

# Joseph Conrad

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Joseph Conrad (born December 3, 1857, Berdichev, Ukraine, Russian Empire [now Berdychiv, Ukraine]—died August 3, 1924, Canterbury, Kent, England) was an English novelist and short-story writer of Polish descent, whose works include the novels *Lord Jim* (1900), *Nostromo* (1904), and *The Secret Agent* (1907) and the short story “*Heart of Darkness*” (1902). During his lifetime, Conrad was admired for the richness of his prose and his renderings of dangerous life at sea and in exotic places. But his initial reputation as a masterful teller of colourful adventures of the sea masked his fascination with the individual when faced with nature’s invariable unconcern, man’s frequent malevolence, and his inner battles with good and evil. To Conrad, the sea meant above all the tragedy of loneliness. A writer of complex skill and striking insight, but above all of an intensely personal vision, he has been increasingly regarded as one of the greatest English novelists.

## Early years

Conrad’s father, Apollo Nałęcz Korzeniowski, a poet and an ardent Polish patriot, was one of the organizers of the committee that went on in 1863 to direct the Polish insurrection against Russian rule. He was arrested in late 1861 and was sent into exile at Vologda in northern Russia. His wife and four-year-old son followed him there, and the harsh climate hastened his wife’s death from tuberculosis in 1865. In *A Personal Record* Conrad relates that his first introduction to the English language was at the age of eight, when his father was translating the works of Shakespeare and Victor Hugo in order to support the household. In those solitary years with his father he read the works of Sir Walter Scott, James Fenimore Cooper, Charles Dickens, and William Makepeace Thackeray in Polish and French. Apollo was ill with tuberculosis and died in Kraków in 1869. Responsibility for the boy was assumed by his maternal uncle, Tadeusz Bobrowski, a lawyer, who provided his nephew with advice, admonition, financial help, and love. He sent Conrad to school at Kraków and then to Switzerland, but the boy was bored by school and yearned to go to sea. In 1874 Conrad left for Marseille with the intention of going to sea.

## Life at sea

Bobrowski made him an allowance of 2,000 francs a year and put him in touch with a merchant named Delestang, in whose ships Conrad sailed in the French merchant service. His first voyage, on the *Mont-Blanc* to Martinique, was as a passenger; on its next voyage he sailed as an apprentice. In July 1876 he again sailed to the West Indies, as a steward on the *Saint-Antoine*. On this voyage Conrad seems to have taken part in some unlawful enterprise, probably gunrunning, and to have sailed along the coast of Venezuela, memories of which were to find a place in *Nostromo*. The first mate of the vessel, a Corsican named Dominic Cervoni, was the model for the hero of that novel and was to play a picturesque role in Conrad’s life and work.

Conrad became heavily enmeshed in debt upon returning to Marseille and apparently unsuccessfully attempted to commit suicide. As a sailor in the French merchant navy he was liable to conscription when he came of age, so after his recovery he signed on in April 1878 as a deckhand on a British freighter bound for Constantinople with a cargo of coal. After the return journey his ship landed him at Lowestoft, England, in June 1878. It was Conrad’s first English landfall, and he spoke only a few words of the

language of which he was to become a recognized master. Conrad remained in England, and in the following October he shipped as an ordinary seaman aboard a wool clipper on the London–Sydney run.

Conrad was to serve 16 years in the British merchant navy. In June 1880 he passed his examination as second mate, and in April 1881 he joined the *Palestine*, a bark of 425 tons. This move proved to be an important event in his life; it took him to the Far East for the first time, and it was also a continuously troubled voyage, which provided him with literary material that he would use later. Beset by gales, accidentally rammed by a steamer, and deserted by a sizable portion of her crew, the *Palestine* nevertheless had made it as far as the East Indies when her cargo of coal caught fire and the crew had to take to the lifeboats; Conrad's initial landing in the East, on an island off Sumatra, took place only after a 13 1/2-hour voyage in an open boat. In 1898 Conrad published his account of his experiences on the *Palestine*, with only slight alterations, as the short story "Youth," a remarkable tale of a young officer's first command.

He returned to London by passenger steamer, and in September 1883 he shipped as mate on the *Riversdale*, leaving her at Madras to join the *Narcissus* at Bombay. This voyage gave him material for his novel *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* the story of an egocentric black sailor's deterioration and death aboard ship. At about this time Conrad began writing his earliest known letters in the English language. In between subsequent voyages Conrad studied for his first mate's certificate, and in 1886 two notable events occurred: he became a British subject in August, and three months later he obtained his master mariner's certificate.

In February 1887 he sailed as first mate on the *Highland Forest*, bound for Semarang, Java. Her captain was John McWhirr, whom he later immortalized under the same name as the heroic, unimaginative captain of the steamer *Nan Shan* in *Typhoon*. He then joined the *Vidar*, a locally owned steamship trading among the islands of the southeast Asian archipelago. During the five or six voyages he made in four and a half months, Conrad was discovering and exploring the world he was to re-create in his first novels, *Almayer's Folly*, *An Outcast of the Islands*, and *Lord Jim*, as well as several short stories.

After leaving the *Vidar* Conrad unexpectedly obtained his first command, on the *Otago*, sailing from Bangkok, an experience out of which he was to make his stories "The Shadow-Line" and "Falk." He took over the *Otago* in unpropitious circumstances. The captain Conrad replaced had died at sea, and by the time the ship reached Singapore, a voyage of 800 miles (1,300 km) that took three weeks because of lack of wind, the whole ship's company, except Conrad and the cook, was down with fever. Conrad then discovered to his dismay that his predecessor had sold almost all the ship's supply of quinine.

## Writing career: notable works, themes, and style of Joseph Conrad

Back in London in the summer of 1889, Conrad took rooms near the Thames and, while waiting for a command, began to write *Almayer's Folly*. The task was interrupted by the strangest and probably the most important of his adventures. As a child in Poland, he had stuck his finger on the centre of the map of Africa and said, "When I grow up I shall go there." In 1889 the Congo Free State was four years old as a political entity and already notorious as a sphere of imperialistic exploitation. Conrad's childhood dream took positive shape in the ambition to command a Congo River steamboat. Using what influence he could, he went to Brussels and secured an appointment. What he saw, did, and felt in the Congo are largely recorded in "Heart of Darkness," his most famous, finest, and most enigmatic story, the title of which signifies not only the heart of Africa, the dark continent, but also the heart of evil—everything that is corrupt, nihilistic, malign—and perhaps the heart of man. The story is central to Conrad's work and

vision, and it is difficult not to think of his Congo experiences as traumatic. He may have exaggerated when he said, "Before the Congo I was a mere animal," but in a real sense the dying Kurtz's cry, "The horror! The horror!" was Conrad's. He suffered psychological, spiritual, even metaphysical shock in the Congo, and his physical health was also damaged; for the rest of his life, he was racked by recurrent fever and gout.

Conrad was in the Congo for four months, returning to England in January 1891. He made several more voyages as a first mate, but by 1894, when his guardian Tadeusz Bobrowski died, his sea life was over. In the spring of 1894 Conrad sent *Almayer's Folly* to the London publisher Fisher Unwin, and the book was published in April 1895. It was as the author of this novel that Conrad adopted the name by which he is known: he had learned from long experience that the name Korzeniowski was impossible on British lips.

Unwin's manuscript reader, the critic Edward Garnett, urged Conrad to begin a second novel, and so *Almayer's Folly* was followed in 1896 by *An Outcast of the Islands*, which repeats the theme of a foolish and blindly superficial character meeting the tragic consequences of his own failings in a tropical region far from the company of his fellow Europeans. These two novels provoked a misunderstanding of Conrad's talents and purpose which dogged him the rest of his life. Set in the Malayan archipelago, they caused him to be labeled a writer of exotic tales, a reputation which a series of novels and short stories about the sea—*The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1897), *Lord Jim* (1900), *Youth* (1902), *Typhoon* (1902), and others—seemed only to confirm. But words of his own about the "*Narcissus*" give the real reason for his choice of settings: "the problem . . . is not a problem of the sea, it is merely a problem that has risen on board a ship where the conditions of complete isolation from all land entanglements make it stand out with a particular force and colouring." This is equally true of his other works; the latter part of *Lord Jim* takes place in a jungle village not because the emotional and moral problems that interest Conrad are those peculiar to jungle villages, but because there Jim's feelings of guilt, responsibility, and insecurity—feelings common to mankind—work themselves out with a logic and inevitability that are enforced by his isolation. It is this purpose, rather than a taste for the outlandish, that distinguishes Conrad's work from that of many novelists of the 19th and early 20th centuries. They, for the most part, were concerned to widen the scope of the novel, to act, in Balzac's phrase, as the natural historians of society; Conrad instead aimed at the isolation and concentration of tragedy.

In 1895 Conrad married the 22-year-old Jessie George, by whom he had two sons. He thereafter resided mainly in the southeast corner of England, where his life as an author was plagued by poor health, near poverty, and difficulties of temperament. It was not until 1910, after he had written what are now considered his finest novels—*Lord Jim* (1900), *Nostromo* (1904), *The Secret Agent* (1907), and *Under Western Eyes* (1911), the last being three novels of political intrigue and romance—that his financial situation became relatively secure. He was awarded a Civil List pension of £100, and the American collector John Quinn began to buy his manuscripts—for what now seem ludicrously low prices. His novel *Chance* was successfully serialized in the *New York Herald* in 1912, and his novel *Victory*, published in 1915, was no less successful. Though hampered by rheumatism, Conrad continued to write for the remaining years of his life. In April 1924 he refused an offer of knighthood from Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, and he died shortly thereafter.

In his own time Conrad was praised for his power to depict life at sea and in the tropics and for his works' qualities of "romance"—a word used basically to denote his power of using an elaborate prose style to cast a film of illusory splendour over somewhat sordid events. His reputation diminished after his death, and a revival of interest in his work later directed attention to different qualities and to different books than his contemporaries had emphasized.

An account of the themes of some of these books should indicate where modern critics lay emphasis. *Nostramo* (1904), a story of revolution, politics, and financial manipulation in a South American republic, centres, for all its close-packed incidents, upon one idea—the corruption of the characters by the ambitions that they set before themselves, ambitions concerned with silver, which forms the republic's wealth and which is the central symbol around which the novel is organized. The ambitions range from simple greed to idealistic desires for reform and justice. All lead to moral disaster, and the nobler the ambition the greater its possessor's self-disgust as he realizes his plight.

“*Heart of Darkness*,” which follows closely the actual events of Conrad's Congo journey, tells of the narrator's fascination by a mysterious white man, Kurtz, who, by his eloquence and hypnotic personality, dominates the brutal tribesmen around him. Full of contempt for the greedy traders who exploit the natives, the narrator cannot deny the power of this figure of evil who calls forth from him something approaching reluctant loyalty. *The Secret Agent* (1907), a sustained essay in the ironic and one of Conrad's finest works, deals with the equivocal world of anarchists, police, politicians, and agents provocateurs in London. *Victory* (1915) describes the unsuccessful attempts of a detached, nihilistic observer of life to protect himself and his hapless female companion from the murderous machinations of a trio of rogues on an isolated island.

Conrad's view of life is indeed deeply pessimistic. In every idealism are the seeds of corruption, and the most honourable men find their unquestioned standards totally inadequate to defend themselves against the assaults of evil. It is significant that Conrad repeats again and again situations in which such men are obliged to admit emotional kinship with those whom they have expected only to despise. This well-nigh despairing vision gains much of its force from the feeling that Conrad accepted it reluctantly, rather than with morbid enjoyment.

## Influence of Joseph Conrad

Conrad's influence on later novelists has been profound both because of his masterly technical innovations and because of the vision of humanity expressed through them. He is the novelist of man in extreme situations. “Those who read me,” he wrote in his preface to *A Personal Record*, “know my conviction that the world, the temporal world, rests on a few very simple ideas; so simple that they must be as old as the hills. It rests, notably, among others, on the idea of Fidelity.” For Conrad fidelity is the barrier man erects against nothingness, against corruption, against the evil that is all about him, insidious, waiting to engulf him, and that in some sense is within him unacknowledged. But what happens when fidelity is submerged, the barrier broken down, and the evil without is acknowledged by the evil within? At his greatest, that is Conrad's theme. Feminist and postcolonialist readings of Modernist works have focused on Conrad and have confirmed his centrality to Modernism and to the general understanding of it.