

Joseph Conrad: An Existential Novelist

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Abstract:

This paper examines Joseph Conrad as an existential novelist. His works explore human isolation, moral conflict, alienation, and the search for identity in a hostile, uncertain universe. Conrad's fiction reflects deep psychological insight into human nature and concern with the struggles individuals face: fear, guilt, loneliness, and moral dilemmas. In *Lord Jim*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Nostromo*, and *The Shadow-Line*, Conrad portrays characters confronting harsh realities, striving to create meaning through personal responsibility and moral choice. The study highlights Conrad's emphasis on three central themes: fidelity, human solidarity, and the struggle of individuals against a threatening and indifferent world. His protagonists frequently experience isolation and inner conflict, illustrating existential ideas associated with thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus. These novels show that characters must define their own values and identities because the universe lacks fixed meaning or certainty.

The paper further discusses Conrad's romantic realism, psychological depth, and modern vision of life, which distinguish him as one of the major novelists of the twentieth century. His exploration of existential themes and his profound understanding of human consciousness establish him as a writer whose works continue to remain relevant in modern literary studies.

Key Words: Mirroring, fidelity, Moralism, Betrayal, Existentialism, Hostile universe, Philosophers, Alienation, Inexorable past Protagonists, Dejection, Melodramatic, Suicide, Exotic lands, Consciousness, Human nature, Uncanny, Human nature, Romantic realist,

Introduction

Joseph Conrad occupies a significant place in modern English literature as a novelist who explored the complexities of human existence, moral uncertainty, and psychological conflict. Writing during a period of transition from Victorian realism to modernism, Conrad

introduced a new depth of introspection and philosophical inquiry into fiction. His novels portray individuals confronting fear, alienation, loneliness, and the struggle to preserve moral integrity in an indifferent, often hostile world. Because of these themes, Conrad is frequently regarded as a precursor to existentialist thought.

Existentialism, as a philosophical movement, stresses individual freedom, responsibility, anxiety, and the search for meaning in a universe without absolute certainty. Conrad wrote before existentialism was formally developed by thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, yet his work reflects many existential concerns. His protagonists face isolation and moral dilemmas, forcing them to define themselves through personal choice and action. In novels such as *Lord Jim*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Nostromo*, and *The Shadow-Line*, Conrad depicts characters who struggle against inner guilt, social alienation, and overwhelming natural and fateful forces.

Conrad's fiction is deeply influenced by his experiences as a sailor and traveler. These experiences exposed him to the realities of human suffering, imperialism, and cultural conflict. His narratives combine romantic imagination with psychological realism. This creates a unique artistic vision that examines both the external world and the inner consciousness of man. His emphasis on fidelity, solidarity, and personal responsibility reveals his concern with the ethical dimensions of human life.

This paper examines Joseph Conrad as an existential novelist by analyzing how his major works address themes such as alienation, moral crisis, identity, and human isolation. It argues that Conrad's treatment of these issues prefigures modern existential philosophy and demonstrates why he is considered one of the most important and influential novelists of the twentieth century.

Elucidation of the Topic

Conrad's novels momentarily reflect his inner being. They mirror the emotional capacity of an incessantly restless soul seeking release from invisible fetters. Bernard C. Meyer says that Conrad is "an explorer of the secrets of the human mind."¹

His biography constitutes the larger part of his work. Conrad exhorted the novelists to mature and assert the strength of their imagination amongst the things of this earth. He claimed that if an artist were to bear true testimony to his view of the world, nothing except his conscience could guide him. Conrad was interested in two subjects: one kept him engaged with the principle of fidelity and faith between man and man, and the other with the distracting power of evil in human life. And another one is his own experiences of sea-life

and tropical areas as the subject matter of his novels, as furnished by the sea and the luxuriant forests of Malaya.

As a moralist, Conrad emphasized the principle of fidelity and faithfulness in human life. Betrayal of trust and deception of one's fellowmen seemed to him to be heinous sins to be condemned and deprecated in fierce language. The principle of fidelity is fully illustrated in his novels, and, to a greater extent, Conrad stressed the need for fidelity in human relationships. Writes Conrad in *Lord Jim*, "fact remains that you must touch your reward with clean hands lest it turn to dead leaves and thorns in your grasp"².

Conrad has his own speculations, his own eloquences, his own kinds of measured affirmation, but it is clear that his outlook is generally bolder and more defensive than that of most other novelists. Memorable moments in his pages suggest that the vulnerable littleness of man may be set against some great threatening environment.

The captain in the *Shadow Line*, beset by an all-obliterating night, Decoud in *'Nostromo'* marooned on a tiny island amid the empty immensity of sea and sky, or Marlow in *'Heart of Darkness'* surrounded by vast tangles of a jungle which seems poised to annihilate intruding men, as Jim in *'Lord Jim.'* Such symbolically charged contrasts between the lonely individual in the foreground and the neutral or threatening vastness of the background may recall Thomas Hardy's work. In Conrad, we can trace a strong sense that the heavens, once thought to be benevolent to man, are empty or even hostile. In Conrad, there is a keen post-Darwinian sense indicating that man and his struggle are but part of 'Nature.'

A number of critics have pointed out similarities between Conrad and European existentialist writers, especially Camus and Sartre. One of the most striking similarities between these writers is their emphasis on the isolation of their major characters and the anguish it causes. In Conrad's novels, man is alone before a hostile universe, and the crisis of loneliness must forge a moral ethic by which to live. M.D. Zabel was one of the early critics who pointed out Conrad's affinities with the existentialist writers. In all his works, fiction as well as non-fiction, Conrad expresses a oneness with the world that aligns with the one held by the philosophers of the existentialist school. Alienation plays a major role in the existentialist conception of Joseph Conrad. Pain and guilt, which he had witnessed from infancy, are imprinted all over his novels as the still voice of an inexorable past. His protagonists are externally oriented toward permanence, seeking to vindicate their values and to participate in exigencies despite intense risks. He infused his protagonists with loneliness and dejection.

The most obvious feature of Conrad's works is their melodramatic quality. He is the novelist of extreme situations, and his heroes may be in total isolation, driven to suicide, or faced with the choice between betraying a friend and pursuing their own careers, all of which are found in his best-known works. Events in Conrad's works have been acted out in exotic lands, and, as a result, theatrical exaggeration seems to be one of Conrad's hallmarks. Conrad examines a trend of the early twentieth century that evolves from the basic nature of man. His characters are caught in moments when imagination shapes their actions and are presented through the answering imagination of their creators, which is why their actions are so often unexpected.

Conrad is a writer who explores consciousness while remaining simultaneously aware of the unconscious processes of human nature. Because of his uncanny perception of human nature—the glimmering of the conscious, often smothered by a spirit of commercialism—as well as the unpredictability of human nature and his intelligent guesses about its dynamics, Conrad is distinguished. According to some critics, he is on par with Tolstoy. Conrad is an artist. As one noted, "His stories cannot be separated from his Philosophy of life."³

Conrad set forth no dogma, but his novels attempt to give the light of the gospel as he saw it, to describe those accidents of common life that best reveal the profound significance of "solidarity" of human fellowship. A letter to Edward Noble in November 1895 contained his declaration relative to his purpose, "Everyone must talk in the light of his own heart's gospel. No man's light is good to any of his fellows. That is my creed from beginning to end. That's my view of life, a view that rejects all formulas, dogmas, and principles of people making these as a web of illusions. We are too varied. Another man's truth is only a dismal lie to me."⁴

It is, however, significant that A.C. Ward referring to Conrad's romantic-realism raised him "a little above the romanticism of the common writers"⁵ Discussing Conrad's contribution to English fiction, Elizabeth Drew writes: "Conrad brought a new vision into English fiction, and if as many people think, the sense of human isolation and the search for individual identity is the most characteristic feature of the serious twentieth century novel, the fact that 'Lord Jim' was published in 1900 makes it a symbol of the new trend".⁶

Conrad was a romanticist interested in the presentation of distant scenes in exotic lands. He was a laureate of sea life and jungle life. Instead of photographically presenting life at sea and in tropical areas with extreme realism, Conrad sought to interpret them through the colors of his imagination.

On the basis of Conrad's 'moral concern', F R. Leavis regards Conrad to be among the very greatest novelists in the language or any language⁷, and places him in The Great Tradition of English fiction as a great romantic realist. Earnest A. Baker, after discussing Conrad's 'romantic-realism,' has felt tempted to 'view him as the natural sequel to Stevensonians.'⁸ J. W. Beach, in his book *The Twentieth-Century Novel*, confined himself to a discussion of Conrad's impressionist technique. In his later book on *English Literature of the Nineteenth and the Early Twentieth Centuries*, Beach has also ignored Conrad's vision of life and regards him as one of the most compelling "exploiters of the exotic picturesque"⁹, concerned with the romantic nature of "Idealism"¹⁰.

English novelists before Joseph Conrad studied man and his world as two entities of objective reality and used their art largely as a powerful "public instrument"¹¹ to present social problems or to study man in relation to society. Joseph Conrad broke away from the existing traditions, for he wrote fiction neither for entertainment nor for propagating his social ideas. His main preoccupation is to study man's existence and predicament, his exploration a search for self. Allen Walter suggests that Conrad's vision of life is typically modern. Allen makes himself more explicit a little later, "The world Conrad describes, the moral dilemmas facing his characters are those we know today, that seem to us now, as someone has said, almost to have come into existence in 1940"¹²

Conrad shares the views of existentialist thinkers. He is an atheistic existential novelist who shares Kierkegaard's authentic existence and self-knowledge, Nietzsche's idea of the self becoming a superman in a hostile, godless universe, Sartre's view that man is the maker of his own destiny, and Camus's concept of an absolute revolt in a meaningless, absurd world. Thus, Conrad successfully incorporated the basic tenets of existentialist thinkers into his life philosophy and creative writing.

Conclusion

Joseph Conrad emerges as one of the foremost novelists whose works anticipate and embody the central concerns of existential philosophy. Through his exploration of alienation, moral conflict, loneliness, guilt, and the struggle for identity, Conrad presents human life as a continuous confrontation with uncertainty and hostile forces. His protagonists, placed in extreme situations, are compelled to define themselves through personal choice, responsibility, and fidelity to their inner conscience.

Conrad's fiction goes beyond mere adventure or romantic realism; it becomes a profound psychological and philosophical inquiry into human existence. In novels such as *Lord Jim*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Nostromo*, and *The Shadow-Line*, he portrays individuals struggling against fear, betrayal, moral ambiguity, and the indifference of nature and society.

His characters often experience isolation similar to that emphasized later by existential thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Søren Kierkegaard, and Friedrich Nietzsche.

Conrad's emphasis on fidelity, human solidarity, and moral consciousness reflects his belief that meaning cannot be imposed from the outside but must arise from individual experience and ethical action. His modern vision of life, combined with psychological depth and artistic craftsmanship, transformed the English novel and profoundly influenced twentieth-century literature. Thus, Joseph Conrad can rightly be regarded as an existential novelist whose works remain relevant because they reveal the timeless human struggle to find meaning, identity, and moral truth in an uncertain and often indifferent world.

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