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Level: L3

Module: Study of Literary Texts

Course Number: Lecture 1

Course Title: The Life of Joseph Conrad

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924)

Naturalized British subject, he was born Joseph Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, the son of a Polish aristocrat in a Poland dominated by Russia. His father having taken part in a revolution that failed, he was sent in exile to Siberia with his wife and son. His mother died when he was 7 and his father was he was 11. He was brought up by his uncle and soon developed a passion for travel and adventure.

He left for Marseilles at 17 and became a sailor. He got involved in gun smuggling in Spain and fell in love with a Basque adventuress who inspired the heroine of *The Arrow of Gold* (1919) (scar: duel, suicide?).

He joined the English merchant marine at 21 and rose from simple sailor to the rank of captain. He taught himself English and became a British citizen in 1886.

He later wrote: "English was for me neither a matter of choice nor adoption. There was adoption, but it was I was adopted by the genius of the language. Its very idioms had a direct action on my temperament and fashioned my still plastic character".

The "tales of hear-say" that all sailors told helped to shape his technique when he became a novelist.

In 1890, he went to the Belgian Congo in similar circumstances to those of Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*. As a boy, he had a passion for map-gazing and dreamt of going to the blank space in central Africa. Being without command for a while, he saw a map in Fleet street and sought to realize his dream. He obtained a job through the intervention of his aunt who had connections with the Belgian society. He was appointed to replace Captain Friesleben (Fresleven in the novel) on a steamboat going up the river Congo to relieve an agent called Klein (Kurtz in the novel, both meaning small, short).

He was disgusted by the behaviour of whites there and his health was deeply affected by fever. He returned from the Congo a changed man: "Before the Congo I was a mere animal", he wrote, meaning lacking the understanding of existence and the maturity.

He retired from the sea and began writing in English. He settled in Kent County, England and published *Almayer's Folly* in 1895. It was a success.

In March 1896 he married 22-year-old Jessie Emmeline George (1873-1936) with whom he had two sons, Borys (b.1898) and John (b.1906). His life was characterized by poor health and near poverty.

Conrad wrote numerous works first serialised in magazines like *Blackwood's*, *Munsey's* and *Harper's* before being published as novels. His most famous ones are *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897), *Tales of Unrest* (1898), *Lord Jim* (1900).

Youth appeared in 1902, *Typhoon* (1903), *Nostromo* (1904), *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906), which is semi-autobiographical.

The Secret Agent (1907) established him as the father of the spy story and the precursor of the famous James Bond 007 stories by Ian Fleming. *Under Western Eyes* appeared in 1911.

In 1924 he was offered a Knighthood but politely refused. More famous works include *The Arrow of Gold* in 1914, *Victory* (1915), *The Shadow-Line* (1917) which evokes Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", *The Rescue* (1920), and *The Rover* (1923).

On 3 August 1924 Joseph Conrad died at home of a heart attack. Although a sceptic much of his life he was given a Roman Catholic service at St. Thomas's and now rests with his wife Jessie in the public cemetery in Canterbury, England.

His name is carved into the massive grave stone as was given at his birth, Joseph Teodor Conrad Korzeniowski. The epitaph carved below it, also the epigraph for *The Rover*, is from Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* and reads:

Sleep After Toyle, Port After Stormie Seas,
Ease After Warre, Death After Life Does Greatly Please