

Empathy and Othering in Joseph Conrad's *Amy Foster*

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Abstract

Amy Foster has never been one of the most popular or critically acclaimed works by Joseph Conrad. Yet this early story clearly deserves attention. Initially analyzed mostly in terms of autobiographical criticism, it has recently been read through the post-colonial and feminist lenses, with emphasis on intercultural encounters or misogynistic treatment of the female character. The present article focuses on the issues of narrative point of view to discuss Conrad's text as a study in the mechanism of othering. Literally and metaphorically speaking, *Amy Foster* revolves around issues related to voice. Like Conrad's major works, this text foregrounds the act of narration. The tragic tale of an outcast dying in utter solitude is told by a country doctor whose credibility is in turn established and qualified by the frame narrator.

Aware of the relativity of social mores and having enough sensitivity to understand the victim's alienation, the narrator links ethnocentrism to fear, lack of imagination and imprisonment in cultural narratives. Ironically, his own tale is not free of bias and reveals limits to his empathy. Thus, while it explores the simultaneously inclusionary and exclusionary nature of cultural narratives, *Amy Foster* also highlights the subjectivity and incompleteness of any act of perception.

Key words: voice, empathy, cultural scripts, othering

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Conrad's short story *Amy Foster*, first published in the *Illustrated London News* in 1901 and subsequently in *Typhoon and Other Stories* in 1903, easily lends itself to interpretation in terms of autobiographical criticism. The poignant tale of a castaway dying in utter solitude in a small village on the coast of Kent can be seen as reflecting Conrad's own predicament of living in exile. In view of how often the novelist was called "[a]n alienated émigré... an outsider, nationally and culturally" (Najder, 2007, p. 576) it is not surprising that many critics read *Amy Foster* as mirroring Conrad's suppressed dislike of England or his marital and sexual problems.ⁱ This, however, is but one of many different approaches. In the words of a scholar, "Conrad has been read so radically differently at different times that it is tempting to talk of different Conrads" (Collits, 2005, p. 3). What does this text mean to today's reader?

Conrad was writing at the heyday of the British Empire and at the time of intense preoccupation with the issue of national character; at the same time, he was experimenting with new literary techniques. Hence, on both thematic and structural level his work is of obvious interest to participants in the post-modern discourse "rotating around the "identity" axis" (Bauman, 2004, p.1). Applying the prism of post-colonial studies to Conrad's position on race, imperialism or eurocentrism has resulted in insightful, albeit often conflicting conclusions (see, for example, Achebe, 1996; Krajka, 1990; Hampson, 2000; Hooper, 1996; Firchow, 2000; Ross, 2004; Collits, 2005, and Henthorne, 2008). Similarly, discussion of female characters in Conrad's fiction shifted from complaints about their presence in otherwise "masculine" tales (Moser, 1966, p. 99) to complex analyses of their role and portrayal; the claim that Conrad's "narrative strategies are articulated through a language of sexual difference" (Schneider, 2003, p. 4) best captures the distance travelled in this regard. The focus on identity, gender and intercultural encounters that has yielded new and valuable insights into Conrad's major works appears to be also very relevant pertaining to *Amy Foster*. After all, although this text does not set Europe against its colonies, it depicts a cultural Other, probes gender stereotypes, and problematizes the issue of interpretative authority.

Placed within the framework of post-colonial and gender studies, the present article proposes that *Amy Foster* can be read as a study in the mechanism of othering. The concept of othering builds on Hegel's theory of self and other, universalized later by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* with regard to gender and by Said in *Orientalism* with regard to race; it also draws extensively on the work of the French psychoanalyst Lacan. Coined by Spivak in 1980, the term has since then been widely used in the liberal arts, social studies, and intercultural research (see Dervin, 2011). Broadly speaking, othering is related to ethnocentricity and stereotyping; it always involves the domination of an in-group that declares itself superior to the out-group and denies the Other subjectivity and uniqueness. Thus understood, the term seems applicable and useful in discussing Conrad's short story.

The plot in *Amy Foster* is stark in its simplicity. Lured by ruthless agents, a young mountaineer, Yanko, leaves his Carpathian village in search of a better future in America. After a traumatic voyage his ship runs aground; as the only survivor he finds himself in a small rural community in England where he meets with hostility and rejection. He tries to adapt and manages to get a foothold in the community; he even marries Amy Foster, the only person who initially shows him some kindness. However, the birth of a son marks the beginning of "steady domestic differences" (p. 226)ⁱⁱ in the life of the couple. Amy, herself a liminal community figure, feels threatened when Yanko tries to share his own language and heritage with their child.

In the end, she abandons her husband when he is raving in fever and asking for water in his native language. The narrator, a country doctor, attributes Yanko's death to heart failure.

Although the outcast's tragic fate is the affective core of the narrative, it is merely one of the building blocks of its thematic structure. Like Conrad's major works, *Amy Foster* foregrounds the act of narration. Literally and metaphorically speaking, the story revolves around issues related to voice and point of view. Similarly to what he does in his earlier texts, in *Amy Foster* Conrad uses his signature narration - within - narration structure. The dominant voice in the story is that of Kennedy, a physician with "the talent of making people talk to him freely, and an inexhaustible patience in listening to their tales" (p. 202). In the main, the fictional world is revealed to the reader as seen through this man's "grey, profoundly attentive eyes" (p. 202). At the same time, Kennedy's reliability is established and qualified by his anonymous addressee. Introducing Kennedy in the opening sentences of the text the frame narrator tells us that this man served abroad and wrote papers on the flora and fauna of little known places. From the outset, his comment delineates the parameters of the doctor's vision:

The penetrating power of his mind, acting as a corrosive fluid, had destroyed his ambition... His intelligence is of scientific order, of an investigating habit, and of that unappeasable curiosity which believes that there is a particle of a general truth in every mystery. (p. 202)

Then again, Kennedy and the frame narrator have much in common. Their camaraderie is implied early on in the surprisingly instantaneous agreement as to Amy's appearance and mental faculties. They see her as ugly, dull, passive and lacking any depth, "a vague shape which, after all, may be nothing more curious or strange than a signpost" (p. 204). The ease and unanimity with which they this opinion portend a shared world view.ⁱⁱⁱ Furthermore, as pointed out by Hampson (2000), both Kennedy and his companion are expatriates who have considerable knowledge of the world outside the community to which they return and which they observe with some measure of detachment and an almost ethnographic interest. Theirs is the "high point of view – the panoptical stance – is enjoyed by those in privileged positions in the social structure, to whom the world appears as a spectacle, stage, performance" (McClintock, 1995, p.122).

It is from this perch that Kennedy depicts a community faced with the threat of the Other. His account identifies three possible reactions to foreignness, ranging from interest in the outlandish, shown by Mr. Swaffer, to human kindness displayed by Amy, to rejection and downright hostility demonstrated by most of the villagers. Ultimately, what prevails and determines the course of events is the ethnocentric attitude. The doctor's speculation on the question as to why and how it happens centers on the role of empathy.

Among the villagers, Swaffer is an exception, his eccentricity known and tolerated only because of his wealth and social standing. He acts out of curiosity rather than true kindness. He "keeps" Yanko, almost like a pet, due to his interest in what he perceives as exotic, not due to solidarity with another human being. Just as he does not need to explain himself to the villagers, he does not feel any need to communicate with the alien. Only after he saves Swaffer's granddaughter from drowning does Yanko earn a place at his table and later on a cottage and an allowance that enables him to marry Amy. This act of gratitude, however, is not equivalent to opening a dialogue, and although it gives Yanko access to the community, it does not secure his place in it.

Amy's impulsive act of kindness - giving Yanko some bread when he is hunted down and locked up as a dangerous creature or deranged lunatic – stands in direct contrast to Swaffer's attitude. Amy is herself a marginal figure in the community due as much to her meager resources as to her looks and personality. If heard at all, her voice is "low and timid" (p. 202), and she speaks with "a slight hesitation in her utterance, a sort of preliminary stammer" (p. 204); addressed harshly, she quickly loses her head. She seems to blend in with the surroundings, her life nothing but drudgery. Ironically, she becomes socially visible - and of interest to Kennedy - only through her association with Yanko. As presented by Kennedy, Amy lacks subjectivity, which makes identification with her difficult. Yet she plays a major role in the tragedy and the narrator's ruminations on it. In his eyes, it is Amy's empathy that initially helps the outcast survive, and it is its withdrawal that kills him. If her attraction to Yanko shocks the locals, her desertion of him when he is sick mystifies the doctor. How does he account for such a failure of compassion?

What initially distinguishes Amy from her neighbors and family members is her gentleness. As Kennedy observes, "there is no kindness of heart without a certain amount of imagination" (p. 204). Although Amy's senses are dulled by the sameness of her daily routine, she has some sensitivity; in Kennedy's words, she has enough imagination to find beauty in "an unfamiliar shape" (p. 204) and "'silently, obstinately'" (p. 205) fall in love with Yanko. In doing so she lays a claim to selfhood and stands her ground against the voice of the public opinion. Yet this position is only temporary. In fact, the limits of Amy's empathy are signaled very early in the story. Kennedy reports that she had never been heard to express a dislike for a single human being, and she was tender to every living creature; yet for all her kindheartedness she did nothing to save her employer's pet bird:

... as to Mrs. Smith's grey parrot, its peculiarities exercised upon her a positive fascination. Nevertheless, 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. (p. 204)

This incomprehensible failure to act is attributed by the villagers to Amy's stupidity; to the narrator it also displays her fundamental weakness and augurs her flight from Yanko. The doctor considers Amy's abandonment of her husband "physiologically" possible. In his eyes Amy is a creature of habit and instinct. Despite her kindheartedness and physical attraction to her husband, she is too squeamish and weak-minded to stand by him. Not having enough imaginative sensitivity to understand the pain of Yanko's alienation, she feels threatened by his intention to teach their son, Little John, to speak his language. What is more, she does not remain loyal to him for long. In Kennedy's words, with Yanko's physical presence gone, "his memory seems to have vanished from her dull brain as a shadow passes away upon a white screen" (p. 229). Ultimately, the narrator attributes Amy's betrayal of her husband to "nothing but the maternal instinct and ... unaccountable fear" (p. 228). At the same time, since he acknowledges that the fear is fueled by "all the talk against the man that had been dinned into her ears" (p. 227), he also sees it as a product of the community's mentality. "All the countryside" speaks with one voice, and this voice of the collective consciousness becomes an inexorable force. If in *Heart of Darkness* Conrad personifies the wilderness, in *Amy Foster* it is the intermental thought^{iv} that acquires the status of an agent in the drama.

To a considerable extent, the characters in *Amy Foster* are shown as products of their milieu. The story exemplifies what Leo Gurko has called Conrad's unique gift - "his abnormal

awareness of place, an awareness magnified to almost a new dimension in art, an ecological dimension defining the relationship between earth and man" (Gurko, 1962, p.147). The symbolism of the setting is crucial in building the theme of alienation and imprisonment. Pointing out that the landmarks dominating the landscape in *Amy Foster* suggest "ramparts designed to repel intruders" (p.162), Simmons (2006) has noted that "this demonstrates how the rules of cultural inclusion are simultaneously those that ensure the exclusion of others" (p.162). In fact, throughout the text the protagonists' mental landscapes appear to be both shaped by their physical surrounding and symbolized through their interaction with it. Thus the essential difference between the foreigner and the community that rejects him is captured in the juxtaposition of the frame narrator's comment on the locals, "The men we walked past, slow, unsmiling, with downcast eyes, as if the melancholy of an over-burdened earth had weighted their feet, bowed their shoulders, borne down their glances (p.203), with Kennedy's recollection of Yanko, a mountaineer "straight as a pine, with something striving upwards in his appearance... when he was passing one of these villagers here, the soles of his feet did not seem to me to touch the dust of the road (pp. 204-205). To the villagers, Yanko's racial characteristics, body language and behavior - the way he walks, dances, eats or lies in the grass looking at the sky - mark him as foreign and "odious." However, it is his voice that makes him completely unacceptable.

Communication – verbal or non-verbal- requires shared symbolic competence and comparable levels of emotionality; without them speech will sound "annoying" or terrifying. In *Amy Foster* the locality the characters inhabit is shown to be palpably the space of shared cultural codes and signifying practices. Doubtless, speech is the most distinctive denominator of culture and identity. After he is washed ashore, Yanko finds himself in an alien land. His inability to speak English makes him less than human to the villagers. This degradation is both verbal and physical, as exemplified by the use of animal imagery and brutalizing handling. Reduced to the level of a "creature", the castaway is feared and hated like Frankenstein's monster. Needless to say, the castaway's attempts to communicate further alienate him. His "insane, disturbing voice, a sudden burst of rapid, senseless speech" (p. 213) is interpreted as a sign of lunacy. He becomes an embodiment of the Other that must be hunted down and locked up to protect the community.

What Conrad does so well in *Amy Foster* is to show the alienation of an individual "taken out of his knowledge" (p. 211). Even when Yanko learns some English and can communicate with Kennedy in "childish language, he does not have the words in any language to describe his harrowing journey because he is talking about things he had never before encountered or imagined. Similarly, his interiorized frames of reference do not work in the new environment. In disparate cultural scripts the same act or behavior will be interpreted differently or made meaningless. As Kennedy puts it, "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" (p. 222). Uprooted and taken outside of the web of shared assumptions and associations Yanko looks for similarities to find only differences; he lives in the world of what in *Lost in Translation* Eva Hoffman calls empty signifiers.

Just as Yanko is "taken out of his knowledge," the people that reject him are imprisoned in theirs. In *Amy Foster* ethnocentrism is shown to be grounded in fear, ignorance and lack of sensitivity. The locals are not bad – they just lack imagination. As Kennedy puts it,

Smith is not a hard man at all, but he had room in his brain only for that one idea of lunacy. He was not imaginative enough to ask himself whether the man might not be perishing with cold and hunger. (p. 213)

Moreover, the villagers form an isolated, close knit community, with its collective memory and consciousness a combination of the factual and hearsay. Bound together by telling and retelling stories, they weave a social fabric that cannot accommodate difference. The “dread of an inexplicable strangeness” (p. 213) that marks Yanko with “a peculiar and indelible stamp” (p. 221) of foreignness is fueled by gossip, rumor and conjecture.

Not surprisingly, Yanko remains an object of close scrutiny and discussion even after he makes “progress” in cultural adjustment. The inhabitants of the village get used to seeing the outsider, but “his peculiarities” (p. 221) continue to offend them. The intensity of this resentment becomes clear when Yanko decides to marry Amy. Up in arms, the community immediately closes ranks to “protect” one of their own armed with the predictable argument that “these foreigners behave very queerly to women sometimes” (p. 226). The opposition will not lessen with time. Naturally, the outcast’s attempts to cling to some aspects of his cultural identity- his ways of singing, dancing, courting or praying - and later on to share them with his son aggravate the situation. Simply put, there is simply no place and no role for Yanko in the cultural script the community enacts and acts out. Consequently, after his death, all the traces of his presence need to be expunged from shared memory. This happens quickly, since erasure of incongruities in orally transmitted versions of events is not difficult. Yanko is illiterate and the only written record of his presence in the village is the cross made in the marriage contract. Hence even his name is obliterated and soon his son begins to be known simply as “Amy Foster’s boy.” Nonetheless, Yanko continues to live - and comes to life for the reader - in the space allotted to him by Kennedy’s interest and memory. What kernel of truth does the narrator find in the story he tells and what does it disclose about him?

Kennedy’s vision is sufficiently broad to encompass varying perspectives. With his experience and scientific bend of mind, he is aware of the relativity of social mores and the mechanism of othering. In allowing us to hear Yanko’s voice he stresses the equivalence of the two cultures that conceptualize experience differently; at times, Yanko’s culture is shown as morally superior. Furthermore, despite his tone of detachment the doctor is sensitive enough to understand the depth of the outcast’s despair and loneliness. Clearly, his pronouncement that Yanko died of heart failure is more an expression of this empathy than a medical diagnosis. At the same time, the narrator’s interest in reading minds does not extend to Amy. In fact, he denies her any depth or complexity. Arguably, Kennedy’s narrative is gendered in silencing Amy and making her a conduit for perpetuating repressive attitudes. If the villagers at times look like ethnographic plates, Amy is almost a blank. As observed by Hooper , “the real other in Kennedy’s story is not Yanko, but Amy” (p.15).

Like other works by Conrad, *Amy Foster* questions the validity of relying exclusively on either a scientific or non-scientific understanding of reality. Knowledge is not sufficient to deal with the complexities of human emotions and relationships; ignorance or a purely instinctive reaction is even more detrimental or useless. A reader of Conrad does not need to be reminded of the novelist’s conviction that neither philosophy nor art will help us to penetrate through the outer shapes to the inner truth. While *Amy Foster* mirrors this skepticism, it also highlights the role of imagination; “the enemy of men, the father of all terror” (*Lord Jim* p. 8) can be dangerous, but it can allow for an empathetic identification with others. One could add that it is in fact indispensable in the process of acknowledging our own foreignness. As Kristeva puts it so

eloquently,” it is with the help of that sole support that we can attempt to live with others” (Kristeva, 1991, p. 170). It is dearth of empathy that does not allow Kennedy to recognize the moment of crisis and prevent Yanko’s demise. The answer to his question why he “didn’t see” that Yanko would be abandoned by his wife lies in his lack of what Conrad calls “imaginative responsiveness” (p. 165) in *Heart of Darkness* or later on “responsive sensitiveness” (p. 74) in *The Rescue*.

The narrator’s failure to see is important in determining his interpretative authority. As a recorder of events who is both an insider and outsider in the world he is depicting, Kennedy is not free of bias. His narrative reveals the limits of perception resulting from the observer-object of observation relationship. To quote Hawkes (1977),

Every perceiver’s method of perceiving can be shown to contain an inherent bias which affects what is perceived to a significant degree. A wholly objective perception of individual entities is therefore not possible: any observer is bound to create something of what he observes (p.17).

Hence, Hawkes concludes, the thing really worth observing is the relation between the observer and the object of observation. This statement rings very true with reference to *Amy Foster*. Kramer (2003) is right when he points out the centrality of the narrator’s role in this short story.

The interpretative frame that structures Kennedy’s understanding of the world is exposed through the persistence with which the image of imprisonment punctuates the movement of his narrative. On several occasions Kennedy compares Yanko to a wild bird under a net; he also uses this metaphor almost verbatim in the final scene, this time with reference to Yanko’s son, Little John. The image of Amy hovering over the crib of her son “with his fluttered air of a bird in a snare” (p. 230) crystalizes the doctor’s view of Yanko’s tragic fate. It also poses as a universal truth about the condition of man. For the narrator Yanko’s fate encapsulates a tragedy “arising from irreconcilable differences and the fear of the Incomprehensible that hangs over all our heads - over all our heads. ...” (p. 203). This belief is in some ways akin to Yanko’s belief that Amy’s instinctive goodness, her “good heart,” will save their union. Both views propose the existence of human emotions that are universal in nature and mechanisms of human interaction that function independently of time and place. Ironically, while Kennedy recognizes the force and rigidity of culturally determined boundaries and perspectives in the society he studies, he tends to disregard them when it comes to formulating – and reflecting on - his own conclusions.

In the end, *Amy Foster* shows not only the storyteller’s fallibility but also his loneliness. What we see and share is always but an approximation. If it is hard to see the truth of anyone’s existence, including one’s own, it is even more difficult to share it with others. We live by telling stories and they can bring us together, but they also separate us. Thus *Amy Foster* echoes Marlow’s conclusion in *Heart of Darkness*, “...No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one’s existence – that which makes its truth, its meaning – its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live as we dream - alone... (Conrad, 1996, p. 43).

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Notes

ⁱ The parallels between Conrad's alienation and the experience he describes in *Amy Foster* are plentiful. As recollected by Jessie Conrad, during their honeymoon Conrad fell ill and, delirious with fever, frightened her by speaking in Polish. In her words, "Now he raved in grim earnest, speaking only in his native tongue and betraying no knowledge of who I might

For hours I remained by his side watching the feverish glitter of his eyes that seemed fixed on some object outside my vision, and listening to the meaningless phrases and lengthy speeches, not a word of which I could understand (1935:26). In this context Edward Said has remarked, "It is difficult to read '*Amy Foster*' without thinking that Conrad must have feared dying a similar death, inconsolable, alone, talking away in a language no one could understand" (Said, 1998, p.2).

ⁱⁱ Conrad, J. (1947). *Amy Foster*. In *The Conrad Companion*. A.J. Hoppe (Ed.) (1947). London: Phoenix House. Henceforth referred to by a page number.

ⁱⁱⁱ As observed by feminist critics, this camaraderie suggests the viewpoint of a male audience marginalizing the female point of view and it seems to extend to the implied reader.

^{iv} Palmer (2010) has noted that intermental thinking understood as "joint, group, shared, or collective thinking"... socially distributed, situated, or extended cognition" (184) is as prevalent in fictional worlds as it is in the real world. His comment, "a large amount of the subject matter of novels is the formation, development, maintenance, and breakdown of these intermental units" (184) will certainly resonate with the reader of *Amy Foster*.

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