

Fiction on Revolution

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Abstract

The present study aims at showing Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* as the author's major deep concern about revolution and revolutionaries. Indeed the book is his memoir of both his past life and his mother country. The novel focuses on Razumov the central character and his unwanted involvement in political activities. Hence two worlds are depicted, one is the individual world of Razumov the student and the other is the communal world of the revolutionists. *Under Western Eyes* is a site for Conrad's sentiments and inner responses where one comes across his obsessions about man and his society.

Key words: Fiction; Joseph Conrad; *Under Western Eyes*; Revolution

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INTRODUCTION

Under Western Eyes appeared between the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, and it is Conrad's last political novel after *Nostromo* and *The Secret Agent*. Joseph Conrad began his *Under Western Eyes* in 1908 and completed it by January 1910. The first version of the novel focused on Razumov the central character, and the author planned to come across the life and events of this St. Petersburg

student in about 1904. In fact, like *Lord Jim* and *Nostromo*, *Under Western Eyes* was to be a short story, but Conrad, having strong and intense feelings about his subject, was compelled to create a massive historical and social document among his other works. In his note to the novel, Conrad emphasizes that "[It] has become already a sort of historical novel dealing with the past", and avers:

I am encouraged in this flattering belief by noticing that in many articles on Russian affairs of the present day reference is made to certain sayings and opinions uttered in the pages that follow, in a manner testifying to the clearness of my vision and the correction of my judgment. (xix)

The major obsession of Conrad in completing his novel was beyond canvassing the psychological anguish and predicament of Razumov, the student who betrayed his university fellow Haldin who sought to receive support and protection from him. The novel has two major aspects sought by the author, one is the individual world of Razumov and the other is the communal world of the revolutionists. Indeed these two worlds are overlapped and pave the way for some ideological, and to some extent dogmatic, attitude and sentiments of the author.

Conrad was a patriotic Pole who chose to be a British citizen later. This sense of nationality grew in Conrad's heart during his childhood years through his father and Polish literature. Ideas of betrayal, desertion, guilt, and shame appear repeatedly in Conrad's works. They are present in *Almayer's Folly*, *An Outcast of the Islands*, *The Rescue*, and *Lord Jim*. These motives were quite normal in Polish literature from the time of Polish independence loss in the early nineteenth century. For instance, Adam Mickiewicz in his *Pan Tadeusz* expressed that "woe to us, who fled at the time of a plague, carrying our timorous heads abroad." (as cited in Najder 13). Juliusz Slowacki, another national poet wrote, "I have no dignity – I have

fled from martyrdom” (13).

In a letter to a Polish friend, Conrad reveals that “[H]omo duplex has in my case more than one meaning” (Watts 7), and by Homo duplex he meant the double man. As Cedric T. Watts describes, the god Janus presides over Conrad’s best work, because Janus with his two heads is able to look in different directions simultaneously so that “he presides over paradox” (7).

Conrad’s works illustrate his treatment of different and various imperial nations. According to him the least corrupt ones are Great Britain, France, Spain, and Japan respectively, while the most descending ones are Russia, Prussia, Belgium, and the United States. For him, Russia and Prussia occupy the bottom of the list, because they subjugated the Poles. Belgium comes after Russia and Prussia, for its bitter and imperialistic activities in Congo. The other countries, more or less, make contribution to the imperialistic and predatory acts, but theirs are not so inhumanistic as the previous ones. Conrad puts France in a high position because both Poles and French people have similar cultural affinities, and most importantly the Napoleonic army attacked Russia. For Conrad, Britain is the country of freedom and liberty. Because of its developed electoral system, advanced laws, and the respect for foreign refugees, Conrad puts Great Britain on the highest position of his list. Even Conrad’s letters show his special interest in the British Government where he declared that “liberty, . . . can only be found under the English flag” (as cited in Watts 59).

Coming back to Conrad’s family, one notices that his father, Apollo, was a real patriot and a loyal nationalist, but he was disloyal to his family, to his wife and young son, as his death brought about troubles for his family. Conrad was suspected of this kind of faithfulness in which loyalty to nation and country subverts loyalty to family. Such an idea is found in Conrad’s works. In *Nostromo*, Charles Gould prefers the progress in the silver-mine to his wife’s happiness, in *Under Western Eyes* the death of Haldin ends in his mother’s death. He is a revolutionary whose ideals are very important for him, and in *Lord Jim*, Jim’s self-destructive decision is the consequence of his idealistic and selfish thoughts and causes him to leave his most loyal friends, Jewel and Tamb’Itam.

Facing many upheavals that were resultants for the Polish rising of 1863, Russia decided to bestow the Poles with some sort of self-government. The Russians were replaced by the Poles in the official jobs and positions. Incidentally, two parties flourished in Warsaw and in other regions among the patriots; one was ‘Whites’ who were more moderate and mediocre in their political and social activities while the other was ‘Reds’ who were fervent and more intolerant in their expectations and demands. Korzeniowski, Conrad’s father, was chosen as the leader of the Reds in 1861. According to W. Danilowski, the two parties opposed each other strongly and dangerously, most

particularly, after the elections of the Town Council which was broken soon:

Two days later people came in great numbers to the Church of the Holy Cross, and to the building of the Academy, where the elections were to take place. We saw many students of the School of Arts and other people, young or old, belonging to the extremists, among them Apollo Korzeniowski, an honourable but too ardent patriot. These passed and re-passed through the crowd assembled to vote, distributing pamphlets, and whispering or talking to those to whom they handed them. . . . and we saw with astonishment that, in spite of the agreement, this was an urgent appeal not to vote. . . . The extremist insulted the students of the Academy, and one of the former, Apollo Korzeniowski, a well-known personality, full of genuine patriotism, and leader of the “Red” party, was obliged publicly to take back his words before the assembled students. (as cited in Morf 29 – 30)

Due to Conrad’s patriotic father, one expects the son to inherit his father’s love of Poland. The traces of Conrad’s patriotism can be followed in his works. Moreover, Conrad’s political essays “Autocracy and War” and “The Crime of Partition” can illuminate, more or less, the writer’s political tendencies. Conrad’s considerable loyalty to his homeland on the one hand, and his wish to gain his independence on the other hand, are important keys to his inner conflicts and tensions. As a young man, he left Poland for a foreign country in order to have a better fortune. Consequently, he became a British citizen under the anglicized name of Joseph Conrad. But his emigration became a topic for different discussions and debates. Wincenty Lutoslawski in a magazine named ‘Kraj’ revealed that “men of talent had the right to emigrate from an oppressed Poland; and . . . Conrad’s novels . . . even if in a foreign language, could still ‘preserve’ the national spirit” (as cited in Watts 52). However, outlooks like these have been harshly attacked. Eliza Orzeszkowa, a well-known novelist, held:

Creative ability is the very crown of the plant, the very top of the tower, the very heart of the heart of the nation. And to take away from one’s nation this flower, this top, this heart and to give it to the Anglo-Saxons who are not even lacking in bird’s milk, for the only reason that they pay better for it- one cannot even think of it without shame . . . Over the novels of Mr Conrad Korzenlowski no Polish girl will shed an altruistic tear . . . (52)

However, Conrad was not insensitive to such bitter assaults. He reveals that his intention for leaving Poland was for the sea thus:

Alas! I have the conviction that there are men of unstained rectitude who are ready to murmur scornfully the word desertion. Thus the taste of innocent adventure may be made bitter to the palate. The part of the inexplicable should be allowed for in appraising the conduct of men in a world where no explanation is final. No charge of faithlessness ought to be lightly uttered. (52)

Nevertheless, Conrad does not put the blame on his patriotic father or the Poles. He accuses the Russian Lords for his nation’s and family’s troubles. In his essay “Autocracy and War”, Conrad attacks Russia and shows

his deep disgust toward the imperialistic nation:

Russia . . . is not an empty void, she is a yawning chasm open between East and West; a bottomless abyss that has swallowed up every hope of mercy, every aspiration towards personal dignity, towards freedom, towards knowledge, every ennobling desire of the heart, every redeeming whisper of conscience. (as cited in Watts 54)

In the same essay, which was written in 1905, Conrad predicts the future of Russia. He reveals that although a revolution will dominate Russia, it will be the beginning of another tyranny:

In whatever form of upheaval Autocratic Russia is to find her end, it can never be a revolution fruitful of moral consequences to mankind. It cannot be anything else but a rising of slaves . . . It is safe to say tyranny, assuming a thousand protean shapes, will remain clinging to her struggles for a long time before her blind multitudes succeed at last in trampling her out of existence under their millions of bare feet. (54)

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Having the privileges of employing an English professor, one who belongs to the Western world and has “no comprehension of the Russian character” (6), Conrad brings, it seems, a narrator who has his own disattachment toward the events within the novel. After suspecting the words which are to him “the great foes of reality” and a world where “man appears a mere talking animal not much more wonderful than a parrot” (5), this narrator is authorized to follow and comment on Razumov and the other Russians involved in the flow of events of the novel. The narrator also holds that Haldin’s self-destructive assassination “is connected with an event characteristic of modern Russia in the actual fact . . . and still more characteristic of the moral corruption of an oppressed society” (8). To him, in such a society “the noblest aspirations of humanity, the desire sense of pity, and even the fidelity of simple minds are prostituted to the lust of hate and fear” (8).

Although the Russians presented in the novel belong to two teams, one the aristocrats and the other the revolutionists, Conrad describes them likewise. The revolutionists are as morally corrupt as the anarchists in *The Secret Agent* and oppressors as the aristocrats in *Under Western Eyes*. Generla T_____ who hangs on Razumov’s words about Haldin is “the embodied power of autocracy, . . . the whole power of autocracy” and stands for “the incarnate suspicion, the incarnate anger, the incarnate ruthlessness of a political and social regime on its defense” (63). Justifying his terrorist activity, Haldin attempts to comfort Razumov thus:

You suppose that I am a terrorist, now ___ a destructor of what is. But consider that the true destroyers are they who destroy the spirit of progress and truth, not the avengers who merely kill the bodies of the persecutors of human dignity. Men like me are necessary to make room for self-contained, thinking men like you. Well, we have made the sacrifice of our lives. (17)

This is when many bystanders assembled round the sledge of the Minister-President were murdered during the second attack. Indeed whether it is the brave code of

the terrorists to save the country or the ideology of the statesmen who are serving to prevent anarchy and are in charge of protecting the state, both are involved in an enterprise which is leading to despotism. That is why Razumov thinks that “Haldin means disruption” (27). The narrator highlights this autocracy spread in entire Russia and among the Russians by opining:

In Russia, the land of spectral ideas and disembodied aspirations, many brave minds have turned away at last from the vain and endless conflict to the one peace of their patriotic conscience as a weary unbeliever, touched by grace, turns to the faith of his fathers for the blessing of spiritual rest. (27)

This spirit of cynicism, it seems, is originated from Russia so that “the spirit of Russia is the spirit of cynicism” (51), and it is “the mark of Russian autocracy and of Russian revolt. In its pride of numbers, in its strange pretensions of sanctity” (51).

In a letter to Conrad, Edward Garnett who was a sympathizer with the revolutionists in Russia attacked and accused the author of rendering a false picture of the revolutionists and Russia in *Under Western Eyes*. Indeed all the endeavours and activities of these people ranging from the famous Feminist Peter Ivanovich to Madame de S_____, Nikita, Laspara, are Janus-faced so that they are portrayed as pretentious or ostentatious men and women in how they think and what they do. Nikita, the slayer of gendarmes and spies, who gave Razumov a deadly punishment turned to be a spy himself, or Peter Ivanovich who claimed to be a resolute Feminist was ready to contempt or even terrify Tekla, the lady in charge of serving Madame de S_____ and Peter in Chateau Borel, the great mansion.

In depicting the sympathy of comprehension that Haldin demanded from Razumov when he sought protection, it seems Conrad entreats his readers to sympathize with him in his exposition of the Russian character and characteristics. His other novel *Lord Jim* is seen as a personal political allegory in which Jim leaps from Patna to save his life and later seeks to redeem himself by his toils in some Eastern lands. Gustav Morf in his book *The Polish Heritage of Joseph Conrad* suggests that Conrad was sublimating his feelings of guilt at abandoning Poland. *Under Western Eyes* stands for another political allegory which is rooted in the long oppression imposed on the Poles by Russia. Strange enough Conrad gives us a very harsh description of the revolutionaries who attempt to uproot a bloody regime, one that made the Poles suffer for a long time. In fact, in both the defenders of Tsarist autocracy and the revolutionary groups, he shows turpitude and wickedness. Even after the Russian Revolution took place, in the Author’s Note to *Under Western Eyes*, while referring to the Russians, Conrad points out:

These people are unable to see that all they can effect is merely a change of names. The oppressors and the oppressed are all Russians together; and the world is brought once more face with

the truth of the saying that the tiger cannot change his stripes nor the leopard his spots. (xxi)

In a discussion between Peter Ivanovitch and Razumov, the latter who was already distinguished by Madam de S_____ as a very reserved person who let nothing of his thoughts be seen in his face, Razumov reveals that “we Russians are prone to take too much as a rule. I have always felt that. And yet, as a nation, we are dumb” (171). This follows their other argument in which Ivanovitch addresses him “one of us” (156), and Razumov acknowledges:

The very patronymic you are so civil as to use when addressing me I have no legal right to – but what of that? I don’t wish to claim it. I have no legal father. So much the better. But I will tell you what: my mother’s grandfather was a peasant – a serf. See how much I am one of you. I don’t want anyone to claim me. But Russia can’t disown me. She cannot!”. (156 – 157)

‘One of us’ is a significant refrain of Conrad’s *Lord Jim*. The phrase is also echoed in his other fictions when raising the issues of social community, political demarcation, or any other typical boundaries. Having a sense of ambiguity and being among Conrad’s strategic species, ‘one of us’ bears a verbal significance, meaning Razumov is a part of both Ivanovitch specific revolutionary ‘circle’ and ‘Russia’. In fact, Conrad in placing people in different boundaries and circles, the camp of the revolutionaries and that of the aristocrats, follows an anecdote-approach of dividing men into the good and the bad. Such an outlook penetrates Conrad’s later works and it becomes one characteristic of his pen among others. In *Under Western Eyes*, the division is not limited to the revolutionists and their adversaries, but it is expanded into the two worlds of the occidental and the oriental. Consequently, evil is lodged and played up in Russia and among the Russians so that Russianness is behind any evaluation of motives or characters in the novel, while the emphasis throughout the novel is that we – the west – have no habitation for this form of

evil. Again, Conrad’s animus against Russia which is settled deeply in his mind is stimulated once more in his treatment of a tough demarcation and enclosure.

CONCLUSION

Indeed Conrad’s novels tend to present public and private histories of mankind. They are political and psychological and these two trends are interrelated so skillfully that the outcome cannot resist any deep political penetration. Being a psychological novel and so much being influenced by Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, *Under Western Eyes* reflects the author’s anxieties about the current political and social challenges. It is a novel where Conrad dramatizes his deep feelings and uneasiness about Poland and Russia, and all his endeavours are to seek sympathy of comprehension. It is his well-written Polish manifesto about Russia and the Russian people so that one can come across his political outlook which turned to be a prophecy fulfilled in 1917 when Tsarism was overthrown and a new tyranny emerged.

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