



The Construction of a New Hegemonic Masculinity in *Youth*

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Abstract

With the theory of masculinity of Raewyn Connell, the essay aims to analyze the construction of hegemonic masculinity in Joseph Conrad’s fiction *Youth*. The essay wants to prove that in the age of New Imperialism in the 1890s, Conrad constructs a new hegemonic masculinity as the idealized masculinity in the novel. *Youth* reveals Conrad’s attempt to integrate into the mainstream English culture and shows his effort to seek an English cultural identity.

Key words: Hegemonic masculinity; Cultural identity; Construction

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INTRODUCTION

Among Joseph Conrad’s various novels, *Youth* is often mentioned as a Bildungsroman. A young second mate suffers from all difficulties and adversities on a sail ship and finally becomes mature. In fact, the theme of “a boy’s growth from immaturity to maturity” is in many of Joseph Conrad’s novels from *Youth* (1898) to *The Shadow Line* (1915). Just as John Batchelor points out: “The

meaning of ‘Youth’ does not have to be worked for. The young Marlow undergoes a rite of passage from which he emerges a more self-possessed and fully-formed person than he was at the narrative’s beginning.” (Batchelor, 1994, p.77)

Since the 1990s, with the publication of *Masculinity* by Raewyn Connell, the issue of masculinity has been closely examined in literature. This provides a new perspective in approaching the novel—to analyze *Youth* from the perspective of the construction of the hegemonic masculinity in the age of New Imperialism.

Youth was written in 1894, a year when New Imperialism was at its peak. New Imperialism had arisen since the 1870s. In the context of New Imperialism, the notion of masculinity has also undergone a major transformation. *Youth* has touched upon the important issue of the British empire—the construction of the hegemonic masculinity of a new age. The essay wants to prove that by constructing a new model of hegemonic masculinity, *Youth* indicates Conrad’s attempt to integrate into the mainstream English culture and shows his effort to identify with the English cultural identity.

1. A JOURNEY TO SEEK FOR SOCIAL RECOGNITION

In *Youth*, the narrator Marlow makes his first appearance. The Marlow who sailed on the *Judea* in *Youth* was almost as young as the Conrad who had sailed on the *Palestine* in 1881-1882. The journey of the young Marlow is not only a journey to maturity but also a journey to social recognition. When the novel begins, Marlow is just “twenty”. He has “come out of a crack Australian clipper, where he had been third officer” (Conrad, 2005, p.836). Although he has been working for six years on the ship, he is obviously not accepted as “one of us” by other sailors. The narrator is considered too young and his youth a sign of inexperience in other seamen’s eyes. According

to the young Marlow, “the pilot mistrusted my youth, my common-sense, and my seamanship and made a point of showing it in a hundred little ways” (Conrad, 2005, p.836). Besides, Marlow is discriminated because he comes from a “clipper”. “A clipper” means a ship powered by steam engines. After the industrial revolution, more and more ships were built of iron and later of steel and powered by steam engines. By 1894, sail accounted for only one-third of the tonnage of the merchant fleet (Watt, 1979, p.17). For the seamen on sail ships, they held a prejudice against these steam ships and believed that only on a sail ship could the seamen show the human potentials of heroism and great courage. Therefore, it is not strange that the narrator, “a gentlemen out of them big ships” (Conrad, 2005, p.836), is considered as “aristocratic and high-toned” (Ibid.).

On the one hand, Marlow is discriminated and not recognized as “one of us” by other experienced seamen; on the other hand, he is very young and ambitious. Young as he is, he is not a green hand at all. He has several years of sailing experience and what he needs is a chance to prove his potentials and establish his authority. He leaves a modern steamship and chooses the old ship *Judea* because of a strong desire to shoulder responsibility and even master a ship. When he gets the chance to be a second mate of *Judea*, he is very excited and accepts the post willingly. “It was one of the happiest days of my life. Fancy! Second mate for the first time—a really responsible officer.” (Ibid., p.835)

2. HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY AND NEW IMPERIALISM

Youth witnesses Conrad’s effort to construct a new mode of hegemonic masculinity in the end of the 1890s. The analytic frame of hegemonic masculinity is proposed by the sociologist Raewyn Connell, who uses the term to distinguish a society’s most authoritative construction of masculinity from other subordinated or marginalized models. Connell argues, “At any time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted.” (Connell, 1995, p.77) Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Ibid.). Connell points out that hegemony is “a historically mobile relation”. “When conditions for the defense of patriarchy change, the bases for the dominance of a particular masculinity are eroded. New groups may challenge old solutions and construct a new hegemony.” (Ibid.)

The 1870s saw the birth of the New Imperialism in Great Britain. New Imperialism lay not only in “feverish pace of overseas annexations” and “tense atmosphere

of international competition”, but also in the “marked appetite of the British public for conquest, combat and heroism” (Tosh, 2005, p.192). New Imperialism, as the culturally ascendant ideology, asks for a new hegemonic masculinity. New Imperialism and masculinity were an inseparable whole. As Joanna de Groot has put it, “manliness and empire confirmed one another, guaranteed one another, enhanced one another, whether in the practical disciplines of commerce and government or in the escape zones of writing, travel and art.” (Groot, 1990, p.122) Indeed, there is a striking similarity between the making of empire and the making of man: both are made of struggle, duty, action and heroism.

The new hegemonic masculinity in the age of New Imperialism is characterized by its escape from domesticity and seek for adventure. According to Bradley Deane, the 1870s witnessed a change of hegemonic masculinity in Great Britain. If the dominant masculinity in the 1860s is “earnest, mature, hard-working, morally pater-familieas, frock-coated and full-bearded,” the dominant masculinity in the 1890s is more to do with a “aggressive competition” (Deane, 2014, p.6). In other words, “by the late nineteenth century, the standard of manliness was carried by new champions; paragons of midcentury manliness, such as the entrepreneur, the missionary, and the affectionate family man, had been elbowed aside by the untamed frontiersman, the impetuous boy, and the unapologetically violent soldier (Ibid., p.I). Similarly, Tosh notices a change of masculinity represented in literature, which he calls the “rejection of domesticity”. He points out that “in the mid-1880s signaled the rapid rise of a new genre of men-only adventure fiction, in which the prevalent concern of the English novel with marriage and family was quite deliberately cast aside in favour of a bracing masculine fantasy of quest and danger” (Tosh, 2005, p.107).

3. THE CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

This change is revealed in Conrad’s novels. As a matter of fact, in Conrad’s novels, adventure rather than a family is more closely connected with a young man’s growth. A young man “taking the first command” has become the subject from *Youth* to *The Shadow Line*. This is fully manifested in the author’s note of *The Shadow Line*. In 1915, Conrad’s 18-year-old son Borys chose to enlist in the army. Although Conrad had a fear for Borys’s safety, he wrote a much autobiographical novel *The shadow Line* to inspire Borys. Much like the outline of *Youth*, *The Shadow Line* describes how a young skipper struggle with diseases, his predecessor’s villainy, the first mate’s skepticism and becomes the commander of the ship both in name and in reality. He admitted in the Author’s note the close relationship with adventure and the growth of

a young man: "Primarily the aim of the piece of writing was the presentation of certain fact which certainly were associated with the change from youth, care-free and fervent, to the more self-conscious and poignant period of maturer life." (Conrad, 2005, p.1278) Here, "certain facts" refer to the difficulties and adversities a young man confronts on his way to maturity.

In *Youth*, as an example of the old and traditional mode of hegemonic masculinity before the 1860s, Captain Beard is more connected with a family than with adventures. In the narrator's eyes, the captain was old and like a "grandfather" (Ibid., p.836). Though "sixty" years old, he was not very experienced. He had been years in "coasters, Mediterranean, and West Indian trade", he had never around the "Capes" (Ibid., p.836). It is his first time to be a skipper. He has a family and has a deep attachment to his wife. When the *Judea* is damaged by a collision in the dock, Beard's immediate concern is for his wife's safety instead of for the ship. Besides, although Mrs. Beard's solicitude for her old husband's health is sweet and engaging, it weakens the old man's authority as a skipper. Old Beard has none of the authority or self-command that one expects of a skipper. He is more like a loving and considerate husband than a courageous captain.

By contrast, the young second mate symbolizes the new hegemonic masculinity of the New Imperialism. His family background is not mentioned and he has no girlfriend or a wife. He is fervent in seeking for adventures. The reason why he chooses *Judea* is because of her destination—Bangkok. The journey to the Oriental city Bangkok is full of adventures and only in the adventures can he show his courage. As the narrator exclaimed: "'Bangkok!' I thrilled. I had been six years at sea, but had only seen Melbourne and Sydney, very good places, charming places in their way—but Bangkok!" (Ibid., p.836) In his eyes, Bangkok is an attractive destination because it symbolizes the Orient, a place of adventures. In the adventures, he will show his ability and rich experience as a professional sailor and establish his authority as a virtual leader of the ship.

One remarkable characteristic of the new model of masculinity is a strong ambition to be the leader or winner. Marlow is ambitious to take the first command. When the ship *Judea* has burnt, all the seamen have to move to the life boats. Marlow has got the opportunity to take charge of the smallest boat. This is his "first command" (Ibid., p.852). Although he was told to keep close with the long-boat, he decided to "part company as soon as I could", for he wanted to "have my first command all to myself" (Ibid.). In the small lifeboats, he was determined to overtake the Captain's boat. It fills him with pride and a sense of competitiveness, and he determines to make landfall before the other two boats. "I would make land by myself. I would beat the other boats." (Ibid., p.853) When he proudly sailed past Mahon's boat, the young second

mate has symbolically usurped the power of the skipper. This also symbolizes the new hegemonic masculinity's triumph over the old one.

4. CONRAD'S IDENTIFICATION WITH ENGLISH CULTURAL IDENTITY

Conrad's construction of a new hegemonic masculinity shows his attempt to integrate into the mainstream English culture and his effort to identify with the English cultural identity.

Youth has a strong autobiographical character. Conrad used to have a similar experience with the narrator of *Youth*. In 1881-1882, he became the second mate on *Palestine*. He was just twenty and overjoyed by his promotion. The *Palestine*, commanded by Captain Elijah Beard, sailed from London on 21 September 1881, stopping at Gravesend and then proceeding slowly to Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where it remained for five weeks to load its cargo of coal. It sailed from Newcastle for Bangkok on 29 November 1881. Crossing the Channel it encountered bad weather, began to leak and lost a mast: the crew refused to continue and Captain Beard was forced to return to Falmouth for repairs. The repairs took eight months and Conrad chose to stay with the ship in order to make up the time in service required for his first mate's examination. The *Palestine* finally set sail from Falmouth to Bangkok on 17 September, and in March of the following year, 1883, the cargo of coal exploded and caught fire; the crew took to the ship's three lifeboats and landed at Muntok on Bangka island (Batchelor, 1994, p.34).

Because of the autobiographical feature of the novel, Marlow can be seen as the projection of Conrad's ego. Marlow's eagerness for social recognition reflects Conrad's desire to seek for integration into the mainstream English culture and a cultural identity.

Alienation and exile central to the life of Conrad results in Conrad's seek for a cultural identity. In 1857, Conrad was born in Poland. Poland then was not an independent nation and was controlled by Russia. When Conrad was only four years old, Apollo and Eva, Conrad's parents had been sentenced to deportation to a remote Russian province because of the involvement in the resistance against Russia. When Conrad was seven years old, Eva died of tuberculosis. Unluckily, four years later, Apollo also died. Later, he was brought up by Tadeusz Bobrowski, his mother's oldest brother. When he was 17 years ago, he left for Marseille and joined the French merchant marine. According to Ian Watt, Conrad's choice of sea career shows his desire to be belonged to a community because "as a ship's officer, in short, Conrad was still an important and needed member of a community rather than someone who merely worked for a living" (Watt, 1979, p.20).

Among all countries, Conrad admired the British seamanship most. The opening of *Youth* says “This could have occurred nowhere but in England, where man and sea interpenetrate” (Conrad, 2005, p.835) characterized by a sense of duty, heroism and a desire to seek adventure and conquest, British seamanship played a crucial role in the establishment of the British Empire. From the 1860s, seaman, instead of farmers, gradually became the exemplar of the age of New Imperialism. British seamen became the ideal example of the hegemonic masculinity in Britain.

The character Marlow, whom Conrad identifies with, stands for the ideal seaman in Conrad’s opinion. Marlow appears in *Youth* for the first time and later appears in many novels including *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*. He bears the characteristics of a hegemonic masculinity in the age of New Imperialism. His heroism, competitiveness and leadership is what Conrad admires. Through the character Marlow, Conrad sets an example for himself about what he is going to be like and this reveals his inner desire to identify with the mainstream

English culture and his seek for an English cultural identity.

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