

THE EVERLASTING ADAM: CONRAD'S VIEW OF MAN

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The enigmatic nature of man is of pivotal interest in Joseph Conrad's art. By bringing a kaleidoscope of elements into focus, the author delineates a fundamentally Adamic view of man. The Conradian Adam, the father of mankind, is a complex combination of the Biblical inhabitant of the Garden of Eden and the savage figure which emerged from the nineteenth-century concept of primitive man. The figure which fuses Biblical and evolutionary man connotes not only the barbarism of an animalistic nature, but also the consciousness of a creature morally responsible for his actions.

While in Conrad's world man may achieve an expansive knowledge in order to rise above the crudity of the past, the very height to which he ascends has a converse correspondent in the depths to which he can fall. Modern man may have reached a pinnacle beyond the grasp of his ancestors, but the position fails to make him invulnerable to the destructive elements in his nature that precipitated the fall of the original Adam. In fact, by attaining those very heights, modern man seems to have rejected in the process those saving forces of faith, morality, and community which were redemptive bonds in the past.

In Conrad's framework, modern man is only a slight

variation of his Adamic ancestor; the man of old is the core of the man of today, and all men of all ages wander in a moral wilderness of their own creation. The original Adamic loss of innocence is paralleled in the modern destruction of personal honor. Just as the loss of innocence in Adam occasioned the knowledge of evil, the loss of honor in nineteenth- and twentieth-century man brings the full realization of the inescapable degradation of the human situation. Man is animal, yes, but he has the fortune--or is it misfortune?--to be a moral creature at the same time; his inherent savage nature is continually required to rise above itself.

The corruption of Conrad's characters is qualified. He does not entirely forsake them to the obscurity of a depraved destiny. Instead, he employs their unavoidable compulsion to act as the springboard for their possible redemption. Man cannot avoid action of some sort, and even though action will eventually cause each man to fall, it also remains as an avenue for a partial restoration of his lost honor.

The necessity to be human binds each man inextricably, not only to his ancestor Adam, but to his contemporary fellow man as well. In this bond of man to man--not of man to God--Conrad's characters discover their damnation or partial redemption. Thomas Moser believes that "Conrad is the traditional moralist; each of his stories is a kind of pilgrim's

progress (but without God!)."¹ Or, as Douglas Hewitt says, "God is not apparent in his [Conrad's] work; he takes no comfort from the supernatural hopes of improvement or redemption. . . . He is in the position--and it is not an uncommon one for writers of the last fifty years--of feeling the reality of a moral and spiritual order sufficiently for it to condemn normal feelings and normal idealisms, but of having no beliefs that can give him hope that the forces of evil will be overcome."² In Conrad's world, men are rewarded or punished by a morality which is unbending but which acknowledges no God to make it logical. Joseph X. Brennan and Seymour L. Gross note that there is a "paradox of Conrad's morality: a belief in absolutes which have no absolute sanction."³ They view Conrad's world as a "universe where there are no eternal sanctions," where "virtue and vice must all the more emphatically reap their own rewards."⁴ This ultimate condition, however, is never quite absolute; the damnation of a character is accomplished with an awful awareness that there is in each man the saintly and the satanic--and a character's redemption

¹Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline (Cambridge, 1957), p. 15.

²Conrad: A Reassessment (Cambridge, 1952), p. 131.

³"The Problem of Moral Values in Conrad and Faulkner," The Personalist, XLI (1960), 65.

⁴Brennan and Gross, p. 65.

or moral victory is tempered with the disillusionment of partial defeat.

The coupling of evolutionary Adam and Biblical Adam creates a depth of dimension which neither concept could achieve alone. Through this technique, Conrad delineates the horror of a civilization which is essentially barbaric, the falsity of apparently cultured personalities which are seen to be no better--and sometimes worse--than their counterparts in primitive lands. But as awful as this may seem, the portrayal is intensified by the tragedy of Eden--the presence of the potential for good in man and the loss of his paradise through the forces of evil which often cause him to sell his heaven to satisfy his instinctive desires. If one tries to make Conradian characters conform entirely to either Adam, he must eventually fail. Each is vital to the other and to the complete portrait of Conrad's view of life.

The primitive Adam of humanity is commonly described by Conrad as an element within each person--his alter ego or some element within himself which he finds frightening and often detestable. The confrontation with this other self is an unavoidable one for all those who desire to see beyond surface truth--which, in reality, is barely truth at all. This kind of realization is distasteful, however, and many characters try to avoid the inevitable comprehension of their

true natures. William Stein writes of this element in Conrad's work: "On occasions this confrontation with the naked ego (the mind stripped of all its protective illusions) may be delayed by fear, stupidity, cowardice, irresolution, or immobility, but eventually the disabling issue must be faced: Conrad exacts the extreme penalty for any incontinent indulgence in the modern vice of optimism."⁵ Conrad defines no solution for the total destruction of the primitive evil within. According to Leo Gurko, Conrad's characters "had to learn, like Marlow, to live with the Kurtz inside themselves, with the devils, murderers, cowards, betrayers lying in wait within."⁶

Conrad's most revelatory portrayal of the primitive elements within man comes in Heart of Darkness. Marlow takes his listeners back to a significant moment of English history when the Romans occupied the land of darkness which was early England. Parallels are drawn from the present moment of Marlow's England to the Roman past and later to the primeval past. Marlow's journey into Africa is also a journey backward in time, and it verifies the awful realization that modern man draws his every breath from his barbaric

⁵William Bysshe Stein, "Conrad's East: Time, History, Action, and Maya," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, VII (1965), iii, 265.

⁶Joseph Conrad: Giant in Exile (New York, 1962), p. 249.

ancestry. When describing the first phases of the African journey, Marlow states, "Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world. . . . You thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once--somewhere--far away--in another existence perhaps."⁷ As Marlow's sense of detachment from the modern world grows, he experiences an uncomfortable feeling of identification with primeval man: "No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it--this suspicion of their not being inhuman. . . . They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity--like yours--the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise."⁸ Marlow's discovery fascinates him because of its truth--the truth that he is, indeed, the inheritor of the cannibal, the tribal dance, the savage religious ritual. His realization, though, scarcely lessens the blow of his encounter with Kurtz, the European who has

⁷Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness in Three Great Tales, Vintage Edition (New York, 1958), p. 253.

⁸Heart of Darkness, p. 256.

fallen to such a state that, as Robert F. Haugh asserts, "Kurtz has become pre-Christian, primal energy, demiurge."⁹ He had become even more savage than the tribesmen whom he "ruled" with maniacal passion.

Captain Wallace of The Secret Sharer finds in Leggatt some of the same qualities which Marlow found in Kurtz. The captain is confronted with his other self in Leggatt and as Paul Levine has pointed out, he learns that "our alter ego houses a murder (sic) within and that we are not free until we have confronted him."¹⁰ Or perhaps even more frightening to the captain is the suspicion that he will find additional evil within his unknown self. The captain's real difficulty lies in being a stranger to himself, and as Douglas Hewitt asserts, the captain's primary fear is that ". . .there are parts of himself which he has not yet brought into the light of day and that these aspects of his personality may interfere with 'that ideal conception of one's own personality which every man sets up for himself secretly,'"¹¹ The realization of the primitive in man generally shatters a comfortable illusion of idealism.

⁹Joseph Conrad: Discovery in Design (Norman, 1957), p. 38.

¹⁰"Joseph Conrad's Blackness," South Atlantic Quarterly, LXIII (1964), ii, 204.

¹¹Hewitt, p. 73.

Marlow and Captain Wallace, however, are not the only characters who recognize their link with the primitive, nor is Kurtz the only one who succumbs to his savage instincts. In Lord Jim, Jim reverts to his instinct for survival, despite all his dreams of making himself heroic. As the Patna wallows toward what Jim thought was her destruction, the debased crew settles into a lifeboat. As Jim recalls the scene, he gasps out in agony, "I had jumped. . . . It seems. . . . I knew nothing about it until I looked up."¹² All the romantic illusions about his courage are erased in one blind moment of obedience to his Adamic nature.

Nostromo and Mr. Gould also have savage qualities, but their weakness is primarily in the primitive's irresistible desire for glittering metal which may become part of the superstitious creed by which he lives. Hewitt notes that "Nostromo is moved partly by greed . . . and most by a superstitious belief that the treasure is accursed and that he is the man who must bear the curse, for 'It was paid for by a soul lost and by a vanished life.'"¹³ Instead of utilizing wealth for good, Nostromo and Gould yield to the evil power of the earth's treasure, creating a modern "religion of silver and iron," enslaving themselves and their

¹²Lord Jim, Riverside Edition (Boston, 1958), p. 81.

¹³Hewitt, p. 57.

countrymen in the process.

In The Secret Agent, Winnie Verloc discovers that her husband has been largely responsible for the death of her retarded brother Stevie, the child who formed the only tie which bound her to Mr. Verloc throughout the years of their marriage. Richard Curle believes that Winnie's "primitive instincts . . . lay close to the surface: they had not been toned down by a culture of which she knew nothing, they had been repressed by a sense of protective loyalty."¹⁴ But once she learns of Stevie's death, she employs her inherited nature by stabbing her husband. Her act of murder is described in a revealing manner: "Into that plunging blow, delivered over the side of the couch, Mrs. Verloc had put all the inheritance of her immemorial and obscure descent, the simple ferocity of the age of caverns, and the unbalanced nervous fury of the age of bar-rooms."¹⁵ The woman whose philosophy of life had hinged on the belief that "life doesn't stand much looking into" is forced to look into the sterility of her relationship with Verloc.¹⁶ The emptiness she finds there calls forth the savage bitterness

¹⁴Joseph Conrad and His Characters (London, 1957), p. 123.

¹⁵The Secret Agent in A Conrad Argosy (New York, 1942), p. 452.

¹⁶The Secret Agent, p. 416.

of a lifetime of sacrifice for a child now dead--and nothing now stands between Winnie and her revenge.

The image of the primitive is extended to more than Winnie in The Secret Agent. Stevie's fragmented body is described as the "accumulation of raw material for a cannibal feast."¹⁷ The innocent half-wit becomes food, in a sense, for the savage creatures of modern London.

The juxtaposition of the savage and the civilized--which turn out to be essentially identical--is found throughout Conrad's work. One of the clearest statements comes in Almayer's Folly where Nina, the daughter of a European man and a Malayan woman, struggles to find her true identity. She finds that the force of her mother's instincts outweighs the "civilization" of her father: "She had little belief and no sympathy for her father's dreams; but the savage ravings of her mother chanced to strike a responsive chord, deep down somewhere in her despairing heart. . . ."¹⁸ Perhaps she had no valid choice after all. Almayer himself reverts back to the life of a savage, forsaking his futile dreams. A monkey, Almayer's constant companion at the end of his life, "seemed to have taken complete charge of his master. . . ."¹⁹ Almayer,

¹⁷The Secret Agent, p. 378.

¹⁸Joseph Conrad, Almayer's Folly in A Conrad Argosy (New York, 1942), p. 151.

¹⁹Almayer's Folly, p. 203.

too, having no more ties to bind him to civilization, chose to follow his more primitive instincts.

Skillfully connecting contemporary humans with their counterparts in history, Conrad reveals the static quality of human nature. Though he makes it apparent that modern man may have a greater capacity for good, he also has a greater capacity for evil; and the historic man in his novels is occasionally seen to be preferable to the civilized man. Donald R. Benson speaks of this when he observes that Conrad chose civilized man for the test case of elemental savagery "because civilization has equipped him, technologically and imaginatively, with a larger capacity for corruption."²⁰ Giving his readers an insight into the ruthlessness of man, the narrator of Nostromo comments, "At no time of the world's history have men been at a loss how to inflict mental and bodily anguish upon their fellow creatures. . . . But it may safely be said that primeval man did not go to the trouble of inventing tortures. He was indolent and pure of heart. He brained his neighbor ferociously with a stone axe from necessity and without malice."²¹ This essential ignorance combined with action arising from necessity rather than calculated evil intent paints a vivid portrait of

²⁰"'Heart of Darkness': The Grounds of Civilization in an Alien Universe," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, VII (1966), iv, 345.

²¹Joseph Conrad, Nostromo, Modern Library Edition (New York, 1951), p. 415.

primeval man. And Conrad never minimizes the essential baseness of modern man's prehistoric representatives; he employs them to reveal the true nature of twentieth-century man. The narrator of Nostromo states, "Not perhaps that primitive men were more faithless than their descendants of today, but that they went straighter to their aim, and were more artless in their recognition of success as the only standard of morality."²² These comments come in the midst of a description of the cruel Montero takeover in the province of Sulaco. Placed in such a context, Pedrito Montero's assertion that "We are not barbarians" is, of course, absurd.

The barbaric qualities inherited from modern man's ancestors reveal themselves in numerous instances. They are typically the most obvious in a setting foreign to the Americans and Europeans who compose Conrad's major reading audience: "Conrad deals with no time and place that we know," declares Claire Rosenfield, "and yet the author's imaginative evocation of Sulaco convinces us that it is all time and every place."²³ Conrad achieves much the same effect with a European setting. He does deal with all time, every place, and, it might be added, each person, for the reader can achieve a safe distance for observation only slightly

²²Nostromo, p. 429.

²³Paradise of Snakes (Chicago, 1967), p. 44.

before he comprehends that he cannot entirely separate himself from the characters.

The majority of Conrad's primeval characters represent the Adamic weaknesses and strengths, the passions and frustrations of all humanity. The significant factor here is that once a person has recognized even one of his own attributes in a Conradian character, he is nearly compelled to trace his lineage to the same source as that of his partial prototype in the novel. Thus he feels indirectly his kinship with even the basest elements in the book, and the strangeness of the original situation begins to look uncomfortably familiar.

Man's legacy of barbarism, revealed through the linkage of modern and primeval man, is expanded by a description of the elements in man's nature which show him to be the heir of Biblical Adam. The line here is drawn through the Judaic-Christian tradition rather than scientific theories of evolution. This is the facet of human nature which establishes man as a moral creature, responsible for his action and punishable for his sins. The purely primitive part of man cannot condemn him; it is the self which strives to gain knowledge, to find truth, to attain heroic stature, which binds him to a morality that defines defeat as well as victory, damnation as well as salvation. Conrad's personalities

usually find only a glimpse of redemption at best, for the instinct of the primitive within and the menacing evil without is too much for a person to entirely overcome.

Several of Conrad's principal characters are revealed to be ignorant of the evil which clings so tenaciously to mankind, and in their ignorance lies their Adamic innocence. The ignorance generally leads to a certain pride or egotism, either conscious or unconscious, which makes the character assert his superiority over other men: "Whether simple or complex," says Moser, "his vulnerable heroes are all egoists. . . . They have thoughts for no one but themselves. This is one of the central convictions of Conrad the psychologist, that egoism is the motive force of most men's actions."²⁴

This area of Conrad's philosophy creates an unresolvable contradiction. It is true that egoism involves an idealization of the self, the formation of self concepts which do not conform to reality. They are essential, however, in allowing one to maintain mental stability, for Frederick Karl notes that ". . . the loss of self-protective illusions is the surest way to self-destruction."²⁵ At the same time, the loss of those protective illusions and the attainment of

²⁴Moser, p. 31.

²⁵"Conrad's Stein: The Destructive Element," Twentieth Century Literature, III (1958), iv, 166.

knowledge--painful and destructive though it may be--is the only avenue left open to truth.

Conrad's work is full of verifying examples such as Lord Jim. Jim's youth was full of idealistic dreams of some future heroism. He imagined himself performing with ease the most difficult of tasks. On one occasion, he ignored the opportunity to help rescue a drowning man; instead, he stood dreaming of future exploits, confident that he "could affront greater perils. He would do so--better than anybody."²⁶ His strength yet remained to be tested. Even when he became associated with the depraved crew of the Patna, Jim felt that ". . . they could not touch him; he shared the air they breathed, but he was different. . . ."²⁷ After the fatal Patna affair, Jim can still be described by Curle as "an imperfect human being who cared only to win a victory which would not only wipe out his past but justify some great ideal he had formed for himself."²⁸ He was soon to recognize the fallacy in his attitude of superiority.

In the beginning of Victory, Heyst is portrayed as a man who is enchanted by the spell of island life. Perhaps the best description of Heyst is given by a "certain

²⁶Lord Jim, p. 8.

²⁷Lord Jim, p. 20.

²⁸Curle, p. 58.

disreputable white man" who states, "Heyst's a puffect g'n'lman. Puffect! But he's a ut-uto-utopist."²⁹ Heyst was determined to isolate himself from everything which would prevent him from building his paradise. In his pride and reserve, he failed to adequately prepare for the future encounter with evil.

In Heart of Darkness, Kurtz had originally intended to establish a system of commerce in which "each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a center for trade, of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing."³⁰ His dream is similar to that of Almayer, and both dreams become nightmares shaped by forces of evil.

Charles Gould is seen as another victim of an idealistic monomania in his attempt to "retrieve the peace and the credit of the Republic" by revitalizing the silver mine. Gould could not act "without idealizing every simple feeling, desire, or achievement." As Robert F. Haugh observes, "Sulaco was to be not merely a complete political state, but an objectified ideal."³¹ Instead, it becomes a demonic Eden, or as Claire Rosenfield puts it, "a microcosm of the fallen world, possessing within its natural barriers all

²⁹Victory (New York, 1918), p. 9.

³⁰Heart of Darkness, p. 252.

³¹Haugh, p. 147.

sorts of evil."³²

The tragedy of Nostromo, according to Albert J. Guerard, is partly that ". . . deception is most sinister when it becomes self-deception. . . ." ³³ Nostromo becomes not a hero as he had envisioned, but a man haunted by the self which he could never erase. Both Nostromo and Gould took their ideals so seriously that their ignorance was increased and their ideals were weakened and bent to support baser instincts. All such characters are classified as either idealistic or romantic, synonyms in most of Conrad's work for ignorance of the harsh realities of human existence. In this manner, they are variations of the old Adam who was ignorant of sin and death--the man who, when tempted to assert his superiority over other creatures, was unable to retain his own innocence. And, like Adam, none of the fallen persons can ever again reach their former states of bliss. Sanford J. Smoller says that ". . . those who fall--physically, mentally, and morally--if they survive the drop, never return to the level of past dreams and illusions, or even to their former place in the external world."³⁴

The desire to recapture the paradise of Eden only

³²Rosenfield, p. 50.

³³Conrad the Novelist (Cambridge, 1958), p. 35.

³⁴"A Note on Joseph Conrad's Fall and Abyss," Modern Fiction Studies, XV (1969), ii, 262.

results in the re-enactment of the archetypal tragedy. No paradise pictured by Conrad remains free of the satanic snake. The tempter is revealed by Marlow in Lord Jim when he attempts to explain Jim's unethical action on the Patna. Marlow states that Jim's crime stemmed from a basic weakness in human nature, ". . . from weakness unknown, but perhaps suspected, as in some parts of the world you suspect a deadly snake in every bush--from weakness that may lie hidden, watched or unwatched, prayed against or manfully scorned, repressed or maybe ignored more than half a lifetime; not one of us is safe."³⁵

The snake image reappears in Heart of Darkness when Marlow describes his fascination with maps, particularly the map of Africa. He describes the "mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake," and he later confesses that "the snake had charmed me."³⁶ He qualifies the nature of the snake quite clearly when stating that his fascination for the river was "deadly--like a snake."³⁷ In both instances, Marlow recognizes that there is "some infernal alloy" in the metal of all men which leaves them prey to the spells, the charms of an irresistible force of evil.

This Adamic portrait of man is further heightened in

³⁵Lord Jim, p. 33.

³⁶Heart of Darkness, p. 223.

³⁷Heart of Darkness, p. 225.

Victory when Heyst is seen meditating on the "mystery of his actions." He has just realized that the tropical paradise of his dreams has been invaded by a sinister force. Mr. Jones, the "embodiment of evil" in the world, is described once in terms of the tempter of Job, "coming and going up and down the earth." He is the timeless, universal evil which traps all men. As Mr. Jones himself admits, "In one way I am--yes, I am the world itself, come to pay you a visit. . . . I am a sort of fate--the retribution that waits its time."³⁸ Faced with this, Heyst states with a sense of awe, "There must be a lot of the original Adam in me, after all."³⁹ The narrator continues to trace Heyst's thoughts: "He reflected, too, with a sense of making a discovery, that this primeval ancestor is not easily suppressed. The oldest voice in the world is just the one that never ceases to speak. . . . There was in the son a lot of that first ancestor who, as soon as he could uplift his muddy frame from the celestial mould, started inspecting and naming the animals of the paradise which he was so soon to lose."⁴⁰ The Heyst paradise was indeed lost very quickly. The young Lena failed to recognize the deadliness of the forces of evil

³⁸Victory, p. 426.

³⁹Victory, p. 193.

⁴⁰Victory, pp. 193-194.

which had entered her happy world. In fact, she thought she had disarmed the enemy. In her mind she believed that ". . .the very sting of death was in her hands; the venom of the viper in her paradise, extracted, safe in her possession--and its head all but lying under her heel."⁴¹ But there was a lot of the original Eve in Lena, and she failed to correctly evaluate her enemy's strength.

In Almayer's Folly, the paradise was a dream within Almayer's mind, but it began to shatter as his native wife "startled Almayer from his dream of splendid future into the unpleasant realities of the present hour."⁴² He pictures a "mansion in Amsterdam, that earthly paradise of his dreams," but his bliss is never attained, partly because of the deviltry of the crafty natives. Conrad combines Adamic naiveté with serpentine wickedness when he notes that the "innocent Almayer recognized there at once the oily tongue of Abdulla" which frequently exists as a barrier to his paradise.⁴³ Almayer is eventually portrayed as somewhat serpentine himself, as he is seen "creeping along the sand" trying to erase the memory of Nina from his mind.⁴⁴

⁴¹Victory, p. 449.

⁴²Almayer's Folly, p. 3.

⁴³Almayer's Folly, p. 36.

⁴⁴Almayer's Folly, p. 195.

A similar transformation occurs in The Secret Agent after Winnie Verloc has murdered her husband. She fears the consequences of her action and decides to cling to one of her husband's associates for safety. But her new self is recognized by Ossipon, and his fear is obvious: "He positively saw snakes now. He saw the woman twined round him like a snake, not to be shaken off. . . . She was death itself--the companion of life."⁴⁵ Winnie has become the image of her tempter, the very snake who had brought mortality to Adam and Eve.

Once the snake has been seen entering the papier-mâché paradises of Conrad's characters, all the forces of evil seem to shape the succeeding action. No person is left untouched; no one remains in his former state of idealistic ignorance. Self-discovery for Conrad's characters, says Moser, involves learning "two important truths about themselves, that they are mortal and that they are imperfect and fallible."⁴⁶ Marlow notes that "Nobody, nobody is good enough,"⁴⁷ and Guerard agrees: ". . . Nearly everyone has jumped off some Patna and most of us have been compelled to live on, desperately or quietly engaged in reconciling what

⁴⁵The Secret Agent, p. 463.

⁴⁶Moser, p. 24.

⁴⁷Lord Jim, p. 229.

we are with what we would like to be."⁴⁸ Each person who tries to make an illusive dream come true finally falls into a terrible knowledge of his own inherent moral weakness.

The fall of man, while a universal experience, nevertheless is shown to have many facets. Nostromo, for one, yields to the urge to conceal the silver entrusted to his care. Since everyone believes the treasure to have been sunk, his crime is not made externally apparent. But the internal chaos created by his action leads to his eventual defeat. Nostromo himself calls the silver a curse upon him and, with a sense of prescience, feels his soul to be damned. Like his ancestors, he has "tasted the dust and ashes of the fruit of life into which he had bitten deeply."⁴⁹

Heyst's error was of a different nature. Heyst, the "utopist," had tried to build a world in which he was the sole inhabitant. His philosophical father had advised him to withdraw from the world in every conceivable way, admonishing Heyst even from his deathbed to "look on--make no sound."⁵⁰ Subsequently, Heyst had devised a scheme of separation in which he had "perceived the means of passing through life without suffering and almost without a single care in the

⁴⁸Guerard, p. 127.

⁴⁹Nostromo, p. 464.

⁵⁰Victory, p. 195.

world--invulnerable because elusive."⁵¹ But some strange compulsion of his humanity leads him to include Lena in his world, and his vulnerability is immediately made obvious. When confronted with the sinister forces of evil in Ricardo and Mr. Jones, Heyst discovers that his experience has not prepared him to deal effectively with his enemies. Consequently, he becomes partially responsible for the death of Lena, the one person he values in his exclusive existence.

Jim is also initiated into the dimension of self-debasement when he ignobly jumps to safety from the deck of what he thinks is a sinking ship. The young man who has remained aloof from the "inferior" people around him now finds himself on their level: "There was no going back. It was as if I had jumped into a well--into an everlasting deep hole."⁵²

Almayer discovers himself experiencing a similar fall. Unlike Jim's leap, however, this fall is agonizingly prolonged: "It seemed to him [Almayer] that for many years he had been falling into a deep precipice. Day after day, month after month, year after year he had been falling, falling; it was a smooth, round, black thing, and the black walls had been rushing upwards with wearisome rapidity."⁵³ Once in the

⁵¹Victory, p. 101.

⁵²Lord Jim, p. 82.

⁵³Almayer's Folly, p. 99.

"infernal place," he finds it impossible to escape. He only sinks lower into the pit of madness and self-pity.

Another fallen Conradian character is Kurtz, the man who had intended to bring light to the dark continent, the person entrusted to report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. Kurtz finds within himself the darkness and savagery he had hoped to eliminate. Falling prey to these elements, Kurtz is so transformed that his ideals for aiding the natives turn to a desire to "exterminate all the brutes!"⁵⁴

At one time or another, nearly all of Conrad's newly fallen characters echo Jim's cry of agony: "Ah! what a chance missed! My God! what a chance missed!"⁵⁵ They have lost the opportunity to rise above their weakness, their bent toward evil; they have fallen from ignorance to a dreadful knowledge, from a state of innocence to one of dishonor. As Leggatt of The Secret Sharer discovers, the man who falls must endure the "'brand of Cain' business."⁵⁶ Leggatt suffers the Biblical punishment for Cain's fall: "'Driven off the face of the earth.'" Very well. I am off the face of the earth!"⁵⁷ He is exiled from the good life,

⁵⁴Heart of Darkness, p. 274.

⁵⁵Lord Jim, p. 62.

⁵⁶The Secret Sharer in A Conrad Argosy (New York, 1942), p. 276.

⁵⁷The Secret Sharer, p. 287.

the paradise of his family, his home town, the community of seamen--and he, like his counterparts, is branded irrevocably for his action.

Conrad, then, places his characters in an extremely complex position. They often revert to primitive behavior--but if they manage to retain even a thin veneer of civilization, they find themselves falling because of the morality implicit in their rise above savagery. Conrad seems to say that if man chooses to be more than animal, more than primitive, he must accept the responsibility of striving for the good--and must fear the consequences of his almost inevitable fall toward evil. Such a position, often incomprehensible to the person, creates a deep bewilderment on the part of the character confronted with a choice of action. The frustration is heightened by the realization that good men and evil men are essentially the same. The moral wilderness allows no clearly defined separation of the black and the white.

The traits which make Jim fall are the traits which trap each man. After having given a vivid account of Jim's humiliating experience at the Court of Inquiry, Marlow tells his listeners that Jim "was the right sort; he was one of us."⁵⁸

⁵⁸Lord Jim, p. 58.

The statement is more than a bit startling, for Marlow knows of the fateful blunder at sea which affected the pathetic change in Jim's moral standing. The enigma is partly resolved when Marlow later states, "I don't know why he [Jim] should always have appeared to me symbolic."⁵⁹ The illuminating series of comments is nearly complete when Marlow says, "Our common fate . . . for where is the man-- I mean a real sentient man--who does not remember vaguely having been deserted in the fullness of possession by some one or something more precious than life?"⁶⁰ Marlow obviously feels that Jim's experience typifies the experience of us all; Jim is the symbol of an entire humanity, fated to fall as a result of that inherited, imperfect nature.

Conrad forges similar chains of illuminating comments to bind other characters to their contemporaries. Any attempt to separate the "good" characters from the thoroughly "bad" persons in the novels is foiled. Conrad is insistent that all men are linked by their humanity. When Jim has achieved an extremely high status in Patusan, his character seems to have been completely remolded. But Marlow swiftly dispels any such illusions by describing an unusual incident. With all his good qualities readily

⁵⁹Lord Jim, p. 190.

⁶⁰Lord Jim, p. 199.

apparent, Jim is challenged by a depraved vagabond, Gentleman Brown. Through the course of the conversation, their Adamic bond of humanity is confirmed. Marlow describes the confrontation by saying, in part, ". . . There ran through the rough talk a vein of subtle reference to their common blood, an assumption of common experience; a sickening suggestion of common guilt, of secret knowledge that was like a bond of their minds and of their hearts."⁶¹ Jim's realization that he is similar to the poor specimen of man standing before him causes him to lose some of his carefully developed strength. Guerard believes that Jim acts as he does because giving Brown a chance to escape his situation is like giving himself another chance.⁶² But this event subsequently leads to the disintegration of Lord Jim's position of honor in Patusan.

Similar situations involving a fusion of the good and evil are found in Nostromo and Victory. Charles Gould, in his attempts to give his chaotic country stability, is faced with a messenger from one of the initiators of that chaos who asks him, "Has not the master of the mine [Gould] any message to send to Hernandez, the master of the Campo?"⁶³

⁶¹Lord Jim, p. 297.

⁶²Guerard, p. 75.

⁶³Nostromo, p. 401.

The narrator observes that "the truth of the comparison struck Charles Gould heavily. . . ." ⁶⁴ In a corresponding scene in Victory, Heyst is forced to recognize his common guilt with the evil Mr. Jones who states, "It's obvious that we belong to the same--social sphere." ⁶⁵

The fall of man, then, is not only perpetual but also universal. The forces of evil within man which are inherited from his primitive ancestor and the corresponding elements in the universe outside of man which precipitated the moral fall of the Biblical Adam are sure traps for the wary as well as the innocent. No one is immune; no one is assured of safety. The world which causes the unceasing fall of mankind binds the facets of each personality so tightly that the good is often indistinguishable from the bad. Conrad's world is truly one of predominant darkness.

What, then, can be resolved? Has man no hope? Must he be doomed to fall because of his primitive instincts and moral failures with no hope of redemption? Perhaps the most consistent view of Conrad's philosophy must accept the paradox of a free man surrounded by moral absolutes sanctioned by no divinity. Brennan and Gross say that Conrad's characters

⁶⁴Nostromo, p. 401.

⁶⁵Victory, p. 425.

"are never the mere victims of blind, irresistible forces--chemical, social, biological, or otherwise; they are very much the pilots of their own destinies, free moral agents who remain apart from nature and continue their struggles to the end."⁶⁶ Free moral agents though they may be, they are still bound by the universal forces which create the consequences of their actions. The principal Adamic characters all fail to attain a complete redemption, and most of them are granted little more than a glimpse of "what might have been."

The guilt and depravity which emerges in the novels must be shared, for all men, by virtue of their humanity, must act. Human action must then lead to guilt because of the nature of the creature from whom the action stems. Heyst clarifies this by explaining, "I allowed myself to be tempted into action. It seemed innocent enough, but all action is bound to be harmful. It is devilish. That is why the world is evil upon the whole."⁶⁷ Since action is unavoidable, guilt is inescapable.

This dilemma leaves man in his moral wilderness. He cannot ignore his link with evil, nor can he avoid action which may result in his doom. Paul L. Wiley states, "When

⁶⁶Brennan and Gross, p. 65.

⁶⁷Victory, p. 60.

subject to accident and the drive of instinct man must err, and existing moral and legal institutions no longer supported by faith offer him little safeguard."⁶⁸ The narrator of Victory defines the ambiguity of man's position when speaking of Heyst: "Like the rest of us who act, all he could say to himself, with a somewhat affected grimness, was: 'We shall see!'"⁶⁹

Part of the difficulty is that the channels toward doom are the ones man must travel to reach even some salvation. If man acts, he must fall, but only through action can he rise again. Stein, the wise butterfly collector and philosopher in Lord Jim, sees the situation clearly: "A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavour to do, he drowns. . . . The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up."⁷⁰ Kurtz immerses himself, surely, and he seems degraded; perhaps he was not exerting himself sufficiently to keep from going completely under. Whatever Kurtz appears to be, it is nevertheless undeniable

⁶⁸Conrad's Measure of Man (Madison, 1954), p. 91.

⁶⁹Victory, p. 209.

⁷⁰Lord Jim, p. 153.

that he gains something which few people possess: he gains a moment of pure truth. As Marlow watches Kurtz die, he says, "I saw on that ivory face the expression of somber pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror--of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision, . . . 'The horror! The horror!'"⁷¹ Such an intense picture of life and death would seem to leave little hope for mankind. Moser, in fact, insists that "to accept Kurtz's pronouncement, 'The horror,' means accepting damnation. . . ."⁷² But the scene involves much more than that. Curiously enough, Marlow insists that the awful enlightenment of Kurtz "had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth."⁷³ He declares, "It was an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by the innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory!"⁷⁴ Any moral victory for a character is purchased at the high price of devastating knowledge. As Haugh says of Kurtz, ". . . In his remarkable

⁷¹Heart of Darkness, p. 297.

⁷²Moser, p. 81.

⁷³Heart of Darkness, p. 299.

⁷⁴Heart of Darkness, p. 299.

actions he defines the mortal condition, and in his last moment of vision he sees all the scheme of the universe; and we share it in a moment of tragic exaltation."⁷⁵

In Heart of Darkness Marlow is not as deeply enmeshed in the totality of the "destructive element" of life; therefore, he is neither as degraded nor as victorious as is Kurtz. Haugh says that "Marlow doesn't go either into the high air as Jim, or deep, deep as did Kurtz; he is a surface creature, a twilight creature, and for that he is saved--but he is no hero either."⁷⁶ Marlow is so preoccupied with leaky steam pipes on the ship that he is somewhat removed from the impact of the dark wilderness which confronted--and engulfed--Kurtz. In a sense, Marlow is much like the accountant in the jungle who keeps up his semblance of civilization in spite of the apparent absurdity of the effort. "Work, or craft as Conrad conceives it," says Donald R. Benson, "is certainly one of civilization's disciplines--a product of civilization and a vital support of it. Both Marlow and, at a lower level, the starched-collar accountant are saved from dangerous introspections by their preoccupation with the details of their trades. . . . Thus work can be a means to salvation. . . ."⁷⁷ Haugh feels much the same

⁷⁵Haugh, p. 55.

⁷⁶Haugh, p. 43.

⁷⁷Benson, p. 343.

way about Conrad's twilight characters. He says that "for most of us fidelity to household gods is the clue of 'how to be'; our leaky boilers hold us to surface truths. . . ." But even as we cling to the trivial, the non-illuminating surface truths, the deeper truths are found by "the moral adventurers who go to their deaths at the far rims of the universe."⁷⁸ The Kurtzes are the ones who are damned, but they are also the very persons who achieve the victory of the purest truth.

In Lord Jim comes one of the most precise delineations of moral victory--or, rather, the possibility of it. Marlow inserts a hopeful note in the beginning of his tale by stating, "We are snared into doing things . . . for which we get hanged, and yet the spirit may well survive--survive the condemnation, survive the halter, by Jove!"⁷⁹ Marlow describes Jim's erratic rationalizations as "those struggles of an individual trying to save from the fire his idea of what a moral identity should be. . . ."⁸⁰ When Jim's error in dealing with Gentleman Brown leads to the death of Dain Waris, the beloved son of the native chief, Jim decides to wrestle with fate and give his life as voluntary retribution for his friend. In this manner he hopes to conquer his fatal

⁷⁸Haugh, p. 55.

⁷⁹Lord Jim, p. 33.

⁸⁰Lord Jim, p. 60.

destiny and retain the honor which, at least in the world of Patusan, has remained untarnished.

It is ironic that Jim's self-sacrifice is described in terms of partial, if not complete, defeat, while Kurtz's final revelation has been considered a victory. Jim is portrayed as "an obscure conqueror of fame, tearing himself out of the arms of a jealous love at the sign, at the call of his exalted egoism. He goes away from a living woman to celebrate his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct."⁸¹ Wm. Wallace Bancroft insists that "Lord Jim represents one of the finest examples of genuine triumph."⁸² But if read closely, the description of what Jim considered to be the height of morally honorable conduct is rather disconcerting. The complete victory which Jim had hoped to secure is marred by the picture of Jewell, who completely detests his last act. By his sacrifice, moreover, he relinquishes additional opportunities to aid his adopted countrymen. Jim not only sacrifices his life; he also sacrifices the human ties which have made his personal victory possible. He chooses the abstract rather than the concrete, the unattainable rather than the tangible, the dream rather than the reality. Gurko sees the results of this severing of human ties when he says

⁸¹Lord Jim, p. 300.

⁸²Joseph Conrad: His Philosophy of Life (New York, 1964), p. 89.

that the action "removes him [Jim] from the dimension of love and identification altogether and thrusts him, instead, into the harsh, bracing light of ironic definition."⁸³

Paul Wiley clarifies the irony of Jim's situation by describing Jim in terms of a Christian hero without a God. Jim tries to give his life for others and, as Wiley says, "This attempt to transcend the brutality of existence involves him ever more deeply in the toils of a universe offering no support for such a dream."⁸⁴ Since Jim's sacrifice ultimately has no divine sanction, it becomes an act of significance to himself alone--and that importance can last for only the short moment of life before he enters the darkness of death. Jim may believe that he has made a decision which would have widespread consequences in assuring his lasting honor; but his hope in itself is a remaining portion of the old pride and romanticism which led to his defeat in the first place. Dale Kramer believes that "Jim has remained the egoist, concerned more with self-justification and self-contentment--with heeding the call of his inward, self-conceived code of perfect deportment--than with the social weal."⁸⁵

Marlow, however, has already cautioned the reader that

⁸³Gurko, p. 111.

⁸⁴Wiley, p. 55.

⁸⁵"Marlow, Myth, and Structure in 'Lord Jim,'" Criticism, VIII, 276.

men's minds are impressed by the externals of any success and that "to Jim's successes there were no externals."⁸⁶ The victory may have been brief and may have included Jim alone, but perhaps a personal victory is all one is allowed in a Conradian world. To have that victory perceived, understood, or shared would involve the sort of man-to-man bonds which are usually erased or never formed by a Conrad hero.

Porter Williams, Jr., in writing of The Secret Sharer, could be writing of Jim when he says, "In weighing honorable intentions against faulty execution, Conrad has tried to counter the easy verdict of guilty with just enough evidence on the other side to cast a shadow of doubt: not quite murder for Leggatt, not quite unforgiveable risk for the captain, but an ambivalent realm where guilt and innocence, selfishness and compassion, inexperience and skill all overlap."⁸⁷ The defeat-victory ambiguity occurs in nearly all of Conrad's works. In Almayer's Folly, Almayer is completely defeated. But Nina and Dain, her native husband, stand as a reminder that man, even though he does not conform to the standards of moral success in a civilized world, may serve as proof of Wiley's view that "life prevails over all conventional principles of right and wrong."⁸⁸ Even these two

⁸⁶Lord Jim, p. 162.

⁸⁷"The Matter of Conscience in Conrad's The Secret Sharer," Modern Language Association Publications, LXXIX (1964), v, 630.

⁸⁸Wiley, p. 75.

characters are defeated in a sense, however, for a moral victory in Conrad's scheme is the highest achievement, and Nina has merely escaped a moral defeat by reverting back to the primitive ignorance which cannot be fully condemned.

The affirmation of life in the face of death occurs again in Nostromo. Gould and Nostromo are both essentially defeated but, as Gurko believes, Nostromo is also "an account of the persistence of man. . . . The power and the will to endure remain."⁸⁹ The persistence of a hero, however, must usually be perpetuated in other men, for the central characters often experience the ultimate defeat of death immediately after their hard-won victories of life. In Victory, the Heyst who has felt for his entire life that salvation lay in separation cries, "Ah, Davidson, woe to the man whose heart has not learned while young to hope, to love--and to put its trust in life."⁹⁰ Haugh says that in his death, Heyst "achieves an almost Christian recognition of brotherhood: to cast off moral isolation and become involved in the human condition."⁹¹ But the realization of fraternity comes too late for fulfillment, for it is ironically

⁸⁹Gurko, p. 141.

⁹⁰Victory, p. 460.

⁹¹Haugh, p. 54. Seymour L. Gross agrees with Haugh's view in "The Devil in Samburan: Jones and Ricardo in Victory," Nineteenth Century Fiction, XVI, 84. And F. R. Leavis discusses this subject in The Great Tradition (London, 1948), 202.

superseded by the universal victor, Death. Lena fulfills the Biblical Eve's role in crushing the evil serpent's head, but Lena and Heyst, like their archetypes, must be defeated by the mortality which robs them of enjoying their final realization of truth. The Conradian mortality carries with it no eternal reward for the perception of that truth. Any conquering of the earthly human destiny must be achieved at a great price, and the fruits of victory are never quite sweet enough to obliterate the bitterness of the former fall.

Trying to resolve the message of Conrad through the medium of his characters must bring to mind the circles of Stevie in The Secret Agent. The "innocent" Stevie sits "drawing circles, circles, circles; innumerable circles, concentric, eccentric, a coruscating whirl of circles that by their tangled multitude of repeated curves, uniformity of form, and confusion of intersecting lines suggested a rendering of cosmic chaos, the symbolism of a mad art attempting the inconceivable."⁹² Because there is no supreme being in Conrad's work to whom man can apply for a merciful release from his condition, he seems to be dealing, indeed, with "cosmic chaos." There is no God to make real man's hopes of eternal redemption; therefore, what salvation man finds must come as an earthly victory through the formation of human bonds of fidelity, love and honor. But because of the

⁹²The Secret Agent, p. 361.

absence of that supreme being, man is doomed to betray himself and others as well. Wiley says that "when mind with its traditional values loses hold in a world no longer ruled by Providence, the result is not only self-betrayal for the individual but also betrayal of man by man."⁹³

Marlow states emphatically that "the initial word of . . . our destiny is graven in imperishable characters upon the face of a rock."⁹⁴ This initial word is revealed throughout Conrad's work to be man's Adamic heritage in all its complexity. But the fact that the entire story is not graven in that rock is significant. As Gurko believes, the universe of Conrad "supplies men with every opportunity to develop their powers. . . . Conrad is the historian of lost causes, somehow redeemed by the manner in which they are lost. He records the price men pay for having brains, conscience, imagination, which is also the price of their humanness."⁹⁵ The man who is defeated automatically asserts, in terms of that defeat, that victory is possible. No Conradian character can hope for an eternal victory granted by a divine mercy, for death is the ultimate defeat for all. But he can strive to achieve a partial moral triumph on earth through the saving forces of

⁹³Wiley, p. 32.

⁹⁴Lord Jim, p. 133.

⁹⁵Gurko, p. 250.

surface truths, a personal but limited triumph through attaining truth from an immersion in life's forces, or a partial triumph of cleansing from the forgiveness of other human beings. Charles J. McCann says that forgiveness in Conrad's world is possible and that the measure of a character's forgiveness must depend upon "how far he had fulfilled his responsibility to other humans, as well as to his own dream."⁹⁶ If forgiveness is obtained, however, it can never be the complete forgiveness of a divinity; it must come from other persons involved in the same human condition. When Marlow observes that "we all need to be forgiven," the forgiveness or mercy is meant to come from man, not God.⁹⁷

Thus Conrad masterfully depicts man as the everlasting Adam, a creature doomed by his ancestry to a moral fall. What he achieves must be accomplished before the awful nothingness of death strips him of any reward he may enjoy on earth. Personal victory is possible, but it is all too often realized only when complete defeat is imminent. The meaning of life is ultimately found somewhat existentially in the struggle itself, in the search for truth, the attainment of knowledge, the earthly victory which can satisfy a man that the struggle has been at least partly worth the price.

⁹⁶"Lord Jim vs. the Darkness: The Saving Power of Human Involvement," College English, XXVII, 242.

⁹⁷Lord Jim, p. 252.

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THE EVERLASTING ADAM: CONRAD'S VIEW OF MAN

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THE EVERLASTING ADAM: CONRAD'S VIEW OF MAN

Joseph Conrad's principal characters are essentially shaped from two sources--the evolutionary concept of primitive man and the Biblical concept of Edenic man. They are plagued by the savage instincts which lie within their inherited natures and by the menacing evil which pervades their environment. Regardless of efforts to make themselves invulnerable to human inadequacies, they are destined to fall from innocence into a dreadful knowledge of good and evil.

Being more than pure savage, Conrad's characters must operate within a moral universe which makes them responsible for their actions. Morality necessarily involves facing the consequences of the inevitable fall. The moral universe, however, acknowledges no supreme being to provide mercy and salvation; men must turn to other means for partial redemption--the only kind possible in Conrad's world. Conradian characters may achieve personal, though universally unrecognized, victory by clinging to an idealized concept of individual honor; they may accomplish temporary redemption by relinquishing self-imposed isolation and becoming involved in the human community; or they may gain cleansing forgiveness through the limited mercy of other human beings.

Thus, Conrad portrays human nature as essentially static,

perpetually conforming to the shaping influences of primitive and satanic evil, finding glimpses of salvation only through limited avenues of human experience.