

Baltimore Evening Sun
April 26, 1910

Joseph Conrad

Who is the greatest living English novelist? Henry James? George Moore? Thomas Hardy? There are many candidates for the bays! Let the reader who would weigh their fine gold upon delicate scales busy himself at that seductive task. As for me, I cast my vote at once. A few weeks ago it would have gone to Samuel Langhorne Clemens, and I should submit "Huckleberry Finn" as its sufficient excuse and justification. Today it goes to Joseph Conrad Korzeniowski, and the evidence supporting it consists, not of one book, nor even of two or three, but of a round half-dozen.

Next to the fact that a great many assiduous students of the novel, particularly in the United States, have apparently never heard of him, the most remarkable thing about Mr. Korzeniowski is the fact that he writes English novels at all. For, as his name indicates, he is not an Englishman, but a Pole, and he was nearly 10 years old before he knew a word of the language he now writes with such extraordinary skill.

A Man Of The-Sea

Born in Russia, of Polish parents, in 1856, he ran away from home as a youth to help the Turks fight the hereditary enemies of his race. But the Turks in those parlous days were not seeking wild-eyed young Polish recruits, and so the boy found himself stranded in Constantinople. A French ship bound for the West Indies offered him a means of escape—and thereafter, for 17 years, he followed the sea.

He made a few voyages in French ships, but it did not take him long to discover that England was mistress of the seas and that the sailorman who sailed in British bottoms was the sailorman of destiny. So he settled down, with his scant savings, at Lowestoft, in England, and proceeded to master the English language. A voyage or two as an A.B. followed, and then he got courage enough to go up for his mate's certificate. The board of trade examiners passed him with enthusiasm; he was a very likely young man. A few years afterward he was a full fledged merchant captain, walking his own quarter deck. His Polish surname had been early slain by mispronunciation. His appellation was now Joseph Conrad.

The story of Mr. Conrad's wanderings as a British skipper is too long to tell. You will find reminiscences of it in every one of his books. It included voyages to all of the Seven Seas—years of service from island to island of the mysterious East; gigantic battles with the typhoons of the China coast; long loafs through Oceania; even a tour of service on the Congo as commander of one of King Leopold's crazy river tubs.

His First Novel

In 1894 the sunburned skipper decided suddenly that he would try half a year of ease ashore. He was tired of the sea, tired of that gaudy stretch of water between Singapore and the Borneo coast which had been his patrol for many monotonous months of the immediate past. So he took lodgings in the Vauxhall Bridge road, in London, and set out to see the wonder of the town.

But idleness quickly palled. What to do? A desire to write arose—a yearning to set down the strange things he had seen in his beating about the world. The result was “Almayer’s Folly,” his first novel—a truly astounding maiden effort.

“Almayer’s Folly” was published in 1895. Despite its striking merits, it was very far from a best seller, but a number of the most conspicuous critics in England were quick to see the promise in it, and so its author, who had gone off to Africa after writing it, was encouraged to come back and try his luck again. His second book was “An Outcast of the Islands,” a sequel to the first.

He was destined, after that, to write about the sea unceasingly, but to sail its billows no more. “The Nigger of the Narcissus,” a superb sea story, published in 1897, lifted him in a day to the front rank of contemporary novelists. And then came book after book—a volume of extraordinary “Tales of Unrest,” in 1898; “Lord Jim,” a subtle psychological study, in 1900; “Typhoon,” in 1902; “Nostromo,” in 1904; and “The Secret Agent,” in 1907. In addition to all these, Mr. Conrad has written two romances in collaboration with Ford Madox Hueffer; a one-act play (it is a stage version of one of his short stories and has been played in London); a delightful book of reminiscences called “The Mirror of the Sea,” and a novelette called “The Point of Honor.”

His Literary Aims

So much for the catalogue of his books. Now for their contents. What is in them that makes them great works of art? Let me answer by quoting Conrad’s own statement of his aims. “The task,” he once said, “Which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see.” Such are his purposes. It is the marvelous manner in which he accomplishes them, the unflinching success of his workmanship, the extraordinary vividness of his pictures, whether of a ship in a storm, a gleaming river under the tropical sun, or a strong man battling with merciless fate—it is this astonishing facility for conveying ideas and impressions by the written word which gives him his high rank as a literary artist.

“He who reads ‘Typhoon,’ says Hugh Clifford, “will be made to hear, to feel—before all, to see. He will find himself deafened by the roar of the storm, aching in sympathy with the weary men who cling to the canting deck, and realizing the individuality of each of them so vividly that he would recognize any one of them were he to meet him in the street.”

“Typhoon” indeed, is fairly typical of Conrad’s method. The story itself is of the simplest build. The steamship Nan-Shan, with a heavy cargo in her hold and 200 Chinese coolies in her steerage, sails from Hongkong for Fu-Chan in command of Captain Mac Whirr, a plodding, unimaginative British skipper. On the second day out, a Pacific typhoon strikes her, and thereafter, for three days she wallows upon the brink of destruction. The coolies, terror-stricken, run amuck. The ship is stripped as bare as a

shingle. But by and by the storm dies out and the crippled Nan-Shan limps into port. That is all.

Queer Conrad Heroes

But what a riot of action and color of sound and fury is that electric tale. Let no one misunderstand me here: Conrad is no mere slinger of adjectives, no “word painter.” There are no passages of purple writing, no piling up of horrors. The thing is done with wonderful simplicity. We see those stupendous billows and stare into that appalling blackness not through a glit picture frame, but through the eyes of Mac Whirr, master mariner, and Jukes, his first mate. It is in the souls of these men that the drama is really played, and particularly in the elemental soul of Mac Whirr.

Mac Whirr is the typical Conrad hero—a hero who is, beyond everything else, unheroic. A dull-witted, commonplace, round-headed, red-faced, half-bovine man, he may well stand as the archetype of the British merchant shipper. The notion that there is any thing romantic about his work—that he is in any sense a man of achievement—never enters his mind. Few ideas in truth of any sort ever penetrate that black hole.

Mac Whirr is a sailor, not a philosopher. Pressed to venture upon a statement of the meaning of life, he would probably take refuge in the theory that it was meaningless. And there, strangely enough, he would come upon all fours with his creator, for it is the eternal meaninglessness of life—the utter fatuity of all human hopes and planning, the grotesque and mirthless humor of fate that seems to be the thesis of all Conrad’s work. Whether his hero be Casper Almayer, rotting in his jungle, or Lord Jim, the broken mate, paying the ceaseless and staggering penalties of his one moment of weakness; or Christian Falk, the inscrutable Norseman, fighting for his life upon his drifting hulk; or Lieutenants Ferand and D’Aubert of the Grand Armee, backing each other in their incredible and interminable duels—no matter what the hero’s rank or enemy—there is always the hint of purposeless striving, of eternal futility.

His Philosophy Of Life

Conrad, in brief, knows how to tell a story with magic art, but it is always a great deal more than a mere story. If you want to see quickly and surely the differences which mark him off from the commonplace fictioneer, read his “Nostromo,” just after you have re-read Richard Harding Davis’ “Soldiers of Fortune.” Both books pretend to deal with South American revolutions and the actual characters and incidents of the two are not unlike. But what a difference between the books themselves. The one is a silly romance for school girls and sentimentalists. The other is a moving picture of a civilization—a picture full of touches of uncanny reality—a picture with the most exquisite art in every stroke of it and a credible philosophy of life guiding the artist’s hand.