

JOSEPH CONRAD

**A biographical essay by
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The author discussed this evening, Joseph Conrad, was considered the greatest of English writers, although he was a Polish immigrant who traveled the world and spoke his native language, as well as French, learning English at the side of his poet father starting at the age of eight years old. Born in 1857, in a city in the Ukraine named Berdichev, Conrad was introduced to the works of Shakespeare and Victor Hugo as his father eked out a living translating classics. The two of them shared a sense of loneliness after the death of his mother, due to debilitating tuberculosis when Conrad was four years old. The political turmoil of the years following his birth caused the father to direct an insurrection against Russia that landed him in jail and exiled to northern Russia. Conrad and his father, Joseph Theodore Apolonius Korzeniowski and mother Evelina endured the harsh climate while exiled and in 1867, by then widowed, the father and young son were allowed to return to Poland. Moving to Cracow allowed father and son to share their love of literature, reading Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, William Thackeray and James Fenimore Cooper, laying the groundwork for young Joseph's ability to think and write in English.

Conrad was entranced by stories of the seas and as a teenager, in 1873, he saw the sea for the first time feeling, as he described later, that "the sea meant the tragedy of loneliness." The following year he went to Marseilles, France and entered the French marine service where he served for twenty years as a ship's officer. In the late 1870's he fell in love with a woman who, like he, supported Don Carlos, the pretender to the Spanish throne. The love affair ended, Conrad and an American fought a duel, and for the first time of many throughout his life, he suffered from suicidal thoughts. In 1878 Conrad went to England and worked as a seaman, moving up to officer in the British merchant service and then rose from third mate to master. The background for much of his fiction came from his

travels to exotic places like Australia, Borneo, India, Java and Singapore, and in 1886, the former Jozef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski of Poland changed his name to Joseph Conrad and became a naturalized British citizen. The early influence of the death of his mother, the lack of attachment to peers until his time in Marseilles where he was introduced to the arts: theater, drama and opera, his shared time with his poet-father, and the influence of his travel to the Belgian Congo and Zaire inspired his first short story titled *The Black Mate*. According to Joyce Carol Oates, "Though desperate to earn a living, the youthful Conrad was clearly a romantic for whom sailing was an emotional, perhaps even a spiritual vocation." His great short novel, *The Heart of Darkness* followed and in 1893 Conrad thought seriously about writing fiction based on his experiences in the East. In 1895 he retired from the merchant marines, and wrote *Almayer's Folly*, having consulted with the novelist John Galsworthy. It received favorable reviews and a new career as a writer began. Other writers befriended him over the years, including Henry James, Arnold Bennett, Rudyard Kipling, and Stephen Crane. Perhaps this success allowed him to fall in love again and marry Jessie George, an Englishwoman who then settled with him in Kent in the south of England. They raised two sons and Conrad resided there for the rest of his life.

The themes of Joseph Conrad's stories and novels are similar: man against man, man against nature, loneliness and the loneliness at sea, alienation of powerful people, the malevolence of man and the inner good and evil battling in people's minds. In tonight's novella *The Secret Sharer* he was able to achieve his task of showing the power of the written word, helping us feel, hear and see the waves, the wind and taste the salty air surrounding a ship. The "native enemies", the crew, as in *The Heart of Darkness* did not matter. The tragic darkness in both works is chilling. Conrad has been called a master of psychological novels and the conflicts in both works are evident. He drew parallels between the inner life of a human character and the broader sweep of human history that included acts of war, slavery, mass annihilation and the suffering of minorities. He reflected on themes of faith, sacrifice and the love of God.

Conrad was high-strung and illness-prone, and was burdened by his wife's emotional immaturity. These appeared to lead to great insecurity and a lack of ability to finish works in progress. While working on *The Return*, a contemporary

English story, he complained: "I go on groping, I feel helpless, after 10 weeks trying to write this story I have twenty pages of print I haven't finished yet".

Conrad's only close friend in 1897 was a Scotsman named Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham, who was impressed by *An Outpost of Progress*, one of many magazine articles Joseph sold. Graham was a member of the House of Commons, a traveler, and a defender of the oppressed. He was a champion of protecting factory and farm workers, an advocate for free public education and a fierce critic of colonialism. Conrad, a Briton by choice and naturalization, was comfortable with Graham as they shared many of the same philosophies of life. Conrad wrote to Graham about the artist who, "speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, the sense of mystery in life and the feeling of friendship with all creation". Some of these feelings were described in his next serialized magazine story, *The Nigger of the Narcissus-A Tale of the Sea*. Buoyed by this success Conrad was able to break out of his "nervous" condition and write *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*. By 1900 he enjoyed financial security and a stable family life with Jessie and their two sons.

Let's not gloss over Joseph Conrad's success without thinking about the justifiable criticisms of his work. According to Oates, gender, class, race and hegemony are implicit in his works that were written, according to her, for an audience of Caucasian males. The women are portrayed as financially secure and childishly dependent. There are no females in tonight's book but the brevity trumps any need. It is class, not race or sex, that determines the worth of the captain and Leggett's relationship.

The success of *The Secret Sharer* allowed Conrad to pursue his craft and explore other topics of interest to him and his readers. Politics was the main topic in an essay written in 1907, *The Secret Agent*, as well as *Victory* which explored characters such as anarchists, politicians, and police. When he died in 1924 of a heart attack Joseph Conrad was considered "One of the premier prose stylists and writers of psychological fiction in the English language", according to one of his biographers, Zdzislaw Najder, in a 700+ page book entitled *Joseph Conrad: A Life*. This book contains hundreds of letters of correspondence and an enormous amount of scholarly information as well as photographs of Conrad, friends and

family. The footnotes and notes on abbreviations are 100 hundred pages and the bibliography is 56 pages. The first biography , published in 1983 took Najder 25 years to write and this one, the revised edition, took another 10 years to complete. It is significant because it has more details about the Conrads' genealogy, his father's role as a Polish leader, and includes more details about Conrad's time at sea, his feelings about socialism, and his reaction to the reception he received following the publication of his books. This newer information was available for the first time as the Polish government released their archival materials to scholars such as Njader. And so we have information about one former Polish citizen written by another Polish writer, both with an affinity for detailed English prose and both exiled from their native land. The new information in this large biography was due to the ability of the writer to unearth details not formerly available or accessed. Not bad for two Polish immigrants whose works are praised throughout the world!