

# Joseph Conrad

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**Joseph Conrad**



**Born:** 3 December 1857  
Berdyczów, Russian Empire

**Died:** 3 August 1924 (aged 66)  
Canterbury, England

**Occupation:** Novelist

### Literary movement: Modernism

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**Joseph Conrad** (born **Teodor Józef Konrad Nałęcz-Korzeniowski**, 3 December 1857 – 3 August 1924) was a Polish-born novelist who spent most of his adult life in Britain. Some of his works have been labelled romantic: Conrad's supposed "romanticism" is heavily imbued with irony and a fine sense of man's capacity for self-deception. Many critics regard Conrad as an important forerunner of Modernist literature.

Conrad's narrative style and anti-heroic characters have influenced many writers, including Ernest Hemingway, D.H. Lawrence, Graham Greene, William S. Burroughs, Joseph Heller and Jerzy Kosiński, as well as inspiring such films as *Apocalypse Now* (which was drawn from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*).

## Early life

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Conrad was born in Berdyczów (Berdichev) into a highly-patriotic landowning Polish family bearing the *Nałęcz* coat-of-arms.



*Nowy Świat 47 (47 New World Street), Warsaw, Poland, where Conrad lived in 1861 with his father, Polish poet, translator and independence activist, Apollo Nałęcz Korzeniowski.*

Conrad's father Apollo was a writer best known for patriotic tragedies, and a translator of Shakespeare and Victor Hugo from English and French. He encouraged his son to read widely in Polish and French.

In 1861 the elder Korzeniowski was arrested by Tsarist Russian authorities in Warsaw for helping organize what would become the January Uprising of 1863-64, and was exiled to Vologda, a city with a very harsh climate, approximately

300 miles north of Moscow. His wife, Ewelina Korzeniowska (*née* Bobrowska), and four-year-old son followed him into exile. Due to Ewelina's weak health, Apollo Korzeniowski was allowed in 1865 to move to Chernigov, Ukraine, where Conrad's mother died within a few weeks of

tuberculosis. Conrad's father died four years later in Kraków, leaving Conrad orphaned at the age of eleven.

In Kraków, young Conrad was placed in the care of his maternal uncle, Tadeusz Bobrowski — a more cautious figure than his parents. Bobrowski nevertheless allowed Conrad to travel to Marseille and begin a career as a seaman at the age of 16. This came after Conrad was rejected for Austro-Hungarian citizenship, leaving him liable for 25-year conscription into the Russian Army.

## Voyages

Conrad lived an adventurous life, becoming involved in gunrunning and political conspiracy, which he later fictionalized in his novel *The Arrow of Gold*, and apparently had a disastrous love affair, which plunged him into despair. His voyage down the coast of Venezuela would provide material for *Nostromo*. The first mate of Conrad's vessel became the model for *Nostromo*'s hero.

In 1878, after a failed suicide attempt, Conrad took service on his first British ship bound for Constantinople, before its return to Lowestoft, his

first landing in Britain. He did not become fluent in English until the age of 21, and in 1886 gained both his Master Mariner's certificate and British citizenship, officially changing his name to "Joseph Conrad." Conrad and his wife Jessie moved into a small semi-detached villa in Victoria Road, Stanford le Hope in 1896 and later to a medieval lath and plaster farmhouse named 'Ivy Walls' in Billet Lane. He later lived in London and near Canterbury, Kent.

Conrad was to serve a total of sixteen years in the British merchant marine, with passages to the Far East, where his ship caught fire off Sumatra and he spent more than twelve hours in a lifeboat. The experience provided material for his short story, *Youth*. In 1883 he joined the *Narcissus* in Bombay, a voyage that inspired his 1897 novel *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. Sailing the southeast Asian archipelago would also furnish memories recast in *Lord Jim* and *An Outcast of the Islands*.

A childhood ambition to visit central Africa was realised in 1889, when Conrad contrived to reach the Congo Free State. He became captain of a Congo steamboat, and the atrocities he witnessed and his experiences there not only informed his most acclaimed and ambiguous work, *Heart of*

*Darkness*, but served to crystalise his vision of human nature — and his beliefs about himself. These were in some measure affected by the emotional trauma and lifelong illness he contracted there. During his stay, he became acquainted with Roger Casement, whose 1904 Congo Report detailed the abuses suffered by the indigenous population.

The description of Conrad's protagonist Marlow's journey upriver closely follows Conrad's own, and he appears to have experienced a disturbing insight into the nature of evil. Conrad's experience of loneliness at sea, of corruption and of the pitilessness of nature converged to form a coherent, if bleak, vision of the world. Isolation, self-deception, and the remorseless working out of the consequences of character flaws are threads to be found running through much of his work. Conrad's own sense of loneliness throughout his exile's life would find memorable expression in the 1901 short story, "Amy Foster."

Notwithstanding the undoubted sufferings that Conrad endured on many of his voyages, he contrived to put up at the best lodgings at many of his destinations. Hotels across the Far East still lay claim to him as an honoured guest, often naming

the rooms he stayed in after him: in the case of Singapore's Raffles Hotel, the wrong suite has been named in his honour, apparently for marketing reasons. His visits to Bangkok are also lodged in that city's collective memory, and are recorded in the official history of the Oriental Hotel, along with that of a less well-behaved guest, Somerset Maugham, who pilloried the hotel in a short story in revenge for attempts to eject him.

Conrad is also reported to have stayed at Hong Kong's Peninsula Hotel. Later literary admirers, notably Graham Greene, followed closely in his footsteps, sometimes requesting the same room. No Caribbean resort is yet known to have claimed Conrad's patronage, although he is believed to have stayed at a Fort-de-France *pension* upon arrival in Martinique on his first voyage, in 1875, when he travelled as a passenger on the *Mont Blanc*.

## Emotional development

A further  
insight into

Conrad's emotional life is provided by an episode which inspired one of his strangest and least

known stories, "A Smile of Fortune." In September 1888 he put into Mauritius, as captain of the sailing barque *Otago*. His story likewise recounts the arrival of an unnamed English seacaptain in a sailing vessel, come for sugar. He encounters

"the old French families, descendants of the old colonists; all noble, all impoverished, and living a narrow domestic life in dull, dignified decay. . . . The girls are almost always pretty, ignorant of the world, kind and agreeable and generally bilingual. The emptiness of their existence passes belief."

The tale describes Jacobus, an affable gentleman



*The Roi des Belges*, the ship  
Conrad used to travel up the  
Congo



chandler beset by hidden shame. Extramarital passion for the bareback rider of a visiting circus had resulted in a child and scandal. For eighteen years this daughter, Alice, has been confined to Jacobus's house, seeing no one but a governess. When Conrad's captain is invited to the house of Jacobus, he is irresistibly drawn to the wild, beautiful Alice. "For quite a time she did not stir, staring straight before her as if watching the vision of some pageant passing through the garden in the deep, rich glow of light and the splendour of flowers."

The suffering of Alice Jacobus was true enough. A copy of the *Dictionary of Mauritian Biography* unearthed by the scholar Zdzisław Najder reveals that her character was a fictionalised version of seventeen-year-old Alice Shaw, whose father was a shipping agent and owned the only rose garden in the town. While it is evident that Conrad too fell in love while in Mauritius, it was not with Alice. His proposal to young Eugénie Renouf was declined, the lady being already engaged. Conrad left broken-hearted, vowing never to return.

Something of his feelings is considered to permeate the recollections of the captain. "I was seduced by the moody expression of her face, by

her obstinate silences, her rare, scornful words; by the perpetual pout of her closed lips, the black depths of her fixed gaze turned slowly upon me as if in contemptuous provocation."

## Novelist



*Nałęcz* coat-of-arms. In 1923, the year before his death, Conrad, who possessed this hereditary Polish coat-of-arms, declined a British knighthood.

In 1894, aged 36, Conrad left the sea to become an English-language author. His first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, set on the east coast of Borneo, was published in 1895. With its successor, *An Outcast of the Islands*, it laid the foundations of a reputation as a romantic teller of exotic tales, a misunderstanding of his purpose that was to frustrate Conrad for the rest of his career.

In 1896 he married a 22-year-old Englishwoman, Jessie George, by whom he

had two sons, Borys and John.

Financial success evaded Conrad, though a Civil List pension of £100 per annum stabilised his affairs, and collectors began to purchase his manuscripts. Conrad's health remained poor for the remainder of his life, although he continued to work relentlessly.

In 1923, the year before his death, Conrad, who possessed a hereditary Polish coat-of-arms, declined the offer of a British knighthood (which is not hereditary).

Joseph Conrad died 3 August 1924, of a heart attack, and was interred at Canterbury Cemetery, Canterbury, England, under the name of Korzeniowski. Shortly before his death, he took last rites and asked that he be buried as a Roman Catholic, the faith he was raised in and which he had abandoned for atheism during his adulthood.  
[1]

Of his novels, *Lord Jim* and *Nostramo* continue to be widely read, as set texts and for pleasure. *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* are also considered to be among his finest books. He also, over a period of a few years, wrote a short series of novels in collaboration with Ford Madox Ford,

writing on these at the same time that he was working independently on other publications.<sup>[1]</sup>

Arguably the most influential work remains *Heart of Darkness*, to which many have been introduced by Francis Ford Coppola's film, *Apocalypse Now*, inspired by Conrad's novella and set during the Vietnam War. The themes of *Heart of Darkness*, and the depiction of a journey into the darkness of the human psyche, still resonate with modern readers.

## Style

Conrad, an emotional man subject to fits of depression, self-doubt and pessimism, disciplined his romantic temperament with an unsparing moral judgment.

As an artist, he famously aspired, in his preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897), "by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel... before all, to make you *see*. That — and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm — all you demand — and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth

for which you have forgotten to ask."

Writing in what to the visual arts was the age of Impressionism, Conrad showed himself in many of his works a prose poet of the highest order: thus, for instance, in the evocative *Patna* and courtroom scenes of *Lord Jim*; in the "melancholy-mad elephant" and gunboat scenes of *Heart of Darkness*; in the doubled protagonists of *The Secret Sharer*; and in the verbal and conceptual resonances of *Nostromo* and *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*.

The singularity of the universe depicted in Conrad's novels, especially compared to those of near-contemporaries like John Galsworthy, is such as to open him to criticism similar to that later applied to Graham Greene.<sup>[2]</sup> But where "Greeneland" has been characterised as a recurring and recognisable atmosphere independent of setting, Conrad is at pains to create a sense of place, be it aboard ship or in a remote village. Often he chose to have his characters play out their destinies in isolated or confined circumstances.

In the view of Evelyn Waugh and Kingsley Amis, it was not until the first volumes of Anthony Powell's sequence, *A Dance to the Music of Time*,

were published in the 1950s, that an English novelist achieved the same command of atmosphere and precision of language with consistency, a view supported by present-day critics like A. N. Wilson. This is the more remarkable, given that English was Conrad's third language. Powell acknowledged his debt to Conrad.

Conrad's third language remained inescapably under the influence of his first two — Polish and French. This makes his English seem unusual. It was perhaps from Polish and French prose styles that he adopted a fondness for triple parallelism, especially in his early works ("all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men"), as well as for rhetorical abstraction ("It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention").

T.E. Lawrence, one of many writers whom Conrad befriended, offered some perceptive observations about Conrad's writing:

He's absolutely the most haunting thing in prose that ever was: I wish I knew how every paragraph he writes (... they are all

paragraphs: he seldom writes a single sentence...) goes on sounding in waves, like the note of a tenor bell, after it stops. It's not built in the rhythm of ordinary prose, but on something existing only in his head, and as he can never say what it is he wants to say, all his things end in a kind of hunger, a suggestion of something he can't say or do or think.... He's as much a giant of the subjective as Kipling is of the objective.

In Conrad's time, literary critics, while usually commenting favourably on his works, often remarked that his exotic style, complex narration, profound themes and pessimistic ideas put many readers off. Yet as Conrad's ideas were borne out by 20th-century events, in due course he came to be admired for beliefs that seemed to accord with subsequent times more closely than with his own.

Conrad's was, indeed, a starkly lucid view of the human condition — a vision similar to that which had been offered in two micro-stories by his ten-years-older Polish compatriot, Boleslaw Prus (whose work Conrad admired): "Mold of the Earth" (1884) and "Shades" (1885). Conrad wrote:

Faith is a myth and beliefs shift like mists on

the shore; thoughts vanish; words, once pronounced, die; and the memory of yesterday is as shadowy as the hope of tomorrow....

In this world — as I have known it — we are made to suffer without the shadow of a reason, of a cause or of guilt....

There is no morality, no knowledge and no hope; there is only the consciousness of ourselves which drives us about a world that... is always but a vain and floating appearance....

A moment, a twinkling of an eye and nothing remains — but a clot of mud, of cold mud, of dead mud cast into black space, rolling around an extinguished sun. Nothing. Neither thought, nor sound, nor soul. Nothing.

## **Criticism**

In 1975, Chinua Achebe published an essay entitled "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'", wherein he labelled Joseph Conrad a "bloody racist". This essay has since sparked a storm of controversy regarding Conrad's legacy. Achebe's point of view, now the single most famous piece of criticism on Joseph Conrad,



is that *Heart of Darkness* cannot be considered "a great work of art" because it is "a novel which celebrates... dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race." [2]

Referring to Conrad as a "talented, tormented man", Achebe drew on several instances of racism in the writings of Conrad, in which the Polish author derided "niggers" as variously "unreasoning", "savage", and "inscrutable". [3] Conrad, for his part, has had many passionate defenders since the publication of Achebe's criticism; often, Achebe has been criticized for disregarding the "historical context" of Conrad's work, in defense of Conrad's reputation, or in defending the extant value of his work. [4][5]

## **Novels and novellas**

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Conrad monument, Gdynia, on  
Poland's Baltic Sea coast.

*a Crime* (with  
Ford Madox  
Ford)  
*The Rover*  
*Suspense*  
1925 (unfinished,  
published  
posthumously)

## Short stories

- "The Idiots" (Conrad's first short story; written during his honeymoon, published in *Savo* 1896 and collected in *Tales of Unrest*, 1898).
- "The Black Mate" (written, according to Conrad, in 1886; published 1908; posthumously collected in *Tales of Hearsay*, 1925).
- "The Lagoon" (composed 1896; published in *Cornhill Magazine* 1897; collected in *Tales of Unrest*, 1898).
- "An Outpost of Progress" (written 1896 and named in 1906 by Conrad himself, long after the publication of *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness*, as his 'best story'; published in *Cosmopolis* 1897 and collected in *Tales of Unrest* 1898; often compared to *Heart of*

*Darkness*, with which it has numerous thematic affinities).

- "The Return" (written circa early 1897; never published in magazine form; collected in *Tales of Unrest*, 1898; Conrad, presaging the sentiments of most readers, once remarked, "I hate it").
- "Karain: A Memory" (written February–April 1897; published Nov. 1897 in *Blackwood's* and collected in *Tales of Unrest*, 1898).
- "Youth" (written in 1898; collected in *Youth, a Narrative and Two Other Stories*, 1902)
- "Falk" (novella/story, written in early 1901; collected only in *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 1903).
- "Amy Foster" (composed in 1901; published the *Illustrated London News*, Dec. 1901 and collected in *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 1903).
- "To-morrow" (written early 1902; serialized in *Pall Mall Magazine*, 1902 and collected in *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 1903).
- "The End of the Tether" (written in 1902; collected in *Youth, a Narrative and Two Other Stories*, 1902)
- "Gaspar Ruiz" (written after "Nostromo" in 1904–05; published in *Strand Magazine* in 1906 and collected in *A Set of Six*, 1908

UK/1915 US. This story was the only piece of Conrad's fiction ever adapted by the author for cinema, as *Gaspar the Strong Man*, 1920).

- "An Anarchist" (written in late 1905; serialized in *Harper's* in 1906; collected in *A Set of Six*, 1908 UK/1915 US.)
- "The Informer" (written before January 1906; published in December 1906 in *Harper's* and collected in *A Set of Six*, 1908 UK/1915 US.)
- "The Brute" (written in early 1906; published in *The Daily Chronicle* in December 1906; collected in *A Set of Six*, 1908 UK/1915 US.)
- "The Duel" (aka "The Point of Honor": serialized in the UK in *Pall Mall Magazine* in early 1908 and in the US periodical *Forum* later that year; collected in *A Set of Six* in 1908 and published by Garden City Publishing in 1924. Joseph Fouché makes a cameo appearance)
- "Il Conde" (i.e., 'Conte' [count]: appeared in *Cassell's* [UK] 1908 and *Hampton's* [US] in 1909; collected in *A Set of Six*, 1908 UK/1915 US.)
- "The Secret Sharer" (written December 1909; published in *Harper's* and collected in *Twixt Land and Sea* 1912)

- "Prince Roman" (written 1910, published in 1911 in the *Oxford and Cambridge Review*; based upon the story of Prince Roman Sanguszek of Poland 1800–1881)
- "A Smile of Fortune" (a long story, almost a novella, written in mid-1910; published in *London Magazine* in Feb. 1911; collected in *Twixt Land and Sea* 1912)
- "Freya of the Seven Isles" (another near-novella, written late 1910–early 1911; published in *Metropolitan Magazine* and *London Magazine* in early 1912 and July 1912, respectively; collected in *Twixt Land and Sea* 1912)
- "The Partner" (written in 1911; published in *Within the Tides*, 1915)
- "The Inn of the Two Witches" (written in 1913; published in *Within the Tides*, 1915)
- "Because of the Dollars" (written in 1914; published in *Within the Tides*, 1915)
- "The Planter of Malata" (written in 1914; published in *Within the Tides*, 1915)
- "The Warrior's Soul" (written late 1915–early 1916; published in *Land and Water*, in March 1917; collected in *Tales of Hearsay*, 1925)
- "The Tale" (Conrad's only story about World War I; written 1916 and first published 1917 in *Strand Magazine*)

## Memoirs and essays

- *The Mirror of the Sea* (collection of autobiographical essays first published in various magazines 1904-6 ), 1906
- *A Personal Record* (also published as *Some Reminiscences*), 1912
- *Notes on Life and Letters*, 1921
- *Last Essays*, 1926

## See also

- Joseph Conrad's Works: A Chronological List.
- ORP Conrad - a WWII Polish Navy cruiser named after Joseph Conrad.
- T. Scovel, *A Time to Speak: a Psycholinguistic Inquiry into the Critical Period for Human speech*, Cambridge, MA, Newbury House, 1988.

## Notes

1. ^ Collaborative Literature
2. ^ Regions of the Mind: the Exoticism of Greenland; Andrew Purssell, University of London.

<http://www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english/A1>

## References

- Zdzisław Najder, *Joseph Conrad: a Chronicle*, new edition, Camden House, 2007.
- Zdzisław Najder, *Conrad under Familial Eyes*, Cambridge University Press, 1984, ISBN 0-521-25082-X.
- J.H. Stape, editor, *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*, Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Jeffrey Meyers, *Joseph Conrad: a Biography*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1991.

## External links

- The Joseph Conrad Society (U.K)
- Conrad First: a digital archive of every newspaper and magazine in which the work of Joseph Conrad appeared between 1896 and 1935
- The Complete works are available from eBooks@Adelaide
- Works by Joseph Conrad at Project Gutenberg



- Free audiobook of *The Secret Agent* from LibriVox
- Free audiobook of *Heart of Darkness* from LibriVox
- Free audiobook of *Lord Jim* from LibriVox
  
- Penn State's Electronic Classics Series has 26 Works of Joseph Conrad available for free *Joseph Conrad at Penn State's Electronic Classics*
- Joseph Conrad at kirjasto.sci.fi
- Heart of Darkness text at American Literature
- Chinua Achebe: The Lecture Heard Around The World
- Collected Letters, vol. 6 (1917-1919) - PDF
- Find-A-Grave profile for Joseph Conrad
- Conrad's page at Literary Journal.com-a number of research articles on Conrad's work
- Conrad's page at *The Literary Network*
- About "An Outpost of Progress" Interpretations of and more background information on the short story.
- About TS Eliot reading Heart of Darkness (French)
- Free to read on a cell phone - Conrad works.

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