

JOSEPH CONRAD AND 'LITERARY IMPRESSIONISM': A TERM BEST
AVOIDED?

JOSEPH CONRAD E "IMPRESSIONISMO LITERÁRIO": UM TERMO A SE
EVITAR?

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ABSTRACT: In this essay, I propose that, although the term 'literary impressionism' has clear historical credentials, it is best avoided in future analyses of Joseph Conrad's work.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad; literary impressionism.

RESUMO: Neste ensaio, proponho-me a, apesar da validade das credenciais históricas do termo "impressionismo literário", recomendar que se evite seu uso em futuras análises da obra de Joseph Conrad.

Palavras-chave: Joseph Conrad; impressionismo literário.

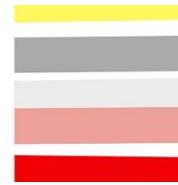
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Veteran Conradians know that 'Conrad and Impressionism' is a topic, popular in the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies, which tends to re-appear from time to time. Indeed, *Conrad and Impressionism* is the title of a book by John Peters which appeared in 2001.¹ Peters argued that the whole range of Conrad's fictional output (even though the works differs so greatly) is characterised by impressionism, which appears in the use of achronological narration, multiple narrators and *in medias res* narration: these features, Peters claimed, express sceptical relativism. As I pointed out in a review,² the same features (which can all be found in pre-Conradian works of literature) differ so greatly from any to be found in impressionist paintings as to call in question the value of using the term 'impressionism' at all: 'sceptical relativism' was, indubitably, Peters' main topic.

In this essay, I propose that, although the term 'literary impressionism' has clear historical credentials, it is best avoided in future analyses of Joseph Conrad's work.

¹ John G. Peters: *Conrad and Impressionism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

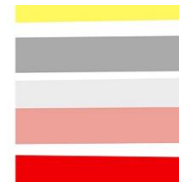
² *Studies in the Novel* 34 (December 2002), pp. 473-6.



A comprehensive definition of *pictorial* impressionism based on the vast range of works produced by visual artists regarded as impressionists (among them Monet, Manet, Renoir, Degas, Morisot, Sisley and Pissarro) would be dauntingly large and complex. Some of their works were painted in the open air, but many were painted in the studio. Some have a ‘rough and ready’ quality, but some are carefully posed. Some concentrate on rendering the effect of varying lights (sunlight, artificial light, night skies) on surfaces; others lack this concern and offer conventional lighting. Some seek to capture motion (e.g. the motion of ballerinas, acrobats and race-horses), while others render a static view.

Another way of defining pictorial impressionism is selective, choosing the most striking features and concentrating on those works which seem to depart most notably from prior tradition. Here great emphasis would be placed on the immediate, apparently rapid, rendering of a scene, with visible brush-strokes and a markedly personal viewpoint. Such painting is characterised more by what it omits than by what it includes. Of course, the impressionist seeks to render the appearance of aspects of the world: what painter does not? The impressionist, however, omits narrative elements which for so long were an important part of the artistic tradition. Impressionist works are secular, lacking the religious iconography and contexts which had sustained so many previous artists, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael and so forth; and they also (with a few exceptions)³ lack grand historical subjects or even minor historical subjects. Furthermore, previous artists often sought to refine their work, giving it the precision of a clear mirror; the impressionist painters, on the other hand, often created a sense of roughness and rapidity, of semblances and temporary approximations rather than immaculate final renderings. ‘Here and now, this is how it seems to me’, the impressionist seems to say; even ‘I’ve rapidly sketched it, and that will suffice.’

Sometimes an impressionist painting seems to capture vividly the fleeting moment; sometimes it seems to offer a clumsily incomplete rendering of what a traditional artist would render with fine precision and detail. Portraits by Hans Holbein the Younger or Thomas Gainsborough or Frans Hals have a minute precision and clarity: they seem perfectly finished. Holbein’s ‘The Ambassadors’ pays minute attention to detail: the broken string on the lute perhaps indicates religious discord. Gainsborough’s ‘Mr and Mrs Andrews’ renders precisely the details of the faces, clothing, and the natural setting. Frans Hals’ ‘The Laughing Cavalier’



has a rich photographic exactitude in its depiction of the smiling man and his opulent clothing. Impressionist canvases, in contrast, often have an air of incompleteness. In Degas's 'Jockeys', faces lack detail: three are virtually blank. In Manet's 'At the Winter Garden', the male sitter's face is a puzzling blur, a strange red ring appearing below his right eye. It remains puzzling: there is no resolution to be found. In Manet's 'The Bullring', the faces of the matadors and toreadors are blank. In Degas's 'The Absinthe Drinkers', the arms and clothing of the female sitter are incomplete. In Pissarro's 'A Clearing in the Woods', the daubing of brush-loads of paint is conspicuous, and the vague central figure is sketched in with a few brusque strokes. Manet's 'Madame Manet at the Piano' is almost a caricature rather than a portrait; and her dress and chair, the piano and the chairs behind her are very rapidly indicated, lacking all detail. Degas's 'Jockeys' depicts several jockeys, whose faces are blank, seated on some awkwardly-sketched horses. (Degas often painted in the studio his open-air scenes.) What would the literary equivalent to such incompleteness be? The incorporation, within a description, of incomplete notation featuring hiati, ellipses, or simply white spaces instead of the expected words in print? Or a description reduced to rapid rough notes? If so, we certainly don't find those equivalents.

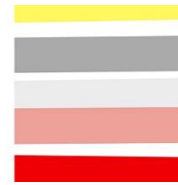
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Literary impressionism resembles pictorial impressionism in its concentration on the immediate impact of an event on the individual's senses. A useful alternative term for 'literary impressionism' is 'sensuous concentration'. In sensuous concentration, the evidence of the senses is given strong emphasis, while the rational mind, which seeks to explain and to coordinate the evidence of the senses, is rendered inadequate or treated ironically, or is marginalised or even silenced. (This corresponds, approximately, to the impressionist painter's relegation of narrative elements.)

Conrad regarded literary impressionism as a technique which could produce vivid results, but which generally was superficial in its rendering of life. Stephen Crane, he said, was '*the only* impressionist and *only* an impressionist'.⁴ He presumably meant: 'Among the writers termed impressionists, Crane is outstanding; but impressionism is necessarily superficial.' Conrad qualified the criticism, saying 'Crane-ibn-Crane el Yankee is all right.

³ For instance, Manet's 'The Execution of the Emperor Maximilian' and 'Battle of the *Kearsage* and the *Alabama*'.

⁴ Edward Garnett, ed.: *Letters from Conrad, 1895 – 1924* (London: Nonesuch Press, 1928), p. 107.



The man sees the outside of many things and the inside of some':⁵ though this still means that Conrad deems impressionism *predominantly* superficial.

Conrad's friend R. B. Cunninghame Graham wrote many short tales or essays, often called 'sketches'. Cunninghame Graham told Edward Garnett in 1898, 'I am not a story teller, but an impressionist.'⁶ Conrad said that in some of his works, Graham offered 'much more of course than mere Crane-like impressionism but even as impressionism these... sketches are well-nigh perfect',⁷ implying that Graham was able to get beneath the surface of appearances but was admirable even when he appeared not to do so. Ford Madox Ford (an unreliable witness) says that Conrad 'avowed himself impressionist',⁸ and some later critics (e.g. Edward Crankshaw and Joseph Warren Beach) applied the term to Conrad, though Conrad would clearly have objected.

Conrad said that the appeal of art must be 'an impression conveyed through the senses'; the writer must 'make you *see*'. He also said that the literary artist 'should awaken the sense of solidarity... which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world'. He 'cannot be faithful to any one of the temporary formulas of his craft...Realism, Romanticism, Naturalism, even the unofficial sentimentalism... must...abandon him'.⁹ (Impressionism would surely qualify as one of these 'temporary formulas'.)

Ian Watt explains that the term 'impressionism' was apparently coined in 1874 by the journalist Louis Leroy to ridicule the seeming formlessness of pictures exhibited at the Salon des Indépendants, particularly Claude Monet's 'Impression: Sunrise'.¹⁰ That painting is indeed a very rapid and rough rendering of sunrise on a waterfront: two boats are represented by black blotches; black dabs with the brush indicate waves, and orange dabs indicate the sun's reflection on the water. Watt continues: 'In one way and another all the main Impressionists made it their aim to give a pictorial equivalent of the visual sensations of a particular individual at a particular time and place'. The term was then extended to 'ways of writing which were thought to possess the qualities popularly attributed to the painters – to

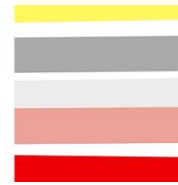
⁵ C. T. Watts, ed.: *Joseph Conrad's Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 59.

⁶ Letter to Garnett, 23 July 1898, quoted in Laurence Davies's Sussex University D.Phil. thesis, *Cunninghame Graham and the Concept of Impressionism*, 1972, p. ii.

⁷ *Joseph Conrad's Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham*, p. 130.

⁸ Ford Madox Ford: *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (London: Duckworth, 1924), p. 6.

⁹ Conrad's 'Preface' to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* [1897], ed. Cedric Watts (London: Penguin, 1988), pp. xlviii, xlix, l.



works that were spontaneous and rapidly executed, that were vivid sketches rather than detailed, finished, and premeditated compositions'.¹¹ This, however, brings to mind short items, such as Cunninghame Graham's 'The Gold Fish' or Crane's 'The Open Boat', rather than whole novels or parts of them.

Conrad greatly admired Crane's novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*, and it may well have influenced Conrad's *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, a novel notable for its descriptive intensity. For much of the time in *The Red Badge of Courage*, the protagonist, in battle for the first time, is thoroughly confused: his senses are battered by many new, bewildering and frightening sensations. Here, naturally, the rational mind is marginalised and the man is assailed by sense-data. In other words, for the rendering of the experience of a young novice on a battleground, the impressionistic method seems particularly apt, being psychologically true. Thus:

Presently he began to feel the effects of the war atmosphere – a blistering sweat, a sensation that his eyeballs were about to crack like hot stones. A burning roar filled his ears.¹²

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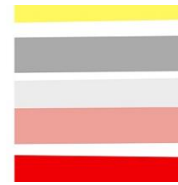
In any novel which uses a variety of techniques, literary impressionism (or what I have called 'sensuous concentration') may seem apt at particular times: notably, times of crisis, shock, fear, bewilderment, illness, and confusion. There, a method which concentrates on sense-data and marginalises rational comprehension seems appropriate. Sometimes, within such a passage, 'rational comprehension' is attempted but is foiled: the comprehension is, ironically, wrong. Consider Conrad's treatment of the death of Willems, shot by Aïssa, near the end of *An Outcast of the Islands*:

He saw a burst of red flame before his eyes, and was deafened by a report that seemed to him louder than a clap of thunder. Something stopped him short, and he stood aspiring in his nostrils the acrid smell of the blue smoke that drifted from before his eyes like an immense cloud.... Missed, by Heaven!...Thought so!... And he saw her very far off, throwing her arms up, while the revolver, very small, lay on the ground between them.... Missed!... He would go and pick it up now. Never before did he understand, as in that second, the joy, the triumphant delight of sunshine and of life. His mouth was full of something salt and warm. He tried to cough, spat out.... Who

¹⁰ Ian Watt: *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1980), p. 170.

¹¹ *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, pp. 170, 172.

¹² Stephen Crane: *The Red Badge of Courage* [1895] (London: Orion Dent Everyman, 1993), p. 33.



shrieks: In the name of God, he dies! – he dies! – Who dies? – Must pick up
– Night – What?... Night already....¹³

Seeking to comprehend what is happening, his mind misinterprets: first, he wrongly thinks that the bullet she has fired has missed him; he experiences sudden delight in life; and secondly, the darkness of incipient death he misinterprets as the rapid descent of night. Thus, although this passage, in the tradition of sensuous concentration, foregrounds the impact of events on the individual's senses (here, the senses of sight, sound, smell, and taste), it is accompanied by a floundering attempt at rational control. We encounter stages one and two of what Ian Watt named 'delayed decoding'.¹⁴

Delayed decoding occurs when the author introduces a marked delay between the presentation of a puzzling occurrence and the correct interpretation of it. The method makes conspicuous an immediate impact of sense-data, initially unleavened by rationalisation: there's the link with visual impressionism, though that initial impact may be on another sense, perhaps the sense of hearing, or on several senses. Often, in Conrad's works, the process has three stages. First stage: an enigma is presented, a puzzle to be solved. Second stage: false decoding: an interpretation is provided but it is incorrect. Thirdly, true decoding: an adequate interpretation is provided. In the passage describing Willems' death, we are given stage one, the enigma, and stage two, false decoding. Willems never attains to true decoding, namely that he has been hit by the bullet and is dying. The true decoding is left to the reader. This technique is not only psychologically true; it also engages the reader more strenuously than would a normal descriptive passage.

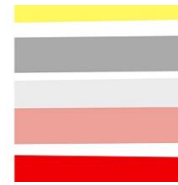
Here are some more examples of delayed decoding. In *The Shadow-Line*, the young captain has been subject to immense stress, and his mate has claimed that the ship is subject to supernatural forces. The captain says:

I became bothered by curious, irregular sounds of faint tapping on the deck. They could be heard single, in pairs, in groups. While I wondered at this mysterious devilry, I received a slight blow under the left eye and felt an enormous tear run down my cheek. Raindrops.¹⁵

¹³ Joseph Conrad: *An Outcast of the Islands* [1896], ed. Cedric Watts (London: Orion Dent Everyman, 1996), p. 276.

¹⁴ *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, notably pp. 270-71.

¹⁵ Joseph Conrad: *The Shadow-Line* [1917] (London: Dent, 1950), p. 113.



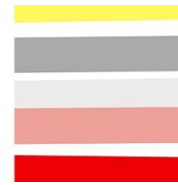
Enigma: the sounds of tapping. First false decoding: ‘mysterious devilry’: perhaps some poltergeist is at work. Second, subordinate, false decoding: an ‘enormous tear’. Eventual true decoding: ‘Raindrops’: the onset of rainfall.

Heart of Darkness contains numerous instances of delayed decoding. Marlow sees a landscape strewn with wreckage and hears ‘a heavy and dull detonation’. The eventual true decoding, ‘They were building a railway’, is fraught with irony, because the attempt at construction seems impotent. This novella even makes a joke of delayed decoding. Marlow finds a manual of seamanship which has strange handwriting on the pages: he interprets this as writing in code. Later he finds that the inscriptions are simply notes in Russian: Cyrillic script. Thus the eventual true decoding establishes no coding – no encryption.

Impressionist paintings offer no equivalent to the three-stage delayed decoding technique. Some works, notably Monet’s ‘The Cathedral Fog’ require one stage of decipherment: without the painting’s title, we would not discern a cathedral in this predominantly blue work. But these are exceptional: normally, the impressionist painting offers an immediate, self-explanatory scene.

In short, the similarities between literary impressionism and pictorial impressionism seem little more than a concentration on the immediate impact of experience on the individual’s senses. The differences are so great that the term ‘impressionism’ has very limited usefulness, and may indeed be deceptive. The impressionist painter eschews narrative; but narrative is essential to the literary artist. The fiction writer may apply sensuous concentration as a local technique within the large narrative; but that local technique will usually employ modes of decoding which generally are absent from the paintings.

To recapitulate. As we have seen, impressionist painting is defined by a number of features. The works we confidently call ‘impressionist’ have several of these features; the works we are less sure about have only a few. If we recall our selective definition, concentration on the visual appearance at a specific limited time is one. Apparent rapidity of execution is another. Others are exclusion of religious iconography and of narrative implication, and the absence of traditional technical plenitudes and exactitudes. Impressionist *literature* is similarly defined by a number of features. These include concentration on the evidence of the senses as they impinge on the individual, and the elision, reduction or ironic treatment of rational analysis of the situation. This recapitulation confirms that the overlap of



features of impressionist painting and impressionist literature is remarkably small, and amounts to little more than concentration on the visually immediate; and, even then, literary impressionism may, of course, incorporate the evidence of other senses. Furthermore, many instances of literary impressionism can be found before the late nineteenth century – before the time when impressionist art gave modishness to the term ‘impressionism’. Consider this passage from Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*, describing Fagin in the dock at the law-court:

Thus, even while he trembled, and turned burning hot at the idea of speedy death, he fell to counting the iron spikes before him, and wondering how the head of one had been broken off, and whether they would mend it, or leave it as it was.¹⁶

That passage fits some definitions of literary impressionism. It emphasises the subjective viewpoint; it concentrates on the evidence of the senses; and, though the logical process is represented, it is shown ironically, an interest in trivia superseding the main concern. Since this passage renders the flow of mental consciousness, no painting can offer a counterpart to it. The painter renders surfaces; the author can explore what lies beneath the surface. The painting depicts a stilled moment; the prose description moves through incessantly-flowing time.

To conclude. The differences between pictorial impressionism and literary impressionism so greatly outnumber the similarities that, apart from its historical references, the term ‘literary impressionism’ is probably best avoided. A combination of the terms ‘sensuous concentration’, ‘subjectivity of viewpoint’ and ‘delayed decoding’ will usually, in future analyses, be more practical.

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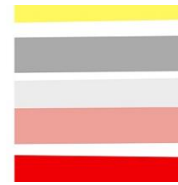
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¹⁶ Charles Dickens: *Oliver Twist* [1839] (London and Glasgow: Collins, n.d.), p. 374.



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