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The Title Theme in Conrad's *Chance*

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Introduction

One well-known criticism of Conrad's novel *Chance* is that the title is misleading. Critics agree that the central theme is isolation, as with virtually every novel and story Conrad wrote. There seems to be a feeling that Conrad's references to chance are an indulgence in pseudo-philosophy, perhaps with an eye on readers who regarded him as "profound." There is also a well articulated conviction that the plot does nothing to support chance as a real theme. Perhaps the most influential of Conrad's critics, F.R. Leavis, observes that "the theme indicated by the title, ingeniously exploited as it is in the mode of presentation, has no essential relation with the main theme: chance plays no different part from what it must play in any story offering a novelist a study of human nature. . ." (Leavis, p. 255).[1] And Conrad's most prominent critical biographer, Jocelyn Baines, agrees in nearly the same terms: "Although *Chance* is the title of the novel, the workings of chance cannot be said to constitute its theme. The action is neither more nor less influenced by chance, or coincidence, than is that of the average novel or the average life; in fact the idea of 'chance' seems to have been superficially grafted on to the action and the frequent emphasis on it tends to cheapen the effect of the book" (Baines, p. 387).

Both critics are referring to Conrad's explicit emphasis on chance in the text (as well as in the title). Baines' reaction is clearly more negative, and closer to the charge of pseudo-philosophizing. Leavis treats Conrad's references to chance in the story as a kind of tour de force – an example of Conrad's ingenuity but of trifling significance, since they bear no relationship to the theme of moral isolation. But Baines seems to be accusing Conrad of pandering to a certain kind of unworthy taste – hardly the vulgarest taste, but nevertheless an uncritical predilection for big ideas.

Furthermore, both Leavis and Baines object that the frequency of chance occurrences in this work is about the same as in other serious novels. Even assuming this to be the case (it would be hard to verify), I feel it is irrelevant to Conrad's real intention and does not disqualify chance as a theme.

In my view Conrad makes legitimate use of chance. Of course the plot contains no gross improbabilities, and would hardly be improved by them. And there may be no more instances of chance than most other serious novels. What makes the theme significant is not the number of fortuitous occurrences but Conrad's treatment of them, locally in each case and structurally as they relate to one another. In this paper I will discuss some important instances of chance, using the word in the sense that Conrad defines "accident": "that which happens blindly and without intelligence."[2] I hope to suggest how Conrad's treatment gives these instances the accumulative status of a theme.

The entire introduction to this paper can be reduced to a single fact: it is Conrad's treatment of chance events that gives their fortuitous nature thematic importance. This treatment is of two kinds:

First, there is the specific (or *local*) suggestiveness of

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each scene. In this sense, Conrad is a poet, for without his powers of evocation his novels would be negligible.

Second, but more prominent and much easier to isolate for inspection, is the pattern that these instances form. By placing the chance occurrences at strategic points in the novel, Conrad in effect strains the entire story through them. To demonstrate the second method, my examples have been culled from the points that set the main characters' courses in the novel and determine their subsequent actions: the characters' starting points. By the main characters, I mean de Barral, Powell, Anthony, and Flora.

Though a good demonstration of my thesis could also be derived from a discussion of the denouement (a wonderful example of converging chance occurrences), this is surely a case where first causes are most relevant. None of the main characters would be together in the denouement. (in Anthony's private saloon) but for the initial instances of blind chance.

Since little can be accomplished without some reference to the actual words on the page, Conrad's first way of developing the theme will receive ample treatment at each point.

In its most basic outline, then, the pattern is this: in terms of action bearing on the plot, each character is set in motion by a chance occurrence.

De Barral

Instead of living out his predictable destiny as a small tradesman, de Barral becomes a fabulously wealthy financier, "the great de Barral." This, Marlow tells us, is because he had the luck to captilize on the word "Thrift" (p. 54). People had a totally irrational urge to entrust their fortunes to a putative savings institution, and de Barral's meager advertizing talent, doggedly pursued, made him a central outlet of this urge.

To some readers this must seem like a flimsy example of the workings of blind chance. After all, chance in the form of opportunity – in this case, the time being right – always plays some part in a person's success. Couldn't "success" in this purely materialistic sense be defined as ability coinciding with opportunity? Marlow anticipates this objection by insisting that de Barral *had* no ability. The repetitions of this point are almost incantatory: "He literally did not know anything. . . He was a mere sign, a portent. There was nothing in him" (p. 54). As for his advertizing talent, he had "a very pretty taste for names: and nothing else besides – absolutely nothing – no merit" (p. 51). His prey was simple "human folly," about which Marlow comments, "The career of de Barral demonstrates it will rise to a naked hook. He didn't lure it with a fairy tale. He hadn't enough imagination for it. . ." (p. 51).

Finally, to those who maintain that the simple assertion of de Barral's nullity is not enough, the answer is that the entire novel, both in individual scenes and in the working out of the plot, supports these assertions. Marlow's statements are only necessary in the musical sense that they introduce the theme.

Powell

As peripheral as Powell's role in the plot might seem for a while to be, his special position as Flora's only friend on Anthony's ship makes him very important. Symbolically, he represents the first stroke of good fortune Flora has had since Anthony proposed to her. And he has everything to do with the resolution of the plot.

Powell's beginnings in the story coincide with his start in life. He actually gets his position on Anthony's ship – his first position as an officer – through two strokes of luck. When he goes to the Shipping Master's office to see about possible openings for second mates, the captain of the *Ferndale* (Captain Anthony himself, as we later learn) happens to show up at the same time to announce that his second mate has been beached with a broken collar bone and a broken arm. Anthony is desperate for a replacement, since he wants to set sail the following morning. The kindly Shipping Master introduces Powell, but there is still a problem of no references and, on the officer level, no experience. The Shipping Master, being characteristically English, would never explicitly lie.

But he isn't averse to leaving Anthony with the impression that the young Powell, whom he met for the first time in his life shortly before Anthony's entrance, is his relative. He can do this because, by the merest chance, his own surname is also Powell. He just allows Anthony to draw his own conclusions. The younger Powell is so naive he thinks the misunderstanding was inadvertent, but there was no mistake: "Mind you don't disgrace the name, Charles" (p. 16), the older Powell, showing an excellent sense of humor, says for Anthony's benefit. The importance of this double stroke of luck is clear enough if we ponder what would have happened to the other protagonists if Powell had not been aboard the *Ferndale*.

Captain Anthony

Anthony is tied to Flora – and therefore to the plot, for it is Flora's story – first by a mild coincidence and then by a blind chance that ends a major crisis in Flora's life. The ordinary coincidence is that they happen to stay at the Fynes at the same time. Flora, in despair over not being able to find a position that will enable her to support her father when he gets out of prison (de Barral's seven years for embezzlement will soon be completed), is morose, and Anthony notices this. He has had a good deal of time to notice things because his sister, Mrs. Fyne, has been too busy writing a feminist tract to entertain him, though she hasn't seen him in fifteen years (p. 114).

Anthony, son of the Victorian Romantic poet Carleton Anthony – as his brother-in-law Fyne never tires of reminding Marlow (e.g., p. 28) – turns out to be a romantic himself. As Marlow speculates later, he is "what the French call *un galant homme*" (p. 168). He falls in love with Flora and determines to help her. For various reasons, psychological and practical – the simplest being that he must leave for a long voyage soon – he suddenly proposes marriage to her. When she tries to put him off by retiring for the night, Anthony threatens to spend the night in the garden outside.

In truth, Flora has too low an opinion of herself to even consider marrying anyone. The proposal simply agitates her further. In despair, she determines to jump into a nearby, hundred-foot-deep quarry, as she started to do once before.

By a stroke of luck, though, she completely forgets Anthony's threat to spend the night in the garden. Thus blind chance asserts itself again. When Anthony sees her, he assumes that she has decided to accept his proposal. As Flora puts it later, "He was gentleness itself" (p. 170), and she feels obliged to explain herself. This leads to Anthony's offer to take her father aboard the ship too. (Only later, from Fyne, does he learn who her father is and where he has been. She is using the name Smith. But Anthony is not deterred in the slightest by Fyne's revelation.) This offer makes Flora rethink the whole matter. The ultimate cause of her despair – the last straw, at any rate – is her inability to help her father. She has no money and no prospects. By offering to take care of de Barral (alias, Mr. Smith) Anthony puts the onus on Flora to accept for her father's sake, if not for her own. Flora tells Marlow in reference to a previously aborted suicide attempt, "It was the idea of – of doing away with myself which was cowardly" (p. 154). If Flora felt that way about killing herself under the earlier hopeless conditions, she has to feel that present circumstances would make the act quite selfish.

By the end of the novel we realize that there is a second reason for her acceptance, still unknown to Flora herself. (Marlow comments, "I had already the suspicion that she did not know her own feelings" (p. 171).) Anthony is the first real gentleman she has ever had a serious conversation with, and his kindness overwhelms her. As C.B. Cox observes, this is why the scene on the dreary and bestial London street, waiting for Anthony outside the hotel while Fyne remonstrates with him, is so moving: "In this context Anthony comes to Flora like a knight of chivalric romance to carry her away from the waste land, and to restore her wounded soul by the healing balm of a secure, innocent life at sea" (Cox, p. 123).

However, the relevant point is that none of this would have happened, and Flora would probably have successfully killed herself the next day if she had

simply remembered that Anthony – whom she met by chance in the first place – would be waiting in the garden. Thus Marlow is justified when he calls Flora's presence in London, waiting for Anthony's ship "this work of the merest chance" (p. 171).

Flora

The extent to which Flora's fate is a matter of blind chance has already been suggested. She actually sets out to take her own life four times, and each time she is interrupted by a chance intrusion. The first time is on her return to England, after her terrible experience with the German family she had served as a governess. She is on the verge of jumping into the North Sea when she is distracted by a solicitous ship's stewardess, a matter-of-fact soul "who did not seem aware of other human agonies than seasickness," (p. 132) and certainly has no idea of what Flora was planning to do. Then she sets out for the Fynes' quarry three times while staying with them. The first time, she is stopped by the Fyne's dog, which she can't chase away and fears will jump with her. (Ironically, when Marlow comes along, the dog abandons her at once, thus adding further absurd evidence to her feeling that no one loves her.) Then she is stopped twice by Anthony, once on the road and once, as already pointed out in the discussion of Anthony, in the garden.

These foiled suicide attempts are excellent examples of chance intervention in Flora's fate, and the last one, at least, presents her with a brand new start in life. But the question of what caused this suicidal state of mind leads back to the real beginning of Flora's problem. This occurs precisely on the morning when de Barral's total financial collapse is revealed to the world: ". . . that everything was over in just twenty-four hours is an exact statement," Marlow reports (p. 67). Flora's governess has read the newspaper, but Flora herself is as oblivious of its contents as she ever was. She is almost sixteen years old and utterly unacquainted with the world, living far from her father's London flat in a Brighton mansion, with the governess to care for her but no relatives.

Though she remains unaware of it until this morning, the element of chance has already been working on Flora. For the governess is venal and heartless, and has been using the house to carry on an affair with a perpetual house guest, a much younger man "with furtive eyes and something impudent in his manner" (p. 65), whom she calls her "nephew" Charley. From this woman's point of view, Flora's purpose in life is to marry Charley so that she, the governess, can keep him on a leash indefinitely. She therefore has Charley courting Flora during the day and satisfying her own less innocent appetites in the evening.

For the governess the collapse of de Barral's enterprise means the end of her schemes. She can already visualize Charley leaving her for a younger woman, and out of perverse cruelty, there being no one else around that she can bully, she vents her rage on Flora. The brunt of her outburst is that Flora is unlovable and has only been protected from complete isolation by her father's now-squandered money. The effect on Flora is devastating. Marlow describes it as Flora's awakening into the world of evil:

> She went bored to bed, and being tired with her long ride slept soundly all night. Her last sleep, I won't say of innocence – that word would not render my exact meaning, because it has a special meaning of its own – but I will say: of that ignorance, or better still, of that unconsciousness of the world's ways, the unconsciousness of danger, of pain, of humiliation, of bitterness, of falsehood. . . Her unconsciousness of the evil which lives in the secret thoughts and therefore in the open acts of mankind . . . was to be broken into with profane violence, with desecrating circumstances like a temple violated by a mad, vengeful impiety (p. 72).

As C.B. Cox says, "The governess's outburst is the cause of all the complexities of the story" (Cox, p. 122). The relevance of this scene to our purposes is made explicit by Marlow in his summing up: "And if you ask me how, wherefore, for what reason? I will answer you: Why, by chance! By the merest chance, as things do happen, lucky and unlucky. . ." (pp. 72-73).

In fairness it should be mentioned that a familiar objection arises: what Conrad claims, through Marlow, to be the case may not be realized in the concrete presentation. R.A. Gekoski, for one, dismisses Marlow's attribution of the governess's damage to chance: "But this is simply nonsense; de Barral may have hired the governess through chance, but it is his thoughtless egoism and inadequate judgment that allow her to stay in her position" (Gekoski, pp. 174-75). I would answer that from *Flora*'s point of view this is still a chance occurrence. Of course de Barral is a negligent father, and of course this negligence is one mark of his egoism. The point is that Flora's terrible luck in governesses is referable to her equally bad luck in fathers. The symbolic intent of Flora's ultimate triumph over her misfortunes is plain enough: the triumph coincides with de Barral's death.

Conclusion

From this discussion it can be seen that Conrad's treatment of the chance theme is more than a matter of assertion. H.M. Daleski has noted how obsessively images of blind fate (like the submerged derelict struck by the *Patna* in *Lord Jim*) recur in Conrad's works (Daleski, p. 81). Conrad takes conscious pains to demonstrate that each of the main characters is initially propelled by forces outside their knowledge and control. Whether Conrad deals successfully with the chance theme is a moot point, of course. But I hope to have shown in this paper that the novel treats this theme consciously, and that either the treatment succeeds or, if it fails, it fails on some score other than effort. In the initial phase of the novel, all of the main characters – de Barral, Powell, Captain Anthony, and Flora – are set in motion by forces entirely outside their ken: in Conrad's words, by "that which happens blindly and without intelligence."

Notes

1. This paper follows the new *MLA Style Sheet* convention. References to critics are included in the text. Names of books corresponding to these references may be found in the Works Cited section.
2. Joseph Conrad, *Chance*. (Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1913, 1985), p 27. All subsequent references to *Chance* are to this edition and are included in the text. *Chance* is referenced with page numbers only.

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コンラッドの作品「チャンス」における主題

グレゴリー・ハウス・ハッチンソン

（昭和62年９月30日受理）

批評家達の間ではコンラッドの小説「チャンス」の主題は孤独であるということで一致しています．私が論じようとする問題は第二の主題とも言うべきチャンスにあります．このテーマは作品中に主要な登場人物がいろいろな運命に遭遇するという形で展開されています．この事実はとりもなおさず，本小説のタイトルそのものが，一つの重要なテーマになっていることを暗示している．批評家達の中には，このテーマは作品中に充分展開されていないと論じている人もあるが，本論では登場人物達の出会う様々な運命が，話の進展に大きく関わっていくテーマとなっていることを論究する。