

WHAT “A SMILE OF FORTUNE” HAS TO HIDE: AN INTERTEXTUAL AND COMPARATIVE RECONSIDERATION OF THE TEXTURE AND THEME OF CONRAD’S TALE

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Abstract: The present article is part of a larger project on Conrad’s less known short fiction, the area of his writing which is largely undervalued, and even deprecated at times. The paper’s aim is to enhance the appreciation of “A Smile of Fortune,” by drawing attention to its “inner texture” as representative of Conrad’s “art of expression,” especially in view of the writer’s own belief in the supremacy of form over content as well as “suggestiveness” over “explicitness” in his fiction. To achieve this aim a New Critical (“close reading”), intertextual and comparative approaches to Conrad’s story have been adopted, involving nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literary texts, i.e., both those preceding and those following the publication of Conrad’s *Twixt Land and Sea* (1912) volume featuring the tale in question. The intertextual reading of “A Smile of Fortune” against Bernard Malamud’s short story “The Magic Barrel,” Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, and William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, with *Light in August* as a point of reference, reveals the workings in Conrad’s story of the modernist device of denegation, which, alongside antithesis and oxymoron, seems to be largely responsible for the tale’s contradictions and ambiguities, which should thus be perceived as the story’s asset rather than flaw. The textual evidence of Conrad’s tale, as well as its comparison with three short stories: Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and Peter Taylor’s “Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time,” seem to confirm the presence of the implications of the theme of incest in Conrad’s text, heretofore unrecognized in criticism. Overall, the foregoing analysis of “A Smile of Fortune” hopes to account for, if not disentangle, the story’s complex narratological meanderings and seemingly insoluble ambiguities, particularly as regards character and motive, naming Conrad rather than Faulkner the precursor of denegation.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, “A Smile of Fortune,” denegation, intertextuality, comparison, incest

The present article is part of a larger project on Conrad’s less known short fiction, the area of his writing which is largely undervalued, and at times even deprecated. The paper’s aim is to enhance the appreciation of “A Smile of Fortune” by drawing

attention to Conrad's artistry, especially in view of his own belief in the supremacy of the figurative over the literal. To achieve this aim a New Critical ("close reading"),¹ intertextual² as well as comparative approaches have been adopted, involving nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literary texts, both those preceding and those following the publication of Conrad's *'Twixt Land and Sea* (1912) volume, featuring the tale in question. The intertextual reading of "A Smile of Fortune" against Bernard Malamud's short story "The Magic Barrel" (1958), Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), and William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), with *Light in August* (1932) as another point of reference, reveals the workings in Conrad's story of the modernist device of denegation,³ which, alongside antithesis and oxymoron, seems to be largely responsible for the tale's contradictions and ambiguities, which should thus be perceived as the story's asset rather than its flaw. The textual evidence of Conrad's tale, as well as its comparison with three short stories: Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter" (1844), Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), and Peter Taylor's "Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time" (1957), seem to confirm the presence of the implications of the theme of incest in Conrad's text, heretofore unrecognized in criticism. Overall, the foregoing analysis of "A Smile of Fortune" hopes to account for, if not disentangle, the story's complex narratological meanderings and seemingly insoluble ambiguities, particularly as regards character and motive, naming Conrad rather than Faulkner the precursor of denegation.

What Conrad criticism seems to be not infrequently heedless of is the writer's insistent, if not desperate, call for a recognition of the implicit and the figurative in his oeuvres as opposed to the explicit and the literal, the plea echoed in his 24 April 1922 letter to Richard Curle:

¹ The New Critical approach is understood here as an evaluation of "texts based on their internal structure and aesthetic impact," where it becomes "a means of interpreting the text and illuminating its complexities and ambiguities" by "plac[ing] particular emphasis on the interrelationships among textual elements." Ross Murfin, Ray M. Supryia, *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* (Boston–New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009), pp. 79–80, 65.

² Intertextuality is defined here after Julia Kristeva, in the sense of a work of art being "part of a larger fabric of literary discourse, part of a continuum including the future as well as the past" (Murfin, Supryia, *Bedford Glossary*, p. 249), as well as in the Bakhtinian understanding of dialogic discourse as developed by Kristeva, "a dialogic work" defined as "one that permits numerous voices or discourses to emerge and to engage in dialogue with one another" (Murfin, Supryia, *Bedford Glossary*, p. 111; emphases of entries removed).

³ Denegation in François L. Pitavy's understanding of the term as applied to Faulkner's fiction is tantamount to asserting presence by absence, in the sense of a fact being the more present for the absence of the apparent reasons for that presence. As understood by Pitavy, denegation is a psychological term, which refers to the speaker. In calling Sutpen in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* a "nothusband," Rosa Coldfield does not mean that he did not ever become her spouse but that he was "the more present for being perceived as the negative of a husband" (François L. Pitavy, "Some Remarks on Negation and Denegation in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*," in *Faulkner's Discourse: An International Symposium*, ed. L. Hönnighausen [Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1989], p. 29). Denegation is therefore more than a negation because it actually affirms what it negates.

Explicitness, my dear fellow, is fatal to the glamour of all artistic work, robbing it of all suggestiveness, destroying all illusion. You seem to believe in literalness and explicitness, in facts and also in expression. *Yet nothing is more clear than the utter insignificance of explicit statement and also its power to call attention away from things that matter in the region of art.*⁴

This appeal on Conrad's part seems to provide an essential clue to the appreciation and understanding of his less known short fiction, which is usually evaluated in terms of content rather than form, with insufficient attention paid to the convergence of both in enhancing the theme, resolving contradictions, or disentangling ambiguities. This appears to result from a light treatment in Conrad's tales of the coincidence of foreshadowing and parallelizing, oxymoron and antithesis, ambivalence and irony, and, last but not least, of the modernist device of denegation. Consequently, Conrad's less known short stories have been mostly perceived in criticism as artistically inferior, their author variously charged with selling his artistry for income;⁵ succumbing to absurdity and ludicrousness;⁶ or else embracing melodrama⁷ and the operatic.⁸

"A Smile of Fortune" is another Conrad tale from his *'Twi*xt *Land and Sea* volume (1912) that, like "Freya of the Seven Isles," has, more often than not, been taken by critics at face value and thus interpreted against what Conrad refers to in his 17 November 1910 letter to Pinker as its "inner texture" and his own "art of expression."⁹ Technically speaking, the reason partly lies with the cuts that the writer was forced to introduce for the sake of the story's serialization, which he, on second thoughts, finally himself conceded to, albeit reluctantly so. Thus both the manuscript of "A Smile of Fortune" and all its subsequent printed editions followed the publisher's recommendations rather than the writer's original typescript, even though, at first, Conrad had refused to cut the story "for the sake of a few pounds" and then "put [it] out as [his] own" on the grounds that his "signature stands for something quite individual and distinctive in the art of expression."¹⁰ In effect, the original typescript version of "A Smile of Fortune" appeared in print only in 2007, that is, almost a hundred years after its first publication, as extensively expounded by S. W. Reid.¹¹

⁴ Laurence Davies, John H. Stape, eds., *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 7, 1920-1922 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005), p. 457. All emphases in quotations in this article are added, unless stated otherwise.

⁵ Cf. Jocelyn Baines, *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960), p. 449; Laurence Graver, *Conrad's Short Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 159; S. W. Reid, "The Unpublished Typescript Version of 'A Smile of Fortune'," *The Conradian* 31, no. 2 (Autumn 2006), p. 93.

⁶ Sylvère Monod, "Heemskirk: The Dutch Lieutenant," *The Conradian* 31, no. 2 (2006), pp. 85-88; Ted Billy, *A Wilderness of Words: Closure and Disclosure in Conrad's Short Fiction* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1997), pp. 80, 92.

⁷ Billy, *Wilderness of Words*, p. 82.

⁸ Baines, *Conrad: A Biography*, p. 452.

⁹ Laurence Davies, Owen Knowles, Gene M. Moore, and John H. Stape, eds., *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 9, *Uncollected Letters and Indexes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁰ Davies et al., eds., *The Collected Letters*, vol. 9.

¹¹ Reid, "The Unpublished Typescript," pp. 94-97.

It did not only take Conrad's publishers, though, but, with few notable exceptions, also his critics, to fail to recognize the artistic merits of the tale, which has thus far been mostly perceived as Conrad's commercial venture and interpreted along the lines of its most obvious binary oppositions: fathers v. daughters,¹² sea v. land,¹³ romance v. commerce,¹⁴ and a fragrant garden v. rotting potatoes;¹⁵ or else against the less obvious psychological ones: "self-contempt and deep pleasure," "sadism and masochism,"¹⁶ "violence and love."¹⁷ Other approaches with a focus on content rather than form involve considerations of the tale's parallels to Conrad's biography—the writer's brief sojourn on Mauritius, his courtship of Eugénie Renouf and Emilie Briquel, and his *Otago* command¹⁸—or else its "economy of racial identity and identification,"¹⁹ and its sociopathic context of the current press coverage of crime in Britain and elsewhere in the Empire.²⁰

It is hardly surprising, then, that the story has been named "Conrad's interesting failure"²¹ and perceived as one of his "lowest moments [...] as low as he ever got."²² To date, it seems to have been fully appreciated by three critics: Thomas Moser, who calls it "a first-rate story of female sexuality and male impotence";²³ Cedric Watts, who refers to it as "one of Conrad's most brilliant yet most neglected and under-rated works";²⁴ and Jeremy Hawthorn, who perceives it as "one of Conrad's finest short fictions."²⁵ On second thought, though, Reid also ultimately sees a possibility of re-

¹² See Jennifer Turner, "The 'Passion of Paternity': Fathers and Daughters in the Works of Joseph Conrad," *Conradiana* 39, no. 3 (Fall 2007), pp. 243-246.

¹³ See Jerome Zuckerman, "'A Smile of Fortune': Conrad's Interesting Failure," *Studies in Short Fiction* 1 (1964), pp. 99-102.

¹⁴ See William Lafferty, "Conrad's 'A Smile of Fortune': The Moral Threat of Commerce," *Conradiana* 7 (1975), pp. 63-74; Billy, *Wilderness of Words*, pp. 80-91; Reid, "The Unpublished Typescript," pp. 98-101; Andrew Francis, "'In the Way of Business': The Commerce of Love in 'A Smile of Fortune,'" *The Conradian* 37, no. 2 (Autumn 2012), pp. 67-79.

¹⁵ See Cedric Watts, "The Narrative Enigma of Conrad's 'A Smile of Fortune,'" *Conradiana* 17 (1985), pp. 125-132.

¹⁶ Jeremy Hawthorn, "Conrad and the Erotic: 'A Smile of Fortune' and 'The Planter of Malata,'" *The Conradian* 28, no. 2. (Autumn 2003), p. 118.

¹⁷ Hawthorn, "Conrad and the Erotic," p. 123.

¹⁸ See Robert Hampson, *Conrad's Secrets* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 4; Christopher GoGwilt, "Conrad's Creole Family Romance and 'A Smile of Fortune,'" *Conradiana* 43, no. 2 (September 2011), pp. 67-68; Hawthorn, "Conrad and the Erotic," pp. 127-128.

¹⁹ GoGwilt, "Conrad's Creole," p. 73.

²⁰ Hawthorn, "Conrad and the Erotic," pp. 115-117, 125, fn. 9. Tempting, though, and enlightening otherwise as those parallels are, the New Critical approach to "A Smile of Fortune" adopted here calls for treating the text as an autonomous entity rather than in relation to its various contexts.

²¹ Zuckerman, "A Smile of Fortune," pp. 99-102.

²² Reid, "The Unpublished Typescript," p. 97.

²³ Thomas Moser, *Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1957), p. 98.

²⁴ Watts, "Narrative Enigma," p. 131.

²⁵ Hawthorn, "Conrad and the Erotic," p. 113.

evaluating the story, following the 2007 publication of its "revised version that Conrad favoured."²⁶

In her comprehensive discussion of "A Smile of Fortune" in *The Strange Short Fiction of Joseph Conrad*, while avoiding evaluative adjectives, Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan reads the story as an expression of Conrad's subversion of Romanticism, "much of [whose] paraphernalia" he "retained, [...] only to undermine it more effectively."²⁷ The critic defines the dramatic conflict in the tale as "ultimately a conflict of mutually exclusive constructions, neither of which is finally validated as the 'truth,' even after the narrator's final choice."²⁸ However, while she perceives "Conrad's preoccupation with the relation of life to art, truth to fiction, and reality to the dream" as a measure of his "Romantic outlook,"²⁹ the present study construes those in terms of a modern one, where Conrad's concern is with the relation between epistemological truth, on the one hand, and artistic expression and life, on the other hand, as is the case in Faulkner's fiction, particularly in his *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August*.³⁰

In discussing "A Smile of Fortune" as the case of a subversion of the Romantic mode, Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan considers it in the context of its two sub/prototexts: Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and the biblical story of Jacob, seeing Conrad's tale as, among others, "a parodic inversion" of the former.³¹ What drives both Conrad's story and Shakespeare's play are the motifs of a secluded island inhabited by a father and a daughter, a tempestuous night on which a young man lands on it, the daughter's love for him as the only man, apart from her father, on whom she has ever set her eyes, and a trial he undergoes at the hands of the father to qualify for his daughter's hand. Indeed, from an intertextual perspective adopted in this paper, it is both the success of the trial in *The Tempest* and "the role of the rescuer" assigned to the young man in Shakespeare's play that might provide a sufficient clue to the significance of the ending of Conrad's tale, but for Vulcan's anti-Romantic reading of the story, in the light of which Captain ultimately chooses commerce over love.³² Incidentally, Conrad's subversion of the Romantic mode in the story, and yet his falling back on

²⁶ Reid, "The Unpublished Typescript," p. 97.

²⁷ Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, *The Strange Short Fiction of Joseph Conrad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 133. While dubbing this "the Romantic paradox," the phrase which also features in the title of the critic's chapter on this Conrad tale, Erdinast-Vulcan perceives it in terms of the dynamics of presence and absence (i.e., "a 'metaphysics of presence'" and "a 'metaphysics of absence'," p. 135). However, she defines this opposition only in relation to Conrad's Romanticism vs. anti-Romanticism as employed in the story rather than in a wider sense inherent to Pitavy's concept of denegation which is defined here in relation to Conrad's general narrative method both in this story and elsewhere in his fiction.

²⁸ Erdinast-Vulcan, *Strange Short Fiction*, p. 135.

²⁹ Erdinast-Vulcan, *Strange Short Fiction*, p. 134.

³⁰ On account of its modern treatment of sexuality in relation to "class, power and violence," Jeremy Hawthorn regards "A Smile of Fortune" as a modernist story as opposed to "The Planter of Malata" with its Romantic stress on chivalry, "courtly-love and fairy-tale conventions" (Hawthorn, "Conrad and the Erotic," p. 114).

³¹ Erdinast-Vulcan, *Strange Short Fiction*, p. 135.

³² Erdinast-Vulcan, *Strange Short Fiction*, pp. 130, 135.

the affirmative implications of *The Tempest*, may indeed be the case of denegation which governs the whole plot, with the presence of the rescue motif asserted by an apparent absence of the reasons for it in the tale's mode and plot. With regard to the biblical prototext, Conrad's indebtedness lies with the motif of the two brothers—Alfred and Ernest Jacobus—and a confusion of identities between the two,³³ which is, as it were, deliberately engineered by the former, with a view to winning the Captain's favours, whether for the sake of the potato deal that he plans to strike with the Captain, or with his own matchmaking intentions involving his daughter in mind, or, possibly, for the sake of both.

Vulcan further admits that, despite making the Captain, as she claims, yield to commerce at the expense of love, Conrad, nevertheless, leaves the reader in the lurch "as there is nothing in the tale itself which would justify the young Captain's eventual choice and resolve the hermeneutic tension." Therefore, as she continues, "it is the reader who must decide whether to become a sharer of the narrator's vision or to challenge it by opting for the other construction."³⁴ Capitalizing on the first half of the critic's conclusion, the present study seeks justification "for the other construction" elsewhere, namely, in an intertextual and comparative reconsideration of Conrad's tale, which, as the article dares claim, aspires to "resolve the hermeneutic tension."

If the governing figure of Conrad's tale is ambivalence, the story revolves around one of modernism's main concepts, that is, epistemological relativity, which starts with its title and the changes it underwent in the author's own hands, from "A Deal of Potatoes," and "*The Smile of Fortune*," through its final title featuring an indefinite article.³⁵ Not in the least cosmetic, the modifications provide an essential clue to the story's ending and message as they, paradoxically, gradually increase in ambiguity, simultaneously pointing to a departure from the emphasis on the potato deal in the direction of a favourable turn of events for more than one character of the tale, if not for all of them at once.

Hence, in view of the Captain's final decision, "a smile of Fortune"³⁶ in relation to Burns, his first mate, might mean taking over the ship's command and making profit on both cane sugar, the Company's staple product in this region, and the lucrative potato trade with Alfred Jacobus because, unlike his captain, Burns has no misgivings about linking the sea to business. The mate's "smile of Fortune" might also perhaps include a romance with, if not marriage to, Alice Jacobus, especially in view of the apparent failure of her father's matchmaking efforts in relation to the Captain-narrator. When applied to the latter, "a smile of Fortune" may signify ridding himself of the morally dubious pursuit of the girl, with the stench of potatoes constantly at his heels

³³ Erdinast-Vulcan, *Strange Short Fiction*, pp. 136-137.

³⁴ Erdinast-Vulcan, *Strange Short Fiction*, pp. 135-136.

³⁵ Reid, "The Unpublished Typescript," p. 94.

³⁶ Joseph Conrad "A Smile of Fortune," in *Twixt Land and Sea Tales*, ed. J. A. Berthoud, Laura L. Davis, and S. W. Reid (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 78. This edition will be further referenced in the main text by page number in parentheses.

(and in more than one sense, too), as well as freeing himself from the grip of the relentless father fuelling both deals. However, the narrator's "wonderful piece of luck" (78) might well spell winning Alice on honest and fair terms, without the blighted shadow of commerce in sight, and from land rather than sea, in accordance with the advice of the bereaved captain of the *Stella* in this Conrad tale: "Don't you ever marry unless you can chuck the sea first. [...] It isn't fair" (27).

Ironically, there may, likewise, be a share of "luck" in stock for Alfred Jacobus in the prospect of continuing both in the potato and matchmaking businesses in the hope of providing himself with a worthy son-in-law whether in the person of the prospective returnee, namely, the Captain, or his eager successor. On the other hand, for Alice Jacobus, "a smile of Fortune" might imply freeing herself from patriarchal control, whether through the agency of the Captain, or his first mate, and, if the former, also from her father's corruption, symbolized by the dubious stench of potatoes which may not necessarily refer solely to the Captain's pursuit of Alice in the context of his commercial deal with the girl's father. Hence the story's title in its final shape only augments its ambivalence rather than solves anything, and if deliberately construed that way to sustain the effect, can hardly be perceived as the tale's flaw.

That the story's ambiguity is deliberate is also evidenced by its major places of indeterminacy in the shape of three letters related to the Captain-narrator's decision to give up the ship's command: Jacobus's own, only partly reported to the Captain by his Company, and two letters, known solely to himself, written by the Captain to his employers, the content of the first one vaguely reduced to the ship's prospective geographical location, with the second one described only as "short" (77). All we know about the narrator's first letter to his employers is that it proposes a two-year project "for the ship"—rather than the Captain—"in the East and about the China Seas" (77), which keeps the Captain's own future plans open-ended, thus belying the general critical opinion as to his clear-cut choice of commerce over love. Hence, paradoxically, and very much Faulkner-like, the only specific detail of the Captain's letter takes the shape of a half-truth about the Captain's prospective goals after his resignation from the ship's command, which is embraced by Conrad's readers and critics alike, quite ironically, contrary to the author's own specific phrasing which points to the *ship* rather than the Captain as the main agent behind the prospective China enterprise.

The second undisclosed letter of the Captain is referred to as a curt reply to his employers' despatch of him back to Mauritius to continue in the sugar business, which clearly suggests the narrator's decline of the offer, especially considering the heavy heart with which he parts with the letter upon sending it. This evidently coincides with his resignation from the ship's command, upon which, however, his opinion for once converges with Burns's and comes down to the curt and highly ambiguous: "A wonderful piece of luck!" (78), with which the story terminates, and which, judging by the context, suggests that this time the Captain's luck lies beyond commerce, and even beyond sea. On the other hand, Alfred Jacobus's letter written to the Company upon the Captain's definitive departure from the island is a laudatory note on the latter's commercial activities there and anticipates his return to the region

on the strength of an enormous profit to his employers from the lucrative potato trade, the remark which only elicits the Captain's knowing, yet ambivalent and sceptical: "he had not given me up."³⁷ Hence, Conrad does his best to confuse the reader by providing him with three enigmatic clues in the form of letters that, in fact, are no clues at all, just as it happens in the case of Charles Bon's letter to Judith Sutpen in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, both being examples of denegation, the device whose invention has heretofore been ascribed to the American modernist.³⁸

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Bon's letter to Judith sent from the Civil War front becomes the sole proof of his alleged love for her; a love which in fact never was and never could be, because it was not her he was after but his father's acknowledgement of him. Likewise, in Conrad's tale, the three letters also function as hard and sole evidence of the Captain's final choice except that, ironically, their content is either altogether withheld from the reader or fragmented, only to be finally offset by a suggestion to the contrary (Jacobus's letter). Thus, both writers use letters denegatively, to assert presence by absence. In the light of Pitavy's definition of denegation, Conrad confirms the fact of the Captain's choice by, ironically, substantiating it with the oxymoronically construed hard evidence of letters largely devoid of substance, thereby making that choice the more present for its enigma. Faulkner conveys the truth about the absence of love between Bon and Judith by the hard evidence of the only love letter from him that she ever receives in the absence of any semblance of courting on his part beforehand and any semblance of mourning on her part afterwards, so the letter is the more present for being unsubstantiated by the reality of love by which it was allegedly occasioned.

With both writers, then, the mechanism of denegation seems to function analogically although it is Faulkner rather than Conrad that has so far been credited with its first application. Compared to the function of denegation in "Freya of the Seven Isles,"³⁹ its use in "A Smile of Fortune" appears to be identical, that is, to deliberately mislead its readers and critics as to the epistemological truth behind the story, espe-

³⁷ Joseph Conrad, "A Smile of Fortune," in *Twixt Land and Sea* (London: Dent, 1912), p. 96. The 1912 Dent edition of "A Smile of Fortune" will be further referenced in the main text by the letter D and page number in parentheses.

³⁸ None of the intertextual contexts referred to in this article—except the Faulknerian one, which claims the precursorship of denegation for Conrad rather than Faulkner—is meant to suggest more than affinities to Conrad's text of the texts discussed.

³⁹ Conrad's antithetical style in his foreshadowing passages introducing Heemskirk and in Freya's father's confused final dialogue with the narrator, demonstrates striking similarities to Faulkner's denegative stylistics in the Rosa Coldfield section of *Absalom, Absalom!*, the fact which has epistemological implications for Conrad's tale (for a detailed analysis, see Grażyna M. T. Branny "The Unfathomability of Conrad's 'Shallow Waters' in 'Freya of the Seven Isles,'" *Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)* 10 [2015]). The story's consideration against Leszek Prorok's play *Freja – zimna bogini miłości* [Freya, the cold goddess of love] exploits the issue of ambivalence behind the mythological Freya, in her being at once associated with fertility and death, love and revenge, conjugal devotion and promiscuity, which sheds reciprocal light on the nuances of meaning in both texts. Thus Prorok's deliberate exploitation of the Conradian motifs of elopement, Wagnerian music, the colonial Seven Isles, etc. in his play about the Nazi *Lebensborn* programme leads to novel conclusions about the nature of Freya's "illness" in Conrad's tale (and the reasons for her unexpected death) as well as exposes the role of colonial ideology in the story.

cially as regards the implications of its ending. In a similar way Faulkner deceived his readers and critics for decades by making Joe Christmas pass for a white-faced African American rather than a half-Mexican that he really is, and by apparently charging him with the murder of Joanna Burden in naming him after the actual culprit Joe Brown, the trick that made the standard critical phrasing: "Joe's murder of Joanna Burden" always appear to be true, irrespective of the truth and Faulkner's own efforts at providing powerful evidence to the contrary, by, among others, construing Christmas as a Christ figure, which was, ironically, for decades taken by the critics as a parodistic proof of the character's guilt. Consequently, all evidence incriminating the real murderer was duly ignored by everyone in the novel and outside of it on the sheer strength of the culprit's indisputable white provenience and a good Anglo-Saxon name, which is how Faulkner succeeded in demonstrating the persistence of racial prejudice far beyond his own times.⁴⁰

The fact that the key epistemological ambiguities of "A Smile of Fortune" that make its ending apparently insoluble revolve around the issues related to the three letters in question is a telling proof of the writer experimenting with denegation. Hence there seems to be no knowing: (1) whether Alfred Jacobus had not planned his matchmaking business all along, from the very moment the Captain set foot on the Pearl, which is why he was the first to visit him on board, and whether the unprecedented surge of interest in and economic demand for potatoes in the regions through which the Captain sailed, upon his sudden departure from the island at the end of the story, was not his doing; (2) whether Jacobus's potato deal with the Captain was a commercial means to a romantic end, or whether it was the means that was romantic and the end commercial; (3) and, finally, whether the Captain gives up the command of his ship in order to change the region of his commercial operations (as his second letter might seem to suggest if taken for granted or at face value) and thus escape Alfred Jacobus's dubious dealings and his daughter's inconsequential charm, or to give up commerce altogether with a view to "carrying [Alice] off" from her abusive father, as will be argued further on (59). Ironically enough, the idea of the Captain "carrying [the girl] off," does appear in the story, albeit by way of a wildly imagined threat uttered in Alice's hearing by her elderly relative, most certainly Alfred's sister, who lives in the same house, the threat which, in fact, foreshadows the story's denegative outcome.

Just as there is no telling what the truth of the matter is in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, where each of the four narrators has their own way of "looking at a blackbird,"⁴¹ it is hardly possible to give an unequivocal answer to the questions above. However, while Faulkner achieves epistemological ambivalence and conveys the idea of the relativity of truth by way of multiple narration and stream-of-

⁴⁰ For a more detailed discussion, see Grażyna M. T. Branny, "Raj czy czyścić? Światłość w sierpniu czy mrok Południa? Pamięć zbiorowa a sygnifikacja w powieści Toni Morrison i Williama Faulknera," in *Mistrzowie literatury amerykańskiej*, vol. 2, *Toni Morrison*, ed. Ewa Łuczak (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2013), pp. 123-132.

⁴¹ Frederick L. Gwynn, Joseph L. Blotner, eds., *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957-1958* (New York: Random House, 1965).

-consciousness monologue, Conrad construes both around narrative ambiguity and oxymoronically and antithetically structured character and motive (cf. also *Lord Jim*, *Heart of Darkness*). Although the solutions to the first two issues will hopefully emerge as we proceed, the implications of the Captain's final decision remain highly ambivalent to the story's end, so the best the reader can do under the circumstances is to remain alert to the workings of denegation in Conrad's tale all along.

The first clue comes with the Captain's optimistic response: "Quite a smile of Fortune" to Burns's comment on his final decision to give up the ship's command: "let people say what they like, this Jacobus has served your turn. I must admit that this potato business has paid extremely well. Of course, if only you had—" (78). Burns's unfinished sentence—another place of indeterminacy in the story—leaves room for speculation as to whether he is referring to the narrator's resignation from his command or his courtship of Alice Jacobus. And the supposition that he is in fact implying the latter follows from Burns's initial qualification: "let people say what they like," for it was indeed the Captain's relations with the socially ostracized Alfred Jacobus and his daughter that had scandalized the traditional society of the island to the point of his having to choose between the two sides, and eventually opting for his hosts.

With the incomplete, or missing, content of the Captain's and Jacobus's letters to the Company, and Burns's comment on what the Captain-narrator had not done, suspended in mid-air, the narrator's enigmatic "Quite a smile of Fortune," followed by his equally double-edged confession:

But I could not tell him that *it* [*a smile of Fortune*] was driving me out of the ship I had learned to love. (78)

suggests the presence of Alice behind the scenes as the chief reason for the Captain finding himself "twixt land and sea," the supposition that he further confirms by his intention to go back to England via the Suez Canal as a passenger rather than a seaman because, as he claims, "the Indian Ocean and everything that is in it has lost its charm" for him (77). The syntactic ambiguity of the Captain's afterthought quoted above, about good luck rather than bad that drove him out of the ship that he loved, upon a closer look at its deep structure, yields still another message: that it was his very act of resigning from the ship's command that taught him love:

But I could not tell him that *it was* [by] driving me [*being driven*] out of the ship [*that*] I had learned to love. (78)

This construes love in Conrad's tale in relation to both the ship and the woman, equating one with the other as does the captain of the *Hilda* at the beginning of the story, bewailing the loss of his ship's figurehead as he would the loss of a wife, which foreshadows the narrator's own dilemma. Another more significant case of foreshadowing related to the latter comes with the story of the tragic death "twixt land and sea" of the *Stella* captain's only child, at whose funeral the narrator hears the already cited advice of its bereaved father to abandon the sea for the land for the sake of love. Intertextually, the father's philosophy is worthy of Ishmael's in *Moby Dick*, with the

stories of bereavement in Conrad's tale clearly evocative of those in Melville's novel, as is also at times the elevated and solemn tone of both texts. Moreover, in both, the loss of one's closest ones—wife and child—is associated with a commercial pursuit at sea, a juxtaposition of land and sea, and the idea of a family's and home's supremacy over sea business, a realization that too often dawns on too late on the protagonists of both texts. In the chapter of Melville's novel, pertinently titled "The Symphony," both Ahab and Starbuck, his first mate, bewail the loss of their wives and sons to whaling and the infernal pursuit of Moby Dick, but only the latter has the determination to break away from the blighted command even if this comes to nought because it is not him who is in charge:

Oh, my Captain! my Captain! noble soul! grand old heart, after all! why should anyone give chase to that hated fish! Away with me! let us fly these deadly waters! *let us home! Wife and child, too, are Starbuck's*—wife and child of his brotherly, sisterly, playfellow youth; *even as thine, sir, are the wife and child* of thy loving, longing, paternal old age! *Away! let us away!*—*this instant let me alter the course!*⁴²

By contrast, Conrad's narrator *does* remain in charge of both his ship and his life, and he *does*, indeed, "alter the course," even when it also seems to be too late, although Conrad is deliberately mysterious about the direction of the new one.

Part of the clue to this greatest conundrum of Conrad's tale seems to lie precisely with intertextualizing the story against Melville's novel, particularly in the light of the convergence of the philosophies behind both texts, supported by the traumatic experiences of their holders—all of that by way of accounting for the presence of the land-sea opposition in the volume to which "A Smile of Fortune" belongs. Hence, the Captain's resignation from his ship's command should be seen in the context of the overall message of Melville's novel echoed in Ishmael's warning against taking "the subtleness of the sea" and "the loveliest tints of azure" too much at face value while overlooking its "treacherously hidden [...] universal cannibalism," as well as in the Melville narrator's heartfelt appeal to "turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth," where "lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by the horrors of the half known life," thus building up an analogy "to something in thyself" and warning you against "[pushing] off from that isle," for fear "thou canst never return," as it happens to Ahab and his crew.⁴³

Just as, in the midst of the mad pursuit of the White Whale and an almost biblical encounter with Moby Dick, only the holder of this philosophy survives. By analogy, in Conrad's story, Ishmael's "follower" in the person of the Captain-narrator seems also likely to survive the confrontation with the mammon and the biblically structured Jacobus brothers—Alfred "the trickster"⁴⁴ and Ernest the brute. Considering his final decision, for Conrad's narrator, his "insular Tahiti" appears thus to be tantamount to land rather than sea, and *with* rather than *without* Alice Jacobus in it, in view

⁴² Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, Norton Critical Edition, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parke (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967), p. 444.

⁴³ Melville, *Moby Dick*, pp. 235-236.

⁴⁴ Erdinast-Vulcan, *Strange Short Fiction*, p. 137.

of the advice of the bereaved *Stella's* Captain and the realization and ultimate fate of the denegatively construed "nothusbands" in Melville's novel⁴⁵ as well as the narrator's own denegatively structured initial avowal of his refusal to marry.

The Captain's decision to give up the sea is foreshadowed by a repetition of significant detail in the form of moments of doubt as to, and exasperation about, sea life that he experiences occasionally, especially while within sight of land, as upon their first approach of the Pearl. Incidentally, Conrad's style in those passages is ominously marked by Melvillian sublimity and elevation: "Ah, but it was an exasperating, weary, endless night, to be lying at anchor close under that black coast!" (D, 5), or, when business calls: "Why must the sea be used for trade—and for war as well? Why kill and traffic on it, pursuing selfish aims of no great importance after all?" (D, 7). Similarly, as mentioned above, the Captain's outspoken initial declaration that he "had no intention to 'chuck the sea,' and [...] would never marry" (D, 27), just as many other of his statements, seems to be construed denegatively, that is, through asserting presence by absence, as it forms an antithesis to the ending of the story, thus providing the key to its crucial ambiguity. If, eventually, contrary to his protestations, the Captain does in fact "chuck the sea" by giving up the ship's command, in placing the issue of marriage side by side with that of the sea in the Captain's declaration, Conrad plants the seeds of doubt in the reader's mind also as regards the validity of the second aspect of the narrator's avowal.

Moreover, with a touch of irony in his words, Burns, who knows the Captain best, questions the validity of the reason the latter cites for giving up his command, thus subverting his attempt at obscuring the real implications of his decision, by replying: "*I've never heard anybody talk like this. And to tell you the truth, sir, all the time we have been together I've never quite made you out. What's one ocean more than another? Charm, indeed!*" (77). The mate's professed inability to read his Captain, and yet Conrad's construction of Burns as a person who subverts the Captain's protestations, find adequate reflection in the name of the island towards which they sail at the outset of the story and from which they depart at its end, namely, the Pearl, for, as rightly indicated by Ted Billy, the name implies "organic metamorphosis."⁴⁶ However, contrary to Billy's wide application of the concept in relation to the story, it seems to be solely applicable to the Captain's final decision, which can thus be viewed as a heart-felt natural urge for change in a mature man rather than momentary blues of a frustrate upon discovering the nature of true love.

Incidentally, Conrad's antithetical construction of his protagonists further contributes to the story's ambivalence. The fact that Burns is constantly castigated by the Captain for his pessimism, notorious grumbling and contrariness makes him his foil and thus an important witness to the truth of the matter, for his opinion is construed as antithetical to the Captain's; however, every time they disagree, the objective truth seems invariably to lie on the side of the mate. Just as he was right about their "bad luck" when they lay at anchor off the shore of the Pearl in appalling weather upon

⁴⁵ Cf. fn. 1, here.

⁴⁶ Billy, *Wilderness of Words*, p. 83.

approaching the island for the first time, when the Captain scoured him for undue pessimism, so are his repeatedly voiced premonitions about the wrong Jacobus brother visiting the unsuspecting Captain on board their skipper upon their arrival in the harbour confirmed by later developments. Likewise, at the end of the story, even though they both agree as to a Fortune that smiles upon them at last, for each of them the nature of that Fortune seems to be different: if for Burns, it means a succession to the ship's command and prospective profit from cane sugar and potato trade at sea, by inference, and thus antithetically, for the Captain, it is most likely construed as referring to personal happiness on shore.

The denegative device of asserting presence by absence employed by Conrad to both camouflage and reveal the true reasons behind the Captain's final decision to resign from his command can also be detected in Alfred Jacobus's persistent pursuit of the narrator after his departure from the island, for, although it perversely both augments and weakens the argument in favour of the Captain's intention to win Alice, in the light of the foreshadowing, repetition and antitheses discussed heretofore, it appears to do the former. The sheer accumulation of measures taken by Jacobus to ensure the narrator's return by awakening his greed as well as the devices the author employs to make those look apparent, prove the case in point, and perversely so, in the light of Conrad's own words to Richard Curle about the fatality of explicitness in art. For albeit precluding the Captain's return, all those likewise remain invalid in view of the actual motives behind it, which defeat Alfred Jacobus's plans for the narrator in more than one sense, as will be demonstrated further on.

The perversely ironic plot of Conrad's serio-comic tale, woven around the discreet and yet cunning presence of the family patriarch attempting to ensnare the sincere if diffident Captain-narrator into at once a commercial and a covertly matchmaking deal is clearly evocative of the plot of another serio-comic short story, Bernard Malamud's "The Magic Barrel," about a prospective rabbi named Leo Finkle, who becomes enamoured of a girl from a photograph that Salzman, a shrewd matchmaker, keeps in his file, and who eventually turns out to be the latter's apparently promiscuous daughter. The story's relevance for Conrad's tale largely consists in the analogies between the cunning patriarchal plots in both, if plots they be, as well as their ironic narrative twists, coupled with significant, if puzzling, detail (also featuring in Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter"), of a convergence in the main heroine of at once corruption and innocence. In the case of Malamud's story this discovery does not stop Finkle from falling in love with her at first sight and thus discovering the true nature of the love of man and the love of God in one, none of which he has ever known, or even properly sought in life, despite his religious vocation.

In the light of "The Magic Barrel," with the matchmaker's presence constantly at the heels of the rabbinical student, "somewhere around, hiding perhaps high in a tree along the street,"⁴⁷ one wonders about the nature of Jacobus's business contacts with the neighbouring islands, for the Captain confesses to a similar sensation of Jacobus's indefinite but persistent presence somewhere close, behind the scenes, upon

⁴⁷ Bernard Malamud, "The Magic Barrel," in *Major American Short Stories*, ed. Arthur Walton Litz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 673.

his departure from Mauritius. Moreover, the last the narrator hears of Jacobus are snatches of the latter's farewell exclamations resounding over the harbour, which function as both a foreshadowing: "next time," and a repetition of significant detail: "all correct" (74), the latter words having fallen from the ship-chandler's mouth twice before, in the context of his chance interception of his daughter and the Captain in their moment of intimacy when they exchanged a kiss or two. The former exclamation anticipates what remains uncertain and ambiguous all along, that is, the Captain's return to the island after giving up his command; the latter foreshadows the potential reasons for that return, both bringing Alice rather than the potato trade into the picture.

The chances that the Captain gives up his command for the sake of Alice, although not necessarily with a solely romantic end in view, but also without the corrupting shadow of the commercial means to it, seem the greater for his belief that a combination of sea and trade is as odious as a combination of the latter with love. This likewise follows from his self-deprecating remarks upon his departure from the island: "it was *impossible to throw the right light on this commercial transaction*"; "[d]uring the first few days *I was for ever questioning myself* as to the nature of facts and sensations connected with her [Alice's] person and with my conduct" (74); "*I felt plunged into corruption up to my neck*" (75). With an awareness of there being something wrong about his trade with Jacobus, with his dubious impressions of his own and Alice's behaviour during their last passionate encounter, and, finally, with his own compunctions about participating in something vaguely smacking of corruption, the Captain seems to be preparing the reader for a change of plans upon discovering more than meets the eye in Jacobus's house and garden. Might this perhaps be what the critics sense as that "something" that "A Smile of Fortune" has to hide?⁴⁸

In the above, the narrator resembles Leo Finkle from Malamud's story, who, after pronouncing the matchmaking business insupportable, finds true love of his own accord, only after becoming penitent himself in admitting that he did not know how to love God because he did not love man. Even when he realizes that the object of his love appears to be far from flawless, he still sees her as more innocent than not. Thus, in their exceptional shrewdness and scheming, neither Jacobus nor Salzman predicts, or even imagines, the power of true love, for Alice, like Stella to Finkle, appears to the Captain both innocent and somehow corrupt. Her generally neglectful appearance and negligent manner, resentful speech, and loose, if not altogether promiscuous, garments as well as ostentatiously dirty slippers seem indicative of corruption far worse than Stella's—implied by her red shoes against a white dress, although "in a troubled moment [Finkle] had imagined the dress red, and only the shoes white,"⁴⁹ the fact which would not have, however, detracted from his determination to offer her his love.

The significant detail of Alice's loss of her slipper while running away from the scene of her and the Captain's moment of forgetfulness and romance when she sought

⁴⁸ Introduction to Joseph Conrad "A Smile of Fortune," in *Twixt Land and Sea Tales*, ed. J. A. Berthoud, Laura L. Davis, and S. W. Reid (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. xliii.

⁴⁹ Malamud, "Magic Barrel," p. 680.

his lips to bestow a kiss on and missed as the couple was suddenly intercepted by Jacobus, as well as the fact that the slipper is described as "soiled," at once legitimize and subvert a romantic reading of "A Smile of Fortune." The slipper's initial recovery by the father of the girl rather than by the beloved smacks of incest, especially considering its filth and state of disrepair, with Jacobus contemplating and turning it over and over again in his "cushioned paws" in the Captain's presence, while simultaneously trying to win him over to his "stinking" potato deal. The significantly protracted slipper scene featuring the father takes up as many as five pages of the narrative:

It looked a *slender* thing in *his big, thick hands*. [...] a low shoe of *blue, glazed kid, rubbed and shabby*. [...] He contemplated the thin sole for a time; then *glancing inside* with an absorbed air [...] *He was still deep in the interior of that shoe on which my eyes too were resting*. [...] I waited for a while. He went on looking at the shoe which *he held now crushed in the middle, the worn point of the toe and the high heel protruding* on each side of his *heavy fist*. (67)

The dramatic tension of the passage rests on two antithetical constructions: the girl's childlike innocence and vulnerability v. the father's violent lust presented in distinctly phallic terms, on the one hand, and Jacobus's patriarchal incest v. the Captain's romantic love, on the other hand.

Ultimately, the man who places the slipper back on Alice's foot is the Captain, the fact which may alone foreshadow the reasons for his resignation from the ship's command for the sake of love. While recollecting the scene later, on board his departing skipper, the narrator muses ambiguously: "*How could I go back to fan that fatal spark with my cold breath? No, no, that unexpected kiss had to be paid for at its full price*" (D, 96). In the first, self-deprecating, remark cited above, the Captain questions his own ability to love, the supposition which, incidentally, runs counter his devoted nursing of his mate back to health before their arrival at the Pearl, even if afterwards the same Captain does not exactly feel for the bereaved captain of the *Stella*, perhaps because he himself has neither wife nor child. The afterthought which follows the initial statement supplies the missing denegative context by expressing the Captain's own emphatic denial of his inability to feel, which confirms his readiness to take full responsibility for Alice's kiss, whatever it takes under the circumstances.

This ironic denegative reflection of the narrator is reminiscent of Faulkner's narrative technique in his stream-of-consciousness monologue of Rosa Coldfield in *Absalom, Absalom!*, where she questions the reality of her love for Charles Bon on the grounds that she did not know or see him but only heard the echo of the shot that killed him. Both passages constitute good examples of denegative ambiguity and its disentanglement in one. Although the denegative context in Conrad's story leaves little doubt as to the meaning of "paid for at its full price," considered on its own merit, the phrase borders on an innuendo by, on the one hand, implying the narrator's readiness for full reciprocity, if not sacrifice, for the sake of love, but, on the other hand, perversely and ironically evoking the wretched potato deal, which is chronologically linked to Jacobus's interception of the couple in the act of kissing. However, as the Captain's subsequent resignation from his command does not of its own solve

this interpretative dilemma, the reader is forced to search for other evidence to validate the claim of the narrator's intention to reclaim Alice.

Part of the evidence comes from the story's foreshadowing building up denegatively from its very beginning to its very end. Thus the lesson that the narrator derives from his chance encounters with other captains at the child's funeral construes a wifeless and childless "old sea-dog" shedding tears thereof as "the victim of *lost opportunities*" (26) and the Captain of the *Hilda* with his lost female figurehead, rebuking the narrator for his "levity" upon the latter's remark that "surely another figure of a woman could be procured," as issuing "*a warning*" (28). Both of these, taken at face value, might be understood as foreshadowing the opposite of what they actually *do* foreshadow if interpreted denegatively, that is, in asserting the presence of opportunities in the Captain's life by their absence in the lives of others. Likewise, the narrator's initial determination never to marry upon hearing the Captain of the *Stella's* advice appears irrevocable but for its open-ended phrasing: "and *when he left me to go aboard his ship I felt convinced* that I would never marry" (27), which suggests a conviction bound to a particular moment but perhaps subject to reconsideration on other occasions, the narrator's resignation from the ship's command the likely case in point.

Moreover, in view of the said resignation, the Captain's commercial project for his ship somewhere in the China Seas unmistakably implies his own engagement elsewhere. And finally, the last we see of the Captain in his posting the letter to his company, heavy-heartedly, and passing by quite a few letter-boxes before deciding to do so, is directly linked to his determination that Alice's kiss be rewarded "at its full price" albeit, denegatively, coming as an afterthought. All this augments the argument in favour of the Captain's deliberation about, quite prophetically, "carrying [the girl] off far away somewhere," which, although formerly construed by Alice's aunt as a warning against his allegedly vile agenda of "cutting [the girl's] throat [...] for [her] money" (59), may, in fact, have been denegatively structured as implying the Captain's plan for rescuing the girl from patriarchal abuse in the shape of violence ("cutting [her] throat") and mercenary matchmaking ("for [her] money").

The Captain's change of mind about the sea is structured as an immediate result of his frequent visits to Jacobus's house. Upon his mention of a departure, when Alice "murmured a distinctly *scared 'So soon,'*" he reacted "*with sudden dismay that this was the end of it,*" for his "*innermost nature had been altered* by the action of *some moral poison,*" which made him experience "*an abject dread of going to sea*" (61). Alice's and his own simultaneous *dread* of his departure, coupled with the idea of *alteration* anticipates a sudden change of the Captain's original plans for his life. Likewise, in the last passionate encounter between them, while referring to his visits and conversations with Miss "Don't Care!," as he calls her, the narrator declares with conviction: "there did not seem to be *any reason why this should not go on for ever*" (65), which may be perceived as foreshadowing his change of mind despite the untoward circumstances. Moreover, to alleviate her wild fears related to his prospective departure, the Captain boosts up her confidences and sense of security by declaring his readiness to confront her father: "*He be hanged!* [...] Are you so stupid as to

imagine that I am afraid of him? *He can't make me do anything*" (64), which alone places the reasons for Alice's fears on her father's rather than the Captain's side, the more so that the latter's assurance triggers a change close to "*a miracle*" in the girl: "the gradual but *swift relaxation of her tense glance, of her stiffened muscles, of every fibre of her body*" (64).

The otherwise "seductively atavistic" portrayal of Alice's behaviour and manner in that scene, as Ellen Harrington has it,⁵⁰ with a far from average display of wildness, nihilism and denial, the fact also stressed by Jeremy Hawthorn, should not be taken at face value but perceived as an example of Conrad's denegative narrative strategy similar to the *bdelygmia* in his portrayal of Heemskirk in "Freya of the Seven Isles" in the same *'Twixt Land and Sea* volume.⁵¹ Just as in the other story, also here, Conrad's strategy of intensification of negativism in the girl's passionate and emotional bearing as well as her negativist thinking, coupled with close to pathological swings of mood, seems to, denegatively, anticipate both the disclosure of evil and the exposure of the perpetrator.

However, contrary to "Freya of the Seven Isles," where *bdelygmia* and denegation are used to introduce the figure of Heemskirk as perpetrator in the tragic events that follow, in "A Smile of Fortune" such foreshadowing is accomplished through a denegative construction of the Captain as seemingly a mirror image of Alfred Jacobus—the latter construction taken at face value by some rather than awakening their suspicions.⁵² Indeed, Conrad construes the Captain denegatively in relation to Alfred Jacobus, thus asserting the presence of sexual abuse coupled with violence as descending from Alice's father rather than the Captain, the supposition confirmed by an atavistically overdrawn conduct of Jacobus's victim upon her confrontation with true love, the theme being the more present in the story for the apparent absence of the reasons for that presence other than the girl's nihilistic behaviour and her "refusal to participate in the expected rituals" of the Victorian society,⁵³ ironically, quite in keeping with the presence in the house of the alleged "governess" of Alice's aunt, the equally atavistic and denegatively construed figure of a "not governess."

Further evidence to the effect is linked to the dubiousness of Alice's moral standing in her being at once associated with innocence and corruption. This association

⁵⁰ Ellen Burton Harrington, *Conrad's Sensational Heroines: Gender and Representation in the Late Fiction of Joseph Conrad* (Mobile, AL: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 141.

⁵¹ As I argue elsewhere, the *bdelygmia* used by Conrad to describe the Dutch lieutenant throughout "Freya of the Seven Isles"—an aspect of Conrad's text that Sylvère Monod finds not only objectionable but downright ridiculous—by its sheer intensity and application to one and the same character clearly suggests the presence of a strategy on Conrad's part, the said *bdelygmia* functioning as a repetition of significant detail and thus a legitimate poetic device rather than the case of the author belabouring the point. If Monod deplors a lack of foreshadowing in Conrad's story, it appears to be there in the very form, serving to deprecate the ambiguous figure of Heemskirk, who is about to bring tragedy to the world of Conrad's tale quite out of the blue. The denegative method used by Conrad to introduce the villain prepares the reader for the ominous parading under the guise of harmlessness, and the comic giving way to tragedy (cf. Branny, "The Unfathomability," pp. 132-133).

⁵² Cf. Zuckerman, "A Smile of Fortune," p. 100; Hawthorn, "Conrad and the Erotic," p. 85.

⁵³ Harrington, *Conrad's Sensational Heroines*, p. 141.

does not solely ensue from intertextualizing Conrad's story in question against Malamud's, or from the analogies to it to be found in Poe's, Hawthorne's, or Taylor's stories, for it is also implied by the Captain himself upon his seeing the heroine in her immediate surroundings in her father's house and garden, which the narrator describes as "*a cemetery of flowers buried in the darkness,*" with Alice "mus[ing] mournfully over the *extinction of light and colour*" (53). Her curt and peevish replies, as he asserts, were "not the naughty retort[s] of a vulgar child; [they] had *a note of desperation*" (49), for the house she belonged to is described by the Captain as "*the abode of obscure desires, of extravagant hopes, of unimaginable terrors*" (62).

This is somewhat perversely confirmed by the island's public opinion, which, however, mainly castigates the father for his extramarital love affair with a woman circus-rider of ill repute, whom he followed, thus bringing to life their daughter Alice, who has been living with him ever since. Despite the ascertained respectability of the traditional Creole community of the island, the reader is led to trusting an outsider, namely, the Captain, who establishes a commercial relationship with the "wrong" brother Jacobus at first, and falls in love with his daughter, before meeting the "right" one, who, although found to be more respectable by the locals than his overtly magnanimous brother, in fact turns out to be a brute maltreating his own half-caste son, which is what makes the reader skeptical about the validity of the island's public opinion in general.

Thus, the reader is led to trust an outsider here, like Roderick Usher's former school friend and outer narrator in "The Fall of the House of Usher," or Tom Bascomb in Peter Taylor's "Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time," rather than the stories' brothers and sisters, especially if those belong to the American South, precisely on account of their "doing pretty" manner, which excludes a possibility of ever recovering the truth of the matter. As Faulkner's historical biographer Joel Williamson phrases it, as in-people, they are given to creating and sustaining the so-called "pearl effect" in the form of a kind of psychological cocoon which accepts the irritant of a taboo, like a pearl shell does a grain of sand, only to adopt it for its own and shield from the light of the day and the gaze of a stranger, who thus sees nothing but its beautiful, perfectly smooth surface,⁵⁴ the irritant in question well camouflaged behind it, as is incest in Conrad's tale. In this context the name of the island acquires double significance.

If it is "The Magic Barrel" that, due to its striking narrative parallels to Conrad's tale, provides the clue to its heroine's dubious moral standing, it is the contrasting settings that accompany these revelations in both stories that seem to account for the nature of that corruption. Malamud's story, with its threefold narrative arrangement and detail is largely grounded in the convention of a fairy tale, which becomes exploded in confrontation with dire reality, one of whose cliché attributes is a street lamp under which Finkle sees Stella for the first time, when he discovers with relief that only her shoes are red rather than the whole dress. The setting and the discovery establish Stella as a possible victim of prostitution rather than incest. In Conrad's tale the air of corruption that the Captain senses about Alice seems inexplicable un-

⁵⁴ Joel Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History* (New York: Oxford University Press 1993), p. 402.

less seen in terms of incest, for, as he learns, and quite significantly so, from the Jacobus female relative living under the same roof, Alice has never set eyes on any other man but her own father, allegedly as a measure of protection against "the riff-raff of Europe" (71). Hence, unlike for Stella, for Alice, the place where she comes into contact with the corrupt patriarchal world is her father's house and garden, just as is also the case of Beatrice Rappaccini from Hawthorne's tale, who, this time contrary to the outer narrator's (Giovanni's) testimony based solely upon appearances, is proven to have been pure at heart rather than poisonous, when she dies from Baglioni's antidote that her doubting beloved administers to her, the fact which establishes her as a victim of the evil perpetrated by her father rather than the perpetrator herself. What likewise puts Beatrice on a par with Alice Jacobus, ultimately establishing both as victims of patriarchal abuse, is the reason for her father endowing her with outward lethality in his, as he explains to her on her deathbed, desire to prevent her from being "exposed to all evil, and capable of none."⁵⁵

Alice's double nature identified by the Captain as "an obscurely tragic flavor" (50) about her, finds its analogy in both Malamud's and Hawthorne's stories under consideration here: in the former in the shape of the "desperate innocence" that Finkle spots in Stella Salzman's eyes despite "a sense of [her] being used to the bone";⁵⁶ in the latter, in Beatrice Rappaccini's tragic innocence sustained by the waters of a heavenly fountain in the midst of her father's poisonous garden, confirmed by her death from the antidote. In all three cases, the phrasing implies victimization rather than a willing or wilful loss of innocence. With at least two of those daughter figures: Alice Jacobus and Beatrice Rappaccini, the distribution of corruption and innocence seems to be related to the patriarchal embrace of the *idée fixe* of sheltering the daughters from the corruption of the world while simultaneously offering them a perverse familial version of one under their own roofs, both strategies sanctioning the same "stay-at-home" order. Ironically, in Conrad's tale, the reality of incest, otherwise hidden from sight, surfaces in the rancorous smell of rotting potatoes, which is denegatively construed in relation to both the "Pearl of the Isles" and Jacobus's rose garden. These denegative details find their analogy in the antithetical construction of the biblical archetype of the Garden of Eden in Rappaccini's perverse garden pervaded with the gorgeous fragrance of its lethal hybrid vegetation, all fed from the waters of a heavenly fountain.

And that, in fact, double incest may be at stake at Alfred's house and garden, might be suggested by the presence therein of the obscure, if foreboding, figure of Alice's aunt, whose behaviour appears to be as wild as her niece's, her looks no less promiscuous. Just as Alfred Jacobus's sensuous garden evokes Rappaccini's, and his relation with Alice seems no less ambiguous than Rappaccini's with his daughter, the presence of another Jacobus female under the same roof in this ingrown house and garden, and on a secluded island, too, seems evocative of Roderick and Madeleine

⁵⁵ Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Rappaccini's Daughter," in *Tales and Sketches*, The Library of America (New York: The Viking Press, 1974), p. 1005. Henceforth referenced directly in the text as "Rappaccini's Daughter."

⁵⁶ Malamud, "Magic Barrel," p. 680.

Usher's seclusion in their solitary and decaying ancestral house on the tarn, into which the house collapses at the end of Poe's tale, burying the siblings, as if in confirmation of the familial legacy. All that mirrors the incestuous relationship between the elderly Dorset siblings from Taylor's story dominated by the sensuous atmosphere of the annual brother-and-sister initiation parties that the two throw annually for the adolescent siblings of the Southern town of West Vesey from which the Dorsets derive their own ingrown ancestry, their parents' name on both sides "Dorset," them being "distant cousins," with no one in the family able to testify as to how distant.⁵⁷

This brings us back to the issue of a comparative consideration of "A Smile of Fortune" against the already mentioned stories—if the eponymous "smile of fortune" also applies to Alice's prospective release from patriarchal confinement and incestuous legacy, for, the Jacobus family is described as so ancient "*that there must have been a Jacobus in at the death of the last Dodo...*" (58), while the oldest colonial families of the island are said to be "*living a narrow domestic life in dull, dignified decay*" (39). All those attributes also feature in Poe's tale where the Ushers are referred to as a "*very ancient family [...]* [which] had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch; in other words, [...] *the entire family lay in the direct line of descent.*"⁵⁸ Likewise, the crumbling walls of the Usher house surrounded with "*decayed trees*" are marked by "*extensive decay.*" Similarly, the Dorset siblings occupy a "*dilapidated and curiously mutilated house,*" with "*a queer sort of bathroom in which the plumbing had been disconnected, and even the fixtures removed*" ("Venus, Cupid" 683, 696) the house's adjoining and adjacent parts dismantled in an effort to downsize for tax reduction's sake, which, figuratively, seems to imply an incestuous relationship between the Dorset siblings.

Similarly, the seclusion of Alfred Jacobus's house and garden, where he and his daughter live like "*a lonely pair of castaways, on a desert Island*" (40) is clearly evocative of the isolation of the Usher house and the loneliness of Roderick Usher and his "*tenderly beloved sister—his sole companion for long years—his last and only relative on earth*" ("The Fall" 133) as well as Rappaccini's perverse garden, where her outward poisonousness makes her "*the maiden of a lonely island*" ("Rappaccini's Daughter" 992). Similarly, the Dorsets are introduced as a "*foolish pair of old people [who] had given up almost everything in life for each other's sake*" ("Venus, Cupid" 683), and who withstood all of the more remote family's efforts "*to separate them*" by "*trying to marry them off to 'just anyone' [...]* *trying to steal the two of them away from each other,*" the way they see it ("Venus, Cupid" 691).

In their suggestiveness, the promiscuous garments worn by Alfred's sister and daughter—the former parading in "*her elementary nightgown-sort of frock*" (48), "*with a great play of thick limb perfectly visible in that weird, clinging garment of hers*" (49), while admonishing the latter to "[g]o at least and *put some more clothes*

⁵⁷ Peter Taylor, "Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time," in *Major American Short Stories*, ed. A. Walton Litz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 683. Further referred to directly in the text as "Venus, Cupid."

⁵⁸ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher," in *Poe's Tales of Mystery and Imagination* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1955 [1908]), p. 129. Henceforth cited in the main text as "The Fall."

on" (49), because "[w]hat she had on under that *dingy, loose, amber wrapper* must have been *of the most flimsy and airy character*" (46), match the details to the effect in Taylor's story, the "*skin-tight coveralls, of khaki material but faded almost to flesh color,*" in which Mr Dorset is seen scrubbing his car "*gently*" as "*something alive,*" and Miss Dorset's vacuuming their house "*without a stitch of clothes on*" in preparation for one of their sensuous annual brother-and-sister initiation parties ("Venus, Cupid" 682).

Similarly, Alice Jacobus's drowsy and neglectful looks, with her "*heavy eyelids* [...], *untidy wisps* hanging down on each side of the clear sallow face," creating "an impression of *magnificently cynical untidiness*" (46) are reminiscent of the appearance of Miss Louisa Dorset in Taylor's story, where she is seen "out on her front terrace at midday *clad in a faded flannel robe and with her dyed black hair undone and hanging down her back*" ("Venus, Cupid" 682), and at the annual sibling party, with her "*corsage dangling somewhere about the nape of her neck,*" in which she matches her brother Alfred (incidentally, named just as the evil Jacobus twin), who is seen walking among the invited pairs of siblings "*with his bow tie hanging limp on his damp shirtfront* [...] *a strand of gray hair,* [...] *hung like fringe about his ear*" ("Venus, Cupid" 693).

No less negligent than her looks, is Alice's general manner in relation to the Captain, to whom she keeps responding in curt denials: "*Won't!*," "*Shan't!*," "*Don't care!*" (50), just as she might to her abusive father. Interestingly enough, the cultural context by way of an English nursery rhyme that Jeremy Hawthorn provides for Alice's verbal denials seems to denegatively confirm the girl's status of a child victim of patriarchal abuse, with an implication of violence behind, which, notably the girl herself alludes to while threatening the Captain with hanging herself on her hair should he try to abduct her: "*Don't care didn't care / Don't care was hung / Don't care was put in a bag / Until he was done.*"⁵⁹ If, as emphasized by Daniel R. Schwartz, Conrad wrote "obsessive[ly about] Victorian sexual taboos: miscegenation, incest, and adultery,"⁶⁰ "A Smile of Fortune" may well be the case in point.

The sensuous atmosphere of the "the *heavily scented*" Jacobus's garden (50), and the house, with its "*dark passage* [...], *drowsing* in a warm, *voluptuous* silence. Where the long, still *shadows* fell across the *beds,*" into which Alfred leads the Captain "across the *naked* parquet floor" (45), are clearly evocative of "*the fragrance* that seemed to pervade [Beatrice's] chamber" in Hawthorne's story ("Rappaccini's Daughter" 1000), and "*the rich perfume* of her breath" (996) as well as "*a fragrance in the atmosphere* around her, *rich and delightful, though evanescent*" (992), all that matching a "*strange perfume* [that] *pervaded the atmosphere* of the [Dorset] house," in which the invited siblings were "*engulfed*" by "*awful fragrance* [...] *like a mixture of spicy incense and sweet attar of roses*" ("Venus, Cupid" 686).

And, finally, in each of the stories in question evil seems non-existent, somehow repressed because aesthetized either into a piece of "*exalted art*" ("The Fall" 129)—

⁵⁹ Hawthorn, "Conrad and the Erotic," p. 124, fn. 8.

⁶⁰ Daniel R. Schwartz, *Conrad: Almayer's Folly to Under Western Eyes* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 7.

as in “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time”—or an aesthetic nature construct of a sensuous garden, as in “Rappaccini’s Daughter” and “A Smile of Fortune.” Hence, Roderick Usher’s “*morbid acuteness of the senses*” resulting from “*a family evil*” (“The Fall” 133) manifests itself in his “*phantasmagoric paintings,*” “*naked designs,*” “*lofty poems*” and “*wild musical compositions*” (“The Fall” 135-136), while the Dorsets’ brother-and-sister initiation parties in Taylor’s story owe their aura of sensuousness to a display of highly erotic pictures and sculptures, such as Bronzino’s “*Cupid, Venus, Folly and Time,*” and Rodin’s “*The Kiss,*” respectively, as well as “*the antique Leda and the Swan plaque,*” all hidden from sight by discrete “*illumination and lighting effects*” in “*grotto-like [...] apertures*” (“Venus, Cupid” 686), which are said to have “*cast a shadow over the whole of childhood*” of the invited brothers and sisters, but from which “*even the most sensible of parents were not willing to keep their children away*” (“Venus, Cupid” 687). Similarly, the manipulated and objectified daughters of their abusive fathers in Hawthorne’s and Conrad’s tales, aesthetically “*embowered,*” to use Ellen Harrington’s term, in their enchanted but perverse patriarchal gardens, can be likened to the “portrayals of the embowered wom[e]n [in which] abound Victorian *poetry and art,*” famously exemplified by Tennyson’s poem “The Lady of Shalott” and its pictorial rendering in Waterhouse’s painting.⁶¹

As demonstrated above, the theme of incest in “A Smile of Fortune” is hardly recoverable other than through textual (“close reading”) and comparative reading of Conrad’s tale, with a particular view to significant detail grouped around nine areas of expression: (1) ancient ancestry, (2) ingrownness, (3) physical decay, (4) utter seclusion, (5) promiscuous garments and appearance, (6) slumberous and drowsy looks, (7) negligent manner, (8) the air of sensuousness, and, finally, (9) evil aestheticized.

Alfred Jacobus’s covert non-commercial corruption, skilfully, or rather cunningly, veiled over in geniality so as to become almost unidentifiable, is encoded in Conrad’s denegative technique and surfaces solely upon a discerning reading. Ironically, the main clue appears to lie with the island’s public opinion, which the Captain distrusts for their ostracism of Alfred to the advantage of his rude and cruel bachelor brother Ernest, whom they glorify. Through his denegative portrayal of the local Creole community’s morals, Conrad seems to provide a clue to Alfred’s actual moral standing, especially with the community’s “effect of pearl” mentality in view. As it appears, it is not exactly Alfred’s consistent acting upon his infatuation with a circus-rider⁶² that seems to have damned him with his own ingrown community but his brazen courtship outside the family and the isle, which brings an influx of fresh blood to both, with Ernest, by contrast, following the community’s long “sanctified” pattern of taking a local lover, no moral obligations attached, whose offspring by his own loins he mistreats at will, the fact which, is, by comparison, quite mistakenly, taken by the Captain as proof of Alfred’s decency.

⁶¹ Harrington, *Conrad’s Sensational Heroines*, p. 133.

⁶² Harrington, *Conrad’s Sensational Heroines*, p. 138.

The paradoxical fact that it is Alfred's alleged magnanimity towards his illegitimate daughter and her mother rather than Ernest's maltreatment of his half-caste son that occasions public outrage seems to denegatively confirm the presence of the incest theme in the story, for, compared to Alfred's villainy, his brother's borders on geniality, which is the more present for its absence in Alfred, the fact which might account for the other brother's name, Ernest, and the apparent paradox behind the community's opinion about both. This eventually makes Alfred Jacobus the more guilty of the two, with Ernest responsible for no more than outward and overt abuse of his son, as opposed to Alfred's covert sexual intrusion upon the body of his daughter and a mental one upon her psyche, the fact which may also account for his wife's hatred of him and her "madness," as, with Alfred's overwhelming business "skills," one may wonder what kind of deal may have lain behind his "gentle" care of both the mother and the daughter, in the first place.

It appears then that it is Alfred Jacobus himself that may have been responsible for the Captain's vague impression of Alice's impurity, for, by far the first news the invariably well-informed Captain's mate Burns brings from town upon their arrival on the island is the local gossip, suspended by him in mid-sentence, which pertains to Alice's presence in Jacobus's house: "He keeps a girl shut up there who, they say—" (30). Significantly enough, while confirming his daughter's presence under his roof with: "There is *only* my girl there" (38), Jacobus fails to mention the other female relative of unknown degree of relatedness to both Jacobus brothers, whose physical resemblance to the two and promiscuous garments—altogether unbecoming to her alleged role of "a governess" to the girl—make her loom large as a potential missing link in the hidden agenda of incest in "A Smile of Fortune," thus adding to the tale's parallelism with Poe's and Taylor's stories of incestuous siblings.

Further clues concerning the implications of the presence of the theme of patriarchal incest in the Jacobus family can be inferred from other textual evidence the story provides. Hence, pouring over Alice's "abominable eccentricities," the Captain asks himself an essential question: "Yet what could he [Jacobus] have done *to repress her?*" (54). At another point, with her scanty and negligent way of dressing, she appears to him "as though she had just jumped out of bed *in the panic of a fire*" (57). And yet, "[s]he seemed, indeed, as unaware of shame as of anything else in the world; but in her ignorance, *her resentment and fear took a childish and violent shape*" (63). In the final dramatic love encounter between Alice and the Captain, she reveals the full extent of what becomes the common denominator of the three statements quoted above, that is, her dread of violence, which clearly implicates her father rather than the narrator, contrary to the suggestions of Zuckerman and Hawthorn, who perceive the Captain as a mirror image of Alfred Jacobus in this respect.⁶³ Oddly enough, Hawthorn claims that the narrator "entertains a fantasy of treating Alice violently"⁶⁴ and cites the Captain's denegatively built hypothetical statement beginning with *as if*, coupled with modality (*could*) and a *perfect infinitive*, to prove the point: "*as if I could*

⁶³ Cf. Zuckerman, "A Smile of Fortune," p. 100; Hawthorn, "Conrad and the Erotic," p. 85.

⁶⁴ Hawthorn, "Conrad and the Erotic," p. 88.

have done her some violence—shaken her, beaten her maybe” (54)—although, quite obviously, the phrase clearly points to the opposite being true. The Captain’s ironic and even condescending comment shows him as incapable of any sort of violence despite his occasional teasing protestations to the contrary while at a loss as to how to interpret Alice’s disparaging words and nihilistic behaviour, which are more often than not taken at face value in Conrad criticism.

Commenting on Alice’s wild idea of how she would free herself from a potential imprisonment imposed on her by the Captain, that is, by strangling herself with her own hair, quite appalled, he wonders: “What *monstrous imaginings of violence* could have dwelt under the low forehead of that girl *who had been taught to regard her father as ‘capable of anything’* more in the light of a misfortune than that of a *disgrace; as, evidently, something to be resented and feared rather than to be ashamed of?*” (D, 74). The question mark at the end of the supposition (present only in the Dent edition), denegatively, makes the latter option, that of “a disgrace” to be “ashamed of,” the more plausible of the two. Likewise, Alice’s idea of an escape from entrapment through death confirms the Captain’s former impression of her “*black, fixed stare*” as one “into which [he] *had read a tragic meaning* more than once, in which [he] *had found a somber seduction* [...], [...] perfectly empty now, void of all consciousness whatever, and not even aware any longer of [his] presence; [...] a little sleepy, *in the Jacobus fashion*. [...] cynical in that unconcealed alteration, *the true Jacobus shamelessness*” (64). The persistent presence of Jacobus behind the scenes in the above passage, and in the context of the “*somber seduction*” in which it occurs, unmistakably points to the patriarch as the perpetrator. In fact, it is only when he reassures Alice of his own intrepidity in relation to her father that she calms down to the point of admitting: “‘*I am not afraid of you*’ [...] ‘*No, I am not afraid.*’ *She hesitated. . . . ‘Not now.’*” (71). Even though she admits to the same feelings about her father just before that: “‘*I am not afraid of papa—by himself,*’ she declared *scornfully*” (71), adding a provision by way of an afterthought: “by himself,” which may be Conrad’s direct translation of the Polish “as such,” suggesting her not being afraid of him in his role of a father (but a seducer, by inference), her tone marked as scornful, which instils doubt and suspicion in the reader’s/hearer’s mind as to the reliability of her admission. Moreover, while replying to the Captain’s supposition: “You must love this garden—,” she answers: “‘*I love nothing.*’ [...] in her sullen tone [with] that faint echo of that *resentfully tragic note*” (71), like “*the everlastingly irritated captive of the garden*” (60), reminiscent, as Ellen Harrington indicates, of the character of Rapunzel from the Brothers Grimm tale, who escaped from the captivity of a wicked witch with the help of her long hair,⁶⁵ whose abundance in Alice’s case is, incidentally, stressed time and again in Conrad’s story.

Thus, Alice’s nihilistic manner and talk, marked by a vague aura of despair and tragedy, seem indicative of her being a victim of patriarchal abuse. The Captain’s unexpected resolve and fundamental change of plans may therefore be related to his sudden realization—given expression in his words about Alice’s kiss having to be

⁶⁵ Harrington, *Conrad’s Sensational Heroines*, p. 141.

paid for in full—that the girl he feels so strong about is extending to him a mute if confused and confusing plea for rescue from her own father, who now intends to objectify her by attempting to trade her off; hence, apparently, the Captain's ultimate resignation from his ship's command and further dealings with Alice's father as well as his choice of love on land over commerce at sea, in perfect unison with the title of Conrad's volume.

Ironically, at the end of Conrad's tale the "Fortune" may also "smile" on Jacobus himself, in ridding him of the main reason for his social ostracism—the presence of his daughter under his roof, for, paradoxically, the presence of his sister therein does not seem to bother the insular Creole establishment, which fails altogether to mark it, precisely in the manner of the Southern community from Taylor's story, whose life is about nothing save sisters and brothers and their generations old incestuous relations. For Alice Jacobus it is the Captain himself that functions as "a smile of Fortune" by virtue of being, like Tom Bascomb from Taylor's story, an outsider, whose arrival explodes the corrupt world of familial abuse and ruins "the pearl effect" of the island, which alone justifies the Captain's decision to give up the ship's command and return to Mauritius on his own terms and for the girl's sake.

As to how far otherwise Alfred Jacobus had planned things to happen, and by way of Conrad's foreshadowing of the narrator's eventual return for Alice, the less discernible detail concerns Jacobus's procrastination in the sugar dealings with the Captain, which the latter discovers, without, however, knowing the reason for at that stage, as it is with "a condescending, shark-like smile" that Alfred announced "a possible shortage, [...] the contingency of a delay [...]," as they themselves "'have been taken unawares,' [as] he concluded primly, with an obvious lie" (43). Thus, apart from inviting himself with his provisions onto the deck the Captain's skipper, persuading him to come to the funeral of the child that died at sea, offering to organize an opening banquet for all captains on his behalf, producing rare cigars in a more intimate manner than their brief acquaintanceship warranted, bringing him a bunch of flowers from his garden, and enticing him to visit his house, almost the first question Alfred Jacobus asks the Captain is whether he is married, which, in combination with all the other measures, unmistakably betrays the true nature of Alfred's original intent. Thus, it is the daughter bred outside of the ingrown Creole community circle that seems to have been the end, with the potato business being the means to it, for, after all, it is Jacobus who loses on the latter economically, and the Captain whose profit skyrockets contrary to his wildest expectations. By offering him and his company a lucrative potato deal, if only to ensure his return, Jacobus deliberately condemns himself to a prolonged economic loss, which he must have, however, apparently calculated into the risk of his matchmaking business. It seems then, that if the Captain *does* indeed return to Mauritius, it is only on his own terms, totally unrelated to either commerce or Jacobus's matchmaking, and only by way of "carrying [Alice] off somewhere" for her own sake rather than his pleasure, or, for that matter, her money,

the conditions which invariably leave the father empty-handed and the daughter free of patriarchal abuse.

The denegative structuring of narration and character motive in Conrad's tale offers disparate resolutions, all of them seemingly validated by the text, which does not, however, have to be the story's flaw, as some critics have it, but its epistemological asset and Conrad's modernist experimentation in the relativity of truth, its disparity to facts, and almost impossible retrieval, whether in art or life. In the light of the above discussion, Conrad's oxymoronic assertion of presence by absence through denegation, very much in the Faulknerian vein, credits him rather than Faulkner with blazing the trail. Curiously enough, Conrad's description of his novel *Romance* in his 8 November 1903 letter to Kazimierz Waliszewski provides the key to our understanding of his short fiction, which is usually perceived as "weaker." Writing to Waliszewski, Conrad refers to *Romance* as "something of no importance," a "purely aesthetic" experiment, an attempt at "something which was very much in vogue with the public at the moment."⁶⁶ The writer's phrasing of the essence of *Romance* here, in relation to a book that is not usually placed among his best, seems perfectly applicable to his less known and undervalued short fiction, which, in the manner of his *Romance*, may be perceived as the writer's exercise ("something of no importance") in the aesthetics ("purely aesthetic") of modernism ("something which was very much in vogue with the public at the moment") rather than judged exclusively on its merit, or, lack thereof, for that matter, as the story at times seems to go.

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⁶⁶ Zdzisław Najder, *Conrad's Polish Background* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 236.

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