Typhoon Short Guide

Typhoon by Joseph Conrad

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Characters

The main characters are Captain MacWhirr, whose limited and literal-minded approach to his work provides the central focus of interest in the novel. Even MacWhirr's wife seems to resent MacWhirr and prefer his absence on long voyages.

Jukes constantly finds MacWhirr tiresome and aggravating, but fortunately, MacWhirr is too much absorbed in his duties even to understand the degree of exasperation and contempt felt by Jukes and some of the others. MacWhirr is a courageous and heroic man in his own way, since he does acknowledge the possibility of Nan-Shan being lost in the storm, but perseveres anyhow; yet Conrad's narrative implies that much of his courage and the efficacy of his actions are due to MacWhirr's inability to understand the perils he faces. MacWhirr's capabilities are shown by the fact that he is not imaginative enough to change course and avoid the typhoon; but he is tenacious enough to handle the ship and its men as well as could be done during the time of trial while the Nan-Shan is at the mercy of the storm. MacWhirr can also understand the need for calming the Chinese laborers when they are scrambling after their dollars during the storm; but he fails to grasp the potential for a riot when he redistributes their money during calm weather. However, MacWhirr's reliance on the traditional symbols of authority proves to be sufficient.

As a foil to MacWhirr, the first mate, Mr. Jukes, is a literate and intelligent man, but it is possible that he has too much imagination. He worries perhaps too much about sailing under the Siamese flag and he foresees numerous perils from the Chinese laborers, especially after MacWhirr confiscates the money they are fighting over during the storm. His apprehension leads to his helping arm the crew with rifles when the money is being re-distributed, a precaution MacWhirr correctly supposes to be unnecessary.

During the voyage, Mr. Jukes gains experience about how to survive in a storm, but he has difficulty admitting the wisdom of MacWhirr's actions.

Unlike Mr. Jukes, the engineer, Solomon Rout, is an experienced seaman who values MacWhirr's limited qualities of mind. Rout proves to be a cool head in a crisis and like MacWhirr, understands that the ship's only chance is to ride out the storm. At the end of the novella, Rout, a good family man, makes an admiring assessment of MacWhirr's handling of the storm and the Chinese, a judgment which stands in contrast to the grudging compliment paid to MacWhirr by the youthful and less experienced first mate.

Rout does not give his wife a detailed description of the storm and its perils, but the experience has had a sobering effect on him, for he ends his letter to Mrs. Rout with the wish that they might be together more. It appears at the end of the story that Rout has matured a bit and his days of careless seafaring without much worry for the consequences may be coming to an end.

Although a minor character, the second mate of the Nan-Shan is a bitter and cynical man, probably from West Hartlepool originally, with a sharp nose, bad teeth, and "no

hair on his face." Hired in an emergency after the regular second mate has been injured and put ashore, the second mate is, as Conrad's narrator comments, "one of those men who are picked up at need in the ports of the world." Since he has no friends or relatives at home, the second mate writes no letters and tends to stick to his own thoughts. His career appears to be one of bad choices and poor luck, and his experiences on various voyages have made him cynical. When the storm hits the Nan-Shan, the second mate proves useless, since his habitual pessimism impels him to believe that the ship will be lost.

Although it is not strictly true that he "lost his nerve" as Captain MacWhirr and the engineer believe, the second mate illustrates an important theme in Conrad: The man who is too alienated from humanity seldom functions well in a crisis.

Another minor character, Mrs. MacWhirr, is not only the recipient of MacWhirr's letters, but a foil to MacWhirr.

Mrs. MacWhirr is herself an imperious woman and a petty tyrant, and just imaginative enough to feel superior to her itinerant husband. Conrad's readers are informed that she prefers for her husband to be absent on long voyages, mainly because his absence allows her to dominate the household. MacWhirr's final letter to her does not convey his deeper feelings about the storm and the ordeal he has gone through, and Mrs. MacWhirr is much too stupid to read between the lines. Thus, although MacWhirr becomes in his own way somewhat heroic in the eyes of the reader, his wife fails to understand the magnitude of what he has done.

By contrast, Solomon Rout's wife and his mother who share the information in Rout's letters show themselves to be more perceptive and concerned about Solomon. However, Mrs. Rout, Solomon's mother, has had many children and outlived all but Solomon. She is unable to think of Solomon as more than a ten-year-old boy, the baby of her family. Solomon's wife, a "jolly woman" is also deeply concerned with her husband's fate, but annoyed that he does not share the details of his ordeal with her.

Social Concerns

Typhoon, one of Joseph Conrad's most famous stories of the sea, is a narrative in which the interest is primarily focused on the behavior of men at sea—both under ordinary circumstances and when facing extreme danger during a storm. Judged simply as a description of life at sea, like "Youth" (1898; see separate entry) and The Nigger of the Narcissus, (1897), "Typhoon" may be read and valued as realistic depictions of maritime life. However, as with Conrad's other first-rate works, the social and intellectual interest of the narrative extends far beyond its surface realism.

Certainly, a major feature of the novella is Conrad's memorable description of the typhoon that strikes Captain MacWhirr's ship. The consequent reactions to it of the different officers and men reveal their inner natures. While MacWhirr worries mainly about his present discomforts and what commands he needs to give to save the ship, the other men aboard respond in widely varying ways. One of the areas of social concern is a judgment of MacWhirr's conduct as captain of this vessel.

Obviously, MacWhirr's refusal to attempt to avoid the storm was foolish, but his conduct during the ordeal may be seen as admirable.

Another area of social concern is the reactions of the other and more imaginative men, such as the first mate, Jukes. It is obvious that these men show varying degrees of courage and presence of mind in the face of imminent destruction, although nearly all acquit themselves adequately.

Yet another area of social interest is the attitude of the white European characters toward the Chinese aboard. It is an interesting point that most of the men see the Chinese as more of a threat than as a group of humans whose survival is important. Not only are the officers and men of the ship tested by their attitudes toward the Chinese, but the commercial attitudes of the shipowners are also brought under scrutiny. Indeed, the entire realm of social and political relationships between Europeans and Asians at the end of the nineteenth century may become an issue for thoughtful readers.

Techniques

One of Conrad's most effective techniques in his description of the storm is to show how it is perceived by different members of the ship's officers after the storm makes its memorable impact. Multiple points of view are used here and throughout the novella; hence readers should not be upset at the use of multiple points of view at the story's end, although Conrad's technique has the effect of destroying the possibility of a melodramatic ending.

Another useful technique is Conrad's revelation of the characters of different officers through the various letters they write during calm times on board ship.

MacWhirr, for instance, in his letter to his wife after the storm does not even begin to convey the fierceness and frightening quality of the ordeal his ship has survived.

Conrad also uses straightforward description effectively, although always in a controlled manner; when the hurricane strength hits the rolling Nan-Shan, Conrad presents it in this sentence: "It seemed to explode all round the ship with an over powering concussion and a rush of great waters, as if an immense dam had been blown up to windward . .." Although the ship pitches wildly, Conrad's prose is always careful to portray the precise effect, as in the use of the breaking dam simile.

The storm's effect is mainly dramatized through its psychological impact on the different crew members of the Nan-Shan, particularly in the contrast between MacWhirr, who struggles to maintain his position in the wheel house, and Jukes, who is sent on a perilous journey down to the engine room. Whereas MacWhirr merely acknowledges that the storm may overturn and sink the ship, Jukes at first gives way to despair, believing at first that the Nan-Shan is "done for."

Conrad's most venturesome use of technique is to conclude the story in a less dramatic key. Leaving the ship wallowing in the storm at its height, the narrator finishes the novella with the differing reactions and views of the main characters afterward, when the Nan-Shan reaches port. Here readers are given the letters and comments of the various characters, from the bitter comments of the disgraced second mate (put ashore because MacWhirr believes correctly that the mate had lost his nerve) to the comments made in letters by MacWhirr, Solomon Rout, and Mr. Jukes. As might be expected, MacWhirr's letter gives the facts without the drama, or even his fears that the Nan-Shan would be lost; Rout expresses admiration for MacWhirr's leadership without trying to explain matters to his wife; and Jukes offers a full description with a frustrated acknowledgment that MacWhirr's leadership had indeed been successful.

Although some readers might find Conrad's ending sequence as exasperating as MacWhirr's literal-mindedness, this method of resolving the story underscores Conrad's ironic theme that perhaps a captain would be more successful if he were not particularly aware or imaginative about the possibilities for failure or disaster.

Themes

One of the major themes of the novella is the contrast between Conrad's characters who are imaginative men aware of the larger issues of life and conscious of the potential for disaster and the literal minded and relatively unaware Captain MacWhirr. MacWhirr is a hard working captain devoted to routine and loyal to the needs of the Nan-Shan and the interests of her owners. Yet he lacks imagination and seems oblivious to the threat of death or disaster in any situation. His response to Jukes's concern about the dangers of flying under the Siamese flag—the colors of an Asian nation which is negligible in the international power struggle—illustrates MacWhirr's lack of imaginative vision. After Jukes's remark, MacWhirr gets the Siamese flag out and studies it carefully to see if there is a flaw in the material, a ludicrous reaction to a statement which nearly everyone would recognize as metaphorical.

The nature of MacWhirr as a commander or captain is tested by the events of "Typhoon." A more imaginative man than MacWhirr would have been concerned about the danger of the storm and changed course to avoid steaming into the teeth of the wind. Lacking imagination, MacWhirr is unable to gain insight from a book offering advice about dealing with hurricane strength winds, calling the text "a lot of words . . ." But a more imaginative commander might also have panicked under stress after actually getting the ship in the typhoon. Ironically, MacWhirr's very lack of imagination and literal-minded application to the immediate crisis enable him not only to demonstrate coolness in handling the ship, but to meet the challenge of a possible insurrection on the part of the frightened Chinese passengers with firmness and success.

Conrad also employs irony in depicting the reactions of the more aware men, from the imaginative but excitable Jukes and the veteran engineer Solomon Rout to the cynical and vicious second mate.

While Jukes foresees the danger, he acts with less self-control than his commander in the early stages of the storm. Rout is somewhat calmer, but like all of the Europeans—except MacWhirr—he fears the worst in the reaction of the Chinese to having their money confiscated. Despite the second mate's experience and understanding from many voyages, his cynical and disillusioned nature makes him of little use in the storm and he begins to tell vicious lies about MacWhirr when he is put ashore after the voyage.

A final theme—though easily overlooked—is the initiation of the first mate, Mr. Jukes into a greater knowledge of men and the trials of life at sea. At the beginning of the novella, the impatient and opinionated Jukes is contemptuous of MacWhirr, failing to recognize MacWhirr's peculiar strengths as a captain ("he's too dense to trouble about," Jukes writes his friend in the "Western ocean trade"). At the end of the novella Jukes, after surviving the storm and the threat of an insurrection by the Chinese laborers, is forced to admit ruefully that MacWhirr "got out of it very well for such a stupid man." In

fact, one could make an argument that "Typhoon" is an "initiation" story, much like "Youth," and that Jukes is its chief protagonist.

Key Questions

Since there is a great interest in disaster stories and the motion picture Titanic (1997) has been a great commercial success, readers may wish to consider the nature of typhoons in the China seas.

Certainly Conrad's novella provides a fine description of a ship wallowing in the wind and seas caused by a typhoon.

Another approach might be to discuss the relationship between Captain MacWhirr and the ship owners and the nature of their conveyance of the Chinese workers back to China. Is the story related to the imperialism of the day? If so, how?

And what are the different attitudes revealed by the Captain and the crew toward the Chinese? Are they guilty of racism, or merely a European sense of patronizing superiority?

1. What are MacWhirr's strengths and weaknesses as a captain? How does Conrad make us aware of them?

2. What is the actual strength of the winds in a typhoon? What perils for ships do such storms pose? Does Conrad's novella present these perils adequately?

3. What influence do MacWhirr's employers have on him? What principles govern MacWhirr's actions whether in or out of peril?

4. Why are the Chinese laborers on board? Where is the Nan-Shan taking them? What is so important about the money they are taking?

5. Does the story's attitude toward the Chinese laborers seem racist? Is the attitude of the chief officers of the Nan-Shan racist, or merely patronizing toward the Chinese?

6. How does the Nan-Shan manage to survive the storm? What actions help her to survive?

7. How do the various officers and crew members act during the crisis of the ship's passage through the typhoon?

What is revealed about each officer and the crew members?

8. Why is the second mate so offensive? What happens to him during the storm? Is MacWhirr's dismissal of him fair? Why or why not?

9. What motivates Captain MacWhirr to confiscate the money of the Chinese passengers? Is this act legal or not? Is it sensible?

10. Why does MacWhirr have such an easy time in redistributing the money to the Chinese?

11. Why is Mr. Jukes uneasy about sailing under the Siamese flag? Is the reason for his uneasiness revealed near the end of the novella, when the officers are concerned about the problems of redistributing the money to the Chinese?

12. What attitudes and feelings are revealed in each of the letters written about the storm at the end of the story?

13. What is the relationship between MacWhirr and Mrs. MacWhirr, if we may judge from the letters MacWhirr writes and from Mrs. MacWhirr's responses?

14. What has Mr. Jukes learned—if anything—about MacWhirr and about life at end of the novella? Is the novella in part a study of Mr. Jukes's initiation into manhood?

Literary Precedents

Conrad's literary precedents for "Typhoon," as with most of his sea fiction, included the novels of Frederick Marryat and the sea fiction of James Fenimore Cooper. In fact, Conrad once published an essay in Outlook (June 4, 1898) praising the fiction of Cooper and Marryat, which he claimed were his favorite reading in boyhood and youth.

On the other hand, it seems unlikely that Conrad had much knowledge of Herman Melville's fiction at this time; but if he had, Melville was never a major influence. In fact, it is recorded in Zdzislaw Najder's Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle (1983) that Conrad late in life expressed dislike tot Moby-Dick (1851).

It should be noted, however, that despite the precedents of such writers as Marryat and James Fenimore Cooper, Conrad's fiction was more influenced by the French realistic tradition associated with Gustav Flaubert and Guy de Maupassant. The realistic tradition certainly influences his treatment of life at sea, and Conrad's sense of realism emerges in his refusal to treat the storm in a spirit of melodrama, and in his low key ending to a dramatic narrative.

Related Titles

"Typhoon" is related to a number of Conrad's other tales that emphasize disasters and perils at sea, as well as the character of a particular captain or ship's , master in the English merchant service.

Included in this group are "Youth," The Nigger of the Narcissus, The End of the Tether (1903), and perhaps "The Secret Sharer" (1912; see separate entry), which, for all its concern about the fugitive representing Marlow's darker side, is also a story about the test of Marlow on his first voyage as a ship's captain. Readers can easily infer some conclusions about MacWhirr by comparing his behavior to other officers in Conrad's stories, including Captain Whalley in The End of the Tether.

Other Conrad titles which show some related concerns are Lord Jim (1900; see separate entry), also concerned in its early sections with the transfer of non-Europeans on a voyage through eastern waters and Heart of Darkness (1902; see separate entry), which offers a different kind of trial by ordeal to its ship captain, Charles Marlow. Conrad, of course, would expect his readers to notice a strong contrast between the introspective Marlow who appears in many of his stories and the unreflective and unimaginative Captain MacWhirr.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994