

INDIRECT NARRATION: A CASE STUDY OF CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS* AND FITZGERALD'S *THE GREAT GATSBY*

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Abstract

Joseph Conrad's narrative style has influenced many writers, including F. Scott Fitzgerald. The objective of my study on verbs used in discourse in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* was to confirm the speculation that besides Conrad's innovative technique of indirect narration there were other techniques (such as careful selection of imagistic detail) Fitzgerald learned from Conrad.

INTRODUCTION

All art appeals primarily to the senses, and the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through the senses, if its high desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions.

(Conrad 2003: 2)

Conrad knew from the very beginning of his writing career what he wanted to express; it was how to express it that concerned him most. His search for such "artistic perfection" as stated in his preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897) forced him into constant experimentation. The introduction of Marlow – narrator meant a turning point in Conrad's writing and offered his successors, F. Scott Fitzgerald being among them, a powerful narrative device.

The objectives of my study on indirect narration in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was to find answers to some of the questions the students of the Littoral Grammar Schools arose during their study of Fitzgerald's novel for the "matura exam" and to confirm the speculation that Conrad's influence on Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* goes far beyond the use of "indirect narration and disrupted chronology" (Moore in Stape: 227).

CONRAD'S INFLUENCE ON FITZGERALD

Fitzgerald was a very keen reader since his youth and Conrad was among his favourites, so even though Conrad's works were not yet taught at Princeton when Fitzger-

ald was a student there (1913 to 1917), he studied them closely (226). It is already in Fitzgerald's first novel *This Side of Paradise* (1920) that we come across Conrad:

Amory was alone; he had escaped from a small enclosure into a great labyrinth. He was where Goethe was when he began "Faust; he was where Conrad was when he wrote "Almayer's Folly".

(Fitzgerald 2005: 25)

We learn about Fitzgerald's acknowledgement of his debt to Conrad from his private correspondence. In a letter to his friend H. L. Mencken Fitzgerald listed not only *The Great Gatsby* (1925) but also Eugene O'Neill's play *The Emperor Jones* (1920) and Somerset Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919) as works written in imitation of Conrad (Turnbull: 482). In another letter Fitzgerald warned Hemingway against the influence of Conrad in dialogue: "Like me you must beware of Conrad rhythms in direct quotations from characters, especially if you're pointing a single phrase and making a man live by it" (300). On the other hand it was Conrad's innovative use of the first person narrator-protagonist that offered Fitzgerald the chance to introduce a character "through whose eyes and mind the central protagonist is gradually discovered" (Biscay: 2).

He smiled understandingly – much more understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced – or seemed to face – the whole eternal world for an instant, and then concentrated on *you* with an irresistible prejudice in your favour.

(Fitzgerald 1994: 54)

INDIRECT NARRATION

Generally writers choose between the first person narrator, the third person omniscient narrator and the third person limited narrator. The third person omniscient narrator allows the writer to give an overall view of the story, its characters, its setting, and its background. The reader gets the information the main character cannot or may not know or notice. The first person narrator, on the other hand, brings greater focus on the feelings, perceptions, and opinions of a particular character in the story. The reader sees how the first narrator views the world and discovers through them how the other characters in the story view it (Harper: 3). Stanzel makes the point that the most important difference between the first person and the third-person narrator is their motivation to narrate:

For an embodied narrator, this motivation is existential; it is directly connected with his practical experiences... For the third-person narrator, on the other hand, there is no existential compulsion to narrate.

(Stanzel: 93).

What is more, the first person narrator may be conscious of telling the story to a given audience, (in the case of Marlow to his audience of one time sailors), at a given place and at a given time.

The traffic of the great city went on in the deepening night upon the sleepless river. We looked on, waiting patiently – there was nothing else to do till the end of the flood; but it was only after a long silence, when he said, in a hesitating voice, ‘I suppose you fellows remember I did once turn fresh-water sailor for a bit,’ that we knew we were fated, before the ebb began to run, to hear about one of Marlow’s inconclusive experiences.

(Conrad 1994: 10)

Many writers, especially at their first arms, prefer to use the third person narrator to the other two. Such was the case with Conrad too. In his first novels *Almayer’s Folly* (1895), *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), and *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* (1897) Conrad narrated in the conventional manner. We come across Marlow for the first time in Conrad’s short story *Youth* (1898) but it is in the succeeding novels *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *Lord Jim* (1900) that this character’s function can be fully appreciated. Conrad employed the same narrative technique, i.e., “the story within the story or the frame story technique” in other works too (Weiss: 23). Where Marlow is not used, there is often an equivalent narrator (e.g. the teacher of languages in *Under the Western Eyes* (1911) or Davidson in *Victory* (1915)).

CONRAD’S NEED FOR MARLOW / FITZGERALD’S NEED FOR NICK CARRAWAY

So what does Marlow offer Conrad? He is the one that unveils the mysteries surrounding the main figure of his story, in the case of *Heart of Darkness* – the controversial Kurtz, but it is his interpretation of what he saw, heard, sensed, and imagined that matters for the readers and helps them to make the distinction between Conrad, the author/reporter and Marlow, the interpreter (Weiss: 65). The readers trust Marlow because even if he is a sailor, he does not represent his class, he is not typical. He is a wanderer, accounting his experiences with mature and objectified attitude, yet “using the forceful and idiomatic expressions of ordinary conversation” (Newhouse: 90). He often interrupts his narrative to take a drink, a smoke, or to remark something.

There was a pause of profound stillness, then a match flared, and Marlow’s lean face appeared, worn, hollow, with downward folds, and dropped eyelids, with an aspect of concentrated attention /.../ ‘Absurd!’ he cried. ‘This is the worst of trying to tell.’

(Conrad 1994: 68)

Although the reality of the story is in Marlow’s head, in his words, in his observations, the reader is made perceptive to the meanings transpiring from his narration thanks to Conrad’s ability to “force his audience to try to penetrate beneath the mere surface level of the narrative” (Rathburn and Steinmann: 65).

I listened, I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative

that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river.

(Conrad 1994: 40)

Fitzgerald's narrator Nick Carraway, on the other hand, "becomes a voice of what Fitzgerald called 'selective delicacy' – filtering sensations and impressions /.../, presenting a landscape of complex images" (Ruland and Bradbury: 299). Kathleen Parkinson also observes that Nick Carraway's "blend of imaginative excitement and ironic detachment hold in balanced tension the two ways of perceiving the world through which the narrative is structured" (Parkinson: 119). A different perspective has been provided by Biscay, who warns the readers to differentiate "between the separate views of Nick Carraway as the narrator and Nick Carraway as the character" (Biscay 1). He alleges that Nick Carraway's character can be seen as dishonest and hypocritical (readers can nevertheless relate to him as a person) but that "we learn to trust him as narrator, because of all the pieces of information he gives to us, received through symbolism, imagery, or personal reflection" (*ibid.*).

The instant her voice broke off, ceasing to compel my attention, my belief, I felt the basic insincerity of what she had said. It made me uneasy, as though the whole evening had been a trick of some sort to exact a contributory emotion from me.

(Fitzgerald 1994: 24)

Trilling believes that in Fitzgerald's work "the voice of his prose is of the essence of his success" (Trilling in Mizener: 18), while Weiss concludes that what has made Conrad one of the most difficult (and most appreciated) of writers in English is not "the complexity of his thought, which appears difficult enough, but his rhetoric or language style" (Weiss: 9).

CONRAD'S / FITZGERALD'S LANGUAGE STYLE

As an artist Conrad "conspired to lift his prose to the level of eloquence" as Weiss puts it (*ibid.*); and he succeeded in doing so with his narrative devices, among which the most important are considered to be: symbolic presentation of the theme, imagery, point of view, and remarkably rich vocabulary. In Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* we come across the same techniques: chronological looping, a central symbol, careful selection of imagistic detail, an indirect narrator, and indirect and interrupted handling of interviews and dialogues.

'There's another little thing,' he said uncertainly, and hesitated. 'Would you rather put it off for a few days?' I asked. 'Oh, it isn't about that. At least –' He fumbled with a series of beginnings. 'Why, I thought – why, look here, old sport, you don't make much money, do you?' 'Not very much.'

(Fitzgerald 1994: 89)

‘Anything since then?’ asked the other, hoarsely. ‘Ivory,’ jerked the nephew; ‘lots of it - prime sort- lots – most annoying, from him.’ ‘And with that?’ questioned the heavy rumble. ‘Invoice,’ was the reply fired out, so to speak.

(Conrad 1994: 45)

So why do we come across dialogue in Marlow’s and Nick Carraway’s indirect narration so often? The answer might be because it is one of Conrad’s and Fitzgerald’s most powerful writing tools. Newhouse claims that all serious novelists use dialogue for a large number of purposes – “to reveal and differentiate character and motive, to slacken or quicken the action, to provide contrast or humour, or to pin-point a moment” (Newhouse: 89). But there is more to Marlow’s and Nick Carraway’s narration. It is also characterized by a very rich vocabulary, used to impress and persuade the readers the way Conrad’s most known phrase clearly indicates: “to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see” (Conrad 2003: 2).

The earth for us is a place to live in, where we must put up with sights, with sounds, with smell, too, by Jove – breathe dead hippo, so to speak, and not to be contaminated.

(Conrad 1994: 71)

On the more superficial level, one could speculate that Marlow’s and Nick Carraway’s story is a record of things seen and done – of their experience in Congo and New York and the knowledge they gain by it. But a more close analysis of one of Conrad’s and Fitzgerald’s greatest talents - their very careful choice of words shows that by means of vivid, exact, diverse description of selected details they achieve their purpose of seducing the reader into perceiving and understanding the novel’s ambiguous imagery and symbolism too (Weiss: 75).

At first I thought it was another party, a wild rout that had resolved itself into ‘hide-and-go-seek’ or ‘sardines-in-the-box’ with all the house thrown open to the game. But there wasn’t a sound. Only the wind in the trees, which blew the wires and made the lights go off and on again as if the house had winked into the darkness.

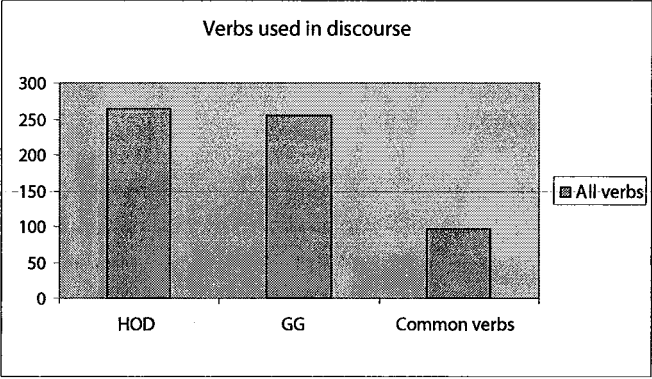
(Fitzgerald 1994: 88)

CASE STUDY AND ITS RESULTS

In order to find confirmation to these assertions I focused on Conrad’s and Fitzgerald’s choice of verbs for Marlow’s and Nick Carraway’s narration about their communication with the others, that is, on discourse. Douglas Biber analyzes several types of discourse, the major ones being “involved, informational, narrative and non-narrative” (Harris-Bosselmann: 2); all to be found in the two novels too. The study was carried out on the basis of three lists of verbs: the control list, Conrad’s list, and Fitzgerald’s list. The control list of single-word verbs (no multi-word verbs such as *bring out*, *run on*, *sum up*, etc. were taken into consideration) included: standard reporting verbs to show

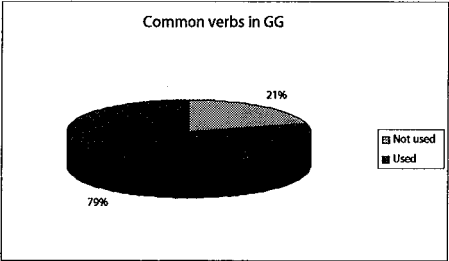
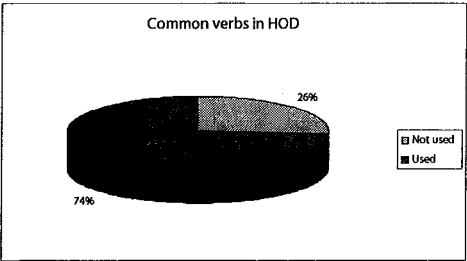
direct speech in writing (e.g. *say, tell, ask*), most common reporting verbs or phrases occurring in indirect speech (e.g. *note, observe, remark*), frequently used verbs to “interpret” direct speech (e.g. *beg, object, wonder*), and frequently used verbs to denote non-verbal communication (e.g. *listen, see, swear*) (Alexander: 224). The same system of selection was applied to the texts of *The Great Gatsby* and *Heart of Darkness*. In addition to verbs there were other parts of the speech (e.g. nouns, adjectives, adverbs) analysed in order to get an overall picture of the most characteristic features of Conrad’s and Fitzgerald’s narrative techniques.

The results of the study are presented in charts and tables. The control verbs are labelled as “common” while those used by the two authors but not included in the control list as “additional”. There are about a hundred verbs (96) in the control list. Marlow’s (269) and Nick Carraway’s (254) lists are nearly three times longer.



Graph 1: All verbs used in discourse

Interestingly enough, Conrad and Fitzgerald did not employ all the verbs listed as “common”. Neither of them for example used such verbs as: *boast, claim, demonstrate, estimate, guarantee or teach*, but preferred verbs like: *confess, hint, inquire, protest, suspect*.



Graphs 2 and 3: “Common” verbs

There are many motives behind such a large number of different verbs used by both narrators. Besides their primary motive to express their own attitudes, thoughts, and feelings, and those of the other characters, Marlow and Nick Carraway also portray different social classes, nationalities or regional speeches of people they communicate with.

‘Wha’s matter? He inquired calmly. ‘Did we run outa gas?’ /.../
‘Wonder’ff tell me where there’s a gas’line station?’

(Fitzgerald 1994: 61, 62)

‘Been living there?’ he asked. I said, ‘Yes.’ ‘Fine lot these government chaps – are they not?’ he went on, speaking English with great precision and considerable bitterness.

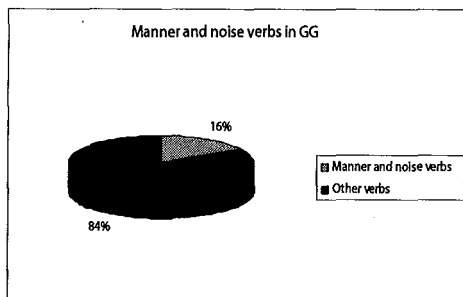
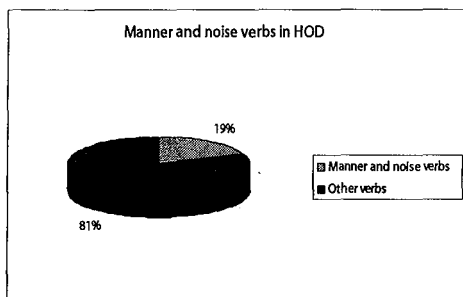
(Conrad 1994: 21)

Another reason for so many verbs can be found in Conrad’s and Fitzgerald’s intent to offer their readers very detailed descriptions of nonverbal communication which is an important feature of involved discourse too. It is perceived and accepted or received with separate or individual senses or several senses contemporaneously. Wordless messages can be communicated through gesture; body language or posture; facial expression and eye contact; intonation and stress; voice quality, and speaking style (Leech and Svartvik: 134, 152).

At first I couldn’t find the source of the high, groaning words that echoed clamorously through the bare garage – then I saw Wilson standing on the raised threshold of his office, swaying back and forth and holding to the doorposts³ with both hands.

(Fitzgerald 1994: 144)

In addition to reporting what the speakers say Marlow and Nick Carraway provide extra information to the reader by reporting about acts that were performed by saying something or as a result of saying it. There are 19 % of such verbs (labelled in graphs as “manner and noise” verbs) used by Conrad and 16 % by Fitzgerald. Marlow and Nick Carraway most frequently use verbs like *mutter*, *sigh* or *whisper* but we also come across such less common verbs as: *flinch*, *gabble*, *grow*, *jabber*, *snort*, *whimper*, or *wince*.



Graphs 4 and 5: “Manner and noise verbs”

Besides confirming Conrad's and Fitzgerald's careful choice of a whole variety of reporting verbs, the results also show a very frequent use of such nouns as *silence*, *mouth*, *lips*, *ears* or *voice* instead of the verbs *to hear/listen* or *say/speak*.

Noun	HOD	GG
Ears	6	9
Lips/Mouth	5	18
Silence	19	10
Voice	41	68

Table 1: Nouns denoting senses

At this point we may hypothesize that these narrative devices offer Conrad and Fitzgerald the possibility to show their mastery in cumulative use of powerful adjectives and adverbs in order to present “a psychological and moral reality, rather than an external naturalism” (Weiss 10).

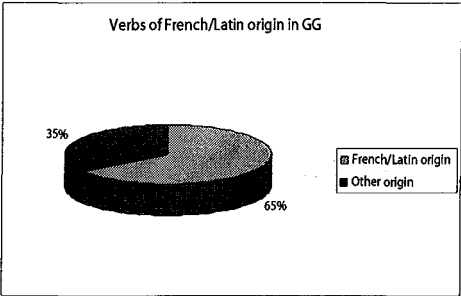
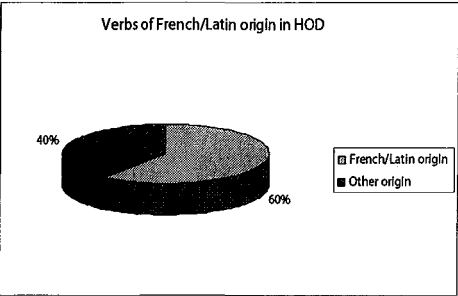
The volume of tone he emitted without effort, almost without the trouble of moving his lips, amazed me. A voice! A voice! It was grave, profound, vibrating, while the man did not seem capable of a whisper.

(Conrad 1994: 86)

His speaking voice, a gruff husky tenor, added to the impression of fractionness he conveyed. There was a touch of paternal contempt in it, even toward people he liked – and there were men at New Haven who had hated his guts.

(Fitzgerald 1994: 13)

Such a rich vocabulary as encountered in Conrad's and Fitzgerald's works can sometimes be quite demanding for a “common” reader or a reader whose mother tongue is not English. On the other hand, their preference for using simple verbs, instead of prepositional or phrasal verbs (there are only about 15% of such verbs in both texts) is of much help to such readers, especially if they are somehow acquainted with Latin or French, as 60 - 65% of the analysed verbs originate from these two languages.



Graphs 6 and 7: Verbs of French/Latin origin

I was particularly interested in verbs that developed from French, wondering how much was Conrad's and Fitzgerald's choice of vocabulary influenced by their personal connection with the language. Conrad started to learn French as a child and left Poland in 1874 to become a sailor in Marseille, while Fitzgerald first moved to the French Riviera (where he completed *The Great Gatsby*) in 1924. It is not very clear why Conrad chose to write in English, since Polish was his mother tongue, he was equally proficient in French, and learned English relatively late (he joined the British navy in his twenties); yet it is well known that he preferred French in oral expression and personal correspondence. Conrad's friend and novelist H.G. Wells observed that "he would supplement his vocabulary-- especially when discussing cultural or political matters—with French words" (Baines: 233). It would be interesting to investigate whether this was the case with Conrad's written English too.

He was becoming confidential now, but I fancy my unresponsive attitude must have exasperated him at last, for he judged it necessary to inform me he feared neither God nor devil, let alone any mere man.

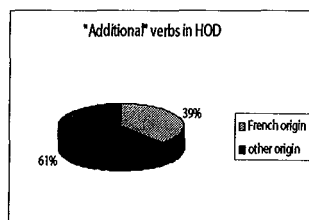
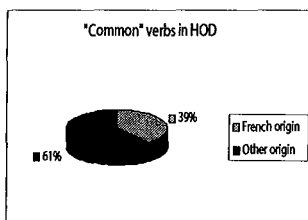
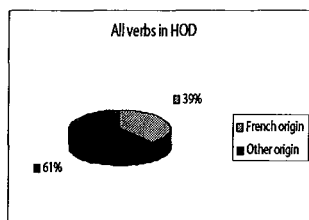
(Conrad 1994: 40)

Fitzgerald, on the other hand, did not speak French very well. Callahan observes that during his childhood spent in his native St. Paul, Fitzgerald was surrounded by French names. He became fascinated with the sounds of the language and they had significant consequences for his writing. "French became for him a language of dreams expressing fantasies of glamour, elegance, sexual conquest, and upward social mobility" (Callahan: 2).

'What do you think?' he demanded impetuously. 'About what?' He waved his hand toward the book-shelves. 'About that. As a matter of fact you needn't bother to ascertain. I ascertained. They're real.'

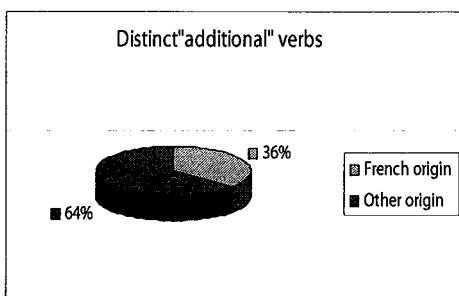
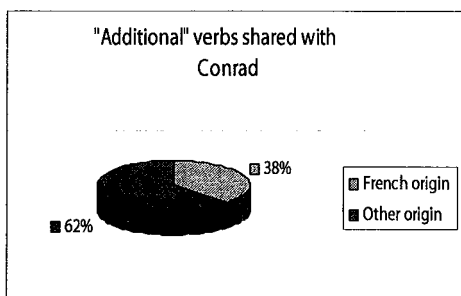
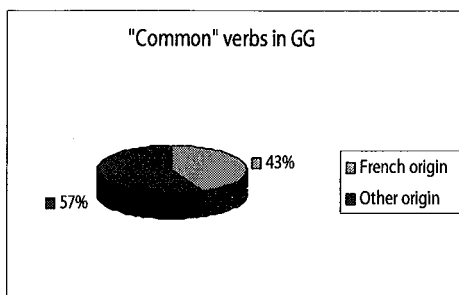
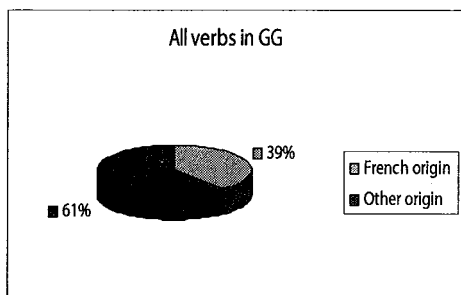
(Fitzgerald 1994: 51)

In *Heart of Darkness* there are 39 % of verbs that developed through Middle English via French in all three categories – all verbs, "common" verbs and "additional" verbs. Among verbs used only by Conrad there are such *uncommon* ones (at least for an average reader) as, for example, *assent*, *conceal*, *expound*, *regard*, etc.



Graphs 8, 9 and 10: Verbs of French origin in *Heart of Darkness*

The Great Gatsby shows a slightly different picture. The percentage of verbs of French origin among all the verbs is the same as by Conrad (39%) but it varies in the other three categories: "common" verbs (43%), "additional" verbs shared with Conrad (38%) and distinct "additional" verbs (e.g. *append*, *defer*, *dispute*, *interpose*, etc.) (36%).



Graphs 11, 12, 13 and 14: Verbs of French origin in *The Great Gatsby*

The results of the study make it clear that nearly every second simple verb we come across in Conrad's and Fitzgerald's indirect narration is of French origin. The questions whether and to what extent these characteristics of Conrad's and Fitzgerald's narrative contribute to a better perception and understanding of the two novels by the readers, whose mother tongue is not English, still need to be answered, though.

CONCLUSION

Discussing about Conrad's and Fitzgerald's writing style is a great challenge not just for contemporary scholars but for generations to come too, I believe. Every single characteristic of their art offers countless possibilities of investigation. Even though I restricted my study solely on indirect narration I hope I succeeded in calling the readers' attention to some of the less discussed aspects of Conrad's and Fitzgerald's language style (e.g. choice of verbs) and stimulated their curiosity into finding out more the next time they intend to reread these two novels.

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