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| Conrad, Joseph (1857-1924) |
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| Joseph Conrad was one of the foremost British novelists of the modernist period. Many of the narrative innovations he developed appeared a decade or more before similar technical experimentation became the norm among modernist writers. Furthermore, his radical skepticism was a stark contrast to the Edwardian optimism evident in the years prior to the First World War and anticipates the disillusionment so many modernist writers felt during the post-war era. Best known for ‘Heart of Darkness,’ *Lord Jim*, *Nostromo*, *The Secret Agent*, ‘The Secret Sharer,’ and *Under Western Eyes*, Conrad influenced numerous writers who followed him, such as William Faulkner, Graham Greene, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and an entire generation of African writers who often found themselves in dialogue with Conrad: e.g., Chinua Achebe and J. M. Coetzee. |
| On December 3, 1857, Joseph Conrad was born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski in Berdyczów, a Polish region of Ukraine. His parents, Apollo Korzeniowski (1820-1869) and Ewa Korzeniowska (née Bobrowska, 1833-1865), were Polish patriots during a time when Poland itself did not exist. Having been conquered during the late eighteenth-century, Poland was divided among Russia, Prussia, and Austria-Hungary. Conrad’s family lived in Russian-occupied Polish territories, and his parents resisted Russian rule. As a consequence, Apollo was arrested in 1861 and exiled with his family to Vologda, a remote part of northern Russia. While in exile, Conrad’s mother died of tuberculosis. His father also contracted the disease and was allowed to return to Poland in 1868. He died the following year. Conrad was then raised by his mother’s family, particularly his uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski (1829-1894), who treated Conrad like a son and strongly influenced him.  At fifteen, Conrad determined his life occupation would be that of a sailor, and at seventeen he moved to Marseilles, France to train for the merchant marine service. Upon graduation at twenty-one, he planned to join the French merchant marine service, only to discover that he would require the permission of the Russian government, which the government would not give. As a result, a few months shy of his twenty-first birthday, he decided to join the British merchant marine service, knowing no English. Conrad then spent roughly twenty years sailing around the globe, particularly in Southeast Asia, eventually working his way up from an ordinary deckhand to captain of a sailing vessel. This experience later served as the raw material for many of Conrad’s writings.  File: Joseph Conrad 1904.jpg  Joseph Conrad 1904  Source: Photograph of Conrad in 1904, with signature. Copyright @ 1996- Beinecke Library. All rights reserved. Cannot find link to this image online.  In 1889, while on vacation in London, Conrad made a decision that forever altered his life: he began writing what would become his first novel, *Almayer’s Folly* (1895). He spent roughly five years writing it in between his work as a ship’s officer. During these five years, Conrad spent a short spell working on a steamboat on the Congo River, an experience that changed his outlook on life. He is reputed to have said years later, ‘Before the Congo I was just a mere animal.’ While in the Congo, Conrad worked alongside the Irish photo-journalist Roger Casement, who later exposed the atrocities perpetuated by the Belgian trading company. This experience would become the basis for ‘An Outpost of Progress’ (1897) and for his most famous work, ‘Heart of Darkness’ (1899). Another life-changing experience occurred in 1893 with his chance meeting of John Galsworthy (1867-1933) while Conrad was serving as First Mate aboard the *Torrens* and Galsworthy was a passenger aboard. Ironically, neither seems to have known they would later become well-known authors. This chance encounter resulted in a life-long friendship, with Conrad even naming his second son after Galsworthy.  File: Page from 'Heart of Darkness' rough draft.jpg  'Heart of Darkness' rough draft  Source: part of Conrad’s rough draft for *Heart of Darkness*. Copyright @ 1999 - Beinecke Library, All rights reserved. Cannot find link to specific image online.  In 1894, Conrad completed the manuscript of *Almayer’s Folly* and sent it to T. Fisher Unwin. One of Unwin’s readers was Edward Garnett (1868-1937), who recommended publication and later became a friend and literary confidant of Conrad’s. Conrad seems not to have been considering a change in professions, but with Garnett’s encouragement and maritime jobs suddenly scarce, Conrad fell into his second profession as a writer. The publication of *Almayer’s Folly* was indicative of Conrad’s early literary career. The reviewers and literary world greatly appreciated it, but the purchasing public was less enthusiastic. This pattern continued for nearly twenty years, during which Conrad often struggled with writer’s block, psychological depression, financial difficulties, and physical ailments. Set in the Malay Archipelago, *Almayer’s Folly* was praised for its exotic setting and descriptive powers. *An Outcast of the Island* followed in 1896 and brings back some of the characters and environment from *Almayer’s Folly*, but set at an earlier time. Also around this time he married Jesse George (1873-1936). In 1897, Conrad produced his first work to which the term ‘masterpiece’ began to be affixed. This novel, *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus*,*’* caused fellow literary figures such as Stephen Crane (1871-1900) and Henry James (1843-1916) to take notice. During this time, Conrad made several important literary friendships with such authors as Crane, James, R. B. Cunninghame-Graham, H. G. Wells (1866-1946), Arnold Bennett (1867-1931), and, most importantly, Ford Madox Ford (1873-1939), who collaborated with Conrad and appears to have helped Conrad develop his narrative techniques.  The publication of *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* ushered in a particularly productive fifteen-year period during which many commentators feel Conrad produced his finest work. In 1898, with the creation of his narrator, Charlie Marlow, Conrad developed a narrative device that helped him to distance himself from his material while simultaneously commenting on it. Appearing first in ‘Youth’ (1898) and then in two of his most highly-regarded works, ‘Heart of Darkness’ (1899) and *Lord Jim* (1900), Marlow allowed Conrad to investigate more fully his impressionist narrative techniques. While occasional narrative innovations had appeared in his previous work, these tales established experimental techniques that would influence the direction of modernist literary form, as happens in instances of what Ian Watt has called ‘delayed decoding’ (for example when Marlow initially sees sticks flying about that then recognizes moments later as arrows in ‘Heart of Darkness’). In fact, Conrad achieves a host of narrative advancements: he demonstrates the fallibility of sensory perception, reveals how all objects are objects of consciousness, and shows how context influences how we experience phenomena – all while placing the reader into the mind of the characters so that the reader experiences phenomena at the same moment as the character, rather than through an author’s subsequent revisionist reading of an event. Other similar techniques emphasize the role of perspective, context, and subjectivity in representing phenomena. In *Lord Jim* in particular Conrad introduces multiple narrators, whose personal perspective influences how phenomena appear, and he presents events unfolding not in the sequence of their occurrence but in the sequence of the narrators’ thoughts. These tales also establish Conrad’s emphasis on his characters’ psychological struggles to find meaning in a seemingly meaningless universe.  File: 'A Set of Six' Title Copy.jpg  'A Set of Six' Title Copy  Source: Cannot find link to image online.  File: 'A Set of Six' Spine.jpg  'A Set of Six' Spine  Source: Cannot find link to specific image online; a similar image can be found at <http://www.sumnerandstillman.com/pictures/13050_2.jpg>  Conrad followed *Lord Jim* with a political satire, *The Inheritors* (1901), written in collaboration with Ford Madox Ford. The novel was not the popular success the authors hoped for, but Conrad solidified his reputation with the publication of two collections of stories: *Youth and Two Other Stories* (1902) and *Typhoon and Other Stories* (1903). By this point in his career, Conrad was viewed as a major literary figure, and the term ‘genius’ began to appear frequently in reviews of these collections. *Nostromo*, Conrad’s most ambitious novel and one many consider to be Conrad’s best work, appeared in 1904. The novel’s sheer panoramic scope alone is remarkable, as Conrad creates a fictitious South American country, complete with history, society, and politics, while investigating revolutionary politics, global capitalism, and economic imperialism. Despite its place in Conrad’s canon, *Nostromo* met a mixed response. Conrad’s longest and most challenging novel was simply too difficult for many readers. In 1906, Conrad published his first book of memoirs, *The Mirror of the Sea*, and unlike *Nostromo* this book was warmly welcomed for its direct narrative and lyric descriptions. Conrad’s next novel, *The Secret Agent* (1907), is not only one of Conrad’s best novels, but it may well be his most perfectly controlled work. The narrative is permeated by irony, and Conrad’s profound skepticism toward political systems comes to the fore. Much of the next few years was spent writing Conrad’s last political novel, *Under Western Eyes* (1911). In some ways, this novel is the culmination of Conrad’s literary efforts. To an even greater degree, Conrad’s skepticism toward political systems becomes apparent; he rejects both the established government and its revolutionary opponents, showing how both sides lose track of individuals, who are invariably crushed between the opposing political forces. *Under Western Eyes* also continues Conrad’s investigations into the complicated issues of moral behavior and the psychological struggles of humanity in a modern world where absolute truths appear to be absent.  Conrad often experienced a minor bout of exhaustion after completing a major project, but *Under Western Eyes* was different. This time, he suffered a complete collapse. Whether because of the extensive time it took to complete the book, the lengthy immersion into all things Russian, the constant financial pressure he felt, or all of these, Conrad remained ill for nearly six months. A letter by Conrad’s wife talks of Conrad allowing no one to touch the manuscript, and of his carrying on conversations with the novel’s characters.  File: 'Under Western Eyes' Title Copy.jpg  'Under Western Eyes' Title Copy 1  Source: Image can be found at <https://openlibrary.org/books/OL7153256M/Under_western_eyes>  File: 'Under Western Eyes' Spine.jpg  'Under Western Eyes' Spine 1  Source: Cannot find link to specific image online; a similar image can be found at <http://www.lwcurrey.com/pictures/133062.jpg>  After the publication of *Under Western Eyes*, Conrad’s works changed. Some, such as Thomas Moser and Albert Guerard, have seen this as an abrupt decline in Conrad’s literary abilities after a period of great achievement. Others, such as Susan Jones, have seen it as a shift in artistic direction, but whatever the case Conrad’s works after this novel (with only a few exceptions) are different in both plot and emphasis. His next work, *A Personal Record* (1912), was a memoir that sought to explain how Conrad became a sailor and how he became a writer. Unlike most memoirs, its narrative structure is not straightforward, nor does the volume reveal much of its author.  Conrad’s next fictional work was the collection *’Twixt Land and Sea* (1912). This volume contained perhaps Conrad’s final masterpiece, the story ‘The Secret Sharer’ (1910), written while he was finishing *Under Western Eyes*. The other two stories are more like the work of the later Conrad, with their emphasis on chance and romantic relationships. The collection was a modest popular success and was followed by *Chance* (1914), Conrad’s first truly popular work. The novel is noted for its narrative intricacy and for its romance between Flora de Barral and Captain Anthony.  With the publication of *Chance*, Conrad finally achieved financial independence, but his works no longer tended to emphasize the plight of humanity in the face of an indifferent universe, the importance of confronting such an existence, and of attempting to create meaning in full knowledge of its contingency. Instead, *Chance* emphasizes a universe controlled by chance happenings and shifts greater value onto romantic relationships. Conrad had always expressed the value of human relationships, but his earlier work emphasized relationships themselves less than their role in humanity’s struggle in a meaningless universe.  The following year, Conrad published *Victory*. *Victory* is often considered to be among Conrad’s best works of this period, as it focuses on rejecting nihilistic skepticism and embracing the necessity of connecting with others.  Presumably because of his response to the First World War, or perhaps for some other reason, Conrad’s work of 1917 was unusual for this period. ‘The Tale,’ ‘The Warrior’s Soul,’ and *The Shadow-Line* all present characters confronting moral and psychological dilemmas that so often marked his earlier career.  File: Cover to 'The Mentor' featuring Conrad 1925.jpg  Cover to 'The Mentor' featuring Conrad  Source: A similar image can be found at <http://www.inherited-values.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/mentor-march-1925-joseph-conrad-cover.jpg>  Some twenty years after he began writing it, Conrad finally completed *The Rescue* in 1920. This novel takes up the earlier period of events appearing in *Almayer’s Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*, although with far greater emphasis on romantic relationships. Conrad’s final completed novel, *The Rover* (1923), is set in Napoleonic France andconsiders such issues as self-sacrifice, romantic love, and patriotism.  File: Conrad later in life.jpg  Conrad later in life  Source: Image can be found at <https://aabthomson.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/joseph-conrad-2.jpg>  For some time, Conrad had felt that he was coming to the end of his days, and on August 3, 1924, he suffered a heart attack and died. A final collection of stories, *Tales of Hearsay* (1925), appeared shortly thereafter, along with an unfinished novel, *Suspense* (1925).  File: Conrad's Grave.jpg  Conrad's Grave  Source: Image can be found at <http://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Record/3520118> List of WorksNovels *Almayer’s Folly* (1895)  *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896)  *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* (1897)  *Lord Jim* (1900)  *The Inheritors* (1901) with Ford Madox Ford  *Romance* (1903) with Ford Madox Ford  *Nostromo* (1904)  *The Secret Agent* (1907)  *Under Western Eyes* (1911)  *Chance* (1914)  *Victory* (1915)  *The Shadow-Line* (1917)  *The Arrow of Gold* (1919)  *The Rescue* (1920)  *The Rover* (1923)  *The Nature of a Crime* (1924) with Ford Madox Ford  *Suspense* (1925) [Unfinished] Short Story Collections *Tales of Unrest* (1898)  *Youth and Two Other Stories* (1902)  *Typhoon and Other Stories* (1903)  *A Set of Six* (1908)  *’Twixt Land and Sea* (1912)  *Within the Tides* (1915)  *Tales of Hearsay* (1925) Memoirs *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906)  *A Personal Record* (1912) Drama *The Secret Agent* (1923)  *Laughing Anne and One Day More* (1924) Essays *Notes on Life and Letters* (1921)  *Last Essays* (1926) Letters *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad* (1983-2007) |
| Further reading:  Biography  (Baines)  (Karl)  (Najder and Najder)  (Stape) Bibliography (Ehrsam)  (Peters) Criticism (Berthoud)  (Fleishman)  (Guerard)  (Hawthorn)  (Hawthorn, Joseph Conrad: Narrative Technique and Ideological Commitment)  (Hay)  (Jones)  (Lothe)  (Moser)  (Peters, Conrad and Impressionism)  (Parry)  (Watt) |