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'To Hear, to See, to Pray': Language, Intertextuality, and the Transnational in the Works of Joseph Conrad and Nadine Gordimer

Abstract — In Nadine Gordimer’s opinion, the questions raised in Conrad’s first novels possess universal qualities that are not only illustrated throughout the whole career of the author, but are also characteristic of a great part of twentieth-century literature. While shedding light on the timelessness of Conrad’s work, Gordimer is implicitly giving voice to her more general conviction that novels do not exist in isolation. They are, instead, mutually dependent and influence each other, regardless of spatial and chronological distance. Mindful of these premises, my paper will compare two narratives by Conrad (“Amy Foster” and Almayer’s Folly) with Gordimer’s The Pickup, by considering the presence of specific common themes — namely, the landscape, language, and religion. Conrad’s descriptive impressionism matches Gordimer’s highly visual and audible settings, while the question of language — a traditional theme of migration narratives — is introduced in connection to ‘higher forms of communication’ in both texts. The analysis concentrates on the aesthetic construction of these three associated thematic clusters and on their social and ethical implications.

Keywords: language, aesthetics, intertextuality, transnational fiction, Nadine Gordimer, Joseph Conrad