"They Pass and Make a Sign": Conrad's Passage on Semiotics

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An Old Story Retold

In the myth of Narcissus and Echo, Ovid brings together those themes of reflection, substitution and desire that have permeated literary thought for centuries, proved central to Freud and Lacan, and often been the clandestine subject matter of the kind of literature that addresses its own mode of functioning. A turn-of-the-century example is Joseph Conrad's *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."* Like the Greek fable, it is also the story of linguistic substitutions, that of a triangular relationship between a main character, his self-image and others. Both technically and psychologically, this is as much the story of the crew as James Wait's. The same applies to the myth, too, where Echo may technically be seen just as central as Narcissus, where the act of constant displacement, or echoing, is inextricably bound up with the act of complete identity, or reflection. This is an odd duplicity: any narcissistic obsession with one's mirror image—which, after Lacan, cannot but remain illusory—is both the confirmation of one's identity as well as its undoing.

It is the themes of duplicity and indeterminate, illusory identity that link *The Nigger* to the Greek narrative. One of the most ambiguous characters ever depicted in literature, Wait resists interpretation. By virtue of all the contradictory statements about him, he becomes emblematic of the complexity of the whole text. He is an "unfair burden" (119) whose presence is "indubitable," (26) but this presence is curiously impalpable, something "immaterial," (103) something that is constantly described as empty, yet whose effect is "interminable" (26).

The metaphor of the mirror underlines this indeterminacy. To the question of whether he would live to be old, Narcissus received the answer that he would not, "Unless you get to know yourself." Jim's life also comes to an end just before he might be known, if not to himself, then to the sailors. It happens very late, for as Singleton explains, "Mortally sick men . . . linger till the first sight of land" (105). Eventually he dies, for (at least in the novel's symbolism) it is only possible through the sea's glim-

mering, mirror-like medium to play the hard game of identification, which is indispensable for human life. Land breaks this spell because it reflects nothing, dissolves whatever social ties have been formerly achieved, and quickly disperses the crew members. The implication is that the extreme dangers of sea-faring and the deadly power struggle between Wait and the others are not accidentally brought together: that which is at stake in games of identification and (mis)recognition is no less than what is at stake in moments of natural disasters—one's whole self.

This mythical background and physical setting underline reflection as the foremost theme in the story. Reflection is inseparable from the generation of meaning, and it is no wonder that the author states his purpose in the preface as "to make you *see*." This visual metaphor has its own impressive cultural history. In it, the concept of literature as holding a mirror to life is very persistent, and when we speculate about the identification processes that shape human relationships on board, we may extend this metaphor to our relatonship to the text, and ask what it is in us which is mirrored by *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*. The picture will not be clear. Even though the vivid, highly cinematic scenes convey an acute sense of what maritime life is like, the story as a whole is far from being realistic. The best way to show this is to paraphrase the story. When we tell it in a nutshell, it turns out that James Wait's mystery never clears up, and the end remains as enigmatic as the beginning; it remains, in a familiar terminology, another impenetrable heart of darkness.

The fact that Jimmy holds everybody under a spell is incredible, yet its artistic presentation is successful. The reader does not believe it, yet senses the truth in it. The metaphoric mirror shows primarily our amazement much the same way the narrators are out of their depth to relate the story, and much the same way the narrators fix their astonished looks on Wait. Thus the realistic mode is only a disguise under which something unbelievable is spoon-fed to the reader.

This blend of the realistic and the fantastic partly accounts for the very uneven critical reception of this story. But once this duplicity is recognized, it leads back to the metaphor of the mirror. For it happens there that the familiar is transfixed by the non-existent, desired image, and because of which the individual (be it the Lacanian ego or the mythical Narcissus) becomes a divided, tragically split self. This is also the central implication of *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*. The present narrrative includes a wonderful sentence which may well be considered its thesis: "The secret and ardent desire of our heart was the desire to beat [Wait] viciously with our fists about the head: and we handled him as tenderly as though he had been made of glass . . . " (54). Why? The story is but another variant on what the other two writings are about. Whereas they address the shocking lack of an inner essence in the universe, and the unreliabilty of narrative means to reconstruct a past experience of the self, *The Nigger* shows a tragic division within the self. The major concern of this paper is to demonstrate how this split is rooted in the signi-

fying practices available for the perplexed characters as well as for the equally nonplussed readers and, ultimately, in the nature of textuality.

A Differential Model of Meaning Generation

The critical investigation can begin with the unity of the novel. Considering the often criticized lack of a consistent narrative point of view, this question is among the most relevant. The well-known answers are as follows: excellent characterization (with special regard to Wait, Donkin and Singleton), the complexity of themes (order versus subversion can be discussed on political, racial as well as psychological levels), and the strong visual appeal of the work (the best example is probably how Wait steps forward for the first time). These are undoubtedly appropriate answers, but they rather designate the strong suits of the novel in general than provide an actual unifying principle. When elaborated, these critical explanations hover between purely thematic analyses (what is shown in this story) and purely technical demonstration (how it is shown), thus sustaining the inevitability of such terms as form and content, tenor and vehicle. Tradition forces a formal duplicity on the reader who, probably unsatisfied, may realize that duplicity—the foremost topic in the text: Does Jimmy sham sickness or not? Is he inherently good or evil?—in fact transcends these binary categories, and yet turns out to be the ultimate unifying principle of *The Nigger*. The concept of duplicity has this priviliged status in the text because this is the point where, in a quite peculiar way, the results of thematic and formal approaches interlock. Topical analysis is preoccupied with the question of genuinity on various levels: will James Wait reveal ultimate goodness or badness? In either case, why does he sham so long? And so forth.

The text propounds, then centers these questions around clear-cut answers that can be seen as oppositions such as good or demonic, empty or full. Whether any of these altenatives is given more weight than the others is another problem yet to be solved, but the way the text interrogates its readers certainly assumes the shape of either-or questions. And this is the point where the thematic dimension interlocks with the structural. For example, the highly cinematic quality of the novel has to do with its ready use of contrasts: opposing colors, light and shadow. The very first sentence can already be read as typical of many others: "Mr. Baker, chief mate of the ship *Narcissus*, stepped in one stride out of his lighted cabin into the darkness of the quarter deck." This is the way Conrad introduces all the main characters. Wait: "The white of his eyes and his teeth gleamed distinctly . . . [the boy] raised the light to the man's face. It was black" (12). Donkin: "And Donkin vanished suddenly out of the lighted cabin into the dark group of mustered men" (11).

Why this heavy reliance on contrastive elements, be they conceptual or visual? Is it a coincidence that both thematic and formal levels have their roots in a system of oppositions, or is the superimposition of

these dimensions intended to generate some extra significance? If the latter is the case, what is this new, emerging meaning? And finally, to what extent does the ideology of the novel appear to shape, or to be shaped by, the habit of thinking in oppositions?

As to the last of these inquiries, a first reading of the novel suggests a strange oscillation between two sets of belief: one is transcendental and the other immanent. Even though overt religious attitudes are sometimes the objects of ridicule—the prime example being Podmore's preaching to the sailors—the story does have a more powerful, yet less conspicuous transcendental dimension. Upon recognizing the peculiar interaction between Wait and the ship, and identifying the moral responsibilities of the crew in having Jimmy function as a half-intruder, half-guest, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" inevitably looms as an intertext. But the conceptual foundation of what Cedric Watts calls a "metaphysical covert plot" (69) is just as hazy as in Coleridge's poem. Both propound the question of how respective transcendental hierarchies are established. Indeed, the power relations among the various spiritual forces in "The Ancient Mariner" remain roughly as unmapped as those among the sea, Wait and the ship. Both set this problem in one of the strongest secular hierarchies: that to be found on board of a ship. In both cases, the question is this: who is in charge of the (literal or metaphorical) ship? The same applies to our dominance over the text and to the dominance of the text over us—there is something common in the way the poem's narrative authority is split between the old mariner's several voices, plus the gloss, and in the way *The Nigger* is notoriously recounted from various, incompatible narrative positions.

Thus the call to find an ultimate center permeates the ideological set-up of the fictional world, the politics of this world, as well as the interpretation of the story. This is a call to find an overall structure for the text, supported by the implication that meaning lies in the structure of things. Lo and behold, Conrad appears to endorse this supposition. He writes in the last paragraph: "Then on the waters of the forlorn stream drifts a ship—a shadowy ship manned by a crew of Shades. They pass and make a sign, in a shadowy hail. Haven't we, together and upon the immortal sea, wrung out a meaning from our sinful lives? Good-bye, brothers! You were a good crew" (128). This meaning that is "wrung out" is then a matter of immanence, at least in the sense that it is not a trait of a higher essence, but something that is produced, that emerges on the same ontological level as that on which its objects are positioned. Along with them, but not in them: this particular kind of meaning is rooted in relationships rather than being inherently located in objects. This relationship is that of differences, and these differences—as has already been suggested—are based on those binary oppositions that account for Conrad's willing use of contrasts.

The lines quoted are not sufficient to support this point in themselves, but the cinematic intensity of *The Nigger* is in accordance with this Saussurean concept of meaning formation—in other words, it ex-

emplifies how we appreciate the work in aesthetic terms and how we "wring out" our interpretation by arranging our contrastive concepts, for example, hierarchy versus subversion, life on shore versus maritime life along these oppositions. Once again, only a look at the text as a whole can substantiate this point, but there is something even in these few lines that work to a similar effect. The sentences are organized around contrastive images that convey a sense of opposition between presence and non-presence, each endowed with their respective values: the "crew" and the "ship" are eventually superior to the "Shades," a "good crew" is triumphant over "sinful life," the "sign" they make is but a supplement for the meaning that is "wrung out," and the fact that their ship continues to "drift" in the present tense (even though a clear good-bye is bid them) dramatizes the desired victory of the presence of things over evanescence. The iambic rhythm of the sentences and their balanced, strongly alliterative structure are all suggestive of desire for presence.

The words are spoken in the first person singular as a conclusion to the story. Their more or less explicit comment on the nature of narration renders the passage the other major metafictional statement of the book besides the preface. It offers a clue to the interpretation of the story, and the task now is to follow up on the reliability of this clue. Only an elaboration on these critical implications can permit one to decide between this and an alternative reading, and if the latter is preferred, to formulate it with respect to the first one.

To conclude this section, one can then argue the following. *The Nigger* is set in a world in which the meaning of human actions can be assigned from two sources: one can be described as the domain of transcendence, the other as the system of immanent differences between objects. The first possibility emerges from time to time, and even though it is never fully discarded, it is not given much weight in general. The second set of implications, however, is endorsed by such artistic qualities as the frequent implementation of visual contrasts as well as by self-reflective statements about how meaning is produced rather than found. Meaning, then, is a matter of oppositions, and the remaining task is to clarify whether the relationship between these opposites is purely differential, or whether one element is privileged over the other—if the latter is the case, the origins of this inequilibrium must be found.

Further Formalist Components

The story lends itself to a formalist reading for other reasons as well. Its reliance on the primary contrast of light and shadow sets a direction for the interpretive mind and unfolds several other supplementary oppositions. First the "Preface" reveals this pattern, claiming that art has "its light" and "its shadows," and that "by bringing to light the truth," art's "one illuminating and convincing quality—the very truth of . . . existence" (xlvii) unfolds. Art then is a kind of Orphean descent which, to be rewarded by an ultimate ilumination, has to plunge into the realm of

darkness first. The novel clearly exemplifies this idea: even though its storyline is a straightforward progression towards a lethal sphere, the dangers of Wait, Donkin and natural forces are successfully overcome in the end.

The opening line of the narrative proper presents Mr Baker stepping out of light into darkness. The sentence has strong Biblical resonance: even though the original account of creation is inverted by the transition from light into darkness. This version too, for all intents and purposes, is an act of narrative genesis. Leo Gurko observed in his commentary on the novel that the initials of the officers' names (Allistoun, Baker, Creighton) "point to the beginning of things" (69). This analogy may be further extended by placing Wait on the other end of the alphabetical scale, thus emphasizing the radical difference between the two. In this context, the highly symbolic name of the ship gains an extra significance, and comes to represent an element that is variably ousted from its middle position towards one of the conflicting parties; the *Narcissus* is alternatively described as chaste and as a rape-victim.

An allegorical strain pervades the whole story. It embraces such phenomena as presenting (and reading) the names of the officers as referring to some divine quality, as reading, for example, the storm as representing the existing social-psychological conflicts on a cosmic scale—one could go on, since most thematic approaches are essentially acts of allegorization. As long as these allegories are read in a traditional way, their presence confirms the model that the text apparently offers for its own interpretation: both allegory and the Saussurean concept endorses a clear-cut correspondence between signifier and signified. The first is less firmly based on a differential relationship of the signifiers, but the cultural (rather than natural) foundation of the allegorical mode of thinking is just as clear as when Saussure elaborates on the arbitrary link between the two components of the sign—in either case, we have "wrung out" a meaning.

Beginning with the primordial opposition of light and darkness, all the main topical issues in the novel continue to be presented in terms of oppositions, each implying value judgements—the narrarive Logos did not simply create light through Mr. Baker, but also set up a logocentric mode of thought.

The first chapter soon focuses on Singleton as he is deciphering a then-popular novel. By way of the mystery that arises from the act of reading, the narrator introduces a contrast between those who belong to life through their normality, and those who are "beyond the pale of life" (4). Since a major segment of the novel is about social solidarity, this *inside versus outside* model suitably paves the way for the presentation of such characters as Wait, who is admittedly out, and Donkin, who desperately tries to be in. Says the latter, "I am a sailor, anyhow . . . That's the kind of man I am!" (5).

The spatial model of exteriority versus interiority continues to show itself through the pattern of *capability versus incapability* of speech.

Knowledge is a matter conveyed by, yet ultimately independent of, language, similar to the kernel of a shell as described in an early passage of *Heart of Darkness*. Wisdom, which is "unspeakable" (96) is primarily the attribute of Singleton's generation: "[they] lived inarticulate" (17); and a page later, ". . . the thoughts of his lifetime could have been expressed in six words, but the stir of those things that were as much part of his existence as his beating heart called up a gleam of alert understanding upon the sternness of his aged face." But it is not simply a generational or cultural question: all humans are plunged into a universe where existence is of a many times larger dimension than what might be comprehended by words only: "The problem of life seemed too voluminous for the narrow limits of human speech, and by common consent it was abandoned to the great sea that had from the beginning enfolded it in its immense grip; to the sea that knew all, and would in time infallibly unveil to each other the wisdom hidden in all terrors . . . " (102). The stated primacy of the signified is nowhere clearer than in the following sentence: "They wanted real things. And suddenly all the simple words they knew seemed to be lost for ever in the immensity of their vague and burning desire. They knew what they wanted, but they could not find anything worth saying" (98-99).

Conrad's symbolism often centers on a quest for a lost unity, and since these unities imply hierarchies, it searches for this origin in terms of the *part versus the whole* pattern. Sea-faring itself is such a quest, therefore it is no wonder that its imagery follows the logic of the synecdoche—the *Narcissus* is, surprisingly enough, frequently shown as yet another dimension of the same earth as with which the sea itself is in sharp contrast. The first sentece to actually launch the ship on her voyage renders her not only an extended part of the earth, but also endows her with cosmic qualities: "The passage had begun; and the ship, a fragment detached from the earth, went on lonely and swift like a small planet . . . On her lived timid truth and audacious lies, and, like the earth, she was unconscious, fair to see—and condemned by men to ignoble fate . . ." (21). By virtue of an interesting inversion, additional comments render earth the ship's immediate allegorical equivalent: "The dark land lay alone in the midst of waters, like a mighty ship bestarred with vigilant lights—a ship carrying the burden of millions of lives . . . A great ship! For ages had the ocean battered in vain her enduring sides; she was there when the world was vaster and darker . . . A ship mother of fleets and nations!" (121).

The *Narcissus* then achieves its real significance only in relation to its static kernel, much the same way as the "nigger" achieves his significance in relation to the microcosm of the crew. Through their very number and hierarchical social organization, they come to represent plenitude, or, more specifically, a quasi-natural plenitude in dependence of their almost divine superiority. Wait becomes *emptiness* incarnate, the opposite of this ideal *fullness*: "He opened his eyes, thinking the fall had been very heavy for an empty man—empty—empty" (83); ". . . Had we

(by an incredible hypothesis) undergone similar toil and trouble for an empty cask, that cask would have become as precious to us as Jimmy was" (53). Wait's presence, depressing as it is, is itself doubtful—the narrators persistently characterize him with images that equate him with the simulacrum of real presence: "[he is] like a black buoy" (102) that "wears the mask of a nigger's soul" (12) and his very existence is labelled a "sham" (108).

We have, then, a set of oppositions that seem to account for the reader's comprehension of the text both topically and ideologically. Each opposite is value-charged and is defined by its relation to its opposite and by an invisible link to a source that transcends opposition. The reader can choose between the following interpretive strategies: he can follow suit and respond to the call of the text to recognize, separate, or even prefer one of the above alternatives, and create a reading which either

a) outlines and condemns/defends, for example, Wait's personality and deeds (which are subversive in contrast to the crew's conservative solidarity); or

b) investigates the very mode of thinking in terms of oppositions, and tries to reveal their function in the text.

The second option appears to offer a deeper insight into the nature of the novel; and, one might ironically add, it does so *in contrast* to earlier readings that had a thematic focus. One way to justify this choice is to claim in general that humanist readings are necessarily exhausted at one point of critical history, or in other words, that the knowledge a text can give us about those characters that are considered autonomous subjects, is limited. This, it is to be acknowledged, is a highly general and questionable statement. But the other reason for the above choice is the fact that the text keeps escaping precisely those rigid, opposition-based categories that are otherwise stated very clearly. This does not mean, of course, that either of the previous interpretations are going to be invalidated, or simply be replaced by other, yet strucurally identical ones; but rather, it means that, whereas categories of opposition retain their applicability, other, incompatible readings can also be justified. Their coexistence proves the ultimate openness of a literary text and also accounts for the persuasion of good literature.

The Model Off Balance

Among others, the following major points have been argued so far: first, images of light versus darkness pervade the text; and second, the themes of the story are centered around the contrasting poles of life and death. The four components interlock and create a homology in which light is to darkness what life is to death. These distinctions seem clear-cut, and so do the carriers of these images. A conservative maritime hierarchy represents both life and light. Mr. Baker's original location is in his "lighted cabin," the initial of his name is symbolic of all beginnings, and his firm supervision protects the ship from destruction. Subversion and social disintegration are bound up with images of death and darkness, carried, primarily, by Wait, whose blackness is persistently emphasized, both in a physical and in a spiritual sense.

The reader's recognition of this homology is secured by the repeated juxtaposition of certain themes, motifs and values. But Conrad's rhetoric also addresses the question of such correlations by establishing the recurring metaphor of a mirror. Here not only the two separate entities are interrelated, but the seemingly independent images of seeing and living, too, are brought into contact with each other. Several sentences indicate that the preservation of life and the fear of death are inextricably bound up with a visual act, just like in the story of the mythological Narcissus who dies of his infatuation with his own reflected self. James Wait is called a "fit emblem of [the] aspirations of the seamen" (90), who had a "developing anxiety not to see him die" (102). The scene of all these struggles is designated as both "the glimmering sea" (106) and as the arbitor of death and life issues. Furthermore, the very title condenses the theme of visual difference ("Nigger") and the existential crisis raised by the desire to erase this difference ("Narcissus").

Then the novel offers two different models of its own working and the reader's task is to decide if either of them is deceptive. Manifestations of the first model can be subsumed under the previously-quoted sentence containing the phrase "they pass and make a sign" (178), where the signifier is clearly separated from the signified. The components are distinct, yet a certain harmony characterizes their relationship, where each signifier has only one referent, and the two never blur. This is also a metaphor for one kind of a mirror in which Wait reflects, for example, hideousness, Conradian fiction shows sealife, and, ultimately, language mirrors reality.

But textual examples of the other model—which is more or less explicitly described as a mirror, too—advocate a different semiotics. It is not based on a clean-cut separation of signifier and referent, but rather on the blurring of the two. As a result, the primary effect of this reflection oscillates between mirroring and misrecognition—i.e., identity and difference. In other words, the Abramsian lamp and mirror situation gives way to a Lacanian model. In it, the onlooker is so pleased by the reflected unity of his self that he continues to seek the same in all en-

counters with the other. This unity, however, is a deceptive one, and it can only be reached through an unconscious yet deliberate act of misconstruing visual impressions—in other words, through exclusions of what desire does not want to see.

The text of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* embraces much of this Lacanian semiotics. It does so to cunningly undermine that set of oppositions which it explicitly postulates as its generator of meaning. One cannot help but notice how subtle, yet persistent is the way Conrad presses forward the concept of misrecognition, exactly in those places where precise correlations could have been expected. Jimmy, who "gave the impression of durabilty" (103) and lived an "unquenchable life" (103), is likely to be a man of acute perceptiveness, yet the narrators keep returning to his "obstinate non-recognition" (103). He was "absurd" and "utterly wrong about himself" (103), someone who "mistook [reminiscences] joyfully for images of an undoubted future" (111). It may all be just a flaw of character, but the endurance of his psychoanalytic construction is further underlined by the reader's recognition of the sailors' similar misrecognition of themselves. It is "Through him [Wait]" that they became "highly humanized, tender, complex, excessively decadent" (103), and the crew had "much faith . . . put in his delusions " (115). The following sentences aptly characterize the process whereby the visual image of the other acts as a mysterious mirror and invites the onlooker to create his or her fictional sense of unity and selfhood: "We set ourselves to bolster [falsehood] up . . . Jimmy's steadfastness to his untruthful attitude in the face of the inevitable truth had the proportions of a colossal enigma—of a manifestation grand and incomprehensible that at times inspired a wandering awe" (102).

Misrecognition is not only a matter of the onlooker's position, it is also tied up with the fictionality of the narrator's position. *The Nigger of the Narcissus* has often been criticized for the wide range of points of view that it displays, seemingly quite inconsistently. Within the frameworks of a humanist reading, it is indeed annoying. But the text prepares the reader for this. By presenting characters who are having difficulties freeing themselves from their compelling mirror image—in other words, who fail to grasp differences—the story itself is appropriately mediated through an array of narratorial positions to dramatize the lack of a place from where differences can be eventually comprehended. This is a message about literature: it is anything but a detached object of our study, for much the same way as our intelligence enters the realm of textuality, our intelligence, what's more, our selfhood have been constituted by textual processes. Conrad's famous preface, which, once again, wishes to "make [the reader] see," gains a new, ironic meaning as one recognizes that seeing in the story usually means the distortion of one's vision, the blurring of differences, of signifier and signified.

Indeed, a close reading of the story reveals that in much the same way as the narrators cannot clearly distinguish themselves, and the sailors are unconsciously engaged in a never-ending mirror-game with

Jimmy, the text also shows the collapse of those oppositional categories that allegedly generate meaning for the reader. Conrad consistently transposes character traits to present the elasticity of their differential boundaries. The opposition of light and shadow, with its firm value implications, keeps blurring at various points. Jimmy's first appearance ("a head vigorously modelled into deep shadows and shining lights" 12) shows that there is no shadow without light, and the description invokes an earlier image where, "in the illuminated doorways, silhouettes of moving men appeared for a moment, very black, without relief, like figures cut out of sheet tin." Thus figures of a positive social hiearchy also appear as interruptions of light. Just like shadow itself is no evil, light itself is no truth—both are outside these qualities, and light is only metonymically tied up with truth. Wait's black face is but "the mask of a nigger's soul" (12) and the truth of life is but a "moment of vision" (l). Conrad repeatedly indicates that the two main characters, the sea and Jimmy inevitably carry both of these attributes: "the blackness of the sea was streaked with trails of light" and the man's face was "indistinguishable" (12). Experience cannot be confined to either side of any opposition only, thus it comes quite naturally that Wait calls Podmore a "white devil" (87).

Narration and Identity

One can now return to the Greek myth and investigate how its protagonists are re-impersonated by a single turn-of-the-century character, James Wait. He becomes an allegory to embrace several attributes of Narcissus and Echo, such as non-presence, a compulsion to substitute, and a drive to find identity where none exists. *He becomes, then, the very allegory of language.* A mere list of the ways in which he exists establishes a curious link between how one can talk about him and how language is usually spoken about. Being a black man, Jimmy functions as pure difference on board of a ship run by whites, and his differential relationship to the others is further confirmed by the assertion of the fact that he is intrinsically empty. As his family name, Wait, and the little scandal surrounding it reflect, he is—like all words are—a form of suspended presence. His real nature is never found out (Conrad is precise in writing that "no one could tell what was the meaning of that black man" 33), but the other meaning of his name and the burial scene imply that he is impossible to get rid of. In other words, he dramatizes the process whereby language creates conceptual "prisonhouses" as well as the processes whereby it deconstructs them. Conrad first lures us into trusting the black and white, signifier-signified model, and then shows how shaky the foundations of these oppositions are; for the consistent transposition of attributes and the compulsive repetition of a Lacanian mirror experience partly eliminate the difference between the opposites.

Ultimately, these nuances reveal a major, yet hidden subject matter of the text: how literature represents itself. This question establishes

a strong parallel between this story and *Heart of Darkness* as well as *Lord Jim*. The first one presents an organic world only to show the narrative strategies man needs to maintain faith in a coherent universe. The second, confessional novel promises an insight into the deepest recesses of the human soul, and turns out to be nothing more but a cobweb of narrative representations. *The Nigger* deals with the lack of accord within the self. All three works propound the possibility of identity and coherence, but the very nature of how this unified world can be represented turns out to be haunted by textual self-difference. Identity will always be sought and will never be achieved—this is how the essence of the Greek hero's sad story is echoed by the passage of yet another fictional Narcissus.

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