Il Conde Short Guide

Il Conde by Joseph Conrad

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Contents

Characters

The cast is even more limited than in most Conrad short stories, partly because of Conrad's economical manner of telling the tale. Nevertheless, the narrator, the count, and the robber are all vividly characterized. The narrator is an articulate and perceptive man, apparently an Englishman who enjoys visiting Naples. Although he has no personal involvement in the story, except for his sympathetic friendship with the count, he evinces several interesting qualities: attentive observation, shrewd judgment, and the ability to empathize with others. His description of the count as a "fairly intel ligent man of the world" with good taste that is "natural rather than cultivated," shows observation and discernment. The count's weariness and lack of vitality are conveyed by the narrator's description of the count's response to the busts of the Roman emperors as being too energetic and vigorous. All in all, the narrator provides an experienced and articulate point of view for the reader.

The central figure in this small tragedy is of course the count himself, a man of sixty who speaks four European languages and displays urbanity without great erudition. The Count is a man of culture who has made his peace with life; he merely wishes to live out his appointed days in a reasonable manner in Italy, since his health is fragile and the reader is told that the Count does not expect to live long if he must stay north of the Alps.

The count is not a man given to emotional attachments; instead he wants to enjoy life on the aesthetic level of observation and enjoyment, without becoming involved in the suffering or emotional ordeals of others. His wealth and social position give him the illusion that he can live a life on such a high plane, untouched by the ugliness of ordinary life.

But this illusion is shattered by his experience of being robbed by the young "cavalier, and the aftermath, in which he fails to inform the police and allows himself to be taunted and threatened boldly by the robber in a subsequent encounter. Ironically, the robber gets little of the Count's money, since the Count had spent most of what he was carrying in his wallet; and to add to the irony, the watch taken by the robber was the Count's cheap Waterbury, because his more expensive watch was at the jeweler's for repairs. Nevertheless, the robber took something more valuable from the Count than money or jewelry: He destroyed the Count's composure and self-esteem, for the robbery is a violation of the Count's self. In taking the loss so seriously, the Count proves himself to be a man of feeling and awareness unlike some of the less aware characters in Conrad's fiction, such as the unimaginative and literalminded Captain MacWhirr of the novella "Typhoon" (1903; see separate entry).

The "cavalier" or robber only appears in a speaking role in two brief scenes, but his portrayal is convincing. In the first scene, the robber appears essentially desperate, although his willingness to threaten the Count in a crowded public area where the Count may shout for help implies a certain arrogance or boldness.

However, the second encounter with the Count, in which the robber shows his contempt for the Count by seeming to invite his victim to call the authorities, definitively establishes the egotism and arrogance of the robber. Here the arrogant young man goes so far as to threaten his victim again and promise vengeance because the Count had not given up all the money he was carrying at the first encounter. The robber's air of being untouchable and able to threaten his victim at will creates an unsettling situation for the Count, who has barely recovered his composure after the first encounter. The robber's self-assurance and boldness seems to symbolize the world of urban crime, and its indifference to its victims' suffering.

A small role is played by Pasquale, the peddler, who is able to provide the information that the young robber is a member of a "Camorra." Although a poor man living by his wits, Pasquale is shown to be more knowledgeable about the urban life of Naples than the wealthy Count: his existence on the fringe of respectable society has taught him to be less trusting and vulnerable.

Social Concerns

On the most obvious level, "Il Conde" describes the decline of Europe's aristocratic class, as it enjoyed its Indian summer in the Edwardian period prior to World War I. In this respect, the story displays a similarity to the vision of Anton Chekhov in his famous drama The Cherry Orchard (1904), which depicts the decline of Russian aristocracy. Obviously, Joseph Conrad's count who owns lands somewhere north of the Alps is a symbol of the declining landed aristocracy of Europe. (Conrad later acknowledged that his title was incorrect, since "conde" is Spanish, and the correct Italian title for his main character should have been "Il Conte.")

However, the story contains a social resonance beyond its surface historical references. As a man victimized by an arrogant and ruthless robber, the count is a man who transcends his membership in a social class; he also becomes a symbol of anyone who tries to live a reasonable life of leisure and social restraint in a world which is carefully controlled.

It is true that some critics of Conrad tend to regard the count as an unsympathetic figure because of his withdrawal from life, and his lack of involvement in the world around him. Yet most readers surely must sympathize with the Count and they probably desire a life that approaches the count's ideal of serenity and order. After all, the count has been deeply involved in existence as a parent and as a landowner; he is a widower, and has a daughter living on an estate in Bohemia (in what was then the Austro-Hungarian Empire) whose own interests are different and whose life he does not wish to trouble. Although he has become a spectator and a connoisseur of life, the count takes an energetic interest in observing the world around him, and his health is sufficiently vulnerable to make life north of the Alps a risky venture for him.

Yet the count's carefully controlled existence is upset by the arrogant intervention of the young "cavaliere," who not only robs the count of a small amount of money and a watch, but in a later encounter boasts that he will return to get a larger haul. It is not simply the count's money that this arrogant young member of a "Camorra" (secret criminal society) steals, but his composure and his self-esteem. The crass and shameless arrogance of the young man's intrusion into the count's life tends to make Conrad's story seem very "contemporary" in its reminders of the threat of crime in the urban environments of the late twentieth century. An arrogant disregard for human dignity by criminals in contemporary urban settings has produced widespread fear and in some cases a vigilante response.

The Count's plight also suggests the condition of the aged in society. When the Count decides to leave Naples for a less healthy environment, he becomes a defeated elderly man and his tragic fate raises the issue of the plight of society's older people who seem to have outlived their usefulness. This story is one of only a few in which Conrad examines the social condition of aging.

Techniques

Conrad's chief technical device is the employment of a detached but observant narrator who provides two contrasting pictures of the count—first, as a selfpossessed elderly gentleman of natural tastes and moderate appetites, and then as a shaken victim of the cavalier's robbery and violation of his personal selfesteem. The unnamed narrator is both sympathetic and objective in his portrait of the count, and he intrudes his own reactions into the story much less than Conrad's more famous first person narrator, Marlow.

A less obvious demonstration of technical literary skill may be seen in the narrator's careful and memorable recreation of the count's evening with his two fateful encounters with the arrogant robber.

Conrad here does not try to tell the story in the count's own words, which might had led to problems in demonstrating the count's command of English; instead he chooses the more effective method of letting his narrator re-tell the incident by recreating it with an economical style.

Finally, the narrator's reiteration of the key Italian phrase (vedi Napoli e poi mori) in the final paragraphs is a rather skillful use of literary allusion and tragic irony. The narrator has already shown himself to be adroit at handling allusion and history in earlier passages, notably in his references to the vacation habits of the ancient Romans and their preference for the Neapolitan coast and the nearby islands.

Indeed, the rich cultural associations of Naples allow Conrad to make the texture of his narrative densely allusive.

Themes

Conrad's story is dominated by a tragic and elegiac tone, as the elderly count is first shown as a very admirable man who has settled for an orderly life as a spectator of events; but it is revealed to the narrator on his return from ten days' absence the the count's psychological composure has been completely destroyed. When the count is driven by fear and a sense of humiliation to leave Naples, the narrator suggests that the count is going back to his landed estate to slowly wither away and die. This tragic theme is underscored by the narrator's quotation of the proverbial Italian phrase, vediNapoli e poi mori ("see Naples and die"), which also serves as the story's epigraph and its final line.

Although the story's action is largely psychological, as Conrad describes the impact of the robbery and the robber's boldfaced effrontery on the count's selfesteem and peace of mind, its overall design is that of a classic tragedy, as the count's fall from serenity is swiftly revealed.

If the count is a tragic hero, then his nemesis, the young cavalier is a character who represents a new social force, a twentieth-century man who rejects the customary values and forces his egotism on others. As a man who resents the count's self-possessed and passionless demeanor, and who readily imposes his egotism on his victim, the robber may be seen as one of the evils of twentiethcentury urban life.

Key Questions

Since the story is set in Naples and the setting plays an important role, discussion might begin with assessment of life in Naples and other Italian cities in which art galleries, music, and literary associations are attractions for tourists. Conrad's story emphasizes certain contrasts; there are the remarkable scenery and the romantic sense of the past in Naples (the references to the Roman culture of leisure and the ruins of Pompeii) as well as the presence of such cultural events as the outdoor concert; these stand in opposition to the uncertain social life of the present, in which the menace of the robber lurks behind the pleasant appearances of the city. Readers may wish to analyze these contrasts.

Another approach could be to discuss Conrad's story in the light of current feelings about urban crime and the apparently random nature of violence in America and other developed countries. The Count, never having been personally affronted by a criminal before, finds the experience to be traumatic. But would contemporary readers be so unnerved by the Count's experience? What steps might the Count have taken to protect himself against the intrusions of the robber?

1. Why does Conrad describe the count's past and present in such detail, and why does the narrator make such balanced assessments of the Count's character?

2. What role is played by Conrad's references to the Roman past of the Naples area? Do the references to the volcanic eruptions of Vesuvius have any purpose?

3. What implicit contrast is developed between the Count and the ancient Roman emperors whose busts are mentioned?

4. What is the apparent relationship between the Count and his unseen daughter who lives in Bohemia?

5. Is the robber the same young man whom the Count happens to join at the outdoor table? Is the robber the same young man the Count seems to encounter at various places later? Or is Conrad suggesting that the robber is a certain Neapolitan type?

6. What is the significance of the robber's use of a knife to threaten the Count's life? Why is the knife perhaps more frightening than a gun might have been?

7. What is the importance of the fact that the robber takes only a very paltry amount of money and a cheap watch from the Count?

8. Why does the Count decide not to shout for help, when he is being threatened? Is this a wise decision?

9. Why does the Count fail to report the robbery to the authorities afterward?

Why does the Count fail to seek social support after his unnerving experience?

10. Why is the second encounter with the robber even more unnerving than the first? Why does the Count again fail to report the robbery after this event?

11. What is the importance of Pasquale, the peddler, in the story? What contrasts are implied between the Count and Pasquale?

12. What influences, besides the robbery, impel the Count to leave Naples and Italy and go back north of the Alps, where his health is sure to suffer? Will the Count's health be impaired more by physical discomforts, or will his psychological depression be a major factor in his future?

13. What is the narrator's view of the Count and his response to his traumatic experience? What judgment should readers make about the Count?

14. In what ways may the Count be considered a tragic figure? How may he be compared and contrasted with other tragic figures in Conrad's fiction such as Kurtz in Heart of Darkness (1902; see separate entry) or Winnie Verloc in The Secret Agent?

Literary Precedents

A major influence on Conrad's mature fiction is the realistic fiction of Gustav Flaubert, which exhibits a nearly flawless artistry of style and structure, and which usually pits a romantic dreamer or idealist against the intractable nature of reality. In his own way, Conrad's tragic count is a victim of romantic illusions, although these are the moderate and restrained illusions of the leisure class at the end of the nineteenth century. Again, too, the short fiction of Guy de Maupassant, with its ability to show how one or two incidents can change the course of a life is one of the major influences on Conrad's short realistic fiction.

Another possible influence is the shorter fiction of Henry James, whose work Conrad admired. The technique of using an uninvolved but observant narrator to explore another character's life and moral weaknesses is employed frequently in James's shorter fiction, as in such tales as "The Liar." Conrad's narrator may remind readers of Jamesian narrators, although they will also suggest Conrad's own creation, Captain Charles Marlow.

Finally, the novels of Dickens which describe an underworld of urban crime and violence in London, starting with Oliver Twist (1838) and continuing in such later works as Bleak House (1853), Little Dorrit (1857), and Our Mutual Friend (1865), may be cited as a pervasive influence on Conrad's stories with urban settings. During his years at sea, Conrad improved his English by reading intensively in Dickens's novels.

Related Titles

Nearly all Conrad's fictional works in which Marlow is a narrator and observer of events could be considered related titles, with "The Secret Sharer" (1912; see separate entry) being an obvious parallel, since that story also reveals something of the hidden nature of the human capacity for crime. It has been noted that Axel Heyst of the novel Victory (1915; see separate entry) shares some affinities of character with the Count, since both seek to withdraw from human suffering and human involvement in order to create a more controlled and "reasonable" existence for themselves.

Conrad's world of urban crime in The Secret Agent (1907; see separate entry) is located in London rather than Naples, but its depiction of an underworld of anarchists and petty criminals provides a parallel to Conrad's depiction of the undercurrent of violence and crime in the supposedly serene world of Naples.

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