

Joseph Conrad—Imperial Writings in a Postcolonial World

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Introduction

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to . . .

(Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 6)

These are some of the first words that Charles Marlow speaks aboard the *Nellie* as it rests at anchor on the river Thames. Part of a longer diatribe about the brutal realities of imperialism and colonialism, these words set the scene for a disturbing voyage into the heart of Africa. Conrad's condemnation of the colonial endeavor is relatively unique for a time when most of Europe scrambled to seize as much of the world as they could. Focused on imperialism's frontiers where the interactions between colonizer and colonized were most evident and damaging to both groups, Conrad's writings force discussion about difficult topics. Racism, forced labor, cultural superiority, religion, and trade all make prominent appearances within his fiction and remain the subject of debate even today.

In order to explain why Conrad grapples with these subjects, it is crucial to understand both the broader context within which he was writing, but also Conrad's own personal encounters and experiences with life on the colonial frontiers. In much the same way Marlow's narration provides context for his own perspective on the events that unfold in *Heart of Darkness*, so too does the relationship between Conrad's life and the world in which he lived. Significantly, this contextualization explains why the narratives that Conrad produced during his lifetime have become more significant

for the contemporary world. This chapter explores both of these topics to provide insights into their visibility in Conrad's writings, focusing principally on the locations, characters, and themes of his work with regards to European colonial imperialism.

Russian Imperialism and Conrad's Childhood

Although not openly discussed in Conrad's own words until the autobiographical accounts penned later in his life, there are traces of a disdain for imperialist rule throughout his bibliography. One element in explaining this attitude can be found in the brutal realities of life for Conrad and his parents under Russian imperialism. In 1861, Apollo and Ewa Korzeniowski were forced into exile by Russian authorities with their infant son, Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski. Conrad's father was charged with "clandestine revolutionary activity" for his involvement with a committee that later orchestrated the failed 1863 January Uprisings; a short-lived but violent guerrilla insurrection against mandatory conscription by the Imperial Russian Army within the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Due to these convictions, Conrad's family lost all of their lands to the Russian Empire.

With the exile of his family for their Polish nationalism and the deaths of both parents by the time he reached the age of twelve, Conrad faced the stark realities of what imperialism meant for those it subjected. As one scholar noted in a review of the autobiographical work *A Personal Record*, "Conrad was unable to grapple with 'the oppressive shadow of the great Russian Empire' whilst struggling to counteract the emotional impact of the loss of both parents due directly to Russian tyranny" (Szyzypien 17). Conrad refused to engage with his childhood or the national identity he inherited at birth until he was in his fifties—*A Personal Record* is one of the very few works that sees Conrad directly address his roots. Furthermore, Conrad refused to work with Russians under any circumstances, even when these Russians were themselves victims of the Russian state (8).

When considering Conrad's childhood heroes, however, an interesting disparity occurs. According to his own recollections as

recorded in the posthumously published collection, *Last Essays*, the young Conrad was infatuated with the unmapped regions of the world. Moreover, he was an ardent admirer of those men who ventured deep into Africa, Asia, and the Pacific to lay bare unexplored and unclaimed regions of the world. These idols of British Victorian imperialism—David Livingstone, Mungo Park, Captain James Cook—shaped Conrad’s views of a world he had not yet seen and had a tremendous impact on the path he followed (*Last Essays* 10). Ironically, Conrad sought refuge from the personal legacies of Russian imperialism in the exploits of those imperial agents, a contradiction that contributed to Conrad’s conflicted depictions of European practices of colonialism in his writings. Conrad’s desire to go to sea from an early age was a response to this internationalized thinking. For Conrad, Austria-Poland, to which he had returned shortly before his father’s death, presented too small a world for a man who had lost himself in ‘all the glories of exploration’ (*Heart of Darkness* 7).

Marseille and the Caribbean

In a broader context, Conrad’s arrival in Marseilles in November 1874 at the age of sixteen was indicative of a much larger trend occurring both in Europe and across the increasingly connected world. In the following century, 60 million people left Europe for a better life overseas, principally in the New World; 3.6 million people emigrated from Poland alone (Wesseling 17). Such migration was unprecedented in human history, greatly impacting the economic, social, and political spheres of both the lands these people arrived in and the nations they left behind. Conrad found inherent interest within these international movements, and his perspective of the world was shaped in part by this understanding of migration. As Andrea White explains, “as an early modern, he sensed the current of a world-wide disruption of peoples and ideas, of exiles and rootlessness. . . . [Conrad’s] writing acknowledges and even participates in the decentring of monolithic unities and traditional hierarchies” (197).

Finding employment with the French shipping firm *Delestang et Fils*, Conrad spent the next four years learning his trade as a seaman on merchant vessels. His time working out of Marseille inspired *The Arrow of Gold*, a semi-fictional, semi-autobiographical account published in 1919 about a gunrunner for the Spanish Carlist cause. Although Conrad's own involvement with gunrunners for the Carlists has been questioned (Ziejka 61-64), the repeated mentions of such escapades in *Some Reminiscences* and *The Mirror of the Sea*, as well as *The Arrow of Gold*, highlights the apparent influence of the cause on Conrad. Carlism was a complex movement revolving around a number of different issues, but one central principle was support for regional autonomy within the nation; an ideal that would have appealed to Conrad in light of his own childhood experiences. Even if he himself did not engage in active support for the Carlists, the decision to give such an option to the characters in his work demonstrates a deeper-held conviction.

Three voyages to the Caribbean were made during Conrad's time in Marseille and left a lasting imprint in his literary mind. At least three characters, as well as numerous locations, can be traced back to these trips. The first mate on Conrad's third voyage to the Americas, Dominic Cervoni, makes a prominent appearance in *The Mirror of the Sea* as the hero of that same name, and Cervoni can also be seen as the foundation for Nostromo and Peyrol in *The Rover*. It is also entirely possible that during that third voyage, Conrad visited South America, the setting for his later novel, *Nostromo* (van Marle 94).

The nautical focus of much of Conrad's writing is another familiar theme developed from his experiences in Marseille and subsequent years employed in the British Merchant Service. A large part of the sense of reality in his narratives comes from his own familiarity with seamanship. The actions of the captain or crew in response to problems or decisions with their ships are given a notable place in the narratives themselves. Whether it is in *An Outpost of Progress*, where the delayed arrival of the company steamboat leads to the tragic events between Kayerts and Carlier, or the abandonment of the distressed *Patna* in the novel *Lord Jim*,

“for the reader of Conrad’s voyage tales some knowledge of the seamanship is essential for understanding crucial points of the action” (Foulke 247). Although Conrad’s time at sea was only just beginning, the trans-Atlantic voyages he made and the initiation into the camaraderie of sailors greatly influenced the development of Conrad’s characters, themes, and settings.

The Malay Novels, the British Merchant Service, and New Imperialism

In 1878, Conrad joined the British Merchant Service, at the time one of largest merchant navies in the world and responsible for supporting the world’s most expansive colonial empire. By the time of Conrad’s first voyage, the British Empire controlled “10 millions of square miles, or about one-fifth of the 50 millions of square miles composing the habitable globe,” as well as 315 million inhabitants—almost 20 percent of the estimated global population at that time (Temple 469).

These rough figures are indicative of the unprecedented scale and rate at which European powers colonized the world towards the end of the nineteenth century. Termed “New Imperialism,” to distinguish it from the archaic colonial empires that had conquered the Americas in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, this new process was driven by a multitude of factors outside of the scope of this chapter. They can be best summed up in the four “C’s” —Commerce, Christianity, Civilization and Conquest (Pakenham xxiv). Between 1850 and the early 1900s, a Second Industrial Revolution occurred in Britain and across the European continent, creating new manufacturing processes and products. This “Technological Revolution” saw an influx of existing technologies, such as railroads, steam ships, and the telegraph, due to reduced costs and improved manufacturing. As the historian John Darwin succinctly noted, the Second Industrial Revolution gave Europeans “the means to colonize far faster and on a far larger scale than was previously possible. It gave them the means to penetrate new markets and crush old competition. . . . Above all, it enhanced their capacity to project their physical power over far greater distances and at much lower cost” (493). For a Europe

that was facing an ever-increasing population and an economic system dependent on continued expansion, these technological advancements provided a temporary escape in the form of colonial empires and overseas markets.

As the Americas had already been colonized for centuries, European “New Imperialism” turned its attentions to Africa and Asia. The rise of steamships made what had been, in the 1850s, a three- to four-month journey from Europe to Asia now possible in three to four weeks and placed the distant locales firmly within the potential grasp of European powers. It is no coincidence that for a young Polish seaman recently enlisted in the BMS, this region of the world dominated his years of service and the themes and locations of his first novels.

In 1881, serving aboard the *Palestine*, Conrad found himself adrift in a lifeboat after his ship sank. His first steps on Asian soil were when this lifeboat safely reached an island off Sumatra in the East Indies. He recorded his experiences in 1898 in a short story entitled “Youth,” with the *Palestine* renamed the *Judea*. His 1883 voyage aboard the *Narcissus* out of Bombay laid the framework for his incisive novel *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus.’* The main character of the novel, Jimmy Wait, was based on a shipmate during that voyage named Joseph Barron, who similarly died at sea. These characters were not drawn from Conrad’s memory simply for convenience. As Miriam Marcus writes, James Wait’s purpose is to function “as a disturbing presence, as the site on which contemporary ambivalence about race is registered and engaged - but only with the greatest difficulty” (40). Conrad creates these characters to force discussion about the nature of the accepted social thinking, to the extent that the title itself—*The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*—became the focus of much debate between Conrad and his publishers in America who were reluctant to publish the book under that title, not because of the offensive nature of the word but because they believed a book about a black man would not sell in the United States (Johnson 110).

In 1887, Conrad spent six months travelling through the islands around Java and Borneo. One particular ship played a huge part in shaping the themes of his writing; the *Vidar*, an Arab-owned