

“YOUTH “BY JOSEPH CONRAD

This is a short biography about the novelist, which is useful to understand his work.

Joseph Conrad didn't set out to become one of the great English novelists. He didn't set out to be a novelist at all, but a sailor, and besides, he wasn't English. English was his third language and he didn't begin learning it until after he was 20 years old!

He was born Jozef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski in 1857, in an area of Poland that was part of Russia and is now part of the Soviet Union. The Poles were fighting for independence from Russia, and both parents were fiercely engaged in the struggle. Conrad's father was arrested in 1861 for revolutionary activity, and the family was exiled to the remote Russian city of Vologda. On the journey there, four-year-old Conrad caught pneumonia. He remained a sickly child, and he suffered from ill health for the rest of his life.

Conditions in Vologda were gruelling. They were too much for Conrad's mother, and although the family was eventually allowed to move to a milder climate, she died of tuberculosis when Conrad was only seven years old. His father's spirit was broken, and so was his health. The Czarist government finally let him return with Conrad to the Polish city of Cracow, but he died there after a year, when Conrad was eleven.

In 1874, at the age of 16, Conrad travelled to Marseilles to learn the seaman's trade.

During his four years in the French merchant marine, Conrad sailed to the West Indies and possibly along the coast of Venezuela, and he had an adventure smuggling guns into Spain. He participated fully in the cultural life of Marseilles, and a little too fully in the social life. He got himself into a spectacular mess. Deeply in debt, he invited a creditor to tea one evening and shot himself while the man was on his way over. His uncle received an urgent telegram: "Conrad wounded, send money--come." He did, and he was relieved to find young Conrad in good shape (except for his finances)--handsome, robust, well mannered and, above all, an excellent sailor. The author would later claim, rather romantically, that he got a scar on his left breast fighting a duel.

Since the young man couldn't serve on another French ship without becoming a French citizen, who would have entailed the possibility of being drafted, he signed on at the age of 20 to an English steamer. The year was 1878. For the next 16 years he sailed under the flag of Britain, becoming a British subject in 1886. Life in the merchant marine took him to ports in Asia and the South Pacific, where he gathered material for the novels he still--amazingly--didn't know he was going to write. His depressive and irritable disposition didn't make sea life any easier for him. He quarrelled with at least three of his captains, and he continued to suffer from periods of poor health and paralyzing depression.

In 1888 Conrad received his first command, as captain of the *Otago*, a small ship sailing out of Bangkok. It was a gruelling journey: three weeks to Singapore owing to lack of wind, and the whole crew riddled with fever; from there to Melbourne, Australia, where he decided to resign the command and return to England. The maddening calms of the

voyage, and his uncomfortable position as a stranger on his first command, provided the inspiration 21 years later for the outlines of "The Secret Sharer".

Back in England, Captain Korzeniowski (as he was still known) wasn't able to find another command, and so through the influence of relatives in Brussels he secured an appointment as captain of a steamship on the Congo River: At the age of 9, he had put his finger on the blank space in the middle of a map of Africa and boasted, "when I grow up I shall go there"; at 32, he was fulfilling a lifelong dream. But the dream quickly turned into a nightmare. "Everything is repellent to me here," he wrote from the Congo, "Men and things, but especially men." The "scramble for loot" disgusted him; the maltreatment of the black Africans sickened him; and as if that weren't enough, he suffered from fever and dysentery that left his health broken for the rest of his life. Though his experiences in Africa were to form the basis of his most famous tale, *Heart of Darkness*, he returned to England traumatized. His outlook, already gloomy, became even blacker.

Though Captain Korzeniowski didn't know it, his sea career was drawing to a close. In 1889 he had started a novel based on his experiences in the East. He worked on it in Africa and on his return, and in 1895 it was published as *Almayer's Folly* by Joseph Conrad. It was, like most of his books over the next two decades, a critical but not a popular success. Writing was an agony for Conrad: he was painfully slow at it, though the necessity of getting paid made him work faster than he liked. As a result of hurry, he never felt satisfied with the finished product. (Of the masterful *Heart of Darkness* he wrote at the time, "it is terribly bad in places and falls short of my intention as a whole.") Marriage and the birth of two sons made his financial strain even more desperate. Periods of intense productivity (such as the mere two months in which he completed *Heart of Darkness*) alternated with periods of despair in which nothing got written, as well as with his recurrent bouts of nervous exhaustion and gout. A description Conrad gave of his father could have described himself: "A man of great sensibilities; of exalted and dreamy temperament; with a terrible gift of irony and of gloomy disposition".

Conrad died in 1924 at the age of 66. He had attained international renown, but even then he was popularly regarded mainly as a teller of colourful adventures and sea stories. But his experiments in style and technique exerted a major influence on the development of the modern novel. Since his death, the profundity--and darkness--of his vision have become widely recognized.

The next thing we are going to talk is an analysis fragment of the short story *Youth*.

This analysis is based on the short story "Youth" by Joseph Conrad, in which involves the explanation of youth in relation to life. The story presents the theme that youth is somehow disillusioning. During the plot progression, it shows the perceptions and thinking of the main character, Marlow, who is a young ship's officer fascinated by the air of adventure and romance of the exotic east. The main themes describe some aspect of human life and behaviour, some of which are idealism versus realism, survival and the trials and tribulations that are encountered through life.

"Youth" is a story of romance and later disillusionment. It is essentially a longing look at the idealism and romance of youth. Marlow gives an account of his first voyage

as a second mate and the grandeur and excitement he had experienced. The voyage was actually a disaster, including delays, frustrations and the eventual sinking of the ship; his arrival on the shores of the exotic East was in a lifeboat. The burning and sinking of the ship is an adventure to be savoured, but this also foreshadows his future: the flames of youth are quenched by time, the ship does not reach its destination and Marlow's youthful dreams are not reached.

These are the themes of *Youth*, which talk about Marlow the main character of the story.

The main theme of Conrad's story is the initiation experience of Marlow on his first voyage to the "Eastern waters."

Since the story does not offer any complex psychological portraits (aside from the youthful Marlow), it does not develop the complexity of theme associated with many of Conrad's other works. Nevertheless, Marlow's determination to establish himself on the voyage, and the courage and tenacity he displays are attested to by his battle against the adversities of the ship.

A related theme is the growth of Marlow's independence and maturing self confidence.

The next is a fragment of the key questions of the novel:

Today's readers may not be very familiar with the English "merchant service" or with the cargo vessels of the 1880s.

A good approach for discussion would be to research both the ships of the era, and the geography of the story. Although the *Judea's* early misfortunes are told quickly, they assume knowledge of the English coast from Newcastle-on-Tyne to Falmouth. Similarly, the concluding sequence of the story may become more vivid if the position of the *Judea* in relation to the Dutch East Indies were studied. It is also of ironic significance that the ship never reaches Bangkok.

This is an analysis made by Jeff Bull of the novel *Youth*.

Dramatis Personae

Marlow: Second mate on the *Judea*, a merchant vessel; the story's narrator.

Captain Beard: Captain of the *Judea*; classic "old salt."

Mahon: First mate on the *Judea*

Synopsis

Youth tells of the improbably doomed voyage of the *Judea*, an English merchant ship bound for the Far East with a load of coal, recounted 20 years after the fact by Marlow; the trip is Marlow's first as an officer. Not only does it take weeks (months?) to get out of port, the *Judea* has to return three times for repairs before finally setting out on the actual journey - during which the boat catches fire. Marlow relates the story to several

old friends, all of them intimates of the sea.

The Writing

I'll start by confessing I was a "Conrad virgin" before wrapping up *Youth*; somehow I made it through high school and graduated from college - in the liberal arts, no less - without touching his work. From a narrowly aesthetic point of view, I'd call this a mixed bag. To begin, he's very descriptive - at times impressively so. A couple specific passages stand out here: one, the description of Captain Beard (p. 8 in the edition I have, the "Barnes & Noble Classics" edition); the other, the following description of the *Judea* in a storm:

"The Judea, hove to, wallowed on the Atlantic like an old candlebox. It blew day after day: it blew with spite, without interval, without mercy, without rest. The world was nothing but an immensity of great foaming waves rushing at us, under a sky low enough to touch with the hand and dirty like a smoked ceiling."

That's the best of it; the worst displays Conrad's habit for over-elaborating, for repeating, for reiterating, with layer upon layer, to push an image to the point where the reading grows tedious, as it does here:

"And she crawled on, do or die, in the serene weather. The sky was a miracle of purity, a miracle of azure. The sea was polished, was blue, was pellucid, was sparkling like a precious stone, extending on all sides, all round to the horizon--as if the whole terrestrial globe had been one jewel, one colossal sapphire, a single gem fashioned into a planet."

It's a taste thing, I know, but page after page of that wears on a body. But that's a quibble when you get right down to it...because the story is very good.

What It's About

Conrad is fairly explicit, and repeatedly so, in declaring the travails of the *Judea*'s voyage a metaphor for life. While he states this all but directly through Marlow's narration, he puts it more subtly - artfully, as I read it - in the introduction:

"Between the five of us there was the strong bond of the sea, and also the fellowship of the craft, which no amount of enthusiasm for yachting, cruising, and so on can give, since one is only the amusement of life and the other is life itself."

I usually hesitate to read grand metaphors into *any* fiction - too great a risk of sounding stupid, you see - but it's hard to avoid with Conrad pointing it out often as he does. The real question is what he uses *Youth* to say about life.

To put it crudely, Conrad thinks "youth" - e.g. being young - kicks ass. That returns to the quote that topped the page because I would interpret the book to say "life is disillusioning." As to youth, even if it's founded on delusion, Conrad, or Conrad writing through Marlow, seems to view it as the most purely empowering, all-conquering moment in life. He expresses this through devices, for instance a refrain tied to the ship; the *Judea* bears the motto of "Do or Die," with the clear understanding that the second half of the phrase isn't even a possibility. But the point gets driven home through Marlow's more impassioned recollections:

"I remember the drawn faces, the dejected figures of [the two crew-men trapped in the lifeboat with Marlow], and I remember my youth and the feeling that will never come back any more--the feeling that I could last for ever, outlast the sea, the earth, and all men; the deceitful feeling that lures us on to joys, to perils, to love, to vain effort--to death; the triumphant conviction of strength, the heat of life in the handful of dust, the glow in the heart that with every year grows dim, grows cold, grows small, and expires--and expires, too soon--before life itself."

The first half of that passage gets to the power of youth, but the second looks ahead - or rather back, from Marlow's older vantage point - of the grinding reality to come. In not a few ways, the lesson of *Youth* is that life just beats one to the ground - and then comes back for more; one doesn't realize this when he or she is young, or, more significantly, that you remain convinced you can not only take the beating, but that you can get back up and win.

A subtler expression of this appears in the aspect of Captain Beard. When he introduces Beard, Conrad describes him as "a little man, with a broad, not very straight back, with bowed shoulders and one leg more bandy than the other," and he notes his "nut-cracker face." But he also mentions "blue eyes in that old face of his, which were amazingly like a boy's, with that candid expression some quite common men preserve to the end of their days..." This struck me as crucial. As the story progresses, Marlow notes time and again that Beard is too old for the sea and he's thoroughly bemused at the old captain's insistence on staying with the ship to the last and dragging as much of it as can be carried - including such clearly impractical items as "tins of paint--fancy paint!" I read this to separate Beard from the story's other characters, to suggest that youth's half-deluded point of view isn't a function of age; it's more about giving into the notion of being beat, whether by great, hard realities or the wear of a thousand little adversities.

To be honest, I only discovered this distinction at the second reading; more to the point,

that's when the contrast with Marlow and his friends became apparent. Marlow voices a new refrain as he tells the story, "Pass the bottle." The weariness in the phrase, as well as the several times he laments the "glow in the heart...[growing] dim, [growing] cold," serves as a counterpoint to his marveling at how unrelenting strong and dauntless he once was.

In conclusion we can talk about the several themes of this novel, with his main character Marlow who grows along the novel.

Patricia Garrigós y Saúl Cánovas.

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