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Joseph Conrad

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Joseph Conrad 1904 [1]
Joseph Conrad by George Charles Beresford [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Despite this choice, Conrad's assumption of a British identity was complex. Conrad's writing, at least, was never inherently 'English', but is rather littered with figures who cross national borders, de-stabilize accepted identities, and embrace the heterogeneity of global cultures -- all this despite the occasional ideological misgiving that have since provoked accusations of racism and pro-imperialism. Conrad's career in the maritime industry took him across seas to numerous continents, and his travels across a globalized world provided him with a huge reservoir of experience upon which he drew when he turned to his writing career in the second half of his life, from the 1890s until he died in 1924. Conrad's novels, short stories and novellas are set in locations as various as South America, the Belgian Congo, Russia, London, and Singapore, and many never move beyond the deck of the ship upon which his characters are enrolled. However, it is interesting to note that Conrad's two careers, maritime and literary, never really overlapped -- Conrad only started writing after he had almost entirely given up his practical job, and once an established author, he never worked on board a ship again.

Writing style

Whether due to his multi-linguistic capacity and his late coming to the English language (Conrad didn't speak English fluently until he was in his twenties), or to the international nature of his early life and experience, Conrad's most distinctive and striking feature is his writing style. Any newcomer to Conrad will be immediately struck by his winding, indirect, tautological, and sometimes frustratingly ambiguous narrative structure. Adjectives are placed stutteringly, punctuation positioned awkwardly, and first readers will find his prose hard-going. But with Conrad, perseverance is the key: after a short while it starts to become clear that the stuttering, awkward syntax is not the work of someone struggling to get to grips with the English language, but in fact someone who is a master of it.

Conrad as Modernist writer

It is this shifting narrative style, that resists the simple linear development of the popular realist novels of the preceding century, that has marked Conrad out as a distinctly Modernist author within an accepted literary canon. Conrad's stylistic experimentation enables him to interrogate, reevaluate and question perhaps his most recurrent thematic interest: morality. However, though early literary critics turned to Conrad as a sort of moral sage, his fictional interrogation of morality, on closer inspection, rejects outright the simple preaching of moral sentiments and 'truths'. Conrad is instead interested in setting up fictional scenarios in which an apparently obvious set of values, or accepted belief system, is thrown into question -- Conrad forces his readers to acknowledge the limitations of their own knowledge, and the historical and geographical specificity of their values and behavioural habits. In doing so, he exposes their relativity and, most importantly, their fragility.

Conrad as Post/Colonial Writer

With regard to his thematic preoccupations and literary styles Conrad can certainly be considered a Modernist writer. However, I would argue that Conrad's work can be more suitably inserted into the genre of Post/Colonial Writing (though, like many authors, it is more likely that he shifts between two, if not more, retrospectively imposed themes). Why might this be? Conrad's sceptical critiques and literary interrogations of distinctly Eurocentric conceptions of morality and tradition does not come from within the metropolitan, bourgeois cityscape that was the home of so many self-fashioned, high Modernist authors (think of Ezra Pound [2], *T.S. Eliot*, or several members of the Bloomsbury Group). Instead, they emerge from colonial settings, underdeveloped environments, from contact zones in which colonizing and colonized cultures clash and conflict, such as in *Lord Jim [3]*, *Nostromo [4]* and *Nigger of the* Narcissus [5]. The exploration of the ramifications of a global imperialism upon the metropolitan centre writes the marginalized space into the very heart of the Empire. Conrad's literature is not simply colonial. The consistent ambivalence of his prose towards the imperial project marks the beginning of a century-long literary interrogation of what it is to exist in the colonies -- what it is to realize that an Empire apparently convinced of its power is in fact slowly entering the period of its decline and fall. That Conrad's most famous novella, *Heart of Darkness [6]* (1899), has been taken up and re-written by several now canonical postcolonial authors, such as Nigerian author Chinua Achebe in his *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Kenyan author Ng?g? wa Thiong'o in his *The River Between* (1965), is a testament to the post/colonial nature of Conrad's fiction.

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