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## BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: THE EXISTENTIAL THEME OF WANDERING IN CONRAD

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### ABSTRACT

The scenario in most of Conrad's work are much the same: they can be read as tales of betrayal, self-punishment and redemption, and as exploration of the consequences of treachery – an act which leads to endless wandering. The central figure in his novels is always an unfulfilled man who, having no foothold in society, must therefore achieve something in life upon which to ground his identity, self-esteem and a sense of worthiness. Yet an act of betrayal, whether intended or not, turns the malleable man into a wounded wanderer whose aspiration for success and potential to achievement only guide him into delusion and self-destruction. as a result, Conrad's heroes are frequently portrayed as “wandering between two worlds, one dead/ the other is powerless to be born.” This paper thus seeks to examine the theme of wandering in Conrad's novels, exploring its role as both a psychological condition and a metaphor for the fragmented modern self.

**Keywords:** Conrad, Wandering, Existentialism.

### I Introduction

The scenario in most of Conrad's work are much the same: they can be read as tales of betrayal, self-punishment and redemption, and as exploration of the consequences of treachery – an act which leads to endless wandering. The central figure in his novels is always an unfulfilled man who, having no foothold in society, must therefore achieve something in life upon which to ground his identity, self-esteem and a sense of worthiness. Yet an act of betrayal, whether intended or not, turns the malleable man into a wounded wanderer whose aspiration for success and potential to achievement only guide him into delusion and self-destruction. as a result, Conrad's heroes are frequently portrayed as “wandering between two worlds, one dead/ the other is powerless to be born.” This paper thus seeks to examine the theme of wandering in Conrad's novels, exploring its role as both a psychological condition and a metaphor for the fragmented modern self.

### II Discussion

Sartre, in *Humanism*, claims that “we are neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. We are left alone to create our own values under the guidance of conscience” (Sartre, 1973, p. 34). This existential burden of freedom—where man must invent meaning without recourse to transcendent absolutes—finds a striking parallel in Conrad's fiction. The scenario in most of Conrad's work are much the same: they can be read as tales of betrayal, self-punishment and redemption, and as exploration of the consequences of treachery – an act which leads to endless wandering. The central figure in his novels is always an unfulfilled man who, having no foothold in society, must therefore achieve something in life upon

which to ground his identity, self-esteem and a sense of worthiness. Yet an act of betrayal, whether intended or not, turns the malleable man into a wounded wanderer whose aspiration for success and potential to achievement only guide him into delusion and self-destruction. Here, we see Conrad adopting Nietzsche's position in that, in order to live, man has to, first of all, make peace with his discontents by deceiving himself.

In *Gay Science* Nietzsche declares the demise of God. Implied in this claim is not just a world without faith, but a world without moral standards. Living in society without a tangible value system, human is left alone in this moral vacuum and can only be governed by his own conscience. Needless to say, human existence constitutes such a precarious business that according to Schopenhauer:

Man is at bottom a wild horrible creature. We know him as merely broken in and tamed by civilisation and hence the occasional outbreaks of his nature shocks us. But where and when the padlock and chain of legal order fall off and anarchy enters, then he shows himself for what he is (Schopenhauer, 1891, p. 207).

His comments echo that of Stein in *Lord Jim*: "man is amazing, but he is not a masterpiece. Man is flawed, precisely. So the question is not how to get cured, but 'how to live'" (Conrad, 1968). Or Razumov's reflection in *Under Western Eyes*: "The most miserable outcast hugs some memory or some illusion. Now and then a fatal conjunction of events may lift the veil for an instant. For an instant only. No human being could bear a steady view of moral solitude without going mad" (Conrad, 1968).

Conrad, as an author, is fascinated by the capacity of human beings. Granted, the expedition he arranges for his heroes often seem tortuous, full of quandary and eventually doomed. For sure, the ambitious student, the adventurous marine officer and the idealistic colonist all embody the complex, degenerating elements of humans as moral agents; what is often ignored, however, resides in their courage to wrestle with fate and cowardice, *single-handedly*: "No! I am independent – and therefore perdition is my lot" (Conrad, 1968). During the process of struggle, the vulnerability of their personal integrity is laid bare. In their strive to reach the other shore, dilemma awaits. Yet a decision to "take the plunge" does not resolve the quagmire once for all. For instance, Jim has to live with the aftermath of his deviation of duty: "There was no going back. It was as if I had jump into a well – into an everlasting deep hole" (Conrad, 1968, p. 88). Unlike Alice in Wonderland, this is no fairytale as the consequences of the Fall force upon Jim all his life. Nietzsche captures the implications best when he says:

Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman – a rope over an abyss. A dangerous across, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and stopping. What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end: what can be loved in man is that he is an *overture* and *going under* (Nietzsche, 1995).

So, what becomes of Jim, Kurtz and Razumov? Do they naturalise into the residents of the webbed city, described by Marco Polo to Genghis Khan in Calvino's *The Invisible Cities*, who no longer worry about falling to their death? Or do they develop an attitude that accepts the eyes of the other, with resignation? As MacIntyre puts it:

I am forever I have been at any time for others – no matter how changed I may be now. There is no way of *founding* my identity – or lack of it – on the psychological continuity or discontinuity of the self. The self inhabits a character whose unity is given as the unity of a character (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 217).

The trouble with Conrad's protagonists is that they cannot let go of their pasts and start afresh. 'The trauma' is not simply a dead history. It remains a towering part of the guilty self which constantly overshadows and defines the present. Jim, Kurtz and Razumov's tragedy grows out of the fact that they can only relate the meaning of their existences to the *fait accompli*, the foregone destruction. Time and again, the pasts come back to haunt them as they believe that they are forever defined by their acts of betrayal. The rupture that cuts through life presents a rare opportunity for Kurtz, Jim and Razumov to make their choice. The question is: are they ready to get rid of the old compass?

In Conrad's works, wandering is a painful yet inevitable experience: the dark side of the moon stalks the ostensible and apparently honourable human endeavours. Take Kurtz, for instance, whose ideals of bringing civilisation to the Dark Continent do not shield him from degenerating during his first-hand meeting between 'the civilised' and the allegedly 'barbarian'. The myth of a laudable mission to instil a new lease of life into the alien soil is blown to pieces not by how the locals behave, but the outrageous hypocrisy of the deceptive expatriates. His transgression, along with the gulping ruthlessness of his fellow Europeans, represents a contravention of the Enlightenment paradigm. Flaunting their fortune and power, a silence of complicity befalls the colonists. The rational pursuit of wealth soon consumes any residue of modesty and fraternity. As a result, the only way to preserve the identity of a civilised being rests on erecting a wall that divides humans on racial lines. At last, Kurtz gains some insight on the hollow differentiation between 'the civilising agents' and 'the natives'. 'The horror! The horror!', these words at his deathbed cannot lift him to redemption; nevertheless, they drive him back to where he used to belong: the realm of the moral. Kurtz's life is by no means the textbook model of righteousness and honesty, but his final revisit of the crimes serves as a warning for the latecomers and seals his status as a thoughtful man. As life events turn Conrad's heroes inside out, they come to terms with the flaws and imperfections common to all, whose idiosyncratic journey moulds a distinctive face to the crucibles.

Jim's trajectory in Patusan echoes Kurtz's in the African wilderness: at the pinnacle of his career, Jim is to suffer another free fall for placing his trust on Gentleman Brown. Cornered, humiliated and lost, Jim proffers his own life to compensate for this fatal error of judgment. His wandering therefore came to an abrupt end. The trade-off between time and distance, on which he relies so much for a breathing space, no longer seems an attractive option. By stepping out and taking up the responsibility of other people's life or death, Jim unwittingly sends himself to the scaffold. The rope, a la Nietzsche, stretches too far. He slips once too many. So his demise is expected. Such is his moral obligation towards the people of Patusan. Whilst poor Jim inadvertently messes up with his fellow sailors and folks, what is it like to be burdened with lives of the cream of the society? Razumov has a story from the hell.

The central theme of *Under Western Eyes* is Razumov's tormenting journey towards self-knowledge through self-deceit. We first meet Razumov as an apparently orphaned student, though in fact the illegitimate son of Russian aristocrat, expelled from his family, vainly clutching a prospective academic career as the sole source of personal security. As a man without family ties, Razumov has nothing but a strong motivation to distinguish himself, to become a somebody. The hunger for success sustains and impels Razumov. In spite of his ambition and intellect, Razumov is lonely: amongst eight million Russians, he has no heart to which he could open himself. Ironically, when confidentiality consists of the paramount concern for certain interests, such as security and intelligence, his isolation becomes the most sought-after characteristic. In a sense, boundaries trespass Razumov without the latter's courting.

The name Razumov, in both Polish and Russian, means 'to understand', and his accidental odyssey, or rather, hijacked out, is an exercise in understanding. He comes to face what other Conradian figures, such as Almayer, Jim and Kurtz, learn under different though no less trying circumstances. That is, excessive isolation leads to moral collapse, whilst a purely egoistic attachment to society can be equally damaging. For Razumov, there are no givens. He has no purchase in the world; he is nothing but himself. This is why he oscillates in the moment of truth. Razumov's inexperience of association takes its toll – a hefty toll indeed, until he musters all his courage to pay up his due.

Events thrust upon the young Razumov. The fences he so carefully keeps against outsiders are forced open and suddenly beyond repair. The picture he paints for his future includes a major defect: Razumov features in the portrait like a perfectly positioned apple. However, as things happen, an earthquake shatters the table. His considered reaction comes much too late for the imminent hijacks on both sides. Fortunately, the self-administered ejection from the flights salvages something from the relics; though crippled and weakened, Razumov certainly stands tall vis-à-vis the rest of Conrad's anti-heroes.

### III Conclusion

The chaotic settings where Conrad's fictional characters find themselves prove challenging in the end. Whilst the protagonists dance with their rosy dreams, their passage towards self-destruction and eventual downfall mercilessly expose the most innate human impotence, be it insecurity, selfishness and self-aggrandisement, or downright recklessness. In Conrad's world, there is no place for romanticism. The romantics invariably stumble over the first real hurdle and bruise themselves. Their lives, it appears to Conrad, are nothing but a slow, irreversible bloodshed. The only chance of lifting oneself beyond narcissism and parochial affiliation is to act out one's true colour and face up, with rigour, the consequences and implications of one's actions. No confession is too late, Conrad seems to suggest. But of course, he only talks to the elite class of superman.

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