

John G. Peters



The Cambridge **Introduction** to
Joseph Conrad

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*The Cambridge Introduction to
Joseph Conrad*

Joseph Conrad is one of the most intriguing and important modernist novelists. His writing continues to preoccupy twenty-first-century readers. This introduction by a leading scholar is aimed at students coming to Conrad's work for the first time. The rise of postcolonial studies has inspired new interest in Conrad's themes of travel, exploration, and racial and ethnic conflict. John Peters explains how these themes are explored in his major works, *Nostromo*, *Lord Jim*, and "Heart of Darkness" as well as his shorter stories. He provides an essential overview of Conrad's fascinating life and career and his approach to writing and literature. A guide to further reading is included, which points to some of the most useful secondary criticism on Conrad. This is the most comprehensive and concise introduction to studying Conrad available, and it will be essential reading for students of the twentieth-century novel and of modernism.

JOHN G. PETERS is Associate Professor of English at the University of North Texas.

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The Cambridge Introduction to Joseph Conrad

JOHN G. PETERS



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*For my grandfather, George L. Snider, and my late grandmother,
Ruth E. Snider*

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Preface

This book is intended as a general overview of the life, works, and context of Joseph Conrad. I hope that this study will be of use to both students and scholars of Conrad, as well as to the interested non-specialist. The book begins with Conrad's life (particularly in relation to his writings), then moves to the context in which he wrote, then considers Conrad's fiction, and concludes with the critical reception of Conrad's works. In the process, I have necessarily had to narrow my discussion to the most essential points. I would have liked to have discussed Conrad's non-fiction prose, but there simply was not space enough to do so. In my discussion of Conrad's works, I have included, of course, my own thoughts on them, but I have also included standard views of these works so that the newcomer to Conrad's works will have access to a wide-ranging discussion.

Unlike most overviews I have considered all of Conrad's published fiction except *The Sisters*, the novel fragment that he abandoned some twenty-five years or more before his death. I have also not considered the three works upon which Conrad collaborated with Ford Madox Ford (*The Inheritors*, *Romance*, and *The Nature of the Crime*) because these books were largely Ford's work. On the other hand, I have commented on every other fictional work Conrad wrote, including the stories collected in the posthumous *Tales of Hearsay*, all of which were finished during Conrad's lifetime, and the posthumous unfinished novel *Suspense*. Unlike most overviews of Conrad's works, I have not dismissed his less studied stories and novels but rather have focused on such aspects of those works that I believe to be worth considering. As a result, I hope that the student of Conrad will come away with a better feel for Conrad's entire career, not just for his middle career for which he is best known. At the same time, however, I have spent the bulk of my effort on the works of Conrad's middle period. In considering all of Conrad's fiction works while emphasizing those of his middle period, I hope I have presented a balanced and useful view of Conrad's works and career.

In quoting from Conrad's works, I have used the uniform 1928 Doubleday edition, with the exception of *The Secret Agent*, where I have quoted from The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad version of the novel, edited by Bruce Harkness and S. W. Reid.

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Chapter 1

Conrad's life

Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski was born in Berdyczów in a predominantly Polish part of Ukraine on December 3, 1857 to Apollo Korzeniowski and his wife Ewelina Bobrowska. Conrad's parents were of the *szlachta*, the Polish gentry. At the time of Conrad's birth, Poland had been partitioned among Prussia, Russia, and Austria-Hungary for over sixty years. Apollo Korzeniowski was a writer and a man passionately committed to Polish independence. He played a prominent role in the revolutionary activities of the early 1860s, for which he was arrested and convicted of seditious actions. In 1862, Korzeniowski was sentenced to exile and sent to Vologda, Russia, and then later to Chernikhov. He was accompanied by his wife and young son, and the family suffered greatly during their exile. As a result of the poor conditions, Conrad's parents both contracted tuberculosis, and his mother died in April 1865. This was a solitary time in Conrad's life, as the boy spent most of his time in the sole company of his father. Korzeniowski remained in exile until early 1868 when he was allowed to leave in order to aid in Conrad's recovery from an illness. This was a better time for them, but Korzeniowski's tuberculosis soon worsened, and he died in May of 1869, leaving Conrad an orphan. Korzeniowski was given a hero's burial and is still considered a national hero in Poland.

Conrad's experience with his father during their time together very much influenced his later years. His devotion to literature, interest in revolutionary politics, attitudes about Russia, skeptical view of the world, and sometimes adventurous spirit all probably have some origin in his experience with his father. After his father's death, Conrad was cared for by family and friends, particularly Tadeusz Bobrowski, his maternal uncle, who became a second father to Conrad. Unlike the fiery and idealistic Korzeniowski, Bobrowski was conservative, careful, practical, and ultimately disapproving of Korzeniowski's approach to the world. Over the years, Bobrowski exerted a strong influence on Conrad and his attitudes, so Conrad's character seems to have been very much affected by both his father and his uncle.

As early as 1872, Conrad expressed a desire to pursue a life at sea. This was an unusual career choice for a Polish boy, and Conrad was certainly influenced in his choice by his reading of such authors as Cooper and Marryat. In 1874, Bobrowski finally agreed to allow Conrad to move to Marseilles, France, to pursue his maritime training. Thus at age seventeen, Conrad in effect left Poland for good. In Marseilles, Conrad studied his trade, and his uncle supported him with a generous allowance, but as Bobrowski's letters attest, Conrad was irresponsible with money, and although Bobrowski always rescued Conrad from his youthful irresponsibility, he constantly upbraided him for such failings.

In July of 1876, Conrad served as a steward aboard the *Saint Antoine*, which traveled to the Caribbean and the Americas, and this represents Conrad's only experience in the new world. It would prove to be the basis for his most panoramic novel, *Nostromo*. Later, in early 1878, Conrad apparently went through a good deal of money, may have been involved in a romantic encounter (possibly with the model for Doña Rita of *The Arrow of Gold*), and may have been involved in some smuggling activity. What occurred after this time is not entirely clear, but, according to Bobrowski's letters, it appears that Conrad attempted suicide. The event remains obscure because at the time and in later years Conrad claimed to have been wounded in a duel.

During these years, the issue of Conrad's citizenship became increasingly important. Bobrowski agreed to allow Conrad to go to Marseilles not only because of Conrad's desire to pursue a life at sea, but because, as a result of his father's revolutionary activities, Conrad was subject to lengthy conscription in the Russian army. Bobrowski thought that by moving to France, Conrad could become naturalized in another country more easily. Because France required a valid passport to work in the French Merchant Marine Service, however, and because Russia refused to issue such a passport to Conrad, it became clear that Conrad would not be free from military obligations to Russia if he remained in France. Consequently, Bobrowski encouraged Conrad to seek naturalization elsewhere. Thus, Conrad eventually joined the British Merchant Marine service, despite speaking no English at that time.

Over the next few years, Conrad sailed on several English ships, and in 1880 he studied to become an officer, passed his examination, and shortly thereafter became third mate aboard the *Loch Etive*. Wishing to move up the professional ladder, Conrad went in search of a position as second mate, finally obtaining one aboard the *Palestine* in November 1881. His experience aboard the *Palestine* was to become the raw material for one of his most important short stories, "Youth." A good deal of Conrad's experience aboard the *Palestine*

resembles the events chronicled in "Youth," including the lengthy repairs before finally setting out, the ship catching fire, their experience in life boats, and Conrad's first close-up view of the exotic East.

Conrad continued to ply his trade, and in 1884 found himself ashore in Bombay, India, where he accepted a position as second mate aboard the *Narcissus*. His experience was to form the basis for his first great novel *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."* Upon arriving in England again, Conrad had completed the required time to qualify for the first officer examination. After some initial difficulty, he eventually passed the examination. However, positions were scarce, and, unable to obtain a position as first officer, despite his new certificate, Conrad finally accepted one as second officer aboard the *Tilkhurst* in April 1885. In 1886, Conrad took the examination for a master's certificate, which would qualify him to serve as captain, but failed one section. In July, Conrad applied for British naturalization and was formally accepted on August 18, and later that year Conrad again took the master's examination, this time passing it. In 1887, Conrad shipped out of Singapore as first mate aboard the *Vidar*, which stopped in various ports throughout the Malay Archipelago. Conrad's time aboard the *Vidar* was his first opportunity to experience the East for an extended period of time, and the experience would become valuable material for much of his fiction about the East. In January 1888, Conrad left the *Vidar* and shortly thereafter received his first and only command when he was appointed captain of the *Otago*. This experience would provide the basis for much of Conrad's fiction, particularly *The Shadow-Line*, "Falk," "A Smile of Fortune," and "The Secret Sharer." The *Otago* was based out of Australia, and during his time in command, Conrad traveled to Port Louis, Mauritius, as well as to various ports along the Australian coast. In March 1889, Conrad decided to give up command of the *Otago*. The reasons for this decision have remained a mystery. He may have been averse to living in the East on a relatively permanent basis, or he may have harbored thoughts of eventually pursuing a career on land in England. Shortly afterwards, a significant change occurred in Conrad's life: he began to write his first novel, *Almayer's Folly* – in English. He could have written in Polish or French, but chose English instead.

Having been unsuccessful in finding a berth bound for the East, Conrad began looking for a command in Africa. He went to Brussels and met Albert Thys, the director of the *Société Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo*, about the possibility of commanding a steamboat on the Congo River. While there, Conrad met a distant relative, Aleksander Poradowski, and his wife, Marguerite. Poradowski died only days after Conrad met him, but the visit was fortuitous in that Conrad and Marguerite became close friends. Shortly

before leaving for the Congo, Conrad made his first trip home to Poland in sixteen years. With experiences so different from those he encountered, Conrad was uncomfortable and must have recognized how little he had in common by then with his compatriots.

In May 1890, Conrad set off on one of the most important voyages of his life when he traveled to the Congo to accept his post. His experience would be recorded in part in his "Congo Diary," but it would also become the basis for "An Outpost of Progress" and his most widely known tale "Heart of Darkness." He arrived on the Congo River in June and began his journey up river, proceeding from Bowa to Matadi. During his stay, he became friendly with Roger Casement, who later became famous when he exposed the atrocities occurring in the Belgian Congo. Despite the colonial enterprise being depicted in Europe as a humanitarian endeavor, Conrad found a great deal of greed, waste, and chaos. In early August, Conrad arrived in Kinshasa intent on taking command of the steamboat *Florida*. The *Florida*, however, had been damaged, and Conrad instead had to travel up river on the *Roi des Belges*, under the command of another captain. They arrived at Stanley Falls (now Kisangani) at the beginning of September and shortly thereafter headed back to Kinshasa. Conrad was asked to take over command of the *Roi des Belges* temporarily while the captain was ill, and the few days he acted as substitute captain constitute Conrad's only command in Africa. The return voyage carried a sick agent, George Antoine Klein, who died on route. Klein became one of the models for Kurtz in "Heart of Darkness." During the next several months, Conrad traveled throughout the Congo on company business and appears to have suffered a good deal from ill health, so much so that he was eventually invalidated home, arriving back in Europe at the end of January 1891. Conrad's experience in the Congo had an enormous impact on him. Despite its relative brevity, it would affect him for the rest of his life and as much as anything else influenced his outlook on civilization and human existence itself. His criticism of the abuses and disorder he witnessed was unrelenting, as evidenced in his various writings on the subject.

After returning from the Congo, Conrad spent some months recovering his physical and psychological health. In November of 1891, he accepted a first mate position aboard the *Torrens*, which regularly sailed between England and Australia. On a return trip from Australia in March 1893, Conrad met Edward Lancelot Sanderson and John Galsworthy, who would become Conrad's life-long friends. Both would also become literary figures, Galsworthy an important novelist and playwright, and Sanderson a minor poet. In July, the *Torrens* arrived in England, and Conrad decided to resign his position and take an extended trip to Poland. By late 1893, he was back in