

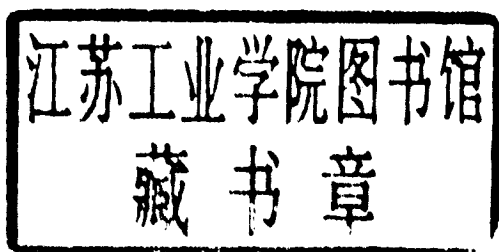


Conrad and Impressionism

John G. Peters

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In this book, John Peters investigates the impact of impressionism on Conrad and links this to his literary techniques as well as his philosophical and political views. Impressionism, Peters argues, enabled Conrad to encompass both surface and depth not only in visually perceived phenomena but also in his narratives and objects of consciousness, be they physical objects, human subjects, events, or ideas. Though traditionally thought of as a skeptical writer, Peters claims that through impressionism Conrad developed a coherent and mostly traditional view of ethical and political principles, a claim he supports through reference to a broad range of Conrad's texts. *Conrad and Impressionism* investigates the sources and implications of Conrad's impressionism in order to argue for a consistent link between his literary technique, philosophical pre-suppositions and sociopolitical views. The same core ideas concerning the nature of human experience run throughout his works.

JOHN G. PETERS is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Superior. He won the Joseph Conrad Society of America's Young Scholar Award for 1999. This is his first book.

For Deanna

“We had approached nearer to absolute Truth, which, like Beauty itself, floats elusive, obscure, half submerged, in the silent still waters of mystery.”

Lord Jim

Preface

Before beginning my inquiry proper, it is necessary to lay some groundwork. On a purely stylistic level, concerning quoted material, I follow standard practice and attribute passages using italics for emphasis either to myself or to the cited author depending on whose emphasis it is. Also, unless otherwise noted, bracketed information and ellipsis within quoted material are mine.

A few other nonstylistic issues must also be addressed. When dealing with any writer's literary works, it is difficult (if not impossible) to separate the writer's own views from those of a work's narrating voice, and with Joseph Conrad this difficulty is particularly problematic because of the presence of multiple narrators and such narrator characters as Marlow and the teacher of foreign languages. When an idea appears consistently throughout Conrad's works, though, I have felt comfortable attributing that idea to Conrad himself, especially when Conrad's own comments in his letters and essays further support that idea or when others who knew Conrad have attributed such an idea to him. Naturally, in considering any of these sources, one must remain skeptical. At different times, Conrad may have expressed different opinions on the same topic to different people; furthermore, commentators have sometimes accused Conrad of doctoring events (as they do his friend Ford Madox Ford, whom I also cite on occasion). When general consistency exists among sources, however, I thought it safe to attribute a particular idea to Conrad.

In addition, as much as possible, I have tried to limit comments concerning human nature, the nature of western civilization, and the nature of the universe to those views that I believe to have been Conrad's own. I have simply tried to report what seems to appear in the various sources I have investigated. However, to avoid constantly introducing sentences with "for Conrad" or "according to Conrad" or some

other qualification, I have sometimes simply stated an idea without the qualification.

In this same vein, Christopher GoGwilt and others have argued convincingly that the west is not a single concept but rather a variety of concepts put forward at various times for various reasons.¹ However, Conrad particularly seems to question a certain popularized and monolithic view of western civilization that saw its methods and practices as originating from absolute truth. Concurrent with this view was the belief in the necessity of civilizing the rest of the world and thus bringing other peoples to a knowledge of the truth. The clearest manifestation of this attitude appears in "Heart of Darkness" when Marlow summarizes his aunt's view: "It appeared, however, I was also one of the Workers, with a capital – you know. Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle. There had been a lot of such rot let loose in print and talk just about that time, and the excellent woman, living right in the rush of all that humbug, got carried off her feet" (159). Conrad rejects such a view. For this reason, when I refer to western civilization in this book, I am typically referring to this popularized view of the role and position of the west in the world at that time.

Regarding impressionist theory, Diego Martelli remarked of impressionist painters that they do not "fabricate their theories first and then adapt the paintings to them, but on the contrary . . . the pictures were born of the unconscious visual phenomenon of men of art who, having studied, afterward produced the reasoning of the philosophers."² Similarly, since literary impressionists left behind no philosophical treatise and usually wrote little by way of helpful commentary concerning their works, I have generally had to reconstruct impressionist literary theory – in a sense archaeologically – from the impressionists' works themselves rather than from their comments about their works.

Finally, even though I discuss impressionist literary theory in general, because this book is primarily about Conrad's impressionism, most of my illustrations of impressionist techniques will, of course, come from Conrad's works. To a lesser extent, I also quote from the works of Ford Madox Ford, Stephen Crane, and Henry James since they are almost universally acknowledged as impressionists and would also be well known to most readers. In so doing, though, I am not implying that these authors were the only impressionist writers – merely that there is not enough space in this book to argue for the impressionism of other authors less categorically associated with this literary movement.

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Finally, I would like to thank my family in general for their support, particularly my mother, Virginia Long, my aunt and uncle, Ruth and George Snider, and my mother and father-in-law, Shirley and Alfred Davis, for their support and interest throughout this project. Furthermore, I would like to thank my grandfather, George Snider, for his moral support and my late grandmother, Ruth Snider, for her endless faith in me. I am also grateful to my two-year-old daughter, Kaitlynne, who I suspect cares nothing for Conrad but is nevertheless a great joy to be around. Most important, though, I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my wife, Deanna, who has been patient, supportive, and loving during the long, difficult, and often discouraging graduate-school and job-search experience that has gone hand in hand (as did we) with the writing of this book.

Abbreviations

Throughout this book, when quoting from *Almayer's Folly* and *The Secret Agent*, I will use the Cambridge editions of these works. For Conrad's other works, unless otherwise stated, I will use the standard 1928 Doubleday edition. The abbreviations I use are as follows:

<i>AF</i>	<i>Almayer's Folly</i>	<i>Ro</i>	<i>The Rover</i>
<i>AG</i>	<i>The Arrow of Gold</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>Suspense</i>
<i>C</i>	<i>Chance</i>	<i>SA</i>	<i>The Secret Agent</i>
<i>I</i>	<i>The Inheritors</i>	<i>SL</i>	<i>The Shadow Line</i>
<i>LJ</i>	<i>Lord Jim</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>A Set of Six</i>
<i>MS</i>	<i>The Mirror of the Sea</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>Typhoon and Other Stories</i>
<i>N</i>	<i>Nostromo</i>	<i>TH</i>	<i>Tales of Hearsay</i>
<i>NLL</i>	<i>Notes on Life and Letters</i>	<i>TLS</i>	<i>'Twixt Land and Sea</i>
<i>NN</i>	<i>The Nigger of the "Narcissus"</i>	<i>TU</i>	<i>Tales of Unrest</i>
<i>OI</i>	<i>An Outcast of the Islands</i>	<i>UWE</i>	<i>Under Western Eyes</i>
<i>PR</i>	<i>A Personal Record</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>Victory</i>
<i>R</i>	<i>Romance</i>	<i>WT</i>	<i>Within the Tides</i>
<i>Re</i>	<i>The Rescue</i>	<i>Y</i>	<i>Youth and Two Other Stories</i>

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INTRODUCTION

Objects of consciousness in Conrad's impressionist world

"The unwearied self-forgetful attention to every phase of the living universe reflected in our consciousness may be our appointed task on this earth."

A Personal Record

I

In this book, I investigate the far-reaching effects of impressionism in the works of Joseph Conrad. In particular, I look at the sources and implications of his impressionism in order to argue for a consistent link between his literary technique, philosophical presuppositions, and sociopolitical views. The same core ideas concerning the nature of human existence and human experience run throughout his works. In the process of investigating these issues, I present a generally unified Conrad that contrasts with the fragmented Conrad popular in some circles. Furthermore, I posit a much-needed definition of literary impressionism based upon philosophical groundings rather than upon the visual arts. In this way, I hope to demonstrate literary impressionism's broad power and significant influence and by so doing argue for a much more important role for this movement in literary history than is generally accorded it.

Running in the background of this study will be an attempt to show that Conrad's narrative techniques and philosophical inquiries result in part from the intellectual environment in which he wrote. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to suggest that my reading of Conrad is either an attempt at cultural studies or intellectual history. Instead, the intellectual and cultural environment is a means of orienting Conrad's works and a backdrop for the philosophical investigations in which I will be engaging. Furthermore, although this book will be a philosophical investigation into epistemological processes and their sociopolitical implications

in Conrad's works, I do not systematically apply the ideas of any specific philosophical school of thought nor the philosophical ideas of any specific thinker (although the views of certain philosophers or schools of philosophy may occasionally inform my argument). Instead, I try to uncover the underlying philosophical presuppositions and their implications in impressionism in general and in Conrad's impressionism in particular. I will then try to follow through with these philosophical conclusions to discover the effects of Conrad's impressionist concerns on yet larger philosophical issues afoot in his works.

The ultimate goal of this book will be to demonstrate that the implications of Conrad's impressionist narrative technique lead not only to questions about his narratology and artistic representation but also to broader questions concerning his views on western civilization, the nature of the universe, and the meaning of human existence. In the end, I believe that these questions arise as much from the narrative techniques Conrad employs as they do from the subject matter he investigates. Conrad's techniques represent the way human beings obtain knowledge, and therefore his narrative techniques function both in a practical manner to move the narrative along and in a philosophical manner to identify epistemological processes, which then in turn lead to important social, political, and ethical concerns.

To begin, I define literary impressionism and outline its origins, context, and implications, thereby establishing the groundwork for a more extended discussion of Conrad's works themselves. The middle chapters focus on what I call *objects of consciousness*, each chapter investigating different objects of consciousness and their relationship to knowledge throughout Conrad's works. Among these objects of consciousness, I will discuss perception of events, physical objects, and human subjects, as well as the human experience of time and space. During the course of these investigations, I look at the various permutations related to each object of consciousness based upon its appearance in Conrad's works. These central chapters each revolve around one of Conrad's major works ("Heart of Darkness," *Lord Jim*, and *The Secret Agent*) as a kind of touchstone; at the same time, I also discuss the particular issues engaged by each chapter throughout Conrad's works in general. In addition, I look at the implications of these investigations, as each inquiry also considers the relationship between a particular object of consciousness and the popularized view of western civilization. Throughout Conrad's writings, objects of consciousness are either a product of western views or they resemble and function as do western

views – or both. Finally, these investigations conclude with a discussion of the nature of Conrad's universe, because it is linked to his ideas concerning western civilization. To arrive at such conclusions, I synthesize my previous discussion of Conrad's impressionism and demonstrate how impressionist technique and epistemology are linked such that they encompass both individual and cultural concerns. I hope to show that Conrad's impressionism leads to a view of western civilization, the nature of the universe, and the meaning of human existence that is consistently connected to and has its origins in Conrad's impressionist theory. In this way, theory and technique merge to form a unified whole.

II

Conrad noted the impossibility of achieving the kind of objective truth many in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sought. Throughout his writings, he rejects attempts to universalize truth and demonstrates that human experience is always individual. Both his philosophical concerns and narrative techniques point to an epistemology that presents human experience and knowledge originating from a particular source in space and time.

In defining literary impressionism, I will look to the underlying philosophical presuppositions and issues the movement raises rather than to impressionist representations in the visual arts. Too closely associating literary and visual impressionism, together with difficulties in defining impressionist theory, have produced a long list of impressionist writers that seems to include most well-known authors writing between 1875 and 1925 – and beyond. However, by looking to impressionism's philosophical groundings and by clearly defining impressionist epistemology itself, confusion can be reduced concerning which writers are impressionist and which are not. In short, I will argue that impressionism saw all phenomena filtering through the medium of human consciousness at a particular place and time, thereby representing knowledge as an individual rather than a universal experience. In addition to defining impressionism, I will also look at some of the techniques impressionist writers employ in order to represent their philosophical ideas. In particular, I look at Conrad's impressionism based upon the definition I establish and identify some of the shortcomings of previous commentaries. These shortcomings include the views that Conrad's impressionist literature focused on surface rather than

depth, that impressionism was a technique Conrad employed only early on in his career, that his impressionism imitated methods from the visual arts, and that it dealt solely with visual perception. In contrast, I will argue that each of these views does not accurately represent Conrad's impressionism.

I will then look at perception of events, physical objects, and human subjects, as well as the human experience of time and, to a lesser degree, space. Concerning physical objects and events, I investigate human interaction with external objects and events in the form of sensory perception as well as the way these phenomena impress themselves upon consciousness such that each perceptual experience is unique. Conrad sees perception as contextualized, with the perceptual event occurring at a specific point in space and time. Such an event consists of subject and object as well as the physical circumstances of the perceptual event and the perceiver's personal and public past. As a result, perception occurs such that perceiver, perceived, and surrounding circumstances blur to produce an experience that is unique to each perceptual instance. Conrad's view of the interaction between subject and object also has important implications for the way human beings acquire knowledge. Knowledge becomes an individual phenomenon rather than a universal one. Each person gains knowledge through interaction with objects of consciousness, and one person's knowledge is never exactly the same as another's, nor even exactly the same as one's own at a different point in space and time.

Closely associated with perception of events and physical objects is perception of human subjects, and accordingly I will also focus my argument on the phenomenon of human subjectivity; in particular, I consider knowledge of self and others. In so doing, I argue that Conrad blurs the boundaries between self and other (between subject and object as it were) such that knowledge of self can come through knowledge of other and knowledge of other can come through knowledge of self. Human subjectivity exists within the context of self, other, and their surrounding circumstances. No clear distinction exists between self and other for Conrad, and in looking at the other and its relationship to the self, Conrad shows that others help to clarify the self either by similarity or by contrast. In this way, the self learns from others both what it is and what it is not. In addition to knowledge of self through knowledge of others, subjective knowledge may also come through cultural conditions and through investigation into one's self.

Along with subjects, objects, and events, I will also look at Conrad's investigation into the human experience of time and its relationship to knowledge. Conrad considers the way human beings experience time in an individual and contextualized manner. In the process, he blurs distinctions between time and human subjectivity (again between subject and object). In investigating these phenomena, Conrad deals with human time (time as human beings experience it), mechanical time (time as a clock measures it), and narrative time (time as represented in narration). The direct relationship between human time and mechanical time is important to Conrad because he uses the contrast between the two as the clearest example of the individual nature of objects of consciousness. Conrad demonstrates how human time is always at odds with the movement of a clock. Furthermore, each individual's experience of time is unique and cannot be synchronized with that of others except by means of mechanical time's intervention. Conrad also uses narrative time to emphasize the subjectivity of human temporal experience so that his impressionist narrative methods are meant to represent the way human beings actually experience time.

Each of these inquiries leads to two important conclusions. First, Conrad demonstrates that knowledge can never (or almost never) be certain. Second, his emphasis on the individuality of the epistemological process brings into question all attempts to universalize human experience. As a result, western civilization in particular comes under Conrad's scrutiny, and since the popular view of western civilization at the time conceived it to be based upon an absolute foundation, Conrad's epistemology strikes directly at that foundation. Therefore, each investigation of objects of consciousness – whether physical objects, human subjects, events, space, or time – demonstrates the ultimate uncertainty of knowledge and approaches the conflict between this uncertainty and the perceived certainty of western civilization. These questions also lead to two unpleasant logical possibilities for Conrad: epistemological solipsism and ethical anarchy. Uncomfortable with both positions, Conrad rejects moral and intellectual nihilism by focusing on his belief in the certainty of human subjectivity, and in fact employs the very source of the problem – human subjectivity itself – as its solution and in the process creates meaning for human existence.

In this way, my investigation into Conrad's impressionist world will come full circle. I begin with the uncertainty and individuality of human experience in Conrad's works and end with that same phenomenon.