

ABSTRACT IDEAS IN *THE SHADOW-LINE*

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Abstract



Conrad's *The shadow-line* is about the value of experience. The unnamed narrator's first command, an unmerited miracle, symbolically represents the crossing of the shadow line, or simply, the boundary between youth and maturity. In this paper, I propose that Schopenhauer's idea of education, as articulated in his essay "On Education," is exemplified in Conrad's story. It provides the theoretical foundation for the story's practical illustration of the complexities inherent in the pursuit of self-knowledge and personal growth. The story highlights the universal journey into the "twilight region between youth and maturity" (Conrad, 2003, p. 22). The young captain's identification of himself in the long legacy of past sea captains and his reliance on the abstract idea of his command prevent him from obtaining meaning from his experience. Once he detaches himself from the abstraction of his command and collaborates with the crew, he manages to obtain that "bit of [his] own" (Conrad, 2003, p. 3) experience. However, a full correspondence between his abstract ideas and his personal knowledge of the world is yet to be achieved.

Keywords: abstract ideas, Conrad, knowledge, maturity, youth, Schopenhauer

Article history:

Received: 29 March 2026

Reviewed: 15 April 2026

Accepted: 12 May 2026

Published: 20 June 2026

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Citation: Panajoti, A. (2026). Abstract ideas in 'The Shadow-line'. *English Studies at NBU*, 12(1), 36-46.
<https://doi.org/10.33919/esnbu.26.1.3>

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Conrad's *The shadow-line* is about the value of experience and the profound complexities of reading it. A retrospective, affirmative, and indefinite mode of discourse marks the opening of the story, seemingly acknowledging the universality of experience and the transitional journey into "that twilight region between youth and maturity" (Conrad, 2003, p. 22), where all mankind has passed. However, this narrative framework also alerts us that such experiences, despite their universal "charm" (Conrad, 2003, p. 3), should contain "a bit of one's own" (p. 3) to hold genuine significance. The unnamed narrator's first command, perceived as an unmerited miracle after he has relinquished a job opportunity because "there was no truth to be got out of [...]" (Conrad, 2003, p. 6), symbolically represents the crossing of the shadow-line—the boundary between youth and maturity, to put it simply—hence, encapsulating the pursuit for grasping the missing truth inherent in personal experience.

The story that unfolds echoes in many ways the themes articulated in Schopenhauer's essay "On Education."¹ The narrator's relentless quest to obtain some truth serves as a poignant illustration of Schopenhauer's assertion that "[t]o *acquire a knowledge of the world* might be defined as the aim of all education" (1893, p. 55; emphasis in the original). This pursuit reflects Schopenhauer's idea that understanding the complexities of human experience and existence is essential for personal growth and maturity.

In this paper, I will read Conrad's *The shadow-line* as a practical follow-up of Schopenhauer's essay "On Education." If Schopenhauer's essay serves as the theoretical framework, we can read Conrad's story as the 'exercise book,' illustrating and applying these philosophical abstractions in real-life contexts. In my analysis, I will seek to demonstrate how Schopenhauer's philosophical probing—in particular, his notion of 'abstract ideas'—embodies Schopenhauer's idea of education as a transformative process that goes beyond formal forms of learning. Instead, he emphasises the acquisition of experiential knowledge through meaningful engagement with the world. Schopenhauer's philosophical underpinnings about education will also manifest in the unnamed

¹ This essay first appeared in vol. 2 of *Parerga and Paralipomena* (1851). (Cf. the back cover of Schopenhauer, A. (2000). *Parerga and paralipomena: Short philosophical essays* (Vol. 2; E. F. J. Payne, Trans.). Clarendon Press.). In this paper, I have referenced the 1893 version, which was included in Schopenhauer, A. (1893). *Studies in pessimism: A series of essays* (T. B. Saunders, Trans.). Scholarly Press.

narrator's voyage, a journey that ultimately aims not only to reveal the truths of the external world but, most importantly, to foster a more profound understanding of oneself amidst the challenges of existence.

The influence of Schopenhauer's philosophy has been widely researched, interpreted, and acknowledged by literary scholars, who have approached its exercise upon Conrad's work in various ways, from indebtedness to tribute. While many scholars attribute Conrad's Schopenhauerian inspiration primarily to the philosopher's seminal work *The world as will and idea* (or *The world as will and representation*), I align with Stinchcombe's assertion (2010, p. 11) that Schopenhauer's essays represent a more plausible avenue for Conrad, a man of letters but not a professional academic, than *The world as will and idea*. That this could be the case is best understood within larger historical and personal contexts.

Besides being more approachable, Schopenhauer's volumes of essays became popular (Stinchcombe, 2010, p. 12) in nineteenth-century Britain, making them more accessible to Victorian readers. It is likely that Conrad's engagement with Schopenhauer was primarily through these essays, especially considering that, as Stinchcombe (2010, p. 11) points out, although Conrad was fluent in French and English, his fluency in German was not sufficient to read Schopenhauer in the original language. From a wider intellectual or historical context, as Woods (2018) argues, "the first truly impartial reception of Schopenhauer is to be found in Great Britain" (p. 421)², making particular reference to John Oxenford's review of *Parerga and paralipomena* titled "Iconoclasm in German philosophy" and published in the *Westminster review* in April 1853 (p. 421), somehow reinforcing the idea that the British audience, including Conrad, encountered Schopenhauer's ideas through his essays rather than his major philosophical work.

Although Conrad himself has not yet been proven to have acknowledged his interest in Schopenhauer, Stinchcombe aligns Conrad's work with Schopenhauer's essays, observing that Schopenhauer's approach to self-knowledge and character could have particularly captivated Conrad (2010, pp. 1-5). As much as I can affirm this connection between Conrad and Schopenhauer, which stems from their mutual interest

² An English translated version of this chapter can be found at <https://philarchive.org/archive/WOOG-3>.

in character, particularly evident in Conrad's stories that feature young protagonists who embark on a journey or voyage and/or are dislocated from their local context, in this paper, for my reading of *The shadow-line*, I will focus on a somewhat overlooked essay of Schopenhauer's, "On Education," which I believe is critical for reading Conrad's stories that feature these young characters.

At one point in *The shadow-line*, the unnamed captain reflects: "[...] a command is *an abstract idea*, and it seemed a sort of a 'lesser marvel' till it flashed upon me that it involved the concrete existence of a ship" (Conrad, 2003, p. 33; emphasis added). Before taking command of the ship, the young captain views his captaincy as an abstraction, characterised by a "strong magic" (Conrad, 2003, p. 24), which he experiences as a combination of enchantment and daydreaming. The ship itself appears to him as being "disengaged from the material conditions of her being" (Conrad, 2003, p. 42). In this paper, I aim to illustrate that the young narrator's subsequent events aboard the ship are a direct consequence of this abstraction, which illustrates Schopenhauer's critique of what he terms "the *artificial* method" (1893, p. 91; emphasis in the original) of education³, which implies learning from "general ideas⁴ before you have any sort of extended acquaintance with the world as it is, and as you may see it for yourself" (p. 91). Against the artificial method of education, Schopenhauer posits "the *natural* method of education" (p. 91; emphasis in the original), "by which he, [...], means that experience or 'particular observations,' as he calls them, that precede the formation of general ideas" (Panajoti, 2015, p. 13).

In retrospect, at the very beginning of the story, the young captain remarks, "One goes on recognizing the landmarks of the predecessors, excited, amused, taking the hard luck and the good luck together [...]. Yes. One goes on. And the time, too, goes on—till one perceives ahead a shadow-line warning one that the region of early youth, too, must be left behind." (Conrad, 2003, p. 3) The "deputy-Neptune" (p. 24), Captain Ellis, soon presents him with the opportunity to leave behind youth when he appoints him to the

³ As it has already been argued elsewhere, "By education Schopenhauer means the path that leads to maturity. In this respect, he distinguishes between knowledge received from schooling and knowledge of the world. It is the second type of knowledge that he is interested in." (Panajoti, 2015, p. 13)

⁴ These ideas are an outcome of what one reads or learns and hears from others.

command of a British ship that had been left behind in Bangkok following the death of its previous captain.

His recognition of the “fellowship of seamen” (Conrad, 2003, p. 28) is affirmed by a growing sense of responsibility and obligation that overtakes the young captain. By viewing himself in the long line of tradition of former sea captains and invoking “the composite soul, the soul of command” (p. 43), he remains entrenched in the abstraction of his captaincy. He, like his predecessors, finds himself “subject for official writing,” “ghosts,” “symbols to juggle with in books and heavy registers” (Conrad, 2003, p. 29). Evidently, he tailors this strong sense of responsibility to match the abstraction inherent in his new role. Consequently, he perceives the ship as an item of his “possession and care” (Conrad, 2003, p. 33), regarding it as “an object of responsibility and devotion” (p. 33). The possessive nature of his abstraction, coupled with his collective or plural references to ships, compels him to view his first command as an important test, one that challenges him to reconcile his idealised notions of leadership with the concrete realities of his responsibilities:

I discovered how much of a seaman I was, in heart, in mind, and, as it were, physically—*a man exclusively of sea and ships; the sea the only world that counted, and the ships, the test of manliness, of temperament, of courage and fidelity*—and of love. (Conrad, 2003, p. 34; emphasis added)

For the time was approaching for me to behold *my* command and to prove my worth in the ultimate test of *my* profession. (Conrad, 2003, p. 40; emphasis added)

This perspective detaches him from the other seamen onboard, leading him to perceive his maturation process as a solitary enterprise:

I might have smiled if I had not been *busy with my own sensations, which were not those of Mr. Burns. I was already the man in command. My sensations could not be like those of any other man on board.* In that community I stood, *like a king in his country, in a class all by myself.* I mean an hereditary king, not a mere elected head of a state. I was brought there to rule by an agency as remote from the people and as inscrutable almost to them as the Grace of God. (Conrad, 2003, p. 51; emphasis added)

He reflects, “And this horrible problem was only an extraneous episode, a mere complication in the general problem of how to get that ship—which was mine with her appurtenances and her men, with her body and her spirit now slumbering in that pestilential river—how to get her out to sea.” (Conrad, 2003, p. 53) Moreover, he experiences a physical manifestation of his isolation: “I felt a slight tightness of the chest before I gave out the first course of my first command to the silent night, heavy with dew and sparkling with stars. There was a finality in the act committing me to the endless vigilance of *my lonely task*.” (Conrad, 2003, p. 63; emphasis added)

Through these reflections, the young captain articulates the profound sense of isolation that accompanies his newfound authority, emphasising the weight of responsibility that sets him apart from his crew and underlining the solitary nature of his journey. The quality of his abstraction also affects his sense of self. He clearly dissociates himself, the captain, from himself, the narrator who tells the story. This dissociation is evident in his detached reflection in the mirror, his engaging in self-talk as if conversing with someone else, and in his decision to keep a diary:

“Let us be calm,” I said to myself. (Conrad, 2003, p. 30)

[...] I stared back at myself with the perfect detachment of distance, rather with curiosity than with any other feeling, except of some sympathy for this latest representative of what for all intents and purposes was a dynasty, continuous not in blood indeed, but in its experience, in its training, in its conception of duty, and in the blessed simplicity of its traditional point of view on life.

It struck me that this quietly staring man whom I was watching, both as if he were myself and somebody else, was not exactly a lonely figure. He had his place in a line of men whom he did not know, of whom he had never heard; but who were fashioned by the same influences, whose souls in relation to their humble life's work had no secrets for him. (Conrad, 2003, p. 44)

As he now lives in the abstraction of his captaincy, he can dissociate himself from anything but the dynasty of sea captains, for which reason he feels ashamed of his predecessor's behaviour: “And like a member of a dynasty, feeling a semi-mystical bond with the dead, I was profoundly shocked by my immediate predecessor.” (Conrad, 2003, p. 51) In these circumstances, it is obvious that the young captain struggles to derive

meaning from his experience. On the one hand, despite having attained his captaincy through what seems to be luck or chance, he embodies and displays a profound sense of responsibility, devotion, and duty—qualities that he himself acknowledges can only be appreciated by “a man pursuing a calling he loves” (Conrad, 2003, p. 68). The young captain’s situation resonates with Schopenhauer’s concept of the first kind of knowledge, which he broadly summarises as cultural or professional knowledge, encompassing any type of knowledge that fits into this category. In Schopenhauer’s view:

Knowledge of the first kind would have to be classified, after an encyclopaedic fashion, in graduated courses, adapted to the degree of general culture which a man may be expected to have in the circumstances in which he is placed; beginning with a course limited to the necessary requirements of primary education, and extending upwards to the subjects treated of in all the branches of philosophical thought. The regulation of the second kind of knowledge would be left to those who had shown genuine mastery in the several departments into which it is divided; and the whole system would provide an elaborate rule or canon for intellectual education, which would, of course, have to be revised every ten years. Some such arrangement as this would employ the youthful power of the memory to best advantage, and supply excellent working material to the faculty of judgment, when it made its appearance later on. (1893, p. 98-99)

As it can be noted, it is the acquisition of the second kind of knowledge that holds significant philosophical implications for Schopenhauer. Within this framework, the young captain’s position pinpoints the importance of accumulating essential knowledge that is directly pertinent to his role and responsibilities as a captain. The quality of the young captain’s first kind of knowledge is undeniable, which becomes obvious from the very beginning by the evidence Captain Giles has obtained from the young captain’s former employer. However, the young captain feels irritated because he does not understand Giles’ motivation for learning about the circumstances of his departure from his previous ship. Giles’ interest lies in understanding how the young captain’s departure relates to experience, to the personal, that second type of knowledge that one acquires naturally, in Schopenhauer’s terms, which accounts for that missing truth or knowledge, that “bit of one’s own” (Conrad, 2003, p. 3) he seeks to obtain—one that is vital for his path towards maturity.

In his essay “On education,” Schopenhauer (1893, p. 97) elaborates on the power of memory in youth, emphasising its significance for the lessons learnt in youth as they become deeply ingrained within the individual. He further posits:

A man’s knowledge may be said to be mature, [...], when an exact correspondence is established between the whole of his abstract ideas and the things he has actually perceived for himself. This will mean that each of his abstract ideas rests, directly or indirectly, upon a basis of observation, which alone endows it with any real value; and also that he is able to place every observation he makes under the right abstract idea which belongs to it. Maturity is the work of experience alone; and therefore it requires time. The knowledge we derive from our own observation is usually distinct from that which we acquire through the medium of abstract ideas; the one coming to us in the natural way, the other by what people tell us, and the course of instruction we receive, whether it is good or bad. The result is, that in youth there is generally very little agreement or correspondence between our abstract ideas, which are merely phrases in the mind, and that real knowledge which we have obtained by our own observation. It is only later on that a gradual approach takes place between these two kinds of knowledge, accompanied by a mutual correction of error; and knowledge is not mature until this coalition is accomplished. (Schopenhauer, 1893, pp. 59-60)

Read along these lines, the young captain’s development can be understood as a process that requires time and experience as he seeks to reconcile his abstract ideas with the realities of his observations. In youth, a significant disparity often exists between the abstract ideas one holds and the concrete knowledge derived from observation. It is only through a gradual process of maturation that these two forms of knowledge begin to align, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of life and the meaning of command.

Thus, it is at the juncture where the initial magic and enchantment of his command begin to turn into a malevolent spell under the guise of some apparently supernatural atmosphere set into play—unmerited and inexplicable, much like his captaincy—that the young captain begins to realise an important truth: despite his diligence, alertness, and commitment to duty, true success and meaning of his experience cannot be derived from living in the abstraction of his command and from assuming the guilt of others. The

mystery of the serene sky abruptly bursting into a storm and the absurdity of the ship's stagnation are made to test the young captain's resolution to face the unpredictability of the weather amidst the open sea and Burn's, that is, the first captain's nonsensical conversations that the ship is hindered by the ominous influence of the late captain. Taking for granted the "seaman's instinct" (Conrad, 2003, p. 89) as a quality that applies to all seamen in the whole line of sea captains is where the young captain goes wrong because such a view distances him from his own experience.

When the young captain speaks of the seaman's instinct, he is actually referring to what Debra Romanick (1999, p. 240) sees as a product of some preparation in the service of a certain code of conduct. This form of preparation, which I would be inclined to read in Schopenhauerian lines as an artificial method of education, or preparation, if you wish, is indeed abstract and yet to be related to that "bit of one's own" (Conrad, 2003, p. 3). The young captain's detached perspective has prevented him from perceiving the essence of his captaincy and measuring his experience by his own standards, hence by the natural method of education/preparation. While his devotion and his strong sense of duty and responsibility help him to keep his presence of mind amidst the rising pressures of his command because he has strongly internalised these concepts from the code of maritime conduct (Dixon, 1981, p. 13)⁵, they do not suffice to overcome the adversities of life at sea.

These events take on a mysterious and absurd quality to stimulate this kind of understanding. The quinine episode serves as a pivotal awakening for him. He almost reaches the verge of a mental breakdown when he discovers that the quinine, on which he had laid his hopes for the ailing crew, is missing, and instead, the bottles contain a different powder. His prompting to the deck, an action he credits to the seaman's instinct—"An example this of training become instinct" (Conrad, 2003, p. 73)—not only saves him from collapsing but, most importantly, leads to the realisation that "the difficulties, the dangers, the problems of a ship at sea must be met on deck" (p. 73).

⁵ For more about the historical account of the code of maritime conduct, cf. Dixon, C. H. (1981). *Seamen and the law: An examination of the impact of legislation on the British merchant seaman's lot, 1588-1918* [Doctoral dissertation, University College London]. UCL Discovery. <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1317735/>

This event marks a turning point in his understanding and paves the way for that “exact correspondence [...] between the whole of his abstract ideas and the things he has actually perceived for himself” (Schopenhauer, 1893, p. 99), that is, establishes a correlation between the artificial method of learning and the natural method of education, or between the abstract idea of his command and the real knowledge he has obtained by his own observation. This knowledge prompts a significant shift in his perception of the ship and the other seamen: “It’s due to the ship, it’s due to the men who are there on deck—some of them, ready to put out the last remnant of their strength at a word from me. And I am shrinking from it. From the mere vision. My first command. Now I understand that strange sense of insecurity in my past.” (Conrad, 2003, p. 88) By channelling all his training, efforts, and devotion to the effect of his abstraction, the young captain failed to immediately realise that one’s maturity and self-knowledge are inherently relational; they are constructed in relation to and interaction with those of the others.

Only upon finally acknowledging that the concrete existence of his ship means not merely the vessel itself but also requires the presence and involvement of the crew—regardless of their individual conditions—does he manage to obtain that essential drop of truth for himself. Only by overcoming his abstraction of the “composite soul” (Conrad, 2003, p. 43) of command and by collaborating with the crew does he manage to draw from “the charm of universal experience” (p. 5) that bit of his own. Does he mature? One cannot tell whether the abstraction of his command fully reconciles with the things he has perceived for himself, but his and Captain Giles’ confirmation that he has grown older does testify to his transitioning beyond that “[T]wilight region between youth and maturity” (Conrad, 2003, p. 22)—the title shadow-line—that accounts for “the green sickness of late youth” (p. 5).

Upon the young captain’s return, Captain Giles remarks, “You will learn soon how not to be faint-hearted. A man has got to learn everything—and that’s what so many of them youngsters don’t understand” (Conrad, 2003, p. 108), echoing Schopenhauer’s trust in experience as a contributor to maturity and as a long process that “requires time” (1893, p. 99). The young captain’s return—described unheroically—complies with Schopenhauer’s “gradual approach” it takes to bring together his two kinds of knowledge, the one acquired through his maritime training and the one brought in by his personal

experience. The unnamed captain's affirmation: "Well, I am no longer a youngster." (Conrad, 2003, p. 108), and Captain Giles' immediate approval is a form of confirmation that he has successfully passed the test implied by the metaphorical 'shadow-line' between his desire to leave behind youth and his aspiration for maturity but that a full correspondence between his abstract ideas resulting from his training and other forms of learning from other sources and his own personal "knowledge of the *ways of the world*" (Schopenhauer, 1893, p. 100; emphasis in the original) is yet to be obtained.

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