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IRONY AND THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE READER  
IN THREE OF JOSEPH CONRAD'S SHORT STORIES

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## INTRODUCTION

As many critics have by now shown, the fiction of Joseph Conrad is particularly significant and interesting with regard to its irony. In their consideration of Conrad's irony most critics have concentrated their attention upon the novels, or upon those short stories generally acknowledged to be masterpieces - namely Heart of Darkness. Also their interest has, for the most part, been in the thematic issues that Conrad's irony involves; studying the work-ethic, romance, nihilism, and so on.

This essay, also, is interested in Conrad's irony. However, here, the interest is in its rhetoric or aesthetic function, the way it involves the reader in a community of experience; and so although there is a thematic concern implicit in the approach the interest itself is not in themes.

There are three stories considered, as this allows through contrast and comparison to highlight the individuality that exists in spite of the common presence of irony; and so indicates in itself that Conrad's interest was not so much in the thematic implications of irony as in its aesthetic function.

Short stories, rather than Conrad's novels, have been studied because they are often overlooked or inadequately criticized; and, also, because in an essay of this length they can be considered with a thoroughness that would be forbid to a reading of the novels.

As regards the structure of this essay, there is first a chapter of theory studying the rhetoric of irony; and then there are three chapters studying the stories themselves; and, finally, a brief concluding chapter.

In Chapter One several aspects of the theoretical background are identified and considered in the sequence that follows: the thematic concern with irony and with Conrad's irony in particular; the formal or rhetorical as opposed to the thematic approach to literary criticism and why, here, it has been preferred to the latter; irony as a literary device; and irony and the actualization of meaning.

Chapters two to four study Typhoon, Falk: A Reminiscence and The Return respectively; all of which employ irony in various ways and with varying success as a structuring principle in the creation of their aesthetic effect. From a thematic perspective they would be versions of the governing ironic pre-occupation, successful or not as they accord with that dominant concern. However, what is most striking is not their similarities but their differences.

There is a "progression" of sorts to the order with which the stories are considered. In terms of orthodox critical opinion the order traces a decline in quality as the treatment of themes, seemingly, becomes more confused. In terms of irony the movement is into increasing instability; that is, any position becomes increasingly vulnerable to ironic undermining. In itself this is neither good nor bad. In Typhoon and even more so in Falk the instabilities involve the reader and a coherent albeit ironic experience is realized. However with The Return it is found that the authorial intention directing the irony is confused; and as a consequence the involvement of the reader in the actualization of a coherent experience is frustrated.

## CHAPTER 1

## IRONY AS A THEMATIC CONCERN

Irony has been extensively and variously defined. The term in general applies to a perception of incongruity. This perception can be localized where the sense of duplicity is contained within a larger un-ironic framework; that is, it is a 'stable irony'. Or the perception can be universalized until there is nothing that cannot be undermined or qualified; this unstable irony is called 'general irony' by D.C. Muecke. Those critics who see Conrad's work in terms of an ironic vision see it as informed by the spirit of General Irony.

In the context of General Irony human life is presented as irreconcilably contradictory. Muecke diagnoses the condition:

The basis for General Irony lies in those contradictions, apparently fundamental and irresolvable, that confront men when they speculate upon such topics as the origin and purpose of the universe, the certainty of death, the eventual extinction of all life, the impenetrability of the future, the conflicts between reason, emotion and instinct, freewill and determinism, the objective and the subjective, society and the individual, the absolute and the relative, the humane and the scientific. Most of these, it may be said, are reducible to one great incongruity, the appearance of self-valued and subjectively free but temporally finite egos in a universe that seems to be utterly alien, utterly purposeless, completely deterministic, and incomprehensibly vast. The

universe appears to consist of two systems which simply do not gear together. The one functions, and can only function, in terms of meanings, values, rational choices, and purposes; the other seems not to be comprehensible in these terms. And yet, though the two systems are incompatible, they are also inter-involved; the alien system extends its dominance into the very centre of the 'human' system and the 'human' system feels obliged to find meanings, values and purposes in the non-human, in short to reduce the duality to a unity.<sup>1</sup>

Conrad in his letters is painfully aware of this view of the human situation. He wrote to Cunninghame Graham:

(Reason) demonstrates ... that ... the fate of a humanity condemned ultimately to perish from cold is not worth troubling about. If you take it to heart it becomes an unendurable tragedy.<sup>2</sup>

The realms of reason and of the heart conflict.

Many critics finding this ironic temperament in Conrad's stories present it as the reason for the stories' being, or at least as the reason for reading them. J. Hillis Miller writes:

Conrad's vision seems to culminate in the recognition of an irreconcilable dualism. Man is the meeting place of matter and spirit, and he is riven apart by their contradictions.<sup>3</sup>

R.A. Gekoski is another critic who sees the thematic issues of irony as central to an appreciation of Conrad's works. His interest is in the moral ironies:

(Conrad) was deeply attracted by what appear to be contradictory apprehensions about the nature and obligations of human life. The feeling that he is obscure surely arises from this. On the one hand he stresses the private and individual nature of man's existence ... while on the other, he affirms the public and moral obligations of human existence.<sup>4</sup>

Conrad's irony is seen as a recognition and representation of the complexity of experience; and his use of the different technical devices of irony is seen to be governed by his ironic outlook on life. In other words, the irony is considered as the representation of a prior philosophical or psychological disposition, rather than as the presentation of a novel experience.

Preference of the rhetorical to the thematic approach to Conrad's irony.

The thematic approach has proved invaluable in unravelling the complex philosophical and psychological issues dramatized by Conrad's stories. However, as the extracts quoted from both Hillis Miller and Gekoski exemplify, one weakness inherent in the approach is that the focus is shifted from Conrad's works onto an abstract outlook on life attributed to Conrad the man. The literature is displaced by metaphysics or morality etc. Both the underlying assumption and conclusion being, as F.R. Leavis ironically expresses it, "that poets put loosely what philosophers formulate with precision."<sup>5</sup> The approach tends to an imbalance in emphasis, treating the text as a source for thematic programmes.

It also tends to generalization; a kind of long-sight that blurs reading of the story immediately at hand. Often the themes may subserve some other end. Often the strength or weakness of a story cannot be accounted for in terms of theme or paraphrasable message. Similar thematic concerns obtain in the very dissimilar Typhoon, Falk, and The Return. Nor is the varying success of these stories to be found in the clarity and extent of the thematic development in itself; rather it is in the power of the dramatization, of which thematic concerns are just a part.

The interest of this essay is in the irony of these stories not as it leads the reader from the text to a transcendent and privileged meaning, but as it functions to involve the reader in the actualization of the written world. Before considering this process, it must first be made clear what is being understood by irony as a literary figure.

#### Irony as a literary figure

Irony can be considered as an attitude to experience; and it can also be considered as a certain manner of holding or expressing that experience. The content is that discussed earlier as the thematic concern. The forms one hold to be examples of irony as a literary figure are many and dependent upon the definition being used.

Cleanth Brooks writes that irony "is the most general term we have for the kind of qualification which the various elements in a context receive from that context".<sup>6</sup> D.C. Muecke argues that this definition only serves "to finessethe word 'irony' out of useful existence."<sup>7</sup> However I want to rehabilitate Brooks' definition and answer the criticism of Muecke by attending to the phrase "the kind of qualification" and the term "context".



The phrase "the kind of qualification" is being understood to cover what Muecke identifies as the "three essential elements ... the formal requirements of irony."<sup>8</sup> These are: the two-fold nature, the contrast or opposition between the constituent elements, and the attitude of "innocence" characteristic of the relationship between the two elements. Muecke writes:

In the first place irony is a double-layered or two storey phenomenon. At the lower level is the situation either as it appears to the victim of irony (where there is a victim) or as it is deceptively presented by the ironist (where there is an ironist) ... At the upper level is the situation as it appears to the observer or ironist ... In the second place there is always some kind of opposition between the two levels, an opposition that may take the form of contradiction, incongruity, or incompatibility ... In the third place there is in irony an element of 'innocence'; either a victim is confidently unaware of the very possibility of there being an upper level or point of view that invalidates his own, or an ironist pretends not to be aware of it.<sup>9</sup>

"Context" is understood to cover both the world of the text and that extrinsic world it imitates. Wayne Booth, discussing how irony is generated from and regulated by contexts both aesthetic or literary and social or historical, writes:

What determines the relevant context out of the infinite number of surrounding details are the author's choices and the reader's inferences about these choices: the relevant

context becomes the picture of a coherent whole, with every detail referring reciprocally to every other in the work. But at the same time it is impossible to say that only what is 'in the work' is relevant context, because at every point the author depends on inferences about what his reader will likely assume or know - about both his factual knowledge and his experience of literature.<sup>10</sup>

I am understanding irony to be working, then, when one element in a context that includes the reader's own assumptions and expectations is set in an incongruous or contradictory relationship with another element in that context. The kind of elements and the ways in which the relationship may be set are many. A common distinction is that between simple verbal irony - where the intention is arrived at through reversing or qualifying the ostensible statement - and situational or structural irony. Structural irony can take many forms; its essential duplicity of meaning might be generated by features such as a fallible narrator, the relationship of narrator to narration, the manipulation of generic expectations, character inter-action, episodic and stylistic dislocations and juxtapositions, etc. In Typhoon, Falk and The Return the ironies are for the most part structural. However, as my interest is not in irony itself but in the way it invites the reader to actualize the story, I do not attempt in my readings to identify and classify the various modes it takes.

#### Irony and the actualization of meaning

Any literary figure involves the reader's competence and creativity but irony demands that involvement in a much more active and personal manner. The reader must recognize the presence of irony and ironic strategies;

consider the deficiency of the immediate feature; judge that against the alternatives, which may have to be supplied from out of the reader's knowledge and experience; and then reconstruct the whole, either closing the gap between the levels or recognizing the levels as mutually qualifying. Wayne Booth writes:

All authors ... invite us to construct some sort of picture of their views and to judge them as in some sense coherent or plausible or challenging. But ironic authors obviously offer that invitation more aggressively, and we must answer it more actively.<sup>11</sup>

The involvement is also personal. The reader draws the completed intention from his knowledge and experience. It is the reader's response and reconstruction that actualizes the meaning. Unlike the meaning of the 'straight' text, the meaning of the ironic text is not complete in itself; its intention is freed only through the reader's reconstruction. The reader realizes and 'co-authors' the meaning. Wayne Booth writes:

When irony succeeds, somehow the energy our minds put into recognizing this type of conflict (between the levels of irony) and making our choices is transferred to one element or another in the ironic scene: either negatively against the victim ... or affirmatively on behalf of the final reconstruction: having decided for myself that the ostensible judgement must be somehow combatted. I make the new position mine with all the force that is conferred by my sense of having judged independently. After all, I built this superior dwelling place "for myself."<sup>12</sup>

There is a third way in which irony builds a community of experience. The attitude of the author as ironist recognizes the reader as a partner who "knows". This remains true even with unstable General Irony; in this case everyone is equally a victim, the difference is between the knowing and the ignorant victim. In this way Wayne Booth's remarks hold for both stable and unstable ironies:

Often the predominant emotion when reading stable ironies is that of joining, of finding and communing with kindred spirits. The author I infer behind the false words is my kind of man, because he enjoys playing with irony, because he assumes my capacity for dealing with it, and - most important - because he grants me a kind of wisdom; he assumes that he does not have to spell out the shared and secret truths on which my reconstruction is to be built.<sup>13</sup>

In his 'Preface' to The Nigger of the "Narcissus" Conrad attaches much importance to the concept of a community of experience, where the reader joins the author in the active and creative realization of the intention. Ian Watt argues that a concern with solidarity is central to the 'Preface':

the urgency of (Conrad's) rhetoric on the subject strongly suggests that his deepest interest in the preface was to articulate the hope that his presented vision would "awaken in the hearts of the beholders (the) feeling of unavoidable solidarity."<sup>14</sup>

The feeling of solidarity follows upon and is part of the reader's involvement. In the often-quoted proclamation of intent Conrad stresses how he wants through his art to make this involvement active and creative:

My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel - it is, before all, to make you see. (N.N.:x)<sup>15</sup>

The task is not to present thematic programmes but to involve the reader in a realization of experience which, as the play on "see" indicates, includes themes. The themes however are not the essential concern; they are like the bass-line to a song, in adding resonance and a certain timbre to the work without constituting the whole performance. It is my argument that irony is an important strategy Conrad uses (not always successfully) to invite us "not to 'think about' and judge but 'to feel into' or 'become' - to realize a complete experience that is given in words."<sup>16</sup>