

## Signifyin(g): Racialising the Other in Joseph Conrad's *The Nigger of the Narcissus*

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### Abstract

This paper examines how Conrad's novella *The Nigger of the Narcissus* discloses a representation of Otherness of its main character, James Wait, through processes of signifying. While the text itself purports to provoke an inquiry into the motivations behind the actions of men, the suggestive use of the N-word in its title and the fact that its main character is of African descent problematises the correlation implied between race and negative human attributes. In my analysis, I use the notion of signifying in two ways. First, I draw on the linguistic notion of signification which is predicated on the existence of the sign consisting of two inseparable aspects: the signifier and the signified. Secondly, I use the concept of signifying as it has been expounded within African-American literary discourse (Gates, Jr., 1986) to describe a variety of verbal rituals resulting in rhetorical negotiations that inform constructions of identity and universal belonging. I posit that both these notions of signifying combine to construct a racial Other in Conrad's text through a sustained focus on the character's personal attributes. I further assert that these signifying processes cast the eponymous 'nigger', James Wait, as the racial Other who is positioned as the narrative's object of knowledge, power and criticism.

**Keywords:** Signifyin(g); Racialisation; the Racial Other; Otherness; Racism; Sentimental(ism).

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The suggestive N-word in the title of Joseph Conrad's novella *The Nigger of the Narcissus* discloses a representation of its main character, James Wait, who I argue is racially Othered through a process of signifying. For my analysis, I use the notion of signifying in two ways. First, I draw on the linguistic notion of signification which is predicated on the existence of the sign consisting of two inseparable aspects: the signifier (the material form of the sign, e.g., sounds in the air, letters on a page that refer to the sign) and the signified (the concept evoked by these words which gives meaning to the sign) (Hall, 1997, pp. 16-17). This idea of signification, which extends to the larger field of semiotics in its application, is mostly associated with the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, although it also derives from the earlier, but much lesser known philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce. In my use of the concept of signification from this angle, I combine Saussure's predominantly linguistic, or verbal, analysis with Peirce's symbolic, iconic and indexical perspective of the concept. Secondly, I also use the concept of signifyin(g) as explored in Henry Louis Gates, Jr's *The Signifying Monkey*. According to Gates (1988, p. 686), signifyin(g) "is a trope that subsumes other rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (the 'master' tropes), and also hyperbole, litotes, and metalepsis". In the sense in which Gates uses it, the term is employed to describe a variety of African-American verbal rituals, including "'trop[ing]-a-dope,' [...] 'marking,' 'loud-talking,' 'specifying,' 'testifying,' 'calling out' (of one's name), 'sounding,' 'rapping,' and 'playing the dozens'" (p. 687). Through a critical assessment of texts within the African-American tradition, Gates examines how this concept is manifested; and drawing on Ralph Ellison, he points out that within their specific cultural context the rhetorical negotiations of signifyin(g) enable "complicated assertions and denials of identity" (p. 117) and even of universal belonging (p. 175). For my analysis of Conrad's narrative, the first meaning

of the concept of signifying, from its use in linguistics, enables an examination of the text from the author's stylistic and figurative use of signs and symbols which combine to create certain impressions on the reader, thus conveying meaning from the text through these impressions. The second meaning of the concept, deeply rooted in African and African-American culture and history, extends the stylistic implications of signification in the narrative so that it does not only facilitate an understanding of the text, but it also marks the text as indicative of much more than can be implied through a random selection of the signs and symbols that combine to create meaning. The 'more' that I focus on in this examination of the novella is the indication of racial Otherness that is underscored in the representation of its main character through the combination of these two meanings of signification.

While my exploration of the racialised Other in Conrad's text may hint at notions of racism, it is important to emphasise that this paper is not intended to argue for or against a racist charge of the author. For if the text itself is anything to go by, its intricate style reflects the writer's abiding concern with the motivations of men and the passions that drive the majority of humanity. Thus, Conrad's narrative captures and explores his characters' troubled inter-personal relationships, as well as their internal struggles with compulsion, obsession and neurosis. As Said (2008, p. 112) observes, Conrad's characters are threatened "with darkness, disorder, and formlessness" – a situation that "leads to an anarchic enlargement of the self" (p. 113). According to Said, Conrad's attempts to deal with this nervous condition reflects the author's personal struggle with "the egoistic assertion of [his] existence so that others will feel it" (p. 112). It is, perhaps, from this foreboding sense of a restive soul, aiming at forging a more unified and recognised self, that Conrad develops what Sewlall (2004, p. 29) refers to as an "obsession with otherness". A scrutiny of such an 'obsession' would make it possible to catalogue evidence related to a racialized regime

of alterity in Conrad's work in support of a racist charge. However, such an exercise would detract from my focus in this paper and my overall argument upholds the notion that such a reductionist assessment of Conrad and his works "routinely ignore and minimize the complexities of Conrad's experience and how those (at times outright contradictory) complexities are negotiated in his work" (Ross, 2004, p. 4). My analysis is furthermore underpinned by Sewlall's assertion that examined "from the theoretical space afforded by postcoloniality, [the] constructions of the other in Conrad's [works] are not as clear-cut and unproblematic as critics [such as Achebe] might suggest" (Sewlall, 2004, p. 30). I further concur with him that, in actual fact, Conrad is rather "ironic" and "most certainly ambiguous and even subversive" in his overall portrayal of subjectivity through his treatment of Otherness (Ibid, p. 30). I, therefore, take the stance that the debate about whether Conrad is racist or not remains unresolved, probably because it is unresolvable depending on the critical angle from which it may be addressed. For, whichever way one looks at it, this argument about racism is bound to provoke intricate and rather biased opinions that distract from a comprehensive analysis of the author's masterful literary style.

### **Racialisation and the Narcissist**

In *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, Conrad employs such masterful style to link his protagonist to his narrative in a relationship marked by a subtle hostility which gains in belligerence, taking on the quality of a struggle to the death. His narration of the arduous homeward journey of the ship *Narcissus* and its crew from India round The Cape in the Southern Seas in winter seems to have the added intention of laying bare his characters so as to make his readers 'see' what he believes to have discovered about the capricious nature of mankind. To effectively depict this, the writer casts his characters upon the backdrop of a portentously capricious universe solely made up

of sea and sky. The capriciousness of this universe is depicted as having a grave effect on human nature. Besides, Conrad portrays the sea as bearing a “disdainful mercy”, and stages it as the exacting universe of ‘toil’, ‘pain’ and ‘labour’ in which men must ‘justify their life’ (Conrad, 1979, p. 55). In the vastness of his ominous universe Conrad depicts the *Narcissus* as “a fragment detached from the earth” sailing on “lonely and swift like a small planet” (p. 18). On this ‘small planet’, Conrad marks life as ‘ever changing and ever the same, always monotonous and always imposing’ (p. 18). From this symbolically Manichean existence, Conrad further portrays that his fictional universe is anything but homogenous; for it depicts an admixture of natures and cultures, which is a recurring trope in most of his stories. The consolidation of this image of a miniature earth fraught with its own inconsistencies prepares the reader’s mind to already imagine the ship crew as representative of a humanity diverse in all its forms. Thus, Conrad uses the classical trope of the ship as state (which has its source in Plato’s *Republic* though the crew, like that aboard Melville’s *Pequod*, is much more ethnically and socially diverse than anything Plato could have imagined). Subsequently, in the cosmological setting of the *Narcissus*, Conrad’s heterogeneous humanity constitutes men of Finnish, Dutch, English, Irish, Scottish, Norwegian, and West Indian backgrounds. It is from this motley crowd that the author racially marks his central character whom he inadvertently represents in ways that signify him as an Other.

From the very title of the novella, notions of signification are subtly implied. The term ‘Narcissus’, which, in the narrative, refers to the name of the ship, evokes the mythological connotations associated with it. In Greek mythology, Narcissus, the son of the river god Cephissus and the nymph Liriope, is a hunter who is noted for his extreme beauty. This makes him arrogant and scornful towards all who love him. As punishment for his arrogance, he is lured by the goddess Nemesis to a pool where he sees his reflection in the water and falls in love with

his own image. Becoming obsessed with his reflection, he loses his will to live and consequently dies. In its evocation of this mythology and its allusion to the self-deluding and fatal consequences of the sin of self-love, Conrad's ship *Narcissus* can be read, in Saussurean terms, as a sign which draws on all its connotative references and imposes an ineluctable meaning on the text. Examined also from Peirce's perspective, the name of the ship serves as an index foretoking the eventual demise of the main character (the nigger) associated with it. Lastly, from the African-American notion of signifyin(g), the ship is ingeniously disguised in Conrad's narrative as a quasi-character that, again through its classical connotations, signifies upon its crew, especially upon the main character around whom the narrative evolves. Thus, the linkage established in the narrative between the ship and the main character, James Wait, yields signs, including even the most camouflaged allusions, that contribute to the overall significance of the text.

In a preface to his 'Readers in America', Conrad, in reference to James Wait, states that "in the book he is nothing; he is merely the centre of the ship's collective psychology and the pivot of the action" (Ibid, p. 168). From this statement, it is obvious that Conrad uses his protagonist, Wait, in two main ways. First, he embodies the 'collective' consciousness of the ship; and secondly, he represents the conflict that drives the plot. Depicted in these ways, Wait signifies both in the semiotic sense of the word and in the sense in which it is used in African-American discourse. Since he is symbolised as the Devil (Ibid, pp. 11; 71) who epitomises all things evil, it is no wonder then that he should signify the consciousness of the ship manned by a crew who are described as "a wicked lot, [...] about as wicked as any ship's company in this sinful world!" (p. 49), and as "[w]orse than devils too sometimes — downright, horned devils" (p. 77). Besides, in being represented as evil and as embodying the conflict that moves the plot, Wait bears a feature that depicts the concept of signifyin(g) as it pertains to Gates' analysis of

the Signifying Monkey. This is evidenced in the fact that like Gates' Signifying Monkey, Wait is presented "not primarily as a character in the narrative but rather as a vehicle for narration itself" (Gates, 1988, p. 688). In this function, he signifies, as implied in African-American discourse, by the fact that he "wreaks havoc upon 'the signified'" (Ibid, p. 689). Seeing as the narrative depends so heavily on James Wait's characterisation, it may then be argued that Conrad, in the actual manoeuvring of his narrative style, contradicts himself in the fact that in his book, James Wait is far from being 'nothing' and his presence and significance is in no way 'merely' arbitrary. For without him and all the signification that his character cumulatively suggests, Conrad's novella and the meaning it holds would probably never exist. Thus, my further analysis also demonstrates how Wait's characterisation signifies Otherness in ways that bind the narrative together.

Upon his introduction into the narrative, James Wait is signified as different through colour. At his first appearance, he is captured simply as the "Nigger" (Conrad, 1979, p. 34). While this debut is heavily impacted by the pun on his last name 'Wait', (which I will discuss later), the reference to him here, and several times afterwards, as 'Nigger' evokes an image that is loaded with ambivalent racial, political, and social connotations. This is because the term historically connotes politically and culturally racial and pejorative associations (Fanon, 1967, p. 165) such as slavery, inferiority, dehumanisation, and animalisation (Fanon, 2005, p. 7). Consequently, as the narrative unfolds, the obnoxious inferences of the term force their essence upon Wait and he is gradually Othered to the point of assuming a monstrosity that dehumanises him. Thus, I argue that this first reference to Wait as a 'nigger' right at the onset of the narrative foreshadows the intensifying of his Otherness as the plot develops.

In my assertion that this initial description of James Wait impacts on his later characterisation, I agree with Hall's (1997, p. 219) claim that once an image is created, it "carries many

meanings". To quote him at length, Hall states that:

[The] image both shows an event (denotation) and carries a 'message' or meaning (connotation) [...] about 'race', colour and 'otherness'. We can't help reading images of this kind as 'saying something', not just about the people or the occasion, but about their 'otherness', their 'difference'. '*Difference*' has been marked. How it is then interpreted is a constant and recurring preoccupation in the representation of people who are racially and ethnically different from the majority population. Difference signifies. It 'speaks'. (p. 219)

In this statement, Hall points out that once an image is evoked, it signifies by drawing attention to itself and registering an impression, a presence (an event). Besides, it also triggers a range of meanings, implied by any inferences that may be associated with it. Thus, the image makes meaning by being 'marked', set apart or differentiated from other images. In this way, it signifies or 'speaks'. It is from such a perspective about how differentiating images signify, or 'speak', that I posit that any images evoked by the introductory description of James Wait reinforce the construction of the character's Otherness.

Besides, in his artistic propensity for detailed 'visual presentations' (Watt, 1958, p. 94), Conrad does not only present the event or the exhibit (Wait), but he also fully expands its message with all the plausible connotations he would like the reader to attach to it. Of course, this in no way limits the reader's range of connotative allusion; rather, from a post-structuralist perspective, it expands it even further as meaning is not fixed and is constantly in a flux. No doubt, the writer fully intends this as his title reveals; and in connecting the referent term for Wait – 'nigger' – to that of the ship – Narcissus, with all the historical and classical symbolism that these terms evoke, Conrad inadvertently constructs a sort of doubly crossed symbolism in



which each term – nigger and Narcissus – signifies in its own way, even while they simultaneously signify upon each other. To expand on the relation between the two Ns – to wit the racial epithet and the Classical allusion – I postulate, from the notion of signifyin(g), that by yoking these terms, the writer achieves “a rhetorical indirection” which is “almost purely stylistic” (Gates, 1988, p. 693).

Exploring this rhetorical style of indirection from Mitchell-Kernan’s perspective, Gates indicates that this is the “key aspect of signifying” as it directly implies meaning through “its indirect intent or metaphorical reference” (p. 693). In effect, signifyin(g) entails “direction through indirection” (p. 689), the implication of meaning through the use of rhetorical elements such as “figuration, troping, and parody [...] or pastiche” (p. 693). From this perspective, I propose that Conrad’s text may be read as a pastiche of the Classical mythology in which Wait assumes the character, (and fate), of the mythological figure. Understood in this way, Wait signifies through the trope of blackness and its associated connotations of evil and death as he projects (read reflects) onto the ship the plethora of meanings that his persona implies. Conversely, the *Narcissus* animated by its crew casts (read reflects back) upon Wait its deficiencies, of which it divests itself by achieving through Wait’s eventual death its own moral cleansing. Therefore, the ship, with its classical allusions, draws attention to the tendency for narcissistic traits while it also signifies upon Wait through whom these tendencies are staged. In an obvious pun on his name, the character then becomes the weight (or burden) that persistently draws the ship into storms and towards near damnation until he is cast off (in his death), resulting in the redemption of the ship and its men. Hence, I suggest that in his stylistic manipulations of and connections between Wait and the *Narcissus*, Conrad subconsciously achieves the effect of demonstrating a subtle wordplay on the notions of racism and narcissism in which the two terms signify upon each other. This may be perceived in

the extent to which narcissism may be deemed as racist in that it prioritises the standardisation and preservation of a certain notion of the Self to the exclusion of Others, while racism may equally be deemed narcissistic in its egocentric differentiation of Others through an over-inflated sense of Self-worth.

### **Signifyin(g) the colour racial Other**

In the text, Wait is referred to in various instances as a “black fraud” (Conrad, 1979, p. 25), a “bloody black beast (p. 42), and a “black phantom” (p. 93). Thus, in his metaphorical and literal blackness, he progresses through the narrative in the sequential manifestation of these descriptions of him. He, therefore, transforms from a fraud, captured in the monstrosity of a beast, and finally lends closure to the narrative as a phantom by implication of his death. These metaphorical representations signify the negative notions implied by his race, which include the dark history of slavery and the enduring politics of racial inferiority. In effect, while Wait signifies racially and historically as an individual, he also signifies upon the ship (troubled and mostly described in sombre terms due to being caught in horrible storms), and upon its crew, often described as a “dark group” of men (Ibid, pp. 9; 74; 107).

Through his sustained stylistic technique of visual depiction, Conrad describes Wait by focusing on his colour – he is different because he is dark-skinned, a “nigger.” In what Fanon refers to as the racial epidermal schema (Fanon, 1967, p. 84), the “nigger,” Wait, is defined throughout the narrative by the fact of his blackness. Associated with this fact of his physical appearance are many more attributive connotations, which are distributed across the entire narrative. However, before we even enter the text and encounter the ways in which Wait’s blackness signifies in the narrative, Conrad already indicates what our “nigger” should, first and foremost, signify among other significations that will undoubtedly follow. In the preface that he writes to his “Readers in America”, Conrad (1979, p. 168) states:

A negro in a British forecastle is a lonely being. He has no chums. Yet James Wait, afraid of death and making her his accomplice was an impostor of some character—mastering our compassion, scornful of our sentimentalism, triumphing over our suspicions.

From this, the reader is already prompted to consider Wait as a loner who ‘has no chums’. His further representation as being fearful of death and yet making it his ‘accomplice’, simultaneously appeals to and scorns our sympathy. On the one hand, the indication of his loneliness alludes to him being an outsider of some sort in the sense that he derives no sense of belonging from among the crew members on the ship; and this arouses our sympathy for him. On the other hand, however, his association with death and, as we later discover, the way he capitalises on this ominous association to sabotage the courage and faith of his fellow shipmates, estranges him even more. Ultimately, his mockery of the shipmates’ sympathy for him, and the reader’s empathy, due to his malingering at the beginning of the narrative, culminates in a disaffection towards him even after his pretence actually gives way to true indisposition and to imminent death. Through this rendering of the character of James Wait, Conrad at once plays on our sentiments while he uses the character himself to overturn any sentimentalism that we may have developed towards him at the onset of the narrative. Countless theorists of sentimentalism, such as Jane Tompkins and Joanne Dobson, have argued that one of the main aims of sentimental literature is to make readers empathise with the suffering of others. A classic example of this occurs in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe which depicts the suffering of slaves in nineteenth century America. In this novel, the readers’ sentiments for black slaves are sustained, and even intensified, as the narrative unfolds. In her book *Sensational Designs*, Tompkins (1985) argues for Stowe’s novel (often excluded because it is sentimental and also because it is considered racist) to be included in the canon. Tompkins’ claim

is made on the evidence that *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in causing its readers to empathise with the plight of its enslaved characters, was “spectacularly persuasive” in its ability to “convince a [whole] nation to go to war and to free its slaves” (Tompkins, 1985, p. 141). Thus, in its sentimental quality, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* arouses in the reader a sense of fellow-feeling, which the narrative itself also depicts through characters such as George Shelby (son of Tom's first master), upon whom Tom has had a great and positive influence; and Eva (daughter of Tom's second master), whose close friendship with Tom is undergirded by their shared religion. In Conrad's *Narcissus*, however, the consequence of Wait's abuse of sentimentalism is that any tendency to fellow-feeling from his shipmates “takes a diabolical turn as the ship's crew, with a mutinous single-mindedness, heap moral responsibility onto [Wait], dehumanizing him in the process” (Greiner, 2012, pp. 13-14). Thus, in a demonstration of the detrimental effects of an exaggerated and over-indulgent appeal to sentimentalism, resulting in its abuse, Conrad's *Narcissus* stages a critique of the aesthetics and politics of sentimentalism, especially of its function, as captured in 19<sup>th</sup> century writing, as a subconscious appeal to what may be deemed as acceptable moral action. In Wait's case, however, his abuse of the sentimentalism of his shipmates as of the reader could be read as a publicised scornful response to his racial othering.

In what can be described as a public enactment of racial othering, Wait's introduction into the narrative is dramatically staged as he literally barges onto the ship. After Mr. Baker, the shipmate, has mustered the men, he observes that he is “one hand short” but is unable to make out on his list the name of that last man, as it is “all a smudge” (Conrad, 1979, p. 10). However, just as he dismisses the men, instructing them to go below, and he starts to turn away, a “deep, ringing voice” cries out ““Wait!”” (p. 10). Occurring right after the shipmate's dismissal of the men, this pronouncement, which obviously contradicts his instruction, clearly causes all, including the shipmate himself, to halt and

turn around. Furious that anyone would dare to contradict him, Mr. Baker asks who called out, and the caller resolutely repeats ““Wait!”” (p. 10). To this, the shipmate retorts: ““Who are you! How dare you...”” (p. 10), only to realise later that the caller, Wait, meant simply to identify himself. This initial confusion that characterises Wait’s appearance is significant for the effect that it has on the crew. The obvious puzzlement resulting from Wait’s declaration of his name is symptomatic of the influence that he will continue to exert on the men who, frozen, in this instance, into inaction or, perhaps, delayed action, persistently display a vacillation in duty or allegiance throughout the rest of the narrative. Thus, in a sense, this early attention drawn to the pun on Wait’s name shows him up as a device used by the author to both create and indicate the major conflict in the narrative, a conflict of duty, marked by the constant ambivalence personified in the character’s name and appearance. Additionally, the framing of Wait’s appearance with the shipmate’s indication of being ‘one hand short’ and unable to clearly see the last name on his list because it is ‘all a smudge’, already foreshadows future events in the rest of the narrative. First, even though Wait eventually shows up, despite the shipmate’s suspicion that “he may not” (p. 10), the ship remains one hand short till the end of the journey, thus justifying Mr. Baker’s scepticism. Besides, embodying the manner in which his name appears on the list, Wait, throughout the rest of the narrative, is cast as a ‘smudge’ on the existence of the ship and on the conscience of its men.

In a further depiction of racial othering, the narrative reveals that Wait’s dramatic entry is captured through the stark contrasts of light and darkness, black and white, distinct and shadowy features; and it is in that static moment that he is identified as “nigger”:

The lamplight lit up the man’s body. He was tall.  
His head was away up in the shadows of lifeboats  
that stood on skids above the deck. The whites of  
his eyes and his teeth gleamed distinctly, but the

face was indistinguishable. His hands were big and seemed gloved.

[...]

The boy, amazed like the rest, raised the light to the man's face. It was black. A surprised hum—a faint hum that sounded like the suppressed mutter of the word “Nigger”—ran along the deck and escaped out into the night. The nigger seemed not to hear. He balanced himself where he stood in a swagger that marked time. After a moment he said calmly: —”My name is Wait—James Wait.” (p. 10)

In this metaphorical representation of Wait, Conrad deploys the use of contrast to stage a theatrical image of the character. Through the description, the reader's gaze literally follows the lamplight in its gradual revelation of the character, as it travels up his tall frame. Directed by this light, the reader perceives parts of the character's body that already drop hints of a difference based on contrast, that is prefigured by the very light facilitating his revelation. Thus, in line with this technique, the character's head, which is ‘away up in the shadows’, only presents a vivid image of the ‘whites of his eyes and his teeth’ which ‘gleamed distinctly’ while his face remains ‘indistinguishable’. When the lamp is finally raised to his face, it reveals that his face is ‘black’, in sharp contrast to the white teeth and eyes already perceived. In relation to this use of contrast to depict Wait as different, I draw again on Hall's analysis of difference in which he argues that meaning is relational and that it depends on the difference between opposites (Hall, 1992, p. 242). In connection to this, Hall further points out that it is possible to know what a term means by thinking about what it is not: therefore, we know what “black” means because we can contrast it with “white”, which it is not. Thus, it is in relation to the one term that the other derives or draws meaning. This constructs a binary formation which post-structuralism, however, deconstructs

precisely because it always harbours a hierarchy where the one term – white – is valued over and above the other – black. The counterpoint to thinking about difference in this way is that although it helps us to appreciate the diversity of the world from the perspective of opposites, it is also reductionist in the sense that values or ideas really exist in varying degrees of nuanced double-binds rather than in pure either/or extremes, thus subverting the Manichean rigidity of the two-term structure of binary oppositions. Nevertheless, when the structure of binary oppositions enabled by such differentiation is sustained as it is in Conrad's text, it subtly begets the uncomfortable predication of power relations. As Jacques Derrida observes, meaning, often derived through the creation of binary oppositions, privileges one half of the two-part structure as always the dominant form while the completing half remains inferior: “**man/woman**”, “**upper class/ lower class**”. This forms a “violent hierarchy [in which] one of the terms governs the other” (Derrida, 1994, p. 41). In the depiction of Conrad's main character, such a two-part structure is compellingly revealed in the persistent reference to Wait's skin colour in contrast to his surroundings, or even to other physical features of his own body, such as the whiteness of his teeth and his eyes. However, despite these sharp contrasts between light and darkness, black and white, the suggestion of shadows and, initially, indistinguishable features indicate the subversion of the tendency to wholly define the character as representing one thing or another by pinning onto him pure notions of subjectivity, which is presumed complete only based on the dominant idea of an assumption of what the character must look like. This disruption of the presumed notion of a complete subject is marked by the murmur of surprise that accompanies the revelation of Wait's face as ‘black’, and the ensuing declaration of him as a ‘nigger’. In a further subversion of these presumptions, we observe, through the narrator's account, that the character defies this description by seeming ‘not to hear’ the use of the N-word in reference to him. Besides,

upon the mention of this word, the character's posture of balancing himself as he 'stood in a swagger that marked time' reflects a confident and self-important attitude that reinforces his defiance. Additionally, the character overturns the stereotyping associated with being identified by the N-word by asserting his individuality through the mention of his name: 'James Wait'. In this self-assertion lies evidence of a clear attempt to redefine the power relations between the describer and the described. This indicates the character's dismantling of a presumed order and, to pun on his name, a weighting against an established system of representation through his insistence on representing himself. While in this case the character's defiance of stereotyping clearly has the positive effect of affirming his personality – confident and dignified, much later in the narrative, his indulgent, and rather condescending, attitude to arrogate to himself the favours of his shipmates while all along pretending to be ill rebounds on him with the effect that he becomes persistently referenced and signified by the N-word, which, occurring forty-five times in the text, is used ten times more than his actual name. This frequency is only outmatched by the use of the diminutive form of his name – Jimmy – which itself plays down his over-valued self through the false endearment expressed by his shipmates: "we all lovingly called him Jimmy, to conceal our hate..." (Conrad, 1979, p. 22).

Through the rest of the narrative, it becomes evident that Wait, though hated, is tolerated because the ship crew empathise with him as sharing in their humanity despite his racial difference. This, however, is what he takes advantage of to dupe the sentimentality of his shipmates. In *Beautiful Deceptions*, Schweighauser (2016, p. 115) points out that, in sentimental novels, this sense of a shared humanity establishes "emotional bonds between characters" to the extent that even "faked emotional distress can call forth heartfelt sympathy" (p. 114). Stating that such "sympathetic identification" is the problem that "haunts sentimentalism" for the fact that "its emotional



appeals” may be based on deception (p. 114), Schweighauser, further demonstrates that such affective identification depicts what Dobson refers to as the “emotional and philosophical ethos” of sentimentalism which “celebrates human connection, both personal and communal, and acknowledges the shared devastation of affectional loss” (p. 115). Examining the affective influence of Wait over the crew from this perspective, it is obvious that the men’s tendency to sympathetically identify with Wait results in their becoming emotionally duped by him. This occurs because the men respond with compassion to Wait’s plight even though they doubt the veracity of his claims. Wait, conversely, exploits the affective tendencies of the men by using his sickness and the persistent reminder of his imminent death to bully them into “a weird servitude” (Conrad, 1979, p. 26), exacting the best treatment from them while showing no appreciation for their efforts:

Our singers became mute because Jimmy was a dying man. For the same reason no chap... could ‘drive a nail to hang his few poor rags upon,’ without being made aware of the enormity he committed in disturbing Jimmy’s interminable last moments. At night, [...] the watches were called man by man, in whispers, so as not to interfere with Jimmy’s, possibly, last slumber on earth. True, he was always awake, and managed, as we sneaked out on deck, to plant in our backs some cutting remark that, for the moment, made us feel as if we had been brutes, and afterwards made us suspect ourselves of being fools. We spoke in low tones within that fo’c’sle as though it had been a church. We ate our meals in silence and dread, for Jimmy was capricious with his food, and railed bitterly at the salt meat, at the biscuits, at the tea, as at articles unfit for human consumption—‘let alone for a dying man!’ He would say:—‘Can’t you find a better slice of meat for a sick man ...?’

But there! If I had a chance, you fellows would do away with it. You would poison me. Look at what you have given me!’ We served him in his bed 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 had found the secret of keeping for ever on the run the fundamental imbecility of mankind; he had the secret of life, that confounded dying man, and he made himself master of every moment of our existence. We grew desperate, and remained submissive. (Ibid, pp. 22-23).

In this account, the narrator outlines the numerous ways in which Wait manipulates the crew based on his purported ill-health and his claim to be dying. In an extreme exploitation that deprives his shipmates of the ability to indulge themselves or to carry out their duties freely, Wait tyrannizes the ship as he casts the morbid mood of his alleged approaching death over the crew. Consequently, the crew feel inhibited in their foisted consideration of him. Their expression of joviality is ‘muted’ and even essential actions that may be performed towards certain needs (such as driving a nail to hang clothes) are hindered. In this already stifled atmosphere, Wait does not cease to vilify the men at the least opportunity, making them feel morally deficient and apprehensive of their own personalities. In his continued disparaging treatment of them, Wait additionally criticises the meals he is served and even goes as far as to accuse his shipmates of the possibility of poisoning him. Despite the aspersions he casts on the men, they continue to serve him and continue to be ruled by him, as implied through the metaphor of the ‘base courtiers of a hated prince’. This notion of Wait ruling, tyrannically, over the lives of the men is later reiterated in the narrator’s assertion: “He became the tormentor of all our moments; he was worse than a nightmare” (p. 27). Yet, despite their despair of the persecution they suffer from Wait, they

remain 'submissive'. From this account, it is evident that Wait routinely imposes upon the crew a performance of the literal pun on his name: he gets them to wait on him, in spite of themselves. He achieves this by capitalising on their emotions and making them feel morally obliged to respect the last wishes of a dying man. Nevertheless, the narrator further reveals that even while they acquiesce to Wait's demand of their sympathy, they cannot help but feel or suspect that they are being conned:

And we hated James Wait. We could not get rid of the monstrous suspicion that this astounding black man was shamming sick, had been malingering heartlessly in the face of our toil, of our scorn, of our patience—and was now malingering in the face of our devotion—in the face of death. Our vague and imperfect morality rose with disgust at his manly lie. But he stuck to it manfully—amazingly. (pp. 44-45).

Notably, this assertion of the shipmates' hatred for Wait is made at a time when the character is genuinely in distress: he is trapped in a locked-down hatch during a violent storm and the crew set out to rescue him. Whereas this statement reveals that the crew suspects Wait of pretending to be sick and abusing their benevolence towards him, it also reveals their disgust at his attitude to persistently hold on to the suspected falsehood. Thus, while they yet treat him with consideration based on his claim of sickness, they cannot help feeling that they are also being hoodwinked. This notwithstanding, they remain devoted to him at the risk of their own lives, as they neglect the imperilled ship and misdirect their efforts to save Wait. Thus, they continue to 'wait' on him, even in the face of death. While the narrator's allusion to a 'monstrous suspicion' and a 'manly lie' insinuates the men's increasing doubt about Wait's claims, to the reader, it is already clear that the character has achieved this feat of winning the undying allegiance of the crew through a sustained act of deception. From this perspective, he fully evokes

the concept of signifying as it is used in African-American discourse, and specifically in reference to the Signifying Monkey. It is important to point out, however, that while Gates' analysis of signifyin(g) takes a more affirmative turn in his reading of the practice as a positive activity, in my reading of the *Narcissus* through this concept I identify that Conrad explores the flip sides of this practice that Gates affirms. In his analysis of the concept, Gates explains that the symbolic figure of the Signifying Monkey is the “signifier as such” (Gates, 1988, p. 689), to the extent that it embodies all the modes of signifying within African-American discourse. Noting that the Signifying Monkey, representing “black mythology’s archetypal signifier, [...] is a trickster figure” (p. 687), Gates further points out that “as tricksters [such figures] are mediators and their mediations are tricks” (p. 687). Drawing on Roger Abrahams, Gates moreover posits that from the standpoint of African-American cultural discourse, signifying “certainly refers to the trickster’s ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle, and lie” (p. 689). Referring to these extended implications of the meaning of signifying as expounded by Gates, I note that it is interesting to view Wait, in his manipulation of his shipmates, as exemplifying such a trickster character. This is evidenced in the fact that he uses deception to sway the emotions of his shipmates and to cause them to pander to his whims without pausing for a moment of scepticism. With further recourse to Gates, I argue that through his name (Wait, *nomen est omen*), the character signifies upon the rest of the crew as he cons them into submission to him. In effect, he bears upon the other men the full import of his name as he signifies upon them, thereby subverting any presumption of his racial inferiority to them. Moreover, Wait’s signifying processes evidently attempt to re-humanise his dehumanised self through what Gates refers to as “modes of figuration itself” (p. 687). This is when a character embarks on self-description, self-representation and self-assertion through their own self-defined terms of reference.

Clearly, Wait demonstrates this in various ways: when, by being referred to as ‘nigger’, he is marked for his race and colour, he defies this description by calling out his name (Conrad, 1979, p. 10). Besides, he possesses a booming voice and is ever-ready to curtly defend his actions (p. 11). Also, in his later admission to Donkin that he is not sick (p. 68), he demonstrates what Smitherman (1977, p. 79) calls the “semi-serious tradition of ‘lying’” which, in black discourse, forms part of a rhetorical performance that signifies the individual within his social and cultural space. Furthermore, Gates’ statement that signifying implies modes of figuration – that is, allegorical representation – elucidates the portrayal of Wait as allegorically representative of the universe of the *Narcissus* where the moral qualities of its men are evaluated. These qualities are examined through Wait’s character which highlights the excesses of negative moral responsibility towards others. However, while Wait, embodying morality, is literally held up to the light of scrutiny in this way, his inclination to self-gratification is compensated by Singleton who, alone among the men, remains unmoved by Wait’s ruses, and displays an unwavering commitment to the business of steering the ship. Displaying, thus, a steadfastness to purpose, Singleton commits to that which is right and in the long run beneficial to all within this microcosmic universe, while Wait is steeped in self-indulgence to his own detriment. Consequently, in the face of its redeeming nature, Singleton’s resoluteness, which helps to keep the ship on its homeward course, contradicts Wait’s act of sticking ‘manfully’ to his ‘manly lie’, which in the end destroys him. It then becomes obvious that in upholding falsehood, Wait shirks a moral responsibility towards his shipmates, and it is clearly this moral neglect that eventually results in his demise. Once again, in this regard, I necessarily emphasise that Gates gives a far more affirmative notion of signifyin(g) as creative word play as opposed to Wait’s audacious lying and deception, portrayed mostly as adverse, in the *Narcissus*. A similarity can, however, be identified between the outcome of such signifyin(g)

both in the *Narcissus* as in Gates' discussion of the concept with reference to the Monkey figure of this African-American practice. For just as in Conrad's text, Wait's demise results from his deception, in the African-American myth, the trickster Monkey receives a retributive trouncing from the Lion who, after being himself trounced by the Elephant, ultimately realises that he has been fooled by the Monkey into going to confront the Elephant who purportedly insulted him (the Lion).

### Conclusion

From the foregoing, I assert that to the representation of Wait as a con artist is also strongly associated the motif of falsehood. Wait is indeed unwell right from the beginning and shows signs of this in his sluggish attitude towards work on the ship. The narrator reveals that all the men "remarked that Jimmy from the first was very slack at his work, but [they] thought it simply the outcome of his philosophy of life" (p. 27). However, when one of the officers reprimands him for his languid movement, scolding: "what's the matter with your hind legs?", Wait answers morbidly: "it isn't my legs, ... it's my lungs. [...] Can't you see I'm a dying man? I know it!" (p. 27). This reveals that he is unwell and is aware of it. Even so, the manner and intensity with which he seems to revel in his condition, especially since it gives him an excuse to avoid work and to bully his fellow shipmates into serving him, makes him subject to that "monstrous suspicion" of a lie that the narrator alludes to and for which reason he is hated: "we hated him because of the suspicion; we detested him because of the doubt" (p. 45). Thus, he is captured as an embodiment of falsehood which begets suspicion and doubt. Yet, it is through this trope of falsehood that we can understand the magnitude of Wait's control over his shipmates. For, it is because of their uncertainty about the actual severity of Wait's condition, and their desire to escape the guilt of callousness to a dying man, that the crew become trapped in servitude to him. As the narrator recounts:

We were trying to be decent chaps, and found it jolly difficult; we oscillated between the desire of virtue and the fear of ridicule; we wished to save ourselves from the pain of remorse, but did not want to be made the contemptible dupes of our sentiment. (p. 25)

For fear of being considered indecent, very likely in the sense of failing to show compassion to a dying man, the crew become victims, simultaneously, of their presumed standards of virtue and of their impressionable sentiments. Consequently, Wait, capitalising on their doubt to control them, continues to take advantage of their oscillating moral ideals to impose his will upon them and to project his frustrations onto them. In this regard, Donkin taunts them, stating that they are “an imbecile lot, daily taken in by a vulgar nigger” (p. 25). Towards the end, however, Wait, in the true embodiment of falsehood, is depicted as becoming a victim of his own duplicities. Claiming at one moment that he was a dying man, and then declaring in the next that he was “trying to get home to be cured” (p. 23), Wait seemed to believe more earnestly in the veracity of the latter statement than in any hint of the faintest possibility of the former. That unfortunate lie is his ‘truth’ with which he deceives himself, which undergirds his overbearing nature, and which eventually transforms him into an Other that symbolically signifies, and is ultimately overcome by death.

### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> This article is derived from my Doctoral Thesis (2018) and is based on research conducted for same.

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