

# From Marginalism to Dualism: On Joseph Conrad's Cultural Awareness

Li Wenjun

School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Ningxia University, Yinchuan, China

**Email address:**

charlie\_lie@163.com, liwj@nxu.edu.cn

**To cite this article:**

Li Wenjun. From Marginalism to Dualism: On Joseph Conrad's Cultural Awareness. *International Journal of Literature and Arts*. Vol. 10, No. 1, 2022, pp. 51-58. doi: 10.11648/j.ijla.20221001.17

**Received:** January 6, 2022; **Accepted:** January 24, 2022; **Published:** February 9, 2022

---

**Abstract:** Joseph Conrad is a Polish born English writer who immigrated or expatriated to many different cultural backgrounds. He is considered a marginal man, a restless figure all through his life, and a man in exile, without root and of no belonging. The cultural identity once was one of Conrad's overriding concerns, one that dominated much of his personal and public life. Conrad was born in Poland, but was not spiritually bred and educated by that culture; he immigrated to and finally settled in Britain, but often kept a heightened sense of his social and cultural alienation. However, having walked in and out of the marginal circles of the several cultures, Conrad was able to free himself from the absolute manipulation of any single culture. His marginal man's relative sense of cultures and identity have well led him to a richly composite individual—one that combines key elements of many cultures. So, the diverse cultural experiences and the unique cultural understanding enabled Conrad to change from marginal form to janiform and became a writer with the concept of dualism. Then, dualism serves as Conrad's philosophical foundation for observing and judging the world. Born a Pole, Conrad does not see things totally from a Polish stance, nor does he totally take a Russian stance, French stance, English stance, or other single cultural stance. Such idea of dualism is clearly demonstrated in portraying the image of the "self" and the "other" in this jungle fiction. Although such dualism very often produces tensions and ambivalence on Conrad and his writings, there are certainly deep insights and revelations in it. His concept of dualism might provide instructive understanding of the world today—to see all the aspects of the matter instead of just one, i.e., to see things from both the opposite sides.

**Keywords:** Joseph Conrad, Marginalism, Dualism, Cultural Identity, Janiform

---

## 1. Introduction

An Arabian teaching story tells of a holy sage who wanted to venture to a strange city. Before he left on his journey, his wife put a tag around his neck with his name on it so that he would not forget his identity. When he arrived at the city, he spent the first night at a hotel; while he slept, a joker took the tag and put it around his own neck. "It seems," he cried, "that you are me. But if you are me, then who am I" [1]?

This question—"who am I?"—is a question asked by many people who are always confused about who they really are and about their relationship with their cultural heritage and social circumstances. So, the "identity crisis," "self-expression," and "finding oneself" become the prior issues for one person living across cultures. Joseph Conrad is a Polish born English writer who immigrated or expatriated to many various cultural backgrounds. He was actually in the

exile in all his life, physically and spiritually. The above question—"who am I?"—once was surely one of Conrad overriding concerns, one that dominated much of his personal and public life.

Conrad finished the physical exile when he settled down in England. Nevertheless, he never fulfilled his spiritual exile—seeking for his cultural identity. Culturally speaking, Conrad is neither a Polish, nor an English. However, although Conrad did not find a cultural entity that his cultural identity should belong to, he actually developed a new form of unique cultural identity—one that could be related to many cultures in the world. Having walked in and out of the marginal circles of the several cultures, Conrad was able to free himself from the absolute manipulation of any single culture. He moved from marginal form to janiform, and finally to the concept of dualism, which proclaims a balanced way of knowing and judging the world and people.

## 2. Marginalism

Conrad is a Polish-born English writer, but he cannot be entirely attributed to either of these two cultures. Although Conrad was born in Poland and grew up as a teenage there, yet he was not bred and educated by that culture very much because he left Poland at his young age before he was integrated with it culturally and spiritually; likewise, although Conrad moved to Britain and settled down there, yet he could not help keeping a heightened sense of his social and cultural alienation there. As a matter of fact, Conrad was a marginal man, who was in fact a restless figure in exile in most of his life: a man with no root and no belonging.

### 2.1. Conrad's Polish Identity

Conrad was born in Poland, but he did not feel he belonged to it. Because of the exile with his family at his young age, Conrad did not get much spiritual influence from his motherland Poland except regrets and resentments. Conrad was very luckily born into a highly patriotic, noble yet slightly impoverished Polish family. However, this luck of being born into a noble family very soon brought him bad luck, which caused Conrad's first exile in his life. In 1861, Conrad's father Korzeniowski was arrested by Imperial Russian authorities for his patriotic fervency and then was exiled to Vologda. Conrad, as a boy of four years old, accompanied his father and mother on this political banishment to a fairly remote area of Russia north-east of Kiev, about 300 miles from their home. They were in very harsh conditions there. As his father's description of the place illustrated, "A great three-vast marsh... everything rotting and shifting under one's feet.... The climate consists of two seasons of the year: a white winter and a green winter. The white winter lasts nine-and-a-half months and the green one two-and-a-half..." [2]. Later, they were allowed to move to a less hostile environment, but there within a few weeks Ewelina, Conrad's mother, died of tuberculosis. Then Apollo, his father, died four years later in Kraków, leaving Conrad orphaned. As an orphan, Conrad moved about a good deal, restless and rootless. Such of his painful experiences were very often conveyed through his literary works. For example, Brian Spittles claimed that "[t]hose potentially noble, potentially destructive concepts that drove his family on recur as themes throughout Conrad's work" [3].

Luckily, Conrad learned French with his father during their period in the exile together and he was once taken to the sea at Odessa. These two factors fired young Conrad's imagination and desire to escape to a place like the open and free sea. He longed to seek a place he was able to form his own life and cultural identity. So, Conrad left Poland for France at the age of 17. And this led to his second exile—to be a sailor on the sea. Such exile on the sea was also a break away from the Polish restraints. After years of exile on the sea, Poland only existed as a mere phantom or distant memory to Conrad. Paul Kintzele had his say about this: "Repeated by so many other Poles before and after Conrad, the migratory leap also constitutes a Polish variant on the theme of displacement that characterizes so many of the lives of the artists who dominated

the first years of the twentieth century" [4]. According to Kintzele, at Conrad's time, many of the painters, dancers, musicians, poets, and novelists have made the modernist revolution by abandoning home and history and embracing exile as a way of life. Kintzele said, "Like others, Conrad left Poland in large part because it did not exist except as a kind of phantom, a notion, a historical memory" [4]. Conrad by no means can be attributed totally to Polish culture.

### 2.2. Conrad's English Identity

Conrad cannot be granted with the absolute English cultural identity either. Conrad began his career as a sailor in the French Merchant Navy in 1847. Four years later, Conrad, in the way many international sailors often did at the time, shifted to the British Merchant Navy where he felt some stability seeping into his nomadic existence. However, as a young adult, Conrad enjoyed none of the customary attachments that could construct an English identity, though he immediately found brotherhood and a feeling of home there. At that time, Conrad was still learning English (his third language) earnestly and English traditions were very new and strange to him. His particular accents and manner distinguished him as a "foreigner." He found a sense of home in England, but it was a home of adoption. Although Conrad established friendships with members of the English middle class, the solitude and marginality that his jungle fiction described was often a psychological commonplace for him. As thus commented by J. H. Stape in the introduction to Conrad's *Notes on Life and Letters*, "Although not unique to Conrad, the antagonism and conjunction between 'Life' and 'Letters' was undoubtedly intensified by his social status in the country of his choice and adoption" [5].

In 1896, Conrad married to an English woman, Jessie George and took up the permanent residence in England. It seemed that Conrad's exile ended. However, that was just the end of his physical exile, but another exile—the spiritual one—followed immediately. Conrad was in a disturbed state of mind, for the search for the "self" and the cultural identity was the prior issue for him. When Conrad's first collection of stories was published in 1898, he named the book *Tales of Unrest*. Apparently, the word "unrest" could properly describe Conrad's living condition and his state of mind then. Owen Knowles claimed that "[t]he whole tenor of Conrad's life as Polish émigré and seaman seems to have encouraged in him habits of mind associated with what has later come to be identified as the hybrid 'marginal man' who, living 'in two worlds, in both of which he is a stranger', needs self-consciously to fashion an identity from a medley of competing demands and allegiances" [6].

Conrad kept a kind of otherness to English culture on his cultural identity, and he suffered the radical alteration. No matter how much Conrad adapted himself to English community; yet he was an "outsider" to that culture forever. Conrad himself was conscious of his sense of alienation, which was a result of his exile experience and expatriate life. In addition, the marginal and solitary life in his adopted country of England made him quite skeptical so that he would

like to see things both in the opposite ways at the same time. This is why some critics argue for a nihilistic vision in Conrad and why other critics also find the existential vision in Conrad. As a matter of fact, “[i]t is through his skepticism that Conrad was able to investigate the human psyche behind the act of betrayal” [7].

### 2.3. *Conrad's Anxiety of Self-identity Revealed in His Writings*

When Conrad started to write, his Polish gentry roots and prior professional experience as a merchant seaman drew attentions and curiosities in the literary field. This gave Conrad a kind of isolation from the main stream of the literary circle. As commented by J. H. Stape, “he [Conrad] suffered popular indifference in his earlier career, and until he had reached mid-life was rarely free from economic anxiety” [5]. However, according to Stape, some favorable reviews and ready recognition from a circle of established and emergent writers, including George Gissing, Henry James and H. G. Wells, might have encouraged Conrad to go on writing and have eased his sense of isolation during Conrad's early difficult time.

Conrad's life experiences indeed set the pattern of his life and provided themes which often occurred in the books he wrote later. P. Amalorpava Mary had her say for this: “Like many of his heroes, he [Conrad] was lonely and sought independence. The emotional estrangement of man in an alien surrounding whether self-imposed or circumstantial recurs in Conrad's novels” [8]. So, Conrad's works are good sources to know his uneasiness in English culture not only because those works convey his thoughts and value of world, but also because some of his works are quite autobiographical. Conrad explained this thus: “My answer is that if it be true that every novel contains an element of autobiography—and this can hardly be denied, since the creator can only express himself in his creation—then there are some of us to whom an open display of sentiment is repugnant” [9]. For instance, Conrad's short story “Amy Foster” is a good example for us to study his relationship with English community. Walker George pointed out that Conrad's alienation clearly conveyed in his literary works. He said: “Never comfortable with his adopted English culture, Conrad used his experiences in different parts of the world during his career in the merchant navy to explore in his writing aspects of cultural dissonance and cultural isolation” [10]. According to George, Conrad's contribution to the understanding of these themes—cultural dissonance and cultural isolation—is well illustrated by particular reference to three of his early short stories—“An Outpost of Progress”, “Karain: A Memory” and “Amy Foster.” It is believed that “Amy Foster” in particular reflects Conrad's own social alienation in English society. Bertrand Russell, the British philosopher, commented thus: “I have wondered at times how much of [Yanko's] loneliness Conrad had felt among the English and had suppressed by a stern effort of will” [10].

“Amy Foster” is a short story written by Conrad in 1901. The central character of the story is Yanko Goorall, a “Slavonian” peasant “mountaineer” from “the eastern range of the

Carpathians” [11]. At the beginning of the story, Yanko met the shipwreck and was washed ashore upon the Kentish coast of England, in an area not far from where Conrad himself took up residence in 1898. Speaking no English, Yanko was treated as a madman and was whipped, stoned, beaten and imprisoned by the locals. Eventually he was given a job by a Mr. Swaffer. Then Yanko began to learn to speak English, and later fell in love with Amy Foster, an English girl who showed him kindness. They got married and then had a son. One day, Yanko fell severely ill. Suffering from a severe fever, Yanko began to rave in his native language. Amy, frightened, took their child and fled for her life. The following morning, Yanko died of heart failure. Later, it was revealed that Yanko had simply been asking in his native language for water.

Conrad himself indeed shared many similarities with the characteristics of Yanko. Like Yanko, Conrad too was a immigrated Pole in England, far from his native land. The trauma that Yanko had suffered reflected that of Conrad's. Yanko's trauma was the violent shipwreck of which Yanko was the sole survivor, being separated from family and homeland by bogus “Emigration Agencies” and a hostile reception by the uncomprehending and incomprehensible English. These were the exact same things that bothered Conrad then when he first came to England. Very relevant to Yanko's traumas, Conrad's psychic-shadow then were danger of sea life, a lonely European expatriate, and an English new learner. It is said that even the scene of Amy being scared by the fevered Yanko is based on an actual incident which occurred during Conrad's honeymoon with his wife Jessie. Brian W Shaffer claimed that “[i]n ‘Amy Foster’, Conrad is aware of this psychocultural dimension of trauma, even if Yanko, his fictional victim, is not” [12]. Thus, as an expatriate in England, Conrad did share many traumas that Yanko had received in England as foreign intruder. Brian W Shaffer further said that “the story [of ‘Amy Foster’] stands as Conrad's meditation on otherness—particularly, on the potentially traumatic experience of radical alterity and on the potentially violent results of simplistic, binary thinking” [12].

## 3. Dualism

Conrad is a Pole and he is also an Englishman, but he totally belongs to none of the two cultural entities spiritually and ideologically. He is a marginalized outsider to both Polish culture and English culture. However, the outsider may be able to take a very good angle to observe things happening inside, which can help one to see better what cannot be seen from inside. Conrad himself admitted that he is a “Polish nobleman, cased in British tar.” This mainly results from his nomadic life experience as “Conrad's life from his birth in 1857 to the early 1890's was a life of restless movement, and exile and loss” [13]. As Owen Knowles said, “surprised though the Polish-born ‘Joseph Conrad’ may have been to become a published English author in 1895 at the age of thirty-seven, it should come as no surprise, given the extraordinarily varied and cosmopolitan influences at work on him, that he should turn out to be the novelist of paradox and riddle” [6].

### 3.1. Conrad's Marginal Form

Conrad was an expatriate in Europe, and he seemed to be marginalized wherever he went. As a marginal man—a culturally up-rooted man, morally and ideologically, Conrad seemed to have no stance in writing and speaking; hence seemed to be radically paradoxical or self-contradictory. However, Knowles argued that “the marginal man’s relative sense of cultures and cultural identity may also lead to a richly composite individual, who, by his very ability to cross boundaries, enjoys the best of several worlds” [6]. According to Knowles, on the one hand, “marginal-form” is likely to result in “spiritual” instability, self-consciousness, restlessness and depression; on the other hand “marginal-form” also means no fixed centre to move around rigidly, which is a kind of deconstruction of the centre. The “marginal-form” Conrad actually was able to enjoy a relative freedom in the country of his adoption. This freedom stems from the off-centre position allowed by the unusual combination of nearness and distance in relation to host-traditions.

As for Conrad’s marginality, Solange Ribeiro de Oliveira had his say: “At the time, forced by personal and political circumstances into a condition of displacement and of-centeredness, Conrad struggled with a cosmopolitanism which found literal and metaphorical expression in what we may call a process of constant translation, or, as J. Clifford puts it, of ‘maximal linguistic complexity’” [14]. Conrad has gone through the three stages of cultural awareness. Firstly, Conrad was once separated from his current position within the society. His family were exiled and he left Poland for ever at the age of sixteen, which fulfilled a total separation from his former cultural identity. Secondly, in France and England, Conrad passed through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. Lastly, Conrad reached his consummation of janiform.

### 3.2. Conrad's Janiform

Psychological speaking, Conrad had a janiform personality. In his letters to his nephew, Uncle Tadeusz repeatedly mentioned that Conrad is a double man, an inheritor of a janiform personality. Tadeusz claimed that Conrad inherited an unstable temperament, changeable, imaginative, impatient, and impractical on the father’s side; while, on the mother’s side, he inherited powers of patient diligence and steady application. Conrad’s career as a seaman could well illustrate this dual-nature. For example, he never stayed on any vessel for long; yet, on the other hand, his zealous endeavors took him to the peak of a naval career by the age of thirty.

With such a janiform personality, it seemed that Conrad never preferred one thing absolutely to others. Conrad said, “I am a great foe to favoritism in public life, in private life, and even in the delicate relationship of an author to his works” [15]. For instance, in “Author’s notes” to *Lord Jim*, when interrogated whether *Lord Jim* is his favorite novel, he said he had no certain reference to either one of his works. Conrad wrote, “I have been asked at times whether this was not the book of mine I liked best. As a matter of principle I will have

no favorites; but I don’t go so far as to feel grieved and annoyed by the preference some people give to my ‘*Lord Jim*’” [15]. Not only did Conrad have no certain favorite in his novels, but also “in public life and in private life” as well. Ford Madox Ford was a literary collaborator of Conrad. His observations provided further interesting clues to Conrad’s janiform personality. In recalling his early communications with Conrad as a collaborator, Ford wrote thus:

*His voice was then unusually low, rather intimate and caressing. He began by speaking slowly but later on he spoke very fast. ...He gesticulated with his hands and shoulders when he wished to be emphatic, but when he forgot himself in the excitement of talking he gesticulated with his whole body, throwing himself about in his chair, moving his chair nearer to yours. Finally he would spring up, go to a distance, and walk backwards and forwards across the end of the room* [16].

From these words, we can see a changeable and emotional Conrad. In speaking, he changes the voice, speed of words, and the manners so often. For example, his voice shifts from low pitch to high pitch, he starts speaking slowly but changes to fast speed in the middle, and he even changes his position from sitting into walking. No wonder Ford claimed that as a man and a writer, Conrad is invariably thought to be “elusive” and “protean.”

Cedric Watts used “Janiform” to sum up Conrad’s ambivalent personality and his distinctive way of literary creation. He described Conrad’s situation thus: “if any god presides over Conrad’s best work, it is the god Janus” [17]. This god Janus is two-faced and always looks in the opposite directions at the same time. Like god Janus, Conrad could see things from both opposite sides. Conrad himself agreed that he is a “home duplex”—the double man. He wrote to a Polish friend thus: “Both at sea and on land my point of view is English, from which the conclusion should not be drawn that I have become an Englishman. That is not the case. Homo duplex has in any case more than one meaning. You will understand me” [18]. This is the reason that Conrad may seem radically paradoxical or self-contradictory in his literary works. Janiform produces a susceptibility to charges of betrayal, since to admit loyalty to multiple allegiances may in itself bear the appearance of disloyalty to any one of them.

### 3.3. Conrad's Dualism

When Conrad reached his consummation of janiform, dualism became his philosophical foundation in seeing, judging, doing the things. Conrad has Polish cultural origins, but he does not see things totally from Polish stance, nor does he do totally from Russian stance, French stance, English stance, or any other single cultural stance. The word “totally” here means that Conrad has never maintained the absolutism. He deals with everything on the concept of dualism. For Conrad, there is no fixed standing line for the truth, which for him is changeable, ambivalent, and sometimes even contradictory.

For example, Conrad’s concept of dualism can be seen in his statement about the interdependence of the artist’s and of

humanity's concerns. In a letter to *The New York Times* of 2 August 1901, Conrad once wrote, "The only legitimate basis of creative work lies in the courageous recognition of all the irreconcilable antagonisms that make our life so enigmatic, so burdensome, so fascinating, so dangerous—so full of hope" [18].

Obviously, dualism requires the consciousness to equally recognize the two dualistic forces and the spirit of skepticism to both of them. Conrad had a janiform personality, so he bore the instinct to see the dualistic forces at the same time. Besides, he had a high spirit of skepticism. In 1901, Conrad sent his famous advice to Galsworthy claiming that skepticism is "the tonic of minds, the tonic of life, the agent of truth—the way of art and salvation." He suggested taking the skepticism as the very foundation of the literary work. It is very noticeable that skepticism and act of betrayal are consistent themes of Conrad's works. Therefore, what seems to drive Conrad to dualism is a continual presence of skepticism. As said by Ella Ophir, "What does give pause is its endurance in his statements through the next two decades—not just through its rapid decline as a literary value but, more importantly, through his destabilizing psychological experiences, his philosophical scepticism, and the nature of his own writing, which is so thoroughly informed by both" [19].

For Conrad, the skepticism is not a negative force but "the agent of truth—the way of art and salvation." It is through his skepticism, "the agent of truth", that Conrad questioned what is behind Jim's desertion, Nostromo's theft of the fatal silver ingots, Verloc's professional betrayal, Razumov's self-justifying betrayal of his friend Haldin, and Heyst's deplorable detachment and his inability to return Lena's love. However, with skepticism in mind, Conrad never lost "faith in himself and others." He cherished that creed of "undying hope." "To be hopeful in an artistic sense it is not necessary to think that the world is good. It is enough to believe that there is no impossibility of its being made so" [5]. Human society maybe is corrupted and bad, but we can make it better by the cooperated efforts.

Cedric Watts summarized Conrad's dualism in viewing the truth thus: "Morality is a sham. Without it, human beings become sham humans. Awareness is better than unawareness. We may become aware that it is better to be unaware, and we may even learn that ignorance is bliss. A person who sells his soul does at least have a soul to sell, and may gain a significance denied to the mediocre" [20]. According to such belief, human civilization can sometimes be very barbaric. It should be vigilantly guarded, for human civilization can be both a hypocritical veneer and a valuable achievement. Society provides an ordered and well-organized human life, yet the society is corrupt. This is why Conrad takes ambivalent attitude toward British imperialism. According to Conrad, "Imperialism may be redeemed by 'an idea at the back of it', but imperialism, irredeemably, is 'robbery with violence'. Brotherhood transcends racial differences, but 'we live, as we dream—alone'" [20].

Conrad's paradoxical attitude toward British imperialism and his national identity revealed his concept of dualism. He

chose England to settle down mainly because he was attracted by robust enterprises of Britain imperialism. As commented by Ford, "England of Conrad's early vision: an immense power standing for liberty and hospitality for refugees; vigilant over a Pax Britannica that embraced the world" [16]. However, after Conrad had paid visits to many of the British colonies, he immediately realized its destructive power to the colonized places. In his jungle novels, he fiercely attacked the exploitation and oppression of European imperialist colonization. According to Stephen Land, Conrad's jungle novels well revealed his concept of dualism:

*In most of the novels from the time of "An Outpost of Progress" the dualistic conflict manifests itself ideologically as between idealism and materialism, order and anarchy, or altruism and individualism, but Lord Jim, being psychological rather than ideological in its general orientation, reverts to the simpler mode of the early Malayan novels, in which the hero pursues his career between two cultures, black and white, Malay and European* [21].

Conrad novella *Heart of Darkness* best manifests his concept of dualism. It revealed clearly Conrad's concept of dualism from the very outset. For example, the title of the novella itself can be interpreted either as the reference to the interior of "dark Africa," or the indications of the darkness of the inner corruption of Kurtz. Besides, the underdeveloped Africa can be the "heart of darkness" of civilizations, but the River Thames, the centre of the empire "on which the sun never sets," where the tale actually begins, can itself be a "heart of darkness." Cedric Watts claimed that the images in "Heart of Darkness" are in fact subverted. He wrote: "The city is 'sepulchral'; London is associated with 'brooding gloom'; and the very title of the tale refers not only to the heart of 'darkest Africa' but also to Kurtz's corruption, to benighted London, and to innumerable kinds of darkness and obscurity, physical, moral, and ontological" [20]. Obviously, *Heart of Darkness* repeatedly produces dualistic and antithetical associations of white and black, of light and dark, and of civilizing and primitive. Undoubtedly, these dualistic contrasts do mean something.

Therefore, Conrad belongs to none specific culture, but he links and unites them together. This cultural situation of Conrad very naturally goes with Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural hybrid. In practicing Bhabha's theory to his reading of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Mark Mossman claimed that the core idea of Bhabha's cultural hybrid is that "there are always social spaces or locations for an individual to exist in which the individual can operate, and can also understand and be deeply critical of every side of the culture as a whole: it is the ability to play both sides of system, the ultimate ability to perceive the schema of the cultural system in action" [22].

Applying this to Conrad, it is not surprising that Conrad just stands in such "social spaces" in which he can "play both sides of the system," in which he is "neither this nor that, and yet is both." Bhabha concluded in his essay "Dissemi Nation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation" thus: "it is

by living on the borderline of history and language, on the limits of race and gender, that we are in a position to translate the differences between them into a kind of solidarity" [23]. In other words, Conrad has the special advantages of someone belonging-yet-not-belonging, so he is able to see things from different sides, even from both opposite directions at the same time. This is the great advantage of "janiform"—the dualistic view of cultures.

## 4. The Effect of Dualism

Conrad used dualism in many aspects of his novel creation: titling, setting, characterization, plotting, and theme. He was able to create dualism not only through explicit statement but also through ambiguous images and many-faceted symbols. So, "dualism" becomes the key to explain why in the process of interpreting Conrad and his fictions, readers and scholars are often confronted with contradictions or oppositions as soon as they have formed one idea. It seems that people can interpret anything in Conrad's works convincingly from both the opposite stances. Most of his major fiction is constructed out of antagonisms that are never finally resolved. For instances, the dualistic contrasts in his writings include egoism and altruism, emotion and reason, solidarity and isolation, moral corruption and redemption, heroism and contingency, loyalty and betrayal, idealism and skepticism, piety and scorn, etc.

### 4.1. Dualism and Conrad's Ambivalence

The dualism makes Conrad ambivalent and controversial. For example, *Heart of Darkness*, which seems to be a bold and astute in its attacks on imperialism, is sometimes revealed as a work that, in the opinion of Achebe Chinua, is actually pro-imperialist in its endorsement of racial prejudice. Achebe asserted that *Heart of Darkness* depicted African as place of negations ... in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest" [24]. However, we may easily find that, the European dehumanized exploitations are vividly and seriously touched in this book. Cedric Watts also argued for this point that although *Heart of Darkness* marginalized the Africans, yet Marlow gave them prominence and presented them with telling vivid description of the conditions of the chain-gang and of the exploited workers dying in the grove. As Watts said, "What the other Europeans choose to ignore, Marlow observes with sardonic indignation. Relegation, which is criticized, is a theme of the narrative" [20]. So, Conrad's ambivalence is not a problematic thing, instead, "the idea of ambivalence is a political counter-hegemonic strategy that addresses the problem of identity as predicated on patently fixed categories of gender, race and class" [25].

Besides, Conrad is a very controversial writer, particularly in the perspective of moral, sex, race, culture, and imperialism and so on. Umberto Eco pointed out, "Conrad's artistic and intellectual peculiarity attracts, confuses, and makes him an easy prey of arbitrariness, of that identification of interpretation with use which is Richard Rorty's fashionable

battle cry" [26]. Actually, Conrad's concept of dualism is the source for the endless argument and controversy. No matter how eloquent, how polemic, and how convincing the argument about Conrad seems to be from a certain point of view, there would be the encounters of the very same eloquent, polemic, and convincing argument from the opposite stance. As a result of many cultural elements, Conrad's novels can be interpreted from the opposite or contradictory point of view. For example, Avram Alpert argued that "Conrad's story, I will argue, enacts a critique of any worldview that claims absolute knowledge through enlightenment" [27]. Moreover, according to Majid Sadeghzadegan, both the accusers of Conrad as a racist, imperial author and the defenders of him as an anti-racist critic of colonialism could be regarded rightful. He said: "Nonetheless, this ambivalent situation Conrad holds in this story is the strategy he used in *Heart of Darkness* in order to oppose the long-assumed primitivity of the indigenous, African communities and to criticize the intimidating discourse of the Western colonizers" [25]. As summarized by Watts, "Conrad's writing voices a combination of nineteenth-century and twentieth-century preoccupations; he 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" [17]. According to Watts, morally and politically, psychologically and philosophically, Conrad can be a probing and challenging writer due to his concept of dualism. He thus warned us of reading Conrad: "Awareness of Conrad's complexity may entail recognition of a currently widespread critical habit: the reductive falsification of the past in an attempt to vindicate the political gestures of the present" [20].

### 4.2. Mirror-like Effect of Conrad's Dualism

Conrad's concept of dualism in writing jungle fiction did result in controversy, paradox, and mystery. However, instead of undermining the meaning of his work, this Conradian dualism makes his works more powerful, more expressive, more profound to interpret, and of course mysterious and unique. In *Heart of Darkness*, as in most of his other jungle novels, the Conrad's concept of dualism has a mirror-like effect in which each side appears as a distorted but inescapably recognizable image of the other. Stephen K Land had such say about mirror-like effect of dualism: "The mirror effect involves not only the revelation of virtual moral equivalence between the two juxtaposed parties, but also a degree of patterning among the characters and events, such that the foremost figures and actions of one party are often counterbalanced by similar but opposing persons and pursuits of the other" [21]. According to Land, the harder we look at the two races portrayed in Conrad's jungle fiction, the more difficult it becomes to isolate any significant moral difference between them.

Such mirror effect of dualism is significant to Conrad's jungle fiction, since it entails that any significant move towards either pole of the dualism will be encountered by an equal but opposite move towards the other. Conrad's protagonists, who are always put into the difficult situation

formed by very conflicting forces, turn out to be as paradoxical as Conrad. For instance, in *Almayer's Folly*, every move the hero Almayer made towards his European goal at the same time bound him more firmly to Malay Sambir—the exotic native land of the “other.” Almayer was in a trap where he was drawn by two dualistically opposite forces—one was from the white world and the other was from the colored world. For example, Almayer (the white)’s partnership with Lingard (the white) initially involved marriage to a Malay woman (the colored); Almayer optimistically began to work on his new European-style house, but his native wife (the colored) re-emerged from the missing to torment him; when Almayer began his plans to hunt for Lingard (the white)’s treasure, but Mrs. Almayer and Babalatchi (the colored) began to plot against him; and as Almayer found an ally in Dain (the colored) he was at the same time obliged against his will to enter into illicit dealings with Lakamba (the colored). The concept of dualism was well manifested in such dualistic patterns of presentation, which helped to convey Almayer’s personality and his doomed fate.

Conrad created dualism in his writing, without trying to idealize any counterpart. For example, in the constructing the image of the “white” and the “colored,” Conrad seemed to neutralize himself in the middle. He never expressed a fixed favorable feeling towards either of them. As for the racial controversy of *Heart of Darkness*, Conradian scholar Peter Firchow’s argument would be objective and acceptable. He pointed out that “nowhere in the novel does Conrad or any of his narrators, personified or otherwise, claim superiority on the part of Europeans on the grounds of alleged genetic or biological difference” [28]. According to Firchow, if Conrad or his novel is racist, it is only in a weak sense since *Heart of Darkness* acknowledges racial distinctions “but does not suggest an essential superiority” of any particular group. Therefore, dualism made Conrad dialectic and skeptical so that he was able to treat his characters, white or colored, in a relatively equal or balanced manner, which was at least rare during his time in the West. Likewise, Andrea White attributed the cause of Conrad’s controversy to the appearance of postcolonial theory: “How to represent a culture not one’s own was once thought a fairly straightforward endeavor, but under the informing pressure of postcolonial theory that reminds us all of our own otherness and of the ways in which our own situatedness inevitably shapes what we see—no matter how objective and scientific our inquiry—it has become a charge issue” [29].

## 5. Conclusion

Joseph Conrad is not the kind of writer can be understood with just one reading, for dualism is his philosophic principle in seeing and doing things. Conrad once was a marginal man, a restless figure all through his life. He was born in Poland, but was not spiritually bred and educated by that culture; he immigrated to and finally settled in Britain, but often kept a heightened sense of his social and cultural alienation. It is safe

to say that Conrad often walked in and out of the marginal circles of the several cultures, free from the absolute manipulation of any single culture. When many marginal circles cross and overlap one another, the marginal spaces may instead turn into the centre that bridges all related circles standing for different cultures. Thus, such a marginal man’s relative sense of cultures and cultural identity may have led Conrad to a richly composite individual—one that combines key elements of many cultures. From marginality to janiform, Conrad has finally developed the concept of dualism in cultural awareness, which is Conrad’s philosophical foundation for observing and judging the world.

Therefore, in reading Conrad, we must be ready for any paradoxical and contradictory events, situations, and opinions. The dualism in Conrad’s novels would often make readers to think and wonder along with the writer. There are deep insights and revelations behind this dualism. With the concept of Dualism, Conrad frees himself from the absolute manipulation of just one single cultural convention. Born a Pole, Conrad did not see things totally from a Polish stance, nor did he totally take a Russian stance, French stance, English stance, or other single cultural stance. Conrad’s fiction was created with many forces combined together. For example, Conrad usually presents the ironies or shock through a dualistic conflict: dual contrast between black and white worlds and between the principles of enlightenment and exploitation.

As an English-Pole, Conrad insisted upon the largeness and historical depth of his Western legacy. However, as a writer, his work on the one hand explicitly announced kinships with wider and freer European traditions, most especially with the literary heritage of France and England; while on the other hand implicitly indicated kinships with all the cultures from the “other” world. The diverse cultural experiences and the unique cultural understanding helped Conrad to form a dualistic way of judging and measuring the world and people, which is clearly demonstrated in the creation of his jungle fiction, in portraying the image of the “self” and the “other”, and in his dualistic worldview. Although such dualism very often produces tensions and ambivalence in the literary content of Conrad’s jungle fiction, there are deep insights and revelations behind this superficial dualism. His concept of dualism might provide instructive understanding of the world today. We are now living in world of antagonism, which makes us to see, to wonder, to weigh, to consider, and finally to decide. Conrad’s dualism means to see all the aspects of the matter instead of just one, i.e., to see things from both the opposite sides.

## References

- [1] Lindholm, Charles. *Culture and Identity: The History, Theory, and Practice of Psychological Anthropology*. Oxford: One world Publications, 2008, c2007: 3.
- [2] Baines, Jocelyn. *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1960: 13-14.

- [3] Spittles, Brian. *Joseph Conrad: Text and Context*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, and London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1992: 3.
- [4] Kintzele, Paul. "Lord Jim: Conrad's Fable of Judgment." *Journal of Modern Literature* 25.2 (Winter 2001/2002): 69-79.
- [5] Conrad, Joseph. *Notes on Life and Letters*. Ed. J. H. Stape. Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004: xlv, xlv, 13.
- [6] Knowles, Owen. "Conrad's Life." *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*. Ed. J. H. Stape. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2000: 1-24.
- [7] Wang, Chull, "Moral Passion and Discovery in Joseph Conrad." *Modern Age* 34.4 (Summer 1992): 310-319.
- [8] Mary, P. Amalorpava. "Identity-Construction and Looking into the Soul: The Narrative Structure and Dynamics of Joseph Conrad." *Language In India* 19.4 (2019): 1-7.
- [9] Conrad, Joseph. *A Personal Record*. The Project Gutenberg Etext [Etext #687]. Release Date: October 1996: 6.
- [10] George, Walker. "Joseph Conrad: International Narrator." *Journal of Research in International Education* 3 (August 2004): 225-236.
- [11] Conrad, Joseph. *Typhoon and Other Stories*. New York: Doubleday, Page, & Company, 1925: 121.
- [12] Shaffer, Brian W. "Swept from the Sea: Trauma and Otherness in Conrad's 'Amy Foster.'" *Conradiana* 32.3 (Fall 2000): 163-176.
- [13] Hynes, Samuel. Ed. *The Complete Short Fiction of Joseph Conrad*. New York: The Ecco Press, 1991: xi.
- [14] Ribeiro de Oliveira, Solange. "Aspects of hybridism in Joseph Conrad's *Almayer's Folly* and *Heart of Darkness*." *Ilha do Desterro* 72.1 (February 2019): 15-28.
- [15] Conrad, Joseph. *Notes on My Books*. The Project Gutenberg Etext [EBook #20150]. Release Date: December 20, 2006: 9.
- [16] Ford, Ford Madox. *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance*. London: Duckworth, 1924: 34-35, 57-58.
- [17] Watts, Cedric. *A Preface to Conrad*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2005: 7, 42.
- [18] Conrad, Joseph. *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad* (Vol. III). Ed., Frederick R. Karl, Laurence Davies. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983: Vol. III: 89, Vol. II: 348-349.
- [19] Ophir, Ella. "Sincerity and self-revelation in Joseph Conrad." *The Modern Language Review* 107.2 (April 2012): 341-363.
- [20] Watts, Cedric. "Heart of Darkness." *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*, Ed. J. H. Stape. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2000: 45-62.
- [21] Land, Stephen K. *Conrad and the Paradox of Plot*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1984: 83, 20.
- [22] Mossman, Mark. "Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*: National Narrative as a Liminal Voice." *The Midwest Quarterly* 40.1 (Autumn 1999): 66-78.
- [23] Bhabha, Homi K. "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation." *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi K. Bhabha. London: Routledge, 2002: 320.
- [24] Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness.'" *Massachusetts Review* 18 (1997): 782-94.
- [25] Sadeghzadegan, Majid. "An ambivalent Conrad in An Outpost of Progress." *Selçuk Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 37 (June 2017): 291-300.
- [26] Najder, Zdzisław. *Joseph Conrad: A Chronic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983: 7.
- [27] Alpert, Avram. "Empires of Enlightenment: On illumination and the politics of Buddhism in *Heart of Darkness*." *Journal of Modern Literature* 40.2 (Winter 2016): 1-21.
- [28] Firchow, Peter. *Envisioning Africa: Racism and Imperialism in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000: 10-11.
- [29] White, Andrea. "Rev. of Cross-Cultural Encounters in Joseph Conrad's Malay Fiction by Robert Hampson." *Studies in the Novel* 34.2 (Summer 2002): 237-238.