

# “Race”, Language and Xenophobia in Joseph Conrad’s “Amy Foster”

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## Summary

Chinua Achebe’s animus against the creator of *Heart of Darkness* did not simply end with the charge of racism but extended to anti-Semitism and xenophobia as well. The term “xenophobia”, which is imbricated in the dialectics of race and language, features strongly in the current politics of diaspora and identity. Conventional scholarship on Conrad’s short fiction “Amy Foster” has followed two predominant strands, namely, the extreme loneliness of Yanko Goorall, the central protagonist of this seemingly mis-titled story, and his inability to communicate in a foreign land. This article, from the hermeneutic space afforded by postcoloniality, postulates the construct of “race”, as understood in the nineteenth century, as a major catalyst in the breakdown in the marriage of Yanko and Amy. It holds to the view that the tragedy of the former is not so much the outcome of a lack of communication between a castaway and his local English wife, but is predetermined in the face of an ethnocentric, if not rampantly “racist” insular, parochial community. The article concludes that the story is Conrad’s study of the racist recesses of the human psyche which manifest in discrimination against the other. Displaced geographically, culturally and linguistically, Yanko (like Conrad himself) is a metonymic inscription of alterity, whose attempts to reclaim his linguistic and cultural identity end in tragedy.

## Opsomming

Chinua Achebe se wrewel teenoor die skepper van *Heart of Darkness* het nie bloot geëindig met die aantygning van rassisme nie, maar het ook anti-Semitisme en vreemdelingehaat ingesluit. Die term “vreemdelingehaat” (of “xenofobie”), wat in die dialektiek van ras en taal verweef is, kom sterk na vore in die huidige politiek van diaspora en identiteit. Konvensionele vakkundigheid oor Conrad se kort fiksie getiteld “Amy Foster” het hoofsaaklik twee strome gevolg, naamlik die geweldige eensaamheid van Yanko Goorall, die sentrale protagonis van hierdie oënskynlik verkeerd benoemde storie, en sy onvermoë om in ’n vreemde land te kommunikeer. Hierdie artikel veronderstel, vanuit die hermeneutiese ruimte wat deur postkolonialisme geskep is, die idee van “ras”, soos verstaan in die negentiende eeu, as ’n belangrike katalisator in die mislukking van Yanko en Amy se huwelik. Dit beaam die sienswyse dat die tragedie van die eersgenoemde nie soseer die uitkoms van ’n gebrek aan kommunikasie tussen ’n verwerpene en sy plaaslike Engelse vrou is nie, maar vooraf bepaal word in ’n etnosentriese, selfs verregaande “rassisties-geïsoleerde”, parogiale gemeenskap. Die slotsom van die artikel is dat die storie Conrad se studie van die rassistiese terugwykings van die menslike psige is wat in diskriminasie teenoor die

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ander manifesteer. Yanko (soos Conrad self) is geografies, kultureel en linguisties ontwortel – ’n metonimiese inskripsie van andersheid, wie se pogings om sy linguistiese en kulturele identiteit terug te eis, in tragedie eindig.

The eminent Polish scholar and editor of the multi-volume series *Conrad: Eastern and Western Perspectives*, Wiesław Krajka, once averred that Conrad was the second most international author, after Shakespeare, in the history of English literature. To justify his extravagant claim, he expanded, “[Conrad] dealt with issues vital to people of many nationalities, with timeless and universal questions, his works have been studied and read worldwide” (Krajka 2004: 1). As a testament to the “timeless” and “universal” nature of Conrad’s fiction, the story of Yanko Goorall, the misnamed protagonist of the short story “Amy Foster” (first published in *Illustrated London News* in December 1901 and later collected in *Typhoon and Other Stories* in 1903 – hence referenced as *TS* in this article), bears an uncanny resonance for our times when people are uprooted from their communities through war, famine and political persecution. Like the migrants of our era making their way to Europe or America, Yanko Goorall (Goorall is not his real name but an appellation attributed by the villagers when he tried to explain with difficulty that he was a “mountaineer”, a word sounding like “Goorall” in his mother tongue) is the victim of a fraudulent emigration agency that promised him and others in his country a better life in America in exchange for their humble homesteads in the region of the east Carpathian Mountains. These ill-fated migrants were being transported in a German vessel from the port of Hamburg when it sank on the south-east coast of England after being accidentally rammed on a dark, stormy night by an unknown vessel that disappeared mysteriously into the night. The story of Yanko, the sole survivor of the German ship, bears a striking prescience to our era when migrations on a global scale have escalated incidents of racism and xenophobia. As Derek Hook (2018: 2) has theorised, “An increasingly globalised and networked world, with historically unprecedented levels of immigration, has resulted not in increased tolerance, as one may have anticipated, but – so it seems – in a renewed passion for segregation”.

Departing from traditional readings of “Amy Foster” which foreground the extreme loneliness of the protagonist occasioned by his inability to communicate in a foreign land, this paper postulates the notions of “race” and “xenophobia” to nuance the discourse on this sad tale. This article suggests that Yanko’s fate, in the manner of a Greek tragedy, is predetermined in the face of an ethnocentric, if not virulently “racist”, insular community.

As far back as 1903, the black American intellectual W.E.B. du Bois wrote that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color [sic] line – the relation of the darker races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea” (cited in Loury 2021: 94). The problem of “race” did not begin in Du Bois’s America in the early twentieth century nor did it

end then. In Western history it can be traced back to the Greeks and Romans who had their barbarian “other” to contend with, and in the twenty-first century the subject of race features prominently in world politics and in the human sciences.

The category of race is almost an imponderable as testified by the vast body of literature on the subject from social, political, historical and psycho-analytical perspectives. Ian F. Hanley López, the son of an Irish father and Salvadorian mother, who describes himself as “Latino” even though he has a brother who “relates most easily with the Anglo side of the family”, has written: “Race is neither an essence nor an illusion, but rather an ongoing, contradictory, self-reinforcing, plastic process subject to the macro forces of social and political struggle and the micro effects of daily decisions” (Rivkin & Ryan 2004: 966). Whereas scholars in literary studies and the social sciences have described race as a social construct, as implied by López, it is not an illusion either. Much of eighteenth and nineteenth century thinking on race in Europe was dominated by the theories of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, the German physician, naturist and anthropologist. Blumenbach found a worthy disciple in the French aristocrat, Arthur de Gobineau (Count de Gobineau) who modified and developed Blumenbach’s race theory in a treatise titled “An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races” published in 1855, and in his posthumously published book *The Inequality of Human Races* (1915). The essence of his thought can be encapsulated in the following extract taken from the latter work (De Gobineau 1915: 107):

When, after examining these types, taken from all the quarters of the globe, we finally come back to the inhabitants of Europe, and of South and West Asia, we find them so superior in beauty, in just proportion of limb and regularity of feature, that we are at once tempted to accept the conclusions of those who assert the multiplicity of races.

Notwithstanding the scholarly tone of his pronouncement and his ethnographic methodology, such writing reinforced the notion of inferior and superior races which has endured over time and resulted in racist and xenophobic purges in the past decades. The notions of racial superiority and inferiority are not confined to the crude dichotomy of Black and White, but are nuanced by shades in between. The historian Ronald Hyam (1976: 39) has asserted that the Victorian hierarchy of racist ideology placed Latin nations well below the Americans, Germans, and the Roman Catholic French. An exemplification of such “inter-ethnic racism”, to coin a phrase, is witnessed in Conrad’s novel *The Rescue* (and its earlier version *The Rescuer*), where an Englishman and an insufferable snob, Mr. Travers, regards D’Alcacer, a Spaniard, as his inferior and treats him with disdain even though the latter is an aristocrat and the epitome of a gentleman. Far from being an illusion, race and racism have determined how societies have

been structured over the ages, resulting in racial hierarchies, social, political and economic disparities and notions of “us and “them”.

The Slovenian scholar Slavoj Žižek, deploying the Lacanian construct of *jouissance*, which variously translates into pleasure of an intellectual or sexual nature, sees racism as arising from an acute sense of one’s pleasure being stolen by the “other” (1992: 165):

What is at stake in ethnic tensions is always [a kind of] possession: the “other” wants to steal our enjoyment (by ruining our “way of life”) and /or he has access to some secret, perverse enjoyment. In short, what gets on our nerves, what really bothers us about the “other” is the peculiar way he organises his enjoyment (the smell of his food, his “noisy” songs and dances, his strange manners, his attitudes to work – in the racist perspective, the “other” is either a workaholic stealing our jobs or an idler living on our labour).

Žižek’s explication of the roots of ethnic and racial tensions in society, premised on Lacan’s psychoanalytical notion of *jouissance*, affords a perfect lens through which the character of Yanko may be viewed: his strange manners, his work ethic and his ability to dance and enjoy life – all of which raise him literally above the mundane in a parochial, narrow-minded society.

Conventional scholarship on “Amy Foster” has followed two strands, namely, Yanko’s (and by implication Conrad’s) extreme loneliness in a foreign land and his crippling inability to speak in a foreign tongue. Albert Guerard (1958: 48) sees the failure of communication as “the subject and central preoccupation of Conrad’s greatest books”. In common with most critics before and after him, Guerard makes the inevitable link between the fate of Yanko and Conrad, seeing in the former a projection of Conrad’s loneliness. Norman Page (1986, Preface xi) has described “Amy Foster” as “a moving allegory of [Conrad’s] own experience, and when he fell ill Conrad, like Janko [sic] in that story [...] reverted to Polish in his delirium”. Jesse Conrad’s sense of dislocation when her husband was in this state during their honeymoon is palpable in her own writing (1926: 35):

To see him lying in the white canopied bed, dark-faced with gleaming teeth and shining eyes, was sufficiently alarming, but to hear him muttering to himself in a strange tongue (he must have been speaking Polish), to be unable to penetrate the clouded mind or catch one intelligible word, was for a young, inexperienced girl truly awful.

Sue Finkelstein (2000: 20) traces Conrad’s emotional fault lines to his youth when he lost his mother at seven and his father at eleven: “[...] I do think that ‘Amy Foster’ in particular bears the marks of these losses. Thematically, it certainly does”. Whilst Finkelstein’s essay makes a compelling argument to support how Conrad’s “traumata” are manifested in the theme

of the story, it derives from the faulty premise that the story was written a year before Conrad's severe psychotic breakdown of 1911. This is stated in the opening sentence which functions as a theoretical framework for her paper. By common consensus, the story was completed in 1901 and published in 1903. This fact notwithstanding, the premise serves to underpin her cryptically-worded conclusion that Conrad “expresses his trauma-derived view of the world as filled with hope perpetually reborn out of hope perpetually, inevitably betrayed” (ibid., p. 27). Acknowledging Finkelstein's contribution but diverging slightly from her psychoanalytical reading, Brian W. Shaffer (2000: 163) focuses on the “traumatic nature of emigration in particular, an experience dear to Conrad's heart”. He points to the fact that Yanko is washed ashore upon the Kentish coast of England in an area not far from where Conrad took up residence in 1898. Shaffer's concluding sentence has pertinence to this article: “If ‘Amy Foster’ achieved nothing else, it represented and explored trauma and its relation to alterity long before our bloody present century made this critical task obvious, necessary, and even inescapable” (ibid., p. 172). A postcolonial critique of alterity in “Amy Foster”, as espoused in this article, responds to the imperative of Shaffer's remark.

Several views have been advanced to account for the tragic breakdown in the marriage of Amy and Yanko. Anna Brzozowska-Krajka, for example, draws attention to Yanko's ethnicity: “Carpathian Mountaineers, who lived in symbiosis with nature and did not yield to civilisation, entered Polish literature, along with Cracovians, Mazovians and Cossacks, as evidence of the national past” (2004: 162). Yannick le Boulicaut (2004) and Katherine Isobel Baxter (2016), on the other hand, have focussed on Yanko's linguistic isolation as the cause of his trauma and tragedy, with Le Boulicaut (2004: 201) suggesting that Yanko is an allegory of Christ on the Cross, asking for “water, too, in a foreign language, Aramaic” which the Roman guards do not understand. Such an allegorical reading is commendable, given that Yanko too asks for water in his home language which terrifies his traumatised wife who flees with her baby, leaving her husband to die of thirst.

Norman Page (1986: 148) states that “Amy Foster” was written “quite quickly in May-June 1901”, immediately after “Falk”. The contiguity of these two works perhaps accounts for some of the similarities between them. Both stories present characters that are physically attracted to each other. The relationship between Amy Foster and Yanko is largely based on the physical attraction that Amy feels for Yanko, although the latter's devotion to her springs from a deeper spiritual source after she offers him succour in the form of half a loaf of white bread, such bread as “the rich ate” (*TS*: 134) in his country (*TS*: 124-125):

Suddenly he dropped the bread, seized her wrist, and imprinted a kiss on her hand. She was not frightened. Through his forlorn condition she had observed that he was good looking. [...] Through 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.

Whereas Falk and the girl he desires are characterised by their mutual silence in a homogeneous society, Yanko and Amy are “silenced” linguistically and in other ways to accentuate their otherness in a society that has to cope with the racialised ethnicity of a man who marries a woman who is “one of us”, yet ironically not “one of us” on account of her choice of a spouse as well as her low status in society. Coupled with this fact, she is not physically or intellectually endowed. This opinion is expressed at two significant moments. The first mention of it is made early in the story when the frame narrator sees her for the first time: “I had the time to see her dull face, red, not with a mantling blush, but as if her flat cheeks had been vigorously slapped” (*TS*: 107). Kennedy, the doctor who relates the tale to the frame narrator, adds his own brush strokes to her portrait: “She is very passive. It’s enough to look at the red hands hanging at the ends of those short arms, at those slow, prominent brown eyes, to know the inertness of her mind [...]” (*TS*: 107).

The other occasion when her perceived lack of physical beauty is remarked upon is in the context of Yanko’s seemingly inexplicable attraction to her. This time, the tone of Kennedy’s comment is not only unflattering to both Yanko and Amy, but patronising and with a racist undertow: “I wonder whether he saw how plain she was. Perhaps among types so different from what he had ever seen, he had not the power to judge; or perhaps he was seduced by the divine quality of her pity” (*TS*: 135). That Kennedy is not an innocent, objective reporter has been observed by Myrtle Hooper in a feminist reading of this story. She submits, “The inarticulate suffering of women is by no means an uncommon trope in Conrad: in this instance, the collusion of masculine critic with masculine narrator serves to mask the crucial irony in the tale” (1996: 64). This irony, she proceeds to point out, is that the real “other” in Kennedy’s story is not Yanko, but Amy, whose opposition of silence to this narrative makes her so. Whilst conceding Hooper’s viewpoint, to which this article will return, it must be noted that the volume of textual space allotted to the figure of Yanko far exceeds that accorded to Amy, who is subsumed as part of Colebrook society.

While this article acknowledges the mainstream scholarship on this text, its salience as a contemporary reading in the early twenty-first century resides in the manner in which it resonates notions of “race” (which is imbricated in ethnicity), identity, gender politics and multiculturalism – all of which form the thematic bedrock of a large body of literature written since the mid-twentieth century. Whilst the terms “race” and “ethnicity” are treated as distinct categories in anthropology and the social sciences, the United Nations convention on the elimination of racial discrimination held in December 1965 did not draw a strict distinction between racial and ethnic discrimination, declaring that superiority based on racial differentiation “is

scientifically false, morally condemnable, socially unjust and dangerous” (International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination – Online).

Ngugi wa Thiong’o claims that racism has been part of all the wars fought in Europe and the world since the seventeenth and eighteenth century (1993: 123). As an issue of contention or contestation, racism remains a major preoccupation in the discourse of the human sciences in the twenty-first century. The task of interrogating notions of otherness and the false premises on which they are based, is an imperative for scholarship in our time, from the perspectival space of postcoloniality. Yanko’s story is Conrad’s exploration of the racist recesses of the human psyche, which manifest themselves in discrimination based on outward appearances. It is not a superior civilisation that persecutes Yanko when he lands in Colebrook. Through his textured irony, Conrad makes this point clear. Mr. Foster who discriminates against Yanko on grounds of blatant racism and xenophobia is no paragon of virtue. Apart from his mercenary interest in his daughter’s employment, he has eloped with his widowed father’s servant. Although Yanko’s Catholicism is regarded as a superstitious creed by the villagers, their own form of Christianity is depraved and uncharitable. The narrator observes with dry irony that if Miss Swaffer had not worn a crucifix, Yanko would have doubted if he were in a Christian country at all (*TS*: 128).

This article postulates the view that the notion of Yanko’s “race”, ethnicity and identity become blurred, if not confounded. This is clearly illustrated when Yanko lands on the shores of England. Mr. Smith, the employer of Amy, who first sees this strange creature, remarks to the narrator, “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?” (*TS*: 126). With his dark hair, olive complexion and strange physiognomy, the locals surmise he could be an inhabitant from the Mediterranean region, or the Basque region from Spain, hence they ply him unsuccessfully with Spanish and French. The reference to “Hindoo” (an archaic variation of Hindu) suggests Yanko might be an inhabitant of India. Strictly speaking, a Hindu is an adherent of the religion Hinduism, but the archaic spelling of that word denotes that in the colonial era the term “Hindoo” referred loosely to an Indian. India was not only a jewel amongst the British Crown’s possessions but also the alien Orient and as such misunderstood and highly likely to be essentialised and stereotyped. The tendency to label, or rather mislabel the other, is fraught with inaccuracies which can be racially offensive. With Yanko, a darker-skinned Caucasian from the Eastern Carpathians, the misnomer “Hindoo” attains its highest level of essentialism to serve the rhetoric of the savage other who needs to be civilised. Edward Said, in his thesis on Orientalism, has commented incisively on Europe’s tendency to assert its cultural dominance

or *hegemony* (a concept he adopts from Antonio Gramsci) over its conquered peoples (1995[1978]: 7):

[...] the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures. There is in addition the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness, usually overriding the possibility that a more independent, or more skeptical [sic], thinker might have had different views on the matter.

It is not surprising that a simple villager like Mr. Smith should be confused about the identity of a man from the East Carpathian Mountains. The similarities between the fate of Yanko and Conrad's own life have been the staple of most commentaries. Here is an account of how a sophisticated man of letters like H.G. Wells reacted on seeing Conrad for the first time (cited in Baines 1959: 233):

At first he impressed me, as he impressed Henry James, as the strangest of creatures ... He had a dark retreating face with a very carefully trimmed and pointed beard, a trouble-wrinkled forehead and very troubled dark eyes, and the gestures of his hands and arms were from the shoulders and very Oriental indeed .... He spoke English strangely ... Conrad with Mrs. Conrad and his small blond-haired bright-eyed boy, would come over to Sandgate ... driving a little black pony ... with loud cries and endearments in Polish, to the dismay of all beholders.

It is a commonplace that language, as a culturally embedded phenomenon, is a strong signifier of identity and otherness as well as race. Benedict Anderson (1983: 140) has famously asserted: "Through that language, encountered at mother's knee and parted with only at the grave, pasts are restored". Robert J.C. Young (1995: 64) contends that racial theory was established on two initially independent bases, namely physiology and language. He argues further, through detailed references to J.F. Blumenbach, who in the 1770s classified human races into twenty-eight varieties, that psychological classification was transformed by the discoveries of contemporary linguistics. The discovery of the Indo-European family of languages linked European languages to the ancient language of India, Sanskrit and an ultimate protolanguage originating in Asia from which the Aryan Caucasians had supposedly come. It was Blumenbach, according to Young, who invented the term "Caucasian" to describe a superior white race (ibid., p. 65). This clash between Indo-European and Semitic languages formed the basis of the racial dialectic that dominated the thinking of the latter part of the nineteenth century until the twentieth century. How language came to be conflated with notions of superiority and inferiority can be witnessed in the division of the Aryan and Semitic races which eventuated in the Holocaust of 1939-1945.



The cogency with which Edward Said (1995[1978]: 233) makes this point on the correlation of race with culture and language and the complicity of linguists in this matter deserves more than a passing mention:

It was assumed that if languages were as distinct from each other as the linguists said they were, then too the language users – their minds, cultures, potentials, and even their bodies – were different in similar ways. And these distinctions had the force of ontological, empirical truth behind them, together with the convincing demonstration of such truth in studies of origins, development, character, and destiny .... A scientist could no more escape such origins in his research than an Oriental could escape “the Semites” or “the Arabs” or “the Indians” from which his present reality – debased, colonized, backward – excluded him ....

Said argues that “the Oriental was linked to such elements in Western society as delinquents, the insane, women, and the poor, having in common an identity best described as lamentably alien” (ibid., p. 207). Yanko, who is believed to have come from the East, is regarded in a similar light. The narrator, Dr Kennedy, tells the frame narrator that Yanko’s “burst of rapid, senseless speech persuaded [Smith] at once that he had to do with an escaped lunatic [...] Smith has not in his heart given up his secret conviction of the man’s essential insanity to this very day” (TS: 120). The issue of Yanko’s foreign language, as well as his ensuing victimisation by the society of Colebrook, is foreshadowed in one of the most resonant ironies in the story. It is said early in the story that Amy would feel pity for all kinds of creatures; that she was devoted to Mrs. Smith’s dogs, cats and canaries (TS: 109). As much as the parrot exercised upon her a positive fascination, she was not able to rescue it when that outlandish bird, attacked by the cat, shrieked for help in human accents (TS: 109). That outlandish bird which fascinated her, symbolically translates into Yanko whom she cannot save when he cries for just a little water in human accents.

If Yanko is the alien who has been “civilized” and taught to communicate in a foreign tongue thus becoming “colonized” in the process, then his son, named Yanko (Little John), becomes the site for the father’s reclamation of his cultural essence. Homi Bhabha (1994: 126) suggests that the threatened “loss” (Bhabha’s emphasis) of meaningfulness in cross-cultural interpretation becomes a hermeneutic project for the restoration of culture’s “essence” or authenticity. The specific cultural essence in Yanko’s case is his lost language. To reclaim his own linguistic space, to give voice to his silenced self, he wants to teach his son his own language. This becomes the point of contention between husband and wife and leads to marital discord.

Chinua Achebe’s animus against the author of *Heart of Darkness* did not simply end with the ignominious charge of racism but extended to anti-Semitism and xenophobia as well (1990: 126-127). Regarding the latter, he has said, “But even those not blinkered, like Conrad, with xenophobia, can

be astonishingly blind” (127). These charges are made briefly in passing and are not substantiated by Achebe. One assumes that the charge of xenophobia is subsumed under the broader charge of racism in the essay as a whole. As for anti-Semitism, if the passing reference to Jews as conniving with human traffickers responsible for the plight of people such as Yanko (*TS*: 116) smacks of anti-Semitism, then Conrad is being no more anti-Jewish than he is anti-German or anti-Scandinavian or anti-Chinese when he wishes to register his disapproval of such people in various contexts throughout his fiction. Whilst Conrad is guilty of stereotyping when he wishes to distance himself from the “otherness” of their conduct, nationalist or ethnic characteristics in his fiction are often markers of identity such as “His father [...] cleared [a] plot of fair pasture land on the sunny slope of a pine-clad pass to a Jew inn-keeper” (*TS*: 117). The fact that the Jew is depicted as materially better off in the land from where Yanko comes, is being no more anti-Semitic than, for instance, Ngugi wa Thiong’o could imaginably be anti-Indian in his novel *A Grain of Wheat* where he describes, in factual terms, Indian shopkeepers in Kenya living in filthy conditions and exploiting Africans (1967: 170). However, to return to Achebe’s charge of xenophobia, it is richly ironic that the Conrad who is accused of being “blinkerred” by his xenophobia should write “Amy Foster” which is a searing indictment of the xenophobia of the small English town of Colebrook, which contributes directly to the doomed marriage of Yanko and Amy Foster.

John Palmer (1968: 83) regards Yanko as an inverted Kurtz, “a civilizable savage emerging from darkness to join himself with a white Intended and suffer the same destruction of self that Conrad’s extremists along this axis usually suffer”. The animal imagery in terms of which Yanko is presented is indicative of the non-human status he is accorded in this hostile environment. After his night of ordeal, he is found the next day in a pig-pound and in Smith’s account he is “indeed a sort of wild animal” (*TS*: 126). When this “horrid-looking man” (*TS*: 118) first lands in England, the driver of a milk-cart whips him, children throw stones at him, and a woman beats him “courageously with her umbrella over the head” (*TS*: 119) before fleeing from the sight of him. Even in death he resembles an animal. When he dies of a fever, the doctor finds him lying face down with “his body in a puddle” (*TS*: 140).

Like any “civilizable savage”, or Shakespearean Caliban, Yanko acquires a smattering of the English language which he speaks like an alien to the tongue. He soon manifests traits of civilised conduct when he begins to till the land and milk the cows. He can sing and dance and literally rise above the others who are weighed down by the humdrum routine of their dreary lives: “He vaulted over the stiles, paced these slopes with a long elastic stride that made him noticeable at a great distance, and had lustrous black eyes. He was so different from the mankind around [...]” (*TS*: 111). As he begins to be accepted in society, “people became used to see him. But they

never became used to him” (*TS*: 132). He remains the quintessential other, alienated and uncertain of his future, “like a man transplanted into another planet [...] separated by an immense space from his past and by an immense ignorance from his future” (*TS*: 132). After he rescues Mr. Swaffer’s grandchild from drowning, he earns a place at the kitchen table where he is served his meals. All-in-all, he is the archetypal Noble Savage, the Lacanian “Other”, both desired for his exotic good looks, courage and physicality but held in fear and awe.

It is not surprising therefore that the locals’ xenophobia and latent racism should reach fever-pitch when Yanko announces his intention to marry Amy: “It was only when he declared his purpose to get married that I fully understood how, for a hundred futile and inappreciable reasons, how – shall I say odious? – he was to all the countryside” (*TS*: 134). Amy’s father had “a very genuine aversion to that match. He contended that the fellow was very good with sheep, but was not fit for any girl to marry” (*TS*: 135). It is also not surprising that the marriage of Amy and Yanko should break down irretrievably. Although their child becomes the object of the tug-of-war between them, the general animosity of the society they live in has finally impacted on their idyllic marriage: “People were saying that Amy Foster was beginning to find out what sort of man she had married [...] His wife 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 the mountains” (*TS*: 137). The inevitable breakdown of their marriage seems to be a vindication of the suspicions the neighbours had harboured all along.

In the opening sentence of her essay titled, “‘Oh, I hope he won’t talk’. Narrative and Silence in ‘Amy Foster’”, Myrtle Hooper expresses puzzlement that Conrad should choose to name his story after the woman rather than the man (1996: 51). In a shrewd feminist reading, she proceeds to her conclusion that the real other in the story is not Yanko but the silenced Amy. Such a reading, whilst serving to bolster her “feminine sense of injustice” (*ibid.*, p. 53), does not take into consideration the fact that Conrad did contemplate alternative titles. In a letter to his literary agent Pinker, dated 3 June 1901, Conrad refers to these titles: “... the short story (entitled – either ‘A Husband’ or ‘A Castaway’) will be ready in a week” (Karl & Davies 1986: 330). It is reasonable to suggest, as Hooper does, that Conrad decided to name the story after the wife in order to give her a voice after effectively silencing her. This article, however, adopts the view that Yanko certainly occupied central space in Conrad’s consciousness during the writing of the story, but in a mimetic and performative gesture the writer erases Yanko’s identity from the title, just as the entire village, including Amy Foster, has elided his history in that village. This process of erasure is hinted at in the ominous response of Amy’s father to news of Yanko’s death from Kennedy: “I don’t know that it isn’t for the best” (*TS*: 141). The smothering of Yanko’s voice, which once provided a lively and dramatic

interlude in the provincial lives of the villagers, is almost achieved by the mother's "hanging over the boy's cot in a very passion of maternal tenderness" (*TS*: 142). Almost, but not quite. If the rampant xenophobia of the villagers succeeds in obliterating the history of Yanko, a devout believer who never failed to say his prayers, a trace of it, the only one in Colebrook, remains in one spot – the "marriage register of the parish" (*TS*: 133). Yanko's identity has found a sanctuary in the church even if his fellow men deny him a place in their hearts.

Conventional scholarship on "Amy Foster" has focused mainly on the traumatic experiences of the protagonist Yanko (in some ways an *alter ego* of Conrad himself), a castaway in a foreign land, coupled with the hostile attitude of the locals to his alterity and the failure of his foreign language to save him when he is ill and dying of thirst. This article has endeavoured to nuance the discourse by factoring in, and problematising the notion of "race", which is imbricated in language and xenophobia, to account for his alterity. To this end, the precepts of race theory from Arthur de Gobineau to Slavoj Žižek, and the Orientalist discourse of Edward W. Said have been sourced. Yanko's "race" proves to be a conundrum to the white folks of the English village of Colebrook and it predetermines his fate, somewhat in the manner of a Greek tragedy. Displaced geographically, culturally and linguistically, Yanko is a metonymic inscription of alterity, whose attempts to reclaim his linguistic and cultural identity end in failure. Dr. Kennedy's account of shipwrecked people like Yanko is a resounding testimony to racism and xenophobia not only in the context of the story but proleptically in the twenty-first century: "Often the castaways were only saved from drowning to die miserably from starvation on a barren coast; others suffered violent death or else slavery, passing through years of precarious existence with people to whom their strangeness was an object of suspicion, dislike or fear" (*TS*: 113).

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