

C-1

١٣٤

١٩٤٠ م. ٧

مكتبة المعلومات الجامعية
تم التسجيل ميكرو فيليبيا
التوثيق الميكرو فيليبيا

The Ambiguity of Good and Evil
in Three of Joseph Conrad's Novels:

An Outcast of the Islands

The Secret Agent

The Shadow-Line

**In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements of
the M.A. Degree:
An M.A. Thesis**

Submitted by:

١٣٤

**Fadwa Kamal Abdel Rahman
Department of English
Faculty of Al-Ain
Ain Shams University**

822
F.K

٤٧٩٥٧

**Under the Supervision of:
Prof. Ibrahim M. Maghraby**

مكتبة المعلومات الجامعية
تم التسجيل ميكرو فيليبيا
التوثيق الميكرو فيليبيا

**1990
1994**



Acknowledgments

The candidate wishes to express her gratitude to her supervisor Professor Ibrahim Mohamed Maghraby without whose help this thesis would not have been completed. Warm thanks are also due to Professor Mohamed Shebl El-Komy for his support and encouragement.

The candidate is also indebted to Dr. Hussam El-Shakaa for his sound advice and unfailing assistance. She is also thankful to Dr. Salwa Bahgat for her genuine concern and valuable support. Last but not least, special thanks are due to all her colleagues who have helped her greatly.



Table of Contents

Introduction	I - IV
Part One : Theory	
Chapter One : Literary Theory	1 - 37
Chapter Two : Techniques	38 - 66
Chapter Three : Themes	67 - 99
Part Two : Practice	
Chapter Four : Apprenticeship	
<u>An Outcast of the Islands</u>	100-161
Chapter Five : Mastery : <u>The Secret Agent</u>	162-243
Chapter Six : Decline : <u>The Shadow - Line</u>	244 -317
Conclusion :	318-322
Works Consulted:	323-346

INTRODUCTION

Conrad's importance in the history of the English novel lies in the fact that his fictional achievement comes at a crucially transitional point. His works are half-way between those of Thackeray, Dickens and Jane Austen, on the one hand, and those of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf on the other. His innovations extend the theme of the novel to its form. He has one unifying theme from which all other themes stem, namely, the ambiguity of good and evil. This ambiguity is in line with the revolutionary thoughts and ideas which prevailed in the endings of the nineteenth-century and the beginning of the twentieth. It also coincides with Conrad's belief in two sets of paradoxical ideas. On the one hand, man's relation to nature, the role of women, political ideas and theories drive him to assert the extent of the human dilemma and the impossible situation of the solitary humans on earth. On the other hand, his experience as a sailor makes him value the ideas of fidelity, loyalty to the group and self-sacrifice. This janiformity of outlook accounts for many of the ambiguities in his works.

This thesis is an attempt to examine Conrad's ambiguities in the light of his work, or, of the work in its own light which is strong and which springs from a

number of sources. The first of these is his literary theory discussed in chapter one. This chapter questions Conrad's choice of the novel as a literary form, his differentiation between invention and imagination and his view of language. It also examines his attitude towards the different schools of fiction and the restrictions imposed on the artist. In addition, it deals with his opinion about aesthetic distance and the artist's relation to moral and religious issues.

The second source is his technique dealt with in chapter two. Most of Conrad's criticism concentrates on the contents and the ideas of his works. The aim here is to suggest the relation of the parts to the whole, of the form and the technical methods along with the themes to the final shape of the work. This chapter presents the things demanding calculation and severe effort for their fulfilment by the craftsman. It presents his innovations in technique and how he works out the idea of the "planned novel" in which each step in the novel points towards a predetermined effect in what he calls a novelistic "progression d'effet." In this respect, an examination of him as a modernist writer largely in control of his medium includes the discussion of his narrative technique, time-shift, flashback, use of irony, setting, characterization and delayed decoding. It is also shown how all these are

used to intensify the ambiguities presented in his works.

The last and third source presents itself in the shape of his different themes. Chapter three is a survey of the prominent Conradian themes in an attempt to prove that all of them tend, in the end, to stress the ambiguity of good and evil in the world of the novels. Moreover, the duality of Conrad's moral stance results from his double vision of life. One asserts the ultimate loneliness and tragedy of the individual in a world without values. This stems from his recognition of the futility of the human existence in a universe which pays no attention to the insignificant man; from the illusory nature of any human relationship; from the corruptible nature of all political ideas and theories and before all, from a lack of any belief in the existence of God. The other vision stresses human solidarity and unreflective stoicism. This chapter marks the end of the theoretical part of the thesis which lays the basis on which the analysis of the novels is built.

Then, comes the second practical part. It starts with Chapter four which deals with An Outcast of the Islands (1896). This novel stands as a representative of the first period in Conrad's literary career in which Conrad is not yet in perfect command of his craft. This Chapter proves that despite its

weaknesses, the novel includes most of the themes and the technical methods he is to develop later in his career. It also points out how far the ambiguity of good and evil is dominant even at such an early stage.

Chapter five analyses The Secret Agent (1907), one of Conrad's major works belonging to the fruitful middle period. It deals with the nature of the political and moral ambiguities prevailing over the world of the novel. In addition, it points out the technical qualities which make this novel stand out as a master piece.

Finally, Chapter six is concerned with the analysis of The Shadow-Line (1917) which belongs to the later fiction of Conrad. It finds out how this work acts as a mirror of the established but exhausted novelist, who, no longer able to experiment, has to draw upon all his practical skill to produce more novels. It also explores how this deterioration affects Conrad's moral outlook and his technique. Then follows the conclusion.

Part One : Theory

Chapter I : Literary Theory

Joseph Conrad has never attempted to set forth his critical principles in a long essay, like that written, for example, by Henry James. For him, "the question of art is so endless, involved and so obscure that one is tempted to turn one's face resolutely away from it."¹ Whenever he finds himself compelled to theorize about his work, he tries to evade the question by digressing to all sorts of other things. That is why his Author's Notes and Prefaces to his works are rather disappointing. Instead of being a guide to his artistic and aesthetic intentions, they merely deal with trivialities tracing all events and characters to their factual counterparts. Disclosing the depth of the creative process with the standards that determine it is so difficult for him because his feelings towards his own creation are so "deep, complex (and at times even contradictory)."² However, one can, by a close examination of his letters, essays on other writers and his only valuable preface to The Nigger of the 'Narcissus', deduce a set of critical principles upon which his literary theory is based. This, in its own turn, helps to judge his artistic successes as well as his

earlier and later generally less successful works.

It is significant that Conrad, in his shift from sailor to artist, chooses the novel as a medium for his work. This choice stems from his belief that "a writer of imaginative prose (even more than any other sort of artist)"³ is the one capable of appealing to the people and that the novel is "absolutely the only vehicle for the thought of our day."⁴ He does not choose to write poetry since he does not appreciate it and confesses that he is "in general insensible to verse."⁵ This is due to his conception of art as "a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe."⁶ On the other hand, poets - as Flaubert puts it - find it necessary "only to speak of themselves to remain eternal."⁷ Poetry which is an outpouring of the poet's internal self can never excel the novel which represents the image of life. Moreover, the novel has the additional virtue of representing life in motion. Whereas poetry is still life experienced only in space, the novel exceeds this boundary and is lived both in space and in time. Moreover, he does not show a great respect for drama. For him, each play seems to be "an amazing freak of folly." It is an art concerned with the "unbelievable,". He cannot stand the actors being "disguised and ugly" involved in their "transparent pretences."⁸

Furthermore, he believes that the novel is not only superior to the other literary forms, but also to non-literary writings. In this respect, the novelist is superior to the moralist. The latter "has no conscience except the one he is at pains to produce for the use of others" while the former's conscience lies in "his deeper sense of things, lawful and unlawful (which) gives him his attitude before the world."⁹ Conrad also goes further to draw the Aristotelian analogy between history and poetry (fiction). Whereas documentary history is based on second hand impressions which state before the reader mere facts without any clear or predetermined aim, fiction is "based on the reality of forms and the observation of social phenomena."¹⁰

In this respect, Conrad's opinion is in line with the distinction made between :

"Understanding," the faculty which reduces its object to a concept in order to classify it, and the "Imagination," the faculty which maintains its objects in a presentation in order to know it as it is - undistorted by logical reduction.¹¹

For him, fact is fidelity to reality, but truth "Suggests a world that gives semblance of reality and includes more."¹² This 'more' is what makes fiction "nearer to

truth."¹³ Conrad confesses that "facts don't matter" because he is "writing fiction not secret history."¹⁴ A real artist should aspire to bring to light "truth, manifold and one"¹⁵ by getting "through the veil of details at the essence of life."¹⁶ This truth is "more permanently enduring"¹⁷ because - unlike logical truth which is directed to "our common sense"¹⁸ - it appeals to that "part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom."¹⁹ Here, Conrad suggests that the truth the novelist seeks is a quality within the heart or the core of an experience that only the deep sensitivity and insight of an artist can get hold of. Moreover, the real skill of an artist is shown in his ability to render this truth to his readers with the same degree of clarity that he sees it with. He does this by appealing "to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain, to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation."²⁰

The novelist manages to reach this truth only by means of his imagination. The novel can never be just a set of ideas, not a man addressing another, each preserving his own liberty of thought and action. It should rather "take upon itself a form of imagined life clearer than reality whose accumulated versimilitude of

that:

my past had, by the very force of my work, become one of the sources of what I may call, for want of a better word, my inspiration - of the inner force which sets the pen in motion.²⁵

In this way, the writer uses the events of his life and his age, then transfer what has till now remained personal to another level illuminating some permanent problems of civilized life - its engagements, its conditions and its imposed sacrifices. Hence, he carries the work further aiming at what is enduring and universal. That is why Conrad rejects any classification of art. Art for him must appeal to all people of all ages. Replying to an "absurd" question by one of his friends asking if his forthcoming book had any message for the young, Conrad asserts that "in a work exclusively artistic in its aim to appeal to emotions, there should be something for everybody, young or old, who was at all susceptible to aesthetic impressions."²⁷

Moreover, the writer's imagination should not yield to any outer influence. Conrad believes that the artist, in his attempt to appeal to all people must not succumb to the taste of the public for fear of damaging his popularity and consequently his income. After all, no artist "can give the public what it wants because humanity

does not know what it wants."²⁸ Hence, an artist should only listen to the higher authority of art. Conrad remains faithful to this doctrine most of his life, the thing that accounts for his lack of popularity or high estimation. However, towards the end of his life, he becomes more ready to make some sort of concession to please the people. His success comes with Chance which is originally decked out to catch popularity. After the failure of his previous three major novels, he chooses an appealing title which is less forbidding than the pervious ones. He also tries to make the ending "nicer - I am thinking of the public,"²⁹ he says. He becomes even ready to deny his own creative power and originality in order to sell his works to the publishers. He writes to Alfred Knopf:

My point of view, which is purely human, my subjects, which are not too specialized as to the class of people or kind of events, my style, which may be clumsy here and there, but is perfectly straightforward and tending towards the colloquial, cannot possibly stand in the way of a large public. As to what I have to say - you know it is never outrageous to mind or feeling.³⁰

Nevertheless, it is fair enough to assert that Conrad

never really loses sight of his artistic aims and his concessions are rarely on the expense of the quality of his work.

Furthermore, Conrad never gives up his belief that an artist should use his imagination to deal with events not as an end in themselves but as "the outward sign of inward feeling" feelings alone "are truly pathetic and interesting." In order for the artist to be able to express them, he "must give {himself} up to emotions."³¹ This, of course, is not easy to attain because the writer will have to

Squeeze out of (himself) every sensation, every thought, every image - mercilessly, without reserve and without remorse (he) must search the darkest corners of (his) heart, the most remote recesses of (his) brain ... (in order to) create human souls : to disclose human hearts.³²

Nonetheless, for the sake of moderation which is one of the conditions of success, feelings themselves should not get hold of the writer. There is big difference between possessing a feeling and being possessed by one. Conrad makes it clear that one should understand feelings and search for their sources and objects since this is the way to truth which is the ultimate aim of art. However,