
THE NIGGER OF THE NARCISSUS:

A TALE OF THE SEA

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The *Nigger of the Narcissus* has an unfortunate title, but it must be borne in mind that the term 'nigger' was not such an emotive one at the time Conrad was writing, and that he was using it descriptively and symbolically, and not insultingly. If that obstacle can be surmounted, the novel can be seen not only as an exciting tale of the sea, but also as a significant new portent in the history of English fiction, and as crucial in Conrad's own development.

Joseph Conrad was born Teodor Józef Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski, in 1857, at Berdyczew in south-eastern Poland - the most landlocked region in the whole of Europe. His parents belonged to the Polish landowning aristocracy, but when Józef was three years old his father was arrested for conspiring against the Russian authorities (who at that time ruled Poland), and the family were exiled to a remote town in Northern Russia. His mother died there in 1865, and though his father was released two years later, his health was affected and he died in Cracow in 1869, leaving the orphaned Józef in the care of an uncle. After attending school in Cracow, he astonished his guardian by announcing his determination to go to sea, fired by the novels of Captain Marryat which he had read in translation. Like most Poles of his class he spoke fluent French, so in 1874, when he was nearly seventeen, he went to Marseilles, where he saw the sea for the first time in his life and joined the crew of a French sailing vessel. After several voyages, mostly in the Carribbean, he and three other young men formed a syndicate, purchased a small sailing vessel and engaged in gun-running to the Carlist rebels in Spain.

The collapse of the gun-running enterprise, which left him badly in debt decided Conrad to join the crew of a British merchantman lying in Marseilles, though he still, at the age of twenty, knew no more than a few words of English. The ship eventually took him to Lowestoft where he set foot on English soil for the first time and began teaching himself English by studying a local newspaper. He progressed so well that two years later, after several coastal trips and a voyage in a wool-clipper sailing to Australia, he passed the first of the officers' examinations of the British Merchant Service.

During the next six years he made a number of voyages as third, and later second, mate, mostly to the China Seas, the Indian Ocean and the Malay Archipelago. On one of these there was a negro member of the crew named

James Wait - the name of the central character of *The Nigger of the Narcissus* - while the ship in which, in 1884, Conrad sailed as second mate from Bombay to Dunkirk, was actually named the *Narcissus*.

In 1886, Conrad became a naturalized British subject, and in the same year he obtained his Master's ticket. From then on he held a number of commands, one of them of a river steamer in the Belgian Congo. He picked up a tropical fever there which permanently affected his health, but which also seems to have had the effect of turning him to writing. During the next five years he worked during his off-duty hours on his first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, which is about a feckless Dutch planter in Indonesia who marries a native girl and whose grandiose visions end in opium addiction and eventual death. Conrad's last voyage, in 1893, was as captain of the *Torrens*, a famous sailing vessel of the day. John Galsworthy, later author of *The Forsyte Saga*, was a passenger for part of the voyage and reported that Conrad still spoke 'with a strong foreign accent'. But when *Almayer's Folly* was eventually published in 1895 it was clear that this man, who had not even begun to learn English till he was twenty-three, might one day become a master of English prose.

Unable to go to sea again because of his health, Conrad married an Englishwoman and settled down to earn his living as a writer. His second novel, *An Outcast of the Island* which, like its predecessor, is about the degeneration of a white man in the tropics (this time Borneo), was published in 1896. With the publication of *The Nigger of the Narcissus* in 1897, Conrad's apprenticeship was over and he was firmly set on the path which would lead to *Nostramo* (1904) which some critics regard as the greatest novel of the twentieth century.

As F. R. Leavis has said, Conrad's genius was a unique and happy union of seaman and writer', and one of the reasons for the leap forward in *The Nigger of the Narcissus* was that it was the first of Conrad's novels to deal with the world he knew so well from the inside - the small enclosed world of a ship at sea.

Summary

The plot itself (which is narrated in the first person) is of the slightest. The crew of the sailing ship *Narcissus*, berthed in Bombay, come aboard. Many of them are based on the crew members of the ship of the same name on which Conrad had sailed. The chief mate, Mr Baker, musters the hands. At the last moment, the negro seaman James Wait comes aboard, announcing that he had been taken on by the captain that morning. He is 'calm, cool, towering, superb'; but he has a cough 'metallic and explosive, like a gong', and not long after the

Narcissus has put to sea, he declares that he is dying - and proceeds to exploit to the full the awe and pity that his announcement arouses. He is excused duty and the crew wait on him: 'with rage and humility, as though we had been the base courtiers of a hated prince; and he rewarded us by his unconciliating criticism.' He tyrannizes over the crew to such an extent that the Chief Mate reports to the Captain that he is a threat to discipline, but the Captain, himself coming under the strange spell of James Wait's ominous 'accomplice' (that is, Death) orders the construction of a sick-bay for him in the deck-house.

Two members of the crew alone are exempt from James Wait's capricious tyranny: the squalid Donkin, who accuses him of malingering, alternately insulting and scrounging from him, and yet paradoxically winning his favour; and old Singleton, who 'with venerable mildness', tells him: '... get on with your dying ... don't raise a blamed fuss with us over that job. We can't help you.'

Off the Cape of Good Hope the *Narcissus* is struck by a gale. She is hurled on to the side and in imminent danger of turning turtle. At great risk to themselves, a number of the crew manage to rescue James Wait, who as usual rewards them with complaints. Eventually, the ship rights herself, and Singleton, after thirty hours at the wheel, collapses and for the first time faces the truth that he is growing old. Gradually, the horrors of the tempest recede into the background and Wait's dying again becomes the dominating preoccupation. As he feels himself growing weaker and terrified by the hellfire sermonizing of the cook, who is subject to spells of religious fervour, Wait insists that Donkin was right in his accusation of malingering and announces that he is going to get up and return to duty. When the Captain orders him to remain in his cabin, there is nearly a mutiny, led by the troublemaker Donkin.

The unrest among the crew is heightened by the fact that the ship is now held up by contrary head-winds. According to Singleton, who believes implicitly in the old seamen's superstition that 'mortally sick men ... linger till the first sight of land', these are caused by James Wait.

When the ship is at last in sight of the island of Flores (in the Azores) Wait does indeed die and Donkin ransacks his belongings. Although the crew have been expecting his death, it comes as a shock: 'A common bond was gone; the strong, effective and respectable bond of a sentimental lie.' But as soon as Wait's body has been consigned to the deeps, a favourable wind springs up, much to the satisfaction of old Singleton who feels the old superstitions have been thoroughly vindicated. A week later the *Narcissus* is in the English Channel, and before long she has docked in London and the crew have dispersed.

Critical commentary

An instructive approach to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* is by way of a contrast. In his Preface, Conrad makes a number of pronouncements like this: 'Fiction... must be, like painting, like music, like all art, the appeal of one temperament to all the other innumerable temperaments, whose subtle and resistless power endows passing events with their true meaning, and creates the moral, the emotional atmosphere of the place and time.'

This lofty profession of aim is a reminder that Conrad was a close friend of Henry James and his most considerable follower in the practice of the 'art of fiction'. Yet nothing could sound less like Henry James's world of subtle and refined characters moving in their refined ambience than, say, the exciting and action-packed description of the gale encountered by the *Narcissus* on her way home from Bombay. On this reckoning, the only thing James and Conrad would seem to have had in common is that they were both exiles from their native lands.

At one time, it was a critical commonplace to refer to Conrad as 'the Kipling of the seas'. Misled by this description, many readers were disappointed when they found that, in spite of the promise of the exciting and exotic settings, Conrad's novels were not anything like as full of incident as, for instance, Rudyard Kipling's *Plain Tales from the Hills and Soldiers Three*, which were published in 1888. The actual plot of *The Nigger of the Narcissus* could indeed be contained within the limits of the normal short story.

Although he made use of action, Conrad was not primarily an action-writer. He really was the disciple of Henry James in that he was a most careful stylist. A large section of *The Nigger of the Narcissus* is given over to the superb description of the storm, but there are equally vivid evocations of the sea in very different moods. However, Conrad's preoccupation with style in his descriptive passages led to faults as well as virtues, and particularly to what F. R. Leavis has called the 'disconcerting weakness or vice' of an over-elaboration of style and an 'adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery', a weakness which marred several of Conrad's later novels, causing one wit to comment - after reading Conrad's novel, *The Rover* (1923) - that he had 'just been listening to a performance on the Conrad'.

It was this tendency towards portentousness that led E. M. Forster to complain of some of Conrad's later work that he always seemed to be 'promising to make some general philosophic statement about the universe, and then refraining with a gruff disclaimer' so that 'the secret casket of his genius contains a vapour rather than a jewel ... No creed, in fact. Only opinions ... held under the semblance of eternity, girt with the sea, crowned with stars, and therefore easily mistaken for a creed.'

One of the great merits of *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, however, is that it is on the whole free from purple passages and the mistiness attending them, and that Conrad's basic message emerges clearly and, for the most part, unambiguously. The finest passages of the novel are nearly always those in which the backgrounds are described not for their own sakes, but in connection with the human beings who belong to them. He is particularly vivid and concrete, moreover, when he is dealing with the day-to-day life of the ship.

The focus of Conrad's interest is not so much the sea as the men who sail upon it. In advising a young would-be novelist, he said: 'Try and make it a novel of *analysis* on the basis of some strong situation,' and Conrad is as much a 'novelist of fine consciences', a term he applied to Henry James, as James was himself. As John Holloway has pointed out:

'Conrad has, as his strongest link with James, his sense of life as a sustained struggle in moral terms; an issue between good and evil in the fullest sense of these words, which individual men find they cannot evade.'

The most subtle and serious of the moral challenges faced by the crew of the *Narcissus* is, of course, that represented by the dying negro. As his disease advances, he becomes not so much a human being as an embodiment of death and corruption - so that his blackness is in effect a symbol of the ultimate darkness. The rough kindness of James Wait's fellow-seamen, in consequence, gradually loses its positive and humane quality:

'Through him we were becoming highly humanized, tender, complex, excessively decadent: we understood the subtlety of his fear, sympathized with all his repulsions, shrinkings, evasions, delusions - as though we had been overcivilized, and rotten, and without any knowledge of the meaning of life.'

This sense of an unknown horror or evil residing in the human psyche was to become one of the outstanding features of Conrad's later work.

As a corollary to the creeping demoralization represented by the dying negro, is the subversive influence of the waster Donkin, whose 'picturesque and filthy loquacity flowed like a troubled stream from a poisoned source.' Whereas James Wait represents the corruption of death, Donkin represents the danger of corruptions with society, and it is significant that they are grudgingly attracted to each other. But the crew have another challenge to face - that of the storm - and as C. B. Cox has said, during that ordeal 'the ship becomes an archetype for human society on its journey through an inexplicable universe...' It is a universe as hostile and indifferent to man as that of Thomas Hardy.

In overcoming this challenge, the crew of the *Narcissus* achieve an heroic status which temporarily raises them above the corrupting influence of James Wait and Donkin. It is, however, a precarious triumph. Just as we are always

aware that the ship has only its planks to oppose to the powerful forces outside, so we feel that it is only the simple virtues possessed by the men who are her crew that stand between humanity and the horror and darkness beyond. The attraction for Conrad of the subject of a ship at sea with its enclosed, specialized society is that inevitably it strips away all inessentials. In *A Personal Record*, a book of reminiscences published in 1912, Conrad made this significant statement:

Those who read me know my conviction that the world, the temporal world, rests on a few very simple ideas: so simple that they must be as old as the hills. It rests, notably, among others, on the idea of Fidelity.

For Conrad 'Fidelity' is embodied above all in the courage, endurance, and sense of discipline that belong to the crew of a ship. *The Nigger of the Narcissus* is fundamentally a novel about fidelity, and the attempts of the elements, the dying negro, and Donkin to overthrow it. The real hero of the book is old Singleton, not only because of his incredible thirty hours at the wheel during the tempest, but also because he is the one man completely immune to the blandishments of James Wait and Donkin. And yet Singleton is a man, Conrad says, who 'in the last forty-five years had lived ... no more than forty months ashore', and for most of that time he was so drunk that he was seldom 'in a condition to distinguish daylight'. In other words, he is the least complicated of all the crew, essentially a grown-up child who can only function within the little world of a ship at sea. The more sensitive men succumb to the insidious temptations of the negro's long drawn-out dying: only Singleton rejects him.

As in Hardy's world, it is only the least sensitive characters who can be immune from tragedy. In this vision there is something which comes close to despair, for if humanity is sustained by men like Singleton (fine and heroic though he is) then the human civilization of centuries is fragile indeed. In addition, the fact that the small knot of discipline represented by the crew of the *Narcissus* can be undone by a James Wait or a Donkin, raises the possibility that that, too, is an illusion to which men cling in order to hide from an ultimately meaningless universe. It is this terrifying possibility which Conrad first raised in *The Nigger of the Narcissus* and which he was to explore with increasing honesty and tragic intensity in the great novels which followed.