

## The Inescapability of Tragic Human Fate in Joseph Conrad's *Amy Foster*

Nieuchronny tragizm ludzkiego losu: *Amy Foster* Josepha Conrada

### Abstrakt

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest ukazanie, w jaki sposób Joseph Conrad w opowiadaniu *Amy Foster* czerpie z tradycji antycznej tragedii greckiej, oraz zaprezentowanie motywów klasycznych, które pojawiają się w tym tekście. Jednym z najważniejszych tematów poruszanych przez Conrada jest nieuchronność ludzkiego losu, często bardzo tragicznego. Mocno osadzony w realiach swoich czasów i kulturze zachodnioeuropejskiej Conrad odziedziczył po wieku dziewiętnastym przeświadczenie, że świat nie jest już pod opieką dobrego Boga. Na tym tragicznym tle przedstawia autor losy Janka, młodego karpackiego górala, który cudem ocalałszy z katastrofy morskiej, doznaje okrutnego odrzucenia i obojętności ze strony mieszkańców angielskiej wioski, aby potem im zaufać i poślubić tytułową Amy. Szczęście jednak nie trwa długo, gdyż dziewczynie nie udaje się Janka w pełni zrozumieć. Opuszcza męża w chorobie, a on umiera w samotności. Inność młodego mężczyzny oraz wartości, którym pozostaje wierny, wydają się jego jedyną winą (*hamartia*). Jego życiem zdaje się kierować niewyjaśniona i okrutna siła, co można porównać do władzy kapryśnych bogów nad bohaterami greckich tragedii czy eposów Homera. Janko umiera bez rozpoznania czy zrozumienia własnej sytuacji, co sprawia, że jego koniec wydaje się jeszcze tragiczniejszy. W ten sposób bolesne odczucie pustki metafizycznej zostaje spotęgowane próżnią epistemologiczną. Odrobinę nadziei tej ciemnej wizji dodaje jednak pełen empatii komentarz dwu narratorów zewnętrznych w szkatułkowej kompozycji tekstu, którzy umieszczając historię Janka w perspektywie uniwersalnej, odgrywają rolę chóru z tragedii antycznej. Paradoksalnie, snując opowieść o nieczulości i beznadziejnej przepaści między ludźmi, sami dają oni

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świadectwo współczucia, zrozumienia i udanej komunikacji, co świadczyć może również o efekcie swoistej *katharsis*, do której prowadzić może sama literatura.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Conrad, los, *fatum*, tragedia, starożytność, *Amy Foster*

**Key words:** Conrad, fate, tragedy, Antiquity, *Amy Foster*

## Introduction

Written in 1901, *Amy Foster* is a short story by Joseph Conrad first published in the *Illustrated London News* and included in the *Typhoon and Other Stories* volume of 1903. As has been argued by numerous critics<sup>1</sup>, the first-person frame narrative enclosing Doctor Kennedy's yarn about Yanko Goorall, a shipwrecked emigrant from the Carpathian Mountains who finds his miserable end in an English village, the novella may well reflect some of Conrad's own fears, anxieties and the sense of personal estrangement as a Polish exile in an adopted country. In wider terms, the novella has often been interpreted as a parable of potential meanness to a fellow human being.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, many have seen in Yanko an Everyman (Guerard 1970: 50): he longs for happiness, friendship and love, but is tossed by the cruel sea on a bleak shore, where his hopes are thwarted by suspicion and misunderstanding.

A vivacious young highlander from the Carpathians, Yanko is tricked by dishonest swindlers offering a job in America, and having narrowly survived a shipwreck off the English shore, is treated cruelly and incomprehensibly by the parochial villagers he encounters. Gradually he manages to acquire the English language, acclimatize and eventually marry the eponymous Amy Foster, a dull girl whose humane impulses were the first acts of kindness he experienced on the foreign soil. Grant him charity as she does, Yanko's refuge and happiness in marriage are short-lived since Amy, terrified by his feverish and incomprehensible ravings in a foreign language, abandons him in his illness and leaves him to die of what is later certified as "heart failure" (175).<sup>3</sup> The story appears to display an array of typically Conradian themes of misunderstanding between people, the struggle between the contradictory claims of human impulses (Graver 1969: 106) as well as man's hopeless loneliness and his helplessness in a universe which does not appear to be governed by a beneficent God. The miserable plight of Yanko is indeed very pitiful, as Doctor Kennedy declares at the outset of his yarn:

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<sup>1</sup> See: Guerard 1970: 49–51; Graver 1969: 104–108; Herndon 1960: 549–566; Russell 1967: 208–209.

<sup>2</sup> See: Guerard 1970: 49–51; Graver 1969: 104–108.

<sup>3</sup> Quotations from Joseph Conrad's *Amy Foster* will be cited with page numbers only.

It is indeed hard upon a man to find himself a lost stranger, helpless, incomprehensible, and of a mysterious origin, in some obscure corner of the earth. Yet amongst all the adventurers shipwrecked in all the wild parts of the world, there is not one, it seems to me, that ever had to suffer a fate so simply *tragic* as the man I am speaking of, the most innocent of adventurers cast out by the sea in the bight of this bay, almost within the sight from this very window. (155) (my italics)

Torn away from his familiar surroundings, unfortunate in his sea voyage, treated inhumanely, continually misunderstood and alienated due to his innate vitality and foreign habits, and finally betrayed by his own wife, his sole benefactress among hostile people, Yanko, “the most innocent of adventurers”, seems to be fated because of who he is. His struggle with the powers governing his lot is doomed to failure. It could be argued that due to its tragic dimension, but also, to other themes and motifs, the novella seems to bear resemblance to the patterns of ancient Greek tragedy outlined in Aristotle’s *Poetics* and exhibited in such works as, for example, Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*.

## Fate in a Universe without God

At the turn of the twentieth century, Conrad offers a particularly heart-rending vision of the world where, due to the decline of religious faith, the Christian God, who – unlike the Greek gods – did use to provide a meaningful framework for man’s fate – is no longer seen as the source of meaning.

As Sewall notes,

Historically, literary tragedy has always appeared at the mature period of a culture, not at its beginning [...] It puts to the test of action all the formulations of philosophy and religion [...] [and] comes after a long period of relative stability, when a dominant myth or religious orthodoxy or philosophic view has provided a coherent and sustaining way of life. Suddenly the original terror looms close and the old formulations cannot dispel it. The conflict between man and his destiny assumes once more the ultimate magnitude. (1959: 7)

Deeply steeped in the intellectual atmosphere of the nineteenth century, Conrad reflected a bleak vision of man’s lot. Among the factors shaping the outlook of the times was the decline of religious belief, the rising prestige of science<sup>4</sup> and the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, all of which contributed to a general sense of loss and disinheritance. Man was no longer perceived as a wonderful creature made in the image of God and guided by His meaningful plan, but, rather, either a machine endowed with conscience, which even in a crowd re-

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<sup>4</sup> Here it is necessary to mention the dramatic impact of Lord Kelvin’s law of entropy, which created a chilly vision of death of man due to the cooling of the sun, and, crucially, Darwinism.

mained forever lonely, or a predetermined animal driven by instincts, whose evolution was not devised by a divine Providence but by sheer accident, thoughtless atavistic competition for survival or a mechanistic force which is far from benevolent. In a famous letter to R.B. Cunninghame Graham, Conrad wrote:

There is – let us say – a machine. It evolved itself [...] out of a chaos of scraps of iron and behold! – it knits. I am horrified at the horrible work and stand appalled. I feel it ought to embroider – but it goes on knitting. You come and say: “this is all right; it’s only a question of the right kind of oil. Let us use this – for instance – celestial oil and the machine will start to embroider a most beautiful design in purple and gold.” Will it? Alas no. You cannot by any special lubrication make embroidery with a knitting machine. And the most withering thought is that the infamous thing has made itself; made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. It is a tragic accident – and it has happened. You can’t interfere with it. The last drop of bitterness is in the suspicion that you can’t even smash it. In virtue of that truth one and immortal which lurks in the force that made it spring into existence it is what it is – and it is indestructible.

It knits us in and knits us out. It has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions – and nothing matters. (20 December 1897, 1969: 56–57)

In such circumstances, free will is an illusion, each individual is a puppet of the universe and there appears to be no commonly acknowledged frame of reference as values seem groundless. As Sewall describes the late nineteenth century:

Traditional certainties (in this instance the Christian revelation and ethic joined with the optimistic formulations of the Enlightenment and of the Romantics) failed to accommodate individual experience; and the failure was seen as not mere personal disorientation, to be expressed in melancholy lyrics, but as a fault at the very heart of things, recalling the original terror and bringing the nature of man once more into dark question. Mysteries once thought solved, at least officially, returned to haunt the imagination. (1959: 52)

It has also been noted that tragedy raises the issue of the power which governs human lot – be it God, fate, society or instincts – and man’s hopeless struggles against it. “To live in the same world as the dangers they embody dramatically is the inescapable human condition, and if tragedy ‘demonstrates’ anything at all, it is no more than this. The question asked is ultimately the question of *power*. In its simplest form: What will have power to harm, and how and in what circumstances will it take effect?” (Brereton 1968: 117). Brereton also claims that tragedy “will not flourish in areas either of strong faith or of strong scepticism. In the first, the sort of power with which it is concerned operates according to absolute principles, knowledge of which is conceptualised as Truth. In the second there are no absolute principles and a search for them would appear futile or absurd. The field of tragedy lies between these two” (1968: 124). Any analysis of the powers which potentially govern human lot needs to take into account not only the forces which influence man but also the issue of man’s responsibility and influence on his destiny.

## *Hamartia?*

In Aristotelian terms, tragedy represents the disastrous downfall of the character whose misery is due to an error rather than a depravity (48). Brereton notices that a tragedy is often a study of “a single but representative human destiny” and such is the case with Oedipus who “carries within him the germ of his own destruction,” he is guilty of the crimes he is punished for because “he is the man he is” (Brereton 1968: 78). “What we do and what we are inseparable; we have no control over what we are and usually no true knowledge of it; it is ourself in the most intimate sense, yet its nature is decided by an outside agency – God, the gods, fate, social forces, or a fortuitous combination of genes. There is nothing whatever we can do about it” (Brereton 1968: 78). Oedipus was fated and his attempts to evade the curse only aggravated the situation as fate is precisely what one cannot escape. In Yanko’s case, his fault seems to lie in his otherness and intrinsic qualities, both of which isolate him from others. Even when, eventually the young man establishes himself as a part of the local society, 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 good will, 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. His quick, fervent utterance positively shocked everybody. “An excitable devil,” they called him. One evening, in the tap-room of the Coach and Horses (having drunk some whisky), he upset them all by singing a love-song of his country. They hooted him down, and he was pained; but Preble, the lame wheelwright, and Vincent, the fat blacksmith, and the other notables too, wanted to drink their evening beer in peace. On another occasion he tried to show them how to dance. The dust rose in clouds from the sanded floor; he leaped straight up amongst the deal tables, struck his heels together, squatted on one heel in front of old Preble, shooting out the other leg, uttered wild and exulting cries, jumped up to whirl on one foot, snapping his fingers above his head – and a stranger carter who was having a drink in there begun to swear, and cleared out with his half-pint in his hand into the bar. But when suddenly he sprung upon a table and continued to dance among the glasses, the landlord interfered. He didn’t want any “acrobat tricks in the tap-room.” They laid their hands on him. Having had a glass or two, Mr. Swaffer’s foreigner tried to expostulate: was ejected forcibly: got a black eye. (168–169)

Despite Yanko’s gradual progress in learning the English language, his speech also continues to be an indelible mark of his otherness. 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).

His passionate nature, enjoyment of song and dance, exuberant vitality, gracefulness, his sense of communion with nature and his sincere and marked religious devotion are all in contrast with the villagers' stolidity, lack of imagination, myopia and parochialism. His characteristic features seem to be the very reasons for widening the gap between himself and others. His intention to marry Amy, the girl who was the first to show him kindness and who seduced him with "the divine quality of her pity" (170), sparks outrage in the village "for a hundred futile and inappreciable reasons" (170), but the girl only has eyes for him. Kennedy remarks that it was only her and himself that could see Yanko's "very real beauty" (170). Soon a baby son Yanko is very proud of is born. "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). However, his strong desire to find understanding and common interests in his own son is, paradoxically, the source of his alienation 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). Similarly to his dancing and singing episodes which only antagonise the villagers, Yanko attempts to vent his natural egoistic desire to express his individuality in unfamiliar surroundings by raising a son who would share his "eccentricities". His natural needs, though, are frustrated as they are not appreciated by the stolid Amy, whose literal short-sightedness seems to be echoed by want of character and myopia in a metaphorical sense. On the other hand, 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 between them (Hooper 1996: 60). If there is any *hamartia* in Yanko, it seems to lie in his otherness, his liveliness, his need for understanding and simple human warmth, and his desire to maintain his identity, combined with his lack of insight. Kennedy starts wondering "whether his difference, his strangeness, were not penetrating 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 Amy fails to overcome. This is also what seems to lie at the core of Yanko's tragedy. Conrad appears to have had ancient patterns in mind; indeed, the theme seems to be introduced at the very beginning of the story, in the following description of the family background of Amy:

She's the daughter of one Isaac Foster, who from a small farmer has sunk into a shepherd; the beginning of his misfortunes dating from his runaway marriage with the cook of his widowed father – a well-to-do, apoplectic grazier, who passionately struck his name off his will, and had been heard to utter threats against his life. But this old affair, scandalous

enough to serve as a motive for a Greek tragedy, arose from the similarity of their characters. There are other tragedies, less scandalous and of a subtler poignancy, arising from irreconcilable differences and from that fear of the Incomprehensible that hangs over all our heads – over all our heads... (151)

### “[L]ove as the Ancients Understood It”

The tragic dimension of Yanko's lot seems to have universal implications: the inability to bridge rifts between individual people is not solely the case of Conrad's outcast but is something every single human being experiences. Furthermore, human emotions governing interpersonal relations are uncontrollable, and, in fact, fated, as if governed by deities capricious just like the gods of Greek mythology:

She fell in love silently, obstinately – perhaps helplessly. It came slowly, but when it came it worked like a powerful spell; it was love as the Ancients understood it: an irresistible and fateful impulse – a possession! Yes, it was in her to become haunted and possessed by a face, by a presence, fatally, as though she had been a pagan worshipper of form under a joyous sky – and to be awakened at last from that mysterious forgetfulness of self, from that enchantment, from that transport, by a fear resembling the unaccountable terror of a brute... (152–153).

Love, which should overcome differences and bond people together, does not offer ultimate solace. What seems to lie beneath Amy's attraction to Yanko in the first place, during their first encounter when she offers the famished man a piece of bread in a gesture of humane kindness, is physicality:

“Can you eat this?” she asked in her soft and timid voice. He must have taken her for a ‘gracious lady.’ 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. She was not frightened. Through his forlorn condition she had observed that he was good-looking. (163)

Yanko the outcast's initial appeal to Amy might be compared to yet another famous scene from the ancient tradition – that of the episode in Book 6 of Homer's *The Odyssey*, when Odysseus is shipwrecked off the shores of the island of Scheria, emerges on the seashore as an outcast and is met by princess Nausicaa and her servants:

Begrimed with salt he made a gruesome sight, and one look at him sent them scuttling in every direction along the jutting spits of sand. Alcinoüs' daughter was the only one to stand firm. Emboldened by Athene, who stopped her limbs from trembling, she checked herself and confronted him, while Odysseus considered whether he should throw his arms round the beautiful girl's knees and so make his prayer, or be content to keep his distance and beg her with all courtesy to give him clothing and direct to the city. [...]

“[...] And now some god has flung me on the shore, no doubt to suffer more disasters here. For I have no hope that my troubles are coming to an end: the Gods have plenty in store for me before that can be. Pity me, my queen. You are the first person I have met after all I have been through, and I do not know a soul in this city or this land. I beg you to direct me to the town and to give me some rag to put round myself [...] And in return may the gods grant you your heart's desire; may they give you a husband and a home, and the harmony that is so much to be desired, since there is nothing nobler or more admirable than when two people who see eye to eye keep house as man and wife, confounding their enemies and delighting their friends, as they themselves know better than anyone.”

“Sir,” said the white-armed Nausicaa, “your manners prove than you are no rascal and no fool; and as for these ordeal of yours, they must have been sent you by Olympian Zeus, who follows his own will in dispensing happiness to people whatever their merits. You have no choice but to endure. But since you have come to our country and our city here, you certainly shall not want for clothing or anything else that an unfortunate outcast has the right to expect from those he approaches.” [...]

When Odysseus retired to sit down by himself on the sea-shore, he was radiant with comeliness and grace. Nausicaa gazed at him in admiration and said to her fair attendants:

“Listen, my white-armed maids, while I tell you what I have been thinking. This man's arrival among the Phaenicians, who are so near the gods themselves, was not unpremeditated by the Olympian powers. For when first we met I thought he cut a sorry figure, but now he looks like the gods who live in heaven. That is the kind of man whom I could fancy for a husband, if he would settle here. I only hope he will choose to stay.” (Homer 1945: 106–109)

Whatever people fall on has been designed by Jove “as he chooses”, it is heavens that grant happiness or misery and organise their fate. Moreover, Nausicaa's attraction to the mysterious outcast seems similar to what Amy experiences on her first encounter with Yanko. However, Homer describes a much kinder welcome and effective aid offered eventually to the outcast by the locals than what Yanko is ever to receive in the village of Brenzett. The love in which the young highlander finds solace after a long period of alienation and desperate homesickness fails to provide lasting happiness, and the tragic finale and death of “heart failure” appears the more bitter.

## The Universal Dimension

The atmosphere of hard toil, overwhelming melancholy and man's insignificance in the scheme of things is introduced at the very outset of the story in the frame narrator's impressionistic description of the English countryside:

The 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. From the edge of a copse a wagon with two horses was rolling gently along the ridge. Raised above our heads upon the sky-line, it loomed up against the red sun, triumphantly

big, enormous, like a chariot of giants drawn by two slow-stepping steeds of legendary proportions. And the clumsy figure of the man plodding at the head of the leading horse projected itself on the background of the Infinite with a heroic uncouthness. The end of the carter's whip quivered high up in the blue. (151)

The image of the wagon may bring to mind the famous Chariot Allegory of Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*, in which the human soul is presented in terms of an uneasy balance that reason (the charioteer) should strive to achieve between sensual passions (the black horse) and moral impulses (the white horse).<sup>5</sup> If it could be argued that this classical allusion could be detected in Conrad's story, it seems that the irrationality of erotic attraction – which failed to be a sufficient basis for the happiness of the protagonists – overpowered all other instincts and powers governing human behaviour and feelings.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the touching irony lying behind the contrast of the impression of heroism and the bloody toil introduce a tragic dimension on a universal scale, foreshadowing the general mood of the story: man is merely a puppet in a universe which is – at best – indifferent to his suffering and efforts. Conrad's descriptions are telling:

A sense of penetrating sadness, like that inspired by a grave strain of music, disengaged itself from the silence of the fields. The men we met walked past, slow, unsmiling, with downcast eyes, as if the melancholy of an overburdened earth had weighted their feet, bowed their shoulders, borne down their glances.

"Yes," said the doctor to my remark, "one would think the earth is under a curse, since of all her children these that cling to her the closest are uncouth in body and as leaden of gait as if their very hearts were loaded with chains". (153)

The excerpt seems to be in keeping with Sewall's claim that "[i]t is this sense of ancient evil [...] of the permanence and the mystery of human suffering, that is basic to the tragic sense of life" (Sewall 1959: 6). As Conrad wrote in a letter to R.B. Cunninghame Graham: "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" (31 January 1898, 1969: 70–71). In another of his letters, he complains: "I am not the master but the slave of the peripeties and accidents (generally beastly) of existence" (1 May 1898, 1969: 84).

A "persistent awareness that human destiny is affected by uncontrollable factors and that its usual condition is unhappiness" (Brereton 1968: 56) may be what the tragic sense of life is tantamount to. The suffering of the tragic protagonist and the scale of his downfall seem, characteristically, often to be disproportionate to the human cause and his fault (Brereton 1968: 40). What remains, also

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<sup>5</sup> The Allegory of the Charioteer is to be found in sections 246–254 of *Phaedrus* (1973: 50–61).

<sup>6</sup> That Amy's physical attraction is insufficient in the face of the harsh reality of her life with Yanko is discussed in Guerard's interpretation of the story (Guerard 1970: 49–51).

in the case of *Amy Foster*, is a burning sense of injustice and incomprehensible senselessness. The vessel that rammed into the German ship carrying emigrants, and among them Yanko,

then had gone out either scathless or damaged, who shall say; but had gone out, unknown, unseen, and fatal, to perish mysteriously at sea. Of her nothing ever came to light, and yet the hue and cry that was raised all over the world would have found her out if she had been in existence anywhere on the face of the waters. 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).

The plight of the ships and their passengers is described in terms of a mysterious and skillful crime, but one without any identified perpetrator. Furthermore, Yanko's lonely death is foreshadowed by the hail of stones and cruelty with which he is showered on finding himself on the English soil: "From that moment he is plainly in the toils of his obscure and touching destiny" (159). Kennedy declares – not without classical references, apparently – that it is "as if the net of fate had been drawn closer around him" (172). Yanko is often likened to a helpless "animal under a net" (154) or "a bear in a cage" (160). Tragically enough, and in a parallel to Oedipus's story, Yanko in attempting to escape his destiny of loneliness and hopeless isolation only worsens his situation and tightens the hold of the "net" which ensnares him. Moreover, in Kennedy's eyes both Yanko and his young son resemble "a bird in a snare" (175); it seems the desperate and entrapping loneliness is going to be perpetuated.

The cruelty and inescapability of fate is often rendered by means of powerful poetic imagery of "the frigid splendour of a hazy sea lying motionless under the moon" where "[n]ot a whisper, not a splash, not a stir of the shingle, not a footstep, not a sigh came up from the earth below [...] and Kennedy's voice, speaking behind me, passed through the wide casement, to vanish outside in a chill and sumptuous stillness" (154). Tellingly enough, Conrad uses the same phrase twice: "The Doctor came to the window and looked out at the frigid splendour of the sea, immense in the haze, as if enclosing all the earth with all the hearts lost among passions of love and fear" (172). The first sentences of the story are devoted to a description of the shores of Eastbay, the nearby town and the wall which "defends it from the sea" (149). Yanko's "straight-glancing, quick, far-reaching eyes [...] only seemed to flinch and lose their amazing power before the immensity of the sea" (167). The closing sentence, uttered by Kennedy, on the other hand, returns to the motif of the cruel and inexplicable power that controls the fate of Yanko, who was "cast out mysteriously by the sea to perish in the supreme disaster of loneliness and despair" (175). Either coldly indifferent, or sometimes even cruel and malicious, the sea seems to stand for the force which governs human lot as well as for the general and overwhelming hostility of the universe. This could be the case in yet another parallel with the ancient Greek

tradition, where one of the most famous instances of gods' spite against men is Poseidon's treatment of Ulysses at sea in Book 5 of Homer's *The Odyssey*:

But now Poseidon, Lord of the Earthquake, who was on his way back from his visit to the Ethiopians, observed him from the distant mountains of the Solymi. The sight of Odysseus sailing over the seas added fresh fuel to his anger. He shook his head and muttered to himself: "So I had only to go to Ethiopia for the gods to change their mind about Odysseus! And there he is, close to the Phaenicians' land, where he is destined to bring his long ordeal to an end. Nevertheless I mean to have his bellyful of trouble yet."

Whereupon he marshalled the clouds and seizing his trident in his hands stirred up the sea. He roused the stormy blasts of every wind that blows, and covered land and water alike with a canopy of cloud. Darkness swooped down from the sky. East Wind and South and the tempestuous West fell to one another, and from the North came a white squall, rolling a great wave in its van. Odysseus' knees shook and his spirit quailed. In anguish he communed with that great heart of his:

"Poor wretch, what will your end be now? I fear the goddess prophesied all too well when she told me I should have my full measure of agony on the sea before I reached my native land". (Homer 1945: 95)

Though it is in an overtly malevolent and violent manner that Neptune interferes with Ulysses' life by means of his own domain of the sea, the similarity with Conrad's story seems to lie in man's helplessness against the forces which control him, which is the central issue of tragedy. Sewall notices that Homer often gives "a sense of loss and doom, even while he shows his heroes as capable of courage and loyalty, and his gods often as benign. But human suffering is in general presented as unrelated and haphazard." "We men are wretched things," says Achilles wearily, 'and the gods who have no cares themselves have woven sorrow into the very pattern of our lives'" (Sewall 1959: 29). In the ancient world "the Greeks affirmed absolutes like justice and order, but revealed a universe which promised neither and often dealt out the reverse" (Sewall 1959: 46).

"Why?"

The scene of Yanko's miserable end reverberates with a tragic echo the more painfully because of its religious connotations.

The fever had left him, taking with it the heat of life. And with his panting breast and lustrous eyes he reminded me again of a wild creature under the net; of a bird caught in a snare. She had left him. She had left him – sick – helpless – thirsty. The spear of the hunter had entered his very soul. '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.

And as I turned away to shut the door he pronounced the word 'Merciful!' and expired. (175)

Likened to a helpless animal under the net of fate and hurt in his very soul, Yanko is overwhelmed by the hopelessness and incomprehensibility of his situation. That his desperate cry of “Why?” is answered with a silent but jarring void may resemble the Biblical Job and the issue of undeserved suffering: “Why died I not from the womb? why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly? Why did the knees prevent me? or why the breasts that I should suck? For now should I have lain still and been quiet, I should have slept: then had I been at rest” (Job 3:11–13). Sewall’s comment that the mark of the Book of Job is “on all tragedy of alienation, from Marlowe’s *Faustus* to Camus’ *Stranger*, in which there is a sense of separation from a once known, normative, and loved deity or cosmic order or principle of conduct” (Sewall 1959: 44) seems applicable in the case of Conrad’s philosophical background and outlook on universe. Strikingly enough, a similar outbreak comes from Sophocles’ *Oedipus*:

O Kithairon,  
 why did you shelter me and take me in?  
 Why did you let me live? Better to have died on that bare slope of yours  
 Where no man would ever have seen me or known the secret of my birth! (ll. 1807–1811,  
 1978: 87)<sup>7</sup>

Job sees his misfortunes as typical of man’s lot and what saves him is the fact that his thoughts turn outward, but the central question about the sense of suffering remains unanswered (Sewall 1959: 18, 21).

In *Amy Foster*, the gust of wind and swish of rain which answer Yanko’s appeal are the more cruel and ironic because of the youth’s devout religious faith and trustful piety. During the accident of the ship “he struggled instinctively like an animal under a net, and this blind struggle threw him out into a field. [...] 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). There is also irony in the mention of his mother back home, “a pious old woman who wanted to offer prayers and make a vow for his safety” (156) and for this purpose asked to be driven to a Carmelite convent. Yanko strove to keep up his habits also in the new surroundings: “He got his food at the back door, carried it in hands, carefully, to his outhouse, and, sitting alone on his pallet, would make the sign of the cross before he began. Beside the same pallet, kneeling in the early darkness of the short days, he recited aloud the Lord’s Prayer before he slept” (165), and among hostile people: “If it hadn’t been for the steel cross at Miss Swaffer’s belt he would not, he confessed, have known whether he was in a Christian country at all. He used to cast stealthy glances at it, and fell comforted. There was nothing here the same as in his country! The earth and the water were different; there were no images of the Redeemer by the

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<sup>7</sup> Kithairon is the name of the mountain ridge where the baby Oedipus is found by the Corinthian despite being left there to perish.

roadside” (166). Even though the villagers would gladly see him convert to High Church, he sticks to his old ways:

They could not, however, break him of his habit of crossing himself, but he went so far as take off the string with a couple of brass medals the size of a sixpence, a tiny metal cross, and a square sort of scapulary which he wore round his neck. He hung them on the wall by the side of his bed, and he was still to be heard every evening reciting the Lord's Prayer, in incomprehensible words and in a slow, fervent tone, as he had heard his old father do at the head of all the kneeling family, big and little, on every evening of his life. (168)

Yanko also craves to be able to share his religious devotion, as part of his identity, with his son: “He expected the boy to repeat the prayer aloud after him by-and-by, as he used to do after his old father when he was a child – in his own country” (172). Despite of it being yet another element alienating him from his wife, Yanko's faith, and the words of his fervent prayers to God to “deliver us from all evil”, stand in an ironic contrast to what befalls him and to the indifferent reply his question is met with at the very end.

### *Anagnorisis?*

The metaphysical void presented in the story seems to be related to an epistemological one. The classic Aristotelian tragedy assumes *anagnorisis* – the moment of recognition – as a necessary element, as is the case in *Oedipus the King*, where self-exploration leads to self-discovery, and where the truth about the identity of the protagonist lays at the core. The answer to the Sphinx's riddle (and thus to the problems of Thebans), as well as to Oedipus' question “Who am I?”, seems to be “Man”, and “the gods who preside over his destiny have little care for whatever agony he may endure to achieve this knowledge. There is no use seeking any justice in the process, nor does the knowledge, which is hard and ‘tragic’, necessarily compensate for the suffering (Sewall 1959: 42). However, the tragic dimension of Yanko's lot seems to be only aggravated by his incomprehension of the situation. The drama of the marine catastrophe, the cruelty and hostility he first encounters on the part of the English people are beyond his comprehension. He fails to perceive what estranges him from Amy and does not understand how her kindness and “golden heart” could eventually give way to fear, lack of understanding and any good will and result in her abandoning him in illness and escaping with the child. Desperate and frustrated, Yanko dies without any self-reflection and without having reached any knowledge about man in general. Not so in the case of the king of Thebes: “Oedipus did answer the question ‘Who am I?’, in the sense of the traditional Greek warning ‘Know thyself!’. This means ‘know you are human’, for every man, even Oedipus, is ‘an insubstantial shadow’, ‘the shadow of smoke’” (Taplin 1995: 153). In this sense,

the answer that could be given to Yanko's "Why?" is "Because you are human". It is simply inherent in human nature to be subject to cruel fate and unhappiness. "Unjustified suffering must be accepted as part of a mystery, it is not for man to reason why. The universe is a realm of infinite complexity and power in which catastrophe may fall at any time on the just as well as the unjust" (Sewall 1959: 23). According to Racine, another great author of tragedies, man is "caught up in a universe which he could not strive against, exercising his will yet unable to enforce it, brought up thus against a power he could not resist yet able in his defeat to demonstrate his status as man" (Raphael qtd. in Leech 1989: 18–19). Such knowledge "may make the terms of existence more endurable. It brings greater humility [...], with humility come compassion and a new tenderness" (Sewall 1959: 42).

## Compassion – Conclusions

It could be argued that compassion is related to the structure of the story in *Amy Foster*. Dire and bleak as the picture evoked by the novella may seem, the significance of the narrative construction appears to add a ray of hope. The senselessness of the villagers and Amy's dull-witted narrowness towards Yanko are framed by two layers of narrative: that of Doctor Kennedy, himself a kind of foreigner and outsider in the community, by virtue of his profession associated with both altruism and a scientific detachment, 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, a stranger to the surroundings, who encloses Kennedy's yarn by interest and sympathy, two qualities which most of the characters in the novella manifestly lack. Additionally, the frame narrator provides a universal dimension to the story of the plight of man by describing poignantly and sympathetically the physical wasteland of the setting and the weariness of the burdened people. The general perspective gained by the two narrators' comments may resemble the role of the chorus in the ancient tragedy.

The issue of compassion is closely related to another of Aristotle's concepts – that of pity and fear experienced by the audience of a tragedy and the subsequent *catharsis*. Whatever the protagonist learns in a classical tragedy, or, in the case of *Amy Foster*, whatever he fails to learn but what his story implies for the readers, may provoke an emotional response in the recipients<sup>8</sup> and, consequent-

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<sup>8</sup> It was Gorgias who specified the impact of the tragedy on the audience: "a fearful horror and fearful pity and doleful yearning. By means of the discourse their spirit feels a personal *emotion* on account of the good and bad fortune of others" (qtd. in Taplin 1995: 168).

ly, may lead to a greater understanding of the human condition. In Aristotelian terms, tragedies sensitise their audiences or readers to other people's suffering but also to the bond of loyalty inherent in the universal human experience (poetry, unlike history, is concerned with universal truths): "our pity is awakened by undeserved misfortune, and our fear by that of someone just like ourselves" (Aristotle 1988: 48). The fact that "Man" is the answer to the questions posed in *Oedipus the King* is symptomatic also because tragedy treats about "man we can recognize as sharing with us the human condition" (Leech 1989: 58). Moreover, the value of tragedy lies in affording us some distance and perspective and ascribing meaningfulness to suffering, as is noted by Taplin: "Tragedy evokes our feeling for others, like much else, but it is distinguished by the order and significance it imparts to suffering" (1995: 170).

The narratorial compassion and the emotions aroused in the readers of the tragic story of Yanko Goorall appear to be in contrast with the stolid cruelty and rejection that the outcast meets with on the part of the villagers, and eventually Amy herself. It also undermines Conrad's apparent (and often paradoxical) doubtfulness as to the possibility of fully successful communication with others, which is a crucial theme of many of the author's works. Significantly, the famous Preface to *The Nigger of "Narcissus"* discusses the role of the artist (in contrast to that of a scientist) and, it could also be argued, the cathartic effect of literature:

His appeal is made to our less obvious capacities: to that part of our nature which, because of the warlike conditions of existence, is necessarily kept out of sight within the more resisting and hard qualities – like the vulnerable body within a steel armour. His appeal is less loud, more profound, less distinct, more stirring – and sooner forgotten. Yet its effect endures forever. The changing wisdom of successive generations discards ideas, questions facts, demolishes theories. But the artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom; to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition – and, therefore, more permanently enduring. He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation – and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity – the dead to the living and the living to the unborn. (viii)

A tale of tragic incomprehension and alienation, drawing on classical patterns and with universal implications concerning the inescapable plight of the destiny which man faces in a world which does not seem to be governed by any beneficent deity, *Amy Foster* could well be perceived a case in point in the Conradian paradox of compassion and the hope of communication in spinning yarns about the impracticability of successful interpersonal relations.

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