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## Conrad's *Nigger of the Narcissus*: A Revaluation

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### ABSTRACT

*Nigger of the Narcissus* is one of the important novels of Conrad. This novel was written by Conrad after working as an ordinary seaman rising to the post of a ship's Captain, for twenty years. He poured this experience in the writing of this novel. During the storm and in its aftermath, all the men on board hang on to the tilted ship. These weak and hungry shipmen have no outside support. Even in such circumstances, we see many of the men selflessly removing their own coats and putting them on the weaker ones. They risk their own lives to save the sick Negro who is trapped in his partially submerged cabin.

**KEY WORDS:** *Nautical novels, serialization, naturalism*

Joseph Conrad's reputation as an important and significant writer of the nautical fiction is very secure. It is based mainly on his novel *The Nigger of the Narcissus* published in 1897. Henry James very aptly considered this third novel as "the very finest and strongest picture of the sea and sea life that our language possesses" (Drabble, 700). More recently Jaquest Berthoud called it both "the most succinct and the most complete narrative of a deep sea voyage in the English language." (1984, vii). The success of this novel made Conrad to think that he had made a correct decision to leave sea-faring and take up novel writing. After writing the last word of the narrative, Joseph Conrad in his preface wrote, "After writing the last words of that book [*Narcissus*]... I understood that I had done with the sea, and that henceforth I had to be a writer. And almost without laying down the pen I wrote a preface, trying to express the spirit in which I was entering on the task of my new life." (On Internet)

*The Nigger of the 'Narcissus': A Tale of the Forecastle* (also subtitled *A Tale of the Sea* and published in the United States as *The Children of the Sea*) is an 1897 novel penned by Joseph Conrad in which the author has written primarily about English concerns. Joseph Conrad earnestly, in the beginning felt that he would be able to assimilate the contents in just around thirty thousand words. However, the novel stretched and stretched at the end it was a narrative which reached over 50,000 words. It must be noted that this novel was written by Joseph Conrad with this specific aim : "It is the book by which, not as a novelist perhaps, but as an artist striving for the utmost sincerity of expression –I am willing to stand or fall." (Forward to *Nigger*, on the Internet)

Unlike his two earlier novels Joseph Conrad consciously wrote *The Nigger of the Narcissus* with serial publication in mind. First, it was serialized in England in an influential pro-imperialist journal, and edited by W. E. Henley called *New Review*, between August and December 1897. It was also published as a serial work in the United States in the *Country life* and in the *Illustrated*

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*Buffalo Express*. Joseph Conrad felt that serialization “ruins” the spirit of the novel. It must be noted that serialization of novels was resorted to by many Victorian novelists. For example we can take the novels of Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray and Thomas Hardy. On 30 November *The Nigger of the Narcissus* was published in New York, under the less reprehensible and objectionable title of *The Children of the Sea*, and on 2 December in London. Conrad had considered at least two other titles. *The Forecastle: a Tale of Ships and Men*, and *The Nigger: A Tale of Ships and Men*. In the several versions and the first American edition the subheading was changed to *A Tale of the Forecastle*, later amended to *A Tale of the Sea*.

In *The Nigger of the Narcissus* Joseph Conrad brilliantly attempted to provide a slice of life to his perceptive readers. Here we find Joseph Conrad rendering the life which would possibly be very acceptable and satisfying to Conrad himself. It is a fact that this novel records the experiences of life during one voyage

Joseph Conrad was a great fan of naturalistic fiction. Dona Campbell says, “The term *naturalism* describes a type of literature that attempts to apply scientific principles of objectivity and detachment to its study of human beings. Unlike realism, which focuses on literary technique, naturalism implies a philosophical position.” (Naturalism in American Literature, On Internet)

He specifically said in an essay, “Books” “In truth every novelist must begin by creating for himself a world, great or little, in which he can honestly believe. This world cannot be made otherwise than in his own image: it is fated to remain individual and a little mysterious and yet it must resemble something already familiar to the experience the thoughts and sensations of his readers.” (Notes on Life, On the Internet)

Joseph Conrad wrote *The Nigger of the Narcissus* in the naturalistic tradition which suggests that literature should attempt to apply scientific principles of objectivity and detachment to its study of life and human beings. Naturalism suggests that exaggeration of any human characters is not desirable. To achieve this end Joseph Conrad used abundantly his own life experiences in this novel. It is a well-known fact that Conrad joined the merchant navy as an ordinary sailor at the tender age of seventeen and by dint of his patience and grit rose to the rank of a Captain. During this particular period he came in contact with many men and was part of many adventures. In this novel we find Joseph Conrad narrating quite honestly and skillfully the experiences his own self and his colleagues which they had on various trips. Martin Seymour Smith, in connection with the name of the ship as “Narcissus” remarks about the reality of the matter: “For he had sailed in a vessel called the 'Narcissus', and for just this once he did not change its name (it is the only case in which he did not). This last matter may be disposed of quite briefly.” (Martin Seymour Smith, P. XIII)

It was on 28 April 1884, that Joseph Conrad signed on as a junior officer on the ship *Narcissus* in Bombay. The destination of the ship was Dunkirk. Towards the end of his life Conrad told one of his French biographers, Jean Aubry, “Most of the personages I have portrayed actually belonged to the crew of the real *Narcissus*, including the admirable Singleton (whose real name was Sullivan), Archie, Belfast and Donkin. I got the two Scandinavians from association with another ship.” (Smith, P. XIII)

Frederick Karl informs us that in fact there was no sailor by the name Sullivan on board the *Narcissus* but he worked on another ship upon which Joseph Conrad had also sailed. Karl suggests that the fictional character of the Nigger James Wait could be modelled on more than one real personage. This character is said to be based on both the white and black seamen. One of these men was a thirty five year old sailor named Joseph Barron, whose death was described by Conrad to Jean Aubry. The other man was George White, who sailed on the ship named *Duke of Sutherland*. In this context Joseph Conrad had remarked that he wrote fiction and not history and therefore he was entitled to choose as he pleased. Karl further tells us that the hateful character of Donkin may have been partly drawn on another "Narcissus" sailor named Charles Button who had been arrested when the ship stopped at Cape Town on the way to Bombay. However, he seems to be drawn from a combination of many "self-pitying and cowardly bolshie types" of persons.

Thus we find the above quotations very strongly substantiating the fact that Joseph Conrad has taken his own real life incidents and experiences and subjected them to the imaginative process, transmuting them into a work of high art. The routine life of ordinary sailors of the *Narcissus* on a voyage from Bombay to London, their struggles with the external forces of nature in the form of a terrible storm and their internal mental struggles in the form of conflict with superstition, fears, passions and instincts become the subject matter of this novel.

These struggles are vividly depicted, especially during and after the storm encountered by the ship and its crew when most of their food is spoiled by the stormy flood, and their clothes and bedding are either wet or washed away. We see the struggle of these ordinary un-heroic men fighting against the overwhelming elements of nature like hunger, thirst, cold, extreme physical exertion, sleep and exhaustion. Though the subject matter is ordinary and absolutely un-heroic, Joseph Conrad's art is such that the struggles portrayed in it attain a heroic stature. The quoted passage illustrates the dull and routine life of seamen: "The smiling greatness of the sea dwarfed the extent of time. The days raced after one another, brilliant and quick like the flashes of a lighthouse, and the nights, eventful and short, resembled fleeting dreams. The men had shaken into their places, and the half-hourly voice of the bells ruled their life of unceasing care. Night and day the head and shoulders of a seaman could be seen aft by the wheel, outlined high against sunshine or starlight, very steady above the stir of revolving spokes. The faces changed, passing in rotation. Youthful faces, bearded faces, dark faces: faces serene, or faces moody, but all akin with brotherhood of the sea; all with the same attentive expression of eyes, carefully watching the compass or the sails." Nigger, On the Internet)

Joseph Conrad's story not only informs but also makes the reader feel the difficulties and problems of the sailors' life; the sailors handle the soaked ropes with "groans and sighs while their officers, sulky and dripping with rain water, unceasingly ordered them about in wearied voices". (Nigger, On the Internet)

The labour involved in the work is so tiring that during the short breaks the sailors "looked with disgust into the smarting palms of their stiff hands, and asked one another bitterly: 'Who would be a sailor if he could be a farmer?' " (Nigger, On the Internet) One of the sailors named Belfast even asserts that "he would 'chuck the sea forever and go in a steamer.'" (Nigger, On Internet) Working in the extremely cold and violent seas, the helmsmen when relieved from their shifts are seen to be frantically thrashing their arms, running around, heavily stamping their feet and

"blowing into swollen, red fingers." (Nigger, On the Internet) The storms are so horrifying and ghastly that the water pours in sheets over the forecastle doors and the men had to "dash through a waterfall" (Nigger, On the Internet) to get into their damp beds and retire to bed in wet clothes. There is a description of how a powerful wave smashes the galley door and drenches the ship's cook in front of his stove. In attempting to repair the broken door, the carpenter is washed away two times from his working position. This incident delays the dinner being prepared by the cook for a long time, but in the end the person bringing it is knocked down by another violent wave and the dinner is washed over the side. We also get a feel of the extreme cold weather that makes the men moan with stiff lips and complain of not feeling themselves from the waist down. Some of the sailors who had tightly closed their eyes imagined that they had a block of ice on their chests. The cold had made their fingers become numb to such an extent that some of them "alarmed at not feeling any pain in their fingers, beat the deck feebly with their hands-obstinate and exhausted." (Nigger, On the Internet)

It is a confirmed fact that during Conrad's time, sailors had an existence of extreme hardship: physically exhausting work, bad or insufficient food, full of danger and an extremely meager pay for all their work. Once on the deck, explaining to the sailors the dangers and problems inherent in their lives, In fact, the character 'Donkin' uses these facts to incite an unsuccessful mutiny on the ship against the officers, Donkin told the mariners that they were good men , "a 'bloomin' condemned lot of good men'. Who thanked us? Who took any notice of our wrongs? Didn't we lead a 'dog's' life for two poun' ten a month ?' Did we think that miserable pay enough to compensate us for the risk to our 109 lives and for the loss of our clothes? 'We've lost every rag!' he cried. . . . The younger men listened thinking." Nigger, On Internet)

It can definitely be deduced from the discussion so far that in *The Nigger of the Narcissus* Joseph Conrad rather rigidly followed the naturalistic tradition of choosing subjects from the lower strata of society, choosing specific time and geographical location, un-heroic and ordinary people facing real life problems under harsh and un-savoury conditions. Even though he deals with raw and unpleasant experiences, his meticulous and delicate treatment of the subject matter raises the story to the level of high art.

M. C. Bradbrook very correctly asserts that "the main body of the work is a rendering of the voyage home, the full life of the ship, simply in terms of the things seen. The power of the writing lies in its implications." (Bradbrook, P. 16) Here Bradbrook categorically states that the aim of Joseph Conrad is "rendering . . . the full life," gaining its power from the "implications." This suggests that Conrad did not insist on direct narration, but suggesting by implications.

*The Nigger and the Narcissus* and *The Mirror of the Sea* are well-known nautical novels by Joseph Conrad. About these novels Conrad recorded in his autobiography. "I have tried with an almost filial regard to render the vibration of life in the great world of waters, in the hearts of the simple men who have tor ages traversed its solitudes, and also that something sentient which seems to dwell in ships –the creatures of their hands and the objects of their care." (A Personal Record, on Internet) Naturally he drew heavily, though not exclusively, on the experiences of his past for the material of his novels, and especially for *The Nigger of the Narcissus*.

For such a naturalistic description it was essential that a person should have first-hand experience of the life of the sea, the atmosphere there; the knowledge should not be derived from second-hand or derivative sources. There is no doubt that that the complete feel of the sea was possessed

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by Joseph Conrad in a great measure. This knowledge is abundantly exhibited in *The Nigger of the Narcissus*.

Such abundant and deep knowledge could only have been learned by a person who loved the sea and observed the happenings very minutely and recorded them very honestly. The reality is also like this. In this novel Conrad records the experiences. The particular voyage whose experiences are recorded here was made by Conrad from Bombay to Dunkirk in a ship named of the *Narcissus*, from 28 April to 11 October in 1884. Joseph Conrad's purported aim in this novel was to "snatch . . . from the remorseless rush of time, a passing phase of life, . . . to hold up unquestioningly . . . the rescued fragment before all eyes in the light of a sincere mood. It is to show its vibration, its colour, reveal the substance or its truth— disclose its inspiring secret; the stress and passion within the core of each convincing moment." (Nigger, P. xiv)

In a very clinical but detailed and objective manner Joseph Conrad builds up the atmosphere of the ship as she commences her journey on the sea. "The passage had begun, and the ship, a fragment detached from the earth, went on lonely and swift like a small planet. Round her the abysses of sky and sea met in an unattainable frontier. A great circular solitude moved with her. . . ." (Nigger, on internet) Then we are informed, " She (the ship *Narcissus*) had her own future; she was alive with the lives of those beings who trod her decks, like that earth which had given her up to the sea, she had an intolerable load of regrets and hopes. On her lived timid truth and audacious lies . . ." (Nigger, on internet)

On way the ship *Narcissus* faces a violent and vicious storm. The struggles of the mariners on the ship are enormous. These ordinary and un-heroic men struggle with the storm like real heroes. They find that during and after the storm most of their food supplies have been washed away. They fight against the over-whelming odds like hunger, thirst, cold, physical tiredness, sleep and exhaustion. The crewmen fight against these odds in a brave and heroic manner. We are told about the seamen in this manner: The smiling greatness of the sea dwarfed the extent of time. The days raced after one another, brilliant and quick like the flashes of a lighthouse, and the nights, eventful and short, resembled fleeting dreams." (Nigger, On Internet)

The crewmen all the same are rudely shaken by the raging storm. "Night and day the head and shoulders of a seaman could be seen aft by the wheel, outlined high against sunshine or starlight, very steady above the stir of revolving spokes. The faces changed, passing in rotation. Youthful faces, bearded faces, dark faces: faces serene, or faces moody, but all akin with brotherhood of the sea; all with the same attentive expression of eyes, carefully watching the compass or the sails." (Nigger, On internet) From such realistic descriptions we feel the real misery of the sailors. While the sailors find it difficult to hold on to the wet ropes with great difficulty, with "groans and sighs while their officers, sulky and dripping with rain water, unceasingly ordered them about in wearied voices". (Nigger, Pp. 47-18)

Thus we can conclude that the novel *Nigger of the Narcissus* is a novel written in the realistic vein. Writing to *Times* critic Richard Curle, Joseph Conrad reflected on "the difficulty that critics felt in classifying [his work] as romantic or realistic."<sup>33</sup> Instead, he explained, "it is fluid" (44). In *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1897), Conrad channels his own maritime experience into the public vogue for sea literature, nautical adventures and sailors' tales—increasingly popular genres in nineteenth-century Britain from Frederick Marryat to Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, and William Hope Hodgson. (Brandon Jernigan, P. 32)

## End Notes

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- vi. Brandon Jernigan, "*Forms of some Intenser Life*": *Genre and imperialism at the turn of the Century*, Ph. D Thesis, University of Urbana, 2010

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