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The Concept of Honour in Joseph Conrad: Unfolding, Relativisation, and Ethical Paradox

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Метою статті є виявлення смислового діапазону поняття честі у творах Конрада, найбільш суттєвих для його з’ясування, та художньої амплітуди реалізацій цього поняття у світі письменника. У межах загального герменевтичного підходу у процесі роботи застосовуються методи close reading та міфопоетичного аналізу.

Конрад не приходить із готовою концепцією та готовим героєм честі від самого початку, а намацує цю свою тему від твору до твору, але вихідною точкою завжди є безчестя/падіння героя. Конрад також з цілковитою ясністю бачить історичну й суспільну обмеженість і неоднозначність ідеалу честі, адже честь має два виміри – приватний, внутрішній (совість) і публічний, зовнішній (репутація). Ба більше, поняття честі є, з одного боку, одним із стрижневих у ціннісному просторі культури, а з іншого – суттєво міфологізованим у своєму історичному функціонуванні, що також позначилося на художній реалізації проблематики честі у творах письменника.

І якщо у Лорді Джимі (1990) честь постає насамперед у своєму внутрішньому вимірі – як внутрішній абсолют, то у романі Ностромо (1904), в якому поняття честі також постає світоутворювальним, акцент переміщується на зовнішній вимір цього феномену. Конрад ставить поняття честі в романі під знак відносності, постійно піддаючи його міфологізації в індивідуальних ціннісних світах героїв та іронічній «переоцінці» під час зміни суб’єктних позицій або в процесі внутрішньої еволюції персонажів. Ще менш очевидною проблематика честі уявляється в повісті Дуель (1908), де поняття честі функціонує в умовному художньому світі, який у статті інтерпретовано як макро-метафору стосунків між свідомим, «аполлонівським» і несвідомим, «діонісійським» у складі людської особистості, що надає поняттю честі в художньому світі повісті химеричного і навіть абсурдного забарвлення.

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Але узагальнююча концепція честі за Конрадом викладена у передмові до роману *Лорд Джим*, аналіз якої демонструє, що ідеалістичний характер конрадівського уявлення про честь протягом усього його творчого життя реалізується з вихідної позиції асоціювання цього поняття з «європеїзмом» (у позанаціональному та позагеографічному сенсі) і, відповідно, «європеїзм» героя визначається гостротою переживання ним колізій честі.

У результаті доходимо висновку, що в творчості Конрада вибудовується динамічна траєкторія осмислення поняття честі в широкому смисловому діапазоні: від висування його в центр етичної системи (*Лорд Джим*) до його релятивізації, оголення його двоїстості (*Ностромо*) і навіть нежиттєздатності в світі, де йде процес розпаду системи цінностей (*Дуель*), і, нарешті, до його алогічного утвердження як основи квазіуніверсальної ідеалістичної/елітаристської етики (Передмова до *Лорда Джима,* 1916). Способами художньої реалізації поняття честі в різноманітті його авторських трактувань стають наступні: 1) особливий тип героя, що корелює з «ніцшеанським» героєм літератури межі століть і одночасно є відмінним від нього ностальгійною спрямованістю до минулого і ціннісних ідеалів минулого, до яких належить і поняття честі, що його герої Конрада переживають з особливими гостротою та індивідуальністю; 2) концентрація уявлень про честь переважно у внутрішньому просторі героїв та їх індивідуальної ціннісної міфології (при активізації міфопоетичного плану тексту загалом); репрезентація поняття честі у всій широті його смислового діапазону через множинність поглядів персонажів; 3) використання фабульної та характерологічної умовності при реалізації «сюжету честі», завдяки чому поняття честі гранично релятивізується; 4) складна побудова авторського наративу, де утвердження ідеалу честі в елітаристській логіці парадоксально здійснюється через трансляцію скептичної позиції автора.

Ключові слова: авторська ціннісна система, ідеалізм, скептицизм, концепція честі, герой честі.

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Joseph Conrad is a key figure in Western literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, since his works, both in form and in content, anticipate a number of major literary movements of the "Iron Age," from modernism and existentialism to postmodernism. In the present paper, however, the focus falls on the moral dimension of several Conradian works, which looks backward rather than forward, seeking to sum up the tradition of classical realism and, perhaps even more importantly, the passing era itself with its gradually disintegrating system of values.

Conrad's works (especially his major novels) are distinguished by a particular type of hero who clearly belongs among the Nietzschean figures characteristic of Western literature of this period: Nora in *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen, the unnamed protagonist of *Hunger* by Knut Hamsun, Jack London's Wolf Larsen and Martin Eden (from *The Sea-Wolf* and *Martin Eden*), Henry Higgins in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and Frank Cowperwood in Theodore Dreiser's *Trilogy of Desire*, among others. Among Conrad's own characters, the title hero of *Lord Jim* naturally belongs in this line, along with Axel Heyst in *Victory* and several others, though in some cases with certain reservations. Despite differences in social status, occupation, character, and even geographical setting, these figures are united by a pursuit–sometimes deliberate, sometimes instinctive–of spiritual independence and, in some cases, by the conscious construction of an autonomous system of values.

This commonality is determined by shared cultural and historical circumstances: the collapse of generally accepted beliefs and the loss of a single ontological foundation for the collective system of values, above all its moral component. Under such conditions, the spiritual seeker is compelled to rely solely on himself [Paccaud-Huguet, 1994, p. 65].

It should be noted, however, that the similarities between Conradian heroes and those listed above largely end here. While most of the latter are oriented toward the future, whatever it may bring, and willingly take up its challenge, Conrad's hero is nostalgically turned toward the past. Unlike the heroes of Nietzschean breed, he is an idealist—either doomed to destruction by his fidelity to an ultimately impotent idealism or rendered non-viable through his betrayal of it.

Much has been written about the idealism of Conrad's heroes: from the idealism of youth to the revolutionary idealism of the protagonists of *Under Western Eyes* [Jones, 2024, p. 146;

Kaplan, 2024, p. 251]. One of the most perceptive commentators on Conrad's work, Robert Penn Warren, makes the general observation (referring primarily to *Nostromo*): "Each character lives by his necessary idealization, up the scale …" [Warren, 1951, p. 382]. Finally, critics have also noted the "idealising yearning for the *underlying* truth of things" that is characteristic of the writer himself [Epstein, 2019, p. 103].

At the same time, Conrad's idealism is neither absolute nor monolithic; it is counterbalanced– and as will become evident, perhaps even outweighed—by another crucial component of his worldview: scepticism. For Conrad, virtually every form of idealism invites suspicion: political [Schwarz, 1997; Steinberger, 1983], ideological [Icoz, 2005], imperialist [Watts, 1996, p. 48; Ramirez,2000], national or patriotic [Fraser, 1996, p. 34], historical or progressivist [McAlindon, 1982; Demory, 1993] , religious [Stape, 1996, p. 77], and civilizational [Watts, 1996, p. 49; White, 1996, p. 184]. Critics have also pointed to his scepticism toward anti-colonial uprisings[1] [Fraser, 1996, p. 26; Eagleton, 1976, p. 135; Hawkins, 1979, p. 86], and, ultimately, philosophical.

As the English scholar J.G. Stape observes, Conrad's novels—*Lord Jim*, in particular– "have … educated the reader into epistemological scepticism, a doubting of the adequacy of any means of apprehension and analysis" [Stape, 1996, p. 77]. Kenneth Graham likewise argues that Conrad's philosophical scepticism aligns him with twentieth-century modernism, since it "looks both backwards and forwards" [Graham, 1996, p.206]. Some scholars extend this scepticism even to artistic creation itself. Robert Hampson, for instance, maintains that "Conrad brings to the fore the work to produce fictions that are variously conscious of their own fictionality" [Hampson, 1996, p. 142]. In this sense, one may also speak of a form of aesthetic scepticism.

Conrad's scepticism also lies behind his distinctive narrative manner, which is marked by a certain reserve despite the apparent verbosity of his style. Indeed, the latter may partly stem from a reluctance to offer direct reference, explicit characterisation, or definitive evaluation. As Ian Watt notes, "his [Conrad's] scepticism prevents him from telling us many things that we are usually told about characters in novels" [Watt, 1979, p. 269].

Researchers have identified a sceptical frame of mind, in one respect or another, in *Almayer's Folly*, *Heart of Darkness* [White, 1996, pp. 188, 192], and *The Secret Agent* [Lothe, 1996, p. 174], and have even spoken of a "pervasive scepticism" in *Lord Jim* [Lothe, 1996, p. 169] and *Nostromo* [Lothe, 1996, pp. 169, 172]. Finally, the writer's personality itself has been characterised in such terms that scepticism is regarded as "the most dominant of his mental features" [White, 1996, p. 206].

And yet it would be mistaken to conclude that scepticism ultimately triumphs. Rather, what emerges is an irreconcilable (in the dialectical sense) tension that permeates–if not all of Conrad's work–then at least all of his major fiction. As the English literary scholar and editor of several editions of Conrad's works, Keith Carabine, succinctly observes: "All his major fictions present, explore, and are constructed out of antagonisms that are never finally resolved. These famously include: egoism and altruism, emotion and reason, solidarity and isolation, moral corruption and redemption, heroism and contingency, loyalty and betrayal, idealism and scepticism, piety and scorn, and fidelity to a code composed of 'a few very simple ideas' and 'truth to one's own sensations'" [Carabine, 1996, p. 122].

We can speak about the fundamental duality of Conradian vision, which in turn generates and/or grows out of a multitude of dualities: "throughout his works, we see tensions that oppose essence and form, presence and appearance, truth and opinion, duty and emotion, honour and betrayal, all intermingled and mutually dependent" [Szczepan-Wojnarska, 2024, p. 304].

Some scholars even see the genesis of this dualism in biographical circumstances, tracing it primarily to two figures who were decisive in shaping the writer's personality: on the one hand, his father Apollo Korzeniowski, whose romantic patriotism made Conrad extremely sensitive to tyrannical autocracy, and, on the other hand, his uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski, whose rational scepticism left its imprint on the writer's worldview as "a profound scepticism about the idealism of social, and particularly nationalistic, movements" [White, 1996, p. 182].

[1] The extreme manifestation of this reading is the accusation that Conrad is a "bloody racist" by the African writer Chinua Achebe, which, however, met significant amount of criticism.

It may be argued that scepticism in Conrad is in fact a consequence of his irremovable and—although regularly defeated—ultimately indestructible idealism. As Robert Penn Warren aptly observes: "Conrad's skepticism is ultimately but a 'reasonable' recognition of the fact that man is a natural creature who can rest on no revealed values and can look forward to neither individual immortality nor racial survival. But reason, in this sense, is the denial of life and energy, for against all reason man insists, as man, on creating and trying to live by certain values. These values are, to use Conrad's word, 'illusions,' but the last wisdom is for man to realise that though his values are illusions, the illusion is necessary, is infinitely precious, is the mark of his human achievement, and is, in the end, his only truth" [Warren, 1951, p. 375].

Returning to the nature and the forms of expression of Conrad's idealism, one may argue that one of its central manifestations—at the level of the moral consciousness of his heroes—is the concept of honour. It constitutes their spiritual core and provides the basis of their identity, their goal setting, and their life tasks.

The object of this study is a corpus of works by Joseph Conrad that can be arranged into a distinctive sequence, enabling an analysis of the "honour plot" within his oeuvre. The scholarly novelty of this article lies in its examination of the genesis and evolution of Conrad's understanding of the concept of honour and its central position within his ethical system, as well as in the interpretation of the ideal of honour as an expression of the fundamental conflict underlying his worldview as a whole.

On this basis, *the aim* of the present article is to identify those aspects of the semantic range of the concept of honour in Joseph Conrad's works that are most essential to its interpretation, as well as the principal modes of its artistic realisation within the writer's oeuvre. The study adopts a broadly *hermeneutic approach*, drawing in particular on close reading and *mythopoetic analysis*.

The most significant examples here, of course, are *Lord Jim* and *Nostromo*; *The Duel* is likewise explicitly structured around an honour-based conflict. Taken together, these works may, in a sense, be regarded as a Conradian "trilogy of honour." The prefatory "Author's Note" to *Lord Jim*, written in the characteristically indirect manner typical of both Conrad's fictional and non-fictional writings (prefaces, autobiographical works, and letters), offers an important clue to the *significance* of this vanishing concept.

The "Author's Note" is largely devoted to responses to the attacks of "some critics." Moreover, the exaggerated seriousness with which this apology is presented seems rather to signal the author's ironic stance. Did Conrad, indeed, require sixteen years to reflect on the objection to the figure of the narrator—namely, that "no man could have been expected to talk all that time, and other men to listen so long" [Conrad, 1968, p. 1] —only to produce the self-evident rejoinder: "*Men <u>have been known</u>, both in the tropics and in the temperate zone, to sit up half the night 'swapping yarns'*" [Conrad, 1968, p. 1]? It is difficult to imagine that such an argument demanded prolonged reflection, and it is equally unlikely that its mere articulation prompted the composition of the preface.

Equally unconvincing is the brief explanation that the novel grew out of a short story, when, in response to a magazine editor's request for something new, the author realised that the story might serve as "a good starting-point" for a novel.

A far more significant–and genuinely revealing—idea is expressed at the close of the "Author's Note," once again in an indirect manner, as if concealed behind a double veil and thereby doubly distanced from the reader. This indirection is highly characteristic of Conrad, who appears to rely on a reader akin to his "investigative narrator" (that is, Captain Marlow), possessing an indefatigable willingness to seek "the *underlying* truth of things."

"*A friend of mine returning from Italy had talked with a lady there who did not like the book. I regretted that, of course, but what surprised me was the ground of her dislike. 'You know,' she said, 'it is all so morbid.'*

The pronouncement gave me food for an hour's anxious thought. Finally I arrived at the conclusion that, making due allowances for the subject itself being rather foreign to women's normal sensibilities, the lady could not have been an Italian. I wonder whether she was European at all? In any case, no Latin temperament would have perceived anything morbid in the acute consciousness of lost honour. Such a consciousness may be wrong, or it may be right, or it may be condemned as artificial; and, perhaps, my Jim

is not a type of wide commonness. But I can safely assure my readers that he is not the product of coldly perverted thinking. He is not a figure of Northern Mists either. One sunny morning in the commonplace surroundings of an Eastern roadstead, I saw his form pass by—appealing—significant—under a cloud—perfectly silent. Which is as it should be. It was for me, with all the sympathy of which I was capable, to seek fit words for his meaning" [Conrad, 1968, p. 2].

In the first place, Joseph Conrad responds to a specific criticism but merely to the reported reaction of a female reader from Italy (?) to the novel. The reaction itself reaches him indirectly, is fragmentary, and–at least as conveyed—contains no reference to the novel's particular content. Yet it prompts in Conrad prolonged and "anxious" reflection, resulting–one must admit—in the rather ill-founded conclusion that the lady is not only Italian but hardly even European.

In this "response," everything is revealing in terms of self-characterisation. The *objective logic*, to put it mildly, is weak, yet precisely for that reason the subjective logic becomes especially evident. The point, of course, is not that Conrad can simply be accused of bias. Rather, this bias itself discloses *a principled conviction: for Conrad, the acute consciousness of questions of honour is synonymous with being European*–and, indeed, with being a European lady.

Accordingly, the hour of "anxious" reflection was evidently not devoted to considering the objection to the lady, but rather to testing the validity of this identification. The statement—posed in the form of a question—about the lady's possible non-European character should thus be understood not as a statement of fact but as a judgment of value. In other words, it presupposes "being European" as a principle and a value.

This "adjustment" for the gender of the reader is highly significant, since it clarifies the idea of Europeanness as, so to speak, a super-empirical value—one that transcends gender and, presumably, other social circumstances.

The author's ensuing statement is even more striking: Jim, he insists, is "not a type of wide commonness." This only deepens the paradox, for the novel's hero is by no means a figure of "Latin temperament." In other words, on the one hand, Europeanness is not reducible to national temperament, however natural such an assumption might seem; on the other, it emerges as something exceptional—almost distilled into a pure concept or principle.

The idealistic nature of Conrad's conception of honour is further reinforced by several considerations. First, his use of the phrase "consciousness of lost honour" implicitly presupposes a prior "consciousness of honour" as such. Second, his insistence that the rightness or wrongness of this consciousness is ultimately irrelevant amounts to a rigorously philosophical claim: the nature and essence of values lie not in their truth or falsity, but in their significance.

The final "illogicality" in this convoluted line of reasoning is the ostensibly "visionary" argument advanced against the charge that Jim is "the product of coldly perverted thinking." Jim is real, Conrad suggests, because he once appeared to the author; and if the figure is real, then the values he embodies must be granted a corresponding reality.

Finally, it is important to note that the "Author's Note" was written sixteen years after the novel itself. By that time (June 1917), most—if not all—of Conrad's major works had already been completed: *Typhoon*, *The End of the Tether*, *Nostromo*, *The Secret Agent*, *Under Western Eyes*, *Chance*, *Victory*, and *The Shadow-Line*. (He would, of course, continue to write until the end of his life, but these later works added little that was fundamentally new to his established reputation.)

The implication is clear. The idea of "Europeanness as honour" appears to have been a persistent conviction throughout Conrad's writing career. It may therefore be argued that the "Author's Note" was composed not merely as a retrospective justification, but also as an attempt to reaffirm this conviction and to articulate its conceptual framework in more generally accessible terms.

This fundamental—one might even say supreme—significance of honour in Conrad's value system was first emphasised by Ford Madox Ford in his unsigned review of *Under Western Eyes*. Ford attributes this aspect of Conrad's worldview to his Polish aristocratic origins—an explanation that may be accepted in part, but which clearly does not accord with Conrad's own understanding (quite apart from the question of its factual accuracy): "…*this preoccupation with the idea of the point of honour is very foreign—so foreign that it has obviously come to this author with his foreign blood. It is a thing wholly individualistic and wholly of the aristocrat. And that is what the Poles are—aristocrats and individualists*…" [Sherry, 1973, p. 243].

According to Ford, all of Conrad's major characters are obsessed with honour, yet this concept of honour is "*hardly ever a question of public polity—or it might be more just to say that their souls do not treat it as a question of public polity*" [Sherry, 1973, p. 243]. Honour thus appears, in his interpretation, as a purely individual idiosyncrasy, largely devoid of social context or wider moral significance. As will be shown later, this view again does not align with Conrad's works. Nevertheless, Ford deserves credit for identifying what he calls "*the constant moral of this writer's entire work—fidelity to one's own sense of personal honour*" [Sherry, 1973, p. 243].

Such a statement, however, clearly involves an overgeneralisation. The protagonists of *Almayer's Folly*, *An Outcast of the Islands*, *The Nigger of the "Narcissus*,*" The Secret Agent*, and a number of other works of different genres are obviously not "obsessed with honour," nor do they always possess a conscious awareness of it. It is nevertheless true that the overwhelming majority of Conrad's characters can be described as participating in a drama—or even a tragedy—of dishonour, or, more broadly, of fall. They live out their stories within the framework of this opposition, though few of them are aware of this alternative and driven by the fear of dishonour; others experience their fall blindly, yet in each case there exists a conscious witness–whether an impersonal narrator or a named one (an "open narrator")—who views them through the prism of this opposition.

Zdzisław Najder has likewise devoted considerable attention to the role of the ideal of honour in Conrad in a dedicated essay on the subject [Najder, 1997, pp.153–164]. While acknowledging the significance of Conrad's Polish origins—and even suggesting that Polish literature is "of all modern literatures probably the one most obsessed by the idea of honour" [Najder, 1997, p. 164]—Najder places his primary emphasis on the broader European literary tradition.

He traces the history of the idea of honour in culture, and in literature in particular, from antiquity (taking *The Iliad* as a point of departure), through the chivalric ethos and the Renaissance, to the era of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Although, in this historical survey, he accords special attention to Polish culture and the traditions of the nobility, he ultimately argues that more decisive for Conrad was his affiliation with a literary tradition "extolling the glories of honourable and heroic deeds"—a tradition encompassing *The Iliad*, *Chanson de Roland*, Calderón, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Torquato Tasso, Stendhal, Mickiewicz, and Alfred de Vigny [Najder, 1997, p. 159].

Najder argues for the prominent role of the idea of honour in shaping secular ethics, a role comparable to that of Christianity. He notes, in particular, a number of affinities between the idea of honour and Christian ethics, as well as points of intersection between them, such as "a coexistence of the chivalric ethos and Christianity" [Najder, 1997, p. 155].

Most significant—especially in the context of Conrad's work—is Najder's observation that, "although since the earliest times honour has been considered a monopoly of the well-born and privileged," its identification with virtue, and its elevation to a criterion of nobility, implicitly entails that all virtuous individuals are, in a moral sense, noble. In this way, "the ideal of honour gave birth to, and then fostered the idea of, human dignity" [Najder, 1997, p. 157]. This thesis echoes the conclusion advanced here, namely, that for Conrad the idea of honour is identical to Europeanness[2].

However, such an overview of the history of the idea of honour, and such an explanation of Conrad's sensitivity to it, leave aside the question of its genesis within his own creative development. A mere appeal to Polish cultural sensibility and to the general European literary tradition, however justified in itself, is not sufficient. On the one hand, there is hardly anything that is specifically Polish in the thematic content of Conrad's works or in the lineage of his characters; on the other, no direct or demonstrable connections can be established between Conrad and the particular literary phenomena invoked above. The mere availability of a tradition, therefore, does not in itself constitute evidence of its actual influence.

More generally, it may be observed that the literary tradition of honour outlined by Najder is, in principle, open to all writers; yet it does not impose itself upon them. It becomes operative only where the chosen material itself exhibits, as it were, a certain amenability to tap into that tradition.

[2] Needless to say that these two theses are by no means identical. The assertion of "the ideal of honour as the foundation of human integrity" is more universal, but at the same time there is an ever-increasing division between European and non-European, which requires further analysis from a (post)colonial perspective. But that is beyond the boundaries of our inquiry.

Attention to the concept of honour is by no means unique to Conrad among writers of his time. A number of Henrik Ibsen's characters, for instance, are likewise preoccupied with honour. A particularly striking example is Torvald Helmer in *A Doll's House*, who proclaims—though to a certain extent declaratively—honour as the highest value. Similarly, Miss Julie, the heroine of *Miss Julie* by August Strindberg, follows the call of honour blindly, without the slightest understanding of its meaning or any deeply internalised commitment to it. Theodor Fontane's Schach von Wuthenow may likewise be seen as a short-sighted victim of narrowly defined class honour.

In a different register, the somewhat brutal, though not entirely unprincipled, businessman Frank Cowperwood in *The Trilogy of Desire* by Theodore Dreiser operates with his own pragmatic conception of honour. The protagonist of *Hunger* by Knut Hamsun clings to honour with near-fanatical persistence through repeated falls and recoveries. Likewise, it is a businessman's concern for honour that contributes to the downfall of the protagonist in *The Rise of Silas* Lapham by William Dean Howells[3].

This list, of course, is far from exhaustive; many further examples could be adduced of works in which honour functions merely as a façade, or in which characters are known to be more familiar with dishonour than with honour itself. Yet it would seem that only in Conrad does the ideal of honour claim a universal cultural significance, while at the same time serving as the foundation of the personal ethics of an extremely limited number of individuals—without, however, implying any form of elitism.

Indication of biographical circumstances—Conrad's Polish noble origins and also his naval career, the last one being seemingly well suited to the formation of such a sensibility[4]—as well as to the general European literary tradition, are likewise insufficient. Conrad does not come up with a ready-made concept of honour or a fully formed "hero of honour"; rather, he develops and tests this theme progressively from work to work.

He starts in literature with the theme of dishonour—or, more precisely, downfall. His early protagonists—Almayer (*Almayer's Folly*, 1895), Peter Willems (*An Outcast of the Islands*, 1896), and James Wait (*The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* 1897)—are figures of failure, undone by their own prejudices, passions, moral weakness, and lack of will. They are doomed to collapse, even to perish, and carry within themselves the seeds of that destruction.

The emergence of the "hero of honour" in Jim, together with his witness and interpreter, Charles Marlow, in *Lord Jim* (1900), is prepared by *Youth* (1898) and *Heart of Darkness* (1899), which present a younger Marlow acquiring the experience that underpins his later attempt to understand Jim. In the latter work in particular, Conrad probes deeply into the problem of moral inferiority in modern man—ranging from individual failings to the "darkness" underlying the civilised surface, that is, the moral flaw embedded in the very foundations of contemporary European civilisation.

By contrast, *Youth* presents a markedly different perspective. It recounts Marlow's first voyage–unsuccessful in technical terms, yet fortunate in that it brings him into contact with men distinguished by their fidelity to duty and their capacity for mutual assistance. It is presumably such figures that Marlow has in mind when he refers to "us" in *Lord Jim* and resolves positively the question of Jim's inclusion within that circle (supported by Conrad in the "Author's Note").

This experience becomes foundational for the emergence of an ethics of honour grounded in loyalty to oneself, a sense of duty, and, ultimately, solidarity as its overarching principle. Admittedly, the deck of a ship can hardly be regarded as an ideal space of mutual understanding; in a number of Conrad's works it serves instead as a site of conflict, where selfish interests collide, disputes escalate, and, in extreme cases, even cannibalism occurs (*The End of the Tether*, *Falk*, *Because of the Dollars*, *The Shadow-Line*, among others). Yet it remains the case that, if there exists an environment in which professional and collective duty is capable of prevailing over

[3] It is true, in some of these cases the concept of honour is not clearly articulated by the characters. But their behaviour corresponds to the ideal of honour, that is, loyalty to one's principles despite any practical consequences (see: [Naider, 1997, pp. 154, 157].

[4] "… the decision to become a sailor and live a life filled with risks and exacting duties, subject to a paramilitary code of behaviour, was in a sense quite consistent with Conrad's background" [Naider, 1997, p. 160].

individualism and personal weakness, it is precisely this one–where the world is reduced to the scale of the ship, and humanity to that of the crew (*Youth*, *Typhoon*, *The Shadow-Line*).

Perhaps the most straightforward formulation of this seaman's ethos—the belief in the exceptional demands and standards of the profession, verging on a certain disdain for those who have never gone to sea—is articulated by one of the characters in *Chance*: "*If we at sea… went about our work as people ashore high and low go about theirs we should never make a living. No one would employ us. And moreover no ship navigated and sailed in the happy-go-lucky manner people conduct their business on shore would ever arrive into port*" [Conrad, 1985, p. 3].

Conrad, however, is far from absolutising his ideal of honour. What distinguishes the British-Polish writer is his acute awareness of its historical and social limitations. Honour, like the two-faced Janus, has two faces: an internal dimension (conscience) and an external one (reputation), corresponding to its private and public aspects [Najder, 1997, p. 154].

Moreover, the concept of honour occupies an ambivalent position within the system of values. On the one hand, it remains one of its core organizing principles; on the other, it has been significantly mythologised in its historical functioning. This mythologisation is largely the result of a gradual shift from the pragmatic pole of culture—where notions such as "treaties of honour" or a "word of honour" once functioned as effective regulators of vassal obligations, commercial agreements, and political alliances—to a different domain, governed by informal norms of tradition and custom, and ultimately by individual conceptions of moral obligation.

As a consequence of this shift, honour increasingly comes to be shaped by subjective interpretations and inherited conventions, so that its "rules" often belong less to the sphere of social regulation than to that of class-bound and personal mythology.

If in *Lord Jim* honour is represented primarily in its internal dimension—as an absolute of conscience—then in *Nostromo*, written four years later and likewise structured around the concept of honour, the emphasis shifts toward its external dimension. It is precisely this displacement of the concept into a more overtly mythologised plane that finds artistic embodiment in the characters whose modes of existence and functions within the fictional world are determined by their relation to honour.

Accordingly, the central issue is not simply the characters' adherence to, or violation of, a set of generally accepted rules. Rather, what emerges is a pluralistic field of diverse and often incompatible value systems, largely individualised, each governed by its own conception of honour and its own internal logic of conduct.

The intention to depict a plurality of perspectives and interacting consciousnesses is already figuratively encoded in the title and, correspondingly, in the protagonist's nickname, which combines the meanings of collectivity and individuality, subjectivity and objectivity—"our man." The figure thus emerges simultaneously as a shared construct and as a distinct personal identity.

The problem of honour is most intensely concentrated in this central character, whose trajectory—from the impeccable fulfilment of the role of an exemplary, honourable individual to his eventual "fall"—constitutes perhaps the most dramatically charged line of the novel.

It is, however, more productive to regard the artistic world of the novel as pluralistic from the outset and, accordingly, to interpret the anthroponym "Nostromo" not merely as the protagonist's nickname, but as a concept of broader, generalising significance. In a certain sense, each character in the novel may be understood as a "nostromo," insofar as each is defined in relation to a particular "we" to which he or she belongs–a political or sociocultural community, a nation, or a family with its own internal phobias, myths, and moral imperatives.

From this collective framework, specific patterns of behaviour are transmitted to the individual, and reputation is formed—often to such an extent that, both in the eyes of the community and in the character's own self-perception, it effectively supplants individual identity. As in the case of Henry James, Conrad tends to leave the inner personality of his characters—Gian Battista Fidanza, Decoud, Antonia, old Viola, Gould—largely inaccessible, as if enclosed within a "thing-in-itself." They appear primarily as "other people's" figures, whose identities are mediated through social roles and reputational constructs. At first glance, this might seem to contradict the earlier thesis concerning the individually mythologised value-worlds of Conrad's characters, and instead to align his method with the "theory of environment" characteristic of naturalism. Yet both the apparent contradiction and the resemblance are ultimately superficial.

The crucial difference lies, first of all, in the fact that Conrad's characters, even in their apparent "environmental conditioning," are constituted as constructs of perception–figures mediated through the viewpoints of others. These viewpoints are conveyed by a narrative that does not proceed from an objectivist position, but rather articulates a plurality of subjective perspectives, voiced both by the implied author and by "unreliable" narrator-figures such as Captain Mitchell. By assigning the subtitle *A Seaboard Tale* to the novel, Conrad foregrounds precisely this dimension: the story of *Nostromo* unfolds not within a stable, conventionally objective reality, but primarily within a discursive space composed of reports, conjectures, rumours, official narratives (including the grand mythologies propagated by the press), and the subjective confessions contained in the characters' letters.

Moreover, in his portrayal of character, Conrad is concerned less with passive environmental conditioning than with the activation of individual traits in the course of a conscious engagement with the surrounding world and its values. The subject realises and articulates the "I" primarily through interaction with the "we," as though fashioning the self in response to the implicit "demand" of the community, which anticipates a certain mode of conduct.

At the same time, each character constructs a distinct "automyth." Gould, for instance, mythologises himself and his enterprise in accordance with an "Anglo-Saxon" ethos of duty and justice; Viola sustains the mythic vision of a unified Italy while preserving within his household a traditional Italian value system; the Doctor shapes his self-conception in line with his ambiguous reputation and, in contradiction to his own nature, assumes the role of a "traitor" as a form of conscious self-abasement ("*The role of a traitor was incompatible with his nature and horrified him. He accepted this sacrifice as a form of self-abasement. He bitterly told himself: 'I am the only one fit for this dirty work.' And he believed it*" [Conrad, 1994, p. 362]).

What is crucial here is that Conrad creates the impression that his characters are not merely determined by their environment but actively construct individualised mythologies as a response to it. It is precisely this feature that distinguishes his use of environment from that characteristic of naturalism. Indeed, one may go further and suggest that such individual mythologisation paradoxically neutralises environmental determinism: the influence of the environment appears as the outcome of a quasi-voluntary process, a tacit "will" to be shaped by it, whereby dependence itself becomes an integral component of self-creation and of the formation of the corresponding "automyth."

In particular, Nostromo is guided in all his actions by a single imperative: the desire to be well spoken of. For a considerable period, an unblemished, almost radiant reputation constitutes the sole value by which he orients himself. As a result, Gian Battista Fidanza becomes the embodiment of the paradox outlined above: his vivid individuality manifests itself not through an autonomous life strategy, but through the maximal fulfillment of social expectations.

Paradoxically, it is precisely while being a "man without qualities" that he most fully realises himself as a "man of honour"—a figure to whom one may entrust a treasure without hesitation, confident that, even at the cost of his life, the "faithful Nostromo" will carry out the task and justify the trust of those whose man he is.

His "rebirth," which is simultaneously a loss of honour, occurs at the moment when he permits himself, for the first time, an independent evaluation of the community he has hitherto served. This act of "revaluation" leads him to experience that community as both betraying and abandoning him. Yet his fundamental nature—to belong to someone, to be "another's man"—remains unchanged: the repudiation of former masters necessitates the emergence of a new one. That new master becomes the silver treasure itself, which henceforth determines his actions no less completely than did, in the earlier phase, his desire to live up to the reputation of a "man of honour."

The motif of the hero's "rebirth" is rendered in a transparently mythologised form. Nostromo's final act in his former capacity—the gesture of giving away all the money he has to an old woman—is not merely an instance of spontaneous generosity, but a demonstrative and symbolically charged act. In this scene, his previous role as protector and benefactor is, as it were, fixed and brought to completion: "*The last act he did in Sulaco was in complete harmony with his vanity and therefore was completely natural. Nostromo gave his last money to an old woman who was moaning under the arch of the ancient gate, heartbroken and exhausted by the search for her*

son and fear for him. Done secretly and without witnesses, this act was nevertheless bright and glorious, completely in the spirit of the reputation of the capataz of the cargadores"[5] [Conrad, 1994, pp. 341–342].

Although performed "secretly and without witnesses," this gesture is profoundly indicative, for it functions as a form of self-confirmation: Nostromo enacts, for himself, the role of the impeccable hero. It may thus be interpreted as a kind of farewell performance, retrospectively summing up and consolidating the life of the former exemplary "man of honour."

At the same time, the figure of the old woman evokes archetypal associations with fate, while the "arch of the ancient gate" operates as a liminal image, marking a threshold the hero is in the process of crossing. Her lament for her son foreshadows Nostromo's own impending misfortune. Significantly, similarly mythologised female figures appear in *Heart of Darkness*, where the role of quasi-parcae is performed by the ominous knitting women in the Company's offices.

Conrad likewise mythologises the emergence of the "new Nostromo," who appears to pass through a symbolic death and undergo a form of rebirth, becoming so radically transformed that he can be likened to nothing but a creature not yet initiated into the categories of good and evil, honour and dishonour: "*Nostromo woke up after a fourteen-hour sleep in his lair among the tall grasses and stood up to his full height. He stood knee-deep in the whispering waves of the green, holding his breath, as if he had just been born. Handsome, strong and flexible, he threw his head back, straightened his arms, stretched, slowly bending at the waist, and lazily yawned at the top of his voice, showing his white teeth—as natural and free from evil at the moment of awakening as a majestic and unconscious wild beast*" [Conrad, 1994, p. 340].

At the same time, mythological motifs become increasingly pronounced in the final sections of the novel. Thus, the motif of the "cursed treasure," which, in the perception of the Sulaco community, has at a certain point sunk to the bottom of the sea, scarcely requires detailed commentary in terms of its correspondence to the widely disseminated theme of the "Nibelung treasure," popularised at the turn of the century by Richard Wagner, since it is explicitly foregrounded in the text itself ("… *the good and evil spirits that hovered around the cursed treasure understood perfectly well that the silver of São Tomé had now acquired a slave who would be faithful to it until death*" [Conrad, 1994, p. 412]), and is directly articulated by Mrs. Gould: "*Aren't there enough treasures without it to make everyone in the world unhappy?*" [Conrad, 1994, p. 456].

Likewise, the mythopoetic dimension of the problem of honour in Conrad's novel is marked by a pronounced, at times sombre, irony that accompanies the vicissitudes of the characters' honour and their respective reputations. Nostromo's case is particularly illustrative in this regard. For those around him, he remains, in effect, an irreproachable "man of honour" up to the very end. The drama of his situation, therefore, lies in the fact that he alone is conscious of his fall–from the "absolutely incorruptible" and brilliant *capataz de cargadores* to the slave of the cursed treasure.

In the process, he constructs a new self-justifying automyth, according to which he has been betrayed by his former masters and is thus morally entitled to take revenge by appropriating their silver. The earlier automyth of the "flawless," "faithful" Nostromo—epithets reiterated in the narrative with an insistence that inevitably recalls Shakespeare's "honest Iago," thereby investing them with an ironic resonance—is replaced by the automyth of Nostromo the betrayed avenger.

Significantly, within this internal "revaluation of values" that underlies the transition from one automyth to another, the category of honour itself appears to lose its regulatory force. Nostromo neither forfeits his external reputation nor experiences himself as inwardly dishonourable; rather, he substitutes one interpretative framework of his existence for another. From his own perspective, he has not lost honour—indeed, he may be said to have preserved it, insofar as his act of revenge restores, in his eyes, a moral balance.

The irony, however, consists in the fact that, while remaining undetected by others, he nonetheless dies precisely as a violator of the code of honour. Old Viola, mistakenly identifying

[5] The symbolism of this episode is even more evident when compared with Nostromo's first striking act–with his theatrical gesture in front of the crowd–aimed not at an old woman, but at a young beauty. He gives her–as a sign of love–all the silver buttons from his luxurious outfit, probably covered with silver jewelry as well. The entire life of the "first" Nostromo seems to be placed between these two gestures of giving, aimed at the young woman and then at the old woman. Within these boundaries he is not yet dependent on silver and easily gets rid of it, but cannot live and be himself without the admiration of others.

him in the darkness, fires the fatal shot and thus assumes the role of a literally blind agent of fate. In seeking to defend his daughter's honour against an imagined offender, he unwittingly becomes the instrument of a higher, almost mythological justice that directs the punitive blow toward the actual transgressor.

Yet the very plot of this "blind" justice is itself subjected to further ironic subversion. The apparent justice of the retribution remains effectively invisible: in the eyes of the community, the "shining robes" of the slain Nostromo remain unsullied, and the true motives and hidden impulses that governed his actions never come to light. Moreover, this seemingly just retribution—as well as Nostromo's "fall" and the self-justification–proves to be such only at a superficial level. At this point, the novel introduces yet another ironic shift of moral perspective. In his final dialogue with Mrs. Gould, Nostromo speaks with the voice of an awakened and troubled conscience, thereby once again "cancelling" himself—this time in the guise of Nostromo the avenger. Mrs. Gould's response is equally significant: her understanding, coupled with a refusal to condemn, and her unconditional acceptance of Nostromo's confession, elevate the novel's value system to a different plane. Here, the logic of guilt and punishment, as well as the traditional code of honour and its retributive mechanisms, ceases to operate. In its place, a different ethical framework emerges—one grounded not in judgement, but in compassion and a form of redemptive sympathy[6].

But this, in turn, does not constitute a general law governing the novel's entire artistic world; rather, it represents the value position of a single—albeit highly significant—character. The positions of others diverge from it: old Viola, "encapsulated" within his Italian patriarchal code of family honour; and Dr. Monigham, who seeks to bring Nostromo to justice and expose him as a dishonest swindler, yet does so from motives that are far from irreproachable—not out of a sense of justice, but rather from jealousy.

All this clearly places the concept of honour in the novel under the sign of relativity, continually subjecting it both to mythologization within the individual value systems of the characters and to ironic "re-evaluation" as subjective positions shift or evolve over time. As a result, the reader is confronted with meanings associated with "honour" that are at once sharply foregrounded and yet remarkably unstable and fluid. This shimmering polyphony corresponds fully to a modernist logic that eschews ready-made meanings and definitive "moral conclusions," instead constructing a deeply problematized axiological and semantic space in which the reader is invited to formulate their own understanding of the novel, its characters, and the values they embody or undermine.

Even less overtly than in *Nostromo*, the issue of honour emerges in the *The Duel*—despite the apparent clarity and transparency of its plot as it relates to this concept. Conrad is clearly not among those authors who construct a linear and "transparent" problematic and axiological field in their works. Rather, in this case, the concept of honour operates within a wholly conventionalised artistic world which, owing to specific features of its poetics, may be interpreted as a kind of macro-metaphor.

This interpretation is suggested both by the schematic quality of the plot and by the strategy underlying the construction of the central characters. In contrast to the finely nuanced and multilayered figures found elsewhere in Conrad's oeuvre, the d'Hubert—Feraud pair in *The Duel* appears strikingly simplified. Their defining traits are reiterated and rendered in highly generalised terms, while their life strategies remain unchanged throughout the narrative. As a result, they seem to project a persistent sense of unreality, emphasising both their extreme conventionality and the anecdotal character of the events in which they are involved–despite the author's reliance on an actual incident from the history of the Napoleonic Wars as the basis for the plot.

[6] Significantly, the episode involving Nostromo's "absolution" by such an apparently unquestionable moral arbiter as Emilia Gould has a kind of mirror counterpart: another seemingly impeccable judge, Teresa, the wife of old Viola, delivers a contrary "verdict" on Nostromo. On her deathbed, she foretells his shame and downfall, accusing him of having "sold his soul" to those whose interests he has so faithfully served. The parallelism is striking: two deaths–Teresa's and Nostromo's; two deathbed confessions (Nostromo's confession to Mrs. Gould and Teresa's unrealised confession, frustrated by Nostromo's refusal to summon a priest); two women who function as moral "judges" of the protagonist; and two fundamentally opposed evaluative positions, from which the hero appears, in one case, condemned, and in the other, absolved. Taken together, these elements establish a set of axiological poles between which Nostromo's life is framed in the judgments of others. In this way, the episode once again foregrounds Conrad's characteristic strategy of presenting the hero not as a stable, self-identical entity, but as a figure constituted through perception–through the refracting consciousnesses of other characters.

All this invites a non-literal reading of the story of the two duelists, in the broadest—archetypal—sense, as a variant of the twin myth. However, identifying this universal substratum in Conrad's anecdote about a lifelong "duel of honour" requires further specification if it is to yield more substantive interpretations–of which, naturally, there may be several.

In developing the interpretation proposed below, it is useful to recall the plurality of consciousnesses through which Conrad typically constructs the semantic texture of his works. This approach aligns with a modernist narrative logic often traced back to Henry James, particularly his emphasis on multiple points of view and the diffusion of consciousness within the structure of the text. If this feature of the subjective and semantic organization of Conrad's prose is taken as a point of departure, then *The Duel* may be interpreted as a kind of "collision of consciousnesses"—that is, as a metaphor for the tension between the conscious, rational, "Apollonian" and the unconscious, irrational, "Dionysian" elements within the structure of the human personality.

Such an interpretation is suggested, first of all, by the stability and recurrence of the defining traits attributed to the two antagonists throughout the narrative. Thus, d'Hubert is consistently presented as a figure of extreme prudence, whose actions are grounded in rational calculation. Logic, reason, and coherence also serve as the criteria by which he evaluates others—from his approval of the reasoning of the young woman who answers the door at Feraud's house, to his repeated references to his sister, whose intelligence and prudence he most keenly misses during their separation.

Accordingly, in d'Hubert's perception, Feraud appears from the outset as a "madman," a "wild beast." The narrator's characterisation of Feraud likewise persistently emphasises his impulsiveness, his incapacity for rational conduct, and the uncontrollability of his rage, as well as the blind irrationality of his actions—such as his slander of d'Hubert—driven by an unmotivated and unrestrained, passionate hatred of his antagonist.

Even in the contrasting physical descriptions of the characters, the same logic of opposition between the "Apollonian" d'Hubert and the "Dionysian" Feraud is carefully maintained. The former is associated with fair hair and light eyes, harmonious features, and a tall, slender build; the latter, by contrast, is marked by short stature, irregular features, and coarse black hair, likened to a "horsehair cap."

Against this backdrop, it appears entirely consistent that the fateful conflict between the two men is initiated through an exchange of remarks in which the opposition between "meaning" and "nonsense" is first articulated:

"Oh, do be reasonable!" remonstrated Lieut. D'Hubert.

"I am reasonable! I am perfectly reasonable!" retorted the other with ominous restraint. "I can't call the general to account for his behaviour, but you are going to answer me for yours."

"I can't listen to this nonsense," murmured Lieut. D'Hubert, making a slightly contemptuous grimace.

"You call this nonsense? It seems to me a perfectly plain statement. Unless you don't understand French."

"What on earth do you mean?

"I mean," screamed suddenly Lieut. Feraud, "to cut o your ears to teach you to disturb me with the general's orders when I am talking to a lady!" [Conrad, 2001, pp. 13–14].

In this dialogue, virtually every line is significant: the "voice of reason," embodied in d'Hubert's speech, seeks to assert its superiority over the "voice of passion" (he dismisses his opponent's words as "nonsense," accompanied by a grimace of mockery), while the "spontaneous" principle, embodied in Feraud, reacts with aggressive defiance against what may be termed the "tyranny of reason." This latter is symbolically associated with general's orders, of which d'Hubert functions as a personification. Moreover, the reference to the lady, together with the understated yet perceptible erotic—or even faintly satyric—coloring of the early episodes involving Feraud, further reinforces the "Dionysian" dimension of his characterisation. Thus, the young maidservant—clearly infatuated with Feraud—opens the door to d'Hubert holding Feraud's trousers in her hands, and her remarks are tinged with jealousy toward the lady in whose drawing room Feraud is at that moment present.

Echoing Friedrich Nietzsche's reflections on the fallacy of the very "tyranny of reason" and the dangers inherent in underestimating the Dionysian principle, the narrator introduces a note of irony in describing d'Hubert's self-assurance as he sets out in search of Feraud, treating the

task as a mere trifle. The mission itself–to deliver the general's order placing Feraud under house arrest—acquires a distinctly symbolic dimension, suggesting an attempt by reason to assert total control over the personality by confining the unconscious and the spontaneous, as it were, to an inner "underground."

The same logic of confrontation between the rational and the elemental principles is evident in the duel episodes themselves. In the account of the first encounter, the narrator repeatedly foregrounds the activity and lucidity of d'Hubert's thought, effectively reconstructing its course through passages of internal focalization, and ultimately attributing his success in this round to "the length of his arm and the coolness of his head." By contrast, Feraud is consistently framed through a network of zoomorphic similes: he appears as a "beast," a ferocious tiger, an "animal." Even his "lady," like a "little wildcat," throws herself at d'Hubert and scratches his face—a detail that may be read as an ironic allusion to the frenzy of the Maenads, the mythical companions of Dionysus.

Accordingly, it is through reason that d'Hubert ultimately prevails in the final duel, having outwitted his opponent. This victory, as we understand it, brings the long cycle of violence to an end, leaving d'Hubert definitively in control of the situation. In metaphorical terms, it may be read as the triumph of the conscious over the unconscious, of reason over passion, of the rational over the elemental. It is therefore both logical and deeply ironic that such a triumph occurs only in later life, when one might be expected to cast off the "burden of passions" after a lifetime spent struggling against them.

Yet Joseph Conrad the ironist does not allow the narrative to conclude on this note (as is likewise the case in *Nostromo*). Having overcome Feraud, d'Hubert falls under the sway of a new passion—not hatred, but love. It is precisely after his victory that he begins to experience, in his feelings for his fiancée, that same uncontrollable and irrational element previously alien to his rationalistic nature. Thus, even in defeat, Feraud seems to exact a kind of revenge within d'Hubert's inner life. The result is a final ironic reversal that exposes the illusory nature of any supposed definitive mastery over the unconscious, suggesting instead the persistent limits of rational control within the human personality.

It is also worth noting that, in narrating the course of the protagonists' long-standing duel, Conrad—following the logic of twinning—progressively shifts the emphasis from their opposition to their affinity and underlying similarity. The narrator repeatedly underscores that they are equally brave, equally esteemed by their comrades, and that their military careers advance in parallel. This structural equivalence is particularly foregrounded in the description of their third duel, which acquires a distinctly parodic resonance in relation to the epic canon, with its recurrent motif of prolonged combat between evenly matched adversaries—whether Cú Chulainn and Ferdiad, or Yvain and Gawain–heroes who battle until exhaustion, only to resume the fight the following day despite their grievous wounds. It is therefore hardly accidental that this episode mobilises symbolic numerology: the third duel itself, and the seven successive charges the protagonists launch at one another before being separated by their comrades, both gravely wounded and utterly exhausted.

As the plot develops, the characters increasingly reveal a reciprocal dependence. It is this latent interconnection that drives Feraud to persist in his pursuit of d'Hubert, even as he remains unaware of the deeper nature of his obsessive hostility. Conversely, it compels d'Hubert to intervene in order to save Feraud from imprisonment–and possibly death–and later leads him, with some astonishment, to recognise within himself a curious, almost involuntary sentimentality toward his adversary.

Thus, the protagonists' inability—and deep reluctance—to kill one another in *The Duel* can be understood naturally within the story's metaphorical framework. The antagonistic principles within human nature, though in constant conflict, are ultimately incapable of destroying one another; they are condemned to coexist eternally, and their "love-hate" dynamic recurs across literature and art in a kind of "eternal return." In this sense, the eccentric provincial gossips who speculated that d'Hubert's and Feraud's inexplicable enmity stemmed from past lives were not entirely wrong.

But what role does honour–and its "rules"—play here? Perhaps it serves as a prompt to reflect on the thin fabric of culture and its rituals, such as the dueling code, which barely conceals the

deeper and more chaotic currents of human nature. It is also telling that Conrad's ardent champion of honour is not the "Apollonian" d'Hubert but the "Dionysian" Feraud. From this perspective, one is led to consider how the refined constructs of culture—like the idea of honour—can fall prey to instinct, and how social regulatory mechanisms can be transformed into instruments of uncontrollable hatred. In any case, when read metaphorically, the concept of honour in *The Duel* appears far less straightforward than a literal reading would suggest, which would reduce the story to a flat illustration of one hero's mistaken understanding of honour and the other's false fear for his reputation.

Thus, we can trace a highly revealing trajectory in Joseph Conrad's understanding of the concept of honour: *Lord Jim* (1900) → *Nostromo* (1904) → *The Duel* (1908) → the Preface to *Lord Jim* (1916), forming a broad semantic arc. Honour moves from its elevation to the centre of an ethical system to its relativisation, the exposure of its inner duality, and even its apparent unviability in a world marked by the collapse of the universal system of values—before being reasserted, seemingly illogically, as the foundation of a quasi-universal, idealistic (or even elitist) ethics.

The following constitute the principal methods of artistic realisation of the concept of honour in the diversity of its authorial interpretations: (1) the construction of a specific type of hero, one that both correlates with the "Nietzschean" figure of turn-of-the-century literature and diverges from it through a nostalgic orientation toward the past and its value system—within which the notion of honour occupies a central place and is experienced by Conrad's protagonists with particular intensity and individuality; (2) the concentration of ideas about honour primarily within the inner world of the characters and their individual systems of value mythology, accompanied by the activation of the text's mythopoetic dimension as a whole; the representation of honour across the full breadth of its semantic range through a plurality of character perspectives; (3) the use of plot-based and characterological conventionality in the construction of the "honour plot," whereby the concept of honour undergoes radical relativisation; (4) the complex organisation of the narrative, in which the affirmation of the ideal of honour, grounded in an elitist logic, is paradoxically achieved through the mediated expression of the author's sceptical stance.

The ideal of honour is, on the one hand, a manifestation of individualism—a self-sufficient ethical system governing both values and conduct; yet, on the other, this moral autonomy emerges out of solidarity. Let us recall Marlow's enigmatic words, his final description of Jim: "He was one of us"—words echoed sixteen years later by Joseph Conrad himself at the close of the preface to the novel. This "we" suggests less certainty than ambiguity. Yet it constitutes both the conclusion and the ultimate aim of Marlow's narrative, which is not undertaken for the entertainment of his listeners, but offered to their judgment as an intense ethical inquiry into the moral grounds of Jim's motives and actions. Marlow's story thus assumes the form of a kind of apology, culminating in an ethical justification of Jim—who has, in effect, passed sentence upon himself—through his inclusion in this highly indeterminate category of "us," a category at once open and severely limited ("a type of no wide commonness").

At this point, we can say with certainty only that this "we" includes at least two persons. Logically, it must encompass Marlow's listeners; otherwise, the narrative would fail as a communicative act and would instead amount to a form of auto-communication. Sixteen years later, Conrad's preface reappropriates Marlow's words, thereby introducing a third figure into this indeterminate community—the author himself—and extending the validity of this "we" from the fictional to the empirical world. In this sense, the closing words of the preface may be understood, if not formally then functionally, as a performative act that brings this community of "we" into being as an unconditional, real collectivity. Accordingly, this community can also be seen as open to readers, who are implicitly invited to join the ranks of Marlow's listeners and Jim's judges, but who must first resolve for themselves the question of their own inclusion among "us."

Thus, the ideal of honour presupposes an indivisible unity of two aspects. The complete behavioural autonomy of the subject of honour is simultaneously an act of solidarity, oriented toward–and indeed requiring—the existence of a certain ideal community. In this respect, the ideal of honour is structurally analogous to Kant's categorical imperative. Let us recall its formulations: "…act only in accordance with that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" [Kant, 2013, p. 33]; and, alternatively, "Act so that you treat humanity,

whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never merely as a means" [Kant, 2013, p. 39]. The moral imperative exhibits the same dual structure: on the one hand, it affirms the absolute autonomy of the deciding subject; on the other, it presupposes solidarity, insofar as the criterion of moral judgment—an imagined instance of universal assent—is grounded in an ideal community. The fundamental difference lies in the scope of this community: in Kant, it tends toward the universality of humanity as such, whereas in Conrad it contracts to an almost minimal circle. However, in Conrad this remains an open category; and if we recall that he equates the ethics of honour with "Europeanness," these two ideal communities no longer seem incomparable.

More than a century separates Kant and Conrad. Kant's philosophy—his ethics in particular—looks forward to the future; it unfolds within a paradigm of historical optimism grounded in the belief in the moral improvement of humanity. Conrad, by contrast, can be described, in historical terms, as a pessimist. Even without entering into the question of which epochal transformations—capitalism, colonialism, imperialism—shaped the worldview of this British-Polish writer, the contrast remains striking.

As early as 1905, in his essay *"Autocracy and War,"* Conrad articulated a distinctly "anti-Kantian" vision of modern Europe: "*The trouble of the civilised world is the want of a common conservative principle abstract enough to give the impulse, practical enough to form the rallying point of international action tending towards the restraint of particular ambitions.... Il n'y a plus d'Europe–there is only an armed and trading continent, the home of slowly maturing economical contests for life and death, and of loudly proclaimed world-wide ambitions*" [Conrad, 1924, p. 111].

It is therefore not surprising that the ideal of honour–this cornerstone of Conrad's ethics, his implicit analogue to a "categorical imperative"–look backward to the past, insofar as it reactivates a concept that is itself historically obsolete. Its universalism, articulated in terms of "Europeanness," remains purely ideal in the sense of its unattainability: there neither exists, nor is there meant to exist, any actual community that could function as a model or reference group, a foundation for genuinely universal solidarity.

Instead, we encounter the paradoxical idea of a community composed of "types of no wide commonness," associated with the idea of Europeanness. This striking contradiction—between exclusivity and universality–constitutes a superlogical yet indivisible synthesis of Conradian idealism and scepticism.

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The Concept of Honour in Joseph Conrad: Unfolding, Relativisation, and Ethical Paradox

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The article is focused on the axiological aspect of Conrad's prose in the context of the change of eras and the value crisis of the fin de siècle and the particular type of protagonist in his oeuvre, characterised by certain Nietzschean features such as pursuit spiritual independence in some cases amounting to the conscious construction of an autonomous system of values. Yet, unlike Nietzschean type, he is an idealist, nostalgically looking backward to the past and doomed to death. At the same time, Conrad's worldview combines idealism with skepticism, which creates an ineradicable tension in the writer's best works (in the dialectical sense), so that skepticism appears to be the consequence of Conrad's indestructible—although regularly defeated—idealism. One of the central manifestations of this idealism at the level of moral consciousness of his heroes is the concept of honour, which is the basis of their identity, goal setting and life tasks.

On this basis, *the aim* of the present article is to identify those aspects of the semantic range of the concept of honour in Joseph Conrad's works that are most essential to its interpretation, as well as the principal modes of its artistic realisation within the writer's oeuvre. The study adopts a broadly hermeneutic approach, drawing in particular on close reading and mythopoetic analysis *methods*.

An analysis of Conrad's generalising concept of honour, as articulated in the preface to Lord Jim, reveals the fundamentally idealistic character of his understanding of honour, which remains operative throughout his entire creative career. This concept is linked to an idea of "Europeanness" understood in a non-national and non-geographical sense; accordingly, a character's "Europeanness" is defined by the intensity with which they experience conflicts of honour.

Yet Conrad does not come with a ready-made concept or a fully formed "hero of honour"; rather, he develops and tests this theme progressively from work to work, whereas his starting point is the hero's dishonour or downfall. However, few of them are aware of this alternative and driven by the fear of dishonour; others experience their fall blindly, yet in each case there exists a conscious witness—whether an impersonal narrator or a named one (an "open narrator") —who views them through the prism of this opposition.

Less overtly than in *Nostromo*, the issue of honour emerges in the story *The Duel*, where the concept of honour operates within a wholly conventionalised artistic world which, owing to specific features of its poetics, may be interpreted as a kind of macro-metaphor for the tension between the conscious, rational, "Apollonian" and the unconscious, irrational, "Dionysian" elements within the structure of the human personality, which gives the concept of honour in the artistic world of the story a chimerical and even absurd colouring.

This leads us to the *conclusion* about a dynamic trajectory in Conrad's understanding of the concept of honour: from its elevation to the centre of the ethical system (*Lord Jim,* 1900) to its relativisation, exposing its duality (*Nostromo,* 1904) and even its apparent unviability in a world marked by the collapse of the universal system of values (*The Duel,* 1908), before being reasserted, seemingly illogically, as the foundation of a quasi-universal, idealistic (or even elitist) ethics (the Preface to *Lord Jim,* 1916).

The following constitute the principal methods of artistic realisation of the concept of honour in the diversity of its authorial interpretations: (1) the construction of a specific type of hero, one that both correlates with the "Nietzschean" figure of turn-of-the-century literature and diverges from it through a nostalgic orientation toward the past and its value system—within which the notion of honour occupies a central place and is experienced by Conrad's protagonists with particular intensity and individuality; (2) the concentration of ideas about honour primarily within the inner world of the characters and their individual systems of value mythology, accompanied by the activation of the text's mythopoetic dimension as a whole; the representation of honour across the full breadth of its semantic range through a plurality of character perspectives; (3) the use of plot-based and characterological conventionality in the construction of the "honour plot," whereby the concept of honour undergoes radical relativisation; (4) the complex organisation of the narrative, in which the affirmation of the ideal of honour, grounded in an elitist logic, is paradoxically achieved through the mediated expression of the author's sceptical stance.

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