

A vertical book cover with a dark central panel. The background is a lush tropical scene with tall grasses, palm trees, and a body of water. The central panel is black with orange and white text.

Signet Classic

JOSEPH
CONRAD



LORD
JIM

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY LINDA DRYDEN

◆ LORD JIM ◆

Joseph Conrad

With a New Introduction by
LINDA DRYDEN

With an Updated Bibliography

—
A SIGNET CLASSIC

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Joseph Conrad lived a life that was as fantastic as any of his fiction. Born in Poland on December 3, 1857, he died in England on August 3, 1924. This native of the European interior spent his youth at sea, and although relatively ignorant of the English language until the age of twenty, he ultimately became one of the greatest of English novelists and stylists. Conrad's parents were aristocrats, ardent patriots who died when he was a child as a result of their revolutionary activities. He went to sea at sixteen, taught himself English and, after diligent study, gradually worked his way up until he passed his master's examination and was given command of merchant ships in the Orient and on the Congo. At the age of thirty-two he decided to try his hand at writing, left the sea, married, and became the father of two sons. Although his work won the admiration of critics, sales were small, and debts and poor health plagued Conrad for many years. He was a nervous, introverted, gloomy man for whom writing was an agony, but he was rich in friends who appreciated his genius, among them Henry James, Stephen Crane, and Ford Madox Ford. Although the ocean and the mysterious lands that border it are often the setting for his books, the truth of human experience is his theme, depicted with vigor, rhythm, and passionate contemplation of reality.

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Introduction

Joseph Conrad published his first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, in 1895 (the same year that Hardy turned from fiction to poetry after publishing his last great novel, *Jude the Obscure*). Nearly five short years later, with the serialization of *Heart of Darkness* (in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Feb.–Mar. 1899),* Conrad ushered in a new era: the era of literary modernism.

Writing at the *fin de siècle*, Conrad saw little cause for optimism. Therefore his modernism is characterized by an extreme skepticism of the assumptions of the past century, resulting in a subversion of romantic idealism. As Cedric Watts says, Conrad “stands at the intersection of the late Victorian and the early modernist cultural phases; he is both romantic and anti-romantic, both conservative and subversive.”† At the century's end Conrad undertakes a serious reassessment of the values of the nineteenth century and suggests a deep unease about an unchallenged acceptance of them.

Coming immediately after *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim* is another expression of Conrad's modernist unease. If Conrad endures nostalgically in the popular imagination as a writer of sea stories, *Heart of Darkness* proves that his fiction is about much more than shipboard adventures. Furthermore, *Lord Jim* is a novel that explores deep psychological issues concerning its eponymous hero, Jim, its main narrator, Marlow, and many of the novel's minor characters. Of *Lord Jim*'s forty-five chapters, only chapters one and two, and possibly Jim's narrative of the *Patna* desertion

*In *Blackwood's Magazine* it was titled *The Heart of Darkness*.

†Cedric Watts, *A Preface to Conrad* (New York: Longman, 1982), 46.

in chapters seven through twelve, deal almost exclusively with events at sea. Yet even these latter chapters are punctuated with observations and anecdotes from Marlow that lend to them an ironic philosophical tone that reaches beyond mere storytelling into profound issues of human experience. As Conrad says in his Author's Note to *Almayer's Folly*:

I am content to sympathize with common mortals, no matter where they live; in houses or in tents, in the streets under a fog, or in the forests behind the dark line of dismal mangroves that fringe the vast solitude of the sea. . . . Their hearts—like ours—must endure the load of gifts from Heaven: the curse of facts and the blessing of illusions, the bitterness of our wisdom and the deceptive consolation of our folly.

In *Lord Jim*, as in most, if not all, of his fiction, Conrad is concerned with themes that touch upon the hopes and aspirations, the delusions and self-deceptions, the successes and failures of individuals everywhere.

The year 2000 marks the centenary of the publication of *Lord Jim* in novel form. It began serialization in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in October 1899, five months after the last installment of *Heart of Darkness*. On July 6, 1899, Conrad had sent thirty-one manuscript pages to *Blackwood's* and was expecting to complete the story by the end of July. He had intended to subtitle it "A Sketch." By December this "sketch" had reached 40,000 words and was continuing to expand. Conrad finally concluded the novel at six a.m. on the morning of July 14, 1900; the "Sketch" had become "A Tale." The creative process had been so prolonged that while completing the serial for the magazine Conrad was simultaneously correcting page proofs of the novel version for *Blackwood's*.

Early reviews of *Lord Jim* were so favorable that Conrad described himself to William Blackwood as "the spoiled child of the critics." His first two novels, *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast*

of the Islands (1896), had been mistaken by some commentators for imperial romance, but with the publication of *Lord Jim* Conrad began to be regarded as a serious author: he was compared to Henry James, esteemed by Conrad as the greatest living writer in English. Nevertheless, *Lord Jim* does feature some of the preoccupations of Conrad's early novels, notably *An Outcast of the Islands*. Jim, like Willems in *An Outcast*, is exiled from his preferred society and is forced to retreat to a remote Malay community. Betrayal and retribution, thwarted ambition and self-delusion are key themes in both novels. Yet, while *An Outcast* has as its flawed hero a Dutchman, Willems, *Lord Jim* focuses on the blond, blue-eyed son of an English country parson. Marlow, the crusty English mariner who benevolently "adopts" Jim is wont to speculate on his appearance and dubious status as "one of us," an English gentleman and a member of the genteel English classes. Conrad's increasing concern with English moral and social values is thus signaled.

Jim's history is told in two distinct parts: the events leading up to his commission aboard the *Patna*, the events on the *Patna*, the official inquiry into those events, and Jim's subsequent attempts to rehabilitate himself constitute the first half of the novel; Jim's history in Patusan, the Malay community to which he is exiled, forms the second half of the novel. Marlow's account of his consultation with Stein, a Bavarian butterfly collector and erstwhile imperial adventurer, lies at the center of the novel, spanning and connecting these two discrete parts. This apparent disjointed narrative structure has been the subject of much critical comment on *Lord Jim* and has led critics to regard the novel as deeply flawed. The tortuous composition of the story and Conrad's inability to reach closure tend to reinforce this view. Yet, despite the fact that it appears to be a modernist tale in the first half and a romantic adventure in the second, the novel's overarching themes lend a unity and logic to the story that are not always acknowledged.

Jim's romantic aspirations are integral to both halves of the novel, but Conrad's modernist skepticism serves as a unifying

narrative trait. Jim's jump from the *Patna* destroys his illusion of romantic heroism aboard ship, and the subsequent revoking of his mariner's certificate amounts to more than public disgrace: it destroys Brierly's belief in the value system that underpins his own self-image. As Marlow says of Jim, "if this sort can go wrong like that. . . ." Jim seems to epitomize the stoic team player and future imperial officer that the Rugby school of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857) creates: he is symbolic of England's ideal imperial son who proves English superiority at sea, on the battlefield, and in the Empire. Yet his desertion of the *Patna*, the result of an instinct for self-preservation that overrides all of his training and breeding as an English gentleman-hero, is the incontrovertible proof that Jim is not "good enough." What destroys Brierly is that Jim is proof too that no one is "good enough" to live up to the stringent ideal of manhood established in the public schools and training centers for those imperial officers who would be representatives of England abroad and in the colonies.

Jim's choice of a life at sea was never a carefully considered career choice based on aptitude, suitability, and temperament. In the opening pages of the novel we are told that nothing more than a "course of light holiday literature" was the impetus for his declared vocation. Immediately the romance themes that dominate the second half of the novel are laid bare. Jim fancies himself as a "hero in a book"; he chooses his vocation after reading sea-faring adventure stories: Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1857) or Marryat's *Masterman Ready* (1841) could well have constituted his holiday reading material. With his English country parsonage background and schoolboy idiom—his speech is peppered with expressions like "Jove," "bally," and "Honour bright!"—Jim may even have modeled himself on Hughes's hero Tom Brown. Certainly the name, Jim, like Tom Brown, suggests a typical English boy, and the fact that Jim is given no surname emphasizes his apparent status as such. Jim aspires to romantic heroism whether it is on the deck of the *Patna* plying the eastern seas or as the leader designate of Malay and Bugis villagers in

Patusan. The first line of the novel, however, warns us of Jim's shortcomings: "He was an inch, perhaps two, under six feet. . . ." No genuine hero this: he does not even meet the required, symbolic six feet, and his subsequent history bears out this significant shortfall.

The first half of *Lord Jim*, in particular the fate of the *Patna*, is loosely based on the scandalous real-life story of the desertion of the *Jeddah* and its 953 Muslim passengers on its voyage from Singapore to Jeddah in 1880. Along with several officers and Muslim leaders, the captain and his wife escaped from the leaking boat with the aid of its first mate, Augustine Podmore Williams. Like the *Patna*, the *Jeddah* limped into port, and the subsequent scandal resulted in questions being raised in the House of Commons. Williams, generally regarded as the inspiration for Jim, eventually overcame the disgrace and managed to remain in Singapore society. Jim, of course, is unequal to the public ridicule after the trial and "jumps" from one situation to another, always aided by Marlow. Jim does in fact thrive in his various roles for a while: the good-natured boyish readiness and enthusiasm that endear him to Marlow make him almost indispensable to a series of employers. When the disgraceful truth, however, threatens to overwhelm his newly constructed, fragile reputation, Jim "deserts" his "post" again and again, baffling his employers. With nowhere left to turn (he cannot go home to his country parson father), Jim is finally provided with "the very thing" as Stein's proxy in Patusan.

In creating Jim, what Conrad adds to the story of Augustine Podmore Williams is an "exalted egotism" based on a "shadowy ideal of conduct," all of which are engendered by a nineteenth-century English sense of what constitutes a romantic hero and an imperial adventurer. It is because Jim so nearly fulfills the requirements of such an ideal that Marlow is fascinated and unable to let the illusion be completely destroyed:

He was a youngster of the sort you like to see about you; of the sort you like to imagine yourself to have been; of the

sort whose appearance claims the fellowship of these illusions you had thought gone out, extinct, cold, and which, as if rekindled at the approach of another flame, give a flutter deep, deep down somewhere, give a flutter of light . . . of heat!

Jim thus awakens Marlow's own youthful dreams of illusory romantic possibilities, and, despite his gruff, tetchy cynicism, Marlow sets about trying to provide Jim with the right conditions for his romantic ego-ideal to survive and flourish.

There is often a tendency to mistake Marlow's words and opinions for Conrad's own; but it must be remembered that within the stories he relates, Marlow is a character in his own right and one who interacts with the other characters. We are told that "many times, in distant parts of the world, Marlow showed himself willing to remember Jim, to remember him at length, in detail, and audibly." The bulk of Jim's story, chapters five to thirty-five, is told by Marlow probably "after dinner, on a verandah draped in motionless foliage and crowned with flowers, in the deep dusk speckled by fiery cigar-ends." Jim's story is difficult to understand and it seems as if, by telling it over and over again, Marlow is himself trying to make sense of it. Thus Marlow's role contributes to the many symbolic layers of the narrative. Jim is at once England's (perceived) ideal imperial son, but also the adopted son of Marlow and of a series of father figures. The "privileged man" is chosen to receive the final pages of Jim's story because he "alone showed an interest in him that survived the telling of his story." That shared interest binds Marlow and his chosen reader in the perplexity of what, ultimately, to make of Jim's fate.

At the center of the novel, between Jim's failures in the "real" world and the exotic, romantic adventure of Patusan, stands Stein, variously described by critics as a kind of Merlin figure, a wizard, a latter-day Prospero, and a holy man. Stein has also been an imperial adventurer. His history is deliberately told in the idiom of romantic adventure; but, like Marlow, Stein too has

grown resigned to disillusionment. He lives a cloistered existence watching over the frozen corpses of his glorious past, glass-mounted rare species of butterflies; but Jim arouses Stein's interest, and he sets about finding a solution to Jim's dilemma of "how to be." Stein utters some of the most enigmatic words in Conrad's fiction; the exact meaning of his speech that begins a "man that is born falls into a dream" has been much discussed, argued over, and interpreted. Yet, ultimately what Stein is striving to articulate is a strategy for survival, for holding one's own in an indifferent universe. Recognizing the essential paradox of Jim's situation—his romantic nature is both "very bad" and "very good"—Stein suggests Patusan as the ideal location for Jim to live up to his ideal self-image as the romantic hero. In Patusan Jim can escape the moral complexities of the world of commerce and industry and immerse himself in a pre-civilized community that bears more than a passing resemblance to the people and locations of popular romantic fiction.

The Patusan episode of *Lord Jim* is often regarded as the most flawed in the novel, lending to it a disjointed structure and fracturing its coherence. It is almost certain that in the early stages of composition Conrad had no intention of the novel developing beyond the *Patna Inquiry*. However, he clearly conceived of other possibilities for Jim and these are explored to their inevitable conclusion through the Patusan adventure. Even the population of Patusan seems to be the result of a romantic imagination: speaking of Doramin, his motherly, "witch-like" wife and their son, Dain Waris, a type of "noble savage" with a civilized mind, Jim says they are "like people in a book" who are "well worth seeing." The whole scenario seems to conform to the stereotype and formula of imperial romance: Jim has a faithful servant, Tamb' Itam; Jewel is the beautiful native girl-woman whose devotion saves his life; he defeats the wicked Sherif Ali and effectively becomes ruler of the community; Cornelius is the repulsive spineless villain; and Jim himself has the Anglo-Saxon good looks and immaculate white uniform of the English imperial

officer. It seems as if finally Jim has found a sanctuary from the real world of irresolvable dilemmas.

Lord Jim, however, is a modernist tale in which nothing can be taken for granted, no "truths" relied upon, and no romantic closure assumed. The arrival of "Gentleman" Brown heralds the end of romantic wish-fulfillment; but Brown is more than an agent of demonic retribution: he is Jim's callous, vindictive nemesis and an emissary from the world of actuality to remind both Jim and the reader that the "Never-never land" of Patusan is a mirage constituted partly by Jim's (and perhaps Stein's) romantic yearnings. Having infiltrated the heart of this seeming paradise, Brown, in an effort to break out of the deadlock he has created, appeals to the "white man" in Jim, to his English sense of fair play, and to their common racial identity. Relying on the simple rules of romance, Jim assumes that Brown will "play the game" and leave peacefully, if allowed: "there was no reason to doubt the story, whose truth seemed warranted by the rough frankness, by a sort of virile sincerity in accepting the morality and consequences of his acts." It is another error of judgement: Brown is as false as his assumed title, "Gentleman," but Jim's reliance on the myths of romantic fiction blind him to the truth of the man's nature.

Brown's betrayal plunges Jim's fragile utopia back into the turmoil from which he had rescued it. Jim is forced again to accept his failure to live up to his self-imposed romantic ideal. Whatever course of action he now takes would be a betrayal: placing himself in Doramin's hands betrays Jewel; but denying Doramin just retribution would compromise Jim's own "shadowy ideal of conduct." This violent rendering asunder of the romantic idyll of Patusan serves to unite, however tenuously, the two halves of the novel. Conrad returns the narrative to its modernist uncertainty by leaving Marlow's question, "Is he satisfied—quite, now, I wonder?" unanswered. Jim's brief success as an imperial adventurer in Patusan has been shattered by the intrusion of a reality from which it seems he could never finally escape, however far into the romantic East he may retreat.

Conrad's meaning is, as ever, notoriously difficult to pin down. Marlow's narrative with its rambling asides and unanswered questions contributes to this slippage of meaning. Famously, in *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow's storytelling is compared to the "yarns of other seamen" that "have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut":

But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.

In writing this Conrad seems acutely aware of the tendency of his own narratives to defy easy analysis. He seems conscious, too, of the fact that his tales are no ordinary sea stories. If, in the spirit of Marlow, we continue to revisit Jim's story, it may in part be due to the resistance of the narrative to crystallize its purpose. It may also be ascribed to the fact that one hundred years after its publication we, like Marlow, and like Conrad, are still compelled to try to decipher the all too human impulses that motivate a man like Lord Jim.

—LINDA DRYDEN
February 2000

Author's Note

When this novel first appeared in book form a notion got about that I had been bolted away with. Some reviewers maintained that the work starting as a short story had got beyond the writer's control. One or two discovered internal evidence of the fact, which seemed to amuse them. They pointed out the limitations of the narrative form. They argued that no man could have been expected to talk all that time, and other men to listen so long. It was not, they said, very credible.

After thinking it over for something like sixteen years I am not so sure about that. Men have been known, both in the tropics and in the temperate zone, to sit up half the night "swapping yarns." This, however, is but one yarn, yet with interruptions affording some measure of relief; and in regard to the listeners' endurance, the postulate must be accepted that the story *was* interesting. It is the necessary preliminary assumption. If I hadn't believed that it *was* interesting I could never have begun to write it. As to the mere physical possibility we all know that some speeches in Parliament have taken nearer six than three hours in delivery; whereas all that part of the book which is Marlow's narrative can be read through aloud, I should say, in less than three hours. Besides—though I have kept strictly all such significant details out of the tale—we may presume that there must have been refreshments on that night, a glass of mineral water of some sort to help the narrator on.

But, seriously, the truth of the matter is, that my first thought was a short story, concerned only with the pilgrim ship episode; nothing more. And that was a legitimate conception. After writing a few pages, however, I became for some reason

discontented and I laid them aside for a time. I didn't take them out of the drawer till the late Mr. William Blackwood suggested I should give something again to his magazine.

It was only then that I perceived that the pilgrim ship episode was a good starting-point for a free and wandering tale; that it was an event, too, which could conceivably colour the whole "sentiment of existence" in a simple and sensitive character. But all these preliminary moods and stirrings of spirit were rather obscure at the time, and they do not appear clearer to me now after the lapse of so many years.

The few pages I had laid aside were not without their weight in the choice of subject. But the whole was re-written deliberately. When I sat down to it I knew it would be a long book, though I didn't foresee that it would spread itself over thirteen numbers of "Maga."

I have been asked at times whether this was not the book of mine I liked best. I am a great foe of favouritism in public life, in private life, and even in the delicate relationship of an author to his works. As a matter of principle I will have no favourites; but I don't go so far as to feel grieved and annoyed by the preference some people give to my Lord Jim. I won't even say that I "fail to understand. . . ." No! But once I had occasion to be puzzled and surprised.

A friend of mine returning from Italy had talked with a lady there who did not like the book. I regretted that, of course, but what surprised me was the ground of her dislike. "You know," she said, "it is all so morbid."

The pronouncement gave me food for an hour's anxious thought. Finally I arrived at the conclusion that, making due allowances for the subject itself being rather foreign to women's normal sensibilities, the lady could not have been an Italian. I wonder whether she was European at all? In any case, no Latin temperament would have perceived anything morbid in the acute consciousness of lost honour. Such a consciousness may be wrong, or it may be right, or it may be condemned as artificial; and, perhaps, my Jim is not a type of wide commonness. But I can safely assure my readers that he is not the

product of coldly perverted thinking. He's not a figure of Northern Mists either. One sunny morning in the commonplace surroundings of an Eastern roadstead, I saw his form pass by—appealing—significant—under a cloud—perfectly silent. Which is as it should be. It was for me, with all the sympathy of which I was capable, to seek fit words for his meaning. He was “one of us.”

J.C.

June, 1917.

TO
MR. AND MRS. G.F.W. HOPE
WITH GRATEFUL AFFECTION
AFTER MANY YEARS
OF FRIENDSHIP