

# The Nigger Of The Narcissus A Tale Of The Forecastle

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by  
Joseph Conrad

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## CHAPTER 3

### THE NIGGER OF THE NARCISSUS

#### Subject Matter and Setting:

Having spent about twenty years of life at sea, Conrad had just started a writer's career which was necessitated by a breakdown in health. Poised on the edge of a writing career, he was very anxious of success. This juncture in his life makes it very interesting to know that the title chosen by Conrad has special implications to the situation then prevailing in his life. According to the Oxford dictionary, the word '*Narcissus*' means; any of the several types of spring-flowering bulbs, including the daffodil. It can be said that the name of this novel which is also the name of the ship on which he once sailed, is suggestive of Conrad's anxieties of whether his budding career as a writer would reach its spring flowering or not. Many critics argue that the artistic success of *The Nigger* was what confirmed Conrad as a writer.

In the naturalistic tradition, Conrad mostly uses his own real life experiences as the subject matter which he transforms into art. Conrad had joined the merchant navy at the age of seventeen as an ordinary sailor and risen through the ranks to be a captain. His first hand experience of the life of a sailor

and of the typical characters and situations encountered in the profession, becomes the subject matter in this novel. The following extracts from the introduction to the novel by Martin Seymour Smith are very apt to help us ascertain this fact:

*For he had sailed in a vessel called the 'Narcissus', and for just this once he did not change its name (it is the only case in which he did not). This last matter may be disposed of quite briefly.<sup>1</sup>*

According to one of Conrad's biographers, Frederick Karl, the name *Narcissus* may have been unconsciously associated in his mind with the next and final career of a writer towards which Conrad was inclined. On the 28 of April 1884, Conrad signed on as a second officer on the *Narcissus* in Bombay. The ship was bound for Dunkirk. This is what Conrad told his French biographer Jean Aubry towards the end of his life:

*Most of the personages I have portrayed actually belonged to the crew of the real Narcissus, [emphasis added] including the admirable Singleton (whose real name was Sullivan), Archie, Belfast and Donkin. I got the two Scandinavians from association with another ship. All this is now quite old, but it was quite present before my mind when I wrote this book. I remember, as it had occurred but yesterday, the last occasion I saw the nigger. That morning I was quarter officer, and about five O'clock I entered the double-bedded cabin where he was lying full length. On the lower bunk, ropes, fids and pieces of cloth had been deposited, so as not to have to*

*take them down into the sail-room if they should be wanted at once. I asked him how he felt, but he hardly made me any answer. A little later a man brought him some coffee in a cup provided with a hook to suspend it on the end of the bunk. At about six O'clock the officer-in-charge came to tell me that he was dead. We had just experienced an awful gale in the vicinity of the Needles, south of the cape . . . As to the conclusion of the book, it is taken from other voyages which I made under similar circumstances.<sup>2</sup>*

Frederick Karl tells us that actually there was no sailor by name Sullivan aboard the *Narcissus* but he came from another ship upon which Conrad had sailed. Karl suggests that the fictional character of the Negro James Wait could be based on more than one real person. This character is said to be based on both the white and black seamen. One of the men was the thirty five year old Joseph Barron, whose death was described by Conrad to Jean Aubry. The other man was George White, who sailed on the *Duke of Sutherland*. In this context Conrad had remarked that he wrote fiction and not history and therefore he was entitled to choose as he pleased. Karl further tells us that the hateful character of Donkin may have been partly drawn on another *Narcissus* sailor named Charles Dutton who had been jailed when the ship stopped at Cape Town on its way to Bombay. However, he is more likely to be drawn from a combination of many “self-pitying and cowardly bolshie types”<sup>3</sup> of men that Conrad encountered at sea:

*Other sailors known to Conrad, some from the Narcissus gave their names or their characteristics to people in The Nigger, including Belfast and Archibald MacLean. Conrad also served on the Duke of Sutherland with a mate called Baker.<sup>3</sup>*

Thus we find the above quotations very strongly substantiating the fact that Conrad has taken his own real life incidents and experiences and subjected them to the imaginative process, transmuting them into a work of high art.

The routine life of ordinary sailors of the *Narcissus* on a voyage from Bombay to London, their struggles with the external forces of nature in the form of a terrible storm and their internal mental struggles in the form of conflict with superstition, fears, passions and instincts become the subject matter of this novel.

These struggles are vividly depicted, especially during and after the storm encountered by the ship and its crew when most of their food is spoiled by the stormy flood, and their clothes and bedding are either wet or washed away. We see the struggle of these ordinary unheroic men fighting against the overwhelming elements of nature like hunger, thirst, cold, extreme physical exertion, sleep and exhaustion. Though the subject matter is ordinary and unheroic, Conrad's art is such that the struggles portrayed in it attain a heroic stature. The quoted passage illustrates the dull and routine life of seamen:

*The smiling greatness of the sea dwarfed the extent of time. The days raced after one another, brilliant and quick like the flashes of a lighthouse, and the nights, eventful and short, resembled fleeting dreams.*

*The men had shaken into their places, and the half-hourly voice of the bells ruled their life of unceasing care. Night and day the head and shoulders of a seaman could be seen aft by the wheel, outlined high against sunshine or starlight, very steady above the stir of revolving spokes. The faces changed, passing in rotation. Youthful faces, bearded faces, dark faces: faces serene, or faces moody, but all akin with brotherhood of the sea; all with the same attentive expression of eyes, carefully watching the compass or the sails.<sup>4</sup>*

Conrad's narrative not only informs but also makes the reader feel the harshness and misery of the sailors' life; the sailors handle the soaked ropes with "groans and sighs while their officers, sulky and dripping with rain water, unceasingly ordered them about in wearied voices".<sup>5</sup>

The work is so harsh that during the short breaks the sailors "looked with disgust into the smarting palms of their stiff hands, and asked one another bitterly: 'Who would be a sailor if he could be a farmer?'"<sup>5</sup> One of the sailors named Belfast even declares that "he would 'chuck the sea forever and go in a steamer.'"<sup>5</sup> Working in the cold and violent seas, the helmsmen relieved from their shifts are seen to be flapping their arms, running, stamping their feet hard and "blowing into swollen, red fingers."<sup>5</sup> The storms are so terrible that the water pours in sheets over the fore-castle doors and the men had to "dash through a waterfall"<sup>5</sup> to get into their damp beds and retire to bed in wet

clothes. There is a description of how a powerful wave smashes the galley door and drenches the ship's cook in front of his stove. In trying to repair the smashed door, the carpenter is washed away twice from his working position. This incident delays the crew's dinner very much, but in the end the person fetching it is knocked down by another wave and the dinner is washed over the side. We also get a feel of the extreme cold weather that makes the men moan with stiff lips and complain of not feeling themselves from the waist down. Some of the sailors who had closed their eyes imagined that they had a block of ice on their chests. The cold had made their fingers go numb to such an extent that some of them "alarmed at not feeling any pain in their fingers, beat the deck feebly with their hands-obstinate and exhausted." <sup>6</sup>

It is already clear that during Conrad's time, sailors had a life of extreme hardship: physically demanding work, bad or insufficient food, mortal danger and a very meager pay for all their risk and trouble. Such prevalent social facts are also treated as subject matter in this novel. In fact, the character 'Donkin' uses these to incite an unsuccessful mutiny against the officers:

*- and we could not but listen with interest to that consummate artist. He told us we were good men - a 'bloomin' condemned lot of good men'. Who thanked us? Who took any notice of our wrongs? Didn't we lead a 'dorg's' loife for two poun' ten a month?' Did we think that miserable pay enough to compensate us for the risk to our*

*lives and for the loss of our clothes? 'We've lost every rag!' he cried. . . . The younger men listened thinking-*<sup>7</sup>

We also find a reference to the MP and social activist Plimsoll, who tried to improve the conditions for sailors:

*'I mind I once seed in Cardiff the crew of an overloaded ship - leastways she were'nt overloaded, only a fatherly old gentleman with a white beard and an umbreller came along the quay and talked to the hands. Said as how it was crool hard to be drowned in winter just for the sake of a few pounds more for the owner - he said. Nearly cried over them - he did; and he had a square mainsail coat, and a gaff-topsail hat too - all proper. So they chaps they said they wouldn't go to be drowned in winter - depending upon that 'ere Plimsoll man to see 'em through the court'.<sup>8</sup>*

That *The Nigger* like many other naturalistic works is rooted in social facts becomes clear here. The vain notion of British superiority over other races of men was hated by Conrad. Conrad's reference To Mr. Plimsoll here is not critical or comic. He believed in the essential character of humanity and he was against racism or any kind of social discrimination. He expressed this attitude in *Heart of Darkness* also. He was actually in favor of social equality and reform. A passage from Martin Seymour Smith's introduction to the novel gives us an insight into Conrad's attitude in this regard:

*The mention of Plimsoll (who did sometimes exaggerate the badness of conditions on ships, as no doubt he had to do, to be effective) cannot be taken as critical. Later Conrad did pay him tribute for his work in ensuring better conditions.<sup>9</sup>*

Apart from the external struggle of the crew with the elements of nature, their inner struggle and turmoil in the face of the inevitable approaching death of their sick Negro shipmate is the main subject of this novel. As the action takes place during the voyage of the ship from Bombay to London, the setting is the ocean in all its different moods and hues. However, as in all other novels of Conrad the ocean is not just a backdrop for the human action but a living force that interacts with the human mind to influence the thoughts and action.

It can definitely be deduced from the discussion so far that in *The Nigger* Conrad follows the naturalistic tradition of choosing subjects from the lower strata of society, an unheroic setting, and ordinary people facing real life problems under harsh conditions. Even though he deals with raw and unpleasant experiences, his meticulous and delicate treatment of the subject matter raises the story to the level of high art.

### Method:

There is no doubt that Conrad follows an objective and detached method of narration which is typical of the naturalists, but his narrative technique in *The Nigger* has borne the brunt of many a critic. In this novel, Conrad has used a shifting identity of the narrative voice which makes us think of inconsistency, ambiguity and authorial confusion. But on the whole, we have to accept that the method does work and we can fairly agree to Martin Seymour Smith's words in the introduction:

*Where Conrad is not quite mature is in his handling of the narrative line. The distinctions between the various voices have been noted: There are, at least, an 'I', an individual crewman, a 'we' (the voice of the whole crew), a voice using 'they' of the crew, but not exactly definable; and there is perhaps an 'omniscient' author of some lyrical and analytical passages. While we must agree with Ian Watt (not a critic anxious to pick holes in the interests of making common room points) that Conrad 'is at liberty to use his pretended narrator in whatever way will best serve his purpose', we also have, I think, to acknowledge that there is sometimes an actual confusion: that the function of each voice has not been fully worked out by Conrad. Hence, almost immediately, the invention of Marlowe as narrative device: the introduction of a definite point of view, not Conrad's own, but consistent. For much of the time the narrative of *The Nigger* does work.<sup>10</sup>*

It is not just in a few places, but throughout *The Nigger* that we can see the scientific method being used. There is use of accurate and meticulous

details, as can be observed in his description of the Negro in the beginning of the novel "The nigger was calm, cool, towering, superb. The men had approached and stood behind him in a body. He overtopped the tallest by half a head." <sup>11</sup> The extreme care that Conrad took to render minute details is typical of the naturalist method and it helps the reader experience, get a real feel of the scene described. The following is a typical example:

*At the other end of the ship the forecandle, with only one lamp burning now, was going to sleep in a dim emptiness traversed by loud breathings, by sudden short sighs. The double row of berths yawned black, like graves tenanted by uneasy corpses. Here and there a curtain of gaudy chintz, half drawn, marked the resting-place of a sybarite. A leg hung over the edge very white and lifeless. An arm stuck straight out with a dark palm turned up, and thick fingers half closed. Two light snores, that did not synchronize, quarreled in funny dialogue.* <sup>12</sup>

Scientific objectivity in the method can also be seen by way of elaborate documentation and unwonted frankness in regard to bodily functions. There is a scene wherein captain Allistoun admonishes the crew after their unsuccessful attempt at mutiny when one of the seamen spits - "There was a moment of profound silence during which a bow-legged seaman, stepping aside, expectorated decorously into the scupper". <sup>13</sup> In the lines describing the last moments of James Wait we find similar elaboration in describing the way he coughs out blood due to tuberculosis and breathes his last - "He was just in time

to see Wait's eyes blaze up and go out at once, like two lamps overturned together by a sweeping blow. Something resembling a scarlet thread hung down the chin out of the corner of his lips - and he had ceased to breathe".<sup>14</sup>

In keeping with the scientific method Conrad portrays life, as objectively and truthfully as the subject matter of science is presented and we can find a good number of passages that present a clinical and panoramic slice-of-life drama. *The Nigger* is widely regarded as the finest and the strongest picture of the sea and sea life that the English language possesses. The vividness of Conrad's description is no doubt due to his scientific objectivity and elaborate detail, but one can draw that the method used definitely succeeds in evoking clear images in the reader's mind. Though some critics say that such detail is unwonted, Conrad's own words from his preface to *The Nigger* justify his method very well:

*Fiction - if it at all aspires to be art – appeals to temperament. And in truth it must be, like painting, like music, like all art, the appeal of one temperament to all other innumerable temperaments, whose subtle and resistless power endows passing events with their true meaning, and creates the moral, the emotional atmosphere of the place and time. . . . My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see. That – and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm – all you demand – and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask.*<sup>16</sup>

According to Conrad, the appeal of art can be effective only if it conveys an impression through the senses because individual or collective temperament is not 'amenable to persuasion.'<sup>16</sup> He says that all art primarily appeals to the senses and even fiction must try to aim for the plasticity of sculpture, the colour of painting and the suggestiveness of music if it has to reach the 'secret spring of responsive emotions.'<sup>16</sup> After reading this powerful justification from Conrad we should not be surprised if we come across again and again the same scientific method in all his works.

### **Plot and Characters:**

Conrad has not used any idealized leading character in this particular novel, though most naturalist works have at least one. Except for a couple of officers, all the others are unsophisticated and uneducated sailors from the lower stratum of society. There is a crew of twenty-six on the ship, of which the characters that can be clearly identified are:

#### **OFFICERS:**

1. Captain Allistoun
2. Mr. Baker the chief mate
3. Mr. Herbert Creighton the second mate

4. The Boatswain (who limps)

SAILORS:

5. James Wait (the sick nigger )

6. Donkin (the loathsome, compulsive troublemaker)

7. Singleton (the oldest seaman on board)

8. Podmore (the cook)

9. Craik (nicknamed 'little Belfast')

10.Charley

11.Archie

12.Davis

13.Wamibo (the Russian Finn)

14.The sailmaker (from the navy)

15.The Steward

16.The Carpenter

17.'Dirty' Knowles (the limping sailor)

18.Two Norwegians

19.Two gigantic Scandinavians

There are no female characters in the main story but at the very end we find the captain's wife who comes to receive him at the docks in London.

There is not much of a plot in *The Nigger* as compared to other novels of Conrad. The plot is framed around a sea voyage from Bombay to London which takes about four months, and all the action concentrates around the human community of the ship. The tensions within the small number of crew are as dangerous as the weather itself, and are created by two different generations of seamen.

Captain Allistoun, his officers and the veteran Singleton have the reticence of men primarily concerned with their duties as seamen. This is in contrast to the younger Donkin who is a compulsive troublemaker, and his other younger followers who do not take their work seriously and do not do it as sincerely as they should. All in this younger lot are confused about their own attitude towards the impending death of their Negro shipmate James Wait due to tuberculosis. Donkin and the youngsters represent a powerful, but less practical set of interests which clash with those of the officers and veterans. During a ferocious gale, Wait has to be rescued from the sickbed and in the ensuing calm Donkin tries unsuccessfully to incite the crew to mutiny. Finally, as predicted by the oldest veteran Singleton, Wait dies, the wind rises and the *Narcissus* is able to dock at London. This in brief is the story in this novel. There is no plot in the conventional sense, no villainy, no heroism, and apart from a storm, a death and a sea burial, no incident. The value of the book lies in

the way the story is told, and not in the events of the tale. The intrigue in the plot arises from the near-disintegration of the corporate unity of the ship's crew because of two of the seamen – the sick Negro James Wait and the indolent Donkin, the wastrel and outcast of metropolitan life. The individual egotisms of these two men disrupt the unity and communal life of the crew. The men are not very clear whether Wait is really dying or simply pretending to be sick in order to avoid work. But he becomes the centre of their thoughts because he expects them to give him the utmost importance because of the seriousness of his disease. A very peculiar kind of association develops between Wait and Donkin when Donkin starts mocking Wait by treating him as though he is pretending to be sick. In such circumstances, instead of offending him, this kind of attitude from Donkin cheers him up because he knows that he is really dying and he is also afraid of death. Donkin's attitude helps him imagine that he is shirking work and is going to have a nice life after the voyage gets over. He, in fact, uses his sickness as a means of self admiration and also as a means of commanding respect and attention from the others on the ship. His self love makes the men almost succumb to his overbearing behaviour. Just as the man who shot the albatross is a jinx on the companions of the Ancient Mariner, the unfortunate Negro is a jinx on the *Narcissus* and its crew. He is a hindrance, a curse, a dead

'weight' (as his name suggests). Yet, he fascinates them and they gravitate towards him with devotion in trying to deal with his harassing ways.

In *The Nigger*, we don't find many individual characters that can be analyzed. Most of the novel deals with the collective psychology of the sailors as a group. A few characters that can be studied individually are also typical representatives of the vices and weaknesses of certain **types**.

The ordinary, less educated sailors as a group represent the rough, working class seamen. They have their usual vices like visiting prostitutes, drinking and drunken brawls, smoking, chewing tobacco, use of vulgar language and others that are so typical of all men who dare the extreme hard work and perils of a life at sea. Though the sailors have these vices, their other good qualities actually dwarf these negative traits in this novel. In the face of the ordeals and mortal danger faced by them, we can see that the virtues like endurance, courage, loyalty between man and man, grit and determination, sacrifice for the weaker others and camaraderie come out as their redeeming aspects. In spite of their struggle against forces beyond their control, because of their humanistic values, the struggle of the characters attains a heroic stature and they maintain human dignity. That is, they don't get dehumanized. Even though they are rough characters, their compassion for the sick and dying James Wait stands out as a redeeming virtue.

An analysis of the characters of Singleton and the younger generation of seamen makes it clear that they are what they are and as they are, because of their surroundings and circumstances. Singleton is the oldest seaman on board the *Narcissus*. He is known to have sailed the South Seas since the age of twelve and his mates have calculated from his papers that in the last forty-five years he has not spent more than forty months ashore. Old Singleton - as he was dearly known - even boasts that from the day he was paid from one ship to the day he sailed in another he was so drunk that he could not distinguish day-light from night. His experiences on the sea facing its perils, brought to Singleton a peculiar wisdom. When a newcomer on the *Narcissus* asks about the ship, he calmly replies that a ship is a ship all the same, but more important is the men in them; “ ‘Ship! . . . Ships are all right. It is the men in them!’ . . . The wisdom of half a century spent in listening to the thunder of the waves had spoken unconsciously through his old lips”.<sup>17</sup>

Singleton and the younger generation of sailors as representative types can be illustrated in the following passage:

*Yet he was only a child of time, a lonely relic of a devoured and forgotten generation. He stood, still strong, as ever unthinking; a ready man with a vast empty past and with no future, with his childlike impulses and his man's passions already dead within his tattooed breast. The men who could understand his silence were gone – those men who knew how to exist beyond the pale of life and within sight of eternity. . . . they*

*had been men who knew toil, privation, violence, debauchery - but knew not fear, and had no desire of spite in their hearts. Men hard to manage, but easy to inspire; voiceless men- but men enough to scorn in their hearts the sentimental voices that bewailed the hardness of their fate. . . .Their generation lived inarticulate and indispensable, without knowing the sweetness of affections or the refuge of a home- and died free from the dark menace of a narrow grave. They were the everlasting children of the mysterious sea.*<sup>18</sup>

The unsentimental, dispassionate practicality of the older generation can be seen in another passage in which Singleton addresses James Wait who is dying of consumption. Impending death has made the Negro cranky and irritable, because of which he speaks to others in disgusting words. But old Singleton asks him directly “are you dying?”<sup>19</sup> This question both surprises and shocks James Wait but he collects himself quickly to reply shakily: “ ‘why? Can’t you see I am?’ ”<sup>19</sup> Singleton, who is calmly eating a soaked biscuit is very unsentimental and practical in his reply: “ ‘well, get on with your dying,’ he said with venerable mildness; don’t raise a blamed fuss with us over that job. We can’t help you’.”<sup>19</sup> The simple minded, greatly experienced and silent man that he is, Singleton is wholly dedicated to his way of life. He is the only member of the crew to remain untouched by the sinister association between Wait and Donkin.

A characteristic feature of the characters in naturalistic works is that they are shown to be subordinate to their environment, either physical or social.

They can also be explained in the light of theories like social Darwinism, where we have the concept of 'survival of the fittest.'

The character of the sailor Donkin from *The Nigger* can be aptly considered here. Though there are no idealized heroes or villains in particular in *The Nigger*, the character of Donkin can be classified as negative. Throughout the novel, he stands out as a detestable, abhorrent, loathsome and wicked character. All he does is shirk work, bully, abuse and envy others. He gets paid even without working. He keeps talking about his rights. Most of the readers may feel that he is the 'scum of the earth'. Detestable as he is, there are many passages in the novel where the readers get hints that he is a victim of social injustice. In the world of 'haves' and 'have-nots', he represents the extreme case of the 'have-nots'. Even in his physical appearance he looks emaciated and ugly. In order to get an insight into Donkin's character, a passage from the novel can be looked at:

*. . . a little fellow with white eyelashes. He looked as if he had known all the degradations and all the furies. He looked as if he had been cuffed, kicked, rolled in the mud; he looked as if he had been scratched, spat upon, pelted with unmentionable filth . . . His neck was long and thin; his eyelids were red; rare hairs hung about his jaws; his shoulders were peaked and drooped like the broken wings of a bird; all his left side was caked with mud which showed that he had lately slept in a wet ditch.<sup>20</sup>*

When Donkin boards the *Narcissus*, he is wearing a battered felt hat and a coat with torn tails, without any shirt underneath. Even such torn clothes looked as though they were stolen. He had recently escaped being beaten up by the crew of an American ship whom he had offended. In Conrad's words, he had 'saved his inefficient carcass from violent destruction'. During the fortnight after running away from the Americans, he had sometimes starved, but managed to survive by cadging for food and sleeping on rubbish heaps (for warmth). He is described as a 'repulsive' and 'startling visitor from a world of nightmares.' He preferred to spend most of his time in the ship's forecabin because there, he could be lazy, shirk work, cheat, bully and lie to others. Because of such traits he is obviously notorious:

*They all knew him. Is there a spot on earth where such a man is unknown, an ominous survival testifying to the eternal fitness of lies and impudence?*<sup>20</sup> (emphasis added)

As far as the work of a sailor was concerned, everybody knew that he could not steer or splice. He always avoided working on dark nights and swore at the wind, sleet and darkness. He was a man who cursed the sea while others worked. In short, he could not do most of the things required of a sailor and would avoid whatever he could:

*The pet of philanthropists and self-seeking landlubbers. The sympathetic and deserving creature that knows all about his rights, but knows nothing of courage, of endurance, and of the unexpressed faith, of the unspoken loyalty that knits together a ship's company. **The independent offspring of the ignoble freedom of the slums full of disdain and hate for the austere servitude of the sea.***<sup>20</sup> (emphasis added)

This passage serves as a very good character sketch of Donkin. The words which are highlighted especially suggest that he is the representative of a **type** of character who is **a survivor** and also **a victim of social persecution and inequality**. The author calls him a victim of Yankee brutality. Almost everybody on the ship disliked him for his loathsome behaviour. The narrator in the novel (as one of the crew) says that Donkin would do nothing but envy others:

*Our sea-boots, our oilskin coats, our well-filled sea-chests, were to him so many causes for bitter meditation: he had none of these things, . . .*<sup>21</sup>

There is a situation in the novel where the ship is dangerously inclined and off balance after a storm, and the sailors are hanging on to anything they could in order to save themselves. Long hours of hanging on in such strenuous positions in the freezing cold night has made them go into torpor. Some have hallucinations. At that time, a pot of hot coffee is carried among them and

“Donkin scrambled viciously, caring not where he kicked, and anxious that the officers should have none of it.”<sup>22</sup>

In this way, Donkin is portrayed as an ordinary being with his selfish and wicked deeds. However, there is another passage in which the author calls him the victim of men’s injustice. All the sailors are labouring hard except Donkin, who is lying lazily on his stomach. The captain has to prod him to work - “ ‘I will brain you with this belaying pin if you don’t catch hold of the brace,’ and **that victim of men’s injustice**, cowardly and cheeky, whimpered: ‘are you goin’ to murder us now,’ while with sudden desperation he gripped the rope.” (emphasis added)<sup>23</sup>

Though the crew dislikes him, Donkin takes advantage of the prevailing situation of mutual distrust to sow the seeds of discord in their minds and incite them to mutiny against the officers. Though the crew originally doesn’t have such ideas of rebellion, Donkin’s words gradually take effect, and this can be seen in their change of attitude to him:

*... though from that time we refrained from kicking him, tweaking his nose, or from accidentally knocking him about, which last, after we had weathered the Cape, had been rather a popular amusement.*<sup>24</sup>

Further on in the novel, the readers come to know that the jail life is nothing new to Donkin. “ ‘I am a man. I’ve seen the inside of every chokey in the colonies rather’n give up my rights. . . .’ ‘You are a jail prop,’ said Jimmy, weakly. ‘I am... an’ proud of it, too.’ ”<sup>25</sup> It goes to add to the experiences that have gone into the making of his character. When the mutiny incited by him fails, the evil thoughts crossing his mind give an idea of his disappointment and rage. He glares around venomously at the men sleeping peacefully around him. Since the mutiny was his brainchild, he seethed with fury looking at the crew’s peaceful slumber: “They slept! He wanted to wring necks, gouge eyes, spit on faces . . . he blew with force through quivering nostrils, he ground and snapped his teeth, and with the chin pressed hard against the breast, he seemed busy gnawing his way through it, as if to get at the heart within. . . .”<sup>26</sup> Donkin is a representative of human follies but he reflects the real beings. His character is the product of the social and natural environment. In the following passage the author clearly portrays Donkin as a victim of fate and society:

*No one knew the venom of his thoughts now. He was silent, and appeared thinner, as if consumed slowly by an inward rage at **the injustice of men and of fate**. He was ignored by all and spoke to no one, but his hate for every man dwelt in his furtive eyes. He talked with the cook only, having somehow persuaded the good man that he-Donkin - was a **much calumniated and persecuted person**.<sup>27</sup> (emphasis added)*

Donkin keeps up his wickedness till the end. Just as vultures wait for an animal to die so that they can pluck out the eyes, Donkin also waits for James Wait to die. He steals his money even as Wait is going through convulsions and death throes. Not only this, but he also cruelly delivers the worst abuse to Wait in his final moments. We never find any feeling of repentance in him. He is almost inhuman in his heartlessness; but he could be understood as a victim of circumstances, forces beyond his control. In this novel he serves as a contrast to the rest of the crew as a group, whose human qualities are thrown into sharp contrast against his wicked and inhuman behaviour. He also provides the dying James Wait with opportunities to rise to magnanimity. Every time Donkin abuses him, Wait gifts him some item like a warm jersey or a pair of sea boots.

The novelist asserts, through Donkin's character, the effect of society and environment on a certain type of character.

The first mate Mr. Baker is a strong character that represents another type. He is one of the veterans who are responsible, serious, equanimous, dispassionate, duty-bound, sincere, and caring. Even when everyone on the toppled ship is in a stupor and hanging on for life, without caring much for himself he crawls to each one of them to make sure that they are fastened and safe with fatherly responsibility and care:

*A seaman, lashed by the middle, tapped the deck with his open hand with unceasing quick flaps. In the gathering greyness of twilight a bulky form was seen rising aft, and began marching on all fours with the movements of some big cautious beast. It was Mr. Baker passing along the line of men. He grunted encouragingly over everyone, felt their fastenings. . . .*

*He went from one to another grunting, 'Ough! . . . see her through it yet;'* <sup>28</sup>

At the end of a very long and tiresome voyage of about four months when *The Narcissus* docks at London, as an ideal mate he checks to see if everything is safely secured and handed over to the ship keeper. He sends off everyone in a very friendly manner but himself stays back. He is the last one to go ashore. Even then, he instructs the ship keeper not to allow anyone to touch anything till he arrived next morning. He is almost reluctant to go away from the ship. It seems to us that he loves the ship and his duty as though they are his everything and only thing in life:

*- a model chief mate! No one waited for him ashore. Mother dead; father and two brothers, Yarmouth fishermen, drowned together on the Dogger Bank; sister married and unfriendly. Quite a lady. Married to the leading tailor of a little town, and its leading politician, who did not think his sailor brother-in-law quite respectable enough for him. Quite a lady, quite a lady he thought,...* <sup>29</sup>

We get an idea of Mr. Baker's family background from this passage and can understand his character in relation to his surroundings.

To sum up, though the novel does not consist of any hero or villain but only ordinary seamen, through the interaction of these ordinary characters with the environment the author brings out the extraordinary and excessive in human nature. Conrad's characterization exposes his preoccupation with the model ideal. His characters are defined by their individual behavior in the face of ordeal. Therefore we cannot typify them as in Dickens but can say that Conrad draws them according to styles. Three basic styles of characters have been identified in Conrad by the critics namely, the base man, the man of simple integrity and the imaginative man of self knowledge. In *The Nigger*, Donkin is a base and ruinous man who cannot stand up even to the lowest levels of moral integrity. The simple hearted Singleton's integrity is unshakable and he is the man of simple integrity. His character has universal moral significance. However, one does not find the third type of character - the imaginative man of self knowledge. Through his characters Conrad conveys to us his strong belief that human egotism is almost universal and universally damaging too and the only defense against it is self knowledge which is achieved by the man of imagination. We shall find this third type of character later, in his other novels.

**Themes:**

Of all the themes characteristic of naturalistic works, the two that are most prominent in *The Nigger of the Narcissus* are;

1. Man is alone and afraid in a world he has not made, and he can maintain himself only through persistent struggle undergoing much suffering.

We do not find direct instances of man struggling against society (people). However, the struggle of man against nature and man against himself (own mind) is constant throughout this work. When the characters struggle against the forces of nature, the theme of survival comes to the fore.

2. Nature as an indifferent force acting on the life of human beings.

A brief discussion can be made on the struggle for survival and suffering first, because most of the novel deals with it. As there are no heroes or villains in this novel, the whole crew as a group is seen to be fighting against the overwhelming natural forces like the storm, cold, hunger, thirst, sleep and exhaustion. After going through a violent storm, *The Narcissus* is tilted in such a way that all on board have to tie themselves with anything they can find and hang on for dear life. The men are exhausted, hungry, thirsty, shivering from the cold and also going in and out of torpor. Some have hallucinations as well. The novelist vividly describes their suffering, the theme of man's fear and

loneliness, and his struggle to maintain himself in the world. One can find candid expression in the following passage:

*They did not try to find out. A mutter more or less did not matter. It was too cold for curiosity, and almost for hope. They could not spare a moment or a thought from the great mental occupation of wishing to live. And the desire of life kept them alive, apathetic and enduring, under the cruel persistence of wind and cold; while the bestarred black dome of the sky revolved slowly above the ship, that drifted, bearing their patience and suffering, through the stormy solitude of the sea.*

*Huddled close to one another, they fancied themselves utterly alone. They heard sustained loud noises, and again bore the pain of existence through long hours of profound silence. In the night they saw sunshine, felt warmth, and suddenly, with a start, thought that the sun would never rise upon a freezing world.<sup>30</sup> (emphasis added)*

The men endure the extreme conditions for almost two days, after which by some luck, they are able to straighten the battered ship that was sailing at a dangerous tilt. At this juncture everybody on board is at the end of his limit of physical endurance. Though exhausted, they have to fight exhaustion and work to survive. They were so weary that their heads swam and they went about their work like zombies:

*The narrow escapes from falls did not disturb the languid beat of their hearts; . . . the wind filled their eyes with tears, and with heavy gusts tried to push them off from where they swayed in insecure positions. . . . Their thoughts floated vaguely between the desire for rest and the desire of life, while their stiffened fingers . . . In an*

*unendurable and unending strain they worked like men driven by a merciless dream to toil in an atmosphere of ice or flame. They burnt and shivered in turns. Their eyeballs smarted as if in the smoke of conflagration; their heads were ready to burst with every shout.<sup>31</sup>*

This is where one can see the extraordinary workings of the indomitable human spirit and the human will to survive.

Man's internal struggle (with his own mind) runs parallel to the external struggle in *The Nigger*. In fact it starts before the external struggle with the stormy sea. The internal struggle depicted in this novel mostly centres around the crew's doubts and fears with regard to the sick Negro's impending death. They all fear his death but at the same time do not want to accept it. They seem to be confused about their own attitude towards the dying man. Deep in their hearts, they know that he will die, but externally they keep up pretence as though they believe in his recovery. This ambiguous attitude heightens the tension in their minds to such a level that they are actually desperate to be free from the situation. The dying Negro continuously makes them feel the presence of his approaching death as though death was his intimate companion and that he was proud of such a friend:

*'Leave me alone. It won't be for long. I'll soon die. . . . It's coming right enough!'*

*Men stood around very still and with exasperated eyes. It was just what they had expected, and hated to hear, that idea of a stalking death, thrust at them many*

*times a day like a boast and like a menace by this obnoxious nigger. He seemed to take a pride in that death which . . .* <sup>32</sup>

The whole atmosphere is so charged with the fear of the approaching dark fatality that the men on the ship are driven to confusion over their own attitude towards the dying man – “Was he a reality - or was he a sham - this ever expected visitor of Jimmy’s? We hesitated between pity and mistrust,” . . .

<sup>32</sup> They knew the inevitability of it but found it hard to accept it. They try in many ways to comfort the dying man, but also hate him for continuously parading the situation in front of them. It is here that we see their internal struggle. Because of the impending death their daily life is also affected:

*“It interfered daily with our occupations, with our leisure, with our amusements. We had no songs and no music in the evening, because Jimmy (we all lovingly called him Jimmy, to conceal our hate of his accomplice) [Death] had managed, with that prospective decease of his, to disturb even Archie’s mental balance.”* <sup>32</sup>

The singers on the ship became mute, the men even avoided hammering nails to hang their clothes on, so as not to disturb Jimmy’s last moments. Instead of the cheerful yells to call out the night watches, they called them in whispers. The crew ate their meals in silence and spoke in low tones in the forecastle “as though it had been a church.” <sup>32</sup> But in spite of all this, the dying

man was so nervous and irritable that he always made some scathing remark at them which: “for the moment, made us to feel as if we had been brutes, and afterwards made us suspect ourselves of being fools. . . . that confounded dying man, and he made himself master of every moment of our existence. We grew desperate, and remained submissive”.<sup>32</sup>

This passage clearly illustrates how the impending death of the sick Negro has completely pervaded the lives of the crew. There is a confused clash of emotions that is going on in their minds and their doubts, suspicions, hopes and fears make them miserable and irritable. They try to behave decently but find it very difficult. They become victims of conflicting desires and emotions. They want to be virtuous, but are afraid of ridicule. They wish to save themselves from the pain of remorse but at the same time they don't want to feel cheated by their own sentiments. Such an interplay of subtleties in their hearts was totally unfamiliar to these sailors and this makes them disturbed and cowardly. They start losing their moral certitudes and begin to doubt everyone including their officers, and even their own selves. Jimmy, with his impending death overpowers the whole crew and the resultant atmosphere of moral uncertainty pervades the ship. The men are at a loss to know what to do in critical circumstances because they are not able to understand and come to grips with their own emotions:

*He fascinated us. He would never let doubt die. He overshadowed the ship. Invulnerable in his promise of speedy corruption he trampled on our self-respect, he demonstrated to us daily our want of moral courage; he tainted our lives. Had we been a miserable gang of wretched immortals, unhallowed alike by hope and fear, he could not have lorded it over us with a more pitiless assertion of his sublime privilege.*<sup>33</sup>

The crew of *The Narcissus* has a kind of love-hate relationship with James Wait. They risk their own lives and save him from his cabin. The internal struggle and turmoil of thoughts are very well exposed when (at the time that they save him) they say that though they hated him more than anything under heaven, they did not want to lose him because they had saved him so far and took it as a personal matter between themselves and the sea. Their feelings are expressed by the narrative voice by saying that if they had put in the hard and risky efforts to save an empty cask, even the cask would have become; “as precious to us as Jimmy was. More precious, in fact, because we would have had no reason to hate the cask. And we hated James Wait.”<sup>34</sup> Further on in the same passage the crew seems to understand that the irritable behaviour of Jimmy is the result of the fact that he knows with certainty that he is about to die, and that it was but natural for them (or anybody) to be angry with such a shipmate. At the same time however, they are confused and have mixed

feelings because somewhere in their minds, they have a suspicion that Jimmy may be feigning sickness in order to avoid work and enjoy the voyage at the cost of others' efforts.

As days go by, Wait's health worsens and the crew is careful more than ever not to hurt his feelings. He and his shipmates are not mentally prepared to face death and superficially keep on denying the ultimate truth:

*Falsehood triumphed. It triumphed through doubt, through stupidity, through pity, through sentimentalism. . . . Jimmy's steadfastness to his untruthful attitude in the face of the inevitable truth had the proportions of a colossal enigma - . . . The latent egoism of tenderness to suffering appeared in the developing anxiety not to see him die.*<sup>35</sup>

At this point it is really worthwhile for us to note that the sailors who usually appear to be very rough and unsentimental are now seen in a totally different light. In fact, we find the narrative voice (representing the crew) admitting that, "He was demoralizing. Through him we were becoming highly humanized, tender, complex, excessively decadent: we understood the subtlety of his fear, sympathized with all his repulsions, shrinkings, evasions, delusions - as though we had been overcivilised, and rotten, and without any knowledge of the meaning of life."<sup>35</sup>

This small passage clearly asserts the human qualities of sympathy and brotherhood between men. With their internal struggles, the apparently rough and unsentimental sailors stand exposed in these lines as having tender human sentiments and feelings.

The intense internal struggle in the minds of the crew does end with the death of Wait, but not immediately. The tension prevails for some time but may be for the reasons that their foolishness lies exposed and they feel ashamed of their own sentimentality. It is only after his death that they realize how sentimental they were in developing faith in Jimmy's hopes of recovery. His death shakes them out of their over-sentimentality and makes them feel guilty. As a result, some of them stop speaking to others and the others speak very unkindly even to their best friends.

Another minor theme that can be identified in *The Nigger* is that of the indifference of nature as a force acting on the lives of human beings. The following passages indicate that nature is considered as a neutral force in this novel:

*... for discipline is not ceremonious on merchant ships, where the sense of hierarchy is weak, and where all feel themselves equal before the unconcerned immensity of the sea and the exacting appeal of the work. (Emphasis added)*<sup>36</sup>

This passage indicates that nature is considered as a neutral force in this novel. It does not affect men's lives but it remains an impersonal force before which man is only a puny mortal who struggles to survive. The same is illustrated in another passage:

*They are gone now - and it does not matter. **The sea and the earth are unfaithful to their children:** a truth, a faith, a generation of men goes - and is forgotten, and it does not matter! Except, perhaps, to the few of those who believed the truth, confessed the faith- or loved the men. (Emphasis added)<sup>37</sup>*

Nature may have been portrayed here as an impersonal and neutral force which is a witness to many insignificant generations of men, but Conrad suggests that there is some hope and value to human kind if it has truth, faith and love as its values.

**Interaction of Man and Nature:**

The elements of nature like the storm and the jungles are used as symbols by Conrad. The storm in *The Nigger* serves as an allegory and can be considered at two levels – the physical and the symbolic. At the symbolic level it can be taken as man's constant internal struggle wherein his essential human nature is trying to assert itself. This mental turmoil is going on in all the characters. The conflict between man and nature in Conrad brings alive his stories which would otherwise be dull and lifeless. We are concerned with the struggle at the physical level in this chapter, but it is sometimes very difficult to separate it from the mental struggle. The constant battle of the characters against the odds of nature in *The Nigger* serves as a test of character and manliness. It provides the characters a chance to assert their essential human nature and thereby redeem themselves of their ordinary human failings. The sailors are mostly uneducated and rough folk with all the ordinary human failings typical of such working class men such as gambling, drinking and drunken brawls, visiting prostitutes, swearing and abusing one another in vulgar language, smoking, chewing tobacco and others. Despite such failings, their conflict with the forces of nature brings out their finer human qualities like love, sacrifice, endurance, courage, loyalty between man and man, determination, and compassion.

The emergence of these noble traits and values in the face of the ordeals and mortal dangers posed by the forces of nature, redeems the characters of their weaknesses. The men on *The Narcissus* may be fighting against forces beyond their control but because of their human virtues their struggles attain a heroic stature, heralding the victory of the indomitable human spirit. Ultimately, the readers as human beings identify with the characters and cannot help appreciating their human qualities.

A few important instances can be considered in the novel where the human virtues are asserted and the human spirit triumphs in the face of struggle with the natural forces. When *The Narcissus* faces a violent storm, she is almost crippled. Before the men could do anything, she is struck repeatedly by the gigantic waves that enter the sailors' sleeping quarters and take away most of their essential belongings including their chests, clothes, blankets, beds, pillows and the like. Such is the force of the wind that the sails get torn to shreds. The ship gets tilted so steeply that all the men on board have to tie themselves with the ropes in order to hang on to the ship and to life; because of the tilt of the ship almost half of the deck is submerged and the masts are almost horizontal, pointing to the horizon. In this precarious situation, the crewmen start shouting at the ship's carpenter to cut the masts believing that to be their only chance of saving themselves. Just as the carpenter is trying to get an axe to cut the masts,

the captain shouts his order not to cut them. It is at this juncture in the episode that the unquestioning loyalty of the men towards their officers can be seen:

*Voices took up the shout [of the captain] – ‘No! No!’ Then all became still. They waited for the ship to turn over altogether, and shake them out into the sea; and upon the terrific noise of wind and sea not a murmur of remonstrance came out from those men, who each would have given ever so many years of life to see ‘them damned sticks go overboard!’ They all believed it their only chance; but a little hard-faced man shook his grey head and shouted ‘No!’ without giving them as much as a glance. They were silent, and gasped.<sup>38</sup>*

This kind of unquestioning trust and obedience of the crewmen is rare and serves to highlight the innate noble virtues in the apparently rough and uneducated sailors. It is this kind of mutual trust and solidarity that helps them battle the odds of nature and survive. It is such instances as these that prove that they pass the test of character.

On the tilted ship, all are exhausted by the constant strain of holding on to their positions. Moreover, they are hungry and cold. It is so cold that their teeth chatter involuntarily. Even in such circumstances imposed on them by the forces of nature the men do not abandon their noble human nature. Instead of being selfish, the older and stronger men are seen to be helping the younger and weaker ones. They take care of their injured shipmates. When one of the youngsters named Charlie weeps silently due to the misery, the older sailor

hanging beside him takes out his own coat and puts it over him and also comforts him. Some of them even risk their own lives to save the sick Negro who is trapped in his cabin:

*Something had to be done. We had to get him aft. A rope was tied slack under his armpits, and, reaching up at the risk of our lives, we hung him on the foresheet cleet.<sup>39</sup>*

As the ship continues to drift in the dangerously inclined position for more than two days, the hunger, cold and the strain of hanging on to their positions has definitely weakened their morale, but the human spirit, their fighting spirit is not totally extinguished. Though prodded on by their officers, the men do make their best efforts to set the ship right, in spite of the utmost difficulty. Because of the hunger and cold the men are in a daze, but the moment they hear orders from their officers they pull up the remnant of their exhausted strength and determination and set to work:

*His voice seemed to break through a deadly spell. Men began to stir and crawl.- 'I want the foretop-mast stay-sail run up smartly,' said the master, very loudly; 'if you can't manage it standing up you must do it lying down – that's all. Bear a hand!' – 'Come along! Let's give the old girl a chance,' urged the boatswain. – 'Aye Aye! Wear ship!' Exclaimed quavering voices. The forecastle men, with reluctant faces, prepared to go forward. Mr. Baker pushed ahead grunting on all fours to show the*

*way and they followed him over the break. The others lay still with a vile hope in their hearts of not being required to move till they got saved or drowned in peace.<sup>40</sup>*

The men continue their efforts till ultimately their efforts pay off and the ship regains its full normal balance. These and many other such instances of courage, endurance, loyalty, sacrifice and compassion touch a chord in the readers' hearts and also illustrate the nobility, grandeur and victory of the human soul in the fight between man and nature.

**Conrad's Vision of Man:**

Conrad's vision that every man must fight his own battle in life on the strength of his own innate resources can be deduced from his own words when he told Marguerite Poradowski in 1884 that "Man must drag the ball and chain of his individuality up to the end. It is what we pay for the infernal and divine privilege of thought."<sup>41</sup> Though Conrad had said these words to describe his writer's predicament, we may as well generalize them to be applicable to all mankind. As per Conrad's vision, man's life is a constant struggle against nature and circumstances, though man may only be a small speck in the universe, his spirit however, is indomitable. It is man's struggle that gives him his sublime nobility. Even in his personal life, Conrad had grown up facing one ordeal after another. It is quite interesting to look at his life and the influences that resulted in the vision that he developed.

Conrad was a Pole by birth and a Slav by race. His first language was Polish and second language was French. He did not know a word of the English language till he was over twenty and yet he wrote in English with distinction, and felt that if he had not written in English, he would never have written at all. He was born in Ukraine in the south of Poland in 1857. He came of a family of Polish landowners who had lost most of their estates during the Napoleonic wars. His father, a patriot and a man of letters, was exiled by the Russian

government for the part he took in secret meetings just before an uprising in Warsaw. The mother and the child accompanied the exile to various prison camps, where they all suffered much. The mother, a cultured lady, died when he was only eight years old and his father, though permitted to return to Poland after becoming so broken in health as to be no longer feared, died at Cracow *five years later in very distressing circumstances*. As an orphan he was taken care of by an uncle and other relatives who supported his education.

A man's attitude in life is very much a matter of early education and upbringing, and Conrad was no exception in this respect. As a child, he was a lonely, suffering soul. He often fell ill while with his parents in exile, and once, he came near death. He had no playmates. He saw no happiness and contentment in life. As his parents died in very sad circumstances he was left an orphan at the age of thirteen, and his nervous system received shock after shock. The ordeal that he passed through was a terrible one, and he was saved only because he turned to books and took to reading. Under the circumstances, he could not but develop a gloomy outlook on life.

He underwent education in Polish and later in French. As a student he was very much attracted to and thrilled by books of travel and exploration. Though there was no family tradition of seamanship, at a very young age he joined the French service at Marseilles, without heeding the opposition by his

relatives. He took, to put it in his own words; “a standing jump out of his racial surroundings and associations”. In about twenty years of seamanship he also served as a ‘First mate’ and as a commander and his life on the seas gave him the raw material to create art. However, Conrad had attempted a suicide in his younger days (due to financial troubles) and it was despair that drove him into the sailor’s life. Later, it was illness that forced him into the writer’s role.

Even as a writer, he was not very successful commercially till the publication of *Chance*. During the worst time of his life, “he could gain some relief only by involving himself in a dubious business deal on behalf of someone else.”<sup>42</sup> (the business was gun smuggling). “He saw the people in power in the world as uncommitted to anything more than fine words, to material gain, to personal advantage and to ‘satisfied vanity’; he saw himself as uninterested in happiness as no more ‘courageous and independent than the others’ ”<sup>42</sup> After seeing the above-mentioned facts of Conrad’s life, it is not too difficult for one to understand his vision and his perspective on man. In a letter to Cunninghame Graham Conrad says, “What makes mankind tragic is not that they are the victims of nature, but that they are conscious of it.”<sup>43</sup>

As per Conrad’s vision, man is seen as subordinate to a superior, seemingly omnipotent force which could be fate, nature or God. In any human predicament, fate may seem to have had the best of it, but the human soul is

nobler and more sublime than fate. This can be illustrated by considering the following words from Martin Seymour Smith's introduction to Conrad's *The Shadow Line*:

*One of Conrad's most persistent themes, besides that of the details of his own painful consciousness of being a 'victim of nature', is intimately connected with it: the question of a person's destiny, which he sees as a matter of what 'nature' is going to do to him. Can people avoid their destiny? The answer for Conrad, as for his near contemporary Thomas Hardy, is that they cannot. But they can choose between the cowardice of an attempted avoidance of it, and a courageous and graceful acceptance of it.*<sup>44</sup>

So we come back again to Conrad's vision of man, who is lonely, and is fighting in a hostile and insurmountable universe. In the words of Martin Smith, "For Conrad the universe was always temptingly meaningless."<sup>45</sup> In this apparently meaningless universe, man is seen by Conrad to be fighting for various things; as he writes in his preface to *The Nigger*, ". . . for the hazardous enterprise of living."<sup>46</sup> In addition, Conrad's vision of the universe as hostile can be made out when he speaks of "warlike conditions of existence"<sup>46</sup>

### **Interaction between Atmosphere and Character:**

As in most of Conrad's novels in *The Nigger* also the natural atmosphere pervades the story from beginning till end. Nature in its various moods influences the minds of the characters. As *The Narcissus* sets sail from Bombay in fair winds, the people on board are also jovial, happy that they are bound homeward. But during the voyage of about four months, we get to see the different aspects of the ocean and how the temperaments of the characters change in consonance with the changing aspects of the sea. However, since there is no particular hero in *The Nigger*, the changing aspects of nature interact with the collective psyche of the crew. In the beginning of the voyage the men are making jokes and going about their routine chores gaily. But slowly, Conrad develops an atmosphere of foreboding gloom by introducing the increasing ill health of the Negro James Wait. This atmosphere is further aggravated by the inevitability of his impending death. The men stop joking. They no longer sing or even talk loudly, so as not to disturb the dying Negro's rest. These developments make the men very nervous and jittery. They are mentally disturbed because of the inevitability of Wait's death and because of their vain hopes of his survival. Though they fear his death, they are not mentally prepared to see him die. When their mental turmoil reaches its heights, it is concurrent with the change of weather. *The Narcissus* runs out of fair monsoon

winds and starts drifting slowly, swinging round and round. Similarly, the men on her are totally involved with Wait's struggle between life and death, and their thoughts are also moving round and round between hopes and fears. Just as the ship drifts, their thoughts also drift in confusion over their own attitude towards the dying man. They are not sure whether they should be behaving with him the way they were. The normally rough men are confused over their own emotions towards the dying Negro. This gloomy mental state of the crew coincides with the especially bad winter off the cape experienced by them.

As the Negro's health increasingly fails, the men's concern for him receives blows just as the ship is pounded by towering waves in the storm. The storm makes their physical lives miserable just as the storm in the mind is making them mentally miserable. If the waves make them wet, cold and miserable, Wait's deteriorating health drenches their warm human care and sympathy. His failing health makes James Wait cranky and irritable. This, like an infectious disease makes the other men behave grumpily with one another. To add to this, the flooding waves spoil their food store, drench their beds, clothes and wash away most of their belongings. The men are put on scarce, little rations, because of which they have to go about their work in a cold and hungry state.

When all these developments make their spirits fall low, the ship is also struck by a powerful wave (akin to the wave of frustration and hopelessness regarding Wait's health) that topples the ship onto her side. The precariously wavering ship struggling to keep her balance is akin to the crew's state of mind; wherein they are trying to maintain sanity under the onslaught of powerful emotions towards 'Jimmy' (James Wait) and his hateful accomplice (death). Subsequent to the tilting of the ship, half of her deck is underwater and with no footholds, the men tie themselves with whatever they find and hang on for dear life. On a mental level, we can say that the men anchor themselves in humanity to save the downside of their souls. This can be seen in their preservation of human virtues like courage, endurance, sacrifice, loyalty and camaraderie. Everybody is seen to be trying his best to help the weaker ones. Some even risk their own lives to save the Negro who is trapped in his cabin due to the tilt of the ship. They are tied to the ropes of human virtues. In the aftermath of the storm, the ship continues to float with a precarious tilt for two days during which the men have to endure freezing cold, hunger and pain. Though the ship regains her balance, the men suffer from extreme fatigue. With the calm weather that follows, the men forget their recent adversity, only to be mentally poisoned by the idea of mutiny. It is easy to understand here that the sudden coming of calm weather and the respite that it provides from the extreme

adversity faced recently has made the crew vulnerable to mental poisoning. Both the external storm and the internal turmoil have taken their toll to make them edgy about even small and silly matters. Though they know that the food stores have been spoilt in the storm, they fall to Donkin's incitement (to demand better and more food) and make a half-hearted attempt at mutiny. Later, they themselves are ashamed of it.

With the return of fair weather, the crewmen are happy though they have lost many of their belongings in the storm. The return of fair weather enables them to think positively and even entertain vain hopes of improvement in Wait's health, but he goes from bad to worse day by day. The calm weather after the storm may get reflected in their calm behaviour, but for all its calmness, it is a deceptive calm. With every passing day Wait's deteriorating health heightens the uneasiness of the others. His misery seems to be unending, just as the ship gets stuck in a seemingly unending drift due to headwinds. The name of 'James **Wait**' seems to be like a dead **weight** on the ship. The respectable old seaman Singleton tells them that Wait is the cause of headwinds and mortally sick men on ships always died at the first sight of land. Though it appears to be a superstitious prophecy, Singleton's words come true and Wait dies soon after they see land (The island of Flores). Almost miraculously, the fair winds pick up hardly a minute after his body is consigned to the waves.

From that moment till the ship docks in London, the fair weather keeps up, and so do the spirits of the men. As soon as the fair winds pick up, they start talking in anticipation and joy of the things they would do on reaching land.

Thus, from the beginning till the end, Conrad creates an atmosphere which is both physical and psychological. Conrad's characters and their atmosphere constantly interact, and in the process, they are developed into rounded, naturalistic and three dimensional characters that are so true to life.

#### **Conrad's Philosophy of Life:**

Next to Hardy, Conrad is perhaps the most pessimistic of English novelists but he doesn't undermine normal human inspirations for living. In all his works, the deep concern of his characters with the moral ordeal gives them grandeur even in their defeat. Conrad offers no recipe for the redemption of society; on the other hand, he strengthens our faith in the final and stern reality of human beings as pre-eminently moral beings.

Conrad had that philosophical purpose of awakening '*that feeling of unavoidable solidarity . . . which binds men to each other and all mankind to this visible world*'. This was the central and unifying purpose in Conrad's writings, and he stressed again and again the need for *fidelity* in human relationships. Nothing stirred his imagination as profoundly as the keeping of

**faith** between man and man. He who injured another or even refrained from helping another was, in terms of Conrad's philosophy, betraying the whole human brotherhood. Conrad was much concerned with the problem of evil, and he saw evil within man, as well as in the environment in which he lived. In this philosophy, it is only fidelity, the **sense of solidarity with the human race**, which can enable him to wage a successful war against evil and to overcome it. This philosophy of Conrad gets expressed repeatedly in his works and we can illustrate it by discussing examples from his texts.

Most of the younger sailors on board *The Narcissus* were oversentimental in their attitude towards the sick and dying Negro James Wait. But in their oversentimental concern, they were neglecting their duties. The narrative voice in the novel says at one point, "The latent egoism of tenderness to suffering (Wait's suffering) appeared in the developing anxiety not to see him die".<sup>47</sup> This, and other such similar situations are interpreted by professor Cedric Watts as the philosophy of 'hard primitivism' which is summarized by him as follows:

*. . . The crew's sympathy with the dying Jimmy is partly a vicarious self pity . . . Those that are apparently ruthless . . . are thus the true altruists, because their unsentimental concern for work and duty sustains **solidarity** and helps to preserve the ship and her voyagers; while those who seem most sympathetic to Jimmy are neglecting their duties and weakening the hierarchic order on which the **general good depends**.<sup>48</sup> (emphasis added)*

Here, the true altruists mentioned by professor Watts refers to the officers, old Singleton and the older generation of seamen. Professor Watt's words reflect Conrad's concern that can be seen in both *The Nigger* and *Typhoon* – “the need for reciprocity between men, if they are to survive.”<sup>49</sup> More of Conrad's philosophy can be understood from Conrad's own words in the preface to *The Nigger* where he is trying to express the literary artist's challenge of appealing to the reader's finer sensibilities:

*He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation - and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity - the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.*<sup>50</sup> (emphasis added)

Thus, we can understand Conrad's philosophy and his interpretation of the truth of human existence. The most prominent values that he upholds throughout his works are - fidelity and sacrifice. These occur again and again in his novels. In *The Nigger*, the loathsome character 'Donkin' is described as – “The sympathetic and deserving creature that knows all about his rights but knows

nothing of courage, of endurance, and of **the unexpressed faith, of the unspoken loyalty that knits together a ship's company.**"<sup>51</sup>[Emphasis added]

This wicked Donkin is impudently cringing to the crew members and systematically insolent to the officers. He behaves this way because he expects good results for himself. All the crew knows that his behavior is wicked and unjust. In the words of Conrad, people with such natures as Donkin forget that men under extreme provocation will behave justly, irrespective of whether they want to be so or not. Donkin's insolent behavior shown to the good mate Mr. Baker ultimately becomes intolerable to the crew and they rejoice when they find that Donkin has lost one of his front teeth as a result of Mr. Baker's punishment.

This little incident in the novel illustrates man's common dislike of 'bad' and his liking for 'good' and 'justice'. Conrad successfully portrays that human beings pre-eminently are moral beings. They at least try to wear the garb of moral principles.

The sailor nicknamed 'little Belfast' is particularly sentimental and sympathetic to the sick James Wait. Because of his sickness, Wait loses appetite and becomes cranky and irritable. Belfast is well aware that it is unethical to steal, but when he faces the moral dilemma he chooses to sympathize with the sick and dying man; "Belfast stole from the galley the officers' Sunday fruit-

pie, to tempt the fastidious appetite of Jimmy. He endangered not only his long friendship with the Cook but also - as it appeared - his eternal welfare".<sup>52</sup> Though a very small incident, it highlights the moral dilemma faced by such an ordinary sailor as Belfast, and how he gives more importance to his humanly concern for sick Jimmy's discomfort and loss of appetite even at the risk of his longstanding friendship with the Cook. (To Belfast, James Wait is just a recent acquaintance of a few weeks on that particular voyage).

During the life-threatening storm and in its aftermath, all the men on board are perilously hanging on to the tilted ship. They are weak, hungry and shivering from the cold. Even in such circumstances, we see many of the men selflessly removing their own coats and putting them on the weaker ones. They risk their own lives to save the sick Negro who is trapped in his partially submerged cabin. They also risk their lives to man the ship, balancing themselves in dangerous positions till their efforts succeed and the ship regains its balance. Such extreme incidents portray the solidarity between man and man. Conrad strengthens our faith in the fact that human beings are pre-eminently moral beings who can succeed against nature and circumstance on the strength of the solidarity of their (human) race.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Martin Seymour Smith, Introduction. *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. By Joseph Conrad: *Typhoon and Other Stories*. (London: Everyman's Library-David Campbell Publishers, 1991), xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, Introduction. *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. By Joseph Conrad: *Typhoon and Other Stories*. xiv.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, Introduction. *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. By Joseph Conrad: *Typhoon and Other Stories*. xv.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories* (London: Everyman's Library-David Campbell Publishers, 1991) 32.

<sup>5</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 47-48.

<sup>6</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 71-72.

<sup>7</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 91.

<sup>8</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 96-97.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, Introduction. *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. By Joseph Conrad: *Typhoon and Other Stories*. xvi, xvii.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, Introduction. *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. By Joseph Conrad: *Typhoon and Other Stories*. xx, xi.

<sup>11</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 21.

- <sup>12</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 25.
- <sup>13</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 120.
- <sup>14</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 137.
- <sup>15</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 56.
- <sup>16</sup> Joseph Conrad. Preface. *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. By Conrad: *Typhoon and Other Stories* (London: Everyman's Library-David Campbell Publishers, 1991) 4-5.
- <sup>17</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 26-27.
- <sup>18</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 27-28.
- <sup>19</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 42.
- <sup>20</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 14-16.
- <sup>21</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 40-41.
- <sup>22</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 76.
- <sup>23</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 79.
- <sup>24</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 91-92.
- <sup>25</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 99-100.

- <sup>26</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 118.
- <sup>27</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories* , 127.
- <sup>28</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 70.
- <sup>29</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 147-148.
- <sup>30</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 75-76.
- <sup>31</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 84.
- <sup>32</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 37-38.
- <sup>33</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 46.
- <sup>34</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 67-68.
- <sup>35</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 123.
- <sup>36</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 20.
- <sup>37</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 28.
- <sup>38</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 56.
- <sup>39</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 67.
- <sup>40</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 78.

<sup>41</sup> Smith, Introduction. *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. By Joseph Conrad: *Typhoon and Other Stories*. x.

<sup>42</sup> Smith, Introduction. *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. By Joseph Conrad: *Typhoon and Other Stories*. xi.

<sup>43</sup> Smith, Introduction. *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. By Joseph Conrad: *Typhoon and Other Stories*. xxii.

<sup>44</sup> Smith, Introduction. *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. By Joseph Conrad: *Typhoon and Other Stories*. xxviii, xxix.

<sup>45</sup> Smith, Introduction. *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. By Joseph Conrad: *Typhoon and Other Stories*. xxxi.

<sup>46</sup> Joseph Conrad. Preface. *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. By Conrad: *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 3, 4.

<sup>47</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 123.

<sup>48</sup> Smith, Introduction. *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. By Joseph Conrad: *Typhoon and Other Stories*. xviii.

<sup>49</sup> Smith, Introduction. *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. By Joseph Conrad: *Typhoon and Other Stories*. xxx.

<sup>50</sup> Joseph Conrad. Preface. *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. By Conrad. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 4.

<sup>51</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 15.

<sup>52</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 38, 39.