

## ‘OH, I HOPE HE WON’T TALK!’ – CONFRONTING THE OTHER IN “AMY FOSTER”

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to provide an analysis of the theme of confronting the Other in Conrad’s story “Amy Foster”. In an indifferent and at times even hostile or malevolent universe, Yanko Goorall’s fate seems to exemplify Man’s ultimate loneliness and the impossibility of reaching a full understanding of other people, as there is always an unbridgeable rift between individuals, of which linguistic and cultural barriers are but a small fraction. Limited by their narrow-mindedness or parochialism and overburdened by the bleak reality of everyday toil, Amy and the other villagers of Colebrook lack the capacity and sensibility that is needed to show understanding. They also lack the imagination to perceive Yanko’s basic needs and to acknowledge his longing for communication and natural human contact. However, the overall atmosphere of inhumanity and the general sense of estrangement appear to be slightly alleviated by – though not entirely compensated for – the empathy and yearning to find “a particle of a general truth in every mystery” exhibited in Doctor Kennedy’s account – which, characteristically, is framed by the primary narrator’s sincere interest in Yanko’s tragedy.

**Keywords:** The Other, alienation, understanding, sympathy, communication, Levinas, loneliness, alterity

Written in 1901, “Amy Foster” appears to display an array of typically Conradian themes of misunderstanding between people, the struggle between contradictory claims of human impulses (Graver 1969, 106) as well as man’s hopeless loneliness. A frame narrative enclosing Doctor Kennedy’s yarn about Yanko Goorall – a shipwrecked migrant from the Carpathian mountains who comes to a miserable end in an English village – the novella surely reflects some of what must have been Conrad’s own erstwhile fears, anxieties and sense of personal estrangement as a Polish exile in an adopted country, as has been argued by numerous critics.<sup>1</sup> In broader terms, the novella has often been interpreted as a parable about the human capacity for being

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<sup>1</sup> See: A.J. Guerard. *Conrad the Novelist*. New York: Atheneum, 1970, pp. 49-51. Print., L. Graver. *Conrad’s Short Fiction*. Berkeley–Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969, pp. 104-108. Print. and R. Herndon. “The Genesis of Conrad’s ‘Amy Foster’”. *Studies in Philology* 1960, Vol. 57, № 3, pp. 549-566. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4173319>, accessed: 22/09/2014.

bestly to others.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, in Yanko many have seen an Everyman (Guerard 1970, 50): he longs for happiness, friendship and love, but the cruel sea casts him onto a bleak shore where his hopes are thwarted by suspicion and misunderstanding. His is but one of many tragedies “arising from irreconcilable differences and from that fear of the Incomprehensible that hangs over all our heads – over all our heads” (151). Yanko is the ultimate Other – a stranger whose humanity the villagers refuse to acknowledge, who fills them with dread and who in a certain sense tests their capacity for humane impulses. The theme of otherness brings to mind the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, a French philosopher of Lithuanian Jewish ancestry who stressed the primacy of encountering the Other. Indeed, it would seem that Levinas’s ideas could well prove helpful in interpreting “Amy Foster”.

A vivacious young highlander from the Carpathians, Yanko falls prey to dishonest agents offering work in America. Among some of the most powerful passages in the story is a description of his hazardous journey through Europe, highlighting his overwhelming feeling of alienation amidst a collection of strangers in the hostile surroundings of an unknown and awe-inspiring world. The following excerpt illustrates this point graphically, as well as introducing the theme of the need for human warmth:

In the morning they were all led down to the stony shores of an extremely muddy river, flowing not between hills but between houses that seemed immense. There was a steam-machine that went on the water, and they all stood upon it packed tight, only now there were with them many women and children who made much noise. A cold rain fell, the wind blew in his face; he was wet through and his teeth chattered. He and the young man from the same valley took each other by the hand. (156)

Later on, separated from all his acquaintances and taken aback by the unfamiliar surroundings, “he must have been abominably unhappy – this soft and passionate adventurer, taken thus out of his knowledge, and feeling bitterly as he lay in his emigrant bunk his utter loneliness; for his was a highly sensitive nature” (158). The way in which the wrecking of the emigrant ship off the English coast is described merely aggravates the sense of the world’s cruelty: “A completeness without a clue, and a stealthy silence as of a neatly executed crime, characterize this murderous disaster, which, as you may remember, had its gruesome celebrity. The wind would have prevented the loudest outcries from reaching the shore; there had been evidently no time for signals of distress. It was death without any sort of fuss” (161). Yanko – the sole survivor of the tragedy – is tossed onto the shore just as if he had been cast away on some exotic island: “for him, who knew nothing of the earth, England was an undiscovered country” (154) or as if he had come into the world as a newly-born child: “his struggle threw him into a field. He must have been, indeed, of a tougher fibre than he looked to withstand without expiring such buffetings, the violence of his exertions, and so much fear. Later on, in his broken English that resembled curiously the speech of a young child, he told me himself that he put trust in God, believing he was no longer in this world” (154). Feeling alien in a strange world, he soon experiences the pain of coming up against the barrier which is raised against him by the local inhabit-

<sup>2</sup> See: A.J. Guerard. *Conrad the Novelist*, pp. 49-51; L. Graver. *Conrad’s Short Fiction*, pp. 104-108.

ants. Dirty and bewildered, “babbling aloud in a voice that was enough to make one die of fright” (159), he attempts to approach them “in his desperate endeavours to get help, and in his need to get in touch with someone” (159) but all he receives are whip lashes, blows and a hail of stones. He is eventually locked up by a villager named Smith, who feels “the dread of an inexplicable strangeness” and when “that being, parting with his black hands the long matted locks that hung before his face, as you part two halves of a curtain, looked out at him with glistening, wild, black-and-white eyes, the weirdness of this silent encounter fairly staggered him” (160). They treat him either as a dangerous tramp or as a lunatic (“that impression never wore off completely. Smith has not in his heart given up his secret conviction of the man’s essential insanity to this very day” – 160). Yanko

remembered the pain of his wretchedness and misery, his heartbroken astonishment that it was neither seen nor understood, his dismay at finding all the men angry and all the women fierce. He had approached them as a beggar, it is true, he said; but in his country, even if they gave nothing, they spoke gently to beggars. The children in his country were not taught to throw stones at those who asked for compassion (162-163).

Smith (we may note the universal and almost proverbial implication of this common surname) “was not imaginative enough to ask himself whether the man might not be perishing with cold and hunger” (160).

Imagination seems to be one of the key words in the story. Indeed, one needs a certain amount of imaginative power in order to be able to see beyond one’s own point of view, to put oneself in other people’s shoes and to be capable of empathy. It is the title character Amy Foster – a dull, plain and seemingly passive girl – who alone recognizes Yanko’s needs and sees a fellow human being in him:

The girl had not been able to sleep for thinking of the poor man, and in the morning, before the Smiths were up, she slipped out across the back yard. Holding the door of the wood-lodge ajar, she looked in and extended to him half a loaf of white bread – ‘such bread as the rich eat in my country’, he used to say [...] he devoured ferociously, and tears were falling on the crust. Suddenly he dropped the bread, seized her wrist and imprinted a kiss on her hand (163).

Amy’s simple gesture of kindness is the first instance of humane and compassionate behaviour that he has encountered on English soil and, in Doctor Kennedy’s words, “[t]hrough this act of impulsive pity he was brought back again within the pale of human relations with his new surroundings. He never forgot it – never” (163). As for Amy herself, this is probably also the moment at which she begins to be infatuated with him: “She was not frightened. Through his forlorn condition she had observed that he was good-looking” (163). Dull-witted as she is, “she had enough imagination to fall in love” (150). As Kennedy reflects, “there is no kindness without a certain amount of imagination. She had some. She had even more than is necessary to understand suffering and to be moved by pity. She fell in love in circumstances that leave no room for doubt in the matter; for you need imagination to form a notion of beauty at all, and still more to discover your ideal in an unfamiliar shape” (152).

The other villagers, however, stubbornly continue to view Yanko with mistrust or to treat him as a local curiosity:

[h]e stood, unsteady on his legs, meek, and caked over in half-dried mud, while the two men talked around him in an incomprehensible tongue. Mrs Smith had refused to come downstairs till the madman was off the premises [...] he obeyed the signs that were made to him to the best of his ability. But Smith was full of mistrust. ‘Mind, sir! It may be all his cunning,’ he cried repeatedly in a tone of warning (163).

Eventually another villager named Swaffer – a collector of curiosities – takes Yanko to his house, where he presents him to Kennedy: “‘Smith caught him in the stackyard at New Barns,’ said the old chap in his deliberate, unmoved manner, and as if the other had been indeed a sort of wild animal, ‘That’s how I came by him. Quite a curiosity, isn’t he? Now, tell me, doctor – you’ve been all over the world – don’t you think that’s a bit of a Hindoo we’ve got hold of here?’” (164). Given such treatment, it is perfectly understandable that Yanko should feel utterly hopeless and alienated: “an overwhelming loneliness seemed to fall from the leaden sky of that winter without sunshine. All the faces were sad. He could talk to no one, and had no hope of ever understanding anybody. It was as if these had been the faces of people from the other world – dead people – he used to tell me years afterwards” (166). The only familiar element he can find in these uninviting circumstances are three Norway pines, by which he sobs and talks to himself. “They had been like brothers to him, he affirmed. Everything else was strange” (166). He remembers Amy as “the only comprehensible face amongst all these faces that were as closed, as mysterious, and as mute as the faces of the dead who are possessed of a knowledge beyond the comprehension of the living” (166). Painful misunderstanding is thus alleviated by kindness and goodwill, which even seem to be a cure for epistemological anxieties and – To Yanko’s mind, at least – ought to be the obvious and logical framework for relationships.

Throughout the story, human warmth, goodwill, understanding and communication seem to be strongly intertwined. The situation sketched out in the novella generally presents a bleak antithesis of Levinas’s view that “the relationship with the other can be communication and transcendence, and not always another way of seeking certainty, or the coinciding with oneself” (1974, 118). It is in conversation, expression through language and true discourse that, according to Levinas, the Other is revealed (1961, 65–66). Moreover, the inhabitants of the village fail to see the Levinasian ethical appeal to respond to the Other with linguistic expression and to take responsibility for him – something that would transcend knowledge. In the philosopher’s words, “[b]y offering a word, the subject putting himself forward lays himself open” (Levinas 1989, 149). This is a far cry from what the story tells.

Yanko gradually manages to learn some of the language, which – characteristically – is tantamount to acquiring a social and cultural identity. Despite his progress, however, his speech continues to be an indelible mark of his otherness. As Kennedy notes:

[h]e told me this story of his adventure with many flashes of white teeth and lively glances of black eyes, at first in a sort of anxious baby-talk, then, as he acquired the language, with great fluency, but always with that singing, soft, and at the same time vibrating intonation that instilled a strangely penetrating power into the sound of the most familiar English words, as if they had been words of an unearthly language (158).

Strikingly, it is thanks to Kennedy's narrative that the identities of both Yanko and Amy (who for most of the time remains practically inarticulate) are established (Graver 1969, 107). However, it would seem that although a narrative may defer existential solitude, it cannot dispel it. Myrtle Hooper (1996, 51-56) and others have also noted that – notwithstanding the novella's title – Amy's point of view is never presented. With her dull wits, passiveness and uncommunicativeness, she could arguably be seen as being the story's second Other.

Although Yanko eventually establishes himself as a member of the local community, he never ceases to be perceived as an eccentric foreigner:

His foreignness had a peculiar and indelible stamp. At last people became used to seeing him. But they never became used to him. [...] He was different: innocent of heart, and full of goodwill, which nobody wanted, this castaway, that, like a man transplanted into another planet, was separated by an immense space from his past and by an immense ignorance from his future (168).

His passionate nature, his love of song and dance (on more than one occasion he is ejected from the local pub, as the locals "wanted to drink their evening beer in peace" – 169), his exuberant vitality, his gracefulness, his sense of communion with nature and his sincere and marked religiousness all stand in sharp contrast to the stolidity, myopia, parochialism and lack of imagination of the villagers. His intention to marry Amy – who has won his heart because of "the divine quality of her pity" (170) – sparks outrage in the village "for a hundred futile and inappreciable reasons" (170), but Amy has eyes only for him. Kennedy remarks that it is only she and himself who can see Yanko's "very real beauty" (170).

The young couple live together in a cottage offered to Yanko by Swaffer in recognition of the fact that the young man has saved the life of his granddaughter. Before long they have a baby son of whom Yanko is very proud. "There was a man now (he told me boastfully) to whom he could sing and talk in the language of his country, and show how to dance by-and-by" (172). Paradoxically, however, his strong desire to find understanding and a sense of kinship with his own son alienates him from his wife, who "had snatched the child out of his arms one day as he sat on the doorstep crooning to it a song such as the mothers sing to babies in his mountains. She seemed to think he was doing it some harm [...] he longed for the boy to grow up so that he could have a man to talk with in that language that to our ears sounded so disturbing, so passionate, and so bizarre" (172). Just as he indulges in bouts of singing and dancing – thereby antagonizing the villagers – so too Yanko attempts to satisfy his natural desire to express his individuality in unfamiliar surroundings by raising a son who will share his "eccentricities". However, his natural needs and impulses are frustrated, as they are strongly disapproved of by his stolid wife, whose literal short-sightedness would seem to be echoed by a metaphorical myopia and a lack of character. On the other hand, although he is happy to be able to return to his own habits, Yanko fails to see that from Amy's point of view he is alienating the child from her by replicating and reinforcing the differences that exist between them (Hooper 1996, 60). Kennedy for his part begins to wonder "whether his difference, his strangeness, were not pen-

etrating with repulsion that dull nature they had begun by irresistibly attracting” (172). As domestic differences escalate, it becomes obvious that Amy’s simple-minded altruism is unable to calm “the basic fear of the unfamiliar or to heal the painful rift arising from irreconcilable differences between people” (Graver 1969, 107). This is what Yanko fails to understand and what Amy fails to overcome.

The tragic climax comes when Yanko falls ill and – lying in a fever on a couch in the kitchen – begins to mutter to himself incomprehensibly. Amy is too afraid to sit with him upstairs and – tellingly – a table stands between the couch and her chair. When Doctor Kennedy comes to visit them, Amy seems to echo the mistrust with which Smith treats Yanko at the beginning of the story, confessing that she cannot help thinking that her husband is feigning illness and complaining that she does not understand what he says to their baby. “Oh, I hope he won’t talk!” (173), she exclaims – a reaction that can hardly be less in keeping with Levinasian ethics. The marks of his otherness – made more acute by his feverish ravings – serve only to distress her. Her altruism, flawed by narrowness and inflexibility, proves to be an insufficient safeguard against fear and incomprehension. Standing as it does in opposition to the thinking of Levinas (yet in a characteristically Conradian manner), it is speech – the tool of communication – that appears to be the most prominent and the most disquieting mark of the differences that set them apart. After Kennedy has left them, “she sat with the table between her and the couch, watching every movement and every sound, with the terror, the unreasonable terror, of that man she could not understand creeping over her. She had drawn the wicker cradle close to her. There was nothing in her now but the maternal instinct and that unaccountable fear” (174). Finally, terrified by the sick man’s delirious calls for water and his passionate remonstrations – all of which are uttered in his native tongue – she flees the cottage with the child in her arms, thus forsaking her husband. This abandonment would seem to be foreshadowed in the initial part of the novella when Amy, who is usually good to animals, fails to come to the rescue of an exotic parrot: “when the 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” (152). It would seem that exoticism – or rather a lack of familiarity – is something that Amy simply cannot cope with. The next morning Kennedy finds Yanko lying in the mud outside his cottage and a little later watches as he dies of heart failure.

Yanko’s otherness puts his wife and her fellow villagers to a test that none of them pass. In Levinasian terms, they fail to acknowledge the fact that the Other always retains his own alterity (Hand 2009, 34, Levinas 1961, 194), while continuing to be our prime responsibility. Being inherent in our own existence, this is a task that we cannot shirk (Levinas 1961, 214), for it is not for us to accept or reject it:

the extraordinary and everyday event of my responsibility for the faults or the misfortune of others. [...] my responsibility that answers for the freedom of another, [...] the astonishing human fraternity [which] [...] would not by itself explain the responsibility between separated beings it calls for. The freedom of another could never begin in my freedom, that is, abide in the same present, be contemporary, be representable to me. The responsibility for the other cannot have begun in my commitment, in my decision. (Levinas 1974, 10)

At the same time, "the other absolutely other – the Other – does not limit the freedom of the same; calling it to responsibility, it founds it and justifies it" (Levinas 1961, 197). Levinas's ethics could be summed up by the phrase: *After you* (Levinas 1974, 117), "as a small illustration of moral vigilance" (Hand 2009, 2). This is certainly not a rule that governs the behaviour of the villagers in Conrad's novella – and in the end we see that it does not even govern the behaviour of Amy herself.

Yanko expires with a sense of tragic injustice: "'Why?' he cried in the penetrating and indignant voice of a man calling to a responsible Maker. A gust of wind and a swish of rain answered" (175). This appears to be the only reply that comes from an indifferent and perhaps even malevolent universe. Somewhat tellingly, perhaps, it is from the mouth of Doctor Kennedy – who is himself a kind of outsider in the community and who by virtue of his profession may be associated with altruism and scientific detachment – that we hear a reflexive narrative about Yanko and Amy. Since (according to the frame narrator) Kennedy is characterized by "an unappeasable curiosity which believes that there is a particle of general truth in every mystery" (150), it could be argued that the yarn he presents has general implications with regard to our common human plight. Indeed, there are many instances when Yanko's life appears to be governed by "the toils of his obscure and touching destiny" (159) or by a malevolent universe, "as if the net of fate had been drawn closer around him" (172). This idea is often rendered by means of powerful poetic imagery of "the frigid splendour of a hazy sea lying motionless under the moon" (154) "as if enclosing all the earth with all the hearts lost among passions of love and fear" (172). Strikingly, Yanko's "straight-glancing, quick, far-reaching eyes [...] only seemed to flinch and lose their amazing power before the immensity of the sea" (167). Yanko is often likened to a helpless "animal under a net" (154) or "a bear in a cage" (160). Moreover, in Kennedy's eyes both Yanko and his young son are comparable to "a bird in a snare" (175), as the desperate and entrapping loneliness would seem to be going to last indefinitely. It could therefore be argued that in Conrad's novella it is not only Yanko who must be confronted as the Other and in relation to whom humane values are tested and challenged, for the surrounding world is also an Other that has to be confronted.

Dire and bleak as the picture painted by the novella may seem, the significance of the narrative structure would seem to provide a ray of hope. The obtuseness of the villagers and Amy's dull-witted, narrow-minded attitude towards Yanko are framed by two layers of narrative: that of Doctor Kennedy, who "had the talent of making people talk to him freely, and an inexhaustible patience in listening to their tales" (150) and "who seldom missed a chance for a friendly chat" with the outcast (158) and that of the unnamed frame narrator, who is a stranger and who encloses Kennedy's yarn with sympathy and interest – the two qualities that most of the novella's characters clearly lack. In addition, the frame narrator lends a universal dimension to the story of our common human plight by poignantly and sympathetically describing the physical wasteland of the novella's setting and the weariness of the over-burdened local inhabitants: "[t]he uniform brownness of the harrowed field glowed with a rosy tinge, as though the powdered clods had sweated out in minute pearls of blood the toil

of uncounted ploughmen” (151). Ironically, what in his eyes seems to be a chariot driven by giants turns out to be the “heroic uncouthness” (151) of a farmer with his cart. The fact that we must all confront the Otherness of the external world and somehow cope with it – taken together with the novella’s narratorial sympathy – does introduce a slight note of solidarity, which is a theme that is common to both Conrad and Levinas.

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