

JOSEPH CONRAD'S CONCEPT OF THE GENTLEMAN

Olena Tkachuk

The Taras Shevchenko National University in Kyiv

Abstract: Notwithstanding the Polish patriotism of Joseph Conrad – who, in the words of G. Morf, was “a descendant of an old Polish family of landowning gentry, whose class, with brilliant qualities [...] had governed Poland for over three centuries” – he saw himself not as a Slav, but rather as a European in the broadest sense of the word. M. Amusin notes that Conrad “considered the problem of the ethnic and cultural self-determination of Poland in a future rejection of ‘Eastern roots’. Conrad believed that his native land did not belong to the Slavonic world. In his interpretation, Poland – with its Catholicism, democratic traditions and enlightenment – had always been an integral part of Europe, sharing Western ‘codes’ of public life and public opinion.”

The ‘rating’ of the education of the Polish nobility was particularly high on the world stage. Comparing the aristocratic ethos of England and Poland, M. Ossowska observes that “the reproach of a lack of education generally does not apply” to the English and Polish aristocracy because “more than just memoirs, descriptions or hunting trips were stored in their libraries. Private art collections that have since enriched many a museum were often much more than aristocratic snobbery or the profitable investment of capital.”

Though impoverished, the noble eastern borderland family of Joseph Conrad was distinguished by its high level of intellectual and spiritual education. “He was a man of noble rank, of gentle birth”, said Stefan Żeromski of Joseph Conrad. The writer’s father Apollo Korzeniowski, having studied at St. Petersburg University in the 1840s, had an extremely good knowledge of English and French literature and translated the works of Shakespeare and Victor Hugo into Polish. Tadeusz Bobrowski, the rich uncle who became Conrad’s guardian after his father’s death, was also a well-educated person and had a good knowledge of art. The foundations for Conrad’s ethical and humanistic stature were laid in his childhood. Someone who knew Conrad once remarked that “He thought in French, wrote in English and, when seriously ill, raved in Polish.”

M. Sokolyanski notes that moral and ethical issues predominate in Conrad’s best works. Endorsing Conrad’s “traditional” values, Bertrand Russell described him as “a strict moralist”. Explaining his attitude to the heritage of noble ethics, Russell says: “Believing in the principle of personal honour, though its effects are often absurd and sometimes even tragic, is a thorough foundation [...] If you dismiss the concept of honour as aristocratic arrogance and a tendency to violence, then it will remain something that helps a person to maintain decency and distribute the principle of mutual trust in social relations. I would not like to have this legacy of the knightly age completely lost.” In his autobiography, Russell calls Joseph Conrad “a Polish gentleman-aristocrat to the fingertips”. The British hereditary Earl Bertrand Arthur William Russell and the Polish nobleman Józef Teodor Konrad Nałęcz-Korzeniowski were united by those values which were otherwise known as the aristocratic ethos and the knightly code of honour.

Keywords: Conrad’s Concept of the Gentleman, aristocratic ethos, aristocratic code of honour, knightly code of honour, Bertrand Russell, Joseph Conrad

The deeply patriotic, nation-oriented views of the Pole Joseph Conrad did not contradict the fact that he saw himself not as a Slav, but as a European in the broad sense of the word. Mark Amusin emphasizes that:

[Conrad] considered the problem of the ethnic and cultural self-determination of Poland in a future rejection of 'Eastern roots'. Conrad believed that his native land did not belong to the Slavonic world. In his interpretation, Poland – with its Catholicism, democratic traditions and enlightenment – has always been an integral part of Europe, sharing Western 'codes' of public life and public opinion.¹

The 'rating' of the education of the Polish nobility was particularly high on the world stage. Comparing the aristocratic ethos of England and Poland, M. Ossowska observes that "the reproach of a lack of education generally does not apply" to the English and Polish aristocracy because "more than just memoirs, descriptions or hunting trips were stored in their libraries. Private art collections that have since enriched many a museum were often much more than aristocratic snobbery or the profitable investment of capital."²

Though impoverished, the noble eastern borderland (in Ukrainian "kresova")³ family of Joseph Conrad was distinguished by its high level of intellectual and spiritual education. "He was a man of noble rank, of gentle birth", said Stefan Żeromski of Joseph Conrad. From a letter Conrad wrote to Edward Garnett, we know that his father Apollo Korzeniowski studied at the Department of Oriental Languages and Philology of St. Petersburg University in the 1840s, that he had an extremely good knowledge of English and French literature and that he translated the works of Shakespeare and Victor Hugo into Polish. Tadeusz Bobrowski, the rich maternal uncle who became Conrad's guardian after his father's death, was also a well-educated person and had a good knowledge of art. The foundations for Conrad's ethical and humanistic stature were laid in his childhood. Dmitry Urnov observes that someone who knew Conrad once remarked that:

He thought in French, wrote in English and, when he was seriously ill, raved in Polish.⁴

Mark Sokolyanski notes that moral and ethical issues predominate in Conrad's best works.⁵ Endorsing the values which guided Conrad's life, the brilliant English scientist, philosopher and hereditary Earl Bertrand Arthur William Russell considered Joseph Conrad to be a "strict moralist":

¹ М. Амузин. "Русская страда Джозефа Конрада". *Нева* 2007, № 12, p. 67. See: J. Conrad. "Author's Note". In: J. Conrad. *A Personal Record*. Eds. Z. Najder, J. Stape. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 5-6.

² М. Оссовская. *Рыцарь и буржуа: Исследования по истории морали*. Transl. К.В. Душенко. Ed. А.А. Гусейнов. Moscow: Progress, 1987, pp. 152-153.

³ С. Яковенко. "Вигнання з "дому" природи: "Серце п'їтьми" Джозефа Конрада і польська традиція". *Питання літературознавства* 2009, Iss. 77, p. 272.

⁴ Д. Урнов. *Джозеф Конрад*. Москва: Наука, 1977, p. 3.

⁵ М. Соколянський. "Джозеф Конрад о літературе". *Вопросы литературы* 1978, № 7, p. 203.

In our work we were almost strangers, but some general view of human life and the destiny of man united us, and it initially linked us particularly hard.⁶

Bertrand Russell repeatedly expressed his deep sympathy for the “traditional values” that Conrad defended⁷ and explained his own attitude to the heritage of noble ethics as follows:

Believing in the principle of personal honour, though its effects are often absurd and sometimes even tragic, is a thorough foundation [...] If you dismiss the concept of honour as aristocratic arrogance and a tendency to violence, then it will remain something that helps a person to maintain decency and distribute the principle of mutual trust in social relations. I would not like to have this legacy of the knightly age completely lost.⁸

In his autobiography, Russell calls Conrad “a Polish gentleman-aristocrat to the fingertips”.⁹ The British hereditary Earl Bertrand Arthur William Russell and the Polish nobleman Józef Teodor Konrad Nałęcz-Korzeniowski were united by those values which were otherwise known as the aristocratic code of honour.

The twentieth-century English classic Joseph Conrad, in comparison with whom most other English authors writing at the turn of the century were – as George Gissing (quoted by Edward Garnett) opined – “graphomaniacs”,¹⁰ came from a family of Polish landowners who had their estates in the Ukraine. Commenting on the writer’s social origins in his book entitled *The Polish Heritage of Joseph Conrad*, Gustav Morf observes that he:

⁶ B. Russell. *The autobiography* (1872-1914) (3 vols). Vol. 1. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967, p. 207. See also: Z. Najder. “Conrad and the idea of Honour”. In: Z. Najder. *Conrad in Perspective: Essays on Art and Fidelity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

⁷ M. Оссовская, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁹ B. Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 207. By birth Joseph Conrad belonged to the Polish nobility or *szlachta*, but as Zdzisław Najder rightly observes: ‘The term *szlachta* has no precise equivalent in English. It encompasses both the nobility and the gentry.’ See: *Conrad under Familial Eyes*. Ed. Z. Najder. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. xiii. John Stape writes that Conrad described himself as “a Polish nobleman, cased in British tar”. See: J. Stape. *The Several Lives of Joseph Conrad*. London: Heineman, 2007, p. 2. In *a Personal Record* (1912) Joseph Conrad – while describing the misfortunes that befell his maternal “Grand uncle” Nicholas B. and his companions during Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow – describes them as “simple minded young Polish gentlemen” who were fighting for their country’s freedom. See: J. Conrad. *A Personal Record*, p. 53. In his 2007 article entitled *For whom did Conrad write*, Najder describes Conrad’s ideal readers (and also his protagonist Marlow) as “gentlemen”: “One can describe those readers as the colonial intelligentsia. Or using the socio-cultural term as gentlemen. Hippolyte Taine writes about them, that they are financially independent, have a decent education in the humanities and good manners, care about their honour, possess the knowledge of the world acquired while travelling, and adopt the attitude of responsibility for others; by the same token they regard themselves as natural members of the ruling class”. Z. Najder. “For whom did Conrad write”. *Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)* 2007, Vol. III, p. 12.

¹⁰ E. Garnett. “Miejsce Conrada w literaturze angielskiej”. In: *Conrad w oczach krytyki światowej*. Transl. H. Cieplińska-Bojarska. Ed. Z. Najder. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1974, p. 331.

was a descendant of an old Polish family of landowning gentry, whose class, with brilliant qualities and pronounced defects, had governed Poland for over three centuries.¹¹

In his letter of 20th January 1900 to Edward Garnett, Conrad wrote that his paternal grandfather Theodor N. Korzeniowski had a “hereditary estate adjoining the extensive possessions of the family of Sobanski”, who were his distant relations. He had served in the cavalry and had been decorated with the “Virtuti Militari” cross. His other grandfather – Joseph Bobrowski – was a landowner, while his uncle Thaddeus:

was a man of powerful intelligence and great force of character and possessed an enormous influence in the Three Provinces (Ukraine, Volhynia and Podolia).¹²

The Earl of Chesterfield Philip Dormer Stanhope (1694-1773) and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) maintained that success was the natural consequence of the moral and intellectual superiority of the true gentleman-aristocrat. The achievements and outlook on life of Joseph Conrad fit in perfectly with their code of the gentleman, who must always and everywhere excel over others. Indeed, Conrad achieved outstanding results in all that he undertook. He became a captain in the British Merchant Marine, after which he changed his profession and became the author of classic novels.

Writing to his son Philip on 29th October 1748, the Earl of Chesterfield observed: “A fine gentleman gives the law of wit, language, fashion and taste to the rest of the company.”¹³ According to Ralph Emerson:

A gentleman gives the law where he is; he will outpray saints in chapel, outgeneral veterans in the field and outshine all courtesy in the hall. He is good company for pirates and good with academicians; so that it is useless to fortify yourself against him; he has the private entrance to all minds.¹⁴

In his book *At Sea with Joseph Conrad*, John Sutherland admires Conrad’s character and personal qualities, which are the marks of his superiority over others:

To a student of psychology Conrad would have been a wonderful study. He was, to me, intellectually head and shoulders over any man I had ever met. His charm, his ideas, his outlook on life generally were to me wonderful, and much as it puzzled me then, it has since puzzled me still more how he, a Polish aristocrat, should have adopted as a profession the sea, with all the cramped hardships of forty years ago in pilot vessels out of Marseilles, in small sailing craft in the Mediterranean, and later in the crack flyers out of England. A sailor spending his life on the waste of waters is naturally a dreamer. Hours at the wheel, with every stitch of canvas set

¹¹ G. Morf. *The Polish Heritage of Joseph Conrad*. New York: Haskell House, Publishers of Scholarly Books, 1965, p. 1.

¹² J. Conrad. *Letters (1895-1924)*. Ed. E. Garnett. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Publishers, 1928, pp. 165-166.

¹³ Ph.D. Stanhope (Earl of Chesterfield). *Letters to his son, Philip Stanhope Letters to His Son on the Art of Becoming a Man of the World and a Gentleman* (3 vols). Vol. 1. Ed. J. Bradshaw. London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co., 1892, p. 168.

¹⁴ R.W. Emerson. “Essays and English Traits”. In: *The Harvard Classics* (5 vols). Vol. 5. Ed. Ch.W. Eliot. New York: P.F. Collier and Son Corporation, 1909, p. 210.

in the trade winds, with little to do but keep the weather leach of the mizzen-royal shivering, or at the weather ear-ring when reefing a topsail, the sailor is always the same, always dreaming; and what visions Conrad, with his great imagination, must have conjured up in these varied and trying circumstances!¹⁵

Conrad's old friend Richard Curle also remarked on the sailor's transformation into a writer:

I cannot end this chapter without commenting on the astonishing series of events that led a Polish boy to enter the British Merchant Service and a master mariner to become a novelist. It seems quite incomprehensible – one of those marvellous "flukes" that fate keeps up its sleeve for a hundred years and then flings in our face. I will not enlarge: it is more astounding as a mere fact than any embroidery could make it. It is, indeed, strangely appropriate that the man who has led one of the most wandering and one of the hardest lives of our time should have written the most realistically-romantic novels of our age.¹⁶

Maria Ossowska also observes that a set of rules that were once adopted for the good of Society has survived down to our times and continues to exert an influence on modern minds:

Chivalric ethos [...] existed for several centuries, was revived in Romanticism and still touches a chord not only with the readers of Sienkiewicz, but also discerning readers of Conrad.¹⁷

We may note that it was revived in the works of devoted advocates of what was then the moribund ideology of chivalry. As an artist, Conrad was far from being capable of assessing people merely according to their social background. His protagonist is a man of honour who proves his worth not in words, but – being a true aristocrat of the spirit – inspires respect by his fidelity to the gentleman's code of honour.

In the seventeenth century, Henry Peacham believed that "Nobility [...] is indeed of it self essentiall and absolute".¹⁸ According to Ralph Emerson, noble rank is first and foremost based on innate superiority. The 'best' are those who have the greatest degree of personal and civic culture.¹⁹ Those who display the requisite qualities will sooner or later take their rightful place in Society. In his opinion:

Personal force never goes out of fashion. That is still paramount today, and, in the moving crowd of good society, the men of valor and reality are known, and rise to their natural place. The competition is transferred from war to politics and trade, but the personal force appears readily enough in these new arenas.²⁰

Many famous people were born into poverty, but this did not prevent them from becoming the guides of mankind. Henry Peacham is sure that:

¹⁵ J.G. Sutherland. *At Sea with Joseph Conrad*. Boston–New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1922, p. 144.

¹⁶ R. Curle. *Joseph Conrad: a Study*. New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1914, p. 26.

¹⁷ М. Оссовская, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

¹⁸ H. Peacham. *Compleat Gentleman*. London–Edinburgh–New York–Toronto: Clarendon Press, 1906, p. 3.

¹⁹ М. Оссовская, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

²⁰ R.W. Emerson, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

From no lesse meanesse of birth and beginning, we finde many great and famous Bishops, Civilians, Orators, Poets, et cetera to have attained to the greatest dignities, both of Church and Common-welth, and to have checked with their Fortunes, even Glory her selfe. Pope John the two and twentieth, was a poore Shooe-makers sonne; Nicholas the fifth was the sonne of a Poulter [...] Cicero was borne and brought up at Arpinum, a poore and obscure Village; Virgil, the sonne of a Porter; Horace, of a Trumpeter; Theophrastus of a Botcher” because it goes without saing that “Honour being then highly prized, every one aymed at Nobilitie, and none refused the most desperate attempts for the good of his Countrey.²¹

In Conrad’s novel *The Rescue*, the spokesman for the traditional ideology of the aristocracy is the Spaniard Mr d’Alcacer, who is an irreproachable representative of his class. All the sympathies of the author are on his side. Lingard, who “lived with gentlemen for years and chummed with them”, said of him: “He is a gentleman”. Mr d’Alcacer is characterized by the courtesy, kindness, courage and gentleness that – according to Ralph Emerson²² – define the gentleman. By nature, he is gentle with others, but displays fortitude and strength of mind in overcoming the difficulties of life. In the words of Mrs Travers, “he has been prepared for whatever might happen” – to which Lingard immediately replies with great respect: “He is a man”. Conrad’s narrator for his part emphasizes the friendliness and kindness of Mr d’Alcacer:

Without being humorous he was a good-humoured man. His habitual, gentle smile was a true expression. More of a European than of a Spaniard he had that truly aristocratic nature which is inclined to credit every honest man with something of its own nobility and in its judgment is altogether independent of class feeling.

And, in a certain sense, this “person of undoubted nobility” acts as a model for the spiritual programme that validates the credo and outlook on life of the other characters. He is closest not to Mr Travers – a member of his own circle – but to Rajah Hassim – a dark-skinned native gentleman, the Prince of the local islands – and to Lingard, who is “a fellow deep in with pirates, thieves, niggers”. Mr d’Alcacer is a man of insight and almost immediately finds his kindred soul:

He believed Lingard to be an honest man and he never troubled his head to classify him, except in the sense that he found him an interesting character. He had a sort of esteem for the outward personality and the bearing of that seaman. He found in him also the distinction of being nothing of a type. He was a specimen to be judged only by its own worth.

Lingard has a “chivalrous character” and above all “has his name to take care of”. “I know what a gentleman would do,” he tells Mrs Travers: “Come! Wouldn’t he treat a stranger fairly? Wouldn’t he remember that no man is a liar till you prove him so? Wouldn’t he keep his word wherever given? Well, I am going to do that.” He behaves like a man of unquestionable authority.

What these people have in common with Mr d’Alcacer is their understanding of the concept of honour:

²¹ H. Peacham, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6.

²² R.W. Emerson, *op. cit.*, pp. 200-201.

“There is that in me,” Lingard murmured, deeply, “which would set my heart harder than a stone. I am King Tom, Rajah Laut, and fit to look any man hereabouts in the face [...] Everything rests on that.” “Mr d’Alcacer would express this by saying that everything rested on honour.” commented Mrs Travers. “Call it what you like. It’s something that a man needs to draw a free breath.”

Of course, Conrad would not have been a genius if he had merely proclaimed the programme he supported. The unexpected happens: Lingard falls in love and finds himself in an existential situation where loyalty to the ideals of honour conflicts with a previous obligation. Without admitting it to himself, he has to make an existential choice, following which his close friends – for whose safety he has taken responsibility – meet their death.

Speaking about this existential predicament, Conrad argues that no one is to blame. The words that Lingard utters sound philosophical. Without trying to justify himself, King Tom explains everybody’s destiny in a few words and gives a definition of the existentialist programme: “So am I – innocent. So is everybody in the world. Have you ever met a man or a woman that was not? They’ve got to take their chances all the same.” But Jaffir, the native friend of the great prince, says emphatically to Lingard: “You are a white man and you can have only one word. And now I go.”

In general, it must be said that Conrad’s concept of the gentleman is international. In *The Rescue*, it is not only the white people who are gentlemen and ladies (d’Alcacer, Lingard and Mrs Travers), but also representatives of the native peoples (Prince Hassim, Jaffir and Immada). To Conrad, it does not matter to which race a person may belong, for to his mind the most important link that unites all mankind – regardless of race – is the concept of the gentleman. Stefan Zabierowski – following in the footsteps of Bertrand Russell, Maria Ossowska and Zdzisław Najder – ventures the opinion that Conrad was never an advocate of the pragmatic ethics of bourgeois Society. He had inherited a much older tradition – the knightly ethics of honour, which would seem to be characterized by certain cultural models and certain archetypes²³ and which he combined with the true British gentleman’s fondness for modesty and discretion. Conrad’s stance would thus appear to reflect his humanism and deep personal culture.

WORKS CITED

- Амусин, Марк. “Русская страда Джозефа Конрада”. *Нева* 2007, № 12.
 Оссовская, Мария. *Рыцарь и буржуа: Исследования по истории морали*. Transl. К.В. Душенко. Ed. А.А. Гусейнов. Moscow: Progress, 1987.
 Соколянский, Марк. “Джозеф Конрад о литературе”. *Вопросы литературы* 1978, № 7.
 Урнов, Дмитрий. *Джозеф Конрад*. Moscow: Nauka, 1977.

²³ S. Zabierowski. *Conrad w perspektywie odbioru: Szkice*. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1979, pp. 110-117.

- Яковенко, Сергій. “Вигнання з “дому” природи: “Серце пітьми” Джозефа Конрада і польська традиція”. *Питання літературознавства* 2009, Iss. 77.
- Conrad, Joseph. *A Personal Record*. Eds. Zdzisław Najder, John Stape. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Conrad, Joseph. “Author’s Note”. In: J. Conrad. *A Personal Record*. Eds. Z. Najder, J. Stape. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 5-6.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Letters (1895-1924)*. Ed. Edward Garnett. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Publishers, 1928, pp. 165-166.
- Conrad under Familial Eyes. Ed. Z. Najder. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. xiii.
- Curlie, Richard. *Joseph Conrad: a Study*. New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1914.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Essays and English Traits*. Vols. 1-5. The Harvard Classics. Ed. Charles W. Eliot. New York: P.F. Collier and Son Corporation, 1909.
- Garnett, Edward. “Miejsce Conrada w literaturze angielskiej”. In: *Conrad w oczach krytyki światowej*. Transl. Halina Ciepłińska-Bojarska. Ed. Zdzisław Najder. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1974, pp. 329-363.
- Morf, Gustav. *The Polish Heritage of Joseph Conrad*. New York: Haskell House, Publishers of Scholarly Books, 1965.
- Najder, Zdzisław. “Conrad and the idea of Honour”. In: Zdzisław Najder. *Conrad in Perspective: Essays on Art and Fidelity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Najder, Zdzisław. *Conrad under Familial Eyes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Najder, Zdzisław. “For whom did Conrad write?” *Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)* 2007, Vol. III, pp. 7-14.
- Peacham, Henry. *Compleat Gentleman*. London–Edinburgh–New York–Toronto: Clarendon Press, 1906.
- Russell, Bertrand. *The autobiography (1872-1914)*. Vols 1-3. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967.
- Stape, John. *The Several Lives of Joseph Conrad*. London: William Heineman, 2007.
- Stanhope, Philip Dormer (Earl of Chesterfield). *Letters to his son, Philip Stanhope*. Ed. John Bradshaw. Vols 1-3. London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co., 1892.
- Sutherland, John Georgeson. *At Sea with Joseph Conrad*. Boston–New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1922.
- Zabierowski, Stefan. *Conrad w perspektywie odbioru: Szkice*. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1979.