Introduction

I

Background

Joseph Conrad and Henry James, both of whom first published their novels in the nineteenth century, are the earliest of the great modern novelists in English. In fact, between 1900 and 1930 revolutionary developments took place in the English novel. These developments involved new subject matter, style and technique, and led ultimately to a radical rethinking of the relationship between fiction and reality. Modern fiction incorporates certain distinctive features: the need to confront violence, nihilism and despair; the fascination with, but fear of, the unconscious, the centrality of a dramatized narrator who is not omniscient but rather himself searching to understand a symbolic richness which invites multiple interpretations. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* epitomizes many of these features and thus claims a unique position in modern fiction. The roots of modernism are exceptionally diverse, the result of cross-fertilization between cultures, between art forms, and between disciplines. However, one form of cross-fertilization is evident at once, in that James was born an American and Conrad a Pole. Each chose to settle in England and to become an English subject and for each the collision of different cultures was an important theme.

Joseph Conrad's Polish origin helped to give 'a cosmopolitan variety' to his shorter fiction as well as to the novel, and much of his enterprise in fiction writing has come from an interest in foreign models, such as Daudet, Maupassant, Kipling, and others. With a wide experience of the sea and of Asia and the Americas and ports of the world, he wrote, in an English that was elaborate and strangely rhythmical, a series of novels beginning with *Almayer's Folly*, interposed in between with works of shorter fiction or novellas of great distinction.
The basis for Conrad’s fiction is the adventure story, but told with a complex evocation of mood and a constant psychological interest. “It is as if the work of R.L. Stevenson had been rewritten by Henry James”. He is self-conscious in his art, and the self-consciousness intrudes. Like Flaubert he seeks perfection, and sometimes the reader may watch him making his slow progress to his ideal. Often he writes of violence and danger, but not of these only, for, like some of the ‘impressionist’ painters, he seeks to capture elusive moods, using a rich and coloured vocabulary, almost as if he employed words as pigments. While he depicts the surface reactions of life, he endeavours, as do some of the Russian novelists, to portray the more mysterious moods as well. In the later novels the moral dilemma of the characters is explored with brilliance of detail. He has a greater integrity as an artist than many writers of his age, and one forgets that he is a foreigner writing English as one follows the strange and complex beauty of his prose.

In the 1960s it had become commonplace to assert that the highest level of Conrad’s art exists in his shorter fiction. Marvin Mudrick comments: ‘Conrad is not a novelist but a writer of novellas. His impulse exhausts, or only artificially protracts, itself beyond their length: the length of a nightmare or of a moral test, not—as novels require—of history or biography. The enduring Conrad is the Conrad who had learned his scope and his method without having yet decided to evade the force of his obsessions’. However, Mudrick’s reductive remark that “Conrad is not a novelist” is hardly tenable and justifiable in respect of his four great novels—Lord Jim and Under Western Eyes, The Secret Agent and Nostromo—which we cannot set apart from the canon of modern literature. No doubt, Lord Jim and Under Western Eyes begin superbly and then slack off; the irony of The Secret Agent hardens; and Nostromo has ‘its hollow moments’. But Typhoon, Heart of Darkness, The Secret Sharer, and The Shadow-Line are as perfect, rich, and complex as anything of their kind in English.

Ford Madox Ford once dogmatically said about Conrad’s fiction writing:
Conrad never wrote a true short story, a matter of two or three pages of minutely considered words, ending with a smack...with what the French call a coup de canon. His stories were always what for a lack of a better phrase one has to call "long short" stories. For these the form is practically the same as that of the novel, or, to avoid the implications of saying that there is only one form for the novel, it would be better to put it that the form of long-short stories may vary as much as may the form of novels. The short story of Maupassant, Tchekhov, or even of the late O. Henry is practically stereotyped—the introduction of a character in a word or two, a word or two for atmosphere, a few paragraphs for the story, and then, click! a sharp sentence that flashes the illumination of the idea over the whole".

Indeed, Conrad was fascinated with the idea of a 'long-short' story form which carried for him a certain 'magical suggestiveness'. In 1902 Conrad once told David Meldrum of 'Blackwood's' Magazine about The End of the Tether: "I want to give you an idea how the figure works. Upon the episodes, after all, the effect of reality depends and as to me I depend upon the reader looking back upon my story as a whole. This is why I prefer the form which needs for its development 30,000 words or so". Conrad also wrote to the publisher himself, "I've a subject which may be treated in 30-40 thou: words: the form I like best but which I believe is in no favour with the public". It appears the figure 30,000 had a definitive quality for him, an ideal story length, although many stories in fact, are much longer than his reiterated length. In an interaction with Lady Veronica Wedgwood Conrad pointed out that the length of Daisy Miller [about 25,000 words] was perfect for a short story, and that any writer producing one such tale each year is truly a master.

II

Conrad's choice of shorter fiction

Working within modes used by other nineteenth century writers helped Conrad define the nature and limits of his own talent. Conrad’s earliest stories—The Black Mate, The Idiots, and An Output of Progress—all contain elements reminiscent of older writers working in acceptable forms, and thus reveal the voice of a new writer who has not yet become himself. His first two stories
showed the impact of Daudet and Maupassant, both of whom had long been among Conrad's favourite authors. At the publication of *Almayer's Folly* in 1895, Conrad called Daudet "a youthful enthusiasm [of mine] that has survived, and even grown"; and he asked his relative Marguerite Poradowska, "you know my worship of Daudet. Do you think it would be ridiculous on my part to send him my book—I who have read all his books under every sky?" At Daudet's death in 1897, Conrad in 'Outlook' praised his honesty, animation, and open heart—his "prodigality approaching magnificence". A gifted storyteller caught by this uniqueness of the moment, Daudet found the anecdotal approach to human affairs useful and satisfying. Conrad was much impressed by Daudet's candid good nature and tender scepticism: Conrad admits that Daudet came "as near the truth as some of the greatest. His creations are seen".

Our understanding of Conrad's interweaving of theme and form is certainly enriched by a detailed sense of this extraordinary man his remarkable background, both social and literary. While pointing out the "three lives" of Joseph Conrad, F.R.Karl definitely had in mind, in addition to the two lives of seaman and writer, a third, his life as a Pole. In fact, Conrad's first sixteen years in Poland did not produce anything tangible, but it informed every aspect of his later years; it was the matrix for his ideas, his attachments, his memories and nightmares; virtually, the life of Conrad and his works are interwoven. Once Conrad became a writer, his contemporary experiences did not inform his work; on the contrary, his work was embedded in past experiences, both the actual events and people and the imagination working on them.


In Chapter I, I shall try to present the contemporary literary scene in which Conrad practised his art of writing and also discuss his innovative experiments that anticipate the modernist writers. It will also be shown how the interactions between social, political, and industrial activities and developments were not only conducive to, but truly indispensable for, the spread of education which created the urge for reading among the middle class people, in particular; how the developments of printing industry accelerated the growth and rapid expansion of publication of magazines and periodicals which gave more space to shorter fiction. The discussion includes the interesting phenomena that Conrad wrote shorter fiction alternately between his novels, and that the novel as a genre reaches a turning point with Henry James and his fellow literary impressionists Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford.

In Chapter II I intend to focus on the ‘dual heritage’ of Conrad. In fact, Conrad turned into a ‘homo duplex’—the man with a dual character. A mixture of different and remote traditions had converged in Conrad. In course of reading his fiction we are constantly reminded of the presence in them of inner tensions between two conflicting selves or natures of Conrad, originating in two different sets of circumstances. Conrad himself was profoundly aware of these tensions to which his letters and works bore ample witness. His father Apollo Korzeniowski and his maternal uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski were mainly responsible for these tensions in Conrad. For Poland was passing through a very crucial time. And Apollo Korzeniowski and Tadeusz Bobrowski...
responded and reacted to the contemporary social and political thinking and happenings in Poland in ways that were diametrically opposite to each other. Conrad no doubt came under their influence. Conrad became the inevitable victim of two contrary states, two conflicting ways of existence.

In Chapter III I intend to discuss the narrative theories of a few select major novelists—Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne and George Eliot—whose work as theorists prior to Henry James was commendable. As Flaubert seems indispensable in any discussion relating to the theory of fiction, I would also consider his arguments.

In Chapter IV I would discuss the narrative theories of Henry James and Joseph Conrad, whose comments on the art of fiction gave the novel form a new direction at the turn of the century. At this crucial time George Eliot was a British Victorian writer at the close of her career, and James an ‘exiled modern novelist’ who had just begun his career. James with Conrad was a transitional figure in English fiction and took over the serious task of recreating the art of fiction as a critical intelligence. He did so by salvaging it from “the debris of tradition” and refusing to make it subservient to “the compromises of popularity”. He thought of raising it to “the dignity of moral power which novelists like Balzac, Turgenev, and Flaubert had already won for it in Europe, but which only Hawthorne and George Eliot had reached in the novel of the English-speaking world. Modern psychology and its interpretation of the concept of psyche encouraged writers like James and Conrad to deliberate on and devise new techniques, new procedures, new pattern for a proper rendition of the subjective layers of experience. In fact, the writers of the period between 1885 and 1925 had been aiming to make of the novel a distinct literary form, as different as possible from the philosophical essay, and the historical chronicle.

In Chapters V, VI, and VII I intend to consider nine major examples of shorter fiction for critical discussion, and hope to show in them a perfect integration of
form and themes by examining certain components: themes, characterization, narrative pattern, use of location, and use of stylistic devices. It is seen that in Conrad’s shorter fiction a rich pattern of themes emerges without invasive authorial comment. There are themes of loneliness and isolation, duty and fidelity to profession; human relationships under stress and strain; the nature of mankind and the question of its survival. In some of his fiction Conrad follows a linear narrative method, and in some others an indirect oblique narrative technique by introducing a series of time-shifts. He presents his characters through multiple points of view. Environments are living and dynamic and interact with the characters in such a way as to lead them to victory or disaster. In this way a moral dilemma is enacted against the natural or cosmic backdrop. Conrad’s language and style are a necessary means to integrate form and themes in his shorter fiction. For he adopted many devices, both structural and stylistic, in order to render objectively the different aspects of reality.

In Chapter V I will consider Conrad’s shorter fiction of the Early period: The Lagoon (1896) and Karain: A Memory (1897); in Chapter VI Conrad’s shorter fiction of the Middle or Major period are discussed: Youth (1898), Heart of Darkness (1899), Typhoon (1901), Falk (1901), and Amy Foster (1901); in Chapter VII form and themes in Conrad’s shorter fiction of the Final period are considered: The Secret Sharer (1909), and The Shadow-Line (1915).

In Chapter VIII I wish to conclude my arguments in defence of my dissertation thus: while Conrad had brilliantly executed a unique fusion and integration of form and content in his shorter fiction, he showed at the same time a remarkable virtuosity in maintaining in his fiction a perfect economy and intensity, concentration and unity of effect. On close analysis it becomes explicit that Conrad utilized a rich variety of materials almost recurrently in his fiction, and through their deft use and arrangement explored some significant ethical and philosophical issues; in fact, he deliberately raised some serious
questions about life, often contradictory in nature, but never strove to provide a resolution or reconciliation.

Notes and references


3 Lawrence Graver, ibid, p vii.

4 L. Graver, pp. vii—viii.

5 Cited by L. Graver, p. viii.

6 Cited by L. Graver, p. viii.

7 L. Graver, op. cit. p. viii.

