


A DENEGATIVE AND INTERTEXTUAL REASSESSMENT OF “THE TALE”

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Abstract: This paper demonstrates that, as in the case of other short fictions of Joseph Conrad (“Freya of the Seven Isles,” “A Smile of Fortune,” and “The Planter of Malata”), also in the case of “The Tale” (1917)—the author’s most enigmatic piece—an intertextual and a denegative approach generates new perspectives. “The Tale”’s intertextuality is considered here in the context of pre- and post-Conrad American writing, ranging from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s, through William Faulkner’s, to Toni Morrison’s. A denegative (asserting presence by absence, and vice versa) reconsideration of “The Tale”’s diagetic concentric narration demonstrates that it owes its epistemological haze precisely to the device of denegation, which likewise creates a strict convergence between the story’s governing themes of love and war, thereby revealing the undercurrent of idealism, ego, and suspiciousness in the commanding officer’s character, which seems to be the main factor in both his murderous operational decision and the lovers’ estrangement.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, “The Tale,” intertextuality, denegation, epistemology, modernism, American writing

This ‘close reading’ New Critical study of Conrad’s “The Tale” demonstrates that, as in the case of other short fictions of Joseph Conrad (“Freya of the Seven Isles,” “A Smile of Fortune,” and “The Planter of Malata”¹), also in the case of this one—the author’s most enigmatic piece—an intertextual and a denegative approach generates new perspectives. “The Tale”’s intertextuality is considered here in the context of pre- and post-Conrad American writing, ranging from Nathaniel Hawthorne, through William Faulkner, to Toni Morrison. It evokes ambiguities typical of American

¹ See my detailed discussion on the subject in: “Narration and Epistemology: Freya, the Ambivalent Nordic Goddess of Love, in Joseph Colonial Seven Isles and Leszek Prorok’s Nazi Germany,” *Yearbook of Conrad Studies*, vol. 10, ed. Jolanta Dudek (Kraków: Universitas, 2016), pp. 127-150; “What ‘A Smile of Fortune’ Has to Hide: An Intertextual and Comparative Reconsideration of the Texture and Theme of Conrad’s Tale,” *Yearbook of Conrad Studies*, vol. 13, eds. Jolanta Dudek and Andrzej Juszczyk (Kraków: Universitas, 2019), pp. 7-33; and “An Epistemological and Denegative Reinterpretation in the Faulknerian Context of Conrad’s Malay Tale ‘The Planter of Malata,’” in *Conrad Without Borders: Transcultural and Transtextual Perspectives*, eds. Brendan Kavanagh, Grażyna M. T. Branny, and Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech (London: Bloomsbury 2023), pp. 53-67.

Romanticism as they appear in Hawthorne's tale "Young Goodman Brown" (1835) and Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick* (1851). It likewise echoes the impressionistic and psychological realist narration of Stephen Crane in *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), and, in its diagetic concentric narration, anticipates the multivocal modernist attempts at reconstructing the truth in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and 'shadow' narrativity in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), both heavily steeped in denegation,² a poetic device which has heretofore been ascribed to William Faulkner. Finally, "The Tale"'s dialogic narration is clearly evocative of Ernest Hemingway's behaviouristic iceberg narration in "The Killers" (1927), while the commanding officer's morbid suspiciousness about the Northman's guilt brings to mind Toni Morrison's narrative technique of 'miscuing' in her novel *Paradise* (1998). Textually, the commanding officer's distrust of and skepticism in love in "The Tale" are akin to Jasper Allen's in "Freya of the Seven Isles" (1912), with the same result of the loss of that love. "The Tale"'s focus being mostly epistemological, the story dramatizes one of the most essential modernist concerns with the impossibility of ever recovering the truth of the matter—here, with regard to war and love—and illustrates the general modernist failure of communication, here, landed at both the commander's and his lover's doorsteps. And, finally, like "The Planter of Malata" (1914), "The Tale" establishes an opposition between truth and facts, three decades later echoed in Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun* (1951). A denegative reconsideration of "The Tale"'s diagetic³ narration demonstrates that it owes its epistemological haze precisely to the device of denegation, which likewise creates a strict convergence between the story's governing themes of love and war, thereby revealing the streak of idealism, ego, and suspiciousness in the commanding officer's character, which seems to be the main factor in both his murderous operational decision and the lovers' estrangement.

² According to François L. Pitavy denegation involves asserting presence by absence, i.e., making a fact the more present for its absence or for the absence of the apparent reasons for that presence, thus it affirms by negating. As defined by Pitavy, denegation is a psychological term referring to the speaker. In calling Sutpen in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* a "nothusband," Rosa Coldfield does not mean that he did not ever become her spouse but that he was "the more present for being perceived as the negative of a husband" (François Pitavy, "Some Remarks on Negation and Denegation in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*" in *Faulkner's Discourse: An International Symposium*, ed. by Lothar Hönnighausen [Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1989], p. 29).

³ Amidst the ongoing debate over the number of "tales" in Conrad's story, I am inclined to follow William Bonney's classification of the diegetic levels of "The Tale" into four concentric tales where the commanding officer's "inward voice" is treated as a tale unto itself (William Wesley Bonney, *Thorns and Arabesques: Contexts for Conrad's Fiction* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980]). This is so because this tale, like the other three, is ridden with denegation, where the Northman's alleged guilt in the commanding officer's eyes is asserted by his apparent innocence in the second in command's and his own. Jakob Lothe disagrees with Bonney over the issue, limiting the classification to three narratives: authorial, the commander's, and the Northman's (Jakob Lothe, *Conrad's Narrative Method* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991]), while a Hungarian critic Balázs Csizmadia, operating from the vantage point of Gerard Genette's narrative theory, in his article titled "'The Tale': A Self-Conscious Fictional Artifice," mentions as many as seven tales to Conrad's story, placed on three diegetic levels: extradiegetic-heterodiegetic (authorial narrator); (intra)diegetic, comprising the (intra)diegetic-heterodiegetic narrator (the commander) and the woman; metadiegetic, comprising the commanding officer as character, the second in command, the boarding officer, and the Northman (Balázs Csizmadia, "'The Tale': A Self-Conscious Fictional Artifice," *The AnaChronisT* 11 [2005], p. 201).

Published as part of Conrad's posthumous volume *Tales of Hearsay* (1925), "The Tale" was written in 1916, during World War I, shortly after Conrad's son Borys joined the army as second lieutenant.⁴ Although quite well covered in recent Conrad criticism, it continues to puzzle its critics and readers alike by both its epistemological "fog" as regards the nature of the relationship between the man and the woman in the governing narrative, and the operational decision made singlehandedly by the commanding officer contrary to the opinion of his second in command in the 'tale' that the main protagonist tells his lover at her specific request.

"The Tale"'s denegative and intertextual aspects become apparent from the very beginning of the story, which begins *in medias res* and in a strikingly similar manner to the opening of the "June Second, 1910" chapter of the Quentin narrative in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* written twelve years later:⁵

Outside the large single window the crepuscular light was dying out slowly in a great square gleam without color, framed rigidly in the gathering shades of the room. [...] The irresistible tide of the night ran into the most distant part of it [...].⁶

The voice from the sofa interrupted the narrator. [...] He bent forward slightly.

"[...] Everything should be open in love and war. Open as the day, since both are the call of an ideal which it is so easy, so terribly easy, to degrade in the name of Victory." (Conrad 67)

Faulkner's chapter begins as follows:

When the shadow of the sash appeared on the curtain it was between seven and eight oclock and then I was in time again, hearing the watch. It was Grandfather's and when Father gave it to me he said, Quentin, I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire; it's rather excruciatingly apt that you will use it to gain the *reducto absurdum* of all human experience [...] Because no battle is ever won he said. They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools.⁷

⁴ Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, *The Strange Short Fiction of Joseph Conrad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 177.

⁵ William Faulkner never acknowledged any debt to Conrad's short fiction although it seems quite apparent in relation to such Conrad tales as "Freya of the Seven Isles," "A Smile of Fortune," and "The Planter of Malata" (see fn. 1). Faulkner's unacknowledged debt to Conrad concerns especially his use of denegation, the device of which it is the American writer that has been deemed a precursor all along in place of Conrad, who used it more than a decade earlier. Generally speaking, Faulkner's overall acknowledgment of his literary indebtedness to Conrad was rather evasive, if any, when at Nagano, asked about it, he claimed that "a writer never knows where he steals from" (*Faulkner at Nagano*, ed. Robert Jelliffe, Tokyo: Kenkyusha Ltd., 1956, p. 72). The heavy indebtedness of Faulkner's 1949 Nobel Prize Address to Conrad's essay on Henry James was discovered only after Faulkner's death – for a more detailed discussion of the issue, see Grażyna Branny, *A Conflict of Values: Alienation and Commitment in the Novels of Joseph Conrad and William Faulkner* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo "Sponsor," 1997), pp. 25-28.

⁶ Joseph Conrad, "The Tale," in *Tales of Hearsay* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1925), p. 59.

⁷ William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), p. 93.

In both cases the opening lines foreshadow some foreboding status quo (in Conrad, apparently, a deadlock in love; in Faulkner, familial incest), which is being slowly shrouded in the ever deepening “shades” and “shadows” of the impending night unrelentingly circumscribed by the time, from which there is no escape. Hence, both parties are caught in “the reducto absurdum of all human experience,” which in Conrad’s story is tantamount to the Great War while in Faulkner’s novel amounts to the doom of the Southern past, both changing it all for the couples involved: the commanding officer and his nameless lover in Conrad’s tale, and Quentin and his sister Caddy in Faulkner’s novel. Thus, “victory” in the emotional “wars” of the protagonists of both texts appears neither desirable (in Conrad) nor possible (in Faulkner) because in the former case it may “degrade” “the ideal,” while in the latter, it is a mere “illusion.”

Although initially both lovers’ voices appear to remain in unison, both resounding with passion: “the whispering of a man’s voice, passionately interrupted and passionately renewed,” it is not the same kind of passion that drives them, for the man “seemed to plead against” the woman’s “answering murmurs of infinite sadness.” (59) This “passionate” discord reveals some sort of emotional incompatibility between the two, with the man’s voice full of eagerness after telling her “everything worth saying in the world” (60), which must have been a confession of love, and the woman’s ridden with sadness and scepticism, the apparent presence of love denegatively asserting its actual absence. This discord comes full circle in the story’s ending when, unexpectedly, upon the narrator’s completion of his war ‘tale,’ the situation takes a turn in the opposite direction. Namely, the woman’s compassion and tenderness at her lover’s revelation of his thwarting of his ideals and disclosure of his moral trauma over committing the Northman and his crew to certain death on the strength of mere suspicion comes up against his sudden coldness, indifference and eventual departure, the apparent presence of love on his part and absence on hers in the initial scene denegatively asserting their opposites in the final scene.

This dramatic change is foreshadowed by the already quoted opening passage of the story, with the shadows of the falling night and unknowing eventually yielding to the ‘openness of the day’ “in love and war” for the woman. Not so for the narrator of the “tale,” though, who is left broken, sceptical, and suspicious, both in war and in love, as becomes apparent from the last scene of “The Tale,” in which his first utterance of: “I shall never know” (81) concludes his war ‘tale,’ and the second one sums up Conrad’s tale of love:

He rose. The woman on the couch got up and threw her arms round his neck. Her eyes put two gleams in the deep shadow of the room. She knew his passion for truth, his horror of deceit, his humanity.

“Oh, my poor, poor—”

“I shall never know,” he repeated sternly, disengaged himself, pressed her hands to his lips, and went out. (80-81)

That his suspiciousness extends to other than solely professional matters which here refer to his military operations at sea, can be surmised from the words of the frame

narrator of Conrad's story at its beginning. From the start both lovers are placed on the opposite sides of the spectrum, in him being described as "masculine and mysterious in his immobility" (59) and her being associated by him with "feminine mobility that slips out of an emotion as easily as out of a splendid gown" (60). Moreover, the commanding officer likens his lover's "fluttering intonation" to "a butterfly's flight" (60), while the frame narrator calls "a loved woman's capricious will [...] a law, embarrassing sometimes and always difficult to elude" (60), thereby confirming the flighty and fleeting nature of women in general, and the commanding officer's lover in particular. Another contrast between the two lovers established on the authorial level at the very start of the story refers to their diverse perceptions of reality by the sheer virtue of him being a man and her being a woman, the former "shrinking as a man would do from the prosaic necessities of existence" and the latter "[a]s usual, [with] the woman" having "the courage" (59).

Indeed, the woman's reaction to the commanding officer's revelation of the truth of the matter as regards his decision to punish the neutrals for what he deemed to be their apparent collaboration with the enemy, against "what he could see" (63) (as opposed to what he imagined) and against the specific recommendations of the second in command, demonstrates her ability to face up to the reality, however sordid it might be, and show her love even so, or despite everything. Not so her lover, who, like Jasper Allen in "Freya of the Seven Isles," beset by self-doubt and general mistrust upon losing his own sense of integrity, "abandons" his lover both emotionally and physically despite having professed his love for her just a short while ago, "and not for the first time!" at that, as he claims at the beginning of the story (60). Or is it her empathy and forgiveness against all odds that intimidate him when in his idealism and egotism he is unable to forgive himself?

In this scene again the lovers fall short of being on the same page. Upon the man's confession of his potential error of judgment and his weakness in not being able ever to know the truth, the woman recovers her confidence in herself that she seems to have lacked in before, with all his assets and virtues—"his passion for truth, his horror of deceit, his humanity," as quoted previously—confronted with what she deemed to have been her imperfectness.

Her sense of inferiority, compared to her lover's perfectness and perfectionism surfaces three times during their conversation topped with his war "tale." The first time covertly so, at the beginning of his 'tale,' when, still anonymously, he likens the commanding officer's ship to "a pretty woman who had suddenly put on a suit of sackcloth and stuck revolvers in her belt," perhaps alluding to his lover's change of vocation in becoming a nurse in the Great War. Describing the ship's movements afloat as "light" and "nimble," and calling her "quite good enough" (63), he elicits the woman's sceptical and ironic remark: "That was the opinion of the commanding officer?," which implies her own self-doubt and distrust of the sincerity of his words, which he thus promptly contradicts:

It was. He used to be sent out with her along certain coasts *to see*—*what he could see*. Just that. And sometimes he had some preliminary information to help him, and sometimes he had not. And it was all one, really. It was about as useful as information trying to convey the locality and

intentions of a cloud, of a phantom taking shape here and there and impossible to seize, would have been. (63; emphasis added)

The metaphorical passage above suggests that Conrad's lovers in "The Tale" are somehow at odds with each other both at the beginning and at the end of the story. Where he sees her as "quite good enough," she doubts herself, knowing about his ideals and her own inability to live up to them. Where he declares his love for her, she withholds her graces, remaining as unreadable and enigmatic as "a cloud" or "a phantom." Where, finally, in the closing scene, she sincerely feels for his loss of his ideals, finding him at last a match to herself, he loses heart to his own self-doubt in both war and love, and walks away. In-between the two scenes is the third one, where the woman ironically asserts her painful awareness of his ideals that, unfortunately, remain beyond her reach: "Oh, yes. Sincerity—frankness—passion—three words of your gospel. Don't I know them!" (64).

This triple recurrence of a similar or identical motif in "The Tale," so characteristic a feature of tales in general, might imply that in thus displaying her scepticism and self-doubt, she is in fact telling the man her own 'tale,' unlike himself, of her own accord, which might explain why she is asking him for one in return. The fact that she reminds him: "You used to tell—your—your simple and—and professional—tales very well at one time. Or well enough to interest me. You had a—a sort of art—in the days—the days before the war" (60) might imply that either she has not heard them for a while, what with the lovers' war duties, or that their simplicity, professionalism, and artistry obliterated his true self, or that they presented him in too idealistic a light, and thus no match for herself. So in asking him for 'a tale' from another world, she may be asking him for something authentic for a change, which might open him up to her and her to him. Hence, her purpose in asking him for 'a tale' may be for him to expose himself at last, and for her to hear the truth about him, which, pertinently, she does.

The commanding officer's 'tale' is also construed around a triple repetition, this time of a an identical phrase, in perfect alignment with the woman's plea for 'a tale.' This phrase relates to the opposition between the truth of the matter and facts identified in relation to the commanding officer as "see[ing]—what he could see." Its first occurrence (in italics in the previously quoted indented passage), quite apart from the meaning it yields in the context of the lovers' relationship, clearly indicates that the commanding officer's ocular observations have little to do with the ultimate judgment of the situation he formulates on their basis in "another tale," that of his "inward voice (73)," where his exalted ego and imagination get the better of his "seeing."⁸ The second occurrence of the phrase provides the reason for this phenomenon in the soldiers afloat losing their lives because of the unseen submerged below the surface of the sea in the shape of submarines, which is when "you go out for the work *to see*—

⁸ As pertinently remarked by Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan in *The Strange Short Fiction of Joseph Conrad*, in "The Tale" Conrad expresses scepticism over ocularcentrism at the end of the phase of his writing given to 'making you see' (p. 172). Referring to Foucault and Bergson, the critic stresses the challenging function of Modernism in relations to Modernity in that the former undermines the hegemony of the eye, and hence certainty (p. 182).

what you can see, and you keep on at it with the conviction that someday you will die from something you have not seen" (64; emphasis added). In other words, to protect your life you have to become suspicious, whether justifiably so or not, of what may seemingly look innocuous, which is precisely what happens to the commanding officer, who, apart from his suspiciousness, "was in revolt against the murderous stealthiness of methods and atrocious callousness of complicities that seemed to taint the very source of men's deep emotions and noblest activities" (67), so, to put it differently, was an idealist, even against the best judgment of those on board, his second in command including. The phrase is repeated for the third time when the crew of the commanding officer's ship detect a floating object akin to a piece of wreckage whereupon "twenty pairs of eyes on her deck stared in all directions *trying to see—what they could see* (65; emphasis added). [...] The object in itself was more than suspect. But the fact of its being left in evidence roused other suspicions" (66).

Apart from aligning with the very definition of a tale, this threefold repetition of the phrase foreshadows the epistemological distinction between truth and fact in the story, the latter category circumscribed by 'what one can see,' as opposed to the actual truth behind the appearances, very much in the likeness of William Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun* more than a generation later.⁹ Although the commanding officer's 'tale' does fulfil the formal requirements of a tale, thematically and denegatively, it turns out to be an account of real war events rather than a tale proper, the absence of the latter requirement asserted by the presence of the former. What's more, instead of being set in "another world," according to the woman's "caprice," by the decree of the commanding officer, it turns into its very opposite in taking place amidst the all too real horrors of the war, in the world whose 'otherness' amounts to stealthy submarine operations when one 'cannot see what there is to see.' Paradoxically, and denegatively so, it is 'a tale'—hence a piece of fiction — that brings the woman the truth of the matter as regards her lover's personal integrity, perfectness and his love for her. In its light, what she deemed to be the truth about all three of those appears no more than a piece of fiction, a figment of imagination, for 'others to see' rather than for her to embrace, the truth of the matter in the 'tale' the more present for the absence in it of typical tale thematics, and the commanding officer's love the more absent for the presence of his suspiciousness and egotism that cloud it.

Conrad's denegative technique becomes particularly apparent and important in the scene of the commanding officer's confrontation with the Northman, which is crucial for the former to decide about the actual guilt of the latter, and thus vital for defining the commanding officer's own standing in the matter as a hero or a murderer. The denegative way in which the scene is construed makes it virtually impossible for the reader to decide whether the Northman is indeed responsible for supplying the enemy submarines to the detriment of ships like the commanding officer's, or not. In this respect "The Tale" is even more enigmatic than Faulkner's denegative narration

⁹ A similar distinction between the two categories is made by William Faulkner in his *Requiem for a Nun*, where he sees the fact of Nancy Mannigoe's murder of Temple's little daughter as standing in no relation to the underlying truth of the salvation of Temple's soul (William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* [Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970]).

nearly two decades later, in Rosa Coldfield's stream-of-consciousness internal monologue in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). For, while it ultimately becomes clear from textual evidence that Rosa's affection for Charles Bon is the more present for its repeated denials, judging by the commanding officer's 'tale,' and particularly "another tale"—that of the commanding officer's "inward voice"—it is impossible to confirm or disclaim the Northman's guilt, except by referring to the even more denegatively construed love plot of Conrad's story, and its finale in especial, which highlight the streak of suspiciousness, idealism, and ego in the commanding officer's character, which distorts the reality for him in both war and love, tipping the scales in favour of the Northman and damning the officer.

In Rosa's monologue in *Absalom, Absalom!* affirmation is immediately denied by a bracketed negation (*not, never, nothing, don't, etc.*) only to become revoked and once again denied, or carried to absurdity, which validates it:

[...] (*I did not love him; how could I? I had never even heard his voice, [...] [...] because I who had learned nothing of love, not even parents' love— [...] became not mistress, not beloved, but more than even love; I became all polymath love's androgynous advocate. [...] I was not spying, though you will say I was. And even if it was spying, it was not jealousy, because I did not love him. (How could I have, when I had never seen him?) And even if I did, not as women love, [...] If it was love (and I still say, How could it be?) [...] Because I asked nothing of him, [...] And more than that: I gave him nothing which is the sum of loving [...] yet who did not do it because I should have had to say 'Don't talk to me of love but let me tell you, who know already more of love than you will ever know or need.*)¹⁰

In his dialogue with the Northman, interspersed with psychological realist introspections into the commanding officer's mind, we see him toss between "not guilty," suspiciousness, and certitude as to the Northman's guilt after all:

"That's true. There can be nothing. I can't suspect him. [...] Suppose I ask him and watch his face. He will betray himself in some way. It's perfectly plain that the fellow *has* been drinking. Yes, he has been drinking, but he will have a lie ready all the same' (75). [...] He felt alarmed at catching himself thinking as if his vaguest suspicions were turning into a certitude. For indeed, there was no shadow of reason for his inferences. There was nothing to give away. [...] And the Englishman felt himself with astonishing conviction faced by an enormous lie, solid like a wall, with no way round to get at the truth, whose ugly murderous face he seemed to see peeping over at him with a cynical grin. [...] (76)

'No, I have no suspicions,'" [...]

"He never faltered. At that moment he had the certitude. The air of the chart-room was thick with guilt and falsehood [...] common decency [...], every scuple of conduct." (77-78)

In this denegatively construed scene, all professions of the Northman's innocence on the commanding officer's part are immediately denied by assertions of his treachery, only to be revoked and again followed by suspicions and finally certitude of his guilt. As much as this denegative narration foreshadows the commanding officer's irrevocable

¹⁰ William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), pp. 146-147; italics original.

cable decision to expel the neutral ship from the dock and send her straight onto the rocks in thick fog, it does not resolve the issue of his unknowing. His occasional assertions of the Northman's innocence only confirm what his "inward voice" tries to convince him about all along, i.e., the man's guilt.

Incidentally, in his article on Conrad's story "Killing 'the Newt,'" Cedric Watts discusses "The Tale" against Rudyard Kipling's short story "Sea Constables." As demonstrated by Watts, while presenting an analogical act to the one we witness in Conrad's, Kipling's story shows it as a clear-cut and transparent military decision, and thus beyond moral nuancing.¹¹ Evidently, Conrad, with his long-standing seafaring experience, the nuanced literary baggage of *Lord Jim*, "The Secret Sharer," and *Under Western Eyes* to his credit, and the historical Polish heritage,¹² presents an analogical episode as morally multi-faceted and complex, ridden with conflicting feelings and contradictory implications, affecting the doer's personal life.¹³ What is shown by Kipling as just, justifiable, and commendable, almost heroic and an indisputable title to glory,¹⁴ is denegatively construed as, at best, torturous and shameful, and, at worst, murderous and deplorable by Conrad. In psychological realist passages, Conrad dissects the commander's conflicting thoughts and emotions as well as tormenting suspicions, all that against the backdrop of an equally nuanced, if not torturous, love relationship, which functions as a foil to the war situation, one illuminating and reflecting back on the other, so that the reader can judge the commanding officer's strategic decision more objectively and in a broader context of his overall personality—his perfectionist nature, his ego, and his suspiciousness—both in love and war—coupled with an inability to face the reality of his own self in either.

¹¹ Cedric Watts, "Killing 'the Newt': Kipling's 'Sea Constables' and Conrad's 'The Tale,'" *The Conradian* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2010), pp. 56-77.

¹² Conrad's nuanced perspective on war may have been related to his Polish background, which made him sensitive to the nuances of war situations, with his compatriots back at home drafted to armies on both sides of the frontline in WWI, putting up a fratricidal fight against one another in all three partitions.

¹³ Notwithstanding all that, it must have been Conrad's direct exposure to war at sea over the three months preceding his completion of "The Tale," that played a crucial role here. As Getano D'Elia explains in the article titled "Let us Make Tales, not Love: Conrad's 'The Tale,'" *The Conradian* 12, no. 1 (May 1987), pp. 50-58, the Admiralty agreed to Conrad's joining the crew of a minesweeper in the period between September 1916 and January 1917, over which, in 1916 alone, the writer composed an "exceptionally ambiguous" tale (Conrad, *LE* 11) about the behaviour of a commanding officer, which appeared even more despicable than the behaviour of the officers in the *Patna* episode, the events described in Conrad's essay "The Unlighted Coast," commissioned by the Admiralty, a story which fits in-between the other two texts in moral categories (52).

¹⁴ The historical—textual and non-textual—context for the first publication of Conrad's story in *The Strand* magazine in 1917, provided by William Atkinson in his 2019 article "Conrad in *The Strand*: The Hermeneutics of Suspicion in 'The Tale,'" *The Conradian* 38, no. 2 (Autumn 2013), pp. 72-89, sheds light on Kipling's attitude, which, as Atkinson demonstrates, would absolutely align with that of the general British public of the day. With an unprecedented escalation of German submarine attacks on British and American merchant ships between Conrad's composition of "The Tale" at the close of 1916 and its publication in *The Strand* a year later, running into thousands of casualties a day, and with the recent expansion of the enemy's U-boats fleet (Davies), the British readership "would have been readier to accept what the English captain does than in the previous year," as confirmed by Laurence Davies in his article "Clenched Fists and Open Hands: Conrad's Unruliness," *The Conradian* 32, no. 2 (2007), p. 31.

The air of incomprehension pervading “The Tale” on all of its diegetic levels is intensified by the author’s use of ambiguity, in which he seems to follow the great American Romantics, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, as well as echo the precursor of literary impressionism Stephen Crane in his psychological realist war novel *The Red Badge of Courage*. Just as Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” questions the reliability of human eyesight, ascribing certain visual impressions to an ocular deception caused by an uncertain light or an angle of vision, the fourth concentric tale of Conrad’s story—that of the commanding officer’s “inward voice,” does precisely the same in wavering between the truth and fact of the Northman’s guilt or innocence, suggesting a possibility of misjudgment caused by an ocular deception, or the commanding officer’s prejudiced perspective:

“The Northman with his hand on the table stood absolutely motionless and dumb. He stood as if thunderstruck. Then he produced a fatuous smile.

Or at least so it appeared to the commanding officer. Was this significant, or of no meaning whatever? He didn’t know, he couldn’t tell. [...] All the truth had departed out of this world, as if drawn in, absorbed in this monstrous villainy this man was—or was not—guilty of. [...]

Was he pretending to be drunk, or only trying to appear sober? [...] His lips outlined themselves firmly under his yellow moustache. But they twitched. Did they twitch? And why was he drooping like this in his attitude?” (Conrad 77)

Hawthorne-like, Conrad undermines the validity of the commanding officer’s angle of vision and visual perception indirectly, through questions, which are clearly evocative of those in “Young Goodman Brown,” when in the scene of initiation into evil in the forest the baptismal font “hollowed naturally in the rock” seems to be filled with blood rather than holy water: “Did contain water, reddened by the lurid light? or was it blood? or, perchance, a liquid flame?” (287), or at the close of the story when the reality of the protagonist’s nocturnal encounter with evil which had affected his and his family entire life, is questioned:

Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest, and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting?

Be it so, if you will. But, alas! it was a dream of evil omen for young Goodman Brown. A stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, and a distrustful, if not a desperate man did he become, from the night of that fearful dream.¹⁵

Incidentally, one can hardly avoid an impression here of the analogy between Hawthorne’s protagonist’s and Conrad’s commanding officer’s distrust and loss of heart in effect of an experience grounded in appearances, as they both believe in

¹⁵ Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown,” in *Tales and Sketches. A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys. Tanglewood Tales for Girls and Boys*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (New York: Viking Press, 1974), p. 288.

'what they can see,' taking it for the truth of the matter, which, for both protagonists, amounts to the truth about their exalted egos and mistaking perfection for love.

During Goodman's providential encounter on his way to evil baptism with a man resembling his father, what struck him was the latter's "staff, which bore the likeness of a great black snake, so curiously wrought, that it might almost be seen to twist and wriggle itself like a living serpent." The ensuing implication of ancestral evil in Goodman Brown's Puritanical lineage of the elect is immediately dismissed by the teasing authorial voice reassuring the reader that "[t]his, of course, must have been an ocular deception, assisted by the uncertain light," thereby, however, confirming the truth behind the implication of Puritanical hypocrisy.¹⁶ By analogy, in the scene in the chart-room of the neutral ship in "The Tale," while beginning to suspect the Northman of having taken "another swig at the bottle," judging by his increased boldness, the commanding officer thus comments on the reliability of his own impressions of the Northman's guilt, adding a typically Hawthornian qualification immediately afterwards: "The Northman on meeting his eyes put on an elaborately surprised expression. At least, it seemed elaborated. Nothing could be trusted" (Conrad 76).

In the same vein, in his discussion of the opening paragraph of "The Tale," Jakob Lothe draws attention to Conrad's use of the verb "seem" (the commanding officer "seemed to plead"), which in the critic's opinion "increasingly epitomizes the narrator's epistemological uncertainty,"¹⁷ and anticipates the recurrence of the verb in the whole text, as illustrated by the fragment of the protagonist's "tale" quoted above. Lothe further claims that this early occurrence in the text of the verb "seem" adumbrates "the affinity between the authorial and the personal narrator," suggesting "that the text's basic problems of epistemological orientation and moral dilemma are not limited to the particular story of the commander."¹⁸

Regarding the epistemological and moral haze behind of the commanding officer's 'tale' with respect to the alleged guilt or innocence of the Northman and his neutrals, the 'tale' appears to dramatize Ishmael's words in *Moby Dick* warning about "the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure."¹⁹ In the same way, the sea in the commanding officer's 'tale' "seemed to pretend that there was nothing the matter with the world" (Conrad 64) in which "it is impossible to believe that the familiar clear horizon traces the limit of one great circular ambush" (63). The commanding officer's comparison of men in their stealthy submarine operations at sea to "moral cannibals" (74) is likewise evocative of Ishmael's comment on "the universal cannibalism of the sea," with "all its creatures prey[ing] upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began."²⁰

¹⁶ Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown," p. 277.

¹⁷ Lothe, *Conrad's Narrative Method*, pp. 75-76.

¹⁸ Lothe, *Conrad's Narrative Method*, p. 76.

¹⁹ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, Norton Critical Edition, eds. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1967), p. 235.

²⁰ Melville, *Moby Dick*, pp. 235-236.

What further contributes to the epistemological enigma of the story and its atmosphere of indefiniteness and uncertainty are numerous impressionistic descriptions, which reveal Conrad's indebtedness to Stephen Crane as "the only impressionist but only an impressionist,"²¹ as Conrad referred to the American writer at one point. Similarly as in *The Red Badge of Courage*, in "The Tale" the characters are presented through delineation of contours, blots of shadow, or patches of colour or sounds. Just as the colonel of the Union army in Crane's text looms large as "a gigantic figure" mounted on "a gigantic horse," raising "his gigantic arm to calmly stroke the mustache,"²² in Conrad's story, the commanding officer is introduced as "tall under the low ceiling" and "somber all over except for the crude discord of the white collar under the shape of his head and the faint, minute spark of a brass button here and there on his uniform." Similarly, all we see of his lover's appearance amounts to "the faint oval of her upturned face" and "pale hands, a moment before abandoned to his kisses and now as if too weary to move," "extended" across "her black dress" (59). Likewise, the Northman's appearance is reduced to the synecdoche of his "straight" and "somewhat glazed" glance, with "lips outlined firmly [...] under his yellow moustache," whether "twitching" or not, "the sound of a sharp breath indrawn through closed teeth" (Conrad 77).

Conrad goes further than Crane, though, in extending his employment of impressionism into the sphere of the protagonists' hidden thoughts and emotions which replace descriptions of the man's physical appearance, as in the scene of the Northman's conversation with the commanding officer, which is rendered through blots and patches of the latter's feelings, such as "his indignation and his anger with the baseness of greed" (73), "scorn and disgust, which were invincible because more temperamental than moral" (75), "[t]he air of the chart-room [...] thick with guilt and falsehood braving the discovery, defying simple right, common decency, all humanity of feeling, every scruple of conduct" (78).

Moreover, the very situation of war in both texts is rendered through patches of shade against a contrasting background in Conrad, and blots of sound in Crane. Thus, the vessel of the neutrals in "The Tale" is seen as "a mere vague blot on the fog's brightness" (Conrad 69), while the approaching battle is *The Red Badge of Courage* is onomatopoeically anticipated by the "whispering [of] speculations," "the clatter of a horse's galloping hoofs," an "exciting clickety-click," a horseman's "jangling equipment,"²³ and "a short, sharp-worded conversation."²⁴

The air of ambiguity and incertitude, whether in war or love, in "The Tale" is augmented by the characters' namelessness, in which they resemble Crane's in the said novel. Just like the latter's youth, the tattered soldier, and the tall, or loud soldiers, Conrad's protagonists remain markedly anonymous, the action of both texts, significantly, taking place during a war, which by its very nature celebrates and in-

²¹ Stephen Crane, *Letters*, eds. Robert W. Stallman, Lillian Gilkes, Introduction by Robert W. Stallman (New York: New York University Press, 1960), p. 154.

²² Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage* (London: Puffin Classics, 1986), p. 21.

²³ Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*, p. 21.

²⁴ Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*, p. 22.

dulges anonymity, be it the Civil War as in Crane's novel, or the Great War as in Conrad's story. The characters' namelessness in "The Tale" is sealed with a distancing psychological realist third-person Jamesian type of narration (also employed in *The Red Badge of Courage*), both techniques evidently enhancing what Lothe refers to as the story's "attitudinal narrative distance."²⁵ Thus, by simultaneously providing the reader with an insight into the commanding officer's elaborate rationale of his murderous decision and creating a deliberate distance between the teller of the tale and its female narratee, the tale's psychological realist narration as if confirms the modernist inability to communicate that the story dramatizes and augments the mutual estrangement of the two lovers despite the affection that evidently binds them together somehow.

Like Ernest Hemingway's dialogic story "The Killers," the equally dialogic Conrad tale, opens *in medias res*, with a scene which introduces a situation rather than the characters involved, neither presented with a clarity sufficient for the reader to formulate a specific statement of facts on the basis of. The exposition of the identity, social status, past or present of the two interlocutors: the man and the woman, is replaced with their dialogic exchange, which establishes the only fact, of the relationship between the two being somehow suspended for reasons that initially seem to lie on the side of the woman rather than the man, who at this point appears the more eager of the two, having apparently made, as Robert Hampson calls it, "a declaration of his feelings for her."²⁶ The enigmatic aura enveloping the scene in Conrad's story seems to be even more impenetrable than in "The Killers," the namelessness of Conrad's characters, as opposed to Hemingway's, further contributing to the story's epistemological "fog."²⁷ Moreover, Conrad's minimalist style in this wartime story, shorn of descriptive adjectives and adverbs, or any kind of elaboration and rhetoric for that matter, unlike in most of his other texts, raises the question of "The Tale" having possibly set precedence for Hemingway's behaviouristic iceberg narrative method.

And, last but by no means the least, another American author, and a third Nobel Prize Winner, whose writing shows affinities with Conrad's story as discussed here, is Toni Morrison in her novel *Paradise* (1998), where, as in her other novels, she employs the technique of 'miscuing,' that is "disappointing the very expectations the narrative arouses,"²⁸ thus becoming an author-trickster, very much after the fashion

²⁵ Lothe, *Conrad's Narrative Method*, p. 75; also cf. fn 7.

²⁶ Robert Hampson in his *Conrad's Secrets* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 190). The critic suggests that what the man might be pleading about is "consummation of their relationship," which she might be feeling "conflicted about" for some reason, and cites convincing textual evidence to support this view.

²⁷ According to Jeremy Hawthorn's *Joseph Conrad: Narrative Technique and Ideological Commitment* (London: Edward Arnold, 1990), pp. 267-268. the ambiguity of Conrad's story is unprecedented even in Conrad writing (Erdinast-Vulcan, *The Strange Short Fiction*, pp. 173, fn. 23).

²⁸ Deborah E. McDowell, "'The Self and the Other': Reading Morrison's *Sula* and the Black Female Text," in *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, ed. Kellie Y. Kay (Boston, Mass.: G. K. Hall, 1988), p. 85.

of William Faulkner in his use of denegation,²⁹ of which he has heretofore been deemed a precursor, but which, in fact, comes from Conrad.

Morrison's denegative description of the co-called Convent in *Paradise*, which aligns with the witch-hunting mentality of the nine raiders that attack it, asserts the absence of the reasons for that raid through the presence of the potentially incriminating evidence against the all-female inhabitants of that haven from familial abuse. For, in place of the evidence of "revolting sex, deceit and the sly torture of children,"³⁰ and "some [...] cult" (11) or worship of "graven idols" (9), which they suspect to find on the basis of a "series of infant booties [...] ribboned to a cord hanging from a crib" and "a teething ring, cracked and stiff," dangling "among the tiny shoes" (7), all that the attackers come across in the Convent's kitchen are dirty utensils, "dusty mason jars" from "last year's canning" (5), stock simmering on the stove, chopped vegetables and "potatoes, peeled and whole" (5), all that indicative of the daily chores of the inmates having been interrupted by a gunshot. The infant accessories in fact belong to the Convent-born baby boy of Pallas, the white girl whom they shoot first, while the nearest they come to finding any incriminating evidence of "the revolting sex" are therapeutic templates on the floor, a poignant evidence of each inmate's emotional and/or physical hurt administered to them by a husband, lover, or partner.

Likewise in the scene of the commanding officer's confrontation with the Northman, the actual absence of the grounds for his suspicions against the neutrals—substantiated by the logbook of the Northman's ship, harmless cargo, fully credible accounts of his crew, and the opinions on board the commanding officer's ship—is denegatively asserted by the presence of the seemingly incriminating but thin evidence, whether in the form of the Northman's drinking habit, the unmarked and unaccounted for presence of his ship next to the commanding officer's albeit in the fog, "the atmosphere of gratuitous treachery" the latter "expected" to find on board the neutral, and the commanding officer's ego, perfectionism, and distrust, both in war and in love. Despite his second in command's protestations: "'You couldn't prove it, sir'" and "'From the report we've heard I am afraid you couldn't even make a case for reasonable suspicion, sir,'" the commanding officer remains adamant: "'I want to look into it myself';" "'I will go on board all the same'" (Conrad 71).

Just as one of Morrison's raiders is wondering: "Looking for what? More evidence? He isn't sure. Blood? A little toe, maybe, left in a white calfskin shoe?,"³¹ the commanding officer's "inward voice" prompts him: "Yet why was he lying with steam up in this fog—and then, hearing us come in, why didn't he give some sign of life? Why? Could it be anything else but a guilty conscience?" (Conrad 75). In both cases the 'righteous' proceed to administer self-made 'justice' to the alleged culprits without as much as a wink of an eye, and with equally murderous results and on equally groundless bases.

²⁹ For a thorough discussion of the issue, see my forthcoming book *Intertextualizing Collective American Memory: Southern, African American and Native American Fiction*.

³⁰ Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (New York: Vintage, 1999), p. 8.

³¹ Morrison, *Paradise*, p. 8.

A lot of more or less speculative conjectures, some rather condescendingly patriarchal, have been made about to the identity of the woman narratee of the commanding officer's 'tale' and the nature of the relationship that binds the couple together. For instance, in his already mentioned article on "The Tale," Cedric Watts construes the woman as someone else's wife taking a five-day leave from her 'marital' duties, which, as she says, she finds "horrible—sometimes"—however that might have been understood by the critic—to meet her lover, the commanding officer in question.³² While loosely following the speculations of the woman's five-day leave being from duties of marital nature Robert Hampson³³ quotes the opinion of Jeremy Hawthorn in his *Joseph Conrad: Narrative Technique and Ideological Commitment* stating that "it is never confirmed that the duties from which she has taken a five days' leave are her marital duties."³⁴ In his seminal study *Thorns and Arabesques: Contexts for Conrad's Fiction*, William Bonney sees the woman just as a "mistress," who "vanishes into an exclusively auditory dimension, becoming only 'the voice from the couch.'"³⁵ Refraining from any speculations as to the nature of the lovers' "duties" in her *The Strange Short Fiction of Joseph Conrad*, Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan focuses on the conflicting implications of the term, which she calls "obscure," depending on whose duties are at stake and seeing this as an expression of the general antagonism between the lovers.³⁶ In *Conrad's Narrative Method*, Jakob Lothe does not elaborate on the issue, restricting his speculations to what the text warrants, i.e., "some estrangement and resignation" between the lovers implied by the text and "the latent tension and instability of the relationship."³⁷

Notwithstanding the value of these speculations, the historical context in which the story was written and the war that features in it, call for an appropriately non-patriarchal and quite Hemingwayan,³⁸ or feminist, if you will, interpretation of the woman's "duties" from which she has taken a five-day leave and which she finds "horrible sometimes." As the personification, quoted before, of the commanding officer's ship likened to "a pretty woman who had suddenly put on a suit of sackcloth

³² Watts, "Killing 'the Newt,'" pp. 47, 70-73. Quite surprisingly, given the evidently deliberately structured enigma of "The Tale" regarding the relationship between the commanding officer and his lover, Cedric Watts develops it into an elaborate Gatsby-Daisy 'love story,' with its provenience before the war and the lover's insistence on the woman leaving her husband and marrying him instead. What I find striking is the certainty with which the critic speculates about the nature of the two lovers' relationship in "The Tale," without resorting to qualifiers of doubt or conjecture.

³³ Hampson, *Conrad's Secrets*, p. 190.

³⁴ Hawthorn, *Joseph Conrad*, p. 262. In this context Robert Hampson refers to Jane Anderson—who later appeared to be a German spy—stating that she "presumably also had certain 'duties' in relation to Northcliffe" (Hampson, *Conrad's Secrets*, p. 7; 274, fn. 55).

³⁵ Bonney, *Thorns and Arabesques*, p. 211.

³⁶ Erdinast-Vulcan, *The Strange Short Fiction*, pp. 172-173.

³⁷ Lothe, *Conrad's Narrative Method*, p. 75.

³⁸ Hemingway's war fiction features female protagonists in the capacity of nurses (e.g., Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms* and Brett Ashley in *The Sun Also Rises*).

and stuck revolvers in her belt” might suggest, the woman’s duties are more likely than not to be those of a wartime nurse, which would establish the two lovers and interlocutors as professionally compatible in the midst of their gender and emotional incompatibility, which might also explain the nature of ‘the tale’ that he chooses to tell her, in counting on the fact that she will ‘appreciate’ it in some way and understand his emotional trauma and moral dilemma.

The above interpretation may also explain the commanding officer’s words about her duty involving “[a]n infinity of absolution,” which might refer to the atrocities of war, and, come to think of it, his own role in it, which foreshadows the content of his ‘tale.’ He remarks that the reason why she describes her duty as “horrible—sometimes” is because she thinks “it’s narrow. But it isn’t. It contains infinities, and—and so” (61), as if hoping for her eventual forgiveness, perhaps, which, however, eventually, he turns his back on. The pause that the woman makes after stating the horrors of her duty at times may be caused by her feeling of shame that she allows herself to think that way about administering relief to her wounded patients, even when being at the end of her tether. The emotional incompatibility between the two lovers shows even here, in the commanding officer’s reaction to the woman’s words when, quite condescendingly, he interprets them as a sign of her admission of her alleged inferiority (“you think it’s narrow”) as a nurse and a woman in relation to her lover’s superior position and rank as a commander. When trying to convince her about the immense value of her job, he mentions “the infinities” that her duty “contains,” most probably meaning her sway over her patients’ lives and deaths, which may include the last confessions of the dying (“absolution”) and their confidences as well as the posthumous messages to their loved ones.

Although the woman asks for ‘a tale,’ and “not of this world” she refuses to be treated like a child when the man reacts “with a slightly mocking accent, as though he had been asked to give her the moon” and rather condescendingly explains to her: “But now, you see, the war is going on” when she remembers the tales he used to tell her before the war, which captured her attention. The authorial perception of her request as a legitimate caprice of “a loved woman” (60) sets in as a note of impatience in her voice, which resounds with a mixture of irony and scorn when he shows his surprise at her request and then patronizingly ignores her “duties” while mentioning his own in the context of a five-day leave they both took to be able to meet.

Although we know nothing about her, less even than about the man, their conversation reveals her assertiveness and expectations of equal treatment. In asking her lover to tell her ‘a tale,’ she may be implying that he feeds her lies, whatever they might be—whether about war or love, or both—in telling her those “simple and professional tales” he used to entertain her with before the war, which now seems to extend beyond the outside world and invade their private one as well. And that it does, can be heard in their conversation, which wavers between conflicting feelings: warmth, love, and devotion, on the one hand, and coldness, irony, doubt, sarcasm, and scepticism, on the other hand. Hence, paradoxically, her empathetic reaction to the truth he tells her at last—albeit under the guise of ‘a tale’ featuring him as the commanding officer—appears to have a healing effect on her, if not also on their re-

lationship. On the other hand, in telling her the truth about his failure of judgment, his suspiciousness, and dubious morality, the commanding officer may be seeking an "infinity of absolution" in both love and war.

To sum up, the enigma of the love scene opening "The Tale": "the deep, shadowy couch holding the shadowy suggestion of a reclining woman" (59), matches the epistemological fog of unknowing that underpins the commanding officer's lethal decision in his own 'tale,' the former foreshadowing the latter and both complementing each other's degrees of obscurity. In showing the collapse of communication between the two lovers, coupled with the commanding officer's inability to ever know the truth of the matter—"whether [he has] done stern retribution—or murder; whether [he has] added to the corpses that litter the bed of the unreadable sea the bodies of men completely innocent or basely guilty"—in "The Tale" Conrad dramatizes the basic precepts of modernist fiction, which will be developed more than a decade later by William Faulkner, the master of American modernism. By his deployment of denegation in the service of dramatizing epistemological haze and irrecoverableness of truth, Conrad appears to be a forerunner of William Faulkner's narrative method in his greatest fiction. What is more, technically, the concentric diageitic narrativity of Conrad's story likewise anticipates the multivocality of such Faulkner novels as *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*.

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