

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