1957

The Crew of the Narcissus: A Study of Joseph Conrad

Charles Edwin Herman
Loyola University Chicago

Recommended Citation
https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_theses/1396

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.
Creative Commons License
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
Copyright © 1957 Charles Edwin Herman
THE CREW OF THE NARCISSUS:
A STUDY OF JOSEPH CONRAD

by

Charles E. Herman, S.J.

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

October
1957
LIFE

Charles Edwin Herman, S. J. was born in Detroit, Michigan, April 24, 1931.

He graduated from De La Salle Collegiate in June, 1949, and attended Holy Cross College for two years before entering the Society of Jesus in September, 1951.

He received the degree of Bachelor of Literature from Xavier University in June, 1955 and enrolled in the Graduate School of Loyola University in September of the same year.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. THE NIGGER OF THE NARCISSUS: REPRESENTATIVE OF CONRAD</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The background which Conrad brought to his writings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--His experience--His temperament--A general view of his writings--</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--What they are not--What they are--The Nigger of the Narcissus, its</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>position among his writings--Its ambiguous position in criticism--The</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigger of the Narcissus as representative of his work.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. THE STORY AND HOW CONRAD TELLS IT</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The plot: first level of meaning--The plot as a life allegory--The</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>second level of meaning--This story and the technique of narration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>according to Conrad's theory as represented in the Preface to The</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigger of the Narcissus--The writer's part in the theory--The reader's</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>part in the theory--Moralizing by symbolism in The Nigger of the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narcissus--Qualities always found--The central position of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>characterization.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. CHARACTERIZATION</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The individual characters--Conrad's ability with and insights into</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>character shown--Reality of characters--Handling of characters--</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women characters--The three key characters in The Nigger of the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narcissus--The meaning and significance behind the characters--The</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>crew as the main character.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. BEHIND THE SCENES</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General considerations--A balanced view--The emphasis on</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>characterization--The conflict--The moral sphere--The solidarity of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mankind--Realist--Romanticist--Pessimist--Optimist--Fatalist--Catholic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--Above all, an artist true to his theory.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

THE NIGGER OF THE NARCISSUS: REPRESENTATIVE OF CONRAD

Gerard Jean-Aubry begins his definitive biography of Joseph Conrad with the safe understatement that he was "a man whose career surpasses the limits of the ordinary."¹ M. C. Bradbrook is more emphatic when she writes: "In the history of English literature there has never been anything like the history of Joseph Conrad; nor, so far as I am aware, has there been anything like him in any other European literature. He was a Pole of the landowning class, who became a Marseilles gunrunner at twenty, an English master mariner at twenty-nine, and one of the great English novelists at thirty-eight."²

Behind these amazing facts is the story of a Polish boy who was born into a troubled atmosphere, who had a serious and even melancholy youth, who conceived the desire to go to sea and followed it, though no one could quite understand why he would want to do such a thing. He coupled his desire for adventure with ability and hard work, and rose to the top in the British merchant


marine service despite the obstacles he met. Then, though he did not foresee or plan on it, he evolved into a writer. Again his character, idealism, ability, and hard work enabled him to rise gradually to the top. More gradually still came the recognition that he deserves as a writer of distinctive prose, a writer who bridges the space from romanticism to realism and excels in both, and a historian "of fine consciences" like his friend Henry James.

Edward Wagenknecht said that there is no doubt that Conrad was the greatest novelist of his time. F. R. Leavis is more insistent when he writes:

But he was not only by far the greatest of the Edwardians; there is more to be said than that. Scott, Thackeray, Meredith and Hardy are commonly accounted great English novelists: if the criterion is the achievement in work addressed to the adult mind, and capability as such of engaging again and again its full critical attention, then Conrad is certainly a greater novelist than the four enumerated. This, which may seem a more striking claim to some critics than to others, is merely a way of insisting on the force of the judgment that Conrad is among the very greatest novelists in the language—or in any language.

Because Conrad's reputation now stands secure, it is no longer necessary to compose tributes to his achievement. But much is still to be done toward a deeper comprehension of the nature of

---


that achievement. The facts about Conrad himself and his character have been investigated most thoroughly by Jean-Aubry in his biographical studies, and presented in an accurate and interesting manner, but with almost no interpretation at all. John D. Gordon's excellent work, Joseph Conrad: The Making of a Novelist, tries to go further. It gives an understanding of how Conrad, "one of the most conscious and conscientious artists who ever lived," composed his early novels, and shows how his past experience, his temperament and other factors influenced his work. This more particular and detailed study of certain phases and works is the direction that Conrad scholarship is ready to take now at the centenary of his birth. Studies such as that made by Gordon and by Wiley show how worthwhile this will be. They help toward an understanding of Conrad, who was misunderstood for a long time.

Readers and critics have still to reckon with the fact that Conrad died apparently certain that no one had really come to grips with his intentions. In 1917 he wrote to Sir Sidney Colvin as follows: "[P]erhaps you won't find it presumption if, after 22 years of work, I may say that I have not been very well understood." The misunderstanding of Conrad may have been largely due to his famous *credo* in the Preface to *The Nigger of the Nar-

---


Many have not grasped the fact that Conrad's great richness of imagery subserves his purpose of presenting "all the truth of life" if the artist can approach to this ideal. How this is effected will be seen later. But here it may safely be said that Conrad can be read on two levels more easily than almost any other author.

Before going on to any general or particular consideration of Conrad's work, it will be helpful here to consider at least that biographical material which will later be seen to have a strong influence on his writings. Conrad's background did influence what he wrote in an exceptionally strong way. Just how strongly can be glimpsed in the following words from one of his Prefaces --always sincere and open: "The sustained invention of a really telling lie demands a talent which I do not possess." Because of this lack of "talent" he wrote by recalling his background as the direct basis for his fiction. This is why Conrad's work is so unquestionably original. What he writes and the way he goes about it come directly out of his own experience and life. General elements of his temperament and his outlook can be understood

---

8 Joseph Conrad, The Nigger of the Narcissus (Garden City, New York, 1925), p. xiv. This volume will henceforth be known as Nigger. All works of Conrad will be referred to by title alone. Page references are always to the Kent Edition.

9 Ibid., p. xvi.

10 Tales of Unrest, p. ix.
only after some consideration of the background which fostered
the elements of melancholy, thoughtfulness, and sincerity, of im-
petuosity, adventuresomeness, tenacity, and fidelity to ideals.

Conrad was born on November 21, 1857, in the Ukraine and
named Teodor Józef Konrad Korzeniowski. Shortly after his birth
his father, a Polish nobleman and nationalist who engaged in revol-
tutionary activities in an attempt to regain Polish independence,
was banished with his wife and their son Teodor Józef to Vologda.
These were years of turmoil and unrest for the young boy who had
no children with whom to play (except during one three-month visit
with his cousins) until he was nine years old. His father's
spirit and courage, his mother's brave loyalty despite failing
health, the uncertain conditions of the times, and the unsettled
fortunes of the family fostered the beginnings of Conrad's ideal-
ism and courage. Zabel says: "[Conrad] was initially, by his
emotional disposition--and perhaps inevitably, by the dramatic
circumstances of his Polish youth and revolutionary heritage--an
idealistic whose passions were early set at a pitch of heroic resol-
ution."11

Conrad also felt the influence of literature early, and this
was a force in his formation. His father and his uncle, Tadeusz
Bobrowski, who later was Conrad's guardian, were both literary
men. Familiarity with literature was a natural part of the family

11Morton Dauwen Zabel, Craft and Character in Modern Fiction
background. Thus it was natural for Conrad to turn to reading during the lonely and troublesome days after his mother's death. Jean-Aubry depicts the situation well:

Deprived of his mother's love, in the company of a sick father who was generally sunk in speechless grief and whose only distraction lay in reading and the pursuit of letters, an exile among foreigners, Conrad was growing up without playmates in this atmosphere of heartache and sadness that had been his almost without interruption since the first days of his life but which had now become even more oppressive. Repressing his hereditary enthusiasm, in daily touch with the most profound forces: death, faith, patriotism, liberty; brought up in an unswerving secret loyalty to practically unattainable ideals, the child had one single doorway to the world, one single escape for the lively imagination—reading.

Much of this reading was about the sea, and its influence is evident in Conrad's early desire to go to sea. His first introduction to the sea was when he read Victor Hugo's Toilers of the Sea, which his father had just translated. He read Cooper's sea books, Captain Marryat, David Livingston's accounts, many other stories of adventure and travel, and much that was too heavy and oppressive, or dangerous for a boy, as he later admitted. Later he would read very much of Maupassant and Flaubert in French, and his admiration for their rhythmic and sonorous French would influence his own style when he began to write.

At the age of eleven the boy was an orphan. Then under
Stefan Buszczynski, his temporary guardian, and a Mr. Georgeon, a Frenchman who was his teacher, he began studies in Cracow in a staid, calm, and reasonable atmosphere which he had not known before. At the end of the school year his uncle Tadeusz sent Conrad on a tour of Western Europe with the student who was his tutor for four years. He was also to try to dissuade Conrad from going to sea, a career which none of the family could understand very well since it did not fit at all with the family traditions.

The account of the climax of this effort is interesting:

When he started to argue at the top of the Furca Pass he was perhaps nearer a success than either he or I imagined. I listened to him in despairing silence, feeling that ghostly, unrealized and desired sea of my dreams escape from the unnerved grip of my will. . . . Then our eyes met and a genuine emotion was visible in his as well as in mine. The end came all at once. He picked up the knapsack suddenly and got to his feet.

"You are an incorrigible, hopeless Don Quixote. That's what you are."

I was surprised. I was only fifteen and did not know what he meant exactly. But I felt vaguely flattered at the name of the immortal knight turning up in connection with my own folly.

I walked behind him for full five minutes; then without looking back he stopped. . . . When I came up to him he turned to me. . . . put his hand on my shoulder affectionately.

"Well! That's enough. We will have no more of it."

And indeed there was no more question of my mysterious vocation between us. There was to be no more question of it at all, nowhere or with any one.

Thus Conrad would not even settle for the naval academy at Pola and the Austrian navy, which his uncle, the only one who

14 A Personal Record, p. 44.
really tried to understand his ambition, tried to counsel. It was not a naval career that he wanted but the sea.\textsuperscript{15} Perhaps, also, Conrad realized that the son of two families who had tried to stir up insurrection for Polish independence, the boy who still had an uncle in a Siberian prison, the boy who had been given the freedom of the city and exempted from taxes in honor of his father, would always be under the surveillance of the Russians. Leaving such restriction, oppression, and unrest, on October 14, 1874, he departed from Poland and traveled toward Marseilles and the sea which offered freedom to his adventurous spirit. He was two months short of his seventeenth birthday.

In and around Marseilles he learned about the sea from the pilots along the coast. In 1875 he made his first deep water voyage to the West Indies. Then, after his return, he led a care-free, gay life for several months and took his first adventurous chances as a gunrunner for the Carlist forces of Spain in their bark the Tremolino. These were his years as an amateur seaman.

His mature and professional life as a seaman began in 1878 when he shipped on board the British ship the Mavis and soon arrived in Lowestoft, England, now determined to be a British seaman.

When Conrad arrived in Lowestoft on June 18, 1878, he stepped for the first time on English soil, knowing only as much English as he had picked up on the voyage, prac-

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 121.
tically without money, without acquaintances in England, and, as his biographer tells us "alone in the world." This is the first of two decisive dates in Conrad's life. Poverty and the rigorous routine of a merchant vessel descended on him and fixed his life for the next seventeen years.

He shipped on a North Sea coaster, then before the mast to Australia. The long climb against obstacles had begun. He passed the examinations for third mate, mate, and in 1886, for master mariner. He sailed to the East again, to Australia, to Malaya, in the Gulf of Siam and the Indian Ocean. He commanded the Otago in 1888 and 1889. Then he returned to England, and in 1890 went to the Congo to command a river steamer for the adventure of it. But, idealist that he was, he was sadly disillusioned by the greed of the men who were there exploiting the country. He also contracted a tropical fever that would recur to torture him periodically for the rest of his life. In 1891 he shipped to Australia as first mate aboard the famous clipper Torrens. The next year, 1894, his sailing career came to an end, though he did not know it at the time. Thus the Polish gentleman ended his career as a British sailor in one French port after beginning it in another sixteen years earlier.

A short but excellent tribute to his character during these years is found in these words: "A personal scrutiny of all the 'sea papers' relating to Joseph Conrad has convinced me that never

---

16Zabel, pp. 154-55.
throughout his maritime career, either as an ordinary seaman or as
an officer, did he fail in his duty."\textsuperscript{17} Certainly, in the light
of this fact, the stress which he put on the virtues of loyalty
and of fidelity to duty and one's ideals is better appreciated
and understood.

His literary career had already begun as early as 1886 when
he made his first attempt at English composition. But it was in
1889 that his life as a writer really began—and in a sudden and
unusual manner. After breakfast he suddenly asked the waitress to
clear the table for him while he went on smoking and looking out
the window. "Then, at the urging of a sudden incomprehensible im-
pulse, he put down his pipe, took a pen and 'thinking of nothing
whatever,' began to write the story of Almayer's illusions. Never
did a writer's life begin so late or so casually."\textsuperscript{18} On that
morning Captain Korzeniowski began to make way for the novelist
Joseph Conrad. But the book was not so easily finished as it was
begun. Its composition took five years. Then during the diffi-
cult and depressing years of sickness and uncertainty in London,
while he was still looking for a suitable berth aboard ship, An
Outcast of the Islands was produced. A literary career was still
the last thing he had in mind. During this time he thought of
sending his first two manuscripts to his aunt in France for trans-

\textsuperscript{17}Jean-Aubry, \textit{The Sea Dreamer}, p. 239.

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., p. 151.
loration and publication serially in French periodicals. Even after his first works were accepted by an English publisher he told the publisher that he was not likely to be writing more since he was planning on returning to sea.

Yet the evolution was taking place. Several of his shorter works had been published by now. In March of 1896 he had been married to Jessie George and now writing was more of a necessity as a means of livelihood. This was when he began to compose The Nigger of the Narcissus. In it he reached the status of a professional writer. In it he established his independence and his theory as an artist, as the famous Preface to this novel clearly shows. "It led him to write further tales of ships and seamen--- Lord Jim, "Youth," "Typhoon," "The End of the Tether," "The Brute," "The Secret Sharer," The Shadow Line,---as well as tales or novels in which the ocean plays a more incidental part---"Amy Foster," "Freya of the Seven Isles," "The Partner," "The Planter" of Malata," Chance, Victory, The Rescue, The Rover. It was also The Nigger of the Narcissus which inspired, in The Mirror of the Sea, his most sustained work in non-fiction and autobiography."21

Only that biographical material has been presented which it seems is necessary to any accurate understanding of Conrad's work.

20 An Outcast of the Islands, p. vii.
21 Zabel, p. 169.
One more point might be highlighted—the fact that he wrote in English. His uncle had been encouraging him to write in Polish for some time but to no avail. French was always an easier language for him, but he did not write in it. English was the fortunate language. Conrad was often asked about this, of course, and in one of his Prefaces he writes: "The truth of the matter is that my faculty to write in English is as natural as any other aptitude with which I might have been born. I have a strange and overpowering feeling that it has always been an inherent part of myself." 22 So at the age of forty Conrad was beginning his literary career in which he would draw heavily on his own past in all he wrote. The rest of the story is one of gradual growth amid persistent effort. Conrad lived in southern England for the remainder of his life, mostly in Kent. He traveled to Europe several times and in the later years of his life to America. Among his friends were such literary men as Cunningham Greene, Edward Garnett, H. G. Wells, Stephen Crane, John Galsworthy, Arnold Bennett, Ford Madox Ford, Richard Curle, and Henry James.

It is not be be argued that Conrad's life explains his work fully. Yet much of his fiction follows his own life struggles and he did admit, as a little investigation makes very clear, that all his characters were at one time or the other known by him. "The nature of the knowledge, suggestions or hints used in my imagina-

22A Personal Record, p. vii.
tive work has depended directly on the condition of my active life."23 While past experience can quite easily and evidently be traced in Conrad's work, traits of character are mirrored in the writings too. Gustav Morf, treating one phase of this question, has emphasized the influence of the slavic strain in Conrad's temperament in connection with the moody psychology of such characters as Lord Jim, Willems, and others, and the sombre tone encountered occasionally. It might seem more accurate to attribute such traits of character and outlook to the influence of circumstance in Conrad's childhood, to the introspection and thoughtfulness engendered by the boredom of long sea watches, and to the lingering sickness, loneliness, and growing melancholy which he experienced after returning from the Congo in 1891.

During Conrad's later sea years and the difficult years of 1890 to 1896 the darker emotions of his personality became still more prominent. This is the strain which is more familiar in his books than the brighter emotions of youth which he sometimes celebrates.25 R. L. Mégroz has summed up this whole author-work relationship extremely well:

What was deepest in Conrad he owed to his racial memories. The ideals of loyalty, endurance, courage, and

23 Bradbrook, p. 21; Within the Tides, p. vii.
25 Zabel, p. 155.
the craftsman's conscience which imbue his work and which it is our perpetual joy to recognize, belong to a people long oppressed. . . . This is the element which is usually described as romantic in his work, and it remains the background of the vivid realism which he could impart to human character or to natural and inanimate objects when he needed to objectify the dream. 26

Conrad has admitted and partially explained his "romantic feeling of reality." He has shown that the seaman's profession, which he seems so surprisingly to have mastered, supplied him with the necessary material for producing the realism of his romances; and by realism is meant life-likeness in the widest and deepest sense. His loyalty to the sea is a loyalty to his own past; but it is also a kind of artistic exploitation. He does not blink facts; he accepts them as raw material for romance. 27

The feeling of adventure and optimism found in such work as The Arrow of Gold and "Youth" is certainly reminiscent and reflective of his days in France. No one would deny the immediate connection in material and in tone between Conrad's Congo experience and "Heart of Darkness." A glance at a map of the Indian Ocean area will show where Conrad did much of his sailing and where he met many of the people who later appear in his fiction. These include Almayer about whom Conrad wrote his first novel and about whom he said in A Personal Record, "If I had not got to know Almayer pretty well it is almost certain there would never have been a line of mine in print." 28 From his experiences in this


area Conrad gleaned the material for An Outcast of the Islands, The Rescue, Lord Jim (especially the last part), "Karain," "The Lagoon," "Falk," The Shadow Line, "The Secret Sharer," "The End of the Tether," "Youth," Victory, and parts of The Mirror of the Sea. His trip to the West Indies furnished the general acquaintance which made possible Nostromo. One voyage from Bombay to London was the basis for The Nigger of the Narcissus, which will be discussed in detail later.

The first impression of Conrad and his writings is that he is a writer of the sea. If this means a writer only of the sea, or primarily of the sea, it is the first impression to be corrected. Conrad one time said that he became very tired of people who imagined him to sit and brood over sea stuff. In a letter to Edward Garnett in July, 1923 he wrote: "You know yourself very well that in the body of my work barely one-tenth is what may be called sea stuff, and even of that the bulk, that is Nigger and Mirror, has a very special purpose which I emphasize in my Preface. That doesn't make them sea stories."29 This statement is all the more important because it came not early in his career, but just over a year before his death. In answer to this misunderstanding Conrad explained: "I have been called a writer of the sea, of the tropics, a descriptive writer, a romantic writer--and also a

---

realist. But as a matter of fact all my concern has been with the 'ideal' value of things, events, and people. That and nothing else. The humorous, the pathetic, the passionate, the sentimental aspects came in of themselves. It is certainly true that in some of Conrad's books there is wonderful description of sea life, sea dangers, sea scenery, and the mysterious fascination of sailing ships. Undoubtedly he makes his pictures of the sea live. But (to agree with Drew) "the more one reads of him, the less one thinks of him as a writer about the sea, and the more one thinks of him as a great human artist. . . . [I]n all his greatest and most profound moments of drama, it is the human truth which altogether outweighs our sense of background."

The second striking impression is that made by the rich style of Conrad. In this connection it must be remembered with what care Conrad always wrote. He had learned English since becoming a mature man and, though he sometimes spoke to the effect that he had no great trouble with it, the fact is that he was sometimes liable to mistakes in idiom. Furthermore, the exotic material and extreme characters about which he frequently wrote were not always easy to handle. Then too, this style serves a purpose. The heightened prose of Conrad is an eloquence "to the total effect of which everything is subdued: choice of words, rhythms, balance of

---

30 Jean-Aubry, Life and Letters, II, 185.
This eloquence in turn heightens character and universalizes situations.

After such general considerations about Conrad's writings it will be good to select one work which can be shown to be representative, and by a close analysis of it come to a better understanding of what he wrote and how he went about it. The book selected here is The Nigger of the Narcissus. This is not to say that it would be impossible to select some other book of Conrad and use it in a similar manner. On the other hand, it does not mean either that from the analysis of one work, applications and comparisons with other works can then be made indiscriminately as though all are of one mold. Conrad's close friend John Galsworthy warns against this. "It does disservice to Conrad to be indiscriminate in praise of his work. . . . To lump all his work together, as if he were always the same Conrad, imperils a just estimate of his greatness." Relationships always include similarity and some variation.

Bradbrook would claim that "one of the difficulties of apprehending Conrad's work is that it changed so much." She

---

32 Walter Allen, p. 295.


34 Bradbrook, p. 11.
bases this on his statement in "A Familiar Preface" to A Personal Record, that such books as Almayer's Folly and The Secret Agent are fundamentally dissimilar. But this dissimilarity is in type of story and setting, more than in artistry, method or technique. In the next sentence Conrad says that the personality behind the books is coherent. 35 And in the author's note to Nostromo he wrote, "... perhaps there never was any change except in that mysterious, extraneous thing, which has nothing to do with the theories of art: A subtle change in the nature of the inspiration a phenomenon for which I cannot in any way be held responsible."36

When Conrad wrote The Nigger of the Narcissus he was a man of mature years. The background for this book and for the other books was almost the same. The past about which he wrote had all been lived, the memories all stored away. The temperament of the author was formed. Just twenty years after he came to England, and two years after he had published his first book, the name of Joseph Conrad was on the lips of everyone who was on the lookout for what was new and beautiful in English Literature. His name was in such currency because of The Nigger of the Narcissus which appeared that year in The New Review. 37 Weygrandt calls it "as

35A Personal Record, p. xxiii.
36 Nostromo, p. vii.
perfectly accomplished a piece of writing as Conrad was to do.\textsuperscript{38}

In the Preface to that work Conrad set forth his artistic aim clearly and tersely, thus rendering the critic the greatest service which the artist can render to one who tries to understand him. He began to write with a definite theory in mind and any subsequent change in his books is a superficial change. The artistic purpose remains the same. Despite any variations in details of presentation, the fundamentals recur. Even though his language changes slightly—it is rich in the earlier novels and toned down a bit in the later ones—the tone and impression, the beauty and the general manner are the same.

In this novel with the formulation of its famous Preface and the discovery of his method, Conrad achieved that vision of life which would remain, scarcely modified, through his later writings.\textsuperscript{39} The theme of conflict and the close coupling of victory and defeat will always be present. Thus it is that this work of Conrad will always be essential to an understanding of him. Technical mastery was no doubt expressed in the intricate presentation of Chance and Victory. But this book was the one in which Conrad became a professional writer.

The surprising fact about The Nigger of the Narcissus is its ambiguous position in literary criticism. Some of those who have

\textsuperscript{38}Ibid., p. 370.

\textsuperscript{39}Paul L. Wiley, Conrad's Measure of Man (Madison, Wisconsin, 1954), p. 82.
praised it are Galsworthy, Ford, Crane, Henry James, Arnold Bennett, Routh, Edgar, Bradbrook, Wiley, Zabel, and James Miller. Méroz writes, "[Galsworthy] confesses that he thought The Nigger of the Narcissus one of the finest, if not the best, of Conrad's stories." Ford referred to it as "[t]he matchless Nigger of the Narcissus" and stated further that "The Nigger, the only mass romance of the sea, must always be regarded as the work of a master." The book earned a close friendship for Conrad with Stephen Crane who was so pleased with it, that on arriving in England he asked to meet the author. "When Henry James said of the book in 1902 that it 'is in my opinion the very finest and strongest picture of the sea and sea-life that our language possesses--the masterpiece of a whole great class,' he ... paid the work a tribute which many readers have since seconded." Bennett called it superb and thought of imitating its manner. Modern critics have also estimated it highly. Bradbrook writes: "The 'Nigger, his first and simplest success, was in some ways his greatest." Zabel reprints the whole of it in The Portable Conrad and states,

40 Méroz, A Talk with Conrad, p. 67.
41 Ford Madox Ford, Portraits of Life (Boston, 1937), p. 61.
42 Ibid., p. 68.
43 Zabel, 169.
44 Ibid., p. 230, citing Arnold Bennett's Diary for December 6, 1897.
45 Bradbrook, p. 20.
"The book remains, if not Conrad's greatest or most ambitious, one of his most perfectly realized and poetically conceived works." 46 "In The Nigger of the Narcissus Conrad's triumph is beyond question." 47 Routh lists it among his four masterpieces. 48 Wiley gives it a special place "not only for its style but also for its steady vision, its heroic tone, and a general certainty both in belief and execution which carries the narrative forward with something like the determined progress of the Narcissus on her path homeward to the port of London." 49 Miller says it is "a novel worthy of consideration as a classic, perhaps minor, but in no sense negligible." 50

These are the opinions of critics and professional literary men with regard to the excellence of the book. What is the popular opinion? In general The Nigger is popular with the "common reader" because of its tone of adventure, its sea description and no more. But he does not understand the literary excellence and real depth of the book. It seems that just such a lack of understanding is most frequently the reason why some critics have neg-

49 Wiley, p. 45.
lected it. Not understanding it they pass it over lightly. Where praise is lacking, the problem is not one of adverse comment but of neglect.

Surprisingly, Guerard gives no special emphasis to The Nigger of the Narcissus though he does speak of the Preface to it, comment on Conrad's outlook in the book, and single out some traits of the work as noteworthy. F. R. Leavis has a fifty-page section on Joseph Conrad in The Great Tradition and does not mention The Nigger of the Narcissus a single time. The omission is amusing but in view of the fact that in the same book he narrows down the great English novelists to four—Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad—his omission of a book is not too surprising. The way in which The Nigger of the Narcissus fits into Conrad's scheme and theory of writing is seen from how well it fulfills the ideal for which he strove. "What he perennially strove for and more than once perfected was a novel in which the entire action was symbol and in which contingent plot was mini-
mized, a form better suited to his feeling for organic unity than the order of checks and balances which he tried in An Outcast."

51 Albert Guerard, Joseph Conrad (New York, 1947), p. 18. Since the writing of this thesis an excellent article by Guerard has come to the author's attention. It is "The Nigger of the Nar-
cissus" in The Kenyon Review, XIX (Spring 1957), 205-32. This is the most comprehensive treatment of the book that has been noted anywhere. It was very satisfying to find that so many ideas put forward in this thesis were expressed there by such an authority.

52 Leavis, p. 1.

Conrad himself considered The Nigger as his best book for descriptive touches of sea and sky.\textsuperscript{54} Though he considered himself to have overcome greater technical obstacles in the composition of some other works—Nostromo and The Secret Agent—he said that this book was the one by which as an artist striving "for the utmost sincerity of expression," he was ready, "to stand or fall."\textsuperscript{55} It is not merely art, but dedicated art, a tribute to what Conrad calls "my unalterable and profound affection for the ship, the seamen, the winds and the great sea—the moulders of my youth, the companions of the best years of my life."\textsuperscript{56} Of The Nigger of the Narcissus he said, "I must enshrine my old chums in a decent edifice."\textsuperscript{57}

He did so, excellently well, according to his theory of art. In this book he found his method. In it he took up his life-long themes. In this book can be seen the surface beauty of his style coupled with the depth of his insight. In it can be seen his treatment of individual conflict, famous in Lord Jim; and the conflict in society, as in his later novels Nostromo, Under Western Eyes, and Victory. The Nigger of the Narcissus may or

\textsuperscript{54}Mégroz, A Talk with Conrad, pp. 53-54.
\textsuperscript{55}Nigger, p. ix.
\textsuperscript{56}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57}Jean-Aubry, Life and Letters, I, 165, citing a letter to Edward Garnett, October 16, 1896.
may not be Conrad's greatest success, but he can be proud of it as representative of his work.
CHAPTER II
THE STORY AND HOW CONRAD TELLS IT

Having singled out The Nigger of the Narcissus as representative of Conrad's work, it is logical to turn to a consideration of the work itself as an exemplification of Conrad's theory of artistic writing, which he presents most completely, yet concisely in the Preface to that novel. The work can be understood correctly only after some understanding of the theory is had. On the other hand, the theory can be appreciated only when it is seen actualised in the work. This means that a two-fold treatment must be undertaken--of the work and the theory behind it. What was Conrad attempting in this story? What does the story say? What is it about? Is there something more than just a sea-story here? How is the theory presented in the Preface to be understood in connection with this story and as fundamental to Conrad's manner of writing? What are the characteristic qualities of the writing as a result of this theory? These are questions which must be answered in this chapter before any more detailed analysis and understanding of the book can be attempted.

There has been misunderstanding about this novel as was seen in the first chapter. Much of the difficulty is caused by failure to grasp the subject of the book correctly in connection with the
purpose which Conrad had in presenting it. M. C. Bradbrook is very close to such a correct grasp of subject, purpose, and method when she writes: "The main body of the work is a rendering of the voyage home, the full life of the ship, simply in terms of the things seen. The power of the writing lies in its implications."\(^1\)

Three points are to be noted in this excellent and concise description. The story is a "rendering of . . . life," "in terms of the things seen," gaining its power from the "implications" of the writing. The first point describes the content of the book. The second gives the main characteristic of Conrad's method. The third summarizes in a word the particular technique used in this book to present fundamental truths beneath the surface narrative.

The descriptive phrase "rendering of life" would probably be very agreeable to Conrad. Of his two books exclusively about the sea--The Niggar of the Narcissus and The Mirror of the Sea--he said: "I have tried with an almost filial regard to render the vibration of life in the great world of waters, in the hearts of the simple men who have for ages traversed its solitudes, and also that something sentient which seems to dwell in ships--the creatures of their hands and the objects of their care."\(^2\) He had drawn heavily on the experiences of his past for the material of


\(^2\)A *Personal Record*, p. xvii.
this story, just as he did in all his writing. The knowledge of
the sea and the understanding of life at sea, of sailors, and the
atmosphere aboard ship which Conrad exhibits in *The Nigger of the*
Narcissus could only have been learned at sea. In fact, it was
one particular voyage which Conrad had made from Bombay to Dunkirk
in a ship by the very name of the Narcissus from April 28 to Octo-
ber 17 in the year 1884 which furnished him with the inspiration
and most of the background for the story. There was the beauty of
the Narcissus, her close-knit crew, the great gale in the vicinity
of the Needles, and the death of a Negro member of her crew. 3 But,
though most of the material is reminiscent of that voyage, the
opening and closing scenes are taken from the memories of other
cruises. The opening scene is taken from an occurrence aboard the
Duke of Sutherland. The last part of the voyage as it is contained
in the book is derived from similar returns to port on ships other
than the Narcissus. For she docked first in Dunkirk rather than
in England, on the trip he made aboard her.

Properly speaking there is little or no plot in the narration.
But plot was unnecessary for Conrad's purpose which was "[t]o
snatch . . . from the remorseless rush of time, a passing phase of
life, . . . to hold up unquestioningly . . . the rescued fragment
before all eyes in the light of a sincere mood. It is to show its
vibration, its colour, reveal the substance of its truth--disclose

its inspiring secret: the stress and passion within the core of each convincing moment."\(^4\) This is the faithful rendering of life. The subject is more than "the Narcissus and everything about that boat during a six months' voyage;" more than "the account of the illness of a Negro sailor, James Wait, and its effect upon the imaginations and emotions of his shipmates."\(^5\) In view of Conrad's statements one must conclude that Warner has failed to comprehend the real significance of the story when he says: "ships and foul weather are in fact the true subject of The Nigger--they, the goss- sip, the grievances and the hardships of the forecastle."\(^6\)

This book is actually a drama, universally applicable to the challenges met by all men either in life's conflicts with other men or within themselves. It is enacted on the decks of the Narcissus, a stage emphasizing this universality as it moves from the Eastern hemisphere to the Western, with men of many nations and nationalities bound up in the action. The crew musters on board in the opening scene, and the men live through the next few months, weather the storm, react to Wait's influence, to his death, and go ashore in England as the reader watches. Everything hap-

\(^4\)Nigger, p. xiv.


pens realistically as the emphasis and the loyalties of the men shift from one side of the conflict to the other. The whole story can be read (and often has been) on the first level of meaning as simply a lively and very interesting sea story about the mesmeric influence exercised on the crew of the Narcissus by James Wait. Such a reading is not really wrong. It is merely incomplete.

Aboard the Narcissus Conrad has set his scene so that a careful reader must be immediately impressed with the possibility of a theme of exceptional scope. The Narcissus is a "minute world" in herself. The setting is dramatic and the imagery of the background is carefully fashioned to make this drama significant.

"The passage had begun, and the ship, a fragment detached from the earth, went on lonely and swift like a small planet. Round her the abysses of sky and sea met in an unattainable frontier. A great circular solitude moved with her. . . . She had her own future; she was alive with the lives of those beings who trod her decks; like that earth which had given her up to the sea, she had an intolerable load of regrets and hopes. On her lived timid truth and audacious lies; . . ." These two elements of truth and lies meet in conflict aboard the Narcissus. The men are faced with a problem in the person of the Negro sailor, James Wait.

---

7Migger, p. 31.
8Ibid., pp. 29-30.
How the crew as individuals and as a group, or little society, works out a solution is the theme of the action. Wait is the "center of the ship's collective psychology and the pivot of the action." His effect on the crew is noted from the very beginning of the book. The opening scene takes place in the darkness aboard the anchored ship. The crewmen are mustered aboard. Then after they, the dramatis personae, have been introduced to the reader by this clever device the following action occurs: "The distinct and motionless group stirred, broke up, began to move forward. "'Wait!' cried a deep, ringing voice.

"All stood still." This is the first encounter of the men with the influence of James Wait.

In the second chapter the men come to recognize him for what he is, death in disguise. "A black mist emanated from him; a subtle and dismal influence; a something cold and gloomy that floated out and settled on all the faces like a mourning veil." After they have recognized the evil of Wait, and the wisdom of Singleton there is no immediate movement toward the good. Donkin keeps the men stirred up and unsure. The dramatic conflict continues and the feelings and sympathies of the crew sway alter-

9Ibid., p. ix.
10Ibid., p. 17.
11Ibid., p. 34.
nately toward one side and then the other. Resolution comes only after Wait's death. Until then the *Narcissus* has been "associated with stormy seas rather than with calm reflections, and even when she . . . [does] 'float on a smooth sea,' resembling a 'sheet of ground glass,' thunder squalls . . . [are] 'growling angrily on the horizon.'"12 But when Wait dies the terrible calm leaves the ship and she proceeds peacefully into port. Only then are the tensions within each man and the tensions among the men resolved. Then, in the latter part the resolute will of Captain Allistoun is again in command. Out of all the struggle has come victory in the moral sphere. Truth, wisdom, goodness, and loyalty have been revealed. Donkin had, for a time, almost won the day and incited the crew to rebellion. The climax of his attempt came with the violence and treachery of throwing the belaying pin at Mr. Baker, the first mate. But wisdom, represented by Singleton, finally triumphed.

The *Narcissus* having weathered the stormy voyage with the forces of nature and the conflict aboard her caused by the storm of moral forces, sails up the Channel in the sunlight. The story closes with a passage of open moralizing which, although it is the only moralizing passage in the book, does serve to make the theme obvious. "Haven't we together and upon the immortal sea, wrung out a meaning from our sinful lives? Good-bye brothers! You were

---

a good crowd." This has been more than a sea story. Conrad himself said: "[The story] gives the psychology of a group of men and renders certain aspects of nature. But the problem that faces them is not a problem of the sea, it is merely a problem that has arisen on board a ship where the conditions of complete isolation from all land entanglements make it stand out with a particular force and colouring." This device of isolating his scene and then treating it very intensely is characteristic with Conrad. It is found in Nostromo, Lord Jim, and "Heart of Darkness" as markedly as here. In every instance, it is but one of the characteristics of Conrad, the artist, at work creating according to his theory of art. Looking at the Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus, one can see what Conrad was trying to do, and appreciate Bradbrook's description of this attempt with the accurate phrases: "in terms of the things seen," and, "[t]he power of the writing lies in its implications." For though Conrad considers the writer to be primarily an artist he also requires that the artist present a work from which the reader will be able to draw profit and meaning. To make a clear distinction between writer and reader is a great help to a clear understanding of Conrad's theory. The task of the writer,

13 Nigger, p. 173.
15 See p. 26, n. 1.
the artist, is "by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel--it is, before all, to make you see." To fulfill his task is not easy. But rather, "it is only through an unremitting never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity, to colour, and that the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words: of the old, old words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage." When fiction attains this ideal, it is art, "a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect."

As the above analysis indicates, the artist is not only an artist. He is also a moralist. He makes his appeal through the senses and tries to reach the spring of responsive emotions. If the right response is to be obtained from the reader, the right picture must be presented by the artist. Thus two qualities are demanded of the artist: clarity of conscience and clarity of presentation. To judge the clarity of Conrad's presentation is

16 *Nigger*, p. xiv.
not hard. Examples of this quality are found on every page of his works and in every character he ever drew, as will be seen in more detail in chapter three. The clarity, or purity, of the artist's conscience refers to the values of the artist. It demands that these be correct and not prejudiced or slanted. If the values of the artist are false, his "eye" is not true and his picture will be distorted.

To judge the clarity of Conrad's conscience and correctness of his values would be an extremely difficult study not to be taken up here, but a few brief words may be said. Conrad's own are appropriate to the subject: "To pronounce a judgment upon the general tendency of an author is a difficult task."20 This is not to say, however, that the novelist is free from all moral responsibility. "It must not be supposed that I claim for the artist the freedom of moral Mihilism. . . . It seems as if the discovery made by men at various times that there is much evil in the world were a source of proud and unholy joy unto some of the modern writers. That frame of mind is not the proper one in which to approach seriously the art of fiction."21 The one trait of Conrad which is most apropos here is his sincerity. He was rigorously honest with himself, and of his work said, "I am not likely to

20Notes on Life and Letters, p. 25.

21Ibid., pp. 8-9.
offer pinchbeck wares to my public consciously." 22 This same conviction of honesty is seen in the words of Marlowe, who is really Conrad speaking. "You know I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appalls me. There is a taint of death, a flavor of mortality in lies—which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world--what I want to forget." 23

After considering the role of the artist according to this theory, what is to be said about the role of the reader? If rigorous demands are made of the artist, it must be remembered that the reader also has certain requirements to fulfill. Conrad believes that "[t]he interest of the reader in a work of imagination is either ethical or that of simple curiosity, . . . there is both a moral and an excitement to be found in a faithful rendering of life." 24 This implies that the reader take a more active role than is usually allotted to him. It means that if the artist gives a faithful rendering of life, the reader himself will become the moralist. From the clarity of the presentation the reader will draw what meaning or moral his vision and the purity, or

---

22 Victory, p. vii.
23 "Heart of Darkness," Youth, p. 82.
clarity, of his conscience allow. He comes to a work to be "edified, consoled, amused . . . or encouraged" and may "find there according to . . . [his] deserts that glimpse of truth for which . . . [he has] forgotten to ask." Conrad has put two levels of meaning into his writing generally, and readers recognize one or both of these meanings "according to their deserts." A boy reads something of Conrad as an exciting adventure story with no deeper meaning. A mature reader takes up the same work and finds truths of life and insights into character dramatized there in such a way as greatly to enrich his understanding and appreciation. He finds, as Hemingway did, that, "from nothing else that I have ever read have I gotten what every book of Conrad has given me." Some critics have not been so discerning and for a long time the failure to understand Conrad led them to consider his work as a sort of bridge between boys' adventure stories and adult literature.

After the above analysis, certain qualities are seen to be

---

25 An excellent analysis of Conrad as a moralist, and the best consideration of his theory according to the roles of the writer and the reader which has come to the attention of the author, is that of Mr. Joseph F. Cieply, S. J. in an unpublished paper entitled: "I Was a Reading Boy: Joseph Conrad, Novelist and Moralist." The paper was done for a seminar in Problems in the Victorian Era, West Baden College, West Baden Springs, Indiana, 1955-56.

26 Nigger, p. xiv.

essential to Conrad's method of presentation, to the style. Most noticeable is the richness of the prose. The vividness and power of the writing in which the reader feels himself almost present on board the ship can be felt in such passages as the following: "He spun round as though he had been tapped on the shoulder. He was just in time to see Wait's eyes blaze up, and go out at once, like two lamps overturned together by a sweeping blow. Something resembling a scarlet thread hung down his chin out of the corner of his lips--and he had ceased to breathe." The power of such rich prose serves Conrad well. Atmosphere is an essential of his method, and through the powerful and rich description he can focus the attention of the reader on the scene, the characters and their actions so as to create what might be called the laboratory conditions under which human nature might be observed. First, by means of the setting he isolates the characters. Then by his powerful atmosphere he "isolates the reader." Through all this rich prose the pace is almost necessarily slower and more careful with the result that the reader gets "into" the story or the surroundings even more.

Maybe it is the characteristic pace that makes so much of Conrad's prose impressive. He has said that "there is . . . a subtle and unmistakable touch of love and pride beyond mere skill; almost an inspiration which gives to all work that finish which is

---

28 Nigger, pp. 154-55.
almost art—which \textit{is} art. . . . Love is the enemy of haste."\textsuperscript{29}

Two examples may help to give a feeling for the descriptive power which is Conrad's.

Next morning, at daylight, the \textbf{Narcissus} went to sea.

A slight haze blurred the horizon. Outside the harbour the measureless expanse of smooth water lay sparkling like a floor of jewels, and as empty as the sky. The short black tug gave a pluck to windward, in the usual way, then let go the rope, and hovered for a moment on the quarter with her engines stopped; while the slim, long hull of the ship moved ahead slowly under lower topsails. The loose upper canvas blew out in the breeze with soft round contours, resembling small white clouds snared in the maze of ropes. Then the sheets were hauled home, the yards hoisted, and the ship became a high and lonely pyramid gliding, all shining and white, through the sun-lit mist. . . .

The \textbf{Narcissus} left alone, heading south, seemed to stand resplendent and still upon the restless sea, under the moving sun. Flakes of foam swept past her sides; the water struck her with flashing blows; the land glided away slowly fading; a few birds screamed on motionless wings over the swaying mastheads. But soon the land disappeared, the birds went away; and to the west the pointed sail of an Arab dhow running for Bombay, rose triangular and upright above the sharp edge of the horizon, lingered and vanished like an illusion. Then the ship's wake, long and straight, stretched itself out through a day of immense solitude.

The \textbf{Narcissus}, at the end of her journey, sails up the English Channel:

A week afterwards the \textbf{Narcissus} entered the chops of the Channel.

\textsuperscript{29}The \textbf{Mirror of the Sea}, pp. 24-25.

\textsuperscript{30}\textit{Nigger}, pp. 27-28.
Under white wings she skimmed low over the blue sea like a great tired bird speeding to its nest. The clouds raced with her mastheads; they rose astern enormous and white, soared to the zenith, flew past, and falling down the wide curve of the sky, seemed to dash headlong into the sea—the clouds swifter than the ship, more free, but without a home. The coast to welcome her stepped out of space into the sunshine. The lofty headlands trod masterfully into the sea; the wide bays smiled in the light; the shadows of homeless clouds ran along the sunny plains, leaped over valleys, without a check darted up the hills, rolled down the slopes; and the sunshine pursued them with patches of running brightness. On the brows of dark cliffs white light-houses shone in pillars of light. The Channel glittered like a blue mantle shot with gold and starred by the silver of the capping seas. The Narcissus rushed past the headlands and the bays. Outward-bound vessels crossed her track, lying over, and with their masts stripped for a slogging fight with the hard sou'wester. And, inshore, a string of smoking steamboats waddled, hugging the coast, like migrating and amphibious monsters, distrustful of the restless waves.

Descriptive prose of such power as this helped make Conrad the master of atmosphere—that certain something so hard to define and so easy to perceive—which is not merely background but which vitally affects the whole spirit and unity of a work of art.

One more problem is involved in the theory considered. How is the author to point the moral without abandoning the objectivity to which he is committed as an artist? Though, as discussed above, the values of the artist will find their way into the work in some degree, he must stay out of the picture as much as possible. Conrad does not interrupt the narrative with "Dear Reader," to point his moral. For, after all, the reader himself is to be the

31 Ibid., pp. 161-62.
moralist. Two methods are used to preserve the objectivity. One is that of the narrator, Marlowe, who tells the story for Conrad. Lord Jim, "Heart of Darkness," and Chance give variations of this presentation. Marlowe can make reflections on the situations encountered and color things according to the way they appeared to him, the way he remembers them, while Conrad remains silently in the background. The other method for preserving objectivity, by which the artist is allowed to present his moralizations, his reflections, his outlook and philosophy is that which Bradbrook refers to as the "implications" and which Miller treats thoroughly in his analysis of the "symbolism" in The Nigger of the Narcissus.

In this novel, which Wiley calls "Conrad's most complete life-allegory," the stress is laid upon the heroic will and mind. It is the greatness of the inner life which is essential. The subject is presented from every conceivable angle of vision and point of view, physical and psychological. "Conrad's aim is to show up evil and reveal goodness. . . . Human nature is not perfect, even in the best, he shows. But it is the striving for the things that are worthwhile in spiritual evaluation that makes a

---


34 Wiley, Conrad's Measure of Man, p. 45.
man or woman admirable. 35 This striving is successful for each member of the crew according to the value that he has wrestled from the conflict on the decks of the Narcissus. The general pattern of Conrad's novels is a similar conflict, representing dramatically the struggle of every man who ever lives.

Conrad's characters have been presented with a romantic light hovering about them. Yet they are real. His supreme mastery can be seen in this great capacity for handling the characters so that each member of the crew stands out as an individual. He sets the scene, introduces the characters, and they live before the audience of readers so that each may receive according to his deserts. The character is central. Therefore, having finished the treatment of the plot in connection with the theory behind it, the next step will be to turn to characterization.

---

35 Ruth M. Stauffer, Joseph Conrad: His Romantic Realism (Boston, 1922), p. 82.
CHAPTER III
CHARACTERIZATION

Certain facts mentioned above in a different context, should be recalled here since they furnish the basis for any consideration of Conrad's characters and characterization. The first is his dependence on his past for the material about which he wrote. It is evident in this novel as in his others. Of its characters he told Jean-Aubry: "Most of the personages I have portrayed actually belonged to the crew of the real Narcissus, including the admirable Singleton (whose real name was Sullivan), Archie, Belfast, and Donkin. I got the two Scandinavians from associations with another ship."¹ The Negro was a member of that crew and was in Conrad's watch. But he took his name, James Wait, from another Negro whom he had known on the Duke of Sutherland six years earlier. This basis in experience is perhaps why realism is so impressive in the writing—why his characters are always real men faced with the problems of real life. Because of this it is true that Conrad does not need to float his characters along on the tide of coincidence or improbable circumstance. The reader meets them and

¹Jean-Aubry, Life and Letters, I, 77.
²Ibid., I, 54; Visiak, The Mirror of Conrad, p. 140.
gradually comes to know them as in real life. All the while he feels more as if they are controlling their own destinies than acting their parts as marionettes on strings. Conrad could recall and present such material because of his sensitive and responsive temperament which was alert to his fellow men. The courtesy and the gentlemanly manners for which he was known and the fact that he was always known to get along well among the men with whom he lived attest to these qualities, as does his great ability as a storyteller. Furthermore, two examples from his book of most intimate reminiscences, The Mirror of the Sea, though weakened greatly by removal from context, show the same. He writes that one night he was on board a ship in port as watchman and a man came on board suddenly, fleeing some men who pursued him. Conrad, doing his duty, refused the man refuge on the ship, only to receive an unexpectedly accurate smash in the face blackening his eye. What is the next remark in the narration of this incident? "I hope he escaped the enemies he was fleeing from to live and flourish to this day."

Another time he met a former officer of his after a ten year lapse. Conrad himself was then a captain and the former officer was out of work. The conversation went as follows:

"What are you doing,?" he asked.

"I am commanding a little barque," I said, 'loading here for Mauritius.' Then thoughtlessly, I added: 'and what are you doing,

---

3The Mirror of the Sea, p. 124.
"'I,' he said, looking at me unflinchingly, with his old sardonic grin--'I am looking for something to do.'

"I felt I would rather have bitten out my tongue. . . . But he forgave me, and we drove off together in a hansom to dine on board my ship."\(^4\)

In this same book, The Mirror of the Sea, Conrad might have been speaking of The Nigger of the Narcissus when he wrote about what crewmen report after some arrivals: "a tale of difficulties overcome, of adversity defied by a small knot of men upon the great loneliness of the sea. . . ."\(^5\) Who are these men--the actors in this drama? First, there is Captain Allistoun "grey, slight, alert, shabby in the sunshine, and as hard as adamant."\(^6\)

He had commanded the Narcissus since she was built. He loved his ship, and drove her unmercifully; for his secret ambition was to make her accomplish some day a brilliant quick passage which would be mentioned in nautical papers. He . . . spoke but seldom to his officers, and reproved errors in a gentle voice, with words that cut to the quick. . . . He shaved every morning of his life --at six--but once (being caught in a fierce hurricane eighty miles southwest of Mauritius) he had missed three consecutive days. He feared naught but an unforgiving God, and wished to end his days in a little house, with a plot of ground attached--far in the country--out of sight of the sea.\(^7\)

\(^4\)Ibid., p. 127.
\(^5\)Ibid., p. 62.
\(^6\)Nigger, p. 33.
\(^7\)Ibid., p. 31.
This is the portrait of an excellent sea captain. Stauffer has said that, "[a]ll of Conrad's characters have in them that universality which we call type." The statement is, in general, true. But Allistoun is more than type. The way in which he handles his ship and the men under his command, especially in times of stress, is as real and lifelike as cinerama.

Mr. Baker is the first mate—"a model chief mate!"—with a manner of grunting between his words "that went well with his menacing utterance, with his heavy bull-necked frame, his jerky rolling gait; with his big seamed face, his steady eyes, and sardonic mouth. But its effect had been long ago discounted by the seamen. They liked him; Belfast—who was a favourite, and knew it—mimicked him, not quite behind his back. Charley—but with greater caution—imitated his rolling gait. Some of his sayings became established, daily quotations in the forecastle. Popularity can go no farther!" Baker is so real a character that the reader is never sure exactly what he will do next. In the midst of the gale which almost destroys the ship, he answers the crewman who expects the captain to "care for us" with, "Why should he care for you? Are you a lot of women passengers to be taken care of? We are here to take care of the ship—and some of you ain't up to

8Stauffer, Joseph Conrad: His Romantic Realism, p. 44.  
9Nigger, p. 166.  
10Ibid., p. 21.
that. Ough! . . . What have you done so very smart to be taken
care of?"\(^{11}\)

The other officer was the tall, young Mr. Creighton, a dif­ferent type--yes, a different person--from Baker. He was capable,
could be hard, showed wonderful courage and selflessness when in­jured during the storm, and was liked by the crew for his smart­ness and "gentlemanly way of damning us up and down the deck."\(^ {12}\)

The crew numbered seventeen and the most significant point
in this regard is Conrad's great ability for handling a crowd so
that each member stands out as an individual. Each one is not of
equal importance in the action. But each is present as living
his full-life on board the Narcissus and as personally bound up
in all that happens aboard her. Conrad's work is never slovenly;
his pictures never blurred. Even quite secondary characters are
developed with patience and insight. Knowles, Belfast, Archie,
Wamibo, the two Norwegians, the steward, and Podmore, the cook,
are all secondary characters who fill in the picture. Yet each is
real and alive. The portrait of Charley for example, shows real
care:

Young Charley was lean and long-necked. The ridge of
his backbone made a chain of small hills under the old
shirt. His face of a street-boy--a face precocious,
sagacious, and ironic, with deep downward folds on each
side of the thin, wide mouth--hung low over his bony

\(^{11}\) Ibid., p. 79.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., pp. 57, 62.
knees. He was learning to make a lanyard knot with a bit of an old rope. Small drops of perspiration stood out on his bulging forehead; he sniffed strongly from time to time, glancing out of the corners of his restless eyes at the old seaman, who took no notice of the puzzled youngster muttering at his work.\textsuperscript{13}

His temperament is excellently portrayed too, as he always adds his note of interested excitement to any argument, scuffle, or work; but is left "with rare tears wrung out by bewilderment, cold, hunger, and general misery"\textsuperscript{14} when the storm is at its worst.

Podmore, the cook, is another character, definitely secondary, certainly carefully drawn throughout the book, and worth some analysis and consideration here. At the reader's first meeting with Podmore it is evident that the cook is a high-strung, nervous, and rather eccentric individual, though Conrad does him the justice—he is always fair to his creations—of labelling him "a serious-minded man."\textsuperscript{15} This trait of "seriousness" is really an eccentric preoccupation with religion, which takes the form of preaching about hell-fire and evil at every opportunity.

But the same night Belfast stole from the galley the officers' Sunday fruit pie, to tempt the fastidious appetite of Jimmy. He endangered not only his long friendship with the cook but also—as it appeared—his eternal welfare. The cook was overwhelmed with grief; he did not know the culprit but he knew that wickedness flourished; he knew that Satan was abroad amongst those men, whom he looked upon as in some way

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{13}Ibid., pp. 7-8.
  \item \textsuperscript{14}Ibid., p. 61.
  \item \textsuperscript{15}Ibid., p. 19.
\end{itemize}
under his spiritual care. Whenever he saw three or four of us standing together he would leave his stove, to run out and preach. 16

Even when the storm rose to its unbelievable heights the men heard "snatches that sounded like: 'Providence' and 'born again.' He [the cook] was at his old game of preaching." 17 Later, when Wait was sick and confined to his cabin, "the cook appeared with a pot of cold tea . . . sweetened with some white cabin sugar, too." 18 But before he had left the cabin he had lost himself in a religious frenzy of preaching and scared Wait almost to death before the crew arrived to quiet things down. He was a good man and a good cook but "[l]ike many benefactors of humanity, the cook took himself too seriously, and reaped the reward of irreverence." 19

By pausing to consider in some detail the character of Podmore, the cook, one can come to a better understanding of Conrad's way with characters. One point to be noted is the way that many of his characters are known by two names--their personal name and the name according to their function or position. This is a natural manner of reference and an easy way to achieve variety. But it also reminds one of the double aspect which every character

16 Ibid., pp. 37-38.
17 Ibid., p. 63.
18 Ibid., pp. 113-17.
19 Ibid., p. 84.
has—his individuality and his contribution to, or his part in, the joint action. This fact catches the attention of the careful reader because many of the characters have the double designation. There is Allistoun, the Captain; Baker, the First Mate; Creighton, the Second Mate; Charley, the boy; Wamibo, the Russian Finn, and Podmore, the cook. Many others are referred to almost always either one way or the other. There are the boatswain, the carpenter, and the steward; Knowles, Archie, Belfast, Singleton, and Donkin. By the end of the story, Singleton is almost synonymous with old seaman; Donkin, with troublemaker. Thus, Conrad is capable of putting meaning in his characters, which they then express to the reader.

Podmore's open and direct moralizing was not acceptable to the crew. Conrad, the moralist, uses a different approach, symbolism and allegory. This practice, as used in his early work, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, is also notable in later novels such as *Chance* and *Victory*. The allegory is always plotted with minute fidelity to the pattern of meaning.\(^{20}\) The insight which enabled Conrad to create such lifelike characters also enabled him to portray real meaning and express deep truth. Penetration

---

\(^{20}\)Wiley, *Conrad’s Measure of Man*, p. 13. It is quite natural, as Wiley suggests, that experience gave Conrad a better control of the technique. Yet on examination of *The Nigger of the Narcissus* one is amazed at the minute perfection of the allegory in such an early work.
and presentation are the two sides of this genius. 21

One more point should be treated in this regard before moving on to the three key characters of The Nigger of the Narcissus—Singleton, Donkin and Wait—and the heart of characterization and symbolism in this work. This point is the characterization and treatment of women by Conrad. Though there are no women characters on board the Narcissus, two appear in the closing pages of the book. One, the Captain's wife, receives mention as she meets him. The other, Charley's mother, merits a glance as she welcomes him home. Women generally play a small part in Conrad's novels. Elizabeth Drew has written that, "his whole handling of women is done in a very gingerly and timid way, compared with the energetic ease and force of his men. The only full-length figure is Rita in The Arrow of Gold and (to her fellow women at least) she is not convincing." 22 Another example of Conrad's unsure or "gingerly" treatment of women is Flora de Barral in Chance, who prompts the

21 Excellent examples of this accurate insight and portrayal in Conrad's other works are found in the desertion scene from the Patna in Lord Jim, in the characterization throughout Chance, in the expression of reticent idealism in Victory, in the reaction to injustice in "Heart of Darkness," and in Under Western Eyes of which Downing wrote: "Anyone who has recently read Under Western Eyes must grant that Conrad was gifted with extraordinary insight. The reading of it confirms Gide's remark that the book contained 'prophetic reflections about the Russian soul.' For our age it is, as Mr. Morton Zabel put it, in a penetrating introduction to the New Classic Series edition, 'a parable and a potent.'"—Francis Downing, "The Meaning of Victory in Joseph Conrad," Commonweal, LV (March 28, 1952), 614.

words: "[a] young girl, you know, is something like a temple. You pass by and wonder what mysterious rites are going on in there, what prayers, what visions?"\textsuperscript{23} This may express the feelings of the man whose insight was usually so sure. If he failed anywhere, it was probably in the characterization of women.

The three characters still to receive careful consideration are Singleton, Donkin, and Wait, and in them is symbolism most apparent. Each is drawn to extremes at times. Wait is the center of the wavering forces. Singleton and Donkin are on opposite ends of the struggle—wisdom and ignorance. But care must be taken not to misplace the emphasis in a treatment such as this one. There is a meaning beneath the story. But it is exactly there—beneath. The reality, or first level, is to be emphasized at least as much as the second level. Otherwise the real art of the work is diminished and the theory on which it is built is turned exactly upside down.

In connection with the above it is to be noted how carefully Conrad introduces the old seaman, Singleton. He is, above all, real.

Old Singleton, the oldest able seaman in the ship, set [sic] apart on the deck right under the lamps, stripped to the waist, tattooed like a cannibal chief all over his powerful chest and enormous biceps. Between the blue and red patterns his white skin gleamed like satin; his bare back was propped against the heel of the bowsprit, and

\textsuperscript{23}Chance, p. 311.
he held a book at arm's length before his big, sunburnt face. With his spectacles and a venerable white beard, he resembled a learned and savage patriarch, the incarnation of barbarian wisdom serene in the blasphemous turmoil of the world.24

It is beneath—rather within—this reality that Conrad embodies a barbaric sort of wisdom. This wisdom sets the stage for the conflict of moral forces at the very beginning of the action. To Wait's inquiry, shortly after he comes aboard, as to what kind of ship the Narcissus is, Singleton responds, "Ship! . . . Ships are all right. It is the men in them!"25 But this is not an attempt at subtlety or cleverness. Singleton is just an old child, strong but unthinking. He does not seem wise, but it is Singleton who is not affected by Wait, Singleton who wins the universal respect of the men, Singleton who could cast out evil with a stony look though it made him uneasy. The way in which he "steered with care"26 all through the wildness of the storm can represent his similar feat amid the storms in the moral order. Later it will be seen that there is a general parallel evident between the storm of the forces of nature and of human passions. Though symbolism is sometimes overworked in any analysis of this type, it would seem difficult to do so in this instance. For the allegory is extremely well worked out.

24_Nigger, p. 6.
26_Ibid., p. 89.
Directly opposed to Singleton is Donkin. He is ignorance. He is the disruptive force. He is as cowardly in his attitude toward the sea as he is sneaking and cunning in his attitude toward James Wait and his fellow men. Introduced in a minute description of his complete disrepute, the first thing that he says is, "I can look after my rights! I will show 'em!"27

He stood repulsive and smiling in the sudden silence. This clean white forecastle was his refuge; the place where he could be lazy; where he could wallow, and lie and eat—and curse the food he ate; where he could display his talents for shirking work, for cheating, for cadging; where he could find surely some one to wheedle and some one to bully—and where he would be paid for doing all this. They all knew him. Is there a spot on earth where such a man is unknown, an ominous survival testifying to the eternal fitness of lies and impudence? . . . He was the man that cannot steer, that cannot splice, that dodges the work on dark nights; that, aloft, holds on frantically with both arms and legs, and swears at the wind, the sleet, the darkness; the man who is the last out and the first in when all hands are called. The man who can't do most things and won't do the rest.28

The extremes to which Conrad draws this character make him a grotesque caricature. Yet, as the novel proceeds, Donkin acts his part true to character in a very real manner and lives up to his unenviable introduction. It is to Conrad's credit that Donkin is very real at every appearance, despite the fact that he is so extreme. Wait represents the presence of trouble on board the ship — amid society— but his resistance to the will of the Captain is

27 Ibid., p. 9.
28 Ibid., pp. 10-11.
passive. Donkin is the active instrument of discontent. Donkin moves the action in the drama. At first his position in the forecastle is "distinguished but unsafe," and he stands on "the bad eminence of a general dislike." He shirks the work, rebels against the officers, and finally, during the storm, shows his true colors: fear and selfishness. But all the time the crew's uncertainty about James Wait increases. After surviving the storm the men are "a discontented and aspiring population" and they dream—note Conrad's humorous irony—"of the time when every lonely ship would travel over a serene sea, manned by a wealthy and well-fed crew of satisfied skippers." Donkin's ascendency continues. "In the pauses of his impassioned orations the wind sighed quietly aloft, the calm sea unheeded murmured in a warning whisper along the ship's side. We abominated the creature and could not deny the luminous truth of his contentions. It was all obvious. We were indubitably good men; our deserts were great and our pay small. Through our exertions we had saved the ship and the skipper would get the credit of it. What had he done? We wanted to know. Donkin asked:—'What 'ee could do without hus?' and we could not answer." The simple seamen are no match for the cunning and treachery of Donkin. They cannot argue with the

29 Ibid., p. 40.
30 Ibid., p. 103.
31 Ibid., pp. 101-02.
man who admits his desire to "do for" the officers some dark night. They cannot understand the man who later hurls the be-laying pin at the Captain in the dark. But he is finally branded for what he is when caught in the despicable act of stealing from a dying man. The animal metaphors applied to Donkin in this last scene remind one of Uriah Heep and the same method used by Dickens.

This evil does not triumph. Donkin later retreats in complete submission before Captain Allistoun; to chafe, completely cowed, amid the peace which reigns after Wait's death and finally to suffer total defeat at the end. Goodness conquers evil; wisdom overcomes ignorance despite the fact that Donkin has been in con-stant evidence as the instigator of evil, busily stirring up trouble and agitating forces that are fundamentally and by nature good.

Conrad was skilled in introducing his characters dramatically, and this is particularly notable in regard to James Wait. The device has been imitated to some extent here in this paper. Having considered the other characters, the climax is reached in Wait, a very problematic subject. He is "calm, cool, towering, superb" and the "deep, rolling tones of his voice" fill the deck without effort. Then suddenly his eyes roll wildly and become all whites. He puts his hand to his side and coughs twice, "a cough metallic, hollow, and tremendously loud" which resounds "like two explosions in a vault." 32 From the very beginning

32 Ibid., p. 18.
Wait's health and sickness puzzle the crew. The mystery lowers their spirits and corrupts their morale. Wait is suspected of being a fraud. "He coughed often, but the most prejudiced person could perceive that, mostly, he coughed when it suited his purpose. He wouldn't or couldn't do his work—and he wouldn't lie up. One day he would skip aloft with the best of them, and next time we would be obliged to risk our lives to get his limp body down." The "monstrous suspicion" that James Wait is "shamming sick" continues to disrupt the crew. Donkin uses the sham in his crusade against right and order in the person of the Captain and the officers. He abuses Wait to his face, though in spite of it all they remain close companions in evil. It is noteworthy that only three people on the ship are not fooled or disturbed by Wait's delusions and pretense: Singleton, untutored wisdom; Captain Allistoun, the rightful authority of justice; and Donkin, who recognizes the evil because he himself is evil. But to the reader it is not clear whether Wait is sick or not. At first examination this seems to be a weakness in the presentation. Actually it is not. For the reader is to be closely associated with the crew, and they are not sure either. It is only after Wait's death that ignorance and evil are done with. He has been overtaken by reality—the reality of death—in his sham and delusion. "Jimmy's death, after all, came as a tremendous surprise. We did not know till

---

33 Ibid., pp. 44, 46, 72.
then how much faith we had put in his delusions. We had taken his chances of life so much at his own valuation that his death, like the death of an old belief, shook the foundations of our society."  

Symbolism, it will be noted is especially evident in the characterization of the grotesque Donkin and Wait. At times the symbolic meanings and implications are so strong that the first level of meaning would be obscured were it not for the vividness and power of Conrad's prose. But the rich imagery of this prose so impresses on the reader the reality of the scene, that a great deal of meaning on the second level can be present without intruding itself into the story so obviously as to destroy the art by reducing it to moralizing. Furthermore, Conrad has that ability to take his stand in the emotional center of human experience so that his analysis of character into its more minute components achieves an accurate portrayal. This same analysis helps toward vivid presentation of the inanimate elements in the story. True, the objectivity of the artist is sometimes strongly colored by the intensity with which he sees and represents things in a close connection with the tone and mood of the scene being portrayed. Thus the sea, the wind, the sky and clouds, even the ship herself are all brought into close connection with the meaning. In this regard that element in Conrad's theory should be remembered which

\[34\] Ibid., p. 155.
calls for purity of conscience in the artist lest he present a distorted picture:

Anxious eyes looked to the westward, towards the cape of storms. The ship began to dip into a southwest swell, and the softly luminous sky of low latitudes took on a harder sheen from day to day above our heads: It arched high above the ship vibrating and pale, like an immense dome of steel, resonant with the deep voice of freshening gales. The sunshine gleamed cold on the white curls of black waves. Before the strong breath of westerly squalls the ship, with reduced sail, lay slowly over, obstinate and yielding. She drove to and fro in the unceasing endeavour to fight her way through the invisible violence of the winds: she pitched headlong into dark smooth hollows; she struggled upwards over the snowy ridges of great running seas; she rolled, restless, from side to side, like a thing in pain. Enduring and valiant, she answered to the call of men; and her slim spars waving for ever in abrupt semicircles, seemed to beckon in vain for help towards the stormy sky. 35

It would be difficult to find a descriptive passage where the overtones were more pronounced. But is Conrad drawing them in unfairly or inaccurately? Certainly not. Every element fits into the allegory and contributes to strengthening the book's theme. Physical climax—the storm—parallels moral climax. The journey begun in the dark roadstead ends in sunshine. The crew has "wrung out a meaning" from their lives and been victorious over the forces, physical and moral, that would destroy them. 36

The strong impressions of Conrad's past life from which he fashioned his fiction are seen here. His memories of the close-knit

35 ibid., p. 49.
36 ibid., p. 173.
crew of the original Narcissus and his feeling for the solidarity of mankind and the brotherhood of the sea are particularly evident. Considering the theme in the light of these facts and after a consideration of characters in the story it seems that one character has been overlooked. Conrad's handling of the "crew," has been noted as particularly well done. Each member fits into the crew smoothly and naturally until frequently it is not individuals but the crew that stands predominant. The members live and act and react together as a unit, as an organism. Together the crew fight the fury of the storm. To save themselves the crew must save the ship. "She is, so to speak, the heroine of the tale, as the crew is its collective hero." 37

At first glance this suggestion or theory may seem surprising. But when carefully analyzed it becomes more and more convincing. Its importance to a proper understanding of the tale and its place among Conrad's work is hard to overestimate. Therefore, the claim is made here that the crew of the Narcissus is the hero and chief subject of the tale.

To one who was familiar with the fact that Conrad's themes are usually of the crisis of a character who must recognize and face a moral situation or fail before it, the claim that The Nigger of the Narcissus was representative of his work must, at first, have seemed unusual. The special stamp of Conrad's heroes

37Zabel, Craft and Character in Modern Fiction, p. 178. This theory is also proposed by Miller in his article in PMLA.
is their facing of crisis in moral isolation. In just such isolation the crew of the Narcissus faces a crisis. The struggle is against outside and inside forces. Within the crew elements of good and evil strive for mastery as in an individual, and thus, the crew plays the same role as the heroes of other novels: as Almayer, Lord Jim, Willems, Lingard, as Flora de Barral, Captain Anthony, and Heyst. Furthermore, this work, with the crew as main character, can also be representative of Conrad when he turned his emphasis on society and man as a member of it, as in his later novels, and Under Western Eyes, and The Secret Agent, and Nostromo. In setting Wait against Captain Allistoun, Conrad gives dramatic expression to the disruptive tendencies in society. The group of men who appeared first as distinct individuals achieve unity and stability in the brotherhood which the sea teaches and at the end of the novel, after their experience, appear as a "knot of seamen in the sunshine." These men have achieved wisdom from their encounter with life. They have faced the "test" and come out better men. They have achieved that solidarity "in toil, in joy, in hope, in certain fate, which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world." The veiled menace of James Wait forces the men of the forecastle into closer companionship and comradeship. The lesson which they have learned is not, however,

\[38\] Nigger, p. 172.
\[39\] Ibid., p. xiv.
immediately evident to others. It must be learned personally.
The scene as the men are paid off is interesting for the way in
which this is expressed. Singleton appears quite different here.
"[H]is hands, that never hesitated in the great light of the open
sea, could hardly find the small pile of gold in the profound dark-
ness of the shore," and to the clerk he is "a disgusting old brute.
Donkin, on the other hand, "had better clothes, had an easy air,
appeared more at home" and "stared with assurance." But justice
in the person of Captain Allistoun gives him a bad discharge, and
the crew is not deceived either. "Who's comin' fur a drink?"
shouts Donkin. "No one moved." Then the end of the drama is
signified in a single sentence: "Captain Allistoun sat smiling
thoughtfully at the cleared pay-table."

The detailed considerations of characters in this chapter and
the final consideration of the crew show that Conrad's characters
are always basically real though symbolic and at times almost
grotesque. In regard to this presentation Conrad himself wrote:
"It may have happened to me to sin against taste now and then, but
apparently I have never sinned against the basic feelings and
elementary convictions which make life possible to the mass of
mankind, and, by establishing a standard of judgment, set their

40Ibid., pp. 168-69.
41Ibid., p. 169.
42Ibid., p. 170.
idealist free to look for the plainer ways, for higher feelings, for deeper purposes." He has done all this principally by the accuracy with which he penetrated into character.

---

43 Chance, p. xii.
CHAPTER IV
BEHIND THE SCENES

This chapter returns to general considerations of Conrad and his writings after the two chapters which have tried to analyze one particular work. By concentrating on a single work it was hoped that a greater penetration could be made and a deeper understanding of the work could be achieved. Now, returning to general aspects, the results of that penetration can help toward a better appreciation of the whole picture as it was created by the artist. That which the detailed analysis of one work has shown to be fundamental and basic to all of Conrad's art can now be discussed from this different point of view. One might suggest then, that the purpose of this chapter is to go "beneath the surface." In view of Conrad's close connection with the sea, the metaphor seems very appropriate. Actually it is not so appropriate as at first appears. First of all, it connotes a psychological or psycho-analytical probing into dark depths. Secondly, it neglects the fact that Conrad's own emphasis was not on the sea but on ideal values and an artistic and dramatic presentation of them.

In such presentation his primary emphasis was on characterization with all the proper surroundings and background. He was an historian of fine consciences. He always tried to present his
characters in such real and lifelike tones that they could move on the stage before the audience of his readers, acting out for them that "glimpse of truth." His stories are dramas. In accord with this emphasis on character and a dramatic presentation it seems more appropriate to use a different metaphor as the title: "behind the scenes." Conrad himself would prefer the connotation of this phrase to the former one.

In moving "behind the scenes" to a consideration of what was behind Conrad's art, the points to be covered are, in general, the following: his concept of the individual and of the individual's position in the universe; his idea of the place of conflict in the strivings of a man's life and of the primacy of morality in human endeavor; his attitudes and outlook; his ideals which furnish the norms of action, of success or failure. There is no lack of material in Conrad's writings from which to illustrate these aspects. But using this material does present difficulties. Frequently an essay or an article will present one aspect of the whole picture--the fatalism of Joseph Conrad, the Catholicity of Conrad, pessimism, unrest, etc.--and in doing so will emphasize or "establish" it at the cost of neglecting other aspects of the whole. Thus, what is attempted in good faith, and achieved with truth, hardly helps toward the real goal of a balanced understand-

---

1Bancroft, Joseph Conrad: His Philosophy of Life contains quite a thorough consideration of Conrad's morality according to the philosophical principles of Kant.
ing of the personality and personal philosophy of the author and their expression in his works. Furthermore, such studies, usually convincingly done, are difficult to evaluate unless one is as well versed in the primary sources as the author of the particular article. Though they often offer insights which one never could get for oneself, they must be only supplementary to the primary sources of such study: the man himself as known through accurate biography, and the man's writings as an expression of himself.

There is no difficulty about where to begin in attempting a unified appreciation of Conrad's art. It must begin with the characters, for in Conrad they are central in an especially pronounced and emphatic manner. A study of them reveals something of Conrad's concept of man and his position in the universe. Wiley placed the emphasis correctly when he entitled his study of Conrad Conrad's Measure of Man. Long days at sea seem to have impressed on him the paradoxical position of man in the universe—central but so insignificant. "[M]y vision is circumscribed by the sombre circle where the blue of the sea and the blue of heaven touch without merging. Moving in that perfect circle inscribed by the Creator's hand, and of which I am always the center, I follow the undulant line of the swell."² His insight into the dignity of man and the dreadfulness of his predicament seems to have been deep-

²Wiley, Conrad's Measure of Man, pp. 19-20, citing one of Conrad's letters to Mme. Poradowska.
ened by this sea experience. These two features—man's isolation and man's dignity—furnish the basis for the major theme that runs through all of Conrad's writing. It is a moral theme—a theme of man's conflict, of meeting his "test." Moser has treated this very point well: "Conrad sees experience as a test, and his characters' responses to the test determine their place in his moral hierarchy." In further analysis of the connection between characters and the theme of conflict, Moser divides the characters into the following categories: the simple man (usually a seaman) who successfully meets the test with unthinking devotion; the vulnerable hero, either simple and unimaginative or complex and unthinking, who because of some weakness fails the test; the perceptive hero (Marlowe is the prime example) who keeps pace with the situation and fits in successfully; the villain such as Donkin; and the complacent who have not yet been tried. In whatever categories the characters are, they are drawn with care and understanding. Conrad suits the atmosphere to them and they then "live" in the story in that atmosphere true to their particular type and individuality. This is especially noticeable in his non-European people whose ideas are colored by superstitions of their native regions, whose temperaments and emotions are proper to their particular culture and environment. Their thought pattern and

3 Thomas Moser, Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline (Cambridge, Mass.), p. 15. In the Introduction Moser acknowledges his indebtedness to Zabel for his perception into the "test" in Conrad.
manner of reacting impress one as true to reality. They may be as dull and unimaginative as MacWhirr or as poetic and idealistic as Captain Anthony or Heyst, but in each particular instance they live as a consistent personality, as an individual with a personal background. Frequently the inner problems of the main characters "are mirrored in external events and relationships. The facts of the external world become symbolic of the moral problems with which they are at grips, without ceasing to be facts which are perfectly convincing in naturalistic terms." His characters are faced with the moral test; and beneath the surface of their lives, beneath the usual level of sanity and good will, there is an immense underworld of darkness and unrest. In this interior solitude of the soul the test is met by the individual. Man must face this struggle with the realization of his own nobility.

In the light of this conviction human beings, as Conrad sees them, divide themselves into two moral categories: those who hold fast to their faith in their personal ideal of virtue and determine their actions in reference to it, on the one hand; and, on the other, those who from weakness or blindness are false to it. "All men," he said, "must choose to sacrifice their Gods to their passions or their passions to their Gods." Life, in his view, is a moral drama in which the conflict turns on how far or not human beings can succeed in living up to their innate vision of virtue.

---

Man suffers defeat when he allows himself "to be cowed by the danger and disaster of existence into surrendering that faith in the value of individual nobility."\(^7\) He is victorious in this inner struggle when, given the opportunity, he fulfills his nobility and justifies himself under stress. Sometimes the forces which a man is pitted against are strong enough to remind one of the idea of fate in the Greek tragedies. Sometimes it seems that the individual has no safeguard against mischance or irrational motive. This may be the key to the reason why Conrad is often considered a pessimist. But actually the characters who suffer most are those with the loftiest opinions of their own capacities, with a false sense of security and an unfounded self-confidence. The characters who fail are frequently those who withdraw into themselves and detach themselves from the life and world around them. Wait, for example, does just this in his moment of greatest crisis when he refuses to face death as a fact and withdraws instead to his dreams and illusions. Lord Jim does the same when he begins to imagine and speculate on possibilities, then is led to give in and desert the ship.

The ideas treated above lead to the theme of solidarity. Man can find greater safety in "the solidarity . . . which binds man to each other and all mankind to the visible world."\(^8\) The

\(^7\)Ibid.

\(^8\)\textit{Nigger}, p. xiv.
surer way to succeed is to join in the society of man. This is shown by the idealization of order and social justice, community of endeavor under authority, as seen in the crew of the *Narcissus*. This externalizing of oneself—-that is too strong a phrase—-in striving for success means closer contact with reality, that is, closer association with other men and closer observation of the beauties of the universe surrounding man on all sides. This protects against an unhealthy withdrawal into oneself.

It is to be noted that the romantic note most frequently enters into Conrad's writings at this point—-in the description of atmosphere and scenery. At the same time there is an obvious connection here with his theory of art: the artist seeks the truth and makes his appeal through the senses.

But together with the romantic note of Conrad's scenery is the predominant realistic note in his characterization. The fact, as mentioned above, that some of Conrad's most noble and idealistic characters fall, makes it "difficult . . . to regard Conrad as an admirer of romantic behavior." 9 He is vivid in his realism and frequently harsh in the consequences which he demands of his characters as they strive after their ideals. What are these ideals which motivate the characters? Fundamentally, there always seems to be the same striving, though it appears under various lights. The motivation may be of an abstract ideal or of some

---

9 Wiley, p. 18.
other person; it may be derived from obligation of duty, or from the instinct for society and justice. Any of these forces lifts the individual out of his inner isolation and launches him into the external world. "It may be the world of an island and a single fellow-soul, as in Victory; it may be that wider world of social and political relationships which Conrad seldom explored fully but which he did build in solid form in Nostromo, Chance, and Suspense."

Reference to these works of Conrad is a reminder that the analysis of the structure behind them must not be allowed to dim the chief artistic feature of the works themselves—the rich interplay of emotions, of struggles for ideals and against depravity so finely presented in Conrad's fictional world. The danger of being deceived by an analysis of Conrad's technique is especially evident when one considers the outlook of the man who created these books. A man's outlook—his beliefs and philosophy of life—has many facets which must be treated singly and separately. Yet this very piecemeal treatment can easily result in a failure to grasp the meaning of the whole. Moreover, since a man frequently fails to understand his own more or less unified aggregate of convictions, it is certainly difficult for anyone else

---

10Zabel, Craft and Character in Modern Fiction, p. 162.

to do so. Nevertheless, a few considerations will help to understand the man, and therefore, his work, a little better. If these considerations serve only to destroy certain familiar prejudices about Conrad the effort will be worthwhile. If only they alert a reader to the problem of correctly understanding Conrad or warn against one-sidedness, it will be enough. If Conrad is romantic, accuracy also demands that his realism be kept in mind. If he is pessimistic, such an affirmative allegory as _The Nigger of the Narcissus_ may balance the picture.

Conrad's pessimism has been mentioned above. It is a trait often singled out in his writings. Temple wrote of it: "It is not a sentimental or shallow pessimism. It is profound and, transmuted through his art, has the quality of deepening our sense of the tragedy of life."\(^\text{12}\) This is generally true. Yet there is much that is not pessimistic in Conrad. Any sampling of his works to prove the point would necessarily be too incomplete to be worthwhile. A more satisfactory result can be obtained by considering the following significant statement by an authority on Conrad.

And when Conrad becomes explicit (as in _Notes on Life and Letters_ ) on the subject of human destiny, he most clearly departs from the pessimistic philosophy which has been attributed to his works of imagination.

If as an artist Conrad does not show us triumphant individuals, he does declare, with poetic profundity

---

and fervour, the inalienable validity of the Ideal and the undestroyed persistence of the light which man sins against, but sins against with the ineluctable and agonizing knowledge of sin. 13

Whether Conrad's outlook as expressed in his writings was pessimistic or not will have to be judged in the last analysis by a careful reading of them and not from essays on the subject. But it is certain, as the last quotation suggests, that evil was a reality to Conrad. His serious and melancholy temperament and his Catholic background would not allow him to see it any other way. "We can discuss many novelists without using this term, 'evil,' speaking of aberrations of conduct, regrettable failings, weaknesses of character and the like, but the most cursory glance at Conrad's work is enough to convince us that he has a conception of a transcendental evil as great as that of a Catholic or Calvinist." 14 Well stated. The key is in deciding which type of concept it is--Catholic or Calvinist.

Braybrooke finds a great deal that is Catholic in Conrad. 15 Certainly he has much to support the contention. There is a clear realization and acceptance of man's creation and fall, of his individual dignity, and the conflict of good and evil which he faces. Much "Catholic" vocabulary can be noted in Conrad.

13Mégroz, A Talk with Conrad, pp. 94-95.
14Hewitt, p. 23.
"[T]hat he was baptized a Catholic and lived an honorable life is public knowledge."\(^1\) Yet he never made a great show of religion either in his life or writings. His characters engage in their life-conflict seemingly unconscious of possible Divine help or consolation. The challenge is met and is to be overcome by the personal worth and aggressive action of the individual, who frequently unites with his fellow men for greater strength in the struggle to overcome evil and be true to his ideals.

Other traits which enter into Conrad's writings have been mentioned throughout this work. They cannot all be summarized here, but mention might be made of Conrad's humor, his irony. By watching for it as one reads his works, certain excellent insights can be had into the artist himself. Sometimes he is bitter; sometimes depressed; sometimes reminiscent; seldom completely light-hearted. Always, in whatever mood, he is sincere. He believes that a writer's most valuable asset is the truth which he possesses.\(^2\) As an artist he tries to give it life. Words which Conrad wrote of Almayer apply quite well to himself: "Nothing was ever quite worthy of you. What made you so real to me was that you held this lofty theory with some force of conviction and with an admirable consistency."\(^3\)

\(^{1}\) Temple, p. 213.

\(^{2}\) Nigger, p. xiv.

\(^{3}\) A Personal Record, p. 88.
H. L. Mencken, when Conrad died, summed up the thoughts of many when said: "There was something almost suggesting the vastness of a natural phenomenon. He transcended all the rules. There have been, perhaps, greater novelists, but I believe that he was incomparably the greatest artist who ever wrote a novel."¹⁹ He was above all, an artist. True to his artistic purpose, Conrad refused to define his philosophy of life. In a letter to his publisher, F. N. Doubleday, June 2, 1924, he wrote, "I think that an author who tries to 'explain' is exposing himself to a very great risk—the risk of confessing himself a failure. For a work of art should speak for itself. Yet much could be said on the other side; for it is also clear that a work of art is not a logical demonstration carrying its intention on the face of it."²⁰ These words of Conrad are suitable ones with which to close this study of him. They express his sentiments on such studies. They remind one to go first to Conrad's works for an appreciation of him. They return to one of the key ideas in his theory of art—the role of the reader: "If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm—all you demand—and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask."

¹⁹H. L. Mencken quoted in William McFee's Introduction to A Conrad Argosy (Garden City, New York, 1942), p. 2.
²⁰Jean-Aubry, Life and Letters, I, 183.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. PRIMARY SOURCES


II. SECONDARY SOURCES

A. BOOKS


-----. *The Last Twelve Years of Joseph Conrad.* Garden City, New York, 1928.

-----. *The Personality of Joseph Conrad.* Garden City, New York, 1925.


-----. *Portraits of Life.* Boston, 1937.


Knight, Grant C. The Novel in English. New York, 1931.


B. ARTICLES


C. UNPUBLISHED MATERIAL

APPENDIX I

CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF CONRAD'S WORKS

This list is based on lists found in Walter F. Wright's Romance and Tragedy in Joseph Conrad and Thomas Moser's Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline. Not included in it are The Inheritors (1901) and The Nature of a Crime (1924) which Conrad had a small part in together with Ford Madox Ford, nor the several plays which Conrad wrote or adapted from his other work.

The dates in most instances are those given by Moser because he gives as his sources the two excellent and authoritative works: Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters by Jean-Aubry, and Joseph Conrad: The Making of a Novelist by Gordan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year(s)</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The Black Mate&quot;</td>
<td>ca. 1886</td>
<td>1925 (Tales of Hearsay)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Almayer's Folly</td>
<td>1894</td>
<td>1895</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Outcast of the Islands</td>
<td>1895</td>
<td>1896</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sisters (unfinished)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The Idiots&quot;</td>
<td>1896</td>
<td>1898 (Tales of Unrest)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;An Outpost of Progress&quot;</td>
<td>1896</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The Lagoon&quot;</td>
<td>1896</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Nigger of the Narcissus</td>
<td>1897</td>
<td>1897</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Karain&quot;</td>
<td>1897</td>
<td>1898 (Tales of Unrest)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The Return&quot;</td>
<td>1897</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Youth&quot;</td>
<td>1898</td>
<td>1902 (Youth and Other Stories)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The Rescue&quot; (parts I-III)</td>
<td>1898</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Heart of Darkness&quot;</td>
<td>1899</td>
<td>1902 (Youth and Other Stories)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lord Jim</td>
<td>1900</td>
<td>1900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typhoon</td>
<td>1901</td>
<td>1902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Falek&quot;</td>
<td>1901</td>
<td>1903 (Typhoon and Other Stories)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Amy Foster&quot;</td>
<td>1901</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romance (with F. M. Ford)</td>
<td>1902</td>
<td>1903 (Typhoon and Other Stories)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Tomorrow&quot;</td>
<td>1902</td>
<td>1903 (Youth and Other Stories)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The End of the Tether&quot;</td>
<td>1902</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nostromo</td>
<td>1904</td>
<td>1904</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Mirror of the Sea</td>
<td>1905</td>
<td>1906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The Brute&quot;</td>
<td>1905</td>
<td>1908 (A Set of Six)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Gaspar Ruiz&quot;</td>
<td>1905</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;An Anarchist&quot;</td>
<td>1905</td>
<td>1908</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The Informer&quot;</td>
<td>1905</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Secret Agent 1906 1907
"The Duel" 1907 1908 (A Set of Six) "
"Il Conde" 1907 1908 "
A Personal Record 1909 1912
"The Secret Sharer" 1909 1912 ('Twixt Land and Sea)
Under Western Eyes 1910 1911
"A Smile of Fortune" 1910 1912 ('Twixt Land and Sea)
"Freya of the Seven Isles" 1910 1912 "
"The Partner" 1910 1915 (Within the Tides)
"Prince Roman" 1911 1925 (Tales of Hearsay)
"Because of Dollars" 1912 1915 (Within the Tides)
"The Inn of the Two Witches" 1912 1913
Chance 1912 1915 (Within the Tides)
"The Planter of Malata" 1913 1915 (Within the Tides)
Victory 1914 1915
The Shadow Line 1915 1917
"The Warrior's Soul" 1916 1925 (Tales of Hearsay)
"The Tale" 1916 1917
The Arrow of Gold 1918 1919
The Rescue 1898 -1919 1920
Notes on Life and Letters (reprints) 1921
The Rover 1922 1923
Suspense (unfinished at his death, Aug. 3, 1924) 1925
Last Essays (reprints) 1926
The thesis submitted by Charles E. Herman, S. J. has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

November 18, 1957

Signature of Adviser