamese flag is emotional and arrogant; he feels as if it were 'a personal affront' (9) and is 'greatly exasperated' (10). On the other hand, MacWhirr, rather taken aback by Jukes' excessive reaction, proceeds to check the flag against the International Signal Code-book, and warns Jukes to make sure that it is not hoisted upside-down, as it will then be understood as a signal of distress (11), and adds: 'The elephant there, I take it, stands for something in the nature of the Union Jack in the flag....' (11). While Jukes' reaction betrays his patriotic pride and prejudice against Siam, MacWhirr's reaction is neutral, and is neither emotional nor arrogant; he is concerned only with the function of the flag in the framework of his profession.

As we have seen, in Chapter I, the unpersonified third-person narrator introduces MacWhirr through an oblique form of irony, overtly deprecating MacWhirr as an unimaginative and irresponsive man, but covertly praising him as a competent seaman. Why does the narrator not report MacWhirr more frankly as an emotionally stable and, therefore, professionally competent seaman? One reason is implied in the following comment made by Albert J. Guerard: ‘in our age of anxiety and analysis there may be a natural preference for the more difficult and more psychological story. But explicit even transparent ethic may also have its claims, if built on a solid enough base’ (299). Conrad also belonged to an ‘age of anxiety and analysis,’ and so this tendency to dismiss explicit and transparent moral principles may well have been shared by Conrad’s contemporary readers.

The ethic of merchant seamen, such as the one that is found in ‘Typhoon,’ is explicit and even transparent; so as to make the contemporary readers awaken to the claims of such ethic, the narrator chooses to adopt this kind of inverted irony, inverted in the sense that the narrator, instead of praising overtly and deprecating covertly, as is usually the case, deprecates overtly and praises covertly, solicitous to avoid offending his readers. In *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Wayne C. Booth discusses this kind of irony under the heading of ‘qualifications of readers.’ According to Booth, ‘Every reader will have greatest difficulty detecting irony that mocks his own beliefs or characteristics,’ and the readers, when asked to ironize their straight reading, may be deeply offended (81). This may explain why Conrad adopts such an oblique form of irony in ‘Typhoon.’² Surely Conrad must have been well aware of this tendency on the part of at least some of his readers, since he makes Sophia Antonovna say to Razumov in *Under Western Eyes*, ‘Remember, Razumov, that women, children, and revolutionists hate irony, which is the negation of all saving instincts, of all faith, of all devotion, of all action’ (279).

The rest of Part I, apart from the very last paragraph, is devoted to the personal letters which MacWhirr, Solomon Rout, and Jukes write. The details of MacWhirr's letters to his wife, reminiscent of those he used to write to his parents before his marriage, focus on professional observations. They fail to entertain his wife, who lives in the suburbs of London, but interest the steward, who reads them surreptitiously, because the steward, as a member of the crew, understands their professional significance. Solomon Rout's letters are appreciative of MacWhirr's professional honesty. Although he refers to MacWhirr in antiphrastic words, such as 'the dullest ass' (16) and 'a fool' (16), he is well aware of MacWhirr's professional competence. Jukes' letters extol the comradeship of the *Nan-Shan* and thus he unknowingly confirms the narrator's rather inflated report that 'every ship Captain MacWhirr commanded was the floating abode of harmony and peace' (4). Jukes also unwittingly confirms MacWhirr's careful navigation by referring to his 'regular performance' (17): 'he steps out of the chart-room and has a good look all round, peeps over at the sidelights, glances at the compass, squints upwards at the stars' (17).

Finally, the narrator's representation of Jukes' exasperation over MacWhirr's taciturnity and MacWhirr's wonder at Jukes' loquacity reflects the competing nature of the language they use. Jukes' language is the everyday language based on his feelings and imagination that is triggered off by those feelings: 'Thus wrote Mr. Jukes...out of the fullness of his heart and the liveliness of his fancy' (18). On the other hand, MacWhirr's language is the impersonal and pragmatic language of professional seamen, and is equivalent to what Conrad describes as 'a sailor's phrase which has all the force, precision, and imagery of technical language that, created by simple men with keen eyes for the real aspect of the things they see in their trade, achieves the just expression seizing upon the essential...' (*The Mirror of the Sea* 21).

II

Chapter II of 'Typhoon' presents MacWhirr under the stress of the impending typhoon, and it reintroduces the theme of the weather in the opening paragraphs: 'Had he been informed by an indisputable authority that the end of the world was to be finally accomplished by a catastrophic disturbance of the atmosphere, he would have assimilated the information under the simple idea of dirty weather, and no other, because he had no experience of cataclysms, and belief does not necessarily imply comprehension' (20). MacWhirr fails to comprehend the significance of the oppressive weather, not because he lacks imagination, but simply because he has no previous experience of it, and so he is unfamiliar with the premonitory atmospheric signs of a typhoon. Apart from the fall of the barometer, there have been other signs of an approaching typhoon which do not register with MacWhirr: '...the oily sea heaved without a sparkle, and there was a queer white misty patch in the sky like a halo of the sun' (6) and 'there was no wind, and the heat was close' (6). These are signs of an approaching typhoon that even an ordinary citizen living in the monsoon region would have recognized; whereas MacWhirr begins to believe himself 'greatly out of sorts,' when he first becomes aware of 'the clammy heat' (20). It does not occur to him that he is being affected by its oppressiveness. He takes it out on Jukes by accusing him of losing the bags used for whipping up coals overboard, and expostulates against 'the use of images in speech' (25). MacWhirr in Chapter II is no longer the composed and competent captain that he was in Chapter I; he shows 'animation' (32), 'anger' (33), and 'indignation' (34), displaying feelings and verbalizations both of which are uncharacteristic of his usual self.

In addition to this uncharacteristic display, MacWhirr exhibits other signs that are unusual for him. As Paul Kirschner points out, MacWhirr usually exhibits 'a preference for objects of perception over words'

(74). However, when he enters the chart-room, he unwittingly exhibits a preference for words over objects of perception:

When he had entered the chart-room, it was with no intention of taking the book down. Some influence in the air...had as it were guided his hand to the shelf; and without taking the time to sit down he had waded with a conscious effort into the terminology of the subject.... He tried to bring all these things into a definite relation to himself, and ended by becoming contemptuously angry with such a lot of words and with so much advice, all head-work and supposition, without a glimmer of certitude. (33)

Although he angrily condemns 'all head-work and supposition,' there is no doubt that he has been influenced by 'such a lot of words,' and continues to exhibit a preference for words over objects of perception. His rejection of Jukes' proposition to put the ship's head to the eastward for a while is in fact a refutation of the book he has been reading; and MacWhirr has 'been thinking it all out this afternoon' (34). He does not realize that his own argument is as a neat piece of 'head-work' as the argument of the book.

As a result of becoming more susceptible to words rather than objects of perception, MacWhirr becomes negligent of the present, by reflecting on the past and the future. He recalls Captain Wilson of the *Melita* lecturing on 'storm strategy' (34) which he had happened to overhear when he was ashore, and goes on to imagine in response to it the possible extra time and the coal bill that would occur should he change the course as proposed. In other words, he bases his decision to face the typhoon not on the actualities of the moment, as he is accustomed to doing, but on the memory of a past incident and the imagined future. In fact, MacWhirr under the stress of the approaching typhoon behaves just like one of the captains referred to by the unpersonified third-person narrator in Chapter I as 'your imaginative

superior who is touchy, overbearing, and difficult to please' (4).

In the scene that follows, which takes place in the same room but after the typhoon has engulfed the *Nan-Shan*, MacWhirr again becomes perceptive of objects: 'the lamp wriggled in its gimbals, the barometer swung in circles, the table altered its slant every moment; a pair of limp sea-boots with collapsed tops went sliding past the couch' (35). When the *Nan-Shan* is hit by the typhoon, the force of it reawakens MacWhirr's senses and restores his innate ability to attend to the actualities of the present circumstances.

In Chapter II it is MacWhirr rather than Jukes that has been emotionally affected by the atmospheric changes in the environment brought about by the approaching typhoon, but in Chapter III, the situation is reversed, and it is Jukes that is more emotionally affected. The impact of the typhoon on Jukes' emotions is conveyed effectively through the narrating voice's repetitive use of similes, such as 'like the sudden smashing of a vial of wrath' (40) and 'like an unbridled display of passion' (47); but, more importantly, it is conveyed through its use of metaphors. In *Joseph Conrad and the Reader*, Amar Acheraiou says: 'In most of his novels and short stories, Conrad enlivens the written medium through the infusion of powerful images and metaphors. "Typhoon" is the story that best illustrates Conrad's striving to reinvigorate language through a redeployment of energetic metaphors that appeal to the readers' senses' (89). Unlike an earthquake, a landslip or an avalanche, a furious gale attacks with passion (40); and, therefore, many of the metaphors as well as the similes that are used to describe the force of the typhoon make use of the concept of human emotions.³ In his book, *Metaphor*, Zoltan Kovecses says that one of the most typical conceptual metaphors that characterizes human emotions is that of a natural force (108). In 'Typhoon,' the tenor and the vehicle of the metaphor has been reversed, and one of the most typical conceptual

metaphors that characterizes the natural force, the typhoon, is the concept of human emotions, such as 'the wrath and fury of the passionate sea' (19). The effect of the repetitive use of these metaphors and similes is that they work on the emotions of the reader and reproduce in him or her the same disturbing effect as that of the crew: 'the great physical tumult beating about their bodies, brought, like an unbridled display of passion, a profound trouble to their souls' (47).

The emphasis on the emotions makes it clear that what is demanded of the crew in confronting the typhoon is emotional fortitude, because 'the safety of the property and the lives' is committed not only to their professional 'skill,' but also to their emotional 'fortitude' (*Notes on Life and Letters* 197). Therefore, Jukes tries hard 'to compose his mind and judge things coolly' (43) but fails. Struggling hard with the wind, he feels 'as though he had escaped some unparalleled outrage directed at his feelings,' and 'it weakened his faith in himself' (42). In contrast, MacWhirr has regained his former composure, which is reflected especially in his manner of speech when he exchanges words with Jukes: "Our boats are going now, sir.".... "All right" (44); "Our boats – I say boats – the boats, sir! Two gone!".... "Can't be helped... What can – expect.... Bound to leave – something behind – stands to reason" (44-5). Whatever the effects MacWhirr's voice may have on Jukes' emotions, as Hugh Epstein points out, 'an idiomatic English phrase with a multitude of uses', such as "'All right',' affords a 'relief' to both Jukes and the reader (22). All the time he is speaking with Jukes, MacWhirr is answering in the language of seamen 'created by simple men with keen eyes for the real aspect of the things they see in their trade' (*The Mirror of the Sea* 21): "Will she live through this?".... "She may!".... "Let's hope so!".... "Keep on hammering...builders ...good men..... And chance it...good men...Rout...good man" (47-8). In contrast with Jukes' imaginative faculty which inclines towards 'fancy' (18), triggered off by emotional reactions, MacWhirr's process

of imagination inclines towards a ‘conception’ (84) based on the observation of facts.

The recovery of MacWhirr’s equanimity and his preference for tangible objects enables him to perceive the real aspect of the crew and the ship in Chapter IV, and this leads to his regained confidence in them. The juxtaposition of the second mate who has ‘Lost his nerve’ (67) and Beale’s commitment to the engine, which occurs almost simultaneously, confirms the regained confidence that MacWhirr holds towards the engineers. Furthermore, MacWhirr’s confidence in the ship is reconfirmed by the narrating voice; and here again it adopts figures of speech to convey the grounds of MacWhirr’s confidence by vividly animating inanimate objects in the engine room:

Gleams, like pale long flames, trembled upon the polish of metal; from the flooring below, the enormous crank-heads emerged in their turns with a flash of brass and steel – going over; while the connecting-rods, big-jointed, like skeleton limbs, seemed to thrust them down and pull them up again with an irresistible precision. And deep in the half-light other rods dodged deliberately to and fro, crossheads nodded, discs of metal rubbed smoothly against each other, slow and gentle, in a commingling of shadows and gleams. (68-9)

Here animating inanimate objects has the effect of attracting the reader’s attention to otherwise commonplace and uninteresting parts of ships, such as crank-heads and connecting-rods. The vividly animated description of these parts of the ship in the engine room conveys to the reader the impression that the ship is trustworthy because all these parts are functioning well.

III

At the beginning of Chapter V, the *Nan-shan* is swept by a high sea, so

high that even MacWhirr 'couldn't believe his eyes' (74), but once it dies down, his attention, characteristically, is immediately directed back to the safety of the Chinamen and he orders Jukes to 'Pick up all the money' (75). He does so because he has been informed by the boatswain that 'the Chinamen had broken adrift together with their boxes' (59) and 'there was a blamed fight going on for dollars' (62), although the narrator reports that 'If the coolies had started up after their scattered dollars they were by that time fighting only for their footing' (78). MacWhirr's insistence on restoring order in the 'tween-deck demonstrates his responsibility for work. However, as before, once he hears from Jukes that order has been restored, his attention shifts back to the ship, while Jukes' attention remains on the trouble over the Chinamen:

"As long as it's done....," mumbled the Captain, without attempting to look at Jukes. "Had to do what's fair."

"Let them only recover a bit and you'll see. They will fly at our throats, sir...."

"We are on board, all the same," remarked Captain MacWhirr.

"The trouble's not over yet," insisted Jukes....

"The trouble's not over yet," assented Captain MacWhirr.... (82-3)

Critical attention is often bestowed on the two incidents that take place in the cabin room just after this conversation. The significance of the two incidents lies in the fact that MacWhirr, for the first time, refers to the ship in the everyday language that Jukes speaks, and then reverts to sailor's phraseology. Before these incidents, MacWhirr, no matter how competent a captain he had been, had gone 'skimming over the years of existence' (19); but the typhoon has made him see the perfidy, violence and terror that life may contain (18); and, as a result, he learns to speak the sailor's language more creatively than previously.

The first of the two incidents is of MacWhirr hesitating to return the box of matches to the ledge, and then saying half aloud, “‘I shouldn’t like to lose her’” (86). The phrase, ‘I shouldn’t like to lose her,’ is *not* a sailor’s phrase; it belongs to the everyday language that Jukes uses, because it reflects feelings rather than observation. This is confirmed by the fact that immediately after muttering this phrase, MacWhirr experiences ‘a strange sensation of weariness he was not enlightened enough to recognize for the fatigue of mental stress’ (86). The fatigue is reminiscent of the particular kind of fatigue that Jukes experiences during the typhoon: ‘a searching and insidious fatigue that penetrates deep into a man’s breast to cast down and sadden his heart’ (52). MacWhirr, at this moment, is by no means ‘a stranger to the visions of hope or fear’ (48). The typhoon, or, to be more precise, the ‘tense and unsafe’ quietude of the air (86), which occurs while the ship is under the eye of the typhoon, has momentarily forced him to speak ‘out of the fullness of his heart’ (18), like Jukes. He speaks in everyday language, triggered off by the fear of losing his ship, and the narrator reiterates this fact by repeating it at the end of the chapter:

The hurricane...had found this taciturn man in its path, and, doing its utmost, had managed to wring out a few words. Before the renewed wrath of winds swooped on his ship, Captain MacWhirr was moved to declare, in a tone of vexation, as it were: “I wouldn’t like to lose her.” (90)

Jukes, after experiencing fatigue during the typhoon, escapes into ‘all sorts of memories altogether unconnected with his present situation’ (52), and subsequently he falls under the spell of the storm (53). In contrast, MacWhirr remembers that there is a towel in the washstand locker, and ‘towels himself with energy’ (86); he then murmurs, “‘She may come out of it yet.’” (86). This phrase, which reflects the phrase

“‘She may!’”(48) that MacWhirr utters as an answer to Jukes' question, “‘Will she live through this?’” (47) in Chapter III, is a sailor's phrase. MacWhirr manages to revert to sailor's language by finding a towel in the right place. For this reason, as Albert Guerard points out, the latter scene involving the towel is more significant than the former scene involving the box of matches:

...it is clear what saves him.... He is saved, specifically, in the darkness of his cabin and in the hour of his demoralization, by finding a towel in the place it is supposed to be. So reassured that his world is in place, he at once goes back on deck to continue his stubborn fight with the sea. This humble moment is the story's climax. (Guerard 298)

Finally, in Chapter VI, MacWhirr proves himself to be capable of speaking a more creative sailor's language than before his experience in the cabin room. The change that has come over him is revealed in the decision he makes over what to do with the Chinamen and their property. Not only does the decision reflect MacWhirr's professionalism for 'the safety of the property and the lives,' but it also reflects his personal and humane conviction; this being made possible by the necessity, due to the typhoon's wrath, to speak in everyday language.

The Chinamen are introduced for the first time in the following scene in Chapter I:

The coolies lounged, talked, smoked, or stared over the rail; some, drawing water over the side, sluiced each other; a few slept on hatches, while several small parties of six sat on their heels surrounding iron trays with plates of rice and tiny teacups; and every single Celestial of them was carrying with him all he had in the world – a wooden chest with a ringing lock and brass on the corners, containing the savings of his labour;...amassed patiently, guarded with care, cherished fiercely. (6-7)

This scene is reported by the narrator, and it presents the Chinamen

in a relaxed atmosphere. What is not so clear of this first scene of the Chinamen is that whether it is seen from MacWhirr's point of view. The second scene that describes the Chinamen is found in Chapter II:

...the Chinamen were lying prostrate about the decks. Their bloodless, pinched, yellow faces were like the faces of bilious invalids. Captain MacWhirr noticed two of them especially, stretched out on their backs below the bridge. As soon as they had closed their eyes they seemed dead (21).

This time the scene presents the Chinamen as suffering from the oppression of the clammy heat, and it is presented clearly from MacWhirr's point of view.

These two scenes are presented from similar angles, and, therefore, it might imply that the first scene also was seen from MacWhirr's point of view. Significantly, MacWhirr expresses his wish to act appropriately towards the Chinamen, using the word 'fair' five times (81, 82, 88, 94, 99), even during the calm: 'Give them the same chance with ourselves.... Bad enough to be shut up below in a gale...without being battered to pieces,' pursued captain MacWhirr with rising vehemence' (88). It suggests that 'Conrad firmly establishes MacWhirr as the only man on board who does think of them' (Kirschner 76). His attitude towards the Chinamen, as the lives committed to his care, is professionally consistent throughout the story, but his ultimate decision as to what to do with the money reflects a widened vision. He considers the ship and her owners: 'He wanted as little fuss made as possible, for the sake of the ship's name and for the sake of the owners' (98). But at the same time, he is cognizant enough to realize what will happen if he delivered the Chinamen and their property to a Chinese official (101). Therefore, after 'he had settled it all in mind' (100), divides the money equally among them. MacWhirr, at the end of the story, learns to speak

a more creative sailors' language. The decision he makes reveals that he has learnt to empathize, to imagine more sympathetically, and to think for himself. Most of all, he acts on the basis of the trust he has himself formed towards the Chinamen as fellow human beings like himself, grounded on his prolonged observation of the Chinamen during the voyage.

In 'Typhoon,' MacWhirr is presented consistently as a competent seaman, whose emotional vulnerability is temporarily exposed by the impending typhoon, and his ability to speak sailors' language is enriched by what he experiences under the eye of the typhoon.

Notes

- ¹ Not only the cabin door but also the chart-room door has a 'rubbishy' (35) lock.
- ² This kind of irony may be lost on a reader belonging to a culture that values explicit and transparent ethics. Under the heading 'irony,' in *Oxford Reader's Companion to Conrad*, John Stape writes: 'Ironic effects, whatever their functions in a specific text, depend upon an especially intimate negotiation between author, audience, and culture, since irony involves the exposure of a discrepancy in the manifest content, whether linguistic or situational, in order to establish, by connotation and indirection, the priority of a latent content. It is thus not surprising that irony is at times misread or simply missed, since its coding relies upon a shared, highly sophisticated experience not only of language but also of a cultural ethos' (201).
- ³ In his 'Floating Words: Sea as Metaphor of Style in "Typhoon",' Amar Acheraiou points out that: 'the sea is personified, becoming a human being endowed with passion and speech: "There was hate in the way in which she was handled, and a ferocity in the blows that fell. She was like a living creature thrown to the rage of a mob" (47).'

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