

“A VOICE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS”: JOSEPH CONRAD’S LASTING LEGACY¹

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Abstract: This article looks at Joseph Conrad’s lasting legacy and influence on the literature that followed him. His unique background and Polish experience allowed him to look at the world in a unique way as compared to his contemporaries such as John Galsworthy. Conrad’s views on narrative, on colonialism, on the nature of universe, on the writing of political fiction, and his use of elements from popular fiction both directly and indirectly influenced the Modernism movement and many later writers, aspects of whose works reveal their origins in the works of Conrad.

Keywords: legacy, influence, Joseph Conrad’s works, political fiction, popular fiction, narration, colonialism, Modernism

Like all people in their youth, Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski undoubtedly dreamt of his future, but I find it impossible to believe that he ever could have imagined, not only that he would publish novels in English, a language he knew nothing of before the age of twenty-one, but that he would become one of the three most important twentieth-century English novelists—and probably the single most influential one. Conrad had an interest in literature from a young age, probably at least in part through his father’s influence. We know he read his father’s work, both his original writings and his translations from English; and many years ago Andrzej Busza first revealed the extent of Conrad’s familiarity with Polish literature and Yves Hervouet has written of Conrad’s knowledge of French literature.² We also know that Conrad wrote patriotic plays as a boy.³ Finally, Conrad read literature while aboard ships. Nevertheless, to rise from these modest ties to the literary world to the heights to which Conrad reached is a leap of phenomenal proportion. Yet he reached those heights, and it is precisely because of Conrad’s unlikely beginnings, I would argue, that he achieved his prominent literary position.

¹ This is a revision of a Plenary Address given at the Conrad Our Contemporary Conference in Warsaw, 14th November 2017.

² See A. Busza, “Conrad’s Polish Literary Background and Some Illustrations of the Influence of Polish Literature on His Work,” *Antemurale* 1966, 10, pp. 109-255; Y. Hervouet, *The French Face of Joseph Conrad*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990.

³ S. Z., “Conrad’s First Literary Efforts,” *Poland* 8.8 (August 1927), pp. 471-472.

CONRAD AND COLONIALISM

While criticism of colonialism and imperialism has become common practice among literary scholars and literary artists for the past forty years or more. When Conrad was writing, he was largely a voice crying in the wilderness as it were. It is true that a few authors of the time, such as R. B. Cunninghame-Graham,⁴ were quite critical of colonial practices, but the vast majority of writers and members of British society (along with most of the rest of the West) supported Western imperial endeavors. Conrad's position, however, was much more measured. Although Conrad's view on imperialism and colonialism is mixed, it is still far more critical of these practices than was typical of the Western world of that time, and his stance results directly from his vastly different experience compared to that of his fellow British writers. If we compare Conrad's background with the background of his contemporaries, we find a great gap. For example, if we look at Conrad's friend John Galsworthy, it is difficult to imagine two more different upbringings. Galsworthy came from a wealthy English family, one that would have either directly or indirectly benefitted from England's prominence in the imperial world. Galsworthy also attended well-regarded preparatory schools, later studying at Oxford University. In contrast, Conrad's formal education was spotty, but more than this his life experience was vastly different. Born in a country that was a colonized territory rather than a colonizing country (like Galsworthy's) and living out his early youth in exile with his family in a remote region of Russia, as well as spending nearly twenty years as a sailor in the colonial world, provided Conrad with a completely different view of colonialism and imperialism than Galsworthy or any of his fellow contemporary English writers could have had. They simply could not match that difference in experience. As a result, Conrad knew how colonialism affected both the colonized and the colonizer, and, along with his direct experience with colonial southeast Asia, he clearly had Poland's position as a colonized nation in the back of his mind whenever he addressed the problems of the colonial world.

CONRAD'S VIEW OF THE WORLD

Like his colonial experience, Conrad's experience in the world was again far different from that of his English contemporaries. From his writings, Conrad clearly saw many troubling things in the world. His parents' exile and premature deaths being perhaps the beginning this experience, but also what he saw in his travels in the colonial world solidified his conviction as he supposedly affirmed it to H. G. Wells, that

⁴ In fact, Cunninghame Graham's life-long friendship with Conrad began with a letter he wrote to Conrad in admiration of "An Outpost of Progress" (1897) and the anti-imperial position of that story. See Cunninghame Graham's violent denunciation of racism in his "Bloody Niggers," *Social-Democrat* 1.4 (April 1897), pp. 104-109.

while he loved humanity he did not believe that they could be improved.⁵ Conrad most dramatically revealed his view of the world when he supposedly said to Edward Garnett “Before the Congo I was just a mere animal.”⁶ Conrad’s experience in the Congo was life-changing—and not in a positive way. As a result, while Galsworthy, Wells, Gissing, and Bennett, for example, were continuing the Victorian Realist and Naturalist tradition of the novel of social conscience (which have at their core the belief that society can be improved and the unstated and I believe unquestioned belief that Western civilization is ultimately based upon absolute truths), Conrad on the other hand was writing novels that pointed toward a Modernist emphasis not on absolute truths or the improvement of Western society or on a universe of order and meaning but rather on contingent truths, limited to the society that agrees upon them, the relativity of all social entities, including Western civilization, and a universe with no real order, Conrad’s primary focus being, as Stein remarks in *Lord Jim* (1900): “how to be” in a universe with no transcendental meaning. Some years ago, I wrote an article that asked the question why when so many of Conrad’s contemporaries after the First World War were writing literature of disillusionment in which these authors demonstrated that they no longer had confidence in the Western world Conrad’s focus was elsewhere?⁷ My conclusion was simply that Conrad had been disillusioned long before the war. The First World War only reinforced a view about the nature of the universe that Conrad had recognized many years previously and had been writing about all along. The First World War having reinforced this view, Conrad appears to have moved beyond restating his feelings of disillusionment and instead shifted to a focus on human relationships in his later works as the primary means of confronting a world of disillusionment familiar to him but one his contemporaries had only just discovered. While so many in the pre-war years were caught up in the continuation of the Victorian idea of progress and optimism toward what lay ahead (largely influenced by Darwinism it would seem), Conrad was again a voice crying in the wilderness, unconverted to the confidence in the future that surrounded him during the Edwardian era. In short, the world we have come to associate with Modernist literature first found its expression in Conrad’s works and only much later in those of his fellow Modernists.

CONRAD’S NARRATIVE

Although experimentation with literary form is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for Modernist literature (Robert Frost and E. M. Forster being two prominent counter examples), it *is* a very common feature of the literature of this period. What may be less commonly recognized is that in this aspect, too, Conrad was once

⁵ R. Hart-Davis, *Hugh Walpole*, New York: Harvest, 1952, p. 162.

⁶ G. Jean-Aubry, *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters*, 2 vols., Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page, 1927, vol. 1, p. 141.

⁷ “Joseph Conrad’s Response to the First World War,” *College Literature* 39.4 (Fall 2012), pp. 34-45.

more largely a voice crying in the wilderness. Ford Madox Ford is probably the only other prominent novelist among Conrad's contemporaries of the first decade of the twentieth century who, like Conrad, experimented with traditional narrative technique, but Conrad's experiments seem significantly more radical than even Ford's were in the first decade of the twentieth century. In his memoir on Conrad, Ford outlines his and Conrad's views about the traditional chronological narrative technique:

For it became very early evident to us that what was the matter with the Novel, and the British novel in particular, was that it went straight forward, whereas in your gradual making acquaintanceship with your fellows you never do go straight forward. You meet an English gentleman at your golf club. He is beefy, full of health, the moral of the boy from an English Public School of the finest type. You discover, gradually, that he is hopelessly neurasthenic, dishonest in matters of small change, but unexpectedly self-sacrificing, a dreadful liar, but a most painfully careful student of lepidoptera and, finally, from the public prints, a bigamist who was once, under another name, hammered on the Stock Exchange. . . . Still, there he is, the beefy, full-fed fellow, moral of an English Public School product. To get such a man in fiction you could not begin at his beginning and work his life chronologically to the end. You must first get him in with a strong impression, and then work backwards and forwards over his past. . . . That theory at least we gradually evolved.⁸

We have come to associate non-chronological narration with Modernist fiction, and rightly so, but Modernist experimentation with narrative chronology largely began with Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" (1899) and even more dramatically in *Lord Jim* and later in *Nostromo* (1904) and elsewhere. It was not until a decade or more later that other writers (perhaps with the exception of Ford) preformed similar experiments with narrative chronology, while among Conrad's immediate contemporaries (Wells, Bennett, Kipling, Galsworthy, and Gissing, for example) conventional chronology was still the norm.

Conrad's experiments with narrative chronology were not his only influential contributions to the evolution of narrative form. Even when he employed conventional narrative techniques—flash backs, *in medias res*, frame narrators, first-person and omniscient narrators—he still introduced innovative elements into such techniques. For example, in "The Brute" (1906), the story begins with the narrator entering a tavern and overhearing a man remark: "That fellow Wilmot fairly dashed her brains out, and a good job, too!" [. . .] I was glad when I heard she got the knock from somebody at last. Sorry enough for poor Wilmot, though. That man and I used to be chums at one time. Of course that was the end of him. A clear case if there ever was one. No way out of it. None at all."⁹ Not until several pages later do both the narrator and the reader finally discover that the speaker was talking about a ship and not a woman. In this case, the reader does learn the meaning of what is said (though it takes much longer than would be expected), but unlike traditional *in medias res* where either the reader or the characters only know part of the events, in this instance both the char-

⁸ F. Madox Ford, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance*, Boston: Little Brown, 1924, pp. 136-137.

⁹ J. Conrad, *A Set of Six*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page, 1925, pp. 105-106.

acter (the narrator) and the reader are in the dark. Here and elsewhere,¹⁰ Conrad employs the traditional narrative technique of *in medias res* but does so with significant variations.

Conrad initiates similar innovations when employing frame narrators and also when employing the typical first-person or omniscient authors—though they are rarely typical in Conrad’s hands. When employing frame narrators, authors usually introduce the frame narrator, who briefly begins the tale, then relates the narrative of the main narrator, and when the main narrator’s tale is finished, the frame narrator then appears once more to conclude the tale. Kipling works directly from this model in “The Man Who Would be King” (1888) for instance. In “Heart of Darkness,” however, Conrad establishes a debate as it were between the frame narrator’s view of imperialism and Marlow’s, Marlow’s tale appearing to arise entirely in response to the frame narrator’s comments.¹¹ An even more unusual use of frame narrative appears in *Lord Jim*, in which Conrad employs a frame narrator who is omniscient and presents several full chapters before Marlow picks up the story in Chapter Five, but then, unlike most instances, the frame narrator returns but briefly in Chapter Thirty-Six only to drop out of the novel entirely at that point, leaving Marlow to conclude the remainder of the tale.

Even Conrad’s use of delayed decoding, a term first employed by Ian Watt in a talk given at a famous 1972 conference in Poland,¹² is an example of Conrad’s unique narrative tools. Among other things, this technique (such as when Marlow in “Heart of Darkness” see sticks that he soon after views as arrows,¹³ or in the scene in which he is blown up in “Youth,”¹⁴ or the view of the cliff moving from under Susan Bacadou’s feet in “The Idiots”¹⁵) does not narrate events after the fact but forces the reader into the narrator’s place such that the reader experiences phenomena much as the narrator does and seemingly at roughly the same moment as the narrator.

All of these unique narrative techniques (and others as well), in one way or another, became part of the narrative innovations that later authors came to employ and augment.

¹⁰ See for example the opening of *Almayer’s Folly* (1895) for the earliest example of Conrad’s experimentation with *in medias res*.

¹¹ After the frame narrator mentions “the great knights errant of the sea,” Marlow remarks, “... you say Knights?”; see J. Conrad, *Youth, Heart of Darkness, The End of the Tether*, ed. O. Knowles, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010, pp. 44, 46.

¹² I. Watt, “Pink Toads and Yellow Curs: An Impressionist Narrative Device in *Lord Jim*” [in:] *Joseph Conrad Colloquy in Poland, 5-12 September 1972*, ed. R. Jabłkowska, Warsaw: Polish Academy of Sciences, 1975, pp. 11-31.

¹³ J. Conrad, *Youth, Heart of Darkness, The End of the Tether*, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁵ J. Conrad, “The Idiots” [in:] *Tales of Unrest*, eds. A. H. Simmons and J. H. Stape, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012, pp. 73-74.

CONRAD AND POLITICAL FICTION

Conrad wrote five works that specifically revolve around political action: the short stories “An Anarchist” (1906) and “The Informer” (1906), along with three of his finest novels: *Nostromo*, *The Secret Agent* (1907), and *Under Western Eyes* (1911). Of course, literature dealing with political themes had existed for millennia. Authors have regularly used literature as a platform for espousing one political view while rejecting an opposing view. Conrad’s political fiction, however, is different. Rather than promulgating one political philosophy over another, Conrad instead rejects all political ideas in his fiction because they all place the idea above the person.¹⁶ Invariably, his fiction shows individuals crushed between opposing political forces. I can think of no author prior to Conrad whose political fiction in effect rejects all politics. Conrad’s view is I believe tied to what I see as his general suspicion of ideas because for Conrad all ideas are at best contingent and exist as social contracts not as absolute truths, as the narrator remarks in *Nostromo*, “A man haunted by a fixed idea is insane. He is dangerous even if that idea is an idea of justice; for may he not bring the heaven down pitilessly upon a loved head?”¹⁷ More important, I think in the end that Conrad valued human interaction and affirmed humanity above all else.¹⁸ Therefore, since Conrad saw ideas as contingent and since he saw individuals consistently caught between opposing political forces, he could have no confidence in such ideas and used his political novels as an opportunity to show the consequences of valuing ideas over individuals. Once more, Conrad is a voice crying in the wilderness. Many decades later, this suspicion of both sides of political debates would become, in a rather different way, more common in political fiction, particularly among some postcolonial writers who have resisted the idea that it is necessary to choose sides in political debates. And one wonders whether Anthony Burgess’s suspicion of both sides of the political divide in his *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) if Conrad had not first use the political novel to critique political forces in general.

CONRAD AND THE POPULAR NOVEL

Another area of Conrad’s influence lies in producing literary fiction that sometimes masquerades as popular fiction. As with political fiction, the popular novel had existed for some two hundred years prior to Conrad’s career, and Conrad contributions to this genre are perhaps more modest than they are in some other areas. One could even argue that what is often considered the first novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, combines elements of popular writing (adventure literature and travel writing in par-

¹⁶ Daniel R. Schwarz makes a somewhat similar point regarding *Nostromo* in his “Conrad’s Quarrel with Politics in *Nostromo*,” *College English* 59.5 (September 1997), pp. 548-568.

¹⁷ J. Conrad, *Nostromo*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page, 1925, p. 379.

¹⁸ For more on this, see my *Conrad and Impressionism*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001, pp. 133-158.

ticular) with a literary product. Nevertheless, for much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there seems to have been, though with some notable exceptions, a fairly common bifurcation between literary and popular fiction. Andrea White and others have noted Conrad’s contributions to the romance and adventure tradition,¹⁹ and Andrew Glazzard has argued for Conrad’s relationship to the popular novel.²⁰ Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* in particular adds strongly literary elements to the then relatively new genre of detective fiction, and Conrad’s related espionage fiction, as in *Under Western Eyes*, makes similar contributions to that particular field. For example, much of Graham Greene’s espionage fiction was influenced by Conrad. Again, Conrad’s contributions to the intersection between popular fiction and literature may not be as significant as are his contributions in other areas, but his influence was still felt by those who came after him.

CONRAD’S DIRECT AND INDIRECT INFLUENCE

I have already alluded to the direct influence Conrad had upon the Modernist universe. Although the First World War was largely the source of this view for many post-war writers, these writers also owe a debt to Conrad for beginning the discussion that came to question the conventional Western view of the universe. Along with the Modernist view of the world, as noted earlier, Conrad also influenced much of the way fiction was constructed by many of those Modernists who followed him.

Conrad’s influence was also indirect. Conrad did not write stream-of-consciousness novels like those of Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, or James Joyce. In fact, I believe that stream-of-consciousness is outside the scope of Conrad’s view of the relationship between subject and object, but I also do not believe that writers of stream-of-consciousness fiction could have developed this technique had Conrad not already focused on the role subjectivity has in shaping the objective world. In the same way, Faulkner’s use of multiple narrators in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), and *As I Lay Dying* (1930), for instance, is considerably different from Conrad’s use of multiple narrators in *Lord Jim* and elsewhere, but it is hard to imagine that Faulkner would have thought of using such a technique had Conrad not already entered it into the possibilities for narrative methodology. Similarly, although in a different way from Marlow in *Lord Jim*, who routinely reminds the reader that he is not reliable because so much of his information comes from others and because of his own personal biases, the narrators for Günter Grass’s *The Tin Drum* (1959) and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981) break from

¹⁹ A. White, *Joseph Conrad and the Adventure Tradition: Constructing and Deconstructing the Imperial Subject*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993; see also L. Dryden, *Joseph Conrad and the Imperial Romance*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000.

²⁰ A. Glazzard, *Conrad’s Popular Fiction: Secret Histories and Sensational Novels*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2016, and related is Stephen Donovan’s *Conrad and Popular Culture*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

the conventional desire of narrators that the reader find them reliable, but it was Conrad who had established the model for this kind of narrator.

While many later writers appear to have been influenced at least indirectly by Conrad's works, there are others whom we know directly felt Conrad's influence. Most notable among these may be F. Scott Fitzgerald in the *The Great Gatsby* (1925), whose titular character may never have existed had Fitzgerald not read *Lord Jim*. In addition, Peter Lancelot Mallios has made a compelling case for Conrad's significant influence on many of William Faulkner's works, and those of other American authors.²¹ Similarly, Robert Pendleton has convincingly argued for Conrad's extensive influence on Graham Greene's works in general, not just on his espionage fiction.²² Finally, a different kind of influence has regularly appeared in the works of postcolonial writers, who often re-write or write back against Conrad's works. Bryon Caminero-Santangelo in particular traces Conrad's influence among Africa authors, seeing, for instance, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) being written in light of Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* and Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) as a rewriting of "Heart of Darkness." Many other examples of direct influence could also be cited, such as Conrad's influence on those who followed him.²³

I have written elsewhere that regardless of the particular school of critical theory that is current, whether it be biographical/historical criticism, the New Criticism, psychological criticism, postcolonial criticism, or even the more recent ecocriticism, Conrad's works seem to be unusually fruitful fields for cultivation.²⁴ The same could be said of his far-reaching influence on subsequent literature, which influence seems to seep into the various literary movements that have arisen since the early days of the Modernist literary world in which he wrote. In fact, the fabric of Conrad's literary descendants has been significantly and forever altered through Conrad's profound and permeating influence.

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²¹ P. L. Mallios, *Our Conrad: Constituting American Modernity*, Stanford: Stanford UP, 2010, pp. 335-371.

²² R. Pendleton, *Graham Greene's Conradian Masterplot: Boundaries and Visionary Frontiers*, London: Macmillan, 1983

²³ B. Caminero-Santangelo, *African Fiction and Joseph Conrad: Reading Postcolonial Intertextuality*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005; see also B. Cooper, *Weary Sons of Conrad: White Fiction against the Grain of Africa's Dark Heart*, New York: Peter Lang, 2002.

²⁴ *Joseph Conrad's Critical Reception*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, pp. 245-246.

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