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Joseph Conrad – A Time-Lord

ABSTRACT

Conrad's fiction manages the temporal dimension in highly innovative ways. Conrad was ahead of his time in employing such devices as delayed decoding, flashbacks, time-shifts, as well as by enveloping his characters in temporal loops or a timeless space. In his works, time defies the laws of physics, allowing him to create an idiosyncratic space-time continuum.

KEYWORDS: Conrad's life, Conrad's letters, time manipulation, time perception, trauma

STRESZCZENIE

Joseph Conrad – władca czasu

Conrad w sposób nowatorski wykorzystuje kategorię czasu w swych utworach. Stosując takie narzędzia jak opóźnione dekodowanie, retrospekcje, przesunięcia czasowe, a także wprowadzając swoich bohaterów w pętlę czasową lub pozbawioną czasu przestrzeń, pisarz wyprzedzał swoją epokę. W jego dziełach czas przeczy prawom fizyki, pozwalając mu tworzyć idiosynkratyczną czasoprzestrzeń.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: życie Conrada, utwory Conrada, manipulacja czasem, percepcja czasu, trauma

Introductory remarks

My claim that Joseph Conrad is a Time-Lord¹ is both manifold and confusing. He is a Time-Lord, because the way in which his fiction processes

1 Conrad's use of the category of time has been widely discussed in the literature; as J.M. Kerzner points out Conrad's "time shifts and multiple perspectives ... have been dissected, catalogued, and reassembled" by H. James, D. Davidson, A. Guerard, B. Harkness, J.E. Tanner,

the temporal dimension is highly innovative in his fiction, within which time defies the laws of nature, creating an idiosyncratic space-time continuum, moulding time into a particular form of reality, the medium in which his characters live, move and have their being.

Reflecting, however, on Conrad's life-experience, I realise that in that in his life, he was both a Time-Lord and a Time-Prisoner. In other words, he was both trapped in time and freed from its constraints. His perception of time is of it being neither linear nor circular: events are atemporal or simultaneous, what happened in "the past" is happening now "at present," or "as if it were happening" again. The Past seems to persist in parallel with the Present, accompanying him throughout his life, impinging on the Present.

In his early childhood and adolescence Conrad experienced trauma: his statement that "[i]n the courtyard of this Citadel –characteristically for our nation – my childhood memories begin," are hardly exaggerated (Najder, 1997, p. 30). His childhood memories were connected with Warsaw, but, first and foremost, with the Polish Eastern Borderlands where he was born, with the torment that he and his family suffered as a result of their exile to Siberia and the subsequent trials they endured, and Cracow where he lived and studied both with his father and at school, following his mother's death, and later lived with his dying father. Those events and their emotional effects must have left an indelible imprint on his soul, his mind, and his spirit.

Trauma and Time Perception

Trauma, "a person's emotional response to a distressing experience," as Robert D. Stolorow claims, destroys time:

Experiences of emotional trauma become freeze-framed into an eternal present in which one remains forever trapped, or to which one is condemned to be perpetually returned by life's slings and arrows. ... all duration or stretching along collapses, the traumatic past becomes present, and future loses all meaning other than endless repetition (Stolorow, 2015).

Cathy Caruth, discussing the definition of post-traumatic stress disorder, describes the nature of the event that becomes the cause that triggers

D.C. Yelton and others (1979, p. 302), but I would like to look at Conrad's perception of time from a different and very personal perspective, linked to Conrad's childhood and adolescent experiences of trauma and his endeavours to overcome it.

the trauma. She points to the relationship between the event and its assimilation, or rather the impossibility thereof:

the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is ... to be possessed by an image or event. ... The traumatized ... carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess (Caruth, 1995, pp. 4–5).

C. Fred Alford rightly comments: “As a result, the trauma remains unsymbolized, unintegrated into normal memory,” as if such an event happened “without witnesses, experienced a moment too late, before the self was there to mediate it” (Alford, 2016).

According to Seth J. Gillihan, a traumatised person is somehow trapped in time and their life tends to be different than it was before. Everyone reacts differently to a traumatic event, but each time it leaves a mark on the human psyche and the reactions, although individual, cover a certain common spectrum, some of the common reactions to such an event are:

Re-experiencing the trauma;
Emotional reactions;
Avoiding things related to the trauma;
Changes in how a person views the world and him- or herself (Gillihan, 2016).

Artists who have been traumatised will seek solace in art, fight the trauma through painting, writing or sculpting, and try to regain control of their lives. Through art they try to assimilate such experiences, to integrate them into their memory so that they can break out of the traumatic now and go on living. Conrad drew on his experiences of trauma, subjecting his protagonists to such experiences.

Conrad’s Autobiographical Texts, or From Time-Prisoner to Time-Lord

Conrad’s perception of time can therefore be linked to the traumatic experiences of his childhood and early youth. The way he depicted time in his autobiographical works is therefore the result of an attempt to overcome the trauma and to find a way to break out of the vicious circle of time in which what is past also permeates the present and future.

He knew what happens to a person's perception of time in such situations, which is why he was so good at describing his characters' struggles with time, forcing them to remain suspended, to live in the past or to run away from it. In his writing, it was Conrad the writer, who controlled time, who was its Lord, while in real life he constantly fought with it and was its prisoner. Therefore, I set out to examine Conrad's writing in relation to the perspective of time.

Reading, and then writing, helped Conrad to overcome his trauma, or to be more exact, his being a reader and a writer was what helped. As a child, overwhelmed by the illness of his dying father, in an atmosphere of sadness and depression ever present, he found an escape from reality in books, without which, as he himself said, he would not have been able to exist.

I don't know what would have become of me if I had not been a reading boy. My prep. finished I would have had nothing to do but sit and watch the awful stillness of the sick room flow out through the closed white door and coldly enfold my scared heart. I suppose that in a futile childish way I would have gone crazy. But I was a reading boy. There were many books about, lying on consoles, on tables, and even on the floor, for we had not had time to settle down. I read! What did I not read! (*NLL*, p. 133).

Writing about his childhood experience Conrad-Korzeniowski created his own world: unique, exceptional, special, bothersome, but appealing at the same time. It was his Past that forced him into inescapable time-manipulation.

When describing his past, Conrad combined two dimensions (the real and spectral, thus the present and the past), transposing his past experiences and emotions into the present, looking for some logical connections. He manipulated time by changing its flow. In fact, he changed the course of history, for, as Bernard Stiegler puts it,

History itself is an effect of spectrality. ... Perhaps one should say, furthermore, that this spectrality belongs to what could be called a history in deferred time, a history in the play of writing, which has the structure ... of an irreducible distension between the event and its recording (Derrida & Stiegler, 2013, p. 46).

Thus, he presented his own life from a unique time perspective. In *A Personal Record* he described and explained his adolescent choices and behaviour, writing from the perspective of an adult, creating his history in "deferred time," carefully re-worked, re-ordered, composed, attempting to show that everything that he had done in the past had its purpose, in

this way responding to all accusations of betraying his national identity and language. In such a way, paradoxically, in writing about his past, he pointed to effect and cause, he tried to assimilate, integrate and incorporate all that he had experienced into his life. Therefore, in retrospect, he presented all his decisions and choices as purposeful, thus making sense of everything that had happened to him. By manipulating and transposing time, Conrad creates the effect of linear time, allowing the reader to see the author's past, present and future.

For, in his works, Conrad returned to his past as if endeavouring to “access [all his experiences] again in order to attempt changing them” (Blanco & Peeren, 2013, p. 12). To describe the impact of his past on his present, I will repeat the phrase used by María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren to describe Caruth's theory of trauma, as it most accurately reflects Conrad's case, “[s]uch is the case with ghosts that arrive from the past, seeking to establish an ethical dialogue with the present” (12). The past haunts Conrad's present, the spectres of the past still accompany him. “Poland Revisited,” an essay in *Notes on Life and Letters* volume, is the best example of Conrad's work where he combines the two worlds, the two dimensions: the real and the spectral, the present and the past. They not only coexist, but depending on the circumstances, one of them prevails over the narrator.

While living in the reality of 1914, Conrad travelled to Poland not only in space but also in time. He entirely immersed himself in the past. Talking about his journey to Cracow, he creates an atmosphere of adventure, which was not the same for all his family members:

Moreover as we set together in the same railway carriage they were looking forward to a voyage in space whereas I felt more and more plainly that what I had started on was a journey in time, into the past ... (*NLL*, pp. 119–120).

My eyes were turned to the past, not to the future; to the past that one can not suspect and mistrust, the shadowy and unquestionable moral possession, the darkest struggles of which wear a halo of glory and peace (*NLL*, p. 116).

Without consideration of the contemporary geopolitical situation, this visit to Poland activated the accession of the past to the present, so that Conrad recalled the time spent with his dying father, and again the spectrality of the atmosphere gradually increased:

It was in that old royal and academical city that I ceased to be a child, became a boy, had known the friendships, the admirations, the thoughts and the indignations of that age. It was between those historical walls that

I began to understand things, form affections, lay up a store of memories and a fund of sensations with which I was to break violently by throwing myself into an unrelated existence. It was like the experience of another world. ... and I feared at first that if I ventured bodily in there I would discover that I who have had to do with a good many imaginary lives have been embracing mere shadows in my youth. ... But fear in itself may become a fascination. Men have gone alone and trembling, into graveyards at midnight—just to see what would happen (*NLL*, p. 117).

In Conrad's eyes Cracow had not changed at all since his childhood days, and here it was again, history in "deferred time," as if the time had stopped. On his nocturnal walk through the city everything looked exactly the same as in his childhood: "I felt so much like a ghost that the discovery that I could remember such material things as the right turn to take and the general direction of the street gave me a moment of wistful surprise" (131).

Since over Conrad's entire life hung, "the oppressive shadow of the great Russian Empire" (*PR*, p. 34) the writer could only free himself from his past by writing, creating his own worlds and realities. In what he wrote, he was a Time-Lord, creating time perspectives in which he transposed his personal experience onto a universal level. His protagonists struggle with fate, with the consequences of their own choices, so it is they who cannot escape from their past actions.

It is as if Conrad himself were a superhero who secretly changes from a Time-Prisoner to Time-Lord, who gains power over time and can do anything he likes with his characters in order to delineate their characters and intentions.

Conrad's Fiction, or Conrad –Time-Lord

In all his works, Conrad manipulates time, traps his characters in the time loops (using, among others: time inversion, time-shifts, flashbacks, delayed decoding, symbolic deciphering, thematic apposition, various points of view, and more), leaves them marooned in a time-maze, as if a spell had been cast on them. And all of this is done so that his characters (and also his readers) would realise that, as Kertzer puts it

all characters in the novels of Joseph Conrad ... are essentially historical beings, beings-in-time: time is the fabric of their existence. They must struggle to organize and direct their lives amid the flow of circumstance, for to waste time irresponsibly would be 'an awful waste of life' (Kertzer, 1979, p. 302).

Lord Jim is the best-known such example. For a long time, he tries to escape his past, to avoid the consequences of his cowardice, but his past always manages to catch up with him. When it seems that he finds his niche, with love and esteem; his past once again destroys his life. The incident on the *Patna* haunts Jim's entire life and leads him to his death, as he cannot escape the consequences of past decisions. The past invades and wrecks his future. The only quality that the past time does not destroy is his honour; a timeless virtue [I think this is debatable – it is an attempt to restore his lost honour which destroys him].

Jim also experiences trauma, what happened on board the *Patna* was a traumatic event for him. He failed, in his own eyes, he lost a chance to be a hero, he also acted like a coward, in fact he spent the rest of his life trying to come to terms with this trauma.

When he talks about the event, he describes it in a way that people describe serious accidents, as traumatic events, as if he does not remember how it happened:

“I had jumped...” ... “It seems” ... “I knew nothing about it till I looked up” ... “She seemed higher than a wall; she loomed like a cliff over the boat. ... I wish I could die” ... “There was no going back. It was as if I had jumped into a well – into an everlasting deep hole. ...” (*LJ*, pp. 88–89).

The deep hole was a time loop, wherever he went, his past managed to follow him. The reader “jumps” with Jim. Although “*Lord Jim* is a novel in retrospect” (Young, 1973, p. 60) the reader is invited to discover the truth about Jim following his story as told by numerous narrators from different perspectives, moving through time and space. Conrad makes it possible for the truth to unfold before the reader's eyes, revealing its layers like peeling an onion.

Lord Jim is a perfect example of Conrad's mastery of time. As Ian Watt claims “Conrad seems not so much to manipulate chronology, as to make it wholly plastic instrument of his various purposes” which constitute the writer's main aim of revealing the meaning of the story, as Conrad always “enacts the priority of meaning over event” (1980, p. 300). How, then, does he accomplish this outcome?

Conrad the writer “developed one narrative technique which was the verbal equivalent of the impressionist painter's attempt to render visual sensation directly” (Watt, 1980, p. 176). Initially, the reader is presented with a detailed account of the event or situation, but true understanding comes later, mimicking real-life experiences (175–176). There are three examples of delayed decoding in *Lord Jim*: the *Patna* incident, the story the chief engineer tells Marlow in hospital about pink toads, and the misunderstanding with a yellow cur that marks the beginning of Marlow's

friendship with Jim. The reader gradually, as the story unfolds, “decodes” the meaning of what he has previously “seen”, “felt” or “heard.” The Patna did not sink, the pink toads, in the sailor’s intoxicated state, represent the Patna pilgrims, and the yellow cur is an actual animal, not an insult from Marlow to Jim (see: Najder, 1996, p. LI).

“Marlow gradually leads us towards deciphering the symbolic meaning of the engineer’s raw terror of the ‘pink toads’” (Watt, 1980, p. 274), namely towards the subsequent stylistic technique employed by the author, which is symbolic deciphering. As the reader progresses, they decipher the significance of the symbols embedded within the text: fog, veil, and cloud, which represent the challenges Jim faces (see: Najder, 1996, p. LI); and the butterflies and beetles, which symbolize the dual aspects of human nature (Tanner, 1963, pp. 50–59). Jim’s height, which is described as slightly shorter than six feet in the opening sentence of the book, serves as another symbol that the reader must decipher. This suggests that Jim was nearly perfect, and the subsequent narrative explores the theme of “almost” in his life.

Conrad brings into apposition events out of chronological order to give the reader the right impression. Such a thematic apposition occurs when Marlow tells of Brierly’s suicide immediately after the story of the pink toads. Brierly could not bear the knowledge that he resembled Jim, and the chief engineer, however unconsciously, could not accept that he had failed the pilgrims. Each story reinforces the message of the other (see: Watt, 1980, p. 280). For the same reason all these stylistic devices are often used simultaneously.

Watt explains Conrad’s writing technique as following Bergson’s idea

that essential reality should be sought ... in time itself ... Bergson developed the ... distinction between scientific, objective, calendar or clock time and the subjective experience of time as duration, arrived at through individual introspection (Watt, 1980, pp. 301–302).

In *Lord Jim*, “the duration of self and others is given context, shaped and made real through memory” (302). Jim, Marlow and other protagonists and narrators present their memories hovering over Jim’s story. The reader can permeate into “the consciousness of Conrad’s protagonists” (303) thanks to the feeling of participating in their present. To achieve it Conrad uses “a series of minute movements forwards and backwards in time. This anachronic² oscillation gives an effect of dense impressionist particularity in a fragmented but vivid present” (300).

2 Watt incorporates the term “anachrony” into his work, a concept initially introduced by Gérard Genette, which signifies any narrative order that does not align with the chronological events of the story (294–295).

The narrative is composed of a variety of elements such as accounts, narratives, quotations, and allusions, emphasizing the importance of interpreting the meaning of events rather than focusing solely on the chronological order. Scholars have proposed different ways to analyse the temporal structure, including Najder's fifty-three components of time (XLIII–XLV), Young's twelve layers of time (62–65), and Davidson's identification of seven distinct events in *Lord Jim* (Young, 62). Despite the various divisions, the temporal components in the story overlap and intertwine, creating a multi-dimensional and vivid portrayal of the protagonist.

Conrad employed the stylistic methods previously analysed in all his literary creations. However, due to space constraints, I will focus solely on the ultimate outcome of his writing, specifically his adept handling of the concept of time in his novels.

The protagonist who, to an even greater extent than Jim, is haunted by his own past is Razumov, the main figure in *Under Western Eyes*. Haldin, whom he delivered to Tsarist officials, accompanies Razumov for the rest of his life, is ever-present in Razumov's reality. He cannot escape remorse and time does not help him forget his betrayal. Time for Razumov stopped like a broken watch in his room after the betrayal.

The peaceful steady light of his reading lamp shone on the watch. Razumov stood looking down at the little white dial. It wanted yet three minutes to midnight. He took the watch into his hand, fumblingly.

'Slow,' he muttered: and a strange fit of nervelessness came over him. His knees shook, the watch and chain slipped through his fingers in an instant and fell on the floor. He was so startled that he nearly fell himself. ... After a while he growled:

'Stopped,' and paused for quite a long time before he muttered sourly: 'It's done.... And now to work' (*UWE*, p. 55).

Razumov, despite trying to come to terms with his betrayal of Haldin, is traumatised by his betrayal and unable to fully come to terms with his own actions. For Razumov (though he does not realise that), time symbolically stops. He cannot free himself from his deed or from remorse, he remains trapped in time until the truth literally brings him liberation. He is liberated and at peace when he confesses the truth and thus rejects all the lies he painstakingly created, so that he achieves a definite redemption, more clear-cut, perhaps, than that accorded to Jim.

Marlow from *Heart of Darkness* lives, as it were, in two time perspectives. Time runs differently in Africa, and in Europe, from which he sets off and to which he returns. In Africa, time seems to have stopped or even gone backwards Europeans who arrive there travel back in time, mentally regressing to barbarian times, losing their humanity.

It is as if Marlow's contemporary colonists – “the pilgrims” (HD, p.72) are behaving like the Roman conquerors he speaks of at the beginning of his story, while recalling that England was also “one of the dark places of the earth” (45) and those who arrived there

grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind – as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. The conquest of the earth which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much (47).

Only Marlow, through his daily, painstaking work, remains in his own time, observing with amazement those who, stripped of the external attributes of civilisation, lose their humanity, lose themselves. As Marlow says:

Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world ... There were moments when one's past came back to one as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare to yourself ... this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect. I got used to it afterwards. I did not see it any more; I had no time. I had to keep guessing at the channel ... (77)

In *Nostromo*, time plays tricks, not flowing the same for everyone. The uneven passage of time is most painfully felt by Martin Decoud, who is, in fact, a victim of this phenomenon. Decoud “an idle boulevardier” and “a Franchified – but most un-French” (*N*, p. 152) cosmopolitan, “a sort of nondescript dilettante all his life,” (153) a dandy and sceptic returns to Costaguana. He cannot keep his distance from what is happening in his homeland.

[T]he sceptically withdrawn Decoud surprises himself by the extent to which he becomes involved in the events as editor of the Ribierist journal, lover of Antonia Avellanos, and originator of the idea that ... Sulaco should ... become an independent republic (Knowles & Moore, 2000, p. 88).

Together with Nostromo, he takes on the smuggling of silver. When left alone on the island for several days, he cannot stand the isolation. And although the future looks rosy for him, left to his own devices he commits suicide. When he is left alone, time seems to stand still, the days drag on endlessly, deprived of the company of others, he loses track of time as if enchanted into eternity.

But the truth was that he died from solitude, the enemy known but to few on this earth, and whom only the simplest of us are fit to withstand. The brilliant Costaguanero of the boulevards had died from solitude ... Solitude from mere outward condition of existence becomes very swiftly a state of soul in which the affectations of irony and scepticism have no place. It takes possession of the mind ... Decoud lost all belief in the reality of his action past and to come. ... the solitude appeared like a great void, and the silence of the gulf like a tense, thin cord to which he hung suspended by both hands, without fear, without surprise, without any sort of emotion whatever. ... "It's done" (N, pp. 496–498, 501).

"Tomorrow" presents yet another treatment of time. In this perverse version of the Biblical parable of the prodigal son, everything is presented to us in a distorting mirror. Not only does the prodigal son not understand what he has done, but he actually returns only to leave forever, while his father does not recognise him and continues to wait for his return, which is supposed to be tomorrow, always tomorrow. A widowed "retired coasting-skipper," (T, p. 334) Captain Hagberd is waiting for his son, who "had run away to sea and had never been heard of since," (334) believes that his boy will return tomorrow. He subordinated everything to that "tomorrow." For Hagberd there is no present, no past, his whole life has consisted of imagining what would happen if it were to happen tomorrow. The only person Hagberd trusts and with whom he talks freely about his son's return is Bessie, the daughter of "blind Carvil, the retired boat-builder – a man of evil repute as a domestic tyrant" (333). Hagberd tells Bessie, plunged into the hopelessness of her daily struggles with her blind father, that when Harry returns, he will marry her. Not wanting to upset the old man, Bessie listens to his stories, which are the only entertainment in her life. For her, this "tomorrow" also becomes a respite from her daily worries and problems. This vision of marriage, even if it is unrealistic, is her only hope of gaining freedom from her father's despotism, her only hope of a better future. When Harry finally returns, his father does not recognise him and throws him out, saying that his son will return tomorrow. When Harry learns of the planned marriage, he leaves, this time for good. Bessie loses all hope, humiliated and betrayed, and Captain Hagberd, in his madness, still waits for tomorrow. "It was as if all the hopeful madness of the world had broken out to bring terror upon her heart, with the voice of that old man shouting of his trust in an everlasting tomorrow" (359).

In *The Secret Agent*, time plays an extremely important role, and Conrad shows in a masterful way the variability of its passage for each of the characters. The plot of the novel takes place in a single day, which is like a doomsday for the characters, in which their fate is at stake. That day changes everything, and when it passes, nothing is as it was, or as it had seemed.

Even the Professor, who considers himself superior to the rest of humanity, who despises the weak and regards them as the cause of all his failures, and who claims with great conviction that he depends only on death, is wrong. As Jonathan M. Kertzer rightly observes, “Comrade Ossipon bitterly reminds him that he, like all men, is bound by time” (302). In the face of time, all are equal:

Just now you’ve been crying for time – time. Well! The doctors will serve you out your time – if you are good. You profess yourself to be one of the strong – because you carry in your pocket enough stuff to send yourself and, say, twenty other people into eternity. But eternity is a damned hole. It’s time that you need. You – if you met a man who could give you for certain ten years of time, you would call him your master (SA, 227).

The passage of time, marked by the ticking of the clock, is Winnie Verloc’s constant companion. The reader hears this ticking as Mr and Mrs Verloc lie down and reminisce about the day gone by, “the drowsy ticking of the old clock on the landing became distinctly audible in the bedroom” (49). This ticking is something ordinary, safe, but it is also a harbinger of disaster; time is passing and the inevitable is approaching, as yet unconsciously to Winnie. When Stevie is mentioned, there is again the ticking of the clock, foreshadowing the inevitable happening to Stevie: “‘That poor boy is in a very excited state to night,’ she murmured, after a pause which lasted three ticks of the clock” (49).

The ticking of the clock appears in the background as the couple discuss Verloc’s journey with Stevie, as if the ticking is a warning of what is to come. “All was so still without and within that the lonely ticking of the clock on the landing stole into the room as if for the sake of company” (137). As Verlock assures Winnie that he will surround Stevie with care, the reader hears the clock ticking again and the light goes out. Disaster is coming and nothing can stop it, just like in a Greek tragedy: “She let the lonely clock on the landing count off fifteen ticks into the abyss of eternity, and asked: ‘Shall I put the light out?’ Mr Verloc snapped at his wife huskily. ‘Put it out!’” (138).

Another ticking of the clock occurs after Winnie kills Verloc, the sound of the clock ticking changes to the sound of trickling blood:

She had become aware of a ticking sound in the room. It grew upon her ear, while she remembered clearly that the clock on the wall was silent, had no audible tick. What did it mean by beginning to tick so loudly all of a sudden? Its face indicated ten minutes to nine. Mrs Verloc cared nothing for time, and the ticking went on. She concluded it could not be the clock, and her sullen gaze moved along the walls, wavered, and became vague, while she strained her hearing to locate the sound. Tic, tic, tic.

...Dark drops fell on the floorcloth one after another, with a sound of ticking growing fast and furious like the pulse of an insane clock. At its highest speed this ticking changed into a continuous sound of trickling. Mrs Verloc watched that transformation with shadows of anxiety coming and going on her face. It was a trickle, dark, swift, thin... Blood! (198–199).

In *The Secret Agent*, Conrad shows how elusive a phenomenon time is, depending on the perspective from which we view a given event. J.A. Bernstein, who in his article analyses the notion of time in Conrad's novel from the perspective of McTaggart's theory outlined in his article "The Unreality of Time," points out the common elements of both authors' theses. Bernstein states: "Thus Conrad wrestles with the questions of temporality by conferring an uncertain status on his narrative and badgering it with questions of who's watching, when, and under what circumstances. What this floating perspective does, ultimately, is allow the reader to share in the characters' confusion, mired, as each is, in the very dilemmas of chronological uncertainty – a theme that very much reflects the debates of Conrad's day, particularly McTaggart's." (Bernstein, 2012, p. 44)

Concluding Remarks

Conrad's works can all be discussed in these terms, showing how the writer uses time, stretches it, changes it, shifts perspectives. It is as if Conrad himself, haunted by his past, strives in his writing to compensate for the past while living under its shadow, seeking relief in the role of a Time-Lord by making his characters struggle with time.

However, Conrad is a Time-Lord in another sense; he is the master of his readers' time; when we pick up his book, we are under his spell. When we read Conrad's stories, we are lost in time, immersed in fictional time; our temporal perspective then depends on Conrad's mastery. The reader has the temporal perspective that the writer wants, going back in time, changing perspectives, following the development of events.

And Conrad is a Time-Lord for another reason. At a time of events in Europe and the world (such as Russian aggression against Ukraine, assassinations carried out in Western countries by Russian secret agents, modern terrorism) Conrad's *The Secret Agent* and also *Under Western Eyes*, are not just classic but contemporary novels. Although written more than a century ago, they describe our current reality.

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