

FOUR ESSAYS ON CONRAD - AN INTRODUCTION

BY - JOHN DERRICK

To judge by the essays collected here, Joseph Conrad (1857 - 1924) is alive and well in Brazil. Whether they see him as some sort of reactionary Martin Bohmann, or as a stylist whose weaving of jungle vines and language still stands at the vanguard of Modernism, the four authors we present in this issue are clearly under his spell.

Conrad it must be remembered, was not English at all, but a Polish self-exile whose parents were broken in the czars' camps for their revolutionary sympathies.

He was also a dapper, formal little fellow who carried a goldheaded cane and liked to radiate the air of a Polish count. What wonder then that this man who claimed to dream in Polish, think in French, and write in English, should present contradictory faces to his interpreters! Is Conrad a dated victorian whose lush style, antiquated feudal codes and quixotically macho notion of women set him apart from our world, or is he our contemporary by his psychological depth, his open-ended symbolism, and his vision of a third world tormented by colonial powers?

Two of our authors approach Conrad more as a stylist. Carmen Gago Alvarez and Reynaldo Gonçaves emphasize imagery: Alvarez in the intensive context of a single story, "The Lagoon" and Gonçaves in extended patterns encountered in several works. To me their findings imply that even in his early "Eastern" stories, the author cannot be said to be merely laying exotic atmosphere with his metaphors, the way a cook frosts a cake. Though many critics feel these early settings are

gratuitous and unrelated to plot and character, our two essays argue that Conrad combines metaphor with meaning. Whether we can accept Gonçalves' further assertion that the works reveal a consistent set of personal symbols which reveal a Conradian fable of man's Fall depends perhaps on the extended argument of his thesis on Conrad, which we hope to see soon.

It's unfortunate that none of the four essays has much to say about NostrOmg which is set in South America and deals with the relevant problems of development, colonialism, and revolution. But the essays by Oliveira and Ristoff enter the murky realm of Conrad's social and political ideas by other doors. I find interesting here Oliveira's point that Under Western Eyes expresses sympathy for the Revolutionaries it also parodies. It is after all the story of a reactionary, solipsistic youth who betrays his revolutionary classmates by turning police informer for the Czar.

Razumov's later isolation and crippling come to him as punishment for a betrayal of trust, but his real doom is sealed by the ironic fact that he falls in love with the sister of the man he betrayed, a girl of upstanding radical principles. Ristoff's essay proceeds by contrast to find Victorian Conservatism innate in even as "advanced" a work as Heart of Darkness. His leading question is whether Conrad's recurring metaphor (Ship = human society) is legitimate enough for the author to base an ideology on, as Conrad seems to do in his "law and order" mood. One of Shakespeare's favorite metaphors implies that if you cut the head of the state off (the King) the body must die too. But how many heads have rolled and resprouted, how many "Potemkins" have been seized and resealed since the Days of Shakespeare and Conrad?