


MEMORIES OF THE TITANIC TRAGEDY IN CONRAD'S "SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE LOSS OF THE *TITANIC*" AND HARDY'S "THE CONVERGENCE OF THE TWAIN"

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Abstract: "The Convergence of the Twain" (1912) by Thomas Hardy and "Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*" (1912) by Joseph Conrad both discuss the tragedy of the *Titanic* after colliding with an iceberg on 15th April 1912, during its maiden voyage from Southampton to New York. Hardy's poem and Conrad's essay similarly portray the opulence of the ship – which was a symbol of wealth, extravagance, power, and industrialization of Britain – and the ship's ephemeral nature, through the use of irony and juxtaposition. Both writers express their disdain for the pride and importance that their contemporaries placed upon scientific and technological progress. Hardy shows the waste of the ship's magnificence, which is juxtaposed against its present environment, to emphasize the waste of money, technology, and craftsmanship.

In contrast to the sensationalist media exploitation of the sinking of the *Titanic*, Conrad's is a distinctively personal and human voice speaking on behalf of dead brother-seamen who, betrayed by the so-called "unsinkable" ship, and forgotten in the media "babble," have no voice of their own. The modern era – represented by journalistic opportunism, the quest for speed, an emphasis on the commercial and mechanical, the modern foolish trust in material, and impersonality – confronts what Conrad delineates as a code of values inherited from the past, a life dependent upon devotion to a traditional and exacting craft with an emphasis on individual effort and respect for community. For Conrad, to operate a sailing ship was to master a "craft." You had to observe and interpret nature, adapt and react to fast-changing conditions, obey without question, decide without doubt, toil without pause. The craft connotes more than a clutch of skills; it is a code for how to live. It turns a sailing ship into a "fellowship," a community forged by shared values. Conrad is sure that material may fail, and men, too, may fail sometimes; but more often men, when they are given the chance, will prove themselves truer than steel.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, Thomas Hardy, *Titanic* tragedy, trust in material, waste

In the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, science enjoyed greater prestige than ever before. Cedric Watts writes that during this time

two world wars in which scientific knowledge was so ingeniously employed to multiply slaughter and destruction, have shown that advances in science are far from synonymous with advances

in civilisation, and that a decent quality of life is far more dependent on human kindness than on scientific qualifications.¹

When Thomas Hardy and Joseph Conrad were young men, science seemed to be making vast progress in many areas. Astronomy, biology, physics, engineering and industrial technology were transforming Europe and changing the world. New weapons, new machines, new means of transport were becoming increasingly dominant. In the spectacular advances of the capitalist economies, lay some of the reasons for science's prestige and the notion that it was unfailingly objective. As many scientific laws are synthetic propositions, or inductions, they are often generalizations inferred from a number of experimental observations. These are not rigid, binding and permanent laws which need further revision or correction. Some of them may be even scrapped in the light of further observations. We may note that an intermittent, but powerful sense of the universe as a soulless mechanism determining human lives is one of the obvious sources of Hardy's and Conrad's pessimism and their disdain upon scientific and technological progress. Following the new discoveries of science both writers also questioned the established social and universal order. Nevertheless, although they were pessimists in relation to universal order and optimists in their assessment of man, their characters are often tragic, but honest and dignified individuals, who readily make sacrifice of themselves for the benefit of others, but they are eventually defeated by social circumstances or simply by fate. Both writers were concerned with the disappearance of a "timeless order" in human life due to the uncontrolled progress of civilization.

Hardy, like Conrad whom he met in 1907, is the writer who represents the transition from the 19th to the 20th century. He depicted the entrapments of the individual in an uncaring world with pessimism similar to that of Conrad. Joseph Conrad, who questioned traditional moral axioms in fiction, shared Hardy's belief in supremacy of emotional life over rationality. Like existentialist writers, he explored such dilemmas of existence as personal freedom, responsibility, alienation, despair, anxiety and man's quest for authentic selfhood. Conrad also shared Hardy's view of amoral, indifferent universe. Daniel R. Schwarz writes:

According to Conrad, we recall, humankind would like to believe in a providentially ordered world vertically descending from a benevolent God – that is, to believe in an embroidered world. But we actually inhabit a temporally defined horizontal dimension within an amoral, indifferent universe – or what Conrad calls "the remorseless process."²

Inspired by this awareness, Conrad devoted most of his novels to existential themes. He had a strong affinity with Hardy in philosophical themes. His characters, like those of Hardy, are involved in a lonely struggle against adverse circumstances. Conrad, like Hardy, penetrates the obscure corners of the human heart and shows how a man's life could be wrecked, or sustained, by his dreams or illusions.

¹ Cedric Watts, *A Preface to Conrad* (London: Longman, 1982), p. 67.

² Daniel R. Schwarz, *Reading the Modern European Novel since 1900* (New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2018), p. 80.

Born the son of a rural tradesman, Hardy had allegiances to a fast-vanishing way of life, threatened by the forces that issued from the urban world (mechanized agriculture, newspapers, increased material expectations). The tensions between these two viewpoints is often apparent in his novels. He often depicts the passing of old rural order and the emergence of a new order based on modern technology. Norman Page writes that "Hardy's novels move from the depiction of a small and often isolated community in which individuals have an acknowledged and long-established place, to the portrayal of a rapidly changing society characterized by restlessness and mobility."³ In his last novels, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy extended the social perspective to describe with increasing pessimism the transformation of English society in the period of rapid industrialization of the country in the late 19th century. He criticized the dehumanizing effect of mechanization in agriculture, the sterility of modern industrial civilization, which reduced freedom and spontaneity of the individual. As he explored the emergence of modernity in rural England, he focussed on class issues, changing relations between the sexes and the decline of rural traditions. He offers an impressionist view of modern experience, and he does so in a language that ignores convention, which proceeds directly from his way of seeing, from his conviction of the truth and of its availability to the reader.

"The Convergence of the Twain" (1912) by Thomas Hardy and "Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*" (1912) by Joseph Conrad both discuss the tragedy of the *Titanic* after colliding with an iceberg on 15th April 1912, during its maiden voyage from Southampton to New York. "The Convergence of the Twain," which was first printed in the Souvenir Programme of the "Dramatic and Operatic Matinée in Aid of the 'Titanic' Disaster Fund" at Covent Garden on 14th May 1912,⁴ was included in *Satires of Circumstance*, a collection of poems published in 1914. Hardy's poem records a symbolic confrontation between man and nature. Here modern technology (also embraced in other poems that deal with railways, cars or the telegraph) represents "human vanity" and the "Pride of Life." The poem consists of eleven stanzas of three lines. The first five stanzas are descriptions of the *Titanic*, while the last six discuss its present environment to emphasize the waste of money, technology, and craftsmanship. The poem offers a detailed description of the luxuries of the magnificent ship which was a symbol of wealth, power, and industrialization. The "salamandrine fires" jewels, steel chambers, and "opulent mirrors" are representative of the power and wealth of Britain. However, ironically, these images are juxtaposed to the wrecked vessel, which sits in the "solitude of the sea."⁵ In particular, Hardy points to the self-indulgence of the wealthy, to their opulence and sensuality, which receive satiric comment from the undersea creatures, who perceive the incongruity of the presence of that "vaingloriousness" in the depths of the ocean. The "opulent mirrors," in which the richest passengers would have studied their reflections, are useless now.

³ Norman Page, *Thomas Hardy: The Novels* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001), p. 85.

⁴ Geoffrey Harvey, *Thomas Hardy* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 47.

⁵ Thomas Hardy, "The Convergence of the Twain," in Thomas Hardy, *The Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1965), p. 318.

Only the “sea-worms” crawl on and around these same mirrors, and, in contrast to the Titanic’s passengers, these worms are “grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent”⁶ as they do not realize what the mirrors were created for. This shows how very useless the items are today. The jewels, that were once so beautiful and “in joy designed,”⁷ are now sitting at the bottom of the ocean “lightless, all their sparkles bleared and black and blind.”⁸ The grim, moon-eyed fishes “gaze at the gilded gear,”⁹ the furnaces are cold, the mirrors are bleared. These contrasting images also demonstrate Hardy’s contempt of materialism and disdain for the pride and importance that his contemporaries placed upon scientific and technological progress. In the sixth stanza Hardy discusses the possible cause of the disaster. He suggests that the *Titanic* converging with the iceberg was not a coincidence, but rather an event planned by an “Immanent Will.” The Schopenhauerian notion that nature pursues its own course, its will, which is primary and the essence-in-itself, with total disregard for man’s existence, appealed to Hardy. Nature, as a hostile power, in the shape of an iceberg, is the agent of the “Immanent Will,” and the whole poem leads up to the metaphysical as well as physical shock of nature’s violent negation of the ideological equation of technology with human progress. Hardy is telling that humanity will always be at the whim of nature, which has no feeling or care. We are not able to rise above or control the sea regardless of how far our progress has taken us. Nature which acts without any purpose is indifferent, voracious, and egoistic.

Conrad’s essay “Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*,” which was first published in the *English Review*, in May 1912, is a “personal sort of pronouncement, thoughts, reminiscences and reflex[t]ions inspired by the event with a suggestion or two.”¹⁰ The essay, “in its scorching irony reminiscent of his article on ‘The Censor of Plays’,”¹¹ continues Hardy’s negative analysis of modernity. But, in contrast to the sensationalist media exploitation of the sinking of the *Titanic*, Conrad’s is a distinctively personal and human voice speaking on behalf of dead brother-seamen who, betrayed by the so-called “unsinkable” ship, and forgotten in the media “babble,”¹² have no voice of their own. The modern era – represented by journalistic opportunism, the quest for speed, an emphasis on the commercial and mechanical, the modern foolish trust in material, and impersonality – confronts what Conrad delineates as a code of values inherited from the past, a life dependent upon devotion to a traditional and exacting craft with an emphasis on individual effort and respect for community.

⁶ Hardy, “The Convergence of the Twain.”

⁷ Hardy, “The Convergence of the Twain,” p. 319.

⁸ Hardy, “The Convergence of the Twain.”

⁹ Hardy, “The Convergence of the Twain,” p. 319.

¹⁰ *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 5, eds. Laurence Davies et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 56.

¹¹ Jocelyn Baines, *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography* (London: Weidenfeld, 1993), p. 390.

¹² Joseph Conrad, “Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*,” in Joseph Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters* (London: Dent, 1921), p. 223.

Conrad's seafaring career coincided with the rise of steamships at the expense of sail vessels and naïve fascination with and faith in bigness. The writer is sure that the *Titanic* was too large for safety. He writes: "You can't, let builders say what they like, make a ship of such dimensions as strong proportionately as a much smaller one"¹³ and adds that "if that luckless ship had been a couple of hundred feet shorter, she would have probably gone clear of the danger. But then, perhaps, she could not have had a swimming bath and a French café."¹⁴ Conrad criticizes the luxurious interiors and world-class furnishings of the ship:

You build a 45,000 tons hotel of thin steel plates to secure the patronage of, say, a couple of thousand rich people (for if it had been for the emigrant trade alone, there would have been no such exaggeration of mere size), you decorate it in the style of the Pharaohs or in the Louis Quinze style – I don't know which – and to please the aforesaid fatuous handful of individuals, who have more money than they know what to do with, and to the applause of two continents, you launch that mass with two thousand people on board at twenty-one knots across the sea – a perfect exhibition of the modern blind trust in mere material and appliances.¹⁵

Conrad, declares himself "a disciplined man," who has "a natural indulgence for the weaknesses of human institutions."¹⁶ He does not have much good to say about the English Board of Trade which he describes as "having made the regulations for 10,000 ton ships, put its dear old bald head under its wing for ten years, took it out only to shelve an important report, and with a dreary murmur, 'Unsinkable,' put it back again, in the hope of not being disturbed for another ten years..."¹⁷ The maritime authorities are described as "perfectly irresponsible gentlemen, who exist packed in its equable atmosphere softly, as if in a lot of cotton wool, and with no care in the world."¹⁸ Conrad also accuses journalists of sentimentality in romanticizing needless death by calling those who died "heroes," instead of merely victims.

I am not a sentimentalist; therefore it is not a great consolation to me to see all these people breveted as "Heroes" by the penny and halfpenny Press. [...] There is nothing more heroic in being drowned very much against your will, than in dying of colic caused by the imperfect salmon in the tin you bought from your grocer.¹⁹

According to Conrad, "size is to a certain extent an element of weakness. The bigger the ship, the more delicately she must be handled."²⁰ To illustrate his point, Conrad presents an example of the steamship *Arizona*, which in the eighties was one of the "greyhounds of the ocean."²¹ The ship "did run bows on against a very unmis-

¹³ Conrad, "Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*," pp. 217-218.

¹⁴ Conrad, "Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*," p. 219.

¹⁵ Conrad, "Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*," p. 218.

¹⁶ Conrad, "Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*," p. 216.

¹⁷ Conrad, "Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*."

¹⁸ Conrad, "Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*."

¹⁹ Conrad, "Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*," p. 248.

²⁰ Conrad, "Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*," p. 220.

²¹ Conrad, "Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*."

takable iceberg, and managed to get into port on her collision bulkhead.”²² But the *Arizona* was not “5,000 tons register, let alone 45,000, and she was not going at twenty knots per hour.”²³ Both these facts made for safety. Another “very unsensational little incident”²⁴ Conrad witnessed in Sydney. He was standing on the Circular Quay with a Sydney pilot watching a big mail steamship and “admired her lines, her noble appearance, and were impressed by her size as well, though her length [...] was hardly half that of the *Titanic*.”²⁵ The ship “came into the Cove (as that part of the harbour is called),”²⁶ and damaged the quay because it was too big because that “quay was then a wooden one, a fine structure of mighty piles and stringers bearing a roadway.”²⁷ Conrad is sure that

there is a point in development when it ceases to be a true progress – in trade, in games, in the marvellous handiwork of men, and even in their demands and desires and aspirations of the moral and mental kind. There is a point when progress, to remain a real advance, must change slightly the direction of its line. But this is a wide question.²⁸

According to Conrad, discipline on board, “the sort of hold kept on the passengers in the face of the unforgiving sea”²⁹ is indispensable and should be enforced instantly, and carried it out methodically and swiftly A skilled commander “should be able to hold his ship and everything on board of her in the hollow of his hand, as it were.”³⁰ Conrad regrets that “with the modern foolish trust in material, and with those floating hotels, this has become impossible. A man may do his best, but he cannot succeed in a task which from greed, or more likely from sheer stupidity, has been made too great for anybody’s strength.”³¹ To illustrate his point Conrad gives the example of the *Douro*, a ship, which was less than one-tenth the measurement of the *Titanic*, was not “a mass of material gorgeously furnished and upholstered.”³² One day “just before or just after midnight, [...] she was run into amidships and at right angles by a large steamer which after the blow backed out, and, herself apparently damaged, remained motionless at some distance.”³³ The ship remained afloat after the collision for fifteen minutes or thereabouts. In that time the boats were lowered, “all the passengers put into them, and the lot shoved off. There was no time to do anything more. All the crew

²² Conrad, “Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*.”

²³ Conrad, “Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*.”

²⁴ Conrad, “Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*,” p. 221.

²⁵ Conrad, “Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*.”

²⁶ Conrad, “Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*.”

²⁷ Conrad, “Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*.”

²⁸ Conrad, “Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*,” p. 223.

²⁹ Conrad, “Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*,” p. 224.

³⁰ Conrad, “Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*.”

³¹ Conrad, “Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*.”

³² Conrad, “Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*.”

³³ Conrad, “Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*,” p. 226.

of the Douro went down with her, literally without a murmur."³⁴ Conrad explains that the Douro was a ship

commanded, manned, equipped – not a sort of marine Ritz, proclaimed unsinkable and sent adrift with its casual population upon the sea, without enough boats, without enough seamen (but with a Parisian café and four hundred of poor devils of waiters) to meet dangers which, let the engineers say what they like, lurk always amongst the waves; sent with a blind trust in mere material, light-heartedly, to a most miserable, most fatuous disaster.³⁵

For Conrad, to operate a sailing ship was to master a "craft." You had to observe and interpret nature, adapt and react to fast-changing conditions, obey without question, decide without doubt, toil without pause. The craft connotes more than a clutch of skills; it is a code for how to live. It turns a sailing ship into a "fellowship," a community forged by shared values.

What distinguishes seamanship is the special relationship between the sailor and ship. Conrad says that "We remain in everlasting bondage to the productions of our brain and to the work of our hands. A man is born to serve his time on this earth, and there is something in the service being given on other grounds than that of utility. The bondage of art is very exacting."³⁶ In coping with the sea, which is incapable of faith and trust, the seaman must be committed to unremitting vigilance, because the sea is unforgiving in punishing. The unwary fascination of the cruel sea consists in the challenge it poses to man's courage, fidelity and integrity.

The *Titanic* sank causing a sort of surprised consternation: the "blind trust in material and appliances has received a terrible shock."³⁷ Conrad points out that many lives were miserably thrown away for nothing, "or worse than nothing: for false standards of achievement, to satisfy a vulgar demand of a few moneyed people for a banal hotel luxury."³⁸ He is sure that material may fail, and men, too, may fail sometimes; but more often men, when they are given the chance, will prove themselves truer than steel.

But all this has its moral. [...] Yes, material may fail, and men, too, may fail sometimes; but more often men, when they are given the chance, will prove themselves truer than steel, that wonderful thin steel from which the sides and the bulkheads of our modern sea-leviathans are made.³⁹

Conrad shared Hardy's view of indifferent and hostile universe. Images of nature indifferent to man, the magnitude of the world and the fragility of man, are present in Conrad's essay "Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*" and Hardy's poem "The Convergence of the Twain." Nature as a hostile power is present in Conrad's and Hardy's vision of the sea, which is uncertain, arbitrary, featureless, and violent.

³⁴ Conrad, "Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*."

³⁵ Conrad, "Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*," p. 227.

³⁶ Joseph Conrad, *The Mirror of the Sea and A Personal Record* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 25.

³⁷ Conrad, "Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*," p. 218.

³⁸ Conrad, "Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*," p. 223.

³⁹ Conrad, "Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*," p. 228.

The unwary fascination of the cruel sea consists in the challenge it poses to man's courage, fidelity and integrity. Conrad's treatment of nature suggests that he views it as a symbolic framework or a power. The vast solitude of waters become factors that affect or shape the destiny of his heroes. In contrast to Hardy, for whom Nature, as a hostile power, in the shape of an iceberg, is the agent of the "Immanent Will," Conrad's view is entirely secular, and he presents the natural world as a blind struggle for survival, transformed, in human life, into an intelligent battle for supremacy. Hardy's poem and Conrad's essay similarly portray the opulence of the ship – which was a symbol of wealth, extravagance, power, and industrialization of Britain – and the ship's ephemeral nature. Both writers concentrate on their contemporaries' foolish trust in science and technology which, according to them, does not always contribute to human progress.

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