

OMINOUS CREATURES: FORESHADOWING AND INTERTEXTUALITY IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S SHORTER FICTION

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Abstract: In a number of short stories and novellas during one period of his writing Joseph Conrad specifically used apparently unrelated but dramatic animal imagery, detached from but foreshadowing the development of the subsequent events in each narrative. There may be a number of reasons for this type of foreshadowing and for its effect in his shorter fiction which are explored. Intertextuality has been noted between the stories of Joseph Conrad and H. G. Wells. Here additional examples are found between the works of these authors, men who were good friends but later had conflicting views about writing and life, and between their own and other authors' works.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, H. G. Wells, short stories

INTRODUCTION

Conrad has stated – in a letter to R. B. Cunninghame Graham in 1899 – that in his writing he didn't start with an “abstract notion” but “definite images.”¹ Wilfred Dowden regarded Conrad's primary aim to be, as stated in the “Suppressed Preface” to the American Edition of *The Nigger of the Narcissus*,² to make us hear, feel, and see.³ Ian Watts, while acknowledging the often quoted ‘make you see’ reminds us that, in the same preface, Conrad intended the “presented vision” should “awaken in the hearts... solidarity in mysterious origin, in toil, in joy, in hope, in uncertain fate.”⁴

¹ Cedric T. Watts, *Joseph Conrad's Letters to Cunninghame Graham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) (8th February 1899), p. 116.

² Wilfred S. Dowden, *Joseph Conrad: The Imaged Style* (Michigan: Vanderbilt University Press, 1970), p. 49.

³ Joseph Conrad *Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus*, repr. in *The Norton Critical Edition of The Secret Sharer and Other Stories*, ed. John G. Peters (London: Norton, 2015), pp. 139-142.

⁴ Ian Watt, *Essays on Conrad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 83.

Throughout the short stories and novellas Conrad used striking images to convey emotion, drama, peril and the reactions of his characters. Foreshadowing is a recognised device in modern writing; and Conrad certainly claimed he was a modern writer. Though he didn't "compare himself" with some great names of literature, he hoped "to find a place among them."⁵ From a reader's perspective such dramatic descriptions and foreshadowing capture both the attention and the imagination, making the work (to use a modern term) a "page turner." In most fiction foreshadowing relates to the action: there are clues laid before the reader which relate to the outcome of the story, even if the story is left without a definite conclusion. In the cases here chosen from Conrad's shorter fiction the foreshadowing descriptions do not apparently relate directly to the characters or action though they are nevertheless signposting the coming revelations. A number of stories from Conrad's productive middle period are characterised by a sometimes eccentric variety of "expressions of semblance and resemblance,"⁶ where ominous animal imagery is used. After 1910 (and his treatment for a physical and emotional breakdown) his use of adjectives seemed to reduce,⁷ as did the element of fear in his work.⁸

Animal imagery in the novels of Joseph Conrad has been broadly explored at the 2017 Conference of the Modern Language Association (MLA), in a session sponsored by the Joseph Conrad Association of America;⁹ and a full version of this has been published (with Ellen Harrington) in *The Conradian* recently.¹⁰ There are many animal allusions in *Heart of Darkness*,¹¹ and Wilfred Dowden has drawn attention to the large number of bird images employed in the description of Donkin in *The Nigger of the Narcissus*: a "snipe," "a screechin poll-parrot," that his big ears stood out "resembling the thin wings of a bat," shoulders like the broken wings of a bird hunched as to resemble "a sick vulture" waiting for Wait's death.¹² These frequently unsettling animal allusions are part of a means of conveying personality and motivation of characters in a type of sketch or shorthand,¹³ as Ted Hughes has powerfully demonstrated with his Crow image which imparted a sense of disquiet into his poetry.¹⁴ The animal allusions I will consider here seem initially both detached

⁵ Joseph Conrad to William Blackwood 31 May 1902, in *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 2, eds. Frederick Robert Karl and Laurence Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 415-418.

⁶ Michael A. Lucas, *Aspects of Conrad's Literary Language. Conrad: Eastern and Western Perspectives*, vol. 9 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 98.

⁷ Lucas, *Aspects of Conrad's Literary Language*, p. 116.

⁸ Paul Kirschner, *Conrad: The Psychologist as Artist* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1968), p. 20.

⁹ Joseph Conrad Society of America/Modern Language Association of America. Presiding: Andrew Ferguson, Univ. of Virginia. *Conference: Conrad's Animals*, 7 January 2017.

¹⁰ Ellen Burton Harrison and John G. Peters, "Conrad, Lombroso, and Animals," *The Conradian* 44, no. 2 (Autumn 2019), pp. 10-36.

¹¹ Miriam B. Mandel, "Significant Patterns of Color and Animal Imagery in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness,'" *Neophilologus* 73, no. 2 (1989), pp. 311-315.

¹² Dowden, *Joseph Conrad*, pp. 52-53.

¹³ Harrison and Peters, "Conrad, Lombroso, and Animals," p. 35.

¹⁴ Ted Hughes, *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970).

from the plot line and descriptively unrelated to the characters; though they generate a mood which prefigures events in the evolving story. I have chosen to explore the short stories and novellas because (apart from *Heart of Darkness*) these have had less attention in this respect than the novels, and because each ominous creature (whether in the flesh or by allusion) can reasonably be related to the ensuing story. There may be a number of ways that they can be interpreted, or how the power of the image might be working. I will consider each story in order of composition rather than publication, and then move to the discussion and conclusion. The use of these images to foreshadow or prefigure subsequent unrelated events form a very clear example of “delayed decoding” (first used in the context of Conrad by Ian Watt in a 1972 lecture, “Pink Toads and Yellow Curs: An Impressionistic Device in ‘Lord Jim’”);¹⁵ and their greater significance than simple description can be overlooked on a first reading.

THE NIGGER OF THE NARCISSUS (1897)

The story of the *Narcissus* subtitled *A Tale of the Sea* (published in the United States as *Children of the Sea*) tells the uncomfortable story of the black seaman called Wait who spends much of a voyage not working but ill. Though the illness is doubted we are made to “wait” through some events and dangers including a becalming until he dies, and there is a fair wind again. The ominous animal very near to the beginning of the story is the first description of the ship’s cat given during the preparation for the voyage on deck: “Opposite to (Singleton), and on a level with his face, the ship’s cat sat on the barrel of the windlass in the pose of a crouching chimera, blinking its green eyes at his old friend.¹⁶ “The Chimera, in contrast to a benign tomcat, is a “fire-breathing female creature, part lion, part snake, part goat,”¹⁷ the wrong gender and the wrong animal or animals. Conrad is introducing an early concern in the narrative and using this animal image as a device. The cat avoids minor injury when a rope is thrown towards it by young Charley, just as Wait avoids injury from the biscuit thrown at him and the captain is narrowly missed by a belaying pin, both thrown by Donkin. Both Wait and the cat are handled by the crew, one during and the other after the storm. Wait has to be rescued by several crew members from below deck; and the cat after emerging unperturbed to an ovation from the crew is passed from hand to hand.

The fortunes of the cat seem to reflect the fortunes of Wait. The cat is described as knowing more about on-board disputes than at least one of the sailors but remains apparently oblivious to the general bickering of the crew, as does Wait, and is described as “purring on the windlass” just before Wait’s first cough which ominously foreshadows his death. However the cat is not present at the end of the story or de-

¹⁵ Owen Knowles and Gene M. Moore, *Oxford Readers Companion to Conrad* (Chatham: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 102.

¹⁶ Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (London: Heinmann, 1898), p. 7.

¹⁷ Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, in *The Norton Critical Edition The Secret Sharer*, p. 146.

scribed in the disembarkation of the crew, almost as if he had disappeared at sea with Wait. We know otherwise of course: as an agile survivor he is probably with Singleton, but this is not stated. Wait and the cat are both black, and the “Chimera” may refer to the three-fold superstition about black cats: good luck, bad luck or premonition of death. Conrad has made a point here: a person is not to be judged by first appearances; and the nature of both the cat and Wait turn out to be positive despite the prejudices of some of the crew.

YOUTH (1898)

When all seemed calm after a storm young Marlow (the autobiographical Conrad) noticed that ““on a fine moonlit night all the rats left the ship.”¹⁸ The rats had stayed on board during the storm, during which the ship had almost foundered had transferred in droves to an unlikely ““rotten hulk”” alongside. Marlow derided the rats and the well-founded belief which concerns them leaving a sinking ship. He had earlier found the steward in the storm “clinging to his berth, stupidly, like a mule” rather than going below to safety, just as the deckhouse was being destroyed about them. The steward appeared mentally disturbed and “jabbering cheerfully to himself.” Eventually there was no time and he was manhandled away and unceremoniously thrown down the companionway.¹⁹ Richard Ambrosini regards the young sailor’s experiences as a necessary contrast to the reflection, experience and detachment of an aging but seasoned sailor.²⁰

After some weeks (Marlow describes this period as an ““interminable procession of days””) the ship catches fire. The rats had left the ship at the first opportunity after the storm of course, but by isolating this in time from both the storm and the fire Conrad effectively portrays them as precognisant of the fire to come. The ““intelligence”” of the rats (though they have been described by Marlow as stupid) is contrasted with the foolish madness of the supposedly responsible steward; though they both have, in contrast to Marlow and the other crew, effectively left the captain and ship to its fate. Marlow has learnt about his duties on board in a dramatic and repeatedly perilous way. Dowden sees the strength of *Youth* in the contrasting images of light and dark, but also in the humour (and irony) of first having to pump water out of a sinking ship but then having to pump it back in again to douse the fire.²¹

¹⁸ Joseph Conrad, *Youth and Two Other Stories* (London: Blackwood, 1903), p. 18.

¹⁹ Conrad, *Youth and Two Other Stories*, p. 15.

²⁰ Richard Ambrosini, *Conrad's Fiction as Critical Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 82.

²¹ Dowden, *Joseph Conrad*, pp. 85-86.

HEART OF DARKNESS (1899)

If the tale of the *Narcissus* is an uncomfortable read, *Heart of Darkness* is doubly so. The pitch of tension is carefully and increasingly orchestrated by the experiences of Marlow and the colourful descriptions given by informants. After a difficult passage he finally reached the first company station and was greeted by dereliction. Wilfred Dowden writes that throughout this there are contrasts of light and dark to invoke horror.²² The first intimation was noted by Marlow almost as soon as he landed:

I came upon a boiler wallowing in the grass, then found a path leading up the hill. It turned aside for the boulders, and also for an undersized railway-truck lying there on its back with its wheels in the air. One was off. The thing looked as dead as a carcass of some animal.²³

A dawning premonition was experienced shortly afterwards: “For a moment I stood appalled, as though by a warning.” The carcass is foreshadowing dramatically the corruption, death and decay that Marlow will find as he journeys on towards Kurtz’s camp. There are further animal references in *Heart of Darkness*. Before the end of chapter one there is even a reference to prehistoric creatures splashing and snorting in the distance “as though an ichthyosaurus had been taking a bath of glitter in the great river.” While journeying on up the Congo in the second and final chapter, one of the crew is killed by a spear and Marlow eventually decides to push the body overboard. The pilgrims and the manager disapprove and “chatter like magpies,” adding a superstitious tone and fuelling further the overbearing premonition of worse to come. Marlow’s later conversation with a manager includes an unexpected reference to a marauding hippopotamus that no-one can shoot, comparing it to the apparent invincibility of Kurtz. During the same conversation Marlow has been leaning on the side of the boat, beached like “the carcass of some big river animal.”

Ambrosini directs attention to the contrast between the visual experience of the first part of the story and the verbal and cognitive experience as Marlow gets nearer to Kurtz.²⁴ I see the “carcass” of the upturned railway-truck and later animal references employed by Conrad warning that the reader will be drawn deeper and deeper, losing the comfort of all familiar landmarks and contexts, until all that is left will be the nightmare that is Kurtz himself. Joanna Skolik notes that fidelity is a common theme in *Youth* and *Heart of Darkness*, and that Conrad believed the stories belonged together with *The End of the Tether* in the collected work. Marlow had been faithful to Kurtz who himself proves faithless.²⁵

The way in which Conrad develops a theme by introducing and then reinforcing a notion has been termed ‘Thematic Precipitation’ by Cedric Watts, who highlights in

²² Dowden, *Joseph Conrad*, p. 74.

²³ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, in *Youth and Two Other Stories*, p. 72.

²⁴ Ambrosini, *Conrad’s Fiction as Critical Discourse*, p. 88.

²⁵ Joanna Skolik, *The Idea of Fidelity in Conrad’s Works* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2009), pp. 37-58.

Heart of Darkness the treatment of the sunset, the ivory and Kurtz himself.²⁶ The thematic precipitation in the repeated and threatening animal references building on the initial ominous ‘carcass’ of the upturned railway-truck is a similar developing theme.

AMY FOSTER (1901)

In this tale of the failure of kindness and fidelity, which was not published for another two years, Amy Foster befriends and marries a shipwrecked “poor emigrant from Central Europe” despite some hostility to him in the village in particular from Mr Smith, the head of the household into which she has been taken in service. The account of Amy Foster and Yanko is heavily autobiographical and the multiple references to English heritage to the love of Amy are seen as Conrad’s way of expressing his transition to England and to the modern novel.²⁷ There are early references to multiple animals in the story. Her compassion had only failed previously to them on one occasion. Dr Kennedy tells the story to the narrator who has recently returned to the village:

She was devoted to Mrs. Smith, to Mr Smith, to their dogs, cats, canaries; and as to Mrs. Smith’s grey parrot, its peculiarities exercised upon her a positive fascination. Nevertheless when that outlandish bird, attacked by the cat, shrieked for help in human accents, she ran out into the yard stopping her ears, and did not prevent the crime... her short-sighted eyes would swim with pity for a poor mouse in a trap, and she had been seen once by some boys on her knees in the wet grass helping a toad in difficulties.²⁸

The fate of the parrot is not stated, though the “crime” makes one assume the worst. Amy loved all creatures, even the apparently degenerate²⁹ Yanko, who was likened to a “wild animal” or a “wild creature under the ne” or a “bird caught in a snare.” The “human accents” of the parrot contrast with the inability of Yanko to communicate in his illness. Wild animals often die when rescued from the wild, even with the greatest care. Likewise Yanko, whose poor speech fails to convey his need for water, causes Amy (in the belief that he will not hand back their child) to desert him. This seems to be prefigured by her one other omission of tenderness in care for the parrot. At the end of the novel the narrator considers Yanko and Amy’s young fatherless son and, looking out to sea, pessimistically reflects on the father who had been “cast out mysteriously ... to perish in the supreme disaster of loneliness and despair.”

²⁶ Cedric T. Watts, “Thematic Precipitation in Joseph Conrad’s Works,” *The Conradian* 45, no. 2 (Autumn 2020), pp. 65-70.

²⁷ Robert Wilson, *Conrad’s Mythology* (New York: Whitston, 1987), pp. 107-109.

²⁸ Joseph Conrad, *Amy Foster*, in *Typhoon and Other Stories* (London: Heinmann, 1903), pp. 119-120.

²⁹ Harrison and Peters, “Conrad, Lombroso, and Animals,” pp. 23-24.

THE END OF THE TETHER (1902)

The *Fair Maid* was not Captain Whalley's first ship, but eventually he sells her (his only remaining asset following the collapse of a bank) to provide for his daughter; and he agrees to become Master of the *Sofala*. About half-way through the story, there is an attempt to dissuade him from taking a voyage because the owner Massey is known to be a rogue. Whalley meets Van Wyk at his verandah before setting out. Van Wyk's terrier barks "violently" then "unceasingly" and only stops when Van Wyk flicks his handkerchief at it.³⁰ The flick of a white handkerchief may here signify a surrender or a cease-fire. Before this there are several mentions of a "dog": dog-watch, sea-dog, a dog's life, the ex-governor's three dogs, and that Sterne (a crew-member) resented being "addressed as though he were a dog." The word "whine" appears six times, mostly applied to the case of Massey who is said to have a "dogmatic reproachful whine." Immediately before the critical conversation on the verandah, Van Wyk had confronted Whalley and members of his crew on board with similar concerns. While Whalley had sat at the head of the saloon table calmly smoothing his beard, Van Wyk had been 'growling between his teeth' at the foot. The crescendo of dogs and dog's noises suggests a deliberate intention. We move from a whine to growling then barking, at first violently and then unceasingly. None of these relate practically to the fate of the *Sofala*, but when its problems begin they begin rapidly and decisively. I believe that the barking of the terrier, the ominous creature in this case, is a foreshadowing event in the story, powered by an idea that animals can foresee problems, mainly discerned in retrospect of course but sometimes at the time.

Why had Conrad chosen a barking dog as the ominous creature for this story? It could have been an event that stuck in his mind, or it may have come from his own reading. There are repeated references to dogs, their sounds, and their inferior place in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. In a letter to Edward Garnett Conrad commends the 1901 translation made by Garnett's wife Constance, which he read as he composed *The End of the Tether*.³¹ The earlier Nathan Haskell Dole translation published by Walter Scott in Britain³² edited out a number of references to dogs in hunting scenes and one in the section just before her demise, which are present in both the Garnett and American Dole editions. *The End of the Tether* and *Anna Karenina* both seem to use thematic precipitation in their dog references. The elaboration of this particular motif could also be related to Conrad's nautical training. One dog reference that he might have included is the Dog Star, Sirius, in Canis Major, an intensely bright star rising in the night sky after sunset. The Dog Star is always preceded in this apparent and inevitable motion across the night sky into darkness by Procyon, the Little or Lesser Dog Star (less bright but still distinctive), in Canis Minor; and Van Wyk's terrier is indeed a little but lively dog. Procyon deterministically heralds Sirius, just as

³⁰ Joseph Conrad, *End of the Tether*, in *Youth and Other Stories*, p. 314.

³¹ Joseph Conrad to Edward Garnett (10 June 1902), in *The Collected Letters*, vol. 2, pp. 424-425.

³² Lev N. Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* (London: Walter Scott, 1887).

the little dog marks Whalley's fateful voyage into the night of his death. Conrad mentioned stars several times in this story: for instance that Serang's father once believed that "in the arrangement of the stars may be read the last word of human destiny."³³ Whalley has admitted (undismayed) his increasing blindness to Van Wyk, saying that "it is as if the light were ebbing out of the world ... the stars going out one by one"³⁴ with few left to see.

In the dog references (dog-watch, dog's life, being treated like a dog, etc.) the overwhelming sense is of the dog in the inferior position. Van Wyk is placed at the foot of the ship saloon table growling, with Whalley calmly at the head. But the foreshadowing device that Conrad is using reverses the sense of this. It is the growling Van Wyk and his barking terrier who are right, and Whalley who is tragically wrong. From the moment that Whalley defied Van Wyk, and the dog barked, Conrad set all the pieces in place. The process is reminiscent of Peter's denial and the cock crowing three times in the story of Christ's death. The name of the *Sofala* is a reorganisation of three of the middle syllables of the vocal rising scale (Fa, So, La,) which reinforces the crescendo of this inevitable tragedy.

Ambrosini reminds us of the concept of fidelity in Conrad's fiction and in the Preface to *A Personal Record*.³⁵ He comments on Conrad's statement of the importance of maintaining an attitude of 'resignation open-eyed, conscious and informed by love' and an acceptance of paradox in human life.³⁶ Conrad had written to Cunninghame Graham in 1898:

Egoism is good, and altruism is good, and fidelity to nature would be best of all ... if we could only get rid of consciousness. What makes mankind tragic is not that they are victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it. To be part of the animal kingdom under the conditions of this earth is very well – but as soon as you know of your slavery the pain, the anger, the strife – the tragedy begins. We can't return to nature, since we can't change our place in it. Our refuge is in stupidity, in drunke(n)ness of all kinds, in lies, in beliefs, in murder, thieving, reforming – in negation, in contempt – each man according to the promptings of his particular devil.³⁷

While an animal is less conscious of its fate by this definition, there is no doubt of a "good" dog's fidelity to its master or mistress. Whalley, in the face of common sense, remained faithful to his calling as a seaman and to his impoverished daughter. *The End of the Tether* is named of course to refer to Whalley being offered the end of the rope to save himself as the boat sinks but choosing to sink to his death (with his pocket weighed down with the very iron used fraudulently to misdirect the compass) at his mental "End of the Tether." He realised as master of the *Sofala* that he has to drown with the iron in his pocket; and that this will prevent the suffering of going blind, the risk of being held responsible for fraud, and losing all the money he kept by for his daughter.

³³ Conrad, *End of the Tether*, p. 253.

³⁴ Conrad, *End of the Tether*, p. 337.

³⁵ Joseph Conrad, *Preface to A Personal Record* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1912).

³⁶ Ambrosini, *Conrad's Fiction as Critical Discourse*, pp. 43-49.

³⁷ Watts, *Joseph Conrad's Letters* (31 January 1898), pp. 70-71.

TYPHOON (1903)

Typhoon tells the story of McWhirr, the determined and foolhardy captain of the steamer *Nan-Shan*, facing the storm surge of a typhoon which resolves to a retrospective narrative on a “bright sunshiny day” on land. The ominous animal in this case is a White Elephant on a red field of the old Siam (Thiamese) Flag. There is a lively exchange between Captain McWhirr and Jukes concerning the raising of the flag in a transfer to Siamese registration. Jukes calls it a “ridiculous Noah’s Ark Elephant,” but McWhirr cannot see any objection and just asks him to make sure the flag is flown the correct way up. Jukes is very sceptical of the flag perhaps because “white elephant,” in common usage by the end of the 19th century and possibly originating in a Saimese context, implies a valueless gift that may require cost in maintenance. In modern parlance we also talk about “the elephant in the room.” That phrase may have originated from the very short fable: *The Inquisitive Man* of 1814 by Ivan Krylov, well known in Russia as a fabulist and dramatist, in which a visitor to a museum notices everything in minute detail apart from the elephant in the room.³⁸ Jukes’ resigning words are an admission that the inverted elephant would be a “dam” distressful sight.³⁹ Flying a signal flag upside down is acknowledged as a rapid (or covert) way of indicating that there is distress on board and that help is required. It is said, possibly apocryphally, that the national flag was changed to white and red horizontal stripes with no central motif so that it could not be flown incorrectly, after a national flood disaster left the King’s flag hanging upside down, which would have happened some 14 years after the publication of *Typhoon*.

The crew are concerned about the heavy weather, but it takes commotion in the cabin culminating in his sea-boots sliding past on the couch for McWhirr finally to put them on, respond to the crew’s concerns and come on deck. Ambrosini draws attention to the literal and inadequate nature of McWhirr’s seamanship: an inability to interpret signs warning of something he cannot yet see. He prefers at all times to be in visual contact with the world, hence better suited to the land than the changeable sea.⁴⁰ The abstract elephant in this story has power because McWhirr will not acknowledge any of Jukes’ objections to the symbolism of the flag, just as he will later fail to notice the oncoming weather and passengers’ distress until these almost overwhelm the ship. After a great struggle the passengers with their possessions are thrown back into the bunker, and Jukes thereby ironically regains some confidence in himself and the reckless captain’s advice to keep a “cool head.”⁴¹

This is the only ominous creature in this review in flat symbolic form, possibly reflecting the literal and “two-dimensional” nature of McWhirr’s world. Another example from Conrad’s short fiction could be “The Three Crows” – the Public House

³⁸ Joseph Conrad, *The Brute*, in *A Set of Six* (London: Methuen, 1908), p. 113.

³⁹ Conrad, *Typhoon*, p. 12.

⁴⁰ Ambrosini, *Conrad’s Fiction as Critical Discourse*, pp. 199-200.

⁴¹ Hillel M. Daleski, *Joseph Conrad: The Way of Dispossession* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), pp. 111-112.

mentioned both at the beginning and end of *The Brute*⁴² – which may be the ominous reference in the tale, prefiguring the refusal to change the name of the ship from *The Apse Family*, despite it repeatedly bringing bad luck. Crows have superstitious associations.

There is both symbolism and humour in this prolonged argument over the Siamese flag. Ian Watt derives good evidence from Conrad's 1919 "Author's Note" to *Typhoon*, and a letter to J.B. Pinker,⁴³ that he intended the "stormpiece" tale to have both a symbolic and humorous impact on the reader. The repeated references to the flag can be seen as foreshadowing in a thematic way the dual nature of the storm, within and without, and underlining the difference between McWhirr and Jukes.⁴⁴

THE SECRET SHARER (1909)

Throughout *The Secret Sharer* (published 3 years after composition in 1912) there is an overbearing sense of risk of failure and death. It is perhaps the most enigmatic of Conrad's stories: we are never sure that Leggatt, the runaway and stowaway shielded and fed by the captain secretly in his cabin, is real, perhaps even to the last page. The persisting uncertainty and the young captain's lack of experience may to be autobiographical. Bock and others have deduced that Conrad was writing about a psychological issue: that there was a splitting and uncertainty of self as well as anxiety about his responsibilities,⁴⁵ or even uncertainty about sexuality.⁴⁶ Daleski notes the clear dilemma between his personal compassion to help Leggatt and his duty to surrender him. Such is the reality of responsibility, and indeed truth. Jessie Conrad once reproached her husband for never having told her the story before it was published, and he "laughingly assured (her) that so much of the actual story was pure fiction" and no more.⁴⁷ However he is known to have been unusually pleased with the story in his correspondence with Edward Garnett, remarking that in comparison to *Freya of the Seven Isles* there were "No damned tricks with girls there. Eh? Every word fits and there's not a single uncertain note."⁴⁸

The strikingly ominous creature in *The Secret Sharer* is a scorpion that falls into a black ink-pot and dies soon in the story. It is the chief mate, not the narrator, who

⁴² Ivan A. Krylov, *The Inquisitive Man*, in William Ralston Shedden Ralston, *Krilof and his Fables*, 3rd ed. (London: Straham, 1871), p. 44.

⁴³ Joseph Conrad to J.B. Pinker (October or November 1900), in *The Collected Letters*, vol. 2, p. 304.

⁴⁴ Watt, *Essays on Conrad*, pp. 105-108.

⁴⁵ Martin Bock, *Joseph Conrad and Psychological Medicine* (Lubbock: Texas Tech. University Press, 2002), pp. 155-157.

⁴⁶ Andrew Roberts, *Conrad and Masculinity* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 9, 135.

⁴⁷ Jessie Conrad, *Joseph Conrad as I Knew Him* (London: Heineman, 1926), p. 140.

⁴⁸ Joseph Conrad to Edward Garnett (5 November 1912), in *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 5, eds. Frederick Robert Karl and Laurence Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 127-128.

finds the scorpion; and as he likes to consider everything deeply and take account of it he is deeply puzzled how the scorpion could have come aboard or drowned itself in an ink-pot. The event is dramatic and unexplained, and apparently unrelated to the narrative that develops. Leggatt has escaped from the *Sephora* after killing a man; and he appears, “a headless corpse” described as “ghastly, silvery, fish-like” and “mute as a fish,” to the captain who helps him aboard unseen the same evening.⁴⁹ The background that Conrad used for this story was the murder on the *Cutty Sark* of another crew-member by ship’s mate Smith in 1880. Though the murderer was confined to quarters by Captain Wallace, he was subsequently allowed to escape and Wallace himself later stepped over the side of the ship presumably to his death in shark-infested waters rather than face the consequences.⁵⁰

There are comparisons to be made in *The Secret Sharer* between the drowning scorpion and either the murdered man or water-borne murderer. In addition, Leggatt twice explains he is a parson’s son: that perhaps more has been expected of him and that he has failed. The black ink in the well both prefigures the “black face” of the suffocated and murdered man and the stain against the character of a previously respected Leggatt; though Conrad might also be “drowning” something from his past with ink as he writes. The scorpion has inexplicably appeared at sea just as Leggatt has done, and perhaps hidden in the inkwell as Leggatt has hidden in the captain’s cabin. To resolve the captain’s dilemma he directs the ship close to the shore, and Leggatt is allowed secretly to “Leg it” into the water to leave just as he had first arrived. Dowden points out that Conrad’s description of the ship as the “bark of the dead” floating under Koh-ring at the “very gate of Erebus” (crossing the Styx in death) refers to the death of the captain’s fear; he can now banish his sense of failure and continue his journey⁵¹ towards greater confidence, psychological integration and maturity.

The captain’s floppy hat, which had been lent to Leggatt to hide beneath, is glimpsed floating in the water and guides the captain to safety. Sailors are superstitious about hats in the water because they can be ominous of a drowning. In the floating hat we have eventually but only instantaneously the evidence that Leggatt has both lived and may have died (but nevertheless free), and that by this the captain is freed. Mysteriously Conrad undermines again this small certainty of the reality of Leggatt with the statement that the secret sharer, “as though he were my second self” was simultaneously taking his punishment and becoming a free man. The relation of the ominous scorpion drowning in ink to the freed/drowning Leggatt and freed captain suggests a rite of passage, possibly for both of them, which has a character and function similar to redemption through baptism.

⁴⁹ Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Sharer in Twixt Land and Sea* (London: Dent, 1912), pp. 108-109.

⁵⁰ C. A. Sankey, *Ordeal of the Cutty Sark*, repr. in *The Norton Critical Edition The Secret Sharer*, pp. 421-431.

⁵¹ Dowden, *Joseph Conrad*, pp. 143-144.

DISCUSSION

While there are a number of later stories by Conrad that use animal images or comparisons to set a tone of tension in the story they do not amount to ominous creatures in the same way as in the works discussed here. The clerk in *A Smile of Fortune* has a “dental, shark-like smile.”⁵² Heemskirk in *Freya of the Seven Isles* looked “like an unhappy black-beetle.”⁵³ Willie Dunster in *The Planter of Malata* is compared to a ‘trained dog or child phenomenon’ and a “gigantic, repulsive, and sentimental bat.”⁵⁴ The Chief Steward in *The Shadow-line* smells of ‘decaying zoological specimens,’ with the behaviour of an “absurd hunted animal” and in the same story Mr Burns, the acting Captain with strange and unearthly rambling speech, trips over on deck and is likened to a dog or sheep or bear.⁵⁵ Clearly Conrad was distinctly struck by animals, and often by a desire to create effects in narrative through striking animal comparisons.

His skill is shown in the choice of animal allusions which will mean to his reader what he intends them to mean, and achieve the effect he means them to achieve. Occasionally a character comparison, for instance the “gigantic, repulsive, and sentimental bat” in *The Planter of Malata*, is less obvious or accessible to the 21st century reader. Adding the word “old” before “bat” makes it work better, implying an unpleasant elderly woman who might also be dithery or irritating, but Conrad may have deliberately omitted “old” to protect the more simple animal reference.

H. G. Wells is known to have used themes from other authors and had access to Conrad’s writing.⁵⁶ Linda Dryden has shown how he used many themes from Conrad’s works. His short story *The Empire of the Ants* (1905) has themes that seem to have been derived from *Heart of Darkness*,⁵⁷ and in this there is also an ominous waking by the “hum of a mosquito.”⁵⁸ Additionally *The Valley of Spiders* (1903) uses an ominous fleeing of a yellow wild dog⁵⁹ to warn of the coming plague. One image of railway-building desolation that Wells seems to have used for *The War of the Worlds* is derived from Chapter six of Dickens’ *Dombey and Son*:

⁵² Joseph Conrad, *A Smile of Fortune*, in *Twixt Land and Sea*, p. 15.

⁵³ Joseph Conrad, *Freya of the Seven Isles*, in *Twixt Land and Sea*, p. 193.

⁵⁴ Joseph Conrad, *The Planter of Malata*, in *Within the Tides* (London: Dent, 1915), p. 43.

⁵⁵ Joseph Conrad, *The Shadow-line* (London: Dent, 1917), p. 43.

⁵⁶ Adam Roberts, *H. G. Wells A Literary Life* (Cham: Springer/Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 84-90.

⁵⁷ Linda Dryden, *Joseph Conrad and H.G. Wells: The Fin-de-Siecle Literary Scene* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 89-93.

⁵⁸ H. G. Wells, *The Empire of the Ants*, in *Complete Short Story Omnibus* (London: Gollancz, 2011), p. 641.

⁵⁹ H. G. Wells, *The Valley of Spiders*, in *Complete Short Story Omnibus*, p. 481.

A chaos of carts, overthrown and jumbled together ... Everywhere were bridges that led nowhere; thoroughfares that were wholly impassable ... carcasses of ragged tenements ... piles of scaffolding... giant forms of cranes, and tripods straddling above nothing.⁶⁰

While desolation is a common theme in literature of this type the mention of “carts,” “carcasses” of buildings, and ‘tripods,’ which gives the account its threatening edge, suggests influence. In H.G. Wells’ *The First Men in the Moon*, the narrator wakes after the crash landing on the Moon to the sense of “thin feelers” at his face and ears but this is Cavor waking him⁶¹ and is unrelated to, but perhaps warning the reader of, a similar encounter with the Selenites later. Wells and Conrad differed in their approaches to writing. Wells wrote with a “conventional, uninterrupted forward narrative impetus”⁶² and the images he used were matter of fact, whereas Conrad was keen to explore deeper the appearance or significance of an image. A good example of this is the discussion they had about a boat seen on the water.⁶³

The ominous creatures in Conrad are signposting that *here* something is about to happen or that an irreversible die is about to be cast. Such effects can be based on metaphor and the writing can also be said to be impressionistic. Conrad intends the reader to “see” and “hear” and achieves this effect; and the device is most effective if the reader absorbs the effect without reflection or analysis. In this sense the device can be seen as psychological (whether the power is consciously recognised or subliminal), dramatic or even cinematic in its effect.

Undoubtedly there is a dependence upon superstitious or supernatural belief. Conrad was ambivalent about conventional religious belief and seems to have rejected the supernatural and superstitious. In his author’s note to *The Shadow-line* for instance he states that he had not intended to “touch on the supernatural” and that if he had it would have “failed deplorably”;⁶⁴ and yet he often used such images to great effect. Sailors are well known to be superstitious about behaviour at sea. They are also well tuned to the signs of nature; and variance from the norm excites concern and action. Captain McWhirr in *Typhoon* is characterised as incapable of noticing or acting on any small sign or premonition and yet he overcomes great difficulty. He is the antithesis to the normal wise sailor, and this is intended as Conrad’s joke. So although he claims not to believe in, or want to promote belief in, superstition or the supernatural Conrad does rely on innate sensibilities of that kind in the reader, and knowledge of maritime ways, to convey his intention. Many Conrad stories have been dramatised for stage and film, and the cinematic technique of foreshadowing through related or unrelated images to create tension, drama or shock has been a long-stand-

⁶⁰ Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, Biographical Edition, vol. 10 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1903), pp. 51-52.

⁶¹ H. G. Wells, *The First Men in the Moon*, in *H. G. Wells, Four Collected SF Stories* (London: Sirius, 2020), p. 397.

⁶² Dryden, *Joseph Conrad and H.G. Wells*, pp. 127-128.

⁶³ H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, p. 531 and discussion, cited in Roberts, *H. G. Wells A Literary Life*, pp. 189-190.

⁶⁴ Joseph Conrad, *Author’s Note to The Shadow-line*, 2nd ed., in *The Norton Critical Edition of The Secret Sharer*, p. 43.

ing characteristic of “film noir” and horror genre productions in particular, mostly after Conrad’s periods of writing. The detached ominous creature in these stories seems to be an individual and characteristic aspect of much of his short fiction in this period which may have directly or indirectly contributed to this trend.

CONCLUSION

This paper was intended to explore the animal references in Conrad’s shorter fiction and to show how, in the shorter works written in a very productive period of his writing from 1897 up to and including his physical and emotional breakdown in 1910, Conrad often employs an ominous animal which bears a symbolic relationship to the later narrative in a form of delayed decoding. The tone of these works is generally pessimistic and deterministic; though in some he attempted to impart humour, and was keen in others to demonstrate honour. Two of the stories provide further examples of thematic precipitation.

Influences may have come from other authors; and his works also seem to influence others. In particular his mutual admiration at the time of H. G. Wells produced some clear intertextuality and additional examples are explored here. Techniques of foreshadowing in Conrad demonstrate a keen eye for detail in the development of suspense, irony and unfolding tragedy in his short fiction during this period.

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