CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND
INTERCULTURAL DISCOURSE IN THE SHORTER FICTION OF
JOSEPH CONRAD

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ABSTRACT

Thesis: Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Discourse in the Shorter Fiction of Joseph Conrad

Cultural difference is a major preoccupation of Joseph Conrad’s fiction. This may be related to Conrad’s own experience of foreignness in Britain. Whatever the possible influences of Conrad’s life upon his work, attempts at communication and positive intercultural exchange on the part of Conrad’s fictional characters of different cultures, races and ethnic backgrounds, most often fail. Misunderstanding, fear of the foreign and the unfamiliar, intolerance, ignorance of other cultures, and the supremacist assumptions of the colonizing nations, these barriers to any meaningful communication often also lead, ironically, to the loss of cultural identity for individual characters, even to alienation and the inability to survive. Cultural difference and failed intercultural bonding also contribute to the development of other themes in Conrad’s fiction, especially that of self-recognition. The isolation of characters in unfamiliar surroundings brings them face to face with themselves, stripped of all cultural trappings and support systems. Some seek self discovery in exotic worlds where the romantic notion of the ‘mirror of the other’ is revealed to be yet another cultural mindset that closes the door on alternative perspectives. Conrad’s own inherent romanticism is offset by his strong sense of moral and creative responsibility and his awareness of the snare of romantic exoticism in which several of his characters become entangled.

Although some reference is made to the novels, this study centres around the shorter fiction, concentrating on the less frequently discussed short stories. The multiplicity of viewpoints and voices in Conrad’s narrative method resembles, and often matches in its ultimate function and purpose, the presentation of different cultural viewpoints and perspectives in his characterisation.

Conrad reveals through his fiction that the most tolerant person cannot be rid of all cultural prejudice, which is a limitation imposed by the inevitable social construction of individual identity. In some cases cultural prejudice relates more closely to class distinctions than to ethnic background. Whatever its source, Conrad embraces every opportunity to challenge that prejudice, whether directly or by quietly undermining its underlying assumptions. He remains aware to the last that the problems it raises are greater when disregarded, that they cannot be considered defeated and should never be laid to rest.