UNIT 12: JOSEPH CONRAD: *LORD JIM* I

UNIT STRUCTURE

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12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- form an idea regarding the background of modernist fiction
- discuss the life and works of Joseph Conrad
- identify Conrad as an important novelist of the early 20th century
- trace the context of the novel *Lord Jim*
- explain and summarise the novel

12.2 INTRODUCTION

The English novel became immensely popular at the turn of the nineteenth century. It is the only literary form that overshadowed poetry and drama, and continued to successfully compete with other mediums such as the radio and the cinema. Late nineteenth century and early twentieth century was marked by wars, political uprisings, colonial rule, civil unrest, the ebb and flow of economic fortunes, all of which played a significant part in shaping the literature of the period. Important cultural issues, such as

effects of colonialism, women's suffragette, increased industrialism and mechanisation, scientific and technological advances, and the changing political climate were equally influential in doing the same. Furthermore, the literary, philosophical, and artistic movements of this period directly relate to the literature that appeared. Even more than other British novelists, Conrad was affected not only by important historical events in England but also by those on the continent. Although Conrad wrote in the English language, he was not a British by birth. Given his years in Poland, France, Russia and the Orient, Conrad's experience was far more cosmopolitan than that of most of his fellow novelists in England. In particular, Conrad was significantly influenced by events affecting France, Poland, and Russia during the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century. These events would form the context for Conrad's life and also for much of his fiction.

Conrad resisted being associated with any particular literary movement because he felt that it restricted and compartmentalised a writer's work. Nevertheless, one can still discuss certain tendencies in Conrad's work in light of the literary and artistic movements of his time, particularly since his own work was often instrumental in developing some of these movements. Among the literary and artistic movements of Conrad's time, Modernism was the most important to his work. Modernism is known for its formal experimentation and in fiction; this experimentation took a number of forms such as achronological narratives, multiple narrators, stream-of-consciousness narration, fragmented narratives, inconclusive endings, unreliable narrators. However, Modernism was not just concerned with formal experimentation. Modernist writers were just as concerned with larger philosophical issues. Modernist literature is often known for its insistence on issues such as an indifferent universe, alienation of the individual in the modern world, indeterminacy of knowledge, and for its emphasis on conceptions of the self. All of these come out of the atmosphere of uncertainty concerning traditionally held truths that arose in the nineteenth century. In the following section, we shall discuss briefly about the novelist Joseph Conrad.

12.3 JOSEPH CONRAD: THE NOVELIST

The following sections shall enable you to know in details the life and works of Joseph Conrad.

12.3.1 His Life

Joseph Conrad is best known for the writings of his middle period approximately between the period 1899 to 1911. This period was Conrad's most productive and has generally been seen as comprising his most artistically accomplished works like the short fiction namely, *Youth*, *Heart of Darkness, Typhoon and Other Stories* and the novels such as *Lord Jim* and *Nostromo*.

He was a Polish-born English novelist. He is regarded as the greatest novelists to have written in the English language and is considered one of the prolific modern writers of England . The complexities of the human mind, suffering and distress, and power that lead to misjudgement have been the principle concerns in his novels. The character development in Conrad's works is enthralling and powerful. He was among the first writers to have introduced an essentially non-English sensibility into English literature. Conrad in his stories and novels, included nautical setting , that depicted the trials of human spirit amid the apathetic universe .

Jozef Teodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski (Joseph Conrad) was born to Joseph Theodore Appolonius Korzeniowski and Eveline Korzeniowski on December 3, 1857, in Berdyczew, Poland. His father was a writer and the translator of the works of William Shakespeare (1564 - 1616). His father was engaged in a movement seeking for Polish independence from Russia. In the year 1862 the Korzeniowski family had to forcefully move to Russia due to his father's involvement in politics . Conrad's mother died in the year 1865. Later in the year 1867 , Conrad and his father returned back to Poland.

Conrad was given education at home by his father. The early reading that was introduced to him that prevailed his life included Victor Hugo's *Toiler of the Sea*, and Shakespeare, both of which brought him into the orbit of English literature . The two prominent writers apart from Hugo and Shakespeare that influenced him were the workers of Mickiewicz and Slowacki, as his father would read to him aloud. He initially preferred Mickiewicz but later preferred Slowacki , as he was considered the soul of all Poland . However in the year 1869, Conrad's father died, when he was just eleven years old . Conrad was now left with his mother's brother Tadeusz Bobrowski. Conrad was not a good student and his health problems would cause economic disgrace to his uncle. At the age of thirteen, Conrad urged to become a sailor, as he was influenced with books by the American, James Fernimore Cooper and the English Captain Frederick Marryat . In October 13 ,1874 , Bobrowski sent fifteen year Conrad to Marseilles, France. Conrad did not complete his secondary school, yet he was a fluent French speaker with some knowledge of Latin, German, and Greek and good knowledge in Geography, History , Physics and Political Romantic literature .

In June 1878 Conrad went to England and became a British citizen . He travelled to the Belgian Congo , Zaire and Africa which inspired much of his writings. From 1896 to 1904, he wrote many novels about the places he explored when he was a merchant marine. He was given many honours during his lifetime including Knighthood which he declined. Conrad passed away due to cardiac related issue in the year 1924 and by that time he was well-established in the literary world as one of the leading modernists. He was buried at Canterbury, England.



LET US KNOW

After his death Conrad was buried at the Canterbury Cemetery in Canterbury. The following lines from Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* which he had chosen as the epigraph to his last complete novel, *The Rover*, are engraved on his headstone as his epitaph:

"Sleep after toyle, port after stormie seas,
Ease after warre, death after life, doth greatly please."

12.3.2 His Works

Joseph Conrad's first novels were *Almayer's Folly* (1895) and *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), both of which were set in the Malay archipelago and rich in exotic description. This was followed by *The Niger of the Narcissus* (1897), and *Lord Jim* (1900). The sea continued to be the central setting of his novels and short stories, partly influenced by his own experiences out in the sea. His narrative technique is characterised by the presence of a frame narrator, Marlow and also contains breaks in the plots. His richly textured narrative prose shows evidence of influence from Polish and French writings. Around 1899, he also wrote novellas that were published in the *Blackwood Magazine* such as *Heart of Darkness* and *Youth.* His other novels include *Typhoon* (1903) which was followed by one of his major works *Nostromo* (1904) that focused on man's psychology and vulnerability in relation with public actions. In the novel *The Secret Agent* (1907) which was somewhat similar to Dickens' writings, he gives the description of London. *Under Western Eyes* (1911) is set in Switzerland and Russia and is centred around a student called Razumov who is caught up in the treachery and violence of Revolution.

Conrad's other major novels include *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906), *Victory* (1915), *The Shadow Line* (1917), *The Rescue* (1920) and *The Rover* (1923). His autobiography *A Personal Record* came out in book form in 1912 and his unfinished novel *Suspense* was published in 1925.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: When was Lord Jim published?

12.4 CONTEXT OF THE NOVEL

J.H. Stape writes that Lord Jim is a novel that "dissects and reassembles the consciousness of a young man" who in his flaws and disappointments "resembles like the rest of us". The novel resembles the tragedies of the past where the hero, even with all his merits and virtues, undergoes a downward spiral and doom due to a tragic flaw in his character. In case of Jim, the tragic flaw is a naive mistake on his part that haunts him for the rest of his life.

For generations, most Westerners had viewed their way of looking at the world as the only one possible, a view evolving out of Christian theology and ultimately based upon absolute truths. Consequently, they saw Western culture's advanced technology and civilisation as validating their world view, with all other ways of looking at the world appearing inferior, backward, and wrong. However, the challenges to such Western views that appeared in the nineteenth century brought into question fundamental assumptions about the nature of the world and the nature of the universe. In this way, the moorings of Western civilisation began to erode, and the very idea of absolute truths came to be scrutinised. The effects of this cultural climate profoundly influenced the world in which Conrad wrote. Conrad is known primarily as a Modernist writer, and he certainly fits in with the movement. In fact, he may be the first Modernist. His works clearly evidence both the Modernist experimentation with form and the Modernist view of the world. Formal experimentation appears as early as his first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, with the flash back and flash forward techniques he employs.

This experimentation becomes much more pronounced in many of the works from his middle period on. The shifts in time and space that occur

in *Lord Jim* and even more drastically in *Nostromo* are examples of Conrad's experimentation, as are the multiple narrators he employs in relating the tales told in *Heart of Darkness*, *Typhoon*, and elsewhere. On the other hand, the alienation, solitude, and epistemological uncertainty that so many of his characters experience speaks of Conrad's Modernist world view, as they consistently try to find meaning and order in human existence while recognising that such is never transcendent but merely contingent – merely a means to do away with the chaos, anarchy, and nihilism.

Lord Jim, considered one of the best works of Joseph Conrad, is unique for its narrative style. The novel begins with the omniscient third person voice and is then broken up by Marlow's narration of Jim's story. Marlow has a complete control over the story as he brood over and attempts to find meaning in Jim's story . His language is dense with terms like "inscrutable" and "inexplicable" , words that denote vagueness but which also possess a certain quality of uncertainty in themselves, as words. This uncertainty of language is the key feature of Conrad's writing style. Conrad is known for his high , elegiac language that seems to contain depths of complexity nearly indefinable in words. One of the stylistic devices that Conrad used in the novel is the use of symbolism. The use of symbolism is what makes the novel so amazing. The repeated use of sea imagery represents dark past of Jim, which he was struggling to escape. Conrad wrote many stories and novels with a marine setting that depict the assessment of the human spirit amidst the enigmatic universe. His narrative style and anti-heroic characters influenced numerous authors. Conrad wrote stories and novels based on his own experiences in the French and British merchant naives, that reflects the aspects of European dominated world including imperialism and colonialism and that profoundly explore the human psychology. Conrad's narrative technique in the story is unusual, as the information comes from a variety of sources, a third-person narrator, who relates more than one perspective, as well as letters by crew members.

12.5 SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL

Lord Jim was first published in the year 1900. It began as a short story based on a true tragic incident, where a steamship called Jeddah, carrying Muslim pilgrims from Singapore to Mecca was drowned. The novel was initially published as a series in *Blackwood's Magazine*. Joseph Conrad spent much of his time between 1883 and 1888 in the area now called as Indonesia. The second part of the novel takes place in a fictional village named Patusan on the Borneo Island. The novel centres around the protagonist, the British seaman Jim who is publicly condemned for abandoning a drowning ship along with its passengers. The plot revolves around his attempts after that incident, to overcome his past and regain his lost honour.

Jim, the son of a English parson, aspires to become a sailor. With his romantic aspirations for the sea, he roams the Asian south seas as a water clerk. After a long injury and stay in the hospital, instead of returning back to England, he accepts the position of chief mate of a local streamer Patna, carrying eight hundred pilgrims to Mecca. The voyage is led by a German captain followed by five white men as crew.

During the journey, the steamer sails through the Arabian sea. One night, Jim and the other crew members senses unusual vibrations disturbing the bottom of the steamer, after the steamer hits something and begins to take on water. Jim suddenly talks to the official inquiry, but with the believe that the ship is on the verge of sinking, panic arises among the crew members . The captain and the two crew members thinks to save themselves and therefore prepare to lower a boat. Jim, however wants to put the passengers on the few boats. But before that can happen, out of panic Jim, unable to decide jumps into the boat, leaving the passengers on the drowning steamer. The Patna and its passengers were saved by the French navy ship. Jim and the members, after reaching the port learns that the ship was rescued. The captain and the other two crew members leave the town, and Jim

only was left to bear witness . All lose their certificates to sail and the Captain commits suicide after losing the reputation as a perfect sailor.

Captain Marlow, attends the trial and meets Jim, who confesses his guilt to Marlow. The narrative is now shifted to Marlow, who is now telling the story of Jim. Marlow befriends Jim and finds him his old friend's place with no family and is the owner of a rice mill. Soon Jim learns that a crew member from the Patna is the manager of the mill, and he leaves as he did not want to be near the unfortunate memory of his past. Jim then finds a job as a water clerk in ports of the East Indies, while he was succeeding in his job, he hastily quits the job when the Patna is mentioned. Marlow worries about Jim's condition and hence consults with his good friend Stein who was a successful writer with both romantic and tragic life history. Both discusses about Jim and Stein offers the former to be his trade representative in Patusan, a village in a remote island. Jim accepts the offer as he finds what he exactly needs, he got an opportunity to move from his past and start a new life.

In the village Patusan, there were the two native communities Malay and the Burgis. After his initial challenge to enter the village, he manages to earn the respect of the natives by freeing them from the depredations of the bandit Sherif Ali and protecting them from the local Malay chief Rajah Tunku Allang. He shared a great bonding with Doramin, Stein's friend and his son Dain Warris. Jim for his bravery was named "tuan Jim" or Lord Jim. Jewel a young woman of mixed race falls in love with Jim. Jewel believes that just like her father left her mother Jim would not stay with her. Her mother who died, was married to Cornelius who is a jealous and lazy person and treats his daughter brutally. He was the trade factor of Stein , who steals supplies for sale, later he is replaced by Jim and decides to seek revenge against Jim. Marlow then visits Patusan and becomes overwhelmed to see Jim's success.

Captain Brown, infamous for his evil ways, arrives in Patusan, as his small crew runs out of food and water. Dain followed by the

local refuge manages to stop the intruders from looting the village and keeps them fixed in place. Jim was away to some other place and after he returns Brown wins Jim's sympathy. Reluctantly, Jim allows them to leave Patusan and reminds Brown of the long passage to the sea will be guarded by refugee. Cornelius takes it as an opportunity to destroy Jim and tells Brown the other side channel that will avoid most of the defenders, Brown then stops the defenders on his way and in the process Dain Warris among some other defenders gets killed. Brown sails on, leaving Cornelius who gets killed by Jim's man TambItam for his duplicity. Jim gets traumatised when he learns the death of Dain Warris. Jewel who wanted Jim to attack Brown and his ship, becomes numb. Jim, taking the responsibility of Dain's death goes to Doramin. Doramin upon learning the news of the death of his only son, ends up shooting Jim with his pistol in the chest .

Marlow arrives at Stein's house a couple of days later after this tragic incident where he finds Itam and Jewel there and tries to relate as to what happened .



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 2: What is it that haunts Jim's memory?

Q 3: Who is the principal narrator in the novel?

Q 4: What does the word "tuan" mean?

Q 5: Jim is send to Patusan to replace _____.



12.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit provides the learner with an introduction to the author Joseph Conrad with a detailed discussion of his life and works. It has also provided an overall analysis of the novel *Lord Jim*. The discussion of the background of the novel should help you place the novel in its proper historical context and hence follow it better. It highlights a discussion on Modernist Fiction

with special reference to Conrad. This unit shall help in your understanding of the various aspects of the novel that we shall deal in the next unit.



12.7 FURTHER READING

1) Birch, Dinah. (2011). *Oxford Companion to English Literature.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

2) Peters, John G. (2006). *The Cambridge Introduction to Joseph Conrad.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

3) Stape, J.H (Ed.) (2004 rpt.). *The Cambridge Comapnion to Joseph Conrad*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

12.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: *Lord Jim* was published in the year 1900.

Ans to Q No 2: Jim is haunted by the memory of abandoning the ship Patna.

Ans to Q No 3: Marlow is the principal narrator in the novel.

Ans to Q No 4: The word 'tuan' means lord.

Ans to Q No 5: Cornelius.



12.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1 : Write an essay on the contribution of Joseph Conrad to Modernist Literature.

Q 2 : Describe the Patna incident. What was its impact on the life of Jim?

Q 3 : Describe the events in the novel that finally lead to the death of Jim.

Q 4 : Write short notes on the following :

a. Background of the Novel.

b. Joseph Conrad as a modern novelist.

Q 5 : Critically summarise the novel *Lord Jim*.

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