

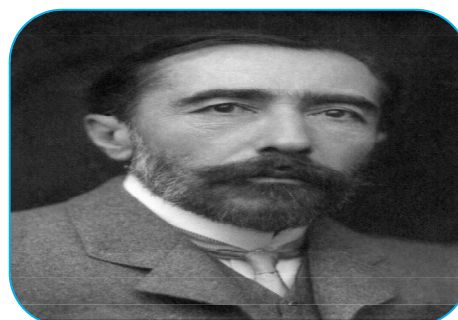


LIFE AND WORKS OF JOSEPH CONRAD

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ABSTRACT

The life and works of Joseph Conrad's. The chief aim here is to study the essence of Conrad's personality which has some intrinsic value. The writer has to present a faithful picture of his own personality. It needs courage to speak out the motives that form the basis of his character. The influences i.e., social, cultural, literary, political and others, which have gone into the making of his personality, must be fully brought out without any minimization.



KEYWORDS: social, cultural, literary, political and others.

INTRODUCTION

The personality of an individual is a complex of the stable and the ever changing. The former aspect consists of temperamental characteristics formed during the impressionable age of the individual. That determines the nature of the individual's reactions to any situations. The latter is the reaction to any situations. The latter is the change in the standpoint or the opinion of the individual. In the case of most people, this change is generally impulsive and is determined by momentary reaction to events.

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) was a different kind of 'outsider' in search of integrity. Conrad, born in Poland, the son of a prominent nationalist victim of Russian repression, was naturalized as a British citizen in 1886. If he did not in any truly reasonable sense betray his homeland, and if he rarely refers directly to the Poland he had left, a sense of betrayal nevertheless haunts his work. Conrad's career as an exile had begun and developed as a merchant Seaman and it was as a writer of sea-stories set in the East Indies and the Pacific that he first attracted public attention. It was only with the appearance of his more obviously political fiction in the early years of the twentieth century that the true bent of his art became clear to a broad group of discriminating admirers. There is, however, no clear dividing line between his sea-stories and his land-stories, between tales set in European colonies and those set in an equally troubled and benighted Europe. In a dense late sea-story, *The Secret Sharer* (1909), the narrator speaks disarmingly of the great security of the sea as compared with the unrest of the land and of a shipboard life which presents no disquieting problems. The irony of the statement becomes obvious as this particular narrative develops, but no reader of Conrad's fiction is alert to his account of the phonons and tempests, of marine disasters and shipwrecks, could unquestioningly accept its validity. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which his descriptions of shiplife suggest a relatively ordered society which is, by its very nature, prepared to face the challenges of an external and impersonal hostility. The ship also contains a small hierarchical society in which individual decision and responsibility take on the moral force of paramount virtue. In the sea-stories, 'disquieting problems', frightful and utterly

devastating as they may prove to be, do at least seem to find some kind of resolution, albeit a singularly fragile resolution.

Conrad's tales, concerned with the nature and effects of European imperialism, both economic and colonial, are of a different order to Kipling's. Conrad deals not with the multiple confrontations of India, but with the intrusion and interference of Europeans in the Pacific, in the East Indies, in South America and in Africa. His colonizers are drawn from a variety of national backgrounds most are disreputable, uncomprehending, intolerant, and exploitative. The title character in *Lord Jim* (1900) may have proved himself a successful colonial agent and have earned himself the title of Than ('Lord') from his grateful subjects, but his organizing virtues are seen as countered by the lasting memory of the corruption of his predecessor and by the deception and ruthless European piracy of Gentleman Brown. In Conrad's work colonialism generally emerges as both brutal and brutalizing, alienating nature and settler alike. Power is not simply corrupting; it is systematically open to abuse. In *An Outpost of Progress* (1898) 'Progress' is an obvious misnomer. A newspaper from 'home' brightly discusses 'Our Colonial Expansion' (though Conrad does not locate the 'our') in terms of the rights and duties of civilization, of the sacredness of the civilizing work and of the merits of those who went about bringing light and faith and commerce to the dark places of the earth. There is little light; the story indicates that the 'darkness' corrupts both internally and externally, an idea which reaches its apogee in *Heart of Darkness* (1899 -1902), a narrative which gradually unveils, layer by layer, an underlying horror. Imperialism is initially expounded as a variety of brutish idealism. 'The conquest of the earth, which mostly means taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look at it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it, not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea'. The tale, as it unwinds, exposes the lack of such an 'idea' and the remoteness of any ideal from the colonial reality. There is no redemption from 'the buying and selling gang which bosses the construction of new weapons that would bring previously unknown horror and destructive capability to warfare.

To many writers and artists working at the beginning of the twentieth century, this period of experimentation-starting at the turn of the century, from 1915 to 1925, and continuing through the 1930s-is referred to as "modernism". Modernist literature is marked by a focus on extreme subjectivity as opposed to absolute truth.

Joseph Conrad does not fit tidily into the modernist period, nor does he fit into the Victorian period. *Heart of Darkness*, written in 1899 and published in 1902, may be described most accurately as a harbinger of modernism. It is morally ambiguous, it exhibits a modernist uneasiness with the world, it emphasizes human isolation and alienation, it shows a familiarity with the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud, and its narrative structure (an "oral" story set within a narration) is unusual. High modernists like Eliot were clearly admirers of Conrad's work. Eliot uses a famous line from *Heart of Darkness* as the epigraph to his poem "The Hollow Man", and uses similarly bleak description of London in *The Waste Land*.

The aim of the modern psychological novelist, like Conrad, is to render the soul or 'psyche' truthfully and realistically, and with this end in view he uses the impressionistic technique. The human psyche is not a simple entity, functioning logically and rationally, in a predictable manner. Writing many years before James Joyce, Conrad uses impressionistic techniques to depict the human psyche. It is the very sensation of living, and not the dead outer crust, which he seeks to convey, and this makes him, says J.W. Convey, and this makes him, says J.W. Beach, "the most notable example of the reaction against the well-made novel.

Conrad is always primarily occupied with the subjective experiences of his people, their sensations in the presence of one another, but at the same time, he is also aware of how they look from the outside, of their tone and manner, the setting in which they play their parts, what they say and do, in short, of all that gives them reality. It is, therefore, impossible for him to maintain strictly the point of view of any character keeping to the subjective aspect of things. "He is forever passing back and forth between subjective and objective, within the chapter, within the paragraph, within the sentence. The characters are seen together in their setting, or they are themselves aware of their setting as something

outside themselves. Or one of them is seen and felt by the other, taken by himself or in his setting. It is impossible, to give attention, to stick to the point of view of one character in preference to that of another. A character like Kurtz is viewed through a number of eyes and is avidly realized commenting on Conrad's handling of the psychological novel. J.W. Beach says that it is Conrad's sense of the elusiveness of human nature which leads him not merely to view his subject from so many angles and strain it through so many media, but also to keep moving his camera backward and forward in time so as constantly to get the subject into some new illuminating perspective. It is as if human nature were a rare and skittish bird which he must approach with every circumstance of precaution and which must by all means be taken by surprise.

In order to understand correctly Conrad's genius, it is essential to form an idea of some more important works of the novelist. This chapter outlines the stories of some of his best novels; it has been given so that the study of the subsequent criticism may be more easily understood and appreciated. *Almayer's Folly* is a story of illusion, weariness, and powerful passion. *The Nigger of the Narcissus* is the story of one of the voyages of the ship *Narcissus* from Bombay to London. *Nostromo* is another great novel of Conrad's. It is based on the history of a South American Revolution. *The Secret Agent* is another great novel of Conrad's. As in *Nostromo*, so in this novel also, Conrad continues his study of character in society, rather than in isolation, but it is the underworld of London, a world of spying and counter-spionage, of anarchists, of government departments and police action.

Conrad's purpose was not merely to entertain, not even to teach a moral, but to catch and record the complex pattern of life as he saw it. The purpose of Conrad's art is to convey to his reader his own vision of life and man, realistically and convincingly, and his technique of the novel is designed to achieve this end. The realism he aims at is not the realism of external fact, but a higher realism, spiritual and emotional.

It is the human psyche or soul which Conrad wants to render, and he uses the impressionistic technique, and the technique of "the multiple point of view", to achieve his purpose. He is not just a seaman turning out an after dinner yarn but a serious artist aiming at truth and realism. He had behind him moral traditions of a Polish young gentleman. Everything he saw was interesting because it was new. He observed and reflected. He read books. He had keen psychological insight into the behavior of men. All the time there was developing in him a philosophy of life which his imagination expanded into a vision, "of form and color, of sunshine and shadows.

In his novels and short stories, Conrad's theme is "individual psychology". His aim as an artist was to portray the complete man as he understood it. "In this endeavor he made no use of the mechanism of current psychology, he laid no claim to the discovery of, 'complexes', leaving it to the reader to unearth, if he liked, while he portrays a perfect example of the inferiority complex in Lord Jim. Nor did he distinguish sharply between the conscious and the unconscious activities of the mind, though he recognized both aspects of human behavior. Such generalizations as we arrived at were the old ones, which it was his business to interpret anew. Conrad was essentially an impressionist; perhaps he carried the technique of inferencing for external behaviour further than any other modern novelist, except Henry James. His subtle, slow, oblique, varied method of narration may be difficult, but it renders faithfully that, 'shimmeriness' at which D.H. Lawrence aimed, or that, luminous texture of life, which was the quest of Virginia Woolf.

Conrad was a consummate artist for whom the novel was not merely a form of entertainment but a serious art form. His critical creed was developed through his discussions with Henry James and Ford MacloxFord, and the Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* may be regarded as his critical manifesto, for it is the most explicit general statement of the theories of the novelist regarding his art. His purpose was to explain the meaning of the human situation, to study and analyse the motives and springs of human action, and to convey his own perception to his readers. He pursues this purpose with unflinching tenacity, and his art and technique, his methods of storytelling and characterization, are all devoted to the achievement of this aim. His sincerity and integrity as an artist are amazing. To him creation was an agony and everything that he wrote was carefully revised and polished till perfection was reached. The language, the setting, the narration, and the characters, in his novel all together form

one organic whole, and contribute to the total effect. Nothing is superfluous, every digression, sentence, nay every word, is a step forward towards the desired aim. As Richard Curie points out every chapter and every character is important in itself as well as essential to creating the total effect.

The purpose of Conrad's art is, as noted above, to convey to his readers his own vision of life and man, realistically and convincingly, and his technique of the novel is designed to achieve this end. The realism he aims at is not the realism of external fact, but a higher realism, spiritual and emotional. It is the human psyche or soul which he wants to render, and he uses the impressionistic technique and the technique of "the multiple point of view", to achieve his purpose. He is not just a seaman telling an after dinner yarn but a serious artist aiming at truth and realism. It is in the interest of realism that he makes personal experience the stuff of which his stories are made. As W. L. Cross points out, "with him the first essential of a novel was a good story taken directly from real life and standing in some personal relation with himself. It might be almost, if not quite, autobiographical as in *Youth*, *The Shadow Line* and *Heart of Darkness*. The sick Negro of the *Narcissus* was in his watch. Or the story might be a seaman's yarn that he heard somewhere in a distant seaport. It was during a voyage to the West Indies that he heard the story of a man who had stolen single-handed a whole lighter full of silver during a revolution somewhere in South America. This was the starting point for *Nostromo*. In all Conrad's novels and tales there is a large basis in fact. So far they are authentic.

The ordinary seaman spins his yarn, and that is the end of it. Such a comment as he may make relates to the most obvious characteristics of the people in his story. Beyond that he is without psychological discernment. Having little imagination he accepts things as they are. His ship is his home as a cottage somewhere on shore might have been. It never occurs to him that his personality has been in any way affected by his life on the sea. A storm brings hard labour and exhaustion; calm brings dull routine with time left over to sit about on deck and smoke and talk. But Conrad was no ordinary seaman. He had behind him the moral traditions of a Polish young gentleman. Everything he saw was interesting because it was new. He observed and reflected. He read books. He had keen psychological insight into the behavior of men. All the time there was developing in him a philosophy of life which his imagination expanded into a vision, of form and color, of sunshine and shadows. How to transfer to the minds of his readers that vision was his basic concern. What he saw and heard were but opportunities that chance offered him for the play of a creative imagination, if he had it. "I have tried" he said after it was all over "with an almost filial regard to render the vibration of life in the great world of waters, in the hearts of the simple men who have for ages traversed its solitudes, and also that something sentient which seems to dwell in ships, the creatures of their hands and the objects of their care"

The technique of Conrad had been regarded as over- difficult. Such objections Conrad met by saying that he must tell his story in his own way, not in the way of another. It might be a forthright narrative, from the first to the last page, as in *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. But usually he began with a scene at some point well on in his story, and afterwards gave the previous events culminating in that scene. So far there was nothing uncommon in his manner. But in going back to check up on his first scene, he seemed to prefer not an open and direct path but a trackless maze. Chronology he set at defiance, turning time upside down, as in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. Lord Jim is the first complete exposition of Conrad's impressionistic technique. The purpose of the novelist is to lay bare the psyche of Jim, torn, baffled and at bay, to give hereaders an idea of his motives and springs of action. The action moves freely backward and forward in time and space, and characters and incidents are introduced through digressions, apparently irrelevant, but in reality they throw light, on some hidden recess or the other of Jim's soul. A. E. Baker, summarising his method writes, "The course of the narrative is so rambling and apparently fortuitous that there seems at first to be no method at all, only an accidental synthesis of the yarn told by this man and that man, the scarce reconcilable testimony of many different witnesses. This is what the Court of Inquiry are confronted with when they have to reconstruct the history of the accident and the abandonment of the *Patna*, the reader has to perform the same operation. Marlow, who tells most of the story, states the whole theory of Conrad's impressionism in the remark "All this happened in much less time than it takes to tell, since I am trying to interpret for

you into slow speech the instantaneous effect of visual impressions. We get glimpses of Jim, which must be pieced together by the readers themselves.

In recounting an incident and what led up to it, Conrad does not address himself to the intelligence, which has by now grown automatic, recognizing things for what they are and putting them in their proper place in the general world of facts. Instead of proceeding in the manner of Fielding, he pours out sensations and impressions as they occur to a spectator of curious sensibility, visual impressions especially, which we can put together and explain to ourselves, as we are doing at every moment of our existence. He goes back to the initial stages of the experience, and gives what falls upon ear and eye, not the thing as the understanding grasps it. The ordinary novelist observes an inherent logic, shows effects arising from causes. This is the realism of the intellect. The impressionist ignores any such logic. He gives the instantaneous reactions of his characters, the effect upon the senses, not a rational description of the things felt or seen or heard. But through the vivid impact of these impressions a sense is transmitted of our being in immediate contact with what is going on. Conrad might well say that "all creative art is magic for he was always evoking this illusion—it was the only way he could tell a story. Such impressionism is far more compulsive than mere work-a-day realism, its effects being so much more like the raw sensation which are the original stuff of experience. For reality is not an intelligible story. The story is an orderly arrangement subsequently put together or a lucid connection which has been deduced. And, when the understanding does presently seize and comprehend all that has been gathered in, it holds this with a vividness and firmness infinitely stronger than when things are recounted by the other method, which must needs be more abstract, however simultaneous the operation of our consciousness. Fiction thus comes close to life swiftly or gradually; from the crowding impressions the full meaning emerges, order is perceived rising out of chaos. The illusion of multitudinous life has been conjured up, the whole mirage of Nature, as Garnett puts it; and the reader is thus keenly alive to the unity, to the underlying significance, to all that which the imagination of poet and artist discerns in the complexity and apparent confusion'

Thus Conrad emerges as the novelist of the colonial world. His art is made to suit the theme of colonialism, especially the colonialism of the British in South Africa as it is reflected in his major novels like *Nigger of Narcissus*, *Heart of Darkness* and *Nostromo*.

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