

## IMPRESSIONISM IN ART AND LITERATURE

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### Abstract

*The origin of pictorial Impressionism in the 1870s in France marks a significant change from earlier conventional realism. The Impressionist artists laid great stress on the act of seeing, and the process of conception within the artist's mind became the focus of interest. The emphasis shifted from the objective world outside to a subjective vision, for to the Impressionists each individual has his own particular point of view to look at things. These features of pictorial Impressionism led to the development of literary Impressionism at the turn of the century. There are some specific features that characterise literary Impressionism and which link it to pictorial Impressionism such as achronology, limited point of view, multiple narrators, pictorial descriptions of shifting light and colour, subjective accounts of sensuous experience and conveying of immediate and fleeting feelings. In Impressionist writing the importance of the visual motif, mainly that of fog and mist, is foregrounded, linking closely pictorial and literary Impressionism. This essay tries to find out how Impressionism adds a new dimension to Modernism with its stress on individualism and distinctiveness of each person, and continues to be relevant to this day.*

Impressionism is a concept that is common to both art and literature, and is relevant even now. The origin of Impressionism can be traced back to the French art movement of the same name that began in the late nineteenth century. Historically the rise of Impressionism can be related with certain assumptions of philosophic empiricism, namely with the belief that a person never directly perceives any article but only discrete sense stimuli out of which afterwards the images of material things are constructed by the human mind. Impressionism implies a complete break from earlier conventional realism which accepted a relatively unproblematic and straightforward contact between the human mind and the external world

and its representation thereafter. The term Impressionism signified a new trend in nineteenth century French art, and also a new stage in the development of European painting. It marked the end of the neo-classical period that had begun during the Renaissance and had continued right until the eighteenth century and which was realistic in nature. The Impressionist painters refused to limit themselves by what they regarded as trivial details of the external world in terms of accurate depictions of realities and in the treatment of details. Impressionist art as well as Impressionist literature was concerned with the momentary and transient, rather than with reflections of the past. A concentration on the present, or the ways by which the past became a part of the present through the juxtaposition of the two, was a key element of Impressionism's modernity and its appeal for writers and artists. The Impressionists did not completely break with the theories of Leonardo da Vinci and the rules according to which all European academies had conceived their paintings for over three centuries since the Renaissance. But they were hesitant to always base a painting on a story or a narrative, and questioned the link of painting with historical and mythical subjects. Impressionist painting is a re-assessment of traditional perception of things, just as literary Impressionism is a re-evaluation of conventional narration. The Impressionists made subtle and fleeting moments the basis of their art, accepting that sight and sensation were, of necessity, fleeting and ephemeral. Nathalia Brodskaja says, "[N]ature was exactly what interested them most. . . . All of them preferred living nature . . . Now, instead of a model skilfully placed upon a pedestal, they had nature before them and the infinite variations of the shimmering foliage of trees constantly changing colour in the sunlight" (Brodskaja 9-11). The main subject of the Impressionist painters was landscape as it was a genre that appealed solely to accuracy of observation, rather than to the imagination. According to Ian Watt, "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" (Watt 170). In the year 1874, these young painters organised their own society which they named the "Anonymous Society of Artist, Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers" and decided to sponsor their own exhibition, because they had all been repeatedly rebuffed by the established Salon for their radical technique. For this exhibition, Monet painted scenes of his childhood hometown of Le Havre, eventually selecting his best Havre landscapes for display. Among these Havre landscapes there was a canvas painted in the early morning depicting a blue fog that seemed to transform the shapes of yachts into ghostly apparitions. The painting also depicted smaller boats gliding over the water in black silhouette, and above the horizon the flat, orange disk of the sun was painted, its first rays casting an orange path across the sea. It was more like a rapid study than a painting, a spontaneous sketch done in oils. Monet had initially given this painting the title "View of Le Havre", but it seemed inappropriate as Le Havre could not be seen anywhere. So he renamed it *Impression: Soliel Levant* or "Impression: Sunrise". Interestingly, this painting provided the movement with its name. The first Impressionist exhibition in which thirty

artists including Claude Monet, Paul Cézanne, Edgar Degas, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro, Alfred Sisley and Berthe Morisot participated with one hundred and sixty five paintings was held from April 15 to May 15, 1874. The reviews were mostly unfavourable, mainly aimed at Monet, Cézanne and others who used bright, freely employed colours. One art critic Louis Leroy ironically termed this mode of painting *Impressioniste* in his review in the *Charivari* dated April 25, 1874 using the title of Monet's painting, "Impression: Sunrise". Leroy called his article, "The Exhibition of the Impressionists". Jesse Matz observes:

When Louis Leroy coined the term in his satirical review of Monet's *Impression: Soleil Levant* (1872), he knew it would sound absurd. "Impression" would connote transient, insubstantial, passive sensation; "ism" would imply some systematic, doctrinal, activist idea; the compound would make no sense, and its meaninglessness would neatly publicize Monet's defects. (Matz 12)

Soon the painters themselves adopted the tag "Impressionism" to label their artistic vision which was about the importance of seizing the motif and of concentrating completely on the act of seeing. One of the chief after-effects of Impressionism was that it drew attention to the paint surface, the process of perception and execution, and to the artist's and viewer's subjectivity, as much as to the objects painted. The group's second exhibition was held in April 1876 in which nineteen artists including Monet, Degas, Sisley, Renoir, Pissarro, Morisot and Caillebotte participated. This time also the artists drew harsh criticisms with accusations that they were threatening the established artistic modes and values. There were a total of eight exhibitions of the Impressionists, the last being in 1886.

French Impressionism has been seen as a reaction to the philosophical tradition of Descartes who taught us to doubt the evidence of our senses. However the word "Impressionism" in English was not related to Descartes, it had first been applied to English thought much before French Impressionism even began by John Rogers in 1839 about Hume's philosophy, and critics such as Ian Watt have ascribed Conrad's stress on the sense impressions on the influence of Hume's emphasis on the priority of feeling (Watt 168-80). Hume tried to understand how to proceed from sense impressions to certain knowledge, and concluded that man's pursuit of certainty will never be satisfied, but a close approximation can be achieved only through sense impressions. His *Treatise of Human Nature* starts with the sentence: "All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call *IMPRESSIONS* and *IDEAS*" (Hume 1). He argued that impressions are the generative force behind all knowledge. According to the Oxford Dictionary the root word of "Impression", "premere", means "press" in the physical sense, but the meaning changed subsequently to a more psychological one—"the effect produced by external force or influence on the sense or the mind". Later the definition adds the clause, "especially in modern use a vague or indistinct survival from a more distinct knowledge". In the late eighteenth century this withdrawal into the private individual perception resulted in the

Romantic Movement. Walter Pater was greatly influenced by Hume's theory of the way impressions lead to the formation of ideas. In his Conclusion to *The Renaissance* Pater writes that it is the individual temperament that replaces abstract conceptions of beauty with the help of impression, with the result that beauty becomes relative and subjective because of individual aesthetic judgment. Eloise Knapp Hay feels that Pater was influenced more by the seventeenth century empiricism of David Hume than by Descartes (Hay 142). Pater adopted Hume's theory in his writings and named it "impressionism". In his essay 'Coleridge's Writings' (1866), Pater had argued for the primacy of the "relative" rather than "absolute" spirit, that is a subjectivity of impressions rather than a fixed impression, remarking that "[t]o the modern spirit nothing is, or can be rightly known, except relatively and under conditions" (Pater 2). This association of modernity with relativity of perception would be a cornerstone of his philosophy. In adopting the tenets of Impressionism, Conrad and Ford were influenced by this older English tradition of Hume that ran through Pater as well as the newer French art movement.

Literary Impressionism owes its origin and its name to pictorial Impressionism. As in the case of French Impressionism, the term was very quickly extended to methods of writing which were supposed to share the qualities attributed to the painters, to works that were spur-of-the-moment and rapidly done, that were vivid sketches rather than finished products. As Impressionist literature originated from Impressionist painting, the two of them share some basic characteristics. Peter Childs discusses how the features of Impressionist painting came to influence the style of Conrad and Ford as Impressionist authors:

I will consider . . . how writers adopted the techniques of painters to literary ends, but might briefly mention here what Impressionist writing meant to Conrad and Ford: in brief, it can best be described as a method for accumulating impressions, a technique Ford called 'progression', in which the novel's incidents and even paragraphs follow a similar pattern whereby a series of connected elements reaches a culmination in terms of the development of the narrative. For example, a paragraph might contain a list of traits associated with the characters or a cumulative series of instances of their behaviour before ending with a statement that underlines their significance, like 'that's the way it was with us', in one example from *The Good Soldier*. (Childs, *Modernism* 77-78)

The Impressionism of painting and literature are both interested in subjectivity of perception. The shift of interest in both painting and literature from object to subject, with the emphasis on point of view, seems to have resulted in attention to momentary effects. John G. Peters says in this context that "pictorial shifting of light and color, subjective accounts of sensuous experience, transmission of immediate and evanescent feelings—these are literary Impressionism's specialities." He further adds, "Impressionism was in literature what it was in painting—representation of intense and evanescent visual effects with emphasis on the ways that color and light subjectively appear" (Peters 3, 15). Plot lost its importance to the

Impressionist painter and writer who gave more weight to freedom and informality to give the impression of actual lived reality. Monet is the most significant artist in this context. In 1891, Monet exhibited his famous series of haystacks which contained fifteen views of two haystacks seen at different times of the day, and he tried to show through this series of studies the infinite variety of colour that different shades of light could produce at different hours of the day. He chose haystacks because they could be drawn as simply swathes of colour with no intricate details: something seemingly plain that should traditionally have little interest for art, but through effects of different angles of sunlight would show innumerable shades of colour. Monet's series of Rouen Cathedral is also similar in treatment because he paints the cathedral simply as a mass of colours and not as a holy site or an intricate piece of architecture. Both these series demonstrate how remarkably the same object changes its appearance according to differing atmospheric condition and the positioning of the perceiving eye. This play of light and shade seen at a particular moment of time deeply influenced the Impressionist authors. As Ford recollects in his *Thus to Revisit: Some Reminiscences*, "During all those years—for many years that seemed to pass very slowly—Mr Conrad and I, ostensibly collaborating, discussed nothing else. Buried deep in rural greenness we used to ask each other how, exactly, such and such an effect of light and shade should be reproduced in very simple words" (Ford, *Thus to Revisit* 39). Monet and Seurat frequently used mist or halo in their paintings. This also left a deep impact on the Impressionist writers. Conrad shows this influence when he writes in *Heart of Darkness*: "to [Marlow] the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of those misty halos that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine" (Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 6). Conrad's novels in particular frequently use the motifs of fog and mist to indicate confusion between appearance and reality. Since Monet often painted out in the middle of the river, the viewer is situated inside the landscape in these paintings just as the Conradian narrator Marlow is situated at the centre of the tales he is narrating. In another of his famous series, Monet depicts the railway bridge at Argenteuil several times but from different angles just as in Conrad and Ford an incident is often seen from multiple angles and points of view.

Unlike Ford who was an announced Impressionist, the attitudes of both Henry James and Conrad underwent changes regarding Impressionism over a period of time. Henry James had anticipated Conrad's later reactions to Impressionist painting when he had reviewed the second Impressionist exhibition in the *New York Tribune* commenting that "the effect was to make me think better than ever of all the good rules which decree that beauty is beauty and ugliness ugliness." James further said that the Impressionists "are partisans of unadorned reality and absolute foes to arrangement, embellishment, selection." He feels that "the painter's proper field is simply the actual, and to give a vivid impression of how a thing happens to look, at a particular moment, is the essence of his mission." James thus found



Impressionist painting unattractive and even technically unsound. He concluded that the “‘Impressionist’ doctrine strikes me as incompatible, in the artist’s mind, with the existence of first-rate talent” (James, Henry. “The Impressionists.” Sweeney 114-15). But a few years later, in ‘The Art of Fiction’, James changed his view and wrote that “a novel is in its broadest definition [is] a personal impression of life; that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression.” James also says, “If experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions *are* experience” (Basant and James 60-61, 66). In the 1890s, Conrad too had felt a deep dislike on first seeing Impressionist paintings. Eloise Knapp Hay classifies Conrad’s attitude to Impressionism in three distinct phases:

If we put together all that Conrad said about impressionism, we see three fairly distinct phases in his attitude [to Impressionism]; the first in his disgust at a collection of impressionist paintings in 1891; the second when he met Crane and gave qualified praise to his art in 1897, soon afterwards writing his Preface to *The Nigger*; and the third at the end of his life when he curiously reversed himself—after years of denigrating the movement—and began to aim for the same effects that he had earlier questioned. (Hay 138)

The first stage of Conrad’s attitude to Impressionism can be seen when he first encountered the works of the Impressionist painters in the apartment of his “aunt” Marguerite Poradowska in Paris in the early 1890s. He felt revulsion at these paintings and wrote to his aunt after returning to London, “It [the apartment] is too nightmarish with that collection of paintings by the School of Charenton [Madmen].” But though initially unimpressed by Impressionist painting, Conrad subsequently moved from his early rejection of the movement. Hence in a letter to E. L. Sanderson written on 17<sup>th</sup> October 1897 we find Conrad saying that he himself is an “impressionist from instinct”. Conrad by now had shifted from a position of despising the Impressionist movement to that of qualified appreciation, regarding it as appealing though superficial. Later that year after the publication of *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*, Conrad wrote a letter to Stephen Crane on December 1, 1897, praising him highly, “You are a complete impressionist. The illusions of life come out of your hand without a flaw.” He was more ambivalent on Crane when he wrote in a letter on 5<sup>th</sup> Dec 1897 to Edward Garnett on the theme of Crane’s Impressionism in the story ‘The Open Boat’: “His eye is very individual and his expression satisfies me artistically. He certainly is *the* impressionist and his temperament is curiously unique . . . He is *the only* impressionist and *only* an impressionist. . . . I could not explain why he disappoints me—why my enthusiasm withers as soon as I close the book” (Conrad, *CL* 1: 398, 415, 416). This lack of enthusiasm of Conrad for Crane’s brand of Impressionism might be for its supposed lack of in-depth analysis and the probing of human psyche. Unlike the Impressionists such as Crane, Conrad lays stress on analysis, which was similar to what the post-impressionists like Gauguin sought. By 1919, we find that Conrad had become more enamoured of Impressionism. Conrad now says that Crane “had a

wonderful power of vision . . . that seemed to reach, within life's appearances and forms, the very spirit of life's truth." He contradicts his own previous opinion that Crane provides a superficial, though appealing, view of life: "His impressionism of phrase went really deeper than the surface" (Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters* 50). The reason behind this might be that while writing his last complete novel *The Rover*, Conrad was trying to be Impressionistic in his technique, he was trying to be objective and brief instead of trying to search for deeper meanings, and this effort continued in his unfinished novel *Suspense*. This change of position might be due to his distaste for Freud and psychoanalytic criticism that was becoming popular around him. According to Eloise Knapp Hay, "Lenormand . . . had presented to Conrad (along with a volume of Freud's writings) a Freudian interpretation of *Almayer's Folly* and *Lord Jim*. It was in rejecting these that Conrad said he was 'only a story-teller,' not an analyst" (Hay 143). Now at last Conrad was ready to acknowledge Impressionism as having been a worthy part of the Modernist movement as a reaction against the newer schools of psychoanalytic criticism. However, as late as in 1918, Conrad was still claiming a Symbolist position as well for himself, for unlike Ford he did not claim a steady ideological position for himself artistically. In a letter to Barrett H. Clark written on May 4, 1918, Conrad says:

My attitude to subjects and expressions, the angles of vision, my methods of composition will, within limits, be always changing—not because I am unstable or unprincipled but because I am free. . . . A work of art is seldom limited to one exclusive meaning and not necessarily tending to a definite conclusion. And this for the reason that the nearer it approaches art, the more it acquires a symbolic character. (Conrad, *CL* 2: 418)

The major phase of literary Impressionism in England lasted approximately from 1895 to 1925 and the term "Impressionism" is almost universally attached to authors such as Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Stephen Crane and Ford Madox Ford. They all lived in close proximity in either east Sussex or west Kent for a certain period of time and tried to introduce continental techniques as well as an element of self-conscious artistry in the art of English fiction. Ford lived at Bonnington near Ashford from 1894, and later at nearby Aldington and then at Winchelsea; and Conrad stayed at Pent Farm near Hythe, which he rented from Ford from about 1898, having been introduced to him by their mutual friend the critic and literary editor Edward Garnett, with whom they all discussed fictional techniques. James lived at Lamb House, Rye, from 1898 and in the following year they were joined by Stephen Crane, also introduced to them by Garnett, who moved to Brede Place, Northiam, near Rye. Crane, like James, was an American expatriate, Conrad was of Polish origin, and Ford, though born in England, was the son of a German emigrant, and known until after the First World War as Ford Madox Hueffer. This common thread of foreignness formed a bond between them, though Ford at times tried to proclaim his thoroughbred Englishness due to his mother being the daughter of the Pre-Raphaelite painter Ford Madox Brown. Though apart from Ford none

of them described themselves as Impressionists, they all gave a privileged place to “impression” in their criticism as well as their fiction. In his comparative study of literary Impressionism in the writings of Jean Rhys, Ford Madox Ford, Joseph Conrad, and Charlotte Bronte, Todd Bender discusses the influence of French pictorial Impressionism on Ford’s and Conrad’s aesthetics, especially regarding the object of representation. According to Todd Bender, the Impressionist painter’s attempt to capture the act of perception of the world by a given consciousness is echoed in Ford’s literary theory. Ford’s view of literary history in *The March of Literature* revolves around the shift from a direct, “realist” representation of the world to the representation of the impression left by the world on a particular consciousness. Bender says that the Impressionist novelist renders the process through which the characters as well as the readers of the Impressionist novel apprehend the world “in growing concentric circles of understanding” (Bender 6). Unlike Ford who wrote extensively on Impressionism, Conrad did not write anything expressively connected with it. However, Conrad’s Preface to *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* (1897) has been read as a manifesto for Impressionism in fiction, and was often echoed by Ford in his later criticism, especially the famous claim made by Conrad in the Preface: “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see*” (Conrad, *Typhoon* 3, 5). Ford used this as the heading of Part III of *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* which has the title “IT IS ABOVE ALL TO MAKE YOU SEE . . . .” The isolated moment of visual perception is given the most important place in the overall narrative scheme by Conrad. The “see” here, however, does not mean just the visual act of seeing; it also involves the faculty of imagination. So “see” here further connotes both the sense perception as well as the process of realisation. A visual sensation here is transformed into impression by a form of visual perception. This in turn is transformed into a kind of creative thought process, shared by the author and the reader alike. Conrad does not discuss Impressionism directly in the Preface, but removing art from any supporting context he argues that art’s “appeal, to be effective, must be an impression conveyed through the senses” and that “[i]t must strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting and to the magic suggestiveness of music” (Conrad, *Typhoon* 5). A few years later in a letter written on May 31, 1902 to William Blackwood, Conrad laid stress on the sense impressions as being the only medium that can apprehend truth in the modernist art: “I am *modern*. . . . My work shall not be an utter failure because it has the solid basis of a definite intention . . . —action observed, felt and interpreted with an absolute truth to my sensations (which are the basis of art in literature)—action of human beings that will bleed to a prick, and are moving in a visible world” (Conrad, *CL* 2: 418). However the Impressionism as discussed in the Preface is not just restricted to the eye; the Preface tells us that the artist has to bring the whole of his sensory organs and his moral and philosophical outlooks into play in order to achieve the difficult business of communicating his private and inward perception of truth:



To snatch in a moment of courage, from the remorseless rush of time, a passing phase of life, is only the beginning of the task. The task approached in tenderness and faith is to hold up unquestioningly, without choice and without fear, the rescued fragment before all eyes in the light of a sincere mood. It is to show its vibration, its colour, its form, and through its movement, its form, and its colour, reveal the substance of its truth—disclose its inspiring secret; the stress and passion within the core of each convincing moment. (Conrad, *Typhoon* 6)

This concentration on the moment is an Impressionist feature, common to both painting and literature.

Unlike Conrad, Ford publicly announced his Impressionist credentials and associated Conrad as well with the movement. In the Preface to his 1924 biography of Conrad, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance*, Ford writes that Conrad “avowed himself impressionist” (Ford, *JCAPR* 6), and goes on to describe how the two of them worked out a new fictional technique which was more lifelike than others because through such devices as time-shift and multiple perspectives it more closely imitated the way our knowledge of others is built up in a confusing and often non-chronological way. Ford believes that the “general effect of a novel must be the general effect that life makes on mankind”. At the same time the novelist must “keep the reader entirely oblivious of the fact that the author exists—even of the fact that he is reading a book” (Ford, *JCAPR* 180, 186). This requires the use of multiple points of view instead of the all-knowing omniscient narrator substituting for the author. By means of the Impressionist technique, Ford says that the Impressionist author can give a sense of multiple impressions, he can “give a sense of two, or three, of as many as you will, places, persons, emotions, all going on simultaneously in the emotions of the writer.” Ford continues:

Indeed, I suppose, that Impressionism exists to render those queer effects of real life that are like so many views seen through bright glass—through glass so bright that whilst you perceive through it a landscape or a backyard, you are aware that, on its surface, it reflects a face of a person behind you. For the whole of life is really like that; we are almost always in one place with our minds somewhere quite other. (Ford, *Critical Writings* 40-41)

According to Todd Bender, when Ford asserts that a novel should not narrate but “render impressions”, he means that the novel “must proceed by associative indirection, locked in the limitations of a central intelligence whose struggle for understanding is the main concern to the reader” (Bender 46). This shifts the interest of the narrative from the story being told to the protagonist whose emerging consciousness assumes greater importance in the narrative. Impressionism for Ford is a “frank expression of personality” for it deals not with facts but with a personal, individualised point of view, that is with a radical subjectivism. The justification of the artistic method for Ford as well as the measure of its success “will be just the measure of its suitability for rendering the personality of the artist” because personality is the “chief thing in a work of art.” To Ford, Impressionism means “showing you the broken

tools and bits of oily rag which form my brains” and in doing so he claims to present “the sort of odd vibration that scenes in real life really have.” In ‘On Impressionism’ Ford says that on the one hand the Impressionist author is careful not to let “his personality appear” in his work, but the “whole book, his whole poem is merely an expression of his personality” (Ford, *Poetry and Drama* II: 169, 174, 323). Conrad similarly stresses the role of personality or consciousness, for only a registering consciousness “endows passing events with their true meaning” (Conrad, *Typhoon* 5). Here is thus a contradiction between keeping the artist hidden and at the same time the work being an expression of her/his personality. Conrad and Ford both have to reconcile this apparent contradiction in their writings. Michael Levenson argues:

These two aims—the registering of fact and the recording of consciousness, *physis* and *psyche*—have invited contradictory interpretations of Impressionism; it has been characterized as both a precise rendering of objects and an unrepentant subjectivizing. The struggle between them is submerged, though revealing, in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”* but in Conrad’s work over the next several years—and principally through the introduction of Marlow—it will become conspicuous. . . . [T]he *agon* of modernism has already begun to emerge: its ideological crisis, the struggle between its values and its forms, the instability in the forms themselves. (Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism* 36)

Conrad attempts to solve the apparent contradiction with the introduction of Marlow as the narrator-agent and as a sort of stabilising figure in the narrative in four of his tales—*Youth*, *Lord Jim*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *Chance*. But by the time we read *Chance* Marlow himself has become an unreliable narrator thus further destabilising the narrative. Ford, on the other hand, never uses any such central intelligence. The result is a growing instability of the form, a characteristic feature of Modernism.

Although literary Impressionism was never a school like French naturalism, as only Ford announced himself an Impressionist, we can find several features or characteristics that link it to pictorial Impressionism. These include the use of limited first person point of view and multiple perspectives, the disruption of conventional chronology, the foregrounding of sense impressions, particularly visual impressions, in the narrative, and the frequent use of fog and mist, a feature borrowed from visual Impressionism. Both Impressionist painting and literature shift the interest from the subject to the object, with an emphasis on point of view. The freedom from conventional plot construction and the importance given to sense impressions enable the artist to move closer to the actual lived experience.

A major feature of literary Impressionism which links it to pictorial Impressionism is the use of limited first person point of view, as well as the use of multiple points of view by the authors, replacing the conventional device of authorial omniscience. The Impressionist novelist uses the device of multiple narrators to demonstrate the relativity of impressions for each of these narrators has a limited awareness. This is a feature of Conrad’s technique in

novels such as *Lord Jim* and *Chance* as also in other Impressionist works. The technique of multiple narrators enables the novelist to present a number of limited points of view which see the same event from different angles, thus demonstrating the relativity of perspective and the fact that there is no absolute view possible of any single event. The inclusion of different narrators and points of view demonstrates the impossibility of arriving at a definitive conclusion given the uncertainties of subjective, individual views of these characters and the discrepancies which appear between these different points of view. Some of these narrators do not offer reliable commentary on the events unravelling on the page, rather they share their unreliability, their tendency to receive and remember impressions each in his own way. So it makes us conscious of the multiplicity of perspectives, as different subjectivities reinvent impressions in their own image. That's why Ford stresses the multiple, overlaid, fluid and variable qualities of impression.

A characteristic feature of Conrad's Impressionist technique, though not of Ford's to that extent, is the use of the technique of what Ian Watt calls "delayed decoding". Ian Watt says that by introducing this technique, Conrad "had developed one narrative technique which was the verbal equivalent of the impressionist painter's attempt to render visual sensation directly" (Watt 176). In the following passage Ian Watt discusses how the technique of delayed decoding links pictorial and literary Impressionism together:

Literary impressionism implies a field of vision which is not merely limited to the individual observer, but is also controlled by whatever conditions—internal and external—prevail at the moment of observation. In narration the main equivalents to atmospheric interference in painting are the various factors which normally distort human perception, or which delay its recognition of what is most relevant and important. (Watt 178)

As the Impressionist painters use the individual's perception of a momentary impression on their canvas, the Impressionist writers use the limited first person point of view with its uniqueness and preconceived notions, representing both the physical limitations of human perception as well as the process of conception within the human consciousness. This sometimes leads to instances of "delayed decoding" which "combines the forward temporal movement of the mind, as it receives messages from the outside world, with the much slower reflexive process of making out their meaning." The author tends "to present a sense impression and to withhold naming it or explaining its meaning until later; as readers we witness every step by which the gap between the individual perception and its cause is belatedly closed within the consciousness of the protagonist" (Watt 175). Eventually the raw data of chaotic sense impressions are resolved into a coherent meaning by both the character and the reader whereby the meaning is not forced on it but has to be discovered within it. The reader is placed at the same epistemological level as the character who is initially baffled. The reader too becomes a receiver of temporally fragmented sense impressions rather than a chronologically organized narration leading to a sense of defamiliarization of familiar

objects. An example of delayed decoding can be found in Conrad's description in *Heart of Darkness* of Marlow's confusion when his boat is attacked just beyond Kurtz's station. Marlow does not initially realise the cause of the various odd changes around him. He thinks that sticks are being thrown around him, "Sticks, little sticks, were flying about—thick: they were whizzing before my nose, dropping below me, striking behind me against my pilot-house." Only later does he realise that they are being shot at with arrows, "Arrows, by Jove! We were being shot at!" (Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 62) He also realises at a later moment that the helmsman of his boat has been killed by one such arrow.

An important characteristic of literary Impressionism is the importance of the visual motif, mainly that of fog and mist. In France, Impressionism in literature dates simultaneously with Impressionism in visual arts in authors such as Maupassant, and arguably even preceded it, notably in Baudelaire's influential *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863), which anticipated the programme of the Impressionist artists who began their group exhibitions in 1874. Discussions of literary Impressionism from Ferdinand Brunetiere onwards were inspired by the ideas of the Impressionist painters such as Claude Monet and Edgar Degas who were interested not in the external notion of objective reality but in the actual physical appearance of a scene to the perceiving eye at a particular point of time. In his Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1897) Conrad had described his intention as "by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see*." This stress on immediate physical sensation rather than authorial explanation of a scene paralleled Monet's indistinct outlines of his paintings, which was criticised by the majority of the critics. Monet replied to this criticism in a dismissal of traditional realism, "Poor blind idiots. They want to see everything clearly, even through the fog". Fog and haze in Monet, as later in Conrad and Ford, do not signify an accidental atmospheric obstruction which stands between the viewer and the object, rather the obscurity is a part of the whole scene the artist is trying to convey. Monet's later paintings of the Thames and the British Parliament, begun on a balcony of the Savoy Hotel in the winter of 1899, completed from memory in his studio, and first exhibited between 1902 and 1904, are now regarded as some of the vital images of early twentieth century London. The omnipresence of fog in these paintings is almost like a symbol of London. Buildings appear through fogs of violet, yellow, and green, a testimony not only to Monet's chromatic vision and artistic innovation, but also to the extraordinary atmospheric conditions of contemporary London. These paintings frequently involve difficulties of perception, such as Monet's series of paintings of a cathedral at Rouen seen through the mist (1894) or a haystack disappearing in the fading light (1891). Similarly in Impressionist writing external description is often sacrificed for the immediacy of confusing perceptions. These images of haze, mist and fog and the overlapping of light and shadow link Impressionist painting and literature together. A cartoon in the *Punch* in December 1886, "The Winter Art Exhibitions", satirised this tendency when it showed a fog-bound art gallery

where critics were peering at an art object they could barely see. In literature, in the works of both Conrad and Ford, fog and mist are used in this Impressionist sense as a blurring of objective reality. It is associated with subjectively received impressions, of blurring of clarity. For both the Impressionist painter and the writer the fog and the mist are not an atmospheric obstruction between the viewer/reader and a clear sense of the artist's 'real' subject: the conditions under which the viewing is done are an integral part of what the pictorial or the literary artist observes and therefore tries to convey.

Another centre of focus of Impressionist literature as for Impressionist art was the modern metropolis. For the imperialists, London stood for British power, wealth, and ingenuity, but for others it encapsulated the vicious and depraved aspects of city life and, more disturbingly, human nature. It was the literal centre of the world through the founding of the Greenwich Meridian in 1884, and the symbolic centre of it through being the heart of the British Empire. This vast city offered raw material for Impressionist artists as it did to Modernists. Arnold Hauser thinks that Impressionism is primarily a by-product of modern urbanism, and the artistic experiment with the city goes back to Manet rather than Monet. He writes:

At first sight, it may seem surprising that the metropolis, with its herding together and intermingling of people, should produce this intimate art rooted in the feeling of individual singularity and solitude. But it is a familiar fact that nothing seems so isolating as the close proximity of too many people, and nowhere does one feel so lonely and forsaken as in a great crowd of strangers. (Hauser 165-66)

While Ford was writing *The Soul of London*, Claude Monet was finishing the series of London pictures he had begun on the fifth floor of the Savoy Hotel early in 1901. These paintings appeared between 1902 and 1904, and now seem central to the modernist era. Monet's paintings treat complex subjects of time, space and memory and do not offer the objectivity of realist art. Impressionist London, as depicted in Monet's scenes of fog on the Thames and in Whistler's famous paintings of Thames in *Nocturnes*, influenced the portrayal of London by Ford and Conrad. Similar urban landscape is found in Ford's *Soul of London*. Impressionism has been viewed as a response to the rapid urbanisation at the turn of the century which tended to suppress individualism. The vastness of the city led to the anonymity of existence. As opposed to this, Impressionism stressed the individuality of each observer. Either way, the city occupies an important place in the Impressionist narrative. Both Conrad and Ford use the city's presence extensively in their works. Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* uses Geneva not only as the backdrop of the events of the novel but almost as a character with an individuality of its own. *The Secret Agent* has as its sinister backdrop the vast, impersonal, cosmopolitan metropolis. As Conrad writes in his 'Author's Preface': "the vision of an enormous town presented itself, of a monstrous town more populous than some continents and in its man-made might as if indifferent to heaven's frowns and smiles; a cruel devourer of the world's light" (Conrad, *The Secret Agent* xxxi). Ford, on the other hand, was



excited by the city's dynamism as was Arthur Symons who was intoxicated by its modernity and artifice. For both of them, London was as much an opportunity as a threat. Ford was conscious of the human and environmental misery that followed in the wake of rapid urbanisation, but he rejected the sentimental appeal of the countryside. Other works on London by Impressionist authors include Stephen Crane's 'London Impressions' which was a regular feature of the *Saturday Review* during 1897.

Impressionism, as discussed above, is still very much relevant in this day, mainly due to the ever-increasing emphasis on individuality in the current times. Impressionism in art and literature complement each other, and a discussion of one would be incomplete without a reference to the other. Though situated temporally in the late nineteenth and twentieth century, Impressionism has remained relevant to this day, and we can continue to discover its latent influence on other sister arts such as cinema, music and sculpture if we look deeply in the treatment of the media of expression and technical virtuosity of the artists dealing in these forms.

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