Chance Short Guide

Chance by Joseph Conrad

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Characters

Charles Marlow, resurrected from an earlier lustrum, is both the narrator of the tale, its architect, and a principal actor whose chance encounters with other of the characters serve to link their lives in unexpected ways.

As in "Youth" he reminisces with his new acquaintance, Powell, who agrees that "the happiest time in their lives was as youngsters in good ships." But Marlow has changed in the decade since his last narrational appearance: he is more long-winded but also more observant and can now attach meanings to his observations and can draw upon his knowledge to offer guidance, somewhat reluctantly at first, to the Fynes and Flora, then quite freely to Flora, and finally quite avuncularly to Powell and Flora. He is no longer a mere observer and commentator but allows his life to be touched, in hitherto uncharacteristic ways, as if by some secret sharer of his existence.

Flora de Barral first excites Marlow's interest and exasperation by her unaccountable actions, then his pity as he learns her story as a child ill-used by servants once her father is jailed, then his admiration as she purposefully sets her course with Anthony, and ultimately a friendly interest as he counsels her to make Powell a happy man.

Powell himself is presented sympathetically, a fellow of the craft of seafaring, whose devotion to Flora is not at all the negative ruling passion it might have been in an earlier work of Conrad's but a life-giving, positive quality deserving of reward. The Fynes are wonderfully realized bastions of the middle class and Captain Anthony a well drawn soul in conflict created by obligation and duty. De Barral is first presented as an incompetent and, after his fall and release, as a shattered, broken, self-centered man, vicious in his appropriation of Flora and his hatred of Anthony.

Social Concerns

Chance chronicles the potentially devastating effects of capital venture upon several characters, principally Flora de Barral whose father, exposed as a swindler, is revealed as merely an inept financier, more a victim of his scheme than a predator. Conrad probes the English class structure, chiefly the middle class and, to an extent, the world of governesses and domestic help. His presentation of the world of finance and capital venture follows the career of the unfortunate de Barral and amply illustrates both the sphere of finance and the courts and men of law eager to be in on the kill. But the central focus is on Flora in the role of social outcast who, under the weight of her alienation first appears to Marlow when she contemplates suicide on the edge of a precipice. Another focus of the narrative derives from its title, the chances or opportunities given to the several characters, among them Powell, Captain Anthony, Flora, de Barral, and Marlow himself; in Marlow's case this applies to chance meetings, the chance of arranging matters between Powell and Flora as the story ends, and the chance of telling the whole tale to his younger, unnamed acquaintance. The place of fate or chance in human endeavors has both positive and negative outcomes, but the main chances with which the tale begins and ends are affirmative, so that, like the role of chance in "The Secret Sharer," chance here has a life-affirming role in the narrator's concept of self and of society. This is a marked change in Conrad's social perspective that draws him away from the nihilistic sense of futility in his political novels and heralds a transition to his later phase as a writer.

Techniques

The contrasts of light and darkness, of land and sea, of innocence and experience common to Conrad's work are present in a vibrant way in Chance.

Conrad's use of dialogue and physical description are also well-established techniques used in this work to great advantage. What is missing, however, is his generally poetic tone. In part, the change in tone is attributable to the necessity Marlow feels to explain each phase of the history he relates, which he is part of, and which he helps to change. The burden of narration, of storytelling, outweighs the tendency to brooding reflection and analysis characteristic of the earlier Marlow and Conrad. The narrative technique is a discontinuous narrative told over several meetings to the unnamed listener.

Conrad then weaves the narratives of the Fynes, Powell, and Flora into Marlow's story, which moves back and forth in time over a period of several years. This is not an uncommon technique in Conrad but is exercised with chronological clarity in each attempt to delve into the past and to set the record straight regarding the full circumstances of each chance that forms part of the main Chance.

Themes

The principal theme, chance, is amply illustrated both explicitly and implicitly in the novel. The many chances each of the characters have are folded into Marlow's newfound or newly formulated philosophy which he expresses to Powell near the novel's end: Reminding Powell that they got to know each other by chance, Marlow states, "And the science of life consists in seizing every possible chance that presents itself." Marlow also has altered, very slightly, his position on humanity through his pondering of chance and concludes his lengthy tale by anticipating that Powell and Flora will be married: he says to his listener, "What on earth are you grinning at in this sarcastic manner? I am not afraid of going to church with a friend. Hang it all, for all my belief in Chance I am not exactly a pagan." Chance brings Flora and Marlow together in the country, chance brings Powell to serve under Captain Anthony who has eloped with Flora, chance leads Fyne to inform Captain Anthony that Flora is an adventuress who does not love him, chance secures a place for the fallen de Barral, and chance lets Powell observe the attempt on Anthony's life and the suicide of de Barral. Finally, chance allows Marlow to encourage Powell and Flora to seek their happiness with each other. But overall, the novelist plots a strange and tangled tale that hinges upon coincidence, happenstance, and opportunity and the ageold maxim to seize opportunity by the forelock. The theme had an unexpected place in the novelist's own life: the popularity of the theme and of the work proved so great that this best seller became Conrad's Chance.

Literary Precedents

Conrad's principal literary precedent for the elaborately contrived swindles is found in the novels of Dickens, especially in his depiction of the AngloBengalee fraud of Tigg Montagne in Martin Chuzzlewit (1843-1844) and in some segments of Little Dorritt (18551857) and Our Mutual Friend (18641866) as they relate to wealth. The many coincidences or chances in the novel share in the novelistic traditions that make virtues of chance meetings; again Dickens comes to mind as one who perfected the technique. Indeed Chance closely resembles the plot of a Dickens novel; Conrad's novel contains a damsel in distress who is idealized and sentimentalized, and a parent who is the victim of his own manias and whose burden the daughter must bear.

Indeed de Barral has much in common with Nell's grandfather in The Old Curiosity Shop (1840-1841). And, surprisingly for Conrad's readers, Chance has no tragic ending but the promise of a happy one for Flora and Powell and for Marlow as well. These and other similarities with Dickens' works help account for the instant popularity of the novel.

Related Titles

Marlowe appears as the narrator in several of Conrad's stories and novels, but his role varies. As in Heart of Darkness (1902), the characters listening to Marlow in "Youth" are the Director of Companies, the man of finance, the man of law and the teller of the tale.

Marlow is, again, the principal actor and narrator of his own experience as second mate who gets his first command in a lifeboat of the ill-fated Judea and so lays eyes upon the East for the first time. Captain Beard and the first mate Mahon play important roles to Marlow who is bent on exploring the valor, strength, foolishness, optimism and evanescence of his own youth and youth generally.

The Marlow of Heart of Darkness is stronger than the present Marlow who is too deeply involved with his own past to avoid sentimentality and so becomes a victim of narrational and perhaps authorial irony, particularly if one recalls that the young Marlow of the tale is now about the age of Captain Beard in the story, sixty. In one sense the present Marlow is purged of idealism in "Youth" (written 1898) to appear in a stronger guise in Heart of Darkness (written 1899).

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