

The Best Books by Joseph Conrad

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Heart of Darkness

Heart of Darkness is a densely-packed tale that is both profoundly political and profoundly apolitical. It is to be sure a powerful critique of colonial waste and abuse (while also revealing Conrad's, or at least his narrator Marlow's, cultural blind spots regarding his African characters), but it is also a journey within, with Marlow in search of the self and the meaning of human existence. As Marlow journeys up-river and approaches closer and closer to the literal heart of darkness in the Congo, he also approaches closer and closer to the figurative heart of darkness as he comes to see life as a "droll thing": "that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself – that comes too late – a crop of unextinguishable regrets." For Marlow, meaning for human existence can only come from confronting an empty universe and in the face of that knowledge maintaining an "inner strength," acting as if there were an inherent order and purpose to life and society while remaining aware that such is only contingent.

Lord Jim

Lord Jim is a book about honor, the loss of honor, and the attempt to regain honor, but it is also a book about the world view that creates the conditions under which that honor is achieved. In a moment of weakness, Jim fails in his duties as officer aboard a maritime vessel and spends the remainder of the novel trying to atone for that failing. Jim is, as the narrator Marlow calls him, "one of us," that is an adherent to a code of conduct that expects unfailing fidelity to that code. But the code allows for no redemption. And yet Marlow and others know that there is nothing at the back of the code, that is it is a mere social contract, but its adherents treat the code as if it were founded upon transcendental truths. Although Marlow recognizes that the code is not absolute but only contingent, he finds he cannot relinquish it. Further complicating matters, the code is a product of the idealism of the Victorian world, which expected unwavering adherence to an ideal standard of behavior from imperfect beings. Consequently, by extension, the same contingency of the maritime code is revealed to be at the heart of the Western world view that is the origin of the code, as the novel in the end comes to question the very nature of the Western universe.

Nostromo

Nostromo is the first of Conrad's oddly apolitical political novels, that is unlike the typical political novel that posits a particular political position in opposition to another political position, Conrad rejects all political positions. In *Nostromo*, this view appears in the endless cycle of revolutions that occur in the fictitious South American country of Costaguana, each revolution fueled not by the desire for better government but by the persistent desire for personal gain. The novel

further ties its politics to reinvigorating a long-defunct silver mine, as Conrad also critiques economic imperialism and material interests in the novel. All of the characters are negatively influenced by the material wealth the mine creates, and the mine becomes the ruling element in the lives of the novel's characters. The mine incites the revolutionaries, who desire its wealth; it brings about the American and European economic and political intervention in Costaguana; and it brings about the personal tragedies of so many of the characters, as one of its characters remarks of the possibility of finding a lost shipment of silver: "Isn't there enough treasure without it to make everybody in the world miserable?"

The Secret Agent

The Secret Agent is Conrad's most carefully controlled novel. While novels such as *Nostromo* and *Lord Jim* may have gotten away from him a bit, Conrad is in complete control of *The Secret Agent*. The novel is a carefully-wrought narrative and like *Nostromo* is a novel of politics, and also like *Nostromo* it is highly critical both of the revolutionaries and the established authorities. Conrad also follows through even more clearly than in *Nostromo* his rejection of those who place politics over the individuals those politics are supposed to serve. Conrad deliberately establishes a close interaction between a political plot and a domestic plot, as Verloc's terrorist actions, forced upon him by an established government to place blame on the revolutionaries, utterly destroy himself and, more important from Conrad's perspective, his family members, as we experience the graphic consequences of political action in the body of Verloc's brother-in-law being inadvertently blown in such small pieces that he had to be gathered up with a shovel. A major feature of the novel is also the all-permeating irony of the novel's omniscient narrator.

Under Western Eyes

Under Western Eyes is the last of Conrad's overtly political novels, and, like *Nostromo* and *The Secret Agent*, it rejects both sides of the political struggle. The novel most dramatically chronicles the consequences of political views that do not place individuals over ideas. Razumov, a university student, simply wants to remain neutral in the struggle between the Russian revolutionaries and the Tsarist government, but neither side of the political divide will allow him to do so. Each pushes upon him unwelcome political action, and the result is the complete destruction of his existence, a promising student with hopes of academic success at the opening of the novel he ends the novel with no future possibilities; he can never finish his university training and is now deaf, having had his eardrums burst (ironically by a double agent), and permanently disabled when he is run over by a streetcar because he cannot hear it coming.

Under Western Eyes most strikingly shows how individuals are crushed between competing political forces. The novel reveals in the end that despite their beliefs otherwise, both political forces, revolution and autocracy, are equally dismissive of legality and ultimately appear to be merely different aspects of the same entity. As Conrad remarks in his "Author's Note" to the novel: "The ferocity and imbecility of an autocratic rule rejecting all legality and, in fact, basing itself upon complete moral anarchism provokes the no less imbecile and atrocious answer of a purely Utopian revolutionism encompassing destruction by the first means to hand." A