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When considering Joseph Conrad's literary style, much has already been said of the shared qualities between Conrad and stylistic decadence. The Impressionistic technique of *fin-de-siècle* writers, artists and musicians has been readily identified in much of Conrad's prose. Ian Watt's concept of Conrad's "delayed decoding," representing a form of Impressionistic writing that "takes us directly into the observer's consciousness," has become one of the enduring landmarks of the study of *Heart of Darkness* (1899) at undergraduate level. [1] Writing a decade later than Watt, Joseph William Martin explored the "decadent styles and paradigms" in Conrad's prose, along with the "decadent temperament and values" of his characters in "The Shock of Trifles: Decadence in the Novels of Joseph Conrad." [2] This acceptance of decadence in Conradian technique is now fully established within literary criticism. It is, however, when one attempts to link Conrad to the decadents themselves that one strays into more treacherous waters.

There is one major piece of evidence suggesting a link between Conrad and the decadent circles of the 1890s in Victorian Britain, namely Conrad's contribution to *The Savoy* (1896) – a publication which marked the high-water mark of decadence in periodical format. The magazine appeared as a rival to *The Yellow Book* following the latter's expulsion of Aubrey Beardsley in the wake of Oscar Wilde's scandalous downfall in 1895. Along with Beardsley, the leading lights of the avant garde who had given colour to John Lane's Yellow Book, including Arthur Symons, Max Beerbohm, Hubert Crackenthorpe, Will Rothenstein, Walter Sickert, and Joseph Pennell, all defected to *The Savoy*. They were joined by a significant number of the previous generation of decadent writers and artists responsible for manifesto-style periodicals voicing and embodying decadent

themes, such as Selwyn Image, Ernest Dowson and Lionel Johnson from *The Century Guild Hobby Horse* (1884-94) and Charles Haslewood Shannon of *The Dial* (1889-97). Hence *The Savoy* represents not only a concentration of decadent styles and themes far above that of its direct predecessor, but its central body of writers and artists consists of a coterie of decadent artistes in sharp contrast to the *Yellow Book*'s more varied and even contradictory stable. [3]

Conrad's short story "The Idiots" was given pride of place as the opening piece for *The Savoy* number six in October 1896, suggesting to the casual reader a certain level of intimacy with this decadent coterie. However, Conrad's letters belie such a relationship. Arthur Symons, editor of *The Savoy*, used Edward Garnett as an intermediary in his request for work from Conrad, [4] and did not actually meet Conrad until 1911. [5] Furthermore, Conrad's reply to Symons' request does not suggest any ideological connection with the magazine at all: "If the 'Savoy' thing asks for my work – why not give it to them? I understand they pay tolerably well (2g[uinea]s per page?)," after "The Idiots" was refused for publication by *Cosmopolis*. [6] Following the story's publication in October 1896, Conrad is led to write to Unwin again, commenting on the positive reception of the story, but complaining that "Smithers [publisher of *The Savoy*] had not the courtesy to send me a copy of his magazine. I shall write to him." [7] Over the next three months, Conrad's letters to Unwin display the fact that Smithers was late making payment for the story, and when he finally did, Conrad complained that the cheque was for less than he expected. [8]

Clearly Conrad was not on intimate terms with the *Savoy*'s inner circle. A letter to Edward Noble regarding the *Yellow Book* in 1895 re-enforces this feeling of otherness: "Those People are very aest[h]etic very advanced and think no end of themselves. They are certainly writers of talent – some of very great talent." [9] In displaying his distance from both the *Savoy* in 1896 and the early *Yellow Book* of 1895, Conrad does not appear to be involved with the leading British decadent short story writers on any significant level. [10] However, the letter to Noble does display the fact that Conrad deeply admired much of their writing,

notwithstanding their pomposity. Indeed, Jessie Conrad confirms that “Arthur Symons [...] was the only poet [whom] Conrad read with pleasure.” [\[11\]](#) Furthermore, after the two men met during the early twentieth century, they became quite close friends. In his work *Notes on Joseph Conrad: With Some Unpublished Letters* (1925), Symons displays the intimacy between the two writers using excerpts of Conrad’s letters; and in his criticism, Symons clearly aligns Conrad himself, as well as his prose techniques and style, with the decadents. Verlaine, Rabelais, Balzac, Whistler and Huysmans are all cited by Symons as terms of reference for both Conrad’s works, and his temperament. Of accord with Huysmans’ *A Rebours*, a significant milestone in the development of the decadent novel, Conrad’s work is termed “abnormal,” “morbid” and his novels are said to “have no plots.” In this book Symons is making a clear attempt to link Conrad retrospectively to the circles of late-nineteenth-century European decadence.

By examining his short story “The Idiots” and the groundbreaking novella *Heart of Darkness*, one may illuminate facets of Conrad’s work that not only re-enforce Symons’ posthumous critique, but also reveal very specific connections with other decadent texts. In particular, Ernest Dowson’s 1893 short story “The Statute of Limitations” appears to have had a profound influence on Conrad’s own creative process.

Ernest Dowson was a regular contributor of both poetry and short stories to the *Century Guild Hobby Horse* since 1891, and after contributing to only one issue of the *Yellow Book* in 1894, he became a mainstay of *The Savoy*. Next to Symons, he is the most frequent contributor of written works in the magazine. Dowson had worked at the family business, Bridge Dock, a dry dock in Limehouse before being hired as a professional writer in 1895 by Leonard Smithers. [\[12\]](#) Although their individual lives differed greatly, this pattern of experience – a shift in professional life from the maritime to the literary – is the first noticeable connection between Dowson and Conrad. It was, no doubt, his experiences with the sea-faring world that provided the frame for Dowson’s morbid tale of a

doomed relationship between a colonial trader and his English bride to be, “The Statute of Limitations.”

The decadent trope of morbidity suffuses this tale of an imperial merchant whose brooding over the picture of his young betrothed finally forces him to suicide, on account of their fifteen-year separation having supplanted the girl he loved with a woman he has never met. Like Huysmans’ *Des Esseintes*, shut up in his artificial world, Michael Garth’s life is dominated by his brooding, morbid imagination, where the imagined becomes a replacement for any and all possible realities. As with so many of Dowson’s decadent anti-heroes, Garth mirrors the passions of his creator, having fallen in love with a child:[\[13\]](#) The fateful photograph describes

the charming, oval face of a young girl, little more than a child, with great eyes, that one guessed, one knew not why, to be the colour of violets, looking out with singular wistfulness from a waving cloud of dark hair.
(*Hobby Horse* NS. I, 2.)

However, the arrival of a new photograph, years later, causes Garth to reflect on the transition from childhood into womanhood. In a philosophy reminiscent of Ronald Pearsall’s “Cult of the Little Girl,” the image of the child becomes a substitute, or even rival to the mature woman, with whom a sexual relationship would be possible. [\[14\]](#) The beloved’s initial, pre-sexual status is highlighted as Dowson clearly states, “the girl was very young: there was no question of an early marriage” (*Hobby Horse* NS. I, 4). This fact, added to the poverty of the lover, spurs Garth on to an imperial career, but as well as amassing wealth, the intervening years enable him to divorce his child-love from the reality of her adult person utterly: “The notion of the woman, which now she was, came between him and the girl he had loved, whom he still loved with a passion, and separated them” (*Hobby Horse* NS. I, 6).

In a feature fraught with notions of a repressed sexuality, the maturation of the girl into a woman is here likened to death – the young girl is literally killed by the arrival of the mature woman: “Only the girl I loved; it’s as if she had died. Yes,

she is dead, as dead as Helen [...] Our marriage will be a ghastly mockery: a marriage of corpses.” (*Hobby Horse* NS. I, 7.) Such notions are typically decadent in their fusing of love, perverted sexuality and death, intensified and transfigured by the fevered obsessions of a morbid imagination.

Dowson’s work is particularly interesting due to its embodiment of certain developments within decadent fiction. The tale is suffused with identifiably Modernist tropes, most notably a reversal of the values of stereotypical Victorian love-stories, which would have the young lovers estranged by adversity, and through a series of life-enriching trials, lead them a final, permanent union and a “happy ever after.” Such a linear love story is rejected by Dowson, as time here represents regression and a moving away from the ideal state, not one towards it. Rather than the trials set before Garth leading to a fully-rounding of his character, both Garth himself and his beloved are seen to fragment and decay in this morbid philosophy of time, and the Victorian value of constancy in love is turned on its head:

Her heart, how can she give it to me? She gave it years ago to the man I was, the man who is dead. We, who are left, are nothing to one another, mere strangers [...] her constancy [has] given her the one rival, with whom she [can] never compete: the memory of her old self, of her gracious girlhood, which [is] dead. (*Hobby Horse* NS. I, 7-8).

The Victorian family building blocks of steadfast devotion in the woman and a dedication to financial betterment in the man are displayed as leading to psychological trauma and ultimately death, instead of an harmonious and lasting resolution. Awash on a tide of endlessly disjointed time, Garth finally jumps from the ship on his homeward journey, and Dowson-the-poet spins this analogy of time as water, closing his narrative with a description of Garth’s final wish:

he chose to drop down, fathoms down, into the calm, irrecoverable depths of the Atlantic, when he did, bearing with him at last an unspoilt ideal, and

leaving her a memory, that experience could never tarnish, nor custom stale. (*Hobby Horse* NS. I, 8.)

Conrad's "The Idiots" shares many characteristics with the writings of Dowson. Firstly, the tale is framed by an outer-narrator, who uncovers the central story as he travels through Brittany. An overwhelming number of decadent short stories are set in France, and Dowson's in particular use rural France as their settings, notably "Apple Blossom in Brittany" and "A Case of Conscience."

Symons' evaluation of Conrad's inherent morbidity and abnormality is borne out by this overtly morbid tale of a farming couple whose repeated attempts to raise a family to work the land only result in a string of five abnormal, idiot children. The tale gathers a hideous momentum as hope rapidly dwindles, consumed by relentless despair, as life itself is ultimately engulfed by madness and death. The central aspect of the tale – marriage and children – shares many of the techniques seen in Dowson's story. When discussing the idea of marriage, Jean-Pierre tells his father, "It is not for me that I am speaking [...] it is for the land." His father agrees, these are "sensible arguments" for marriage and the union takes place. (Savoy, VI, 13.) As with "The Statute of Limitations," devotion to the family and hard work, the two central pillars of thrifty middle-class conformity, are subverted utterly. Though intended to grow up to become useful land workers, child after child is merely "vacant," an empty shell, useless for any purpose and simply another mouth to feed. Indeed, as Symons remarked, "Abnormality is the keynote" here; [15] the desperate father claims "they are like other people's children" as their dumb faces stare at their parents without recognition. (Savoy, VI, 15.) Jean-Pierre toils endlessly with the earth which now seems to mock him:

it seemed to him that to a man worse than childless there was no promise in the fertility of fields, that from him the earth escaped, defied him, frowned at him like the clouds, sombre and hurried above his head. Having to face alone his own fields, he felt the inferiority of man who passes away before the clod that remains. (Savoy, VI, 20.)

Eventually the tormented wife kills her husband with a pair of scissors and descends into a fevered madness, which ultimately drives her to throw herself from a cliff. The “natural order” is subverted utterly, as, preceding her final fateful journey, her own mother tells her “There is no room for you in this world” and “I wish you had died little.” (*Savoy*, VI, 24-5.)

This harrowing tale of despair, madness and death overturns the traditionally didactic elements of mainstream Victorian fiction. Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* suffers from poverty, is threatened by madness, suffers tremendous injustices, but her steadfast devotion to personal betterment, underpinned by relentless hard work, results in her becoming the lady of her own house. Not so for Jean-Pierre and his wife Susan. There is no divine provenance and hard work does not result in the reward of comfort. Like Dowson’s subversion of the values of financial betterment and loyal devotion to one’s spouse, Conrad’s tale destroys any notion of naturally progressive humanity within a social context.

In these respects, Dowson and Conrad share much in common in terms of theme, style and purpose. However, a closer examination of “The Statute of Limitations” reveals a much more compelling case for Conrad being directly influenced by Dowson’s tale. The closing paragraphs, where Dowson uses the depths of the Atlantic as an analogy for the regression of time is immediately brought to mind in the opening scene of Conrad’s seminal work, *Heart of Darkness*.

The first similarity the two tales share is the use of a frame-narrative to tell the tale of their imperial merchant, tragic heroes. Although Conrad compounds this technique with the use of the un-named narrator recounting Marlow’s tale, Dowson’s earlier, sea-fairing tale-within-a-tale-told matches Conrad’s later technique. Furthermore, both Conrad’s Marlow and Dowson’s narrator become the accidental custodians of their imperial acquaintances’ memory, Kurtz and Garth respectively. Both take the literary remains of the men they met back to their betrothed ladies in England, and both lie to them regarding the manner of their beloved’s death: “I kept a secret from her, my private interpretation of the

accident of his death.” (*Hobby Horse* NS. I, 8.) Although Marlow’s lie – “The last word he pronounced was – your name” – [16] has a greater psychological impact upon the liar (in some respects, the whole of *Heart of Darkness* may be seen as a tale told in order to justify the lie), both narrators deceive the beloved as to the true, horrific nature of their intended husbands’ tortured mental state, as the tellers believe the lie to be more fitting than the truth, within an English setting.

Like the ultimate darkness and disease-ridden madness of Conrad’s “inner station,” Garth’s domain is set within the “pestilential stew” of “the interior” (*Hobby Horse* NS. I, 3). However, the greatest similarity within the texts relates to the characters of Kurtz and Michael Garth themselves. As Kurtz represents for Marlow a problem to be solved, so too does Dowson’s narrator perceive Garth: “As our acquaintance advanced, it took (his character, I mean) more and more the aspect of a difficult problem in psychology, that I was passionately interested in solving.” (*Hobby Horse* NS. I, 2.) Just as the enigmatic Kurtz is pieced together from rumour and chance meeting, such as with the Russian “harlequin,” Garth’s “singular character” is “gathered from hints, which he let drop [...] I guessed more, however, than he told me; and what was lacking, I pieced together later, from the girl to whom I broke the news of his death.” (*Ibid.*) [17] The two men share great success in their imperial endeavours; the “remarkable” Kurtz “Sends in as much ivory as all the others put together,” [18] and to his predecessor Garth, his business (undefined “metal” trading) became “a second nature to him [...] He made money lavishly [...] all his operations were successful, even those, which seemed the wildest gambling” (*Hobby Horse* NS. I, 4). Kurtz’s apparent grounding in the humanities, manifest in his skill as a painter, writer and his “greatest gift [...] his eloquence,” [19] is also a characteristic of Garth:

Morose, reticent, unsociable as he had become, he had still, I discovered by degrees, a leaning towards the humanities, a nice taste such as can only be the result of much knowledge, in the fine things of literature [...] In his rare moments of amiability, he could talk on such matters with verve and originality (*Hobby Horse* NS. I, 3).

This image of Garth as a dark, obsessive man, yet one who might suddenly enlighten his listeners with flashes of intellectual brilliance, matches the “harlequin’s” staccato portrait of his idol, Kurtz, exactly: “We talked of everything! [...] I forgot there was such a thing as sleep. The night did not seem to last an hour. Everything! Everything!” [20]

Marlow’s philosophising in the wake of his dealings with Kurtz, which is the dominant thread throughout the novella, is also present in “The Statute of Limitations,” as the narrator is given cause to dwell upon Garth’s life and death, after delivering his message to the woman. Reflecting upon Garth’s insistence upon calling his fortune in his imperial adventures “luck,” the narrator muses:

When the first shock of his death was past, I could feel that it was after all a solution: with his “luck” to handicap him, he had perhaps avoided worse things than the death he met. For the luck of such a man, is it not his temperament, his character? Can anyone escape from that? (*Hobby Horse* NS. I, 8.)

Such a theorising over the effects of the man’s “character” finds echoes in Marlow’s reflection that in Kurtz, there was always “something wanting in him,” a fatal, tragic flaw which would inevitably bring about his eventual ruin. When Marlow finally meets Kurtz’s intended wife, the likeness between Garth and Kurtz becomes yet more striking. Marlow states that, like Garth, Kurtz wished to marry in England, but “it was his impatience of comparative poverty that drove him out there.” [21] For both Michael Garth and Kurtz, the details of their personalities, their skills, their motivations and experiences are one.

The Hobby Horse would appear to have never enjoyed a particularly wide readership. A. H. Mackmurdo, co-founder of the Guild and the magazine itself admitted that its circulation “never quite reached 500 subscribers.” [22] However, the fact that several Hobby Horsers were also members of the Rhymers’ Club, who met at the Century Guild’s headquarters in Fitzroy Street, Chelsea, popular haunt of the cream of British decadent artistes, meant that the magazine enjoyed a

favourable reputation amongst certain literary and artistic circles during the 1880s and '90s. Furthermore, the fact that "The Statute of Limitations" was republished many times, the first in 1895 by Elkin Mathews in the collection *Dilemmas: Stories and Studies in Sentiment*, adds to the supposition that Conrad did indeed read Dowson's tale, and was greatly influenced by it in the creation of his most famous work.

Hence although Conrad may not be considered a member of the decadent circles during the closing decades of Victorian Britain, it does indeed appear that writers such as Dowson had a profound effect upon his early work. Frederick Karl notes that the writing styles of both Symons and Dowson find parallels in Conrad:

[the writing of] Arthur Symons [...] is full of 'sea moons' and 'dark shivery trees,' 'sickle moons' and 'delicate ivory' – that whole paraphernalia of late-nineteenth-century poets who combined the vivid mannerisms of romanticism with [...] French symbolism. Like Ernest Dowson, that frail figure of washed-out manhood who wrote of pale and faded roses, long-dead leaves, the pallor of ivories, the 'dread oblivion of lost things,' 'languid lashes,' and a vast assortment of exhausted objects, Conrad similarly wrote of the murmuring river behind the white veil, the soft whisper of eddies washing against the riverbank, and the breathless calm of the breeze. As much as Yeats or Dowson, Conrad learned his literary English at the end of the century. [\[23\]](#)

These and other similarities in style are so pronounced in Conrad's work that Arthur Symons posthumous praise for Conrad aligns him fully with the decadents. Though Karl makes the correct connections, his appraisal of the decadent influence on Conrad does not go far enough. It is true that the symbolism and melancholic romanticism of Dowson's poetry shares features with Conrad's prose, but something that has been generally overlooked in much of the twentieth-century assessment of Dowson is that Dowson did not actually consider himself a poet primarily. It was as a writer of prose that Dowson preferred to be known,

[24] and it is within his prose works that one may find the most significant contribution of the decadents to Joseph Conrad's fiction. None of the major biographies of Conrad mention any connection between Conrad's novella and Dowson's short story, and neither do the *Critical Heritage* (1973) for Conrad, nor *The Oxford Reader's Companion to Conrad* (2000). However, it seems highly likely that Conrad would have read "The Statute of Limitations" and that within this tale of a psychologically doomed imperial trader he found the seeds for his most enduring prose work, *Heart of Darkness*.

Endnotes

[1] Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Chatto, 1980) 175. The arrow attack upon Marlow's steamer as it nears Kurtz's Inner Station is most frequently cited to illustrate this technique.

[2] Joseph William Martin, "The Shock of Trifles: Decadence in the Novels of Joseph Conrad," Diss. Purdue University, Indiana, 1990.

[3] For further details, see Matthew Brinton Tildesley, "*The Century Guild Hobby Horse* and Oscar Wilde: A Study of British Little Magazines, 1884-1897.," Diss. Durham University, 2008, particularly chapter 3.5 "*The Savoy - A Homecoming*".

[4] See Joseph Conrad, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, eds. Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies, vol. 1, 8 vols. (Cambridge: CUP, 1983) 292, n. 5.

[5] Arthur Symons, *Notes on Joseph Conrad: With Some Unpublished Letters* (London: Myers, 1925) 13. According to this source, Symons became firm friends with Joseph Conrad in these later years.

[6] Letter to Unwin, 22nd July 1896. Conrad, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad* 293. Conrad had also asked Unwin to "try 'Idiots' for *Cornhill* on 7th June 1896. See *Collected Letters* 286.

[7] 19th October. Conrad, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad* 308-9.

[8] See Conrad, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad* 314, 29.

[9] 18th June 1895. Conrad, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad* 231.

[10] *The Yellow Book* and subsequently *The Savoy* marked an explosion in the successes of fashionable short story writers. For further details see Winnie Chan, "The Economy of the Short Story in British Periodicals of the 1890s," *Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory*, ed. William E. Cain (New York: Routledge, 2007), Tildesley, "*The Century Guild Hobby Horse* and Oscar Wilde ", particularly chapter 3.4 "*The Yellow Book: The Real Chameleon*".

[11] Frederick R. Karl, *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives: A Biography* (London: Faber, 1979) 349.

[12] For further details see James G. Nelson, *Publisher to the Decadents: Leonard Smithers in the Careers of Beardsley, Wilde, Dowson* (High Wycombe: Rivendale, 2000) chapter 7, "Smithers and Ernest Dowson".

[13] Dowson suffered greatly under the emotional burden of unrequited love for the Polish girl Adelaide Foltinowicz ("Missie"), whom he first met in 1891, when he was 24 and she a mere 12. (For further details see Mark Longaker, *Ernest Dowson*, 2nd ed. [Philadelphia: U of Philadelphia P, 1945].) This frame of an older English man falling in love with a young European girl is used in several of his short stories, such as "A Case of Conscience" (1891) first published in the *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, "Apple Blossom on Brittany" (1894) published *The Yellow Book*, and "Countess Marie of the Angels" (1896) from *The Savoy*.

[14] Ronald Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality*, 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth: Pelican-Penguin, 1971) 430-46.

[15] Symons, *Notes on Joseph Conrad* 23.

[16] Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986) 121.

[17] This is also a feature of "The Idiots:" The narrator states that "In time the story [...] shaped itself before me out of the listless answers to my questions, out

of the indifferent words heard in wayside inns or on the very road those idiots haunted.” (*Savoy*, VI, 12.)

[18] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 47.

[19] Conrad, Paul O’Prey, in his introduction, Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 20.

[20] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 94.

[21] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 119.

[22] J. R. Tye, *Periodicals of the Nineties: A Checklist of Literary Periodicals Published in the British Isles at Longer Than Fortnightly Intervals, 1890 - 1899*, Occasional Publication No. 9 (Oxford: Oxford Bibliographical Society, 1974) 3.

[23] Karl, Joseph Conrad 349-50.

[24] Ernest Dowson, *The Poetical Works of Ernest Christopher Dowson*, ed. Desmond Flower, 2nd ed. (London: Cassell, 1950) 16.

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First Response

This well-researched paper raises a number of points concerning the relationship between Joseph Conrad and Ernest Dowson and their respective literary output. In particular, it asks whether Dowson's short story, 'The Statute of Limitations' was a literary source for *Heart of Darkness*, given the clear correlations between their themes, characterisation and stylistics. This last category the writer takes as something of a given, citing wider work by Arthur Symons, Ian Watt and Joseph Martin showing Conrad to use Impressionist techniques familiar to many fictive texts of the decadent era. While the present reviewer does not, in fact, see this entirely as a *fait accompli*, more fertile ground is then shown to lie in the two other areas mentioned.

Different theoretical approaches are employed in literary PhDs and this is a rather traditional analysis via detailed primary reading and the matching of relevant secondary material to build a coherent case. It is not, therefore, a cultural theory approach but nor is it an empirical, archival project. As such, it could be seen to fall between two camps, neither invoking the canonical priests of post-structural semiotics nor employing the conventional tools of bibliographic collation. This is where the bad news ends, however, since what we are left with certainly contributes to new knowledge by adding to the growing weight of evidence that Conrad not only knew of Dowson's Chilean short story, but wove it inter-textually into his own 1899 novella. This proposition may not in fact be a new one (R. Jenkins noticed it in 1987 and was not himself the first) but by making further parallels with Conrad's letters, *The Savoy* magazine and recent research on Leonard Smithers, the reader is left with an enduring sense that this is both a purposeful and clearly defined academic study.