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The Sea as a Source of Inspiration and a Force of Destruction in Conrad's *The Mirror of the Sea*

**Morze jako źródło inspiracji i siła niszcząca
w *Zwierciadle morza* Conrada**

Abstract

Conrad, having spent the better part of his life on board ships, in the company of men affiliated to their common concern, the sea, has registered his indebtedness to the sea, its men and ships in *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906). In a specific realistic and impressionistic manner Conrad depicts nature – the sea – as indifferent to man, as a mirror of life, human conscience and problems. The fluid and the changeable power of water, which in itself is colourless, is wonderfully suitable for experiments with light and colour in a way not dissimilar to the Impressionist painters' use of light and shade. The vast solitude of waters become factors that affect or shape the destiny of his heroes. Water also symbolises the link between the man and the ship; it reflects both the shape of the ship and its passenger. Like a mirror, the sea is not a master of itself. Unmastered by its masters, the sea is also unmastered by itself. Conrad presents the natural world as a blind struggle for survival, transformed, in human life, into a battle for supremacy. It is interesting that the sea, for all its immensity or indifference to man's fate, for all the hard knocks it deals the sailor,

can still be the place of romance. Thus Conrad's attitude towards the sea appears to be ambiguous, running from hate to love, but existing, at most times, as a mixture of the two emotions. For in whatever guise the sea appears – occasionally kind and harmless, often deceitful, usually indifferent and unfair, it appears most frequently in its cruelty. Despite the sea being unfair, *The Mirror of the Sea* shows a vision of a man attracted to the sea, viewing it as a testing ground.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad; sea; observation of life; indifferent nature; unusual awareness of place.

Abstrakt

Conrad, spędziwszy większą część życia na statkach, wyraził swoją wdzięczność morzu, jego ludziom i statkom w *Zwierciadło morza* (1906). W specyficzny, realistyczny i impresjonistyczny sposób Conrad przedstawia naturę – morze – obojętną wobec człowieka, jako zwierciadło życia, ludzkiego sumienia i problemów. Płynna i zmienna moc wody, która sama w sobie jest bezbarwna, znakomicie nadaje się do eksperymentów ze światłem i kolorem w sposób nieodbiegający od impresjonistycznego posługiwania się światłem i cieniem. Woda symbolizuje również więź między człowiekiem a statkiem; odbija zarówno kształt statku, jak i jego pasażera. Conrad przedstawia świat przyrody jako ślepą walkę o przetrwanie, przekształconą w życiu człowieka w walkę o dominację. Ciekawe, że morze, pomimo całego swojego ogromu i obojętności na los człowieka, pomimo wszystkich ciosów, jakie zadaje żeglarzowi, wciąż może być miejscem romansu. Stosunek Conrada do morza wydaje się zatem niejednoznaczny i oscyluje między nienawiścią a miłością, ale najczęściej stanowi mieszanie tych dwóch emocji. Morze, niezależnie od tego, pod jaką postacią się pojawia – czasem życzliwe i nieszkodliwe, często podstępne, a zazwyczaj obojętne i niesprawiedliwe – najczęściej objawia się w swoim okrucieństwie. Mimo tego *Zwierciadło morza* ukazuje wizję człowieka zafascynowanego morzem, postrzegającego je jako test swoich możliwości.

Słowa kluczowe: Joseph Conrad, morze, obserwacja życia, obojętna natura, niezwykła świadomość miejsca.

Conrad, having spent the better part of his life on board ships, in the company of men affiliated to their common concern, the sea, has registered his indebtedness to the sea, its men and ships in *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906) which Ernst Bendz considers “the most penetrating, subtle and attractive book ever written on the subject by a man himself

of the craft.”¹ Conrad’s series of sea sketches defined by its author as “a discourse (with a personal note) on ships, seamen, and the sea,”² and his “only seabook,”³ is a novelty among his books. As Zdzisław Najder writes, it was designed neither to develop Conrad’s craft as a writer nor to continue the confrontation of moral and political ideas with observed reality.⁴ It was intended as a series of sketches quick to produce and easy to read. On 18th April 1904 Conrad wrote to J. B. Pinker “that a book like a *Mirror* would appeal to all who like Conrad” and added that “even the general public may take to it; for its interest is not exclusively maritime but largely human.”⁵ That is why Conrad found the short form which “takes, a small-scale narrative (short story) to show the master’s hand”⁶ so appealing when he set about the task. It had been successfully exploited by writers like Maupassant, Flaubert and Turgenev, whose works Conrad studied and admired. In a letter to Sidney Colvin written on 18th March 1917 Conrad complained that he had been called “a descriptive writer, a romantic writer and also a realist.”⁷ Seven years later Conrad wrote to H. Canby: “the only sea-book, and the only tribute to a life which I have lived in my own particular way, is *The Mirror of the Sea*.”⁸ In the “Author’s Note” for *The Mirror of the Sea* Conrad asserted: “for twenty years I had lived like a hermit with my passion! Beyond the line of the sea horizon the world for me did not exist” and added that the sea, ships and the seamen “were the ultimate shapers of my character, convictions, and in a sense, destiny.”⁹ Edward Crankshaw writes that Conrad used the sea and the jungle which he knew very well at first hand, because “both of them freely offered extreme situations. Conrad needed such situations in order

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- 1 Ernst Bendz, “Joseph Conrad: An Appreciation,” in *Conrad: Eastern and Western Perspectives: 4*, ed. Wiesław Krajka (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 21.
 - 2 “Conrad to Messers Methuen & Co., 30 May 1906,” in *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, eds. F. R. Karl et al., vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983–2008), 332.
 - 3 “Conrad to Henry S. Canby, 7 April 1924,” in Joseph Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters*, vol. 2 (London: Dent, 1921), 342.
 - 4 Zdzisław Najder, *Joseph Conrad. A Chronicle*, trans. Halina Carroll-Najder (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 298.
 - 5 *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 3, 133.
 - 6 *Ibidem.*, vol. 1, 124.
 - 7 G. Jean-Aubry, *Joseph Conrad. Life and Letters*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (London: Heinemann, 1927), 185.
 - 8 *Ibidem*, 342.
 - 9 Joseph Conrad, *The Mirror of the Sea & A Personal Record* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), xxxiv.

to show his characters under extreme stress.”¹⁰ But *The Mirror of the Sea*, which suggests the customary Polish genre of *gawęda* (“yarn”), in which a narrator recalls a personal tale in an informal fashion, is not an autobiography in the sense of a factual report because it is often impossible to connect the events described by Conrad with documented facts. Even “The ‘Tremolino’”, the most insistently autobiographical story, cannot be regarded as a fully personal experience. However, Conrad was so exact in his observation of the sea with his precise descriptions of anchoring, cargo loading, riggings, dockings, running around, storms, winds that the book may serve “a textbook in the navigation schools.”¹¹ An intimate knowledge of what Conrad was writing about and objectively transmitted into art was close to his personal experiences.

For a reader who approaches *The Mirror of the Sea* expecting recollections of adventures at sea or descriptions of exotic lands, it may be puzzling to discover that the sea enters into the narrative mostly as a reflection of life aboard ships. The narrative in *The Mirror of the Sea* moves in a cinematic fashion from the panoramic (the view of the land and sea) to the scenic (the ship and her crew). But that movement, normally designed to place and orientate the subject, only compounds the sense of physical and psychological disorientation as it removes all the potential points of reference outside the self and positions the narrator in Conrad’s collection within three concentric circles of uncertainty: the mysterious aspect of physical surroundings, the unknown ship and her crew; and finally, the narrator’s own self: as Conrad’s captain. The same hidden principle functions as an element of a play with the reader, who is forced to look for the unifying factor in a seemingly loose collection of fragments narrated by Conrad.

The fictional narrative demonstrates faithful observation and rendering of life and an unusual awareness of place. Conrad in *The Mirror of the Sea* uses truly impressionist techniques, and vividly presents his love of nature through a sequence of minutely presented physical sensations. In a truly impressionistic manner, the writer demonstrates that each person gains knowledge through interaction with objects of consciousness, and one person’s knowledge is never exactly the same as another’s, not even exactly the same as one’s own at a different point in space and time. All phenomena filter through the medium of human consciousness

10 Edward Crankshaw, *Joseph Conrad. Some Aspects of the Art of the Novel* (London, Macmillan, 1976), x.

11 Martin Ray, ed., *Joseph Conrad. Interviews and Recollections* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 165.

at a particular place and time; therefore, knowledge comes through the medium of human subjectivity.¹² Conrad also uses impressionist techniques to represent his characters' perception of objects and events, and to demonstrate that each perceptual experience is unique.¹³ In a specific realistic and impressionistic manner Conrad depicts nature – the sea – as indifferent to man, as a mirror of nature and the universe. Water also symbolises the link between the man and the ship; it reflects both the shape of the ship and its passenger. Conrad says: "Love and regret go hand in hand in this world of changes swifter than the shifting of the clouds reflecting in the mirror of the sea."¹⁴ The mirror also "explains" the sea's constant inconstancy. If greedy or ambitious men have seen the sea as friendly to their interests, this is because the mirror faithfully reflects all gazes; but if the sea "has never adopted the cause of its masters," as Conrad says in "Initiation", this is because all causes are alien to its nature: the "vast dreams of dominion and power" that would-be masters to the sea have pursued on the sea's surface "have passed like images reflected from a mirror, leaving no record upon the mysterious face of the sea."¹⁵ Like a mirror, the sea is not a master of itself. Unmastered by its masters, the sea is also unmastered by itself. Conrad tries to define the sea as unique and absolutely self-identical, like nothing else on earth. The vast solitude of waters become factors that affect or shape the destiny of his heroes. Nature highlights the characters' emotions and provides a sense of continuity of existence. In *The Mirror of the Sea* man lives close to nature, even in union with it. Reflections upon nature lead to bewailing the transience of things and to similar communications of the themes of freedom and death.

Ian Watt writes that "the ties which most obviously 'bind' mankind to the visible universe are really the shackles which the laws of the cosmos impose upon human aspiration, the iron conditions within which men must attempt to live."¹⁶ According to Watt Conrad's attitude to the visible world reflects the nineteenth-century's growing sense "of nature's unconsciousness but absolute tyranny over human affairs."¹⁷

12 John Peters, *Conrad and Impressionism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3.

13 *Ibidem*, 35.

14 *The Mirror of the Sea & A Personal Record*, 25.

15 *Ibidem*, 135–136.

16 Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 97.

17 *Ibidem*.

Paul Kirschner states that "Conrad presents the natural world as a blind struggle for survival, transformed, in human life, into an intelligent battle for supremacy."¹⁸ The nature being indifferent to men causes his isolation.

Conrad's treatment of nature suggests that he views it as a symbolic framework or a power. The vast solitude of waters become factors that affect or shape the destiny of Conrad's heroes. From his seafaring experience Conrad developed the notion of man's contest with the elements, either as an individual or in a group such as a ship's crew. Many of his works deal with this contest. The measure of man is shown in his struggle against the elements. It is a test which often brings self-knowledge, but which can also prove to be the undoing of the person thus tested. The greatest skill of Conrad the artist is manifested in those works where he combines magnificent descriptions of nature with a convincing portrayal of men and women in their strengths and weaknesses.

Such images of nature, indifferent to man, the magnitude of the world and the fragility of man, are present in Conrad's exposure of the sea's cynical indifference to man's courage and endurance in the essay "Initiation." The awakening to the sea's ability to cheat and defraud, the awareness of the extent of the sea's perfidy, comes eventually to all seamen. Conrad is echoing the wisdom that as enchanting, sight as it may be, the sea "has never been friendly to man."¹⁹ Conrad is sure that "He – man or people who, putting his trust in the friendship of the sea [...] is a fool!"²⁰ because "[I]mpenetrable and heartless, the sea has given nothing of itself to the suitors for its precarious favours"²¹ and "it plays with men till their hearts are broken, and wears stout ships to death."²² It "has lured so many to a violent death"²³ and nothing can touch "the brooding bitterness of its soul."²⁴ The sea "has no generosity."²⁵ It is indifferent to evil and good, it "would have betrayed the basest greed or the noblest heroism,"²⁶ but claims the veneration of every seaman:

18 Paul Kirschner, *Conrad: The Psychologist as Artist* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1968), 34.

19 *The Mirror of the Sea & A Personal Record*, 135.

20 *Ibidem*, 135.

21 *Ibidem*, 136.

22 *Ibidem*, 148.

23 *Ibidem*, 136.

24 *Ibidem*, 148.

25 *Ibidem*, 137.

26 *Ibidem*, 148.

Open to all and faithful to none, it exercises its fascination for the undoing of the best. To love it is not well. It knows no bond of plighted troth, no fidelity to misfortune, to long companionship, to long devotion. The promise it holds out perpetually is very great; but the only secret of its possession is strength, strength – the jealous, sleepless strength of a man guarding a coveted treasure within his gates.²⁷

It is interesting that the sea, for all its immensity or indifference to man's fate, for all the hard knocks it deals the sailor, can still be the place of romance. The terror, perfidy, and violence of the sea are a test of man's solidarity. It has a charm and "a sort of unholy fascination;"²⁸ it is the moral symbol of our life. Thus Conrad's attitude towards the sea appears to be ambiguous, running from hate to love, but existing, at most times, as a mixture of the two emotions as illustrated in the sketches about "The Nursery of the Craft" and "The 'Tremolino'" which show the sea as enchanting and attractive despite its cruelty toward the seamen. In "The Weight of the Burden" Conrad writes that he loved the sea, saying: "I have loved, lived with, and left the sea."²⁹ In "The 'Tremolino'" he asserts that he owes to the ship "the awakened love for the sea."³⁰

Although Conrad asserts that "unlike the earth" the sea "cannot be subjugated at any cost of patience and toil" and "its immensity has never been loved as the mountains, the plains, the desert itself, have been loved,"³¹ his love for the deceitful, changing and mysterious sea is ever present in his collection. For in whatever guise the sea appears – occasionally kind and harmless, often deceitful, usually indifferent and unfair, it appears most frequently in its cruelty. Despite the sea being unfair, *The Mirror of the Sea* shows a vision of a man attracted to the sea, viewing it as a testing ground. In coping with the sea which is incapable of faith and trust, the seaman must be committed to unrelenting vigilance, because the sea is unforgiving in punishing. The unwary fascination of the cruel sea consists in the challenge it poses to man's courage, fidelity and integrity. Man and nature are tied together, but Conrad tries to contrast the sea to the land, the seamen, and the ship – which seems to be the main protagonist of the book. The refrain running through "Initiation" asserts, "ships are all right." Against the cynical indifference of the sea, the ship

27 *Ibidem*.

28 Joseph Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters*, 185.

29 *The Mirror of the Sea & A Personal Record*, 44.

30 *Ibidem*, 157.

31 *Ibidem*, 136.

“makes appeal to a seaman by the faithfulness of her life.”³² The love that men give to ships is, Conrad asserts:

profoundly different from the love men feel for every other work of their hands – the love they bear to their houses, for instance – because it is untainted by the pride of possession. The pride of skill, the pride of responsibility, the pride of endurance there may be, but otherwise it is a disinterested sentiment.³³

It appears that all sailors feel an affinity and affection for all ships, and it is an affinity of the highest order. But for Conrad, the appeal of the sailing ship goes far beyond her inner grace and beauty. The ship is the sailor's most intimate friend and partner. Hence the “sensitive creatures”³⁴ remain in everlasting bondage with sailors, who “must treat with an understanding consideration the mysteries of her feminine nature”³⁵ because “[S]he has her rights as though she could breathe or speak.”³⁶ Conrad asserts that faithful ships will do anything for the right man. It seems that nature is animate in *The Mirror of the Sea* and Conrad focuses attention on the psychological joining of man and objects. Hence the ship has a “pulsating heart of steel”³⁷ “in her inner body.”³⁸ It can breathe “black smoke into the air.”³⁹ Similarly the cruel “black-browed and dark-eyed, grey-robed”⁴⁰ East Wind has a “black and merciless heart [...] manners of villainy, and no more conscience than an Italian prince of the seventeenth century.”⁴¹ The “diabolic ingenuity of the Easterly Weather”⁴² is opposed to “the kingly face of the Westerly Weather”⁴³ and the West Wind, which is like a poet seated upon a throne – “magnificent, simple, barbarous,

32 *Ibidem*, 130.

33 *Ibidem*, 136–137.

34 *Ibidem*, 29.

35 *Ibidem*, 56.

36 *Ibidem*.

37 *Ibidem*, 65.

38 *Ibidem*, 38.

39 *Ibidem*, 65.

40 *Ibidem*, 92.

41 *Ibidem*, 98.

42 *Ibidem*, 97.

43 *Ibidem*, 81.

pensive, generous, impulsive, changeable, unfathomable – but when you understand him, always the same.”⁴⁴

Another distinctly impressionist aspect of Conrad's narrative method concerns his approach to visual description. The relation of individual sense impressions to meaning is dealt with by giving direct narrative expression to the way in which the consciousness elicits meaning from its perceptions. One of the devices Conrad used was delayed decoding – a verbal equivalent of the impressionist painter's attempt to render visual sensation directly, a technique to present a sense of impression and to withhold explaining its meaning until later.⁴⁵ His insistence on making his readers hear, feel and see is evident throughout *The Mirror of the Sea*. Thus, the often excessive use of appositional phrases, no less than his “adjectival style” in descriptions of scenery, produces the result achieved by the painter with a bold stroke of his brush or chalk, often imbued with ironic connotation. It is obvious that the sea and the ocean have always been connected with infinity. Hence in *The Mirror* there “is infinite variety in the gales of wind at sea,”⁴⁶ the ocean looks “old, as if the immemorial ages had been stirred up from the undisturbed bottom of ooze,”⁴⁷ the sea has an “immense surface [...] as though it had been created before light itself,”⁴⁸ “the estuaries of great rivers have their fascination, the attractiveness of an open portal,”⁴⁹ a ship is free because there “is no restraint; there is space: clear water around her.”⁵⁰ Conrad stimulates the reader's visual sense saying: “You encompass the earth with one particular spot of it in your eye;”⁵¹ he also makes his reader “look upon the sea in a storm” if he wants to know the age of the earth.⁵² Conrad's emphasis on movement in *The Mirror of the Sea* also extends the reader's visual experience:

It was a hard, long gale, grey clouds and green sea, heavy weather undoubtedly, but still what a sailor would call manageable. Under two lower topsails and a reefed foresail the barque seemed to race with a long, steady

44 *Ibidem*, 82.

45 Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, 175–176.

46 *The Mirror of the Sea & A Personal Record*, 35.

47 *Ibidem*, 71.

48 *Ibidem*.

49 *Ibidem*, 101.

50 *Ibidem*, 116.

51 *Ibidem*, 4.

52 *Ibidem*, 71.

sea that did not becalm her in the troughs. The solemn thundering combers caught her up from astern, passed her with a fierce boiling up of foam level with the bulwarks, swept on ahead with a swish and a roar: and the little vessel, dipping her jib-boom into the tumbling froth, would go on running in a smooth, glassy hollow, a deep valley between two ridges of the sea, hiding the horizon ahead and astern.⁵³

The linguistic categories represented in this passage confirm Conrad's strong visual focus. He uses countless words and phrases with a visual connotation such as "glare," "star," "look," "glass-clear waves," "flashing seas." The impressionist function of these epithetic adjectives and adverbials – these separate fleeting impressions – seems to be to provide optional information. Translated into a painting metaphor, one could liken the function of these visual categories to touches of a painter's brush to heighten the colours, to intensify the effect, to make the reader "see."

Colour and light also play an important role in Conrad's landscape. The fluid and the changeable power of water, which in itself is colourless while its colours are only apparent (they are caused by some accidental, changeable elements), all of whose colours are always reflections and nothing else, is wonderfully suitable for experiments with light and colour in a way not dissimilar to the Impressionist painters' use of light and shade.

The range of colours and the play of light also enhance the visual appeal of *The Mirror of the Sea*. In most of his works Conrad selects a principal colour scheme, often a dramatic contrast between the dark and the light, or focuses our vision upon a dominant image. Thus, in his descriptions of scenery Conrad produces the effect achieved by a painter.

The structural colours in Conrad's book are black and white, grey, yellow, blue and gold. The sea is "one empty wilderness of black and white hills,"⁵⁴ there are "black squalls, white squalls"⁵⁵ and "white-crested waves,"⁵⁶ the "black-browed," "dark-eyed," "grey-robed"⁵⁷ East Wind has a "black and merciless heart,"⁵⁸ the "Westerly Wind clothed in a mantle of dazzling gold or draped in rags of black clouds,"⁵⁹ a ship has a "coal black

53 *Ibidem*, 75.

54 *Ibidem*, 60.

55 *Ibidem*, 79.

56 *Ibidem*, 61.

57 *Ibidem*, 92.

58 *Ibidem*, 98.

59 *Ibidem*, 81.

shape upon the gloomy blueness of the air,"⁶⁰ there are "grey clouds,"⁶¹ "grey curtains of mist,"⁶² and an "olive hue of hurricane clouds presents an aspect peculiarly appalling,"⁶³ and "low grey sky, as if the world were a dungeon,"⁶⁴ the seamen in "oilskin coats."⁶⁵ There are also "flashing seas"⁶⁶ and "showers of crystals and pearls."⁶⁷

The use of descriptive passages have a dual function: they can either be a mere pictorial description of a scene or of natural phenomena used to foreground the sense of beauty or corruption and provide a special dimension to action, or they can be a brooding spirit filling the whole nervous energy of the story, conceptualised in metaphorical terms to describe persons or situations in visual terms.

In *The Mirror* there are frequent descriptions of the ship as it would have appeared to a distant observer – pictures of the sea as it appeared from the ship, of particular parts of the ship as seen from other parts on board, and of land as it appears from sight. We also have vignettes of the characters in thought about themselves, of the men as they appeared to the officers and vice-versa. Conrad's attempt to portray the characters and settings from the outside as well as from the inside: the "outside" pictures reinforce and complement the "inside" pictures by adding more colour or shading the picture. Conrad's is a dynamic painting that keeps growing and changing almost supernaturally. With each scene, each narrative point of view, a significant detail is added to the layer of colour upon the surface. These little additions, at first hardly noticeable, to the initial visual impression of the protagonist finally determine both his outward appearance and his inner essence.

The evocation and description of atmosphere also has a narrative function. The alteration between descriptive passages with a brooding or retrospective nature force the reader – in the words of Henry James – to create "stopping places" in the novella which foreground the preceding action, thereby necessitating a more "objective" examination and evaluation of the preceding action.

60 *Ibidem*, 78.

61 *Ibidem*, 75.

62 *Ibidem*, 97.

63 *Ibidem*, 79.

64 *Ibidem*.

65 *Ibidem*, 86.

66 *Ibidem*, 78.

67 *Ibidem*, 86.

Conrad uses nature as a pretext for the expression of ethical values – mainly work, fidelity, honour, solidarity and a search for the meaning of existence. His presentation of the intimate contact between the sea and the seamen for whom the sea is always a means of earning a livelihood, and the relationship of the sailor individually to the sea provided a test of character, skill and solidarity. This exercise led to harsh, even fatal consequences in the event of failure through loss of nerve or inefficiency. Conrad's view is entirely secular, and he does not perceive nature's creative energy and the universe through a presence of divinity. Nature reflects and enhances the mental and moral character of the heroes and is, moreover, a direct deteriorating agent. Conrad's fiction reveals a fascination with the individual, tested to the limits of his endurance, called upon to proclaim his moral toughness. For this, the sea offers the perfect antagonist, and, in the sailors' battle for existence against arbitrary natural forces, we find one of the definite images of the modern condition. The writer repeatedly demonstrates that, however anthropomorphically presented, the sea is indifferent to the men who sail on her in a "close dependence upon the very forces that, friendly to-day, without changing their nature, by the mere putting forth of their might, become dangerous to-morrow."⁶⁸ Their shared predicament encourages and demands the fellowship of the craft between sailors dependent upon each other, a fellowship that is tested through the obligations and responsibilities of the sea life.

The above examples show that in his figurative language, in his treatment of nature being indifferent to man, in his depiction of the sympathetic relations of figures to landscape, visual impressions to fragmentary glimpses of objects, people, forms and movements Conrad expressed his love for the natural world. The two principles organising the composition of *The Mirror of the Sea*: the thematic and the compositional, which can be perceived as a tension between an open and closed composition, between the emotive and denotative functions, the strong reliance on sensory images – especially those of colour and sound, visual impressions, lyricism and idealization; and from the philosophical view, as the balance between the concepts of Nature and Man; is an opposition present so evidently in Conrad's book. Conrad in a clearly realistic and impressionistic manner constituted his universe – space, motion, atmosphere and mystery. As could be noted especially in its visual aspects which carry ontological as well as epistemological implications, many of the characteristics of modernism are explicitly impressionistic in form.

68 *Ibidem*, 71–72.

In this respect Conrad can be regarded as a modern writer. Morally, psychologically artistically and philosophically he can be a probing and challenging writer, who, like many great writers, was influenced by and responded to the ideas and ideals of his day as well as his literary predecessors. Since he began writing under the influence of the nineteenth-century realists, but at a period which is regarded as the first stage of Modernism, and possessed a multi-cultural literary heritage, realist and modernist elements are merged in his fiction. As some of the strains in the nineteenth-century realism, such as the importance of individual responsibility, scepticism, a strong sense of doom, continued into the modernist sensibility; it was almost inevitable for a novelist writing in that period to combine the features of both movements. But Conrad opposed many aspects of modernity. His strong reliance on values such as solidarity, authority and order is in conflict with the modern forms which reflect individuality and the belief that only consciousness can give meaning to the world. What is essentially modernist in Conrad's fiction is his narrative technique, the use of different concepts of time, emphasis on subjectivity and the inner world of the individual and rejection of absolutes. He rejected the absolute world of realism and insisted upon the relative world of impressionism with individual experience and human subjectivity at its core. It is Conrad's skeptical refusal to accede to any unchangeable truth of things that places him in the Modernist tradition and distinguishes him from most of his nineteenth-century predecessors.

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