The Symbolic Microcosm in Conrad’s
_The Nigger of the Narcissus_

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Chapter I  Introduction

In the preface of _The Nigger of the Narcissus_, Conrad remarks that the aim of art is to make the reader see. What is it that is worth seeing? "Behold! — all the truth of life there: a moment of vision, a sigh, a smile — and the return to an eternal rest" (p. 16).

He thinks "Art is long and life is short and success is very far off" (P. 16). To present the subtleties of the universe, which attracts the reader’s attention, is what the artist, even the novelist, should do.

To arrest, for the space of a breath, the hands busy about the work of the earth, and compel men entranced by the sight of distant goals to glance for a moment at the surrounding vision of form and colour, of sunshine and shadows; to make them pause for a look, for a sigh, for a smile — such is the aim, difficult and evanescent, and reserved only for a very few to achieve. (P. 16)

Conrad says that if he is successful, we will find there in his work, "encouragement, consolation, fear, charm — all you demand — and, perhaps also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask" (P. 14). The author clutches a moment of courage, from the remorseless rush of time so that he can accomplish this end and bring to the reader that glimpse of truth, to make them hear, feel and see. People who paused to observe the changes of the color, the form and the vibrations where eternalties exist, are touched by the greatness and oneness of the universe. Wilfried S. Dowden says: "For the ultimate accomplishment of the task, he must hold up this moment, the fragment of life, before 'all eyes in the light of a sincere mood.' Thus he will show its vibration, colour and form; and he will reveal the substance of this truth." When the readers have been motivated, they catch the substance of truth, in which the effect of art is implied. To hold up the truth of this given moment, or this fragment of
life is the major aim of the literary artist.

But how does Conrad lead his readers to sense the greatness and oneness of the universe? One way he chooses is through the sea — the early part of his life. He did not leave the sea until he settled down to start his writing career. Then the sea, the jungle and what else he had experienced became the subject matter of his writings.

When Conrad began to write the sea stories which were to achieve for him the Mayfair sophisticate's patronizing title of "spinner of sea yarns," he knew how to recapture artistically both his youthful and his mature sensations of life at sea. As he put it in his "Familiar Preface":

...... 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 for 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. 3

Through these stories, Conrad attempts to give the light of his gospel. He manifests this idea in his third novel, The Nigger of the Narcissus, by way of self-discovery and self-purgation through the crew's direct interaction with the forces of nature which bring them much dangerous struggle in the voyage from Bombay to London.

This story is an allegory of temptation and endurance, a micro-cosm of the moral world of relationships and responsibilities. "The passage had begun, and the ship, a fragment detached from the earth, went on lonely and swift like a small planet. The abysses of sky and sea met in an unattainable frontier around her" (P. 45). The voyage itself is a great challenge. The sea life is chosen as the symbol of the greatness and sameness of the universe. The world of The Nigger of the Narcissus is not just as large as a sailing ship. It is much larger than that. "The voyage exactly symbolizes the real condition of human life." 4 The crew in the ship are the heroes of this story. Together with these manifold heroes, Conrad knits the Narcissus in which despair, hopelessness, loneliness, deception, disasters, quarrels — all the weaknesses and temptations of mankind exist. "Her
freight is an intangible one composed of hopes and fears, truth and falsehood: "an intolerable load of regrets and hopes."5

When the ship sails on the sea, the crew in it will be testified, "To Conrad the sea is neither a god to be submitted to nor a devil to be overcome."6 Conrad shows us the greatness of the sea. There are some excellent descriptions of violence and action during the storm:

The ship tossed about, shaken furiously, like a toy in the hand of lunatic. Just as sunset there was a rush to shorten sail before the menace of a sombre hail cloud. The hard gust of wind came brutal like the blow of a fist. The ship relieved of her canvas in time received it pluckily: she yielded reluctantly to the violent onset; then, coming up with a stately and irresistible motion, brought her spars to windward in the teeth of the screeching squall. Out of the abysmal darkness of the black cloud overhead white hail streamed on her, rattled on the rigging, leaped in handfuls off the yards, rebounded on the deck—round and gleaming in the murky turmoil like a shower of pearls. It passed away. For a moment a livid sun shot horizontally the last rays of sinister light between the hills of steep, rolling waves. Then a wild night rushed in—stamped out in a great howl that dismal remnant of a stormy day. (P. 70)

Here part of the greatness and beauty of nature is presented. At the beginning, while the Narcissus parts from the tug, her sails fill and she becomes a "high, and lonely pyramid, gliding, all shining and white, through the sunlit mist" (P. 43). Her origin in the smoke and greyness of the Clyde is indicative of the mysterious genesis of beauty.7

Life, Conrad was wont to say, is a spectacle of terror and pity, yet also of beauty. "His reason is baffled by the mystery of a world whose beauty holds him in thrall."8 Including the mysterious scenes of horror, the sea symbolizes the life of the universe, where there are many inevitable, terrific powers on which everybody stumbles and in which he tries to find truth. In the little merchant ship, there is no absolute discipline or punishment; thus the protagonist, James Wait, is stealthily arranged in the ship. As a matter of fact, there is no central character in the novel, as said above; the whole
crew are the heroes. They occupy the center of the novel. The main conflict existing in their hearts comes from Wait, an unexpected intruder. "The basis of the plot is the psychological effect which a negro named James Wait, who tyrannized over the crew by playing upon their sympathies, has on his shipmates." 9

Following the course of the crew's concept of life and death, the author exhibits the transition of their inner conflict.

But Conrad is not concerned with everything that happens to the crew on board the Narcissus (such a catalogue of events, if not impossible, would surely not make a novel); more precisely, he is concerned with tracing a change that takes place in the crew: in general terms, the crew passes from ignorance to knowledge about life and about death; as a result, and more specifically, the transition in the crew is from diversity to solidarity. 10

Since his method of developing this theme of self-searching for the truth of life and death is expressed by his choice of characteristic images, especially through two contradictory characters, to analyze this kind of truth-searching by selecting the special characters in pairs who influence the whole crew is the aim of the following chapters.

Chapter II Donkin and James Wait

Both Donkin and James Wait are the new comers of the Narcissus. Donkin is a dirty, ragged and lazy new hand, a man "with shifty eyes and a yellow hatchet face" (P. 23). He is in ambush on the ship, just like a snake curling up in the darkness.

This clean white forecastle was his refuge; the place where he could be lazy; where he could wallow, and lie and eat — and curse the food he ate .... He was the man that cannot steer, that cannot splice, that dodges the work on dark nights; ...., the man who is the last out and the first
in when all hands are called. The man who can't do most things and won't do the rest. The sympathetic and deserving creature that knows all about his rights, but knows nothing of courage, of endurance, and of the unspoken loyalty that knits together a ship's company. (PP. 24-25)

Like a stupid pig, Donkin with an ugly outlook did some foolish actions in reward for the sympathetic donation of the crew who felt pitiful for his miserable situation and gave their old gear to him. Born with evil nature, Donkin provoked many of the crew to rebel against their captain and stirred the free fight with the imbecile Wamibo, a deaf man without a backbone. "Donkin is rabble-rousing labor agitation!
He was not only a never-do-well idler but also a natural troublemaker. He liked to make insulting remarks. He was solitary and nobody liked him. One day Mr. Baker really beat him for his laziness, but all the crew gave no sympathy to him then. "Had the chief officer thrown him overboard, no man would have said as much as 'Hallo! he's gone!'" (P. 57). The next day he was still alive, not a bit hurt. The young sailor teased him so he got agitated. "From that day he become pitiless; told Jimmy that he was a 'black fraud!'" (P. 57).

In order not to expose Wait too early to the reader, the narrator keeps him in the dark till the first mate almost finishes his roll call.

"Wait!" cried a deep, ringing voice, .... What's this? Who said 'Wait'? What ... Then again the sonorous voice said with insistence: — "Wait!" The lamplight lit up the man's body. He was tall. His head was away up .... The whites of his eyes and his teeth gleamed distinctly, but the face was indistinguishable. (P. 31)

With the characteristics of "whites of teeth and eyes" we instantly know that he is a negro with strong physique. The nigger is tall, cool, towery and superb. Now we can slowly apprehend something fearful coming, which we fear to face but look forward to in our heart for a long time. Donkin, everybody's nuisance, is the suitable person to bring us near to this late-coming jinx, something they wait for a long time.

As a combination confidence man and troublemaker, Donkin
preludes the introduction of Wait, providing a prefatory comment upon him and giving Conrad a scorching weapon of attack upon the anarchistic idea. 12

Soon after getting aboard the ship, Wait shammed sickness so he wouldn't have to work. Astounded by his hollow, metallic and tremendously loud cough, the crew came to help him voluntarily. Nobody detected his affectation; only Donkin, the badger from the same mound, knew that he was a malingerer and called him a "black fraud."

Wait, in his role of seagoing confidence man, finds his counterpart in the fraudulent Donkin and in the vague fears and susceptibilities of an ignorant and superstitious crew. 13

To the crew, James Wait is lazy and degenerate, but really sick, while Donkin is something that makes them feel disgusted. They feel sorry for their disturbance of Wait's rest. Naturally and consciously they throw their pity on this seriously sick fellow. Furthermore they begin to disobey the orders of the mate. Donkin, who makes out Wait's tricks, makes use of the crew's weakness to break the harmony of this little world. During the exigencies of the gale, the ship seems to be torn into pieces. They know that it is necessary to cut the mast. But without Captain Alliston's permission nobody dares to cut it down. In this crisis Donkin suggests the crew's cutting the mast in spite of the order which Alliston has already given. Being defeated in this action, he tries to initiate a mutiny for the support of Wait's coming back to his position. This time he throws a pin at Alliston as an initiation. The ensuing confusion causes a chief breach to the discipline of the ship — the helmsman leaves the wheel. When the solidarity is on the brink of danger, the captain restores the order of this ship again.

From the above we can get some hint from the subtle relationship between Donkin and the crew, Wait and the crew, and Wait and Donkin. The interplay of these relationships discloses Conrad's arrangement of the inevitable and universal questions — to face and to accept death, which they fear to face and are still ignorant of. Wait is the embodiment of Death. "The men associate Wait with shadow from that point on, and he is both a symbol of death and a kind of god at whose silver shrine they worship." 14
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The curious character of Wait makes all the crew uncomfortable and Wait is an ill omen to them. "He became the tormentor of all the crew's moments" (P. 60). Wait has already influenced everybody. In order not to make noises, the crew stop their high-flown talk after dinner at dawn. Archic, one of the forecastle workers, doesn't want to sing because Wait emphasizes his own sickness. Wait's fear of humidity makes the starboard watch not dare to do his cleaning work. Wait even fascinates the sailors; everybody is influenced at heart.

He would never let doubt die. He overshadowed the ship, invulnerable in his pride of speedy corruption he trampled on our self-respect, he demonstrated to us daily our want of moral courage. He tainted our lives. (P. 63)

Haunted around by the devil of death, they try to demonstrate their moral courage by doing their best to protect the god of death. Wait has become, as Conrad says, "the fit emblem of their aspirations."¹⁵

For the crew, protecting Wait can prevent them from facing the coming of death. As Conrad states explicitly, "the latent egotism of tenderness to suffering appeared in the developing anxiety not to see him die."¹⁶ Through the moral expression, Conrad leads us to meet confidently and defiantly the inevitable problem of life — mortality. Donkin is the symbol of the demon which encourages us to approach the devil of death.

Chapter III  Singleton and Captain Allistoun

Besides Donkin, Singleton and Captain Allistoun are likewise immune to Wait's blackmail — to sacrifice the ship's solidarity for his own privilege. Singleton is one of the crew, whereas the Captain is high above on the deck as a ruler of this microcosm. In spite of this distinction, both of them are the taciturn prophets or the commanders of all the crew. Captain Allistoun is in an obvious status as leader to give orders, while Singleton is only a latent na-
vigator to save the ship.

Singleton, a mythological figure, is a man of duty. He has his chest and biceps tattooed like a cannibal chief. He is an incarnation of barbarian wisdom and resembles a learned savage patriarch. Wearing spectacles and with a venerable beard, he is taciturn like the ship's cat, crouching and waiting to set the ship free from its misfortunes. Whenever there is leisure, he reads the book *Pelham* (the title means a part of the bridle). Through the polished and insincere sentences, the book gives us excitement and mystery of the sea, which symbolizes life.

Mystery! Is it the fascination of the incomprehensible? — is it the charm of the impossible? Or are those beings who exist beyond the pale of life stirred by his tales as by an enigmatical disclosure of a resplendent world that exists within the frontier of infamy and filthy, ... Mystery! (PP. 20 - 21)

Old Singleton — strong, unthinking, inarticulate, enduring and faithful — is "the epic personification of fundamental virtues."17 The name of Singleton connotes integrity and solidarity. James E. Miller, Jr., says that "Singleton and Donkin are the two poles between which the crew vacillates."18 So deeply agitated, the seamen cannot decide which is right, to waive Singleton or to oppose Donkin. When Singleton is asked if James Wait will die, he says "Why, of course he will die" (P. 59). As a soothsayer, Singleton always keeps mute and seems to know nothing, to understand nothing. It makes the other sailors sometimes suspect him of being stupid from old age. To them, Singleton's oracle is horrible and unacceptable. Their fear to face the dying James causes them to refuse Singleton's prediction which actually leads the crew to acknowledge life in its own way. Death, to Singleton, is a part of life, not the end of it, so it is no use trying to evade it. The right thing to do is to courageously accept death and life for what they are.

Singleton is more than a guide for the crew's puzzlement. Dedicated to his work, he also saves the *Narcissus* from destruction. In the face of a gale, which half submerges the ship, he sticks to the helm for over thirty hours, his white beard tucked under the tip button of his glistening coat.
A big, foaming sea came out of the mist; it made for the ship, roaring wildly, and in its rush it looked as mischievous and decomposing as a madman with an axe. One, or two, shouting, most, held on where they stood. Singleton dug his knees under the wheel-box, and carefully eased the helm to the headlong pitch of the ship, but without taking his eyes off the coming wave. (P. 74)

Without leaving his position for a single minute, Singleton sticks to his job throughout the voyage. While the Narcissus is still at anchor before leaving Bombay, a fresh breeze comes up causing a strain on the anchor cable and necessitating an adjustment on the windlass brake. Singleton instinctively leaps to the task:

Singleton seized the high lever, and, by a violent throw forward of his body, wrung out another half turn from the brake. He recovered himself, breathed largely, and remained for awhile glaring down at the powerful and compact engine that squatted on the deck at his feet like some quiet monster — a creature amazing and tame. "You...hold!" he growled at it masterfully, in the incrust tangle of his white beard. (P. 41)

"Singleton's intuitive wisdom, which seizes upon those very few simple ideas of loyalty, devotion and courage, keeps the ship's crew from floating helplessly about." 19

The other god-father figure with wisdom and power as great as Singleton is Captain Allistoun, ruler of the minute world, coeval with his ship. He has been commanding the Narcissus since she was built. With the same indifferent attitude, the ruler is high up upon the Olympian heights of his poop. Below him are the common mortals struggling and leading their busy and insignificant lives. "He was one of those commanders who speak little, seem to hear nothing, look at no one, but know everything, hear every whisper, see every fleeting shadow of their ship's life" (P. 142). Never leaving his own throne except in an emergency, Allistoun, like Captain Ahab in Moby Dick, leads a group of men to accomplish his own ambition — to be the quickest to pass the Cape of Hope and reach London. He is so ambitious and so devoted to his own career that he nearly neglects the dissatisfaction of his crew. By giving orders as a god-father
always does, he delivers the ship and all the crew from the disasters which have come to his own kingdom. "The captain bears responsibility not for preserving a utopian scheme but for life itself against the destructive elements in nature."20

With serious grey eyes and iron-grey hair, he stands there on his quarterdeck like a statue, as though he has been part of the ship's fittings (P. 67). Even when everybody feels nervous before the storm comes, Allistoun still has his own mood to appreciate the beauty of the ship:

The captain kept his gaze riveted upon her as a loving man watches the unselfish toil of a delicate woman upon the slender thread of whose existence in hung the whole meaning and joy of the world. (P. 67)

Beautiful as the ship is, she has her own weakness. The smudge21 is planted by Allistoun's signing Wait on for this voyage. When he detects this doomed misfortune, Allistoun is enraged and rebukes Wait for his laziness. Wait threatens to bring misfortune, so he refuses to eat anything. Then Allistoun quarantines him in his own coffin-cabin in order not to spoil the others of his crew. But it is too late to stop the tumour from distributing its venom. Wait gains the pity from most of the crew. Only in the spasm of the gale's attack, do the crew, concentrating their mind on saving the boat, forget Wait's existence. After the gale, the crew save Wait from the shut-up coffin. Since Wait's request to return to work is refused, they suspect it is the captain that makes the malingering fall sick. The crew's indignation reaches the highest point when Donkin's assassination fails and the iron is returned to where it is. Allistoun's order brings back to the ship the discipline and ceremony, which have been broken by Wait's and Donkin's exertion of evil. Being a prophet, Allistoun foresees the mischievous Satan in his miniature world. Then with his divine power and primitive thoughts, he overcomes those spells and dissipates them out of his world.

When he (Wait) dies and his body is cast overboard, the spirit of unrest and mutiny which has hung over the ship seems to life away like a cloud, as though the emanation of the spirit of revolt antagonism had been contained in the lonely desperate figure of James Wait, with his queer pride in his companion Death.22
The Captain bears two-fold responsibilities: to preserve a utopian scheme on the one hand, and to fight for life itself against the destructive elements in nature on the other.

Chapter IV Podmore and Belfast

Podmore and Belfast are the two sailors who have genuine sympathy with and concern about Wait. They are the mythic referents which Conrad creates in this novel. Podmore is referred to as James Wait's spiritual saviour, and Belfast as his bodily saviour.

Belfast, is recognized by the other sailors as a queer little man, emotional and illogical. Romancing on principle, he abuses the ship violently. Every time he feels dissatisfied, he just works off his spleen with fighting. Though pugnacious, he is a good hard-working seaman full of sympathy. The contradictory individuality is the factor which compiles Belfast to become a saviour of Wait's body, though he dislikes Wait when he first meets him. It starts from Belfast's "stealing the officer's Sunday fruit pie to tempt the fastidious appetite of Jimmy" (P. 54). He wants to counteract Jimmy's discomfort lest Jim should affect the crew's morale. He believes in Jim's sickness so he makes his effort to take care of him. When the sailors find Wait has got lost in the storm, he quickly takes part in the row of saving Wait. "Belfast untied himself with blind impecuosity, and all at once shot down to leeward quicker than a flash of lightning" (P. 81). Grasping for breath, Wait thinks of Belfast to bring him some water. Belfast supports Wait until the last moment when they are going to bury Wait. He loudly shrieks: "Jimmy, be a man" (P. 177). Then the body starts reluctantly to slip off the lifted planks into the deep sea. Belfast's "be a man" in effect transforms Wait from a super-natural phantom of evil into a mere dead negro.23 From now on, the Narcissus rolls as if relieved of an unfair burden and she favorably calls at the port near London. Off board, Belfast still whimpers along the route. "... Poor Jim! When I think of him, I have no heart for drink" (P. 188).

Belfast executes his saving job from beginning to end even
though he fails at last.

Belfast, who is, incidentally, the only seaman whose devotion and pity for the negro outlasts the latter's death and puts to shame the egotistical emotionalism of his fellows in the forecastle, sets off a chain reaction or suspicions by stealing, in a spasm of sentimentality, the officers' fruit pie for the ailing negro. 24

From Belfast's devotion to securing Wait to his last pushing of Wait's corpse into the sea, the crew's suspicions, drawing out with the stolen pie, disappears along with Wait's body. The story of the crew's enlightenment reveals the meaning of life.

Conceited of being a pious Christian, the cook thinks he is the man to convert Wait, the devil — "The poor fellow had scared me, I thought I had seen the devil" (P. 33). His name is Podmore, which connotes "to beg more pardon from God." He opens the Bible every night no matter whether he reads it or not. When he is on shore with his wife and three children, he takes his family to church twice every Sunday. On the ship he plays the role of a preacher and quotes the scripture to the crew to make them feel ill at ease.

When the pie was stolen, the cook was overwhelmed with grief; he did not know the culprit but he knew that wickedness flourished ...... Whenever he saw three or four of us standing together he would leave his stove, to run out and preach" (P. 54).

Owing to Podmore's accusations, the crew atone for their sin by pitying Wait instead of self-pity.

As to Wait, the cook recognizes him as the most wicked pagan who should be converted first so that God will forgive his sin after his death. Podmore makes it possible to approach Wait and to pray for him. One hot summer night after they have survived the storm, the cook, with a cup of cold tea, walks silently into Wait's room, locks the door (like in the confessional), describes Wait's sin and wants to listen to his confession. "swear ... in the very jaws!" (P. 133). He spends hours in Wait's shelter exhorting him to accept the true religion before he dies. Instead of being baptized, the negro
screams and screams until the cook is pushed out by the Captain. Thus ends this absurd religious fighting. The cook fails to save Wait's soul at last.

The cook's sentimental evangelical Christianity is ineffectual not only because of Wait's rejection, but because of his incompetent personality as described in the second chapter — a conceited saint unable to forget his glorious reward. During the disasters caused by the gale, he just prays to the Master of the crew not to lead him into temptation because of their wrongdoings. From his chatings we also notice that he sees no inconsistency in his behavior as a father. He slapped his son until he couldn't lift his arm for his falling in a pond accidentally on the way to church. As the ship half drowns in the water, his courage gushes out suddenly and miraculously. "As long as she swims I will cook! and disappeared as though he had gone overboard" (P. 98). The merely courageous deed does not go beyond his hypocrisy. All his doings for Wait's deliverance are actually for his own sake although he has really tried to save him in the coffin-cabin. If the gale capsized the Narcissus for her overload of sin, the cook himself can't survive. The sea may as well swallow Wait's soul; and Podmore, the self-appointed confessor, can only pray for himself to gain more pardon from God.

Chapter V  Conclusion

Now we see Wait, the god of death, challenges the crew to an inner struggle. Like Lucifer, Donkin, deludes the crew and entices them away as to give up the moral courage. The crew deem it true that Wait will soon recover if they treat him well. In order to evade the knowledge of death, the crew, like Dr. Faustus, receive Donkin, the devil's temptation. Singleton and Allistoun predicts this catastrophe and restores the lost moral courage of the crew. Both of them act as the prophets and commanders of the microcosm. Finally Allistoun restores the discipline. Singleton saves the ship as well. The cook and Belfast represent the failure of the inner conflict of the shipmates. The cook tries to save Wait's soul, Belfast tries to save Wait's body. Both do not succeed in the saving struggle. It's
just like the struggle of the crew's heart. They give up the moral courage to protect Wait's life. At last Wait is gone into the deep water, the crew still must face the inevitable destiny. From this struggle and the falling of the crew into Donkin's temptation, Conrad bring us to comprehend the meaning of life and death.

In the first chapter, I have already pointed out Conrad's concept of an artist as made clear in the preface of The Nigger of the Narcissus. Frederick R. Karl said, "He (Conrad) apparently was confident that he was heading in a new direction. Both the preface and the novel show Conrad's interest in symbolism, in suggestion, in shaping a novel as a tight world of its own." With this unusual action at sea, the Nigger allowed Conrad, like Melville before him, to recreate a symbolic microcosm of a universal situation, that is, the outer man in his response to the fury of a storm; and the inner man confronted by fear and superstition. In this symbolic microcosm, Conrad unfolds before our eyes a glimpse of truth of nature and life. As Ford puts it, "Conrad found salvation not in any machined form, but in the sheer attempt to produce in words life as it patterns itself to the intelligent observer." By means of the sea and the crew in The Nigger of the Narcissus, we may understand the meaning of life and death as well as see the symbolic meanings represented by the crew. "This is really a two-fold purpose: to make the reader see striking images and to make them understand their meanings."

Notes:


7. Wright, P. 60.


12. Wright, P. 112.


21. When Captain Allistoun employs James Wait as a sailor, Wait signs a smudge on paper for the employment. He is a great smudge in this voyage.

23. Boyle, P. 56.


25. Ibid., P. 48.


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