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THE IRONY OF ANARCHY IN THE  
NOVELS OF JOSEPH CONRAD

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iii
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2	13
CHAPTER 3	35
CHAPTER 4	46
CHAPTER 5	70
FOOTNOTES	
Introduction	74
Chapter 2	76
Chapter 3	78
Chapter 4	80
Chapter 5	82
BIBLIOGRAPHY	83

## INTRODUCTION

My task . . . is, before all, to make you see.<sup>1</sup>

This often-quoted statement in the preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus is central to this thesis: it invites two questions. What does Conrad want us to see? How does he make us see it? He continues in the preface to say that Art:

. . . shall awaken in the hearts of the beholders that feeling of unavoidable solidarity; of the solidarity in mysterious origin, in toil, in joy, in hope, in uncertain fate, which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world.<sup>2</sup>

It is this "unavoidable solidarity" that Conrad wants us to see. He was acutely aware of its opposite: discord; discord between man and man, man and Nature. In order to survive, man had to bind together in an organic community. There was strength in solidarity. Fleishman, in Conrad's Politics, traces Conrad's notion of social solidarity to the organicist theories of earlier English and German thinkers. He looks to philosophers Bradley and Bosanquet as representative of the final form of nineteenth century organicism. He finds connections between Bosanquet and Conrad:

What Bosanquet has done is to psychologize the abstract notion of a community, to locate community in the sense of communion shared by the members of a society . . . In his interest in men's personal loyalty to and proud identification with the state, Bosanquet is akin to Conrad, for whom these emotions were objects of lifelong concern.<sup>3</sup>

In the early novels the ship becomes a metaphor for the state. In the sea tales he shows the ability of a loyal and united crew to dispel human disputes and to survive Nature's brutal onslaughts. Neither the Nan-Shan of Typhoon nor the Narcissus would have stayed afloat without the collective efforts of their crew members. Survival is paramount and is attained through unified effort.

However, among the crews of both these ships, there exist characters who cannot ally with the mob. Jukes of Typhoon is paralysed by the storm on account of an excessively vivid imagination. Dorkin of The Nigger of the Narcissus is flagrantly selfish:

The sympathetic and deserving creature that knows all about his rights, but knows nothing of courage, of endurance, and of the unexpressed faith, of the unspoken loyalty that knits together a ship's company.<sup>4</sup>

These types of characters, in the context of the vagaries of ship life, represent the individualistic ethic, which clashes directly with any organicist theory of community. They pre-figure a long list of characters, who through some special insight or flaw are in isolation from a community. In Lord Jim, Jim has extraordinary dreams of glamour and heroism; in Heart of Darkness, Kurtz has "moral" ideas of civilising the Natives; in Victory, Heyst endorses a philosophy of non-involvement; in Under Western Eyes, Razumov, an intellectual, aspires to position and recognition.

All these characters have the common desire for self-realisation and self-assertion. Their fate is a painful recognition of man's common

fate: "his unavoidable solidarity." These outcasts come to the knowledge that the individual can only find himself by joining a group. In organicist theory, a perfect community is created through the individual's moral will; the sum of these individual wills makes up the civilised, National life.<sup>5</sup> This pre-supposes a high moral level and, certainly, a utopia never exists in Conrad's work. It is, however, the direction in which Conrad leads his principal characters. Both Heyet and Razumov, initially uncommitted and isolated individuals come to learn to "trust" in life; specifically, they learn to trust women. To trust is their significant achievement; it is the panacea for previous internment within their own separated egos.

Fleishman isolates the tension between individual aspiration and social responsibility:

If we were to give a name to Kurtz's vision of "the horror", it might appropriately be anarchy: that state of social decomposition at the opposite pole from organic community. This anarchy is already latent in the individual - individuality and anarchy are implicated in each other - and in the absence of an ordering community it springs into action as terrorism.<sup>6</sup>

We have already hinted at the dangers implicit in individual aspiration. Order and security through community are indispensable. Conrad does not doubt that claim. However, he also exposes a community bound together not by a moral will, but by a spiritless anonymity resulting from excessive order and security. In this case, society is merely an external restraining force. In Outpost of Progress, Conrad speaks thus of his heroes:

Society, not from any tenderness, but because of its strange needs, had taken care of those two men, forbidding them all independent thought, all initiative, all departure from routine; and forbidding it under pain of death. They could only live on condition of being machines. And now, released from the fostering care of men with pens behind the ears, or of men with gold lace on the sleeves, they were like those lifelong prisoners, who, liberated after many years, do not know what use to make of their freedom.<sup>7</sup>

Societies which breed characters like Kayerts and Carlier imprison their inhabitants. A society which believes unfailingly in its institutions fails to generate internalized moral restraints which could govern behaviour when police supervision is removed. Kayerts and Carlier are left not with moral resources, but with mere instincts which lead to murder and suicide. The notion of internalised morality as an antidote to anarchic behaviour is important to this thesis. It is precisely because characters like Kurtz in Heart of Darkness or Winnie in The Secret Agent have no inner restraint that they become anarchic. Kurtz becomes meglomaniac, Winnie commits suicide. In ironic contrast, Marlow in Heart of Darkness admires the restraint of the pilgrims, cannibals, who resist devouring him.

The discussion so far has revealed that Conrad saw the individual and his place in community as a complex issue. If community is essential for survival, it may shelter individuals in the illusion of harmony. The solidarity of a community may promote decent, law-abiding codes of conduct; it can also promote an unimaginative acceptance of life's routine. Single-minded, dutiful characters like Singleton in The Nigger,

the French Lieutenant in Lord Jim, MacWhirr in Typhoon are perfect men for the creation of community. Their contribution to a community solidarity is an unwavering commitment to work. They work unimaginatively but think nothing of the unusual stress that more imaginative natures could not tolerate.

Cox in Joseph Conrad: The Modern Imagination raises an interesting question; "Is it true, therefore, that the order of society is suited only to less imaginative natures?"<sup>8</sup> With this in mind we can ask: what right has an individual, through a frustration with work or a demand for some personal expression, to isolate himself from the mainstream? The answer lies in an ironic appraisal of the outcasts. We can see them as heroes in their anarchy. Characters like Jim, Kurtz, Heyst, Razumov raise questions which would not have been uttered if the anonymous behaviour of dutiful men was an ideal. Through some unusual motivation or insight they forsake the illusions of a comfortable society and face the dark side of reality. In the knowledge they gain, invariably resulting in death, they report a kind of victory, which an ordinary human being, couched in the safety of community, could never achieve. This is the complexity of moral isolation. If, as Fleishman suggests, "individuality and anarchy are implicated in each other,"<sup>9</sup> we can see another perspective. Individuality, because of its anarchy, may reveal, perhaps, save a crippled society of anonymous individuals. In this vein we shall see how Wait, ironically, unites the crew of the *Narcissus*.

Critics such as Glassman, in The Language of Being, believe that these isolated characters were the only admirable people in Conrad's novels. He conjectured that Conrad supposed life to be futile and that

the fullest expression of the individual was the ultimate creative act.<sup>10</sup>

From this stance he suggests:

Moral identity . . . is knowable more by the complexity of one's sensibility than by the stolidity of one's comportment.<sup>11</sup>

Such an assertion, I feel, is too unequivocal. Just as allegiance to a totalitarian community is deluded so also is belief in the Absolute worth of the individual. Kurtz's "complex sensibility" does not automatically enhance his moral identity, as Glassman proposes. Our reactions are ambivalent. His alluring personality makes him more immediately interesting than the grubby avarice of the Accountant and the Manager; but, he is also a gross sensualist. His lack of inner restraint leads to anarchy which we view critically. However, the essential irony is that his anarchy "threw a kind of light"<sup>12</sup> on the composition of a lack-lustre European civilisation, similar to that which nurtured Kayerts and Carlier. Kurtz's behaviour points to the value of and necessity for community and its concomitant restraints of duty and work; it also reveals these notions as insufficient for maintaining a healthy community.

The examination of the limited but necessary existence of a community through an anarchist is the essence of much of Conrad's ironic structure. It is a persistently sceptical temper that can see Kurtz as a possible saviour. Narrators like Marlow or the young Captain in The Secret Sharer learn that the assertive sensibilities of Jim, Kurtz, Leggat, in breaking the law, have enriched their own lives. Lawlessness has not only been provocative, it has been salutary. From Conrad's analysis of social outcasts we learn this cruel Irony: under the threat of non-existence outside society, the individual can turn only to the State - although it

is from the state itself that the threat originates.

Conrad's task was to reveal the strain felt by assertive individuals in their reaction to the conformist niche, the solidarity formed by those with a more passive acceptance of life's illusions. Both sensibilities have integrity and in inter-acting inform each other of their respective dangers and inadequacies. Muecke, in The Compass of Irony, proposes a reconciliation of these two extremes (assertiveness, passiveness) as an ideal way of living:

To recognize an irony in the incompatible demands of the individual and society is, in a sense, to raise oneself above these demands though one still remains both an individual and a member of society. The ironic acceptance of an incompatibility can then be the basis, . . . for a way of living that reconciles the assertive and submissive, the seclusive and the gregarious instincts.<sup>13</sup>

Brierly, in Lord Jim, dramatises the inability to reconcile the incompatible demands of anonymity and assertion. In contrast, Marlow is the most satisfactory ironist in Conrad's work. I shall discuss this at length in Chapter 2. However, there is a danger in proposing Irony, in Muecke's sense, as a way of living. It may lead to non-action. Marlow himself is temporarily paralysed after his meeting with Kurtz. He concludes: ". . . life is - that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose."<sup>14</sup> The young narrator of The Secret Sharer forsakes duty and responsible behaviour while under the persuasive influence of his lawless alter ego. There are times in The Nigger of the Narcissus when Conrad as narrator flirts with nihilism, in recognition of the futility of action. Irony itself is not a sufficient antidote to the

complexity of an individual in a community. Decond, in Nostromo, is a thorough sceptic. And yet, he is just as vulnerable as the dutiful Singleton. On the Great Isabel his scepticism is tested to the utmost. He is bereft of all reason for living and ". . . (he) had died from want of faith in himself and others."<sup>15</sup> In contrast, the idealistic, naive but faithful Natalia is a source of optimism in Under Western Eyes. Her femininity and her ardent commitment to the revolutionary cause promote life and hope for reform. Decond's rigorous sense of Irony leaves him no motivation for action, not even for survival.

The irony of anarchy is what Conrad demands we "see." He persistently uncovers the dualism involved in human experience which sees the opposites of assertion and submission as, unlinked, an insufficient interpretation of reality. However, there is no utopian reconciliation. Cunningham Graham sought an "Educated Singleton" as an answer. Conrad replied that Singleton was already educated, since he "was in perfect accord with his life . . ."<sup>16</sup> Consciousness of the world would make Singleton unhappy because that world is one of inevitable decay:

Would you seriously wish to tell such a man  
 "Know thyself! Understand that you are  
 nothing, less than a shadow, more insignificant  
 than a drop of water in the ocean, more fleeting  
 than the illusion of a dream?" Would you?<sup>17</sup>

To speak of Singleton like this is to be aware of his integrity. In The Nigger of the Narcissus, Conrad lauds his steadfastness. Nevertheless, on occasions, his scepticism includes feelings of futility about this man's life. Conrad is balanced in his analysis. In all the

novels which I shall study Conrad reveals the whole man even if such an analysis requires opposite reactions on our part. As he wrote in the preface to The Secret Agent, he writes in "pity" and "scorn."<sup>18</sup> This thesis shall emphasise Conrad's persistent arousal of opposite reactions.

The work of the new critics, T.S. Eliot and I.A. Richards is particularly relevant to this study. They used the term "irony" in an extended sense as a general criterion of literary value. T.S. Eliot praised a kind of "wit" in the metaphysical poets which is an "internal equilibrium" that implies the "recognition" in dealing with any one kind of experience, "of other kinds of experience which are possible."<sup>19</sup> This is Conrad's art also. I.A. Richards similarly talked in terms of an "equilibrium." He saw the "equilibrium of opposed impulses . . . to be the ground plan of the most valuable aesthetic responses . . ."<sup>20</sup> In Coleridge on Imagination, Richards offers an interpretation of a passage from Venus and Adonis:

Look! how a bright Star shooteth from the sky  
So glides he in the night from Venus' eye.

Richards says that "the more the image is followed up, the more links of relevance between the units are discovered":<sup>21</sup>

The separable meanings of each work, Look! (our surprise at the meteor, hers at his flight), Star (a light-giver, an influence, a remote and uncontrollable thing), shooteth (the sudden, irremediable, portentous fall or death of what had been a guide, a destiny), the sky (the source of light and now of ruin), glides (not rapidity only, but fatal ease too), in the night (the darkness of the scene and of Venus' world now) - all these separable meanings are here brought into one.<sup>22</sup>

He concludes by way of summary:

Shakespeare is realising, and making the reader realise - not by any intensity of effort, but by the fulness and self-completing growth of the response - Adonis' flight as it was to Venus, and the sense of loss, of increased darkness, that invades her.<sup>23</sup>

Richards, in fact, defined irony as the equilibrium of oppositions:

Irony in this sense consists in the bringing in of the opposite, the complementary impulses.<sup>24</sup>

When Irony is working in Richards' sense, the author is said to "realise" the experience. Irony and realisation are the opposites of stereotyping. For an author such as Conrad, who is intent on preserving the integrity of any character and making us see the truth in the unity of opposite reactions, the principles of Irony and Realisation are important. We are not asked to either admire or detest characters like Singleton. We react in a double way and in so doing, we see all round the experience and the total composition of a character's sensibility.

Richards himself says that the major advantage of Irony in this sense is that it forces us to refrain from assertion:

The amplitude and fineness of the response, its sanction and authority, in other words, depend upon this freedom from actual assertion in all cases in which the belief is questionable on any ground whatsoever. For any such assertion involves suppressions of indefinite extent, which may be fatal to the wholeness, the integrity of the experience. And the assertion is almost always unnecessary . . .<sup>25</sup>

If an author is to make us "see" the opposite impulses implicit in any experience, it is essential that he write from a detached position. Richards writes:

. . . to be detached is a curious way of saying that we are more completely involved.<sup>26</sup>

Conrad strived for detachment and impartiality in the point of view of his novels. In Lord Jim and Heart of Darkness he used Marlow as a surrogate narrator; in The Nigger of the Narcissus he balanced the point of view in a combination of his own voice with that of a crew member. This method of narration preserved detachment well enough but created a flaw. Often Marlow failed to "realise" the ironies; he merely revealed them. In an author committed to making us "see", there is a difference between "showing" and "telling". We shall discuss this in detail in Chapter 2. One of the major difficulties with the narration of these early novels was that Conrad could not be ironical about the narrators. He became dependent on the surrogate, who remained extrinsic to the action. In this thesis I shall show that Conrad developed his use of narrator to the extent that he could either adopt an ironic stance towards the narrator's point of view or trust his own impartiality as a narrator. In the first case, narrators like Mitchell in Nostromo, the young Captain in The Secret Sharer, Davidson in Victory, the Professor in Under Western Eyes have only a limited perspective. Their narration itself is an Irony. In the second case, Conrad came to trust his own narration in tales like Typhoon or The Secret Agent. This development is the height of Conrad's narrative achievement. Its corollary is a sophisticated verbal Irony in which the skilful use of language arouses the opposite impulses without a persistently obtrusive narrator. With this development in narrative technique the ironies of anarchy are internalised and more consistently

"realised." Hence, we "see" the complexities of this theme more vividly.

The irony of anarchy is that individual behaviour, even anti-social behaviour, can often put us more in touch with being rather than doing. Conrad's anarchists arouse a double reaction: they have a fuller potential for life; they also possess a tendency towards destruction of themselves and others. Conrad's workers, the mainstays of social solidarity, also generate a double reaction: they bind a society together; in their very activity they cultivate an anonymous albeit secure society. The tension between these opposing sensibilities may be summed up in the maxim: "Conform and die; conform or die." That is what Conrad demands we "see."

I shall illustrate three methods by which Conrad makes us "see" the implications of irony and anarchy. Firstly, I shall examine the novels in terms of their ironic heroes, the anarchists. They are the central focus for the narrative structure of the novels. Secondly, I shall illustrate the developing use of narrators as a means of successfully "realising" the ironies. Thirdly, when Conrad is writing well, his prose possesses an "internal equilibrium" composed of the opposite impulses of "pity" and "scorn." This is Verbal Irony.

Thus, I am concerned with answering the two questions posed at the beginning of this chapter. What does he want us to "see"? How does he make us "see" it? The focus of this thesis is on the irony of anarchy and the means of preserving integrity through a full "realisation" of opposite impulses.