Joseph Conrad: Defender or Condemner of Imperialism?

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Abstract

Joseph Conrad’s attitudes to imperialism and races have been the object of an ever increasing flow of writings. It has been so hard to give him his due and to utter the final verdict concerning his real attitude as regards imperialism and races. His own fiction has provided evidence for both admirers and vilifiers. Although Conrad himself declared that he was content to ‘sympathize with common mortals’, no matter where they lived, this claim has been far from convincing to many critics. Many have seen him as accepting blindly the arrogant attitude of the white as put forth by Victorian sociologists and anthropologist; many on the other hand have defended him vehemently. But, as this paper argues, there are inherent factors in Conrad’s fiction and, most likely, in his character, that preclude the reaching of any final judgment on that head. The inconclusiveness is something essential to Conrad’s intellect, and that is reflected in his fiction. Indeed one of the two focal points in the paper is that this feature of ambivalence is more pronounced in Conrad’s fiction than either of the two extreme readings of his fiction. The other focal point is that though his life experiences can go some way towards explaining his ambivalent stance, the enigma is in Conrad’s very mind, because it seems to be a deliberate choice of his to be inconclusive.