

The Regenerative Paradigm: Male Initiations in

Joseph Conrad's *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"*

Heart of Darkness, and The Shadow-Line

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Abstract

The following thesis looks at the male initiation motif in Joseph Conrad's *The Nigger of the "Narcissus," Heart of Darkness*, and *The Shadow-Line* from the perspective of contemporary anthropology. I argue that Conrad was not only well versed in late-Victorian science, but also used anthropological data on so-called primitive races in his fiction to challenge the covert political ideologies of social Darwinism. He recognized that new developments in Darwin's theory of evolution, which propagated widespread anxiety over the cultural and biological degeneration of Western civilization at the fin de siècle, were aligned with European imperialism and contributed to the exploitation of colonial territories. To counter the scientific studies that characterized indigenous peoples such as the Australian Aborigines as inferior races that were slated for extinction, Conrad applied male initiation rites as a subversive motif in his stories. Following the pattern first described in Arnold Van Gennep's *Les Rites de Passage* (1908), I analyze each novella in terms of the universal tripartite structure of initiations in which a novice is separated from the known world, enters a sacred liminal zone where he undergoes inwardly transformative ordeals, and is then reincorporated into society with an increased level of self-awareness. Conrad uses male initiations as a regenerative paradigm to contrast with the spiritual emptiness of his own modern secular civilization and to suggest that storytelling can function as a potentially restorative form of discourse.

Résumé

La thèse suivante examine le thème de l'initiation masculine dans les romans *The Nigger of the "Narcissus," Heart of Darkness* et *The Shadow-Line* de Joseph Conrad du point de vue de l'anthropologie contemporaine. J'avance que Conrad avait non seulement une bonne connaissance de la science de l'époque victorienne, mais qu'il a également appliqué dans sa fiction certaines données anthropologiques à des races dites primitives pour dénoncer les idéologies politiques du darwinisme social. Il a reconnu que de nouveaux développements dans la théorie darwinienne de l'évolution, qui propageaient une anxiété à l'égard de la dégénérescence culturelle et biologique de la civilisation occidentale en fin de siècle, pouvaient être interprétés parallèlement à l'impérialisme européen, et comme élément de justification de l'exploitation des territoires coloniaux. Afin de réfuter les théories de l'évolution qui catégorisaient les indigènes comme des sauvages inférieurs voués à l'extinction, Conrad a utilisé le thème des rites d'initiation masculine comme un moyen de subversion dans ses histoires. J'analyse chaque roman à travers la structure universelle tripartite des initiations qu'Arnold Van Gennep met en lumière dans *Les rites de passage* (1908); structure selon laquelle un novice est séparé du monde connu, entre dans une zone liminale sacrée où il subit des épreuves qui résultent en une transformation interne et est ensuite réintégré dans la société avec une plus grande conscience de soi. Conrad utilise les rites de passage comme un paradigme de régénération, en opposition avec le vide spirituel de la civilisation séculière caractéristique de l'époque, et comme moyen pour montrer que la narration peut fonctionner comme une forme de discours potentiellement rajeunissant.

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Introduction

In the present study I would like to examine the relationship between Joseph Conrad's little-known interest in contemporary anthropology and the significant role it plays in his fiction. I propose that in three of his most important novellas, *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1897), *Heart of Darkness* (1899), and *The Shadow-Line* (1917), Conrad's use of primitive initiation rites as a literary motif engages in what Patrick Brantlinger has recently called "extinction discourse," a late-Victorian obsession with apocalyptic writing (13). In *Dark Vanishings: Discourse on the Extinction of Primitive Races* (2003), Brantlinger reveals that periodicals, newspapers, and books in fin de siècle Europe reflected a widespread fear that Western civilization was degenerating. Anthropological studies, particularly those that applied Darwin's theory of evolution to the way societies and cultures develop, seemed to confirm that the rapid deterioration of native tribes in imperial colonies indicated the potential for cultural extinction. Yet, as Brantlinger points out, these widely disseminated views expressed an ethnocentric bias which aided the expansion of European imperialism. Evidence suggests that Conrad not only knew about but was also highly critical of scientific studies that portrayed indigenous peoples as savages whose extinction was unavoidable and largely self-inflicted. In his fiction, he subverts the degeneration theories of his period by showing that Western civilization was indeed weakening spiritually, physically, and morally, but that this condition was primarily due to its overemphasis on secular ideologies, mechanization, and capitalism, in short, to the very features that evolutionary theorists considered signs of cultural

superiority. By contrast, from his years as a sailor travelling to exotic ports and his wide reading of scientific and anthropological writings Conrad was well aware that tribal societies had been practicing customs that sanctified life and had allowed them to survive for millennia. I will demonstrate how Conrad uses the motif of male initiation rites in the three novellas as a regenerative paradigm that challenges the politically sanctioned notions of primitive extinction and exposes instead the spiritual and moral degradation of Western civilization.

The initiation motif in Conrad's fiction, on the rare occasions when it has been studied, has by and large been misconstrued. Ever since the myth and ritual interpretation of literature fell out of favor in academic circles, critical studies on the ritualistic aspects of Conrad's work have all but vanished. Myth and ritual criticism mainly centered on anthropological data collected in Sir James Frazer's monumental *The Golden Bough* (1890), a twelve-volume study of primitive religious customs which postulates that human belief systems evolve from the level of magic, to religion, and finally to science. The so-called Cambridge School of ritualists that arose in the 1920s, composed of Frazer himself and other myth specialists such as Robertson Smith and Jane E. Harrison, provided convincing evidence that motifs, images, and themes in modern art could be traced back to primitive rituals. Conrad's fiction was put under this interpretive lens by critics such as Stanley Edgar Hyman. In his 1948 review of Albert J. Guerard's biography of Conrad, Hyman criticizes Guerard for disregarding "the concept of such ancient tribal rituals as initiation, fertility, the totemic feast, purification and expiation ceremonies, the killing of the god-king, etc., underlying Conrad's plots"

(Hyman 191). Yet the Frazerian interpretive method typically failed to take into account the cultural climate in which authors were writing. By the 1950s, with the declining influence of myth and ritual criticism, studies of Conrad's fiction began to use the word "initiation" pejoratively. In the handful of initiation readings in Conrad criticism from the 1950s to 1970s, the term lost its sacred connotations and referred merely to a difficult learning experience that leads to maturity. In articles like "Conrad's Two Stories of Initiation" (1954) by Carl Benson or "'Typhoon': The Initiation of Jukes" (1973) by Paul Bruss, the critics fail to define the word "initiation." For Benson, *The Shadow-Line* simply portrays "the passage of egocentric youth to maturity" (47), while, for Bruss, the young second mate Jukes's "access to maturity" is gained by facing his fears during a typhoon (53). Such interpretations show a lack of knowledge of the anthropological origins of initiations and thus overlook the way Conrad's fiction engages in the socio-historical issues of its period.

Despite the advent of post-colonial approaches to Conrad's work, critical studies that focus on his knowledge of contemporary anthropology fail to mention initiations in his fiction. Both Redmond O'Hanlon and Allan Hunter contend that Conrad was Darwinian in his outlook on life. O'Hanlon, in *Joseph Conrad and Charles Darwin* (1984), shows that Conrad's reading of Darwin's theories partly contributed to his pessimistic worldview, while Hunter, in *Joseph Conrad and the Ethics of Darwinism* (1985), argues not only that Conrad was familiar with the leading evolutionary writers of his period such as Henry Huxley, Herbert Spencer, and E. B. Tylor, but also that in his fiction Conrad "is in most cases extending and

re-writing their radical theories” (6). Yet neither O’Hanlon nor Hunter makes any mention of Conrad’s application of initiation rites as a potentially subversive literary motif. In the more recent *Conrad and the Anthropological Dilemma* (1995), John W. Griffith provides an extensive contextual analysis of fin de siècle scientific writings in relation to Conrad’s fiction but hardly touches on how he may have used these ideas in his stories. Readings such as these, for all their merit, significantly omit an effective close reading of Conrad’s fiction. Such an examination of the aesthetic design of his stories would reveal the complex symbolic pattern Conrad wove into his works, some of which parallel primitive initiation rituals. My goal is to rectify this omission by not only exploring Conrad’s knowledge of anthropology in its historical context, but also examining why he chose primitive initiations, and how they appear in his novellas.

Initiation rites, contrary to popular belief, not only celebrated the manhood of adolescent boys but also served as rituals of tribal regeneration. According to the religious historian Mircea Eliade in *Australian Religions* (1973), male initiations were highly complex religious ceremonies performed cross-culturally by tribal societies as sacred rituals which were required to keep the world from degenerating into primordial chaos. For indigenous peoples such as the Australian Aborigines, the world was based on a dichotomy between the “sacred,” a revelation of divinity, and the “profane” daily world. Rituals of initiation were ceremonies in which the sacred was accessed and the regenerative energies of ancestral spirits could be channelled to keep the world vitalized. In their proximity to nature and its cycles, tribal societies developed beliefs centered on death and

renewal; like all things in nature, man himself periodically had to die and be reborn. In *The Sacred and the Profane* (1957), Eliade states that, in primitive thought, “when brought to birth, man is not yet completed; he must be born a second time, spiritually.” Because birth through the mother into the profane world of nature is considered “an imperfect, embryonic state,” men performed sacred rituals to attain “a perfect, adult state.” As Eliade elucidates, it is only through “a series of ‘passage rites,’ in short, by successive initiations” that “human existence attains completion” (181). Significantly, initiations were usually performed during crises or difficult transitions – for an individual, an entire culture, or a historical period – that might threaten the cohesion or even the very existence of a civilization (Myerhoff 117). There is strong textual evidence in his novellas that Conrad was applying the motif of male initiations from this perspective, as a model of renewal, to contrast with the crisis of spiritual sterility and the perceived threat of extinction in his own civilization.

Remarkably, all three of Conrad’s novellas correspond to a tripartite pattern similar to the one outlined by the French folklorist Arnold Van Gennep in *Les Rites de Passage* (1908). Drawing on the work of men like Sir James Frazer, Sir Baldwin Spencer, R. H. Mathews, and Bronisław Malinowski, Van Gennep discerned an underlying structure that appears cross-culturally in the initiation rites of tribal societies. All rites of passage, Van Gennep claims, conform to the schema of *séparation-marge-agrégation* (separation-liminality-reincorporation). In “a dynamic combination of process and structure” (29), the initiate is first separated from the known world, then enters a liminal or threshold phase in which

everything familiar is subverted, and finally, after experiencing a transformation of character, is reincorporated into the tribe with a new social role. Although Thomas Smith finds no direct proof that Conrad ever read Van Gennep's work (32), textual evidence suggests that Conrad consulted various anthropological studies, similar to those Van Gennep had read, which were available to him during the writing of the three novellas. From these works, Conrad, I believe, formulated a composite pattern of male initiation for his fiction.

In the tripartite structure of Conrad's three novellas, I will be looking at nine recurrent elements, all of which are among the most universal features of male initiation rites. All three stories begin with a separation phase in which the protagonists are (1) severed from their previous identities, (2) enter a sacred ground prepared by elder men, and (3) encounter hostile characters who function as ancestral beings. The liminal phase occurs when they (4) enter a primordial wilderness, (5) undergo ordeals that test their mental and physical fortitude, including a confrontation with the ancestral beings, and (6) experience a symbolic death and rebirth. During the reincorporation phase, the protagonists (7) take part in a separation ritual from liminality, then (8) return to their previous environment, and (9) exhibit a new perception of themselves and the world. Significantly, each novella takes the form of a recollection by an unnamed narrator who has creatively restructured his memories of an arduous experience that has matured him, and presents his trials as a male initiation in a modern setting.

Chapter one focuses on Conrad's response to developments in Darwinian theories and how his sympathetic view of primitive cultures influenced his use of

male initiation rites. Conrad, cognizant of the political ideologies underpinning most of the social evolutionary theories of the fin de siècle, favored the more humane views of the naturalist Alfred Russell Wallace, who, in works like *The Malay Archipelago* (1869), criticized social Darwinists for distorting evolutionary discoveries to fulfill political agendas. I believe that Conrad was also aware of the effort of anthropologists to record the traditional customs and beliefs of the so-called “dying races.” Scientific studies during this period often focused on male initiation rites, which were found to be ubiquitous among tribal cultures and central to indigenous belief systems. The great public interest which the subject garnered led to popular studies about primitive customs such as Spencer and Gillen’s *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899), one of numerous similar works which Conrad seems to have known and used as a source of data.

In chapter two, I argue that *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* is Conrad’s first conscious attempt to depict male initiations in his fiction by using symbols and structures from primitive rituals. Although Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) initially inspired Conrad to look into the initiation theme, Conrad’s interest in anthropology and science led him to a deeper examination of the subject. While the lack of a visible central protagonist and the oscillating narrative voice have mostly prevented critics from seeing the novella as an initiation story, I suggest that the unnamed narrator is the main character who, through the retelling of a life-threatening voyage he survived as a younger man aboard the *Narcissus*, characterizes his experience as a secular initiation in the desacralized modern world. I will demonstrate how the narrator presents the

voyage as a cosmogonic return to the origins of man, with the sailors taking on the role of initiates and the officers that of ritual elders. The two troublesome sailors, James Wait and Donkin, embody ancestral spirits that test the moral strength of the crew and thus trigger their spiritual rebirth.

In *Heart of Darkness*, which I address in chapter three, Conrad subverts the male initiation pattern to expose the moral degeneracy of Imperial Europe. The novella parodies late-Victorian adventure fiction in which anthropological data on primitive cultures were being trivialized by popular writers such as Rider H. Haggard and Grant Allen and functioned as propaganda to disseminate imperialist ideologies. Drawing on troubling memories of his own experiences in the Belgian Congo, Conrad this time creates an unnamed frame narrator who has reconstructed the account by his fellow sailor, Charlie Marlow, of a harrowing ordeal from his youth that has changed him. The novella presents the narrator's rewriting of Marlow's quest to retrieve the renegade ivory trader Kurtz from the Congo into a failed initiation. Marlow's tale demonstrates how initiatory experiences, stripped of sacred rituals, have become private psychological ordeals that result in an incomplete transformation of the initiate.

Conrad revisits the theme of male initiation in *The Shadow-Line*, a late work in which he focuses on the spiritual aspects of the rites as they operate in a modern secular world. In chapter four, I will look at how his autobiographical narrative of a young captain's first experience in command of a sailing ship trapped on the sea with a sick crew has erroneously been misinterpreted as a failed *Bildungsroman* or a poorly executed ghost story due to its apparent

supernatural elements. I argue that this novella, which Conrad first conceived as a story titled “First Command” in 1899, is best understood in relation to his earlier explorations of the male initiation theme. Whereas the untimely death of Stephen Crane was the shocking event that psychologically blocked him from writing the story, Conrad’s visit to his native Poland in 1914 and the outbreak of World War One revived his interest in it. More than any of his previous tales, *The Shadow-Line* merges Christian and pagan imagery of death and resurrection in Conrad’s most overt portrayal of male initiation as a source of potential spiritual renewal.

I will conclude by looking at how Conrad’s motive for using primitive models of male initiation is related to his aesthetic ideal. My analysis of the novellas demonstrates that Conrad knew about the rites and understood that primitive societies performed these spiritual ceremonies for tribal regeneration. By applying male initiations contrastively in the modern settings of his novellas, he seems to be exploring how men, atomized in secular urban environments, function without sacred beliefs. For Conrad, storytelling, or the creative reconstruction of memories based on universal symbols, is a modern counterpart to initiation rites and has a potentially regenerative effect on both the individual and society.

Chapter 1

Conrad and the “Dying Races”

The aborigines are in a low ethnic stage . . . evidence should be obtainable to show either a process of development of or degeneration of the social status.

– A. W. Howitt, “Anthropology in Australia” (18)

Conrad’s decision to explore male initiation in his fiction through models from tribal societies responded to the degeneration theories of the fin de siècle. By the final decade of the nineteenth century, developments in the theory of evolution had created widespread anxiety that European civilization was descending into barbarism. Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) had done more than just remove man from his lofty position in nature. His theory, which postulated that human beings had evolved from ape-like progenitors, fatally damaged the credibility of Christian doctrines that related man to a divine source. By undermining the religious explanation of human origins, science had created a spiritual and ethical vacuum in Western culture. Man was now merely part of the impersonal mechanism of nature, and in the “struggle for survival” it was biology, not spirituality, which prompted man’s actions and determined his fate.¹ Applied to society, evolutionary theories seemed to indicate that civilizations could not only evolve but also degenerate.

Since the 1860s, evolutionists had argued that societies steadily evolved from the primitive to the civilized. Along with other scientists like Herbert Spencer and Thomas Huxley, E. B. Tylor, the founder of modern anthropology, believed that civilizations, like organic beings, tended to evolve from “lower”

forms, as exemplified by tribal cultures such as those in Africa and Australia, to “higher” ones like those in contemporary Europe (Tylor 3). However, by the last decade of the century, the fact that these so-called “savage” races existed in the same period as the apparently “superior” Europeans had raised troublesome questions regarding evolution. Central to the heated social evolutionary debates of the fin de siècle was whether the indigenous peoples in the colonies were remnants of a more developed civilization that had somehow degenerated into a state of barbarism, or were biologically inferior and had never evolved.² As social problems in Western societies, such as poverty, crime, and mental disease, persisted and even seemed to increase, cultural decay appeared to be a more likely possibility; it seemed inevitable that people like the poor in urban metropolises like London were “returning to a more primitive stage of human development, degenerating instead of evolving” (Schaffer 300).

The anxiety in Western civilization over its possible regression into savagery reinforced the negative image of indigenous races and contributed to policies of extermination. According to John W. Griffith, a vast amount of late-Victorian literature exhibits “a common fear that degeneration unleashes primitivistic and atavistic desires in Europeans” (6). Biological scientists of the period were convinced that just beneath the surface of man’s conscious thoughts lurked an unconscious layer of primitive instinctive drives that threatened society. For social Darwinists, who applied theories of evolution to social development, primitivism in modern man was not only a sign of degeneracy, but also a cause of criminality.³ Influential figures like Cesare Lombroso, the Italian criminologist

who, in studies like *Criminal Man* (1876), claimed that signs of atavism were visible in cranial distortions, and Max Nordau, the Hungarian physician whose social critique *Degeneration* (1892) argued that the human mind, exemplified by the work of fin de siècle artists, was regressing in urban environments, contributed to growing fears that hereditary weaknesses in the human body were responsible for destructive social behavior. However, as William Greenslade points out, social Darwinism was essentially a political tool used by the European social elite as a license for eradicating unwanted deviants, all of whom were stigmatized with the image of the primitive. In what amounted to a widespread propaganda campaign, those who subscribed to the ideology of social Darwinism associated marginalized people such as criminals, homosexuals, artists, the poor, the mentally ill, and foreigners with atavistic or savage traits (124). Social Darwinists almost invariably tended to align their political ideologies with the New Imperialism in Europe (1870-1914). As Patrick Brantlinger points out, indigenous races in the colonies became targets of imperialist programs which depicted them as “dying races” that deserved to be exterminated (12). In order to control the vast natural resources available in the colonies, like the ivory in Africa, imperial powers such as England, France, Belgium, and Germany applied theories of social Darwinism as a pretext for exploitation. The apparently superior Europeans, according to natural laws of social evolution, were fully justified in exterminating lower species of man or, through Christianizing missions, converting those capable of adapting to Western culture.

Conrad strongly opposed most of the social evolutionary theories of his time because he recognized that most of the anxieties they propagated were politically motivated. According to Greenslade, Conrad was on the side of neither the evolutionists nor the degenerationists. The “typologies of degeneration” which frequently appear in Conrad’s stories such as *The Secret Agent* (1910) were ironic comments on the political dimensions of social Darwinism. Greenslade explains that Conrad “found the positivists truly offensive,” and “in their aggressive and self-righteous attitude [he saw] how the spiritual was being hijacked by the peddlers of a quack religion. For Conrad the degenerationist credo was as much a dead end as any other” (107). Despite his interest in Darwinian science, Conrad did not think reason alone could provide answers to human troubles. As Zdzisław Najder puts it, “Conrad was convinced that rational knowledge and intellectual study of nature are ethically barren and lead to extreme scepticism in life; he believed that the only firm basis for human bonds can be found in emotions” (*Chronicle* 212). Conrad felt that art, with its ability to stir human sympathy, had a moral aim that science did not. Najder explains that, for Conrad, “the moral aim of art consisted in the stirring up of this profound sense of solidarity based on immemorial tradition” (213). The theories circulated by social Darwinists, by contrast, caused social division by encouraging racism, perpetuating economic inequality, and contributing to imperialism.

Conrad’s views on evolutionary theories were similar to those of Alfred Russel Wallace, the scientist he admired most. Wallace, the English naturalist and botanist credited with the co-discovery of the theory of evolution with Darwin,

had a profound impact on Conrad's views of social evolution. Hunter believes that "Conrad almost certainly read Darwin and Wallace" and "endorsed large amounts of their thinking" (1), but indicates that he had a far greater regard for Wallace, particularly on issues regarding evolution and native societies. Brantlinger indicates that, in comparison to most of the evolutionists of his day, Wallace had the most humane approach to native cultures which was based on his fieldwork and spiritual outlook on life. As Brantlinger puts it, in all of his writings, Wallace was typically "reversing . . . most social Darwinian judgments about savages" (187). A lifelong social activist, Wallace was critical of the way the theory of evolution was being distorted to legitimize imperialist agendas.

Wallace recognized that the British economic system, which was intent on forcing natives into immediately converting to civilization or perishing, was entirely unethical and had nothing to do with the theory of natural selection. In *The Malay Archipelago*, a work that Conrad adored rereading and quoting (Houston 31), Wallace explains that such an approach "inevitably results in the extinction or degradation of 'lower races'" (*Malay* 223), and that this fate does not arise from qualities in the natives' biological structure that supposedly retarded their movement up the ladder of evolution. Wallace condemned social Darwinists for partaking in economic policies that masqueraded as science and decimated races labeled as inferior.⁴ Brantlinger indicates that "in contrast to most social Darwinists, who agreed with Huxley, Spencer, and Francis Galton in opposing state interference in the operations of the marketplace, Wallace added so-called free trade to the causes of the extinction of primitive races" (183). Social

Darwinists, including Charles Darwin himself, mostly came from wealthy families and benefitted both financially and socially from ideologies that supported people of high social rank at the expense of all others.⁵ But according to Wallace “the wealth and knowledge and culture of the few do not constitute civilization” (*Malay* 595). The ideology of progress, most vigorously purveyed by social Darwinists as a license to conquer “lower races,” was a convenient illusion. Wallace recognized that nature does not have an instinctive drive towards rapid improvement, but rather is geared towards gradual adaptation to a changing environment, which is a fact that contradicted imperialist schemes to enforce immediate progress.⁶

For all its technological superiority, Western civilization, Wallace claims, is far below the “savages” in terms of ethical behavior. In *The Malay Archipelago*, Wallace states that, compared to the social customs he witnessed while living amongst indigenous peoples, “we have not advanced equally in morals,” and it is this “deficient morality” that is “the great blot of modern civilization, and the greatest hindrance to true progress” (595). He believes that the moral capacity of man, the “sense of right and wrong,” is “antecedent to and independent of experiences of utility” (*Contributions* 201). Moral and intellectual capacities, he stresses, are not the same. The intellect rationalizes without feeling, whereas sympathy, the prerequisite for building a society based on morality, is dependent on emotional development. Thus, a civilization like that of Victorian England had progressed intellectually but lagged far behind in altruism. He directly connects the problem to those who hold economic and political power. For Wallace, the

moral degradation of the West is attributable to “our neglect to train and develop more thoroughly the sympathetic feelings and moral faculties of our nature, and to allow them a larger share of influence in our legislation, our commerce, and our whole social organization” (*Malay* 596).

Conrad shared many of Wallace’s critical views on social Darwinism, particularly with regard to human sympathy. His favorable view of native peoples is evident from the beginning of his career as a writer. In his Author’s Note to *Almayer’s Folly* (1895), Conrad rejects Alice Meynell’s argument in “Decivilised” (1891) that contact with colonial writing can lead to the degeneration of British literature. Conrad, who spent years on merchant ships delivering cargo to distant ports, observed the similarities of people regardless of culture and believed “there is a bond between us and that humanity so far away.” He saw “that brown humanity” as part of the same mortal sphere as his own rather than as an inferior race. “I am content,” he explains, “to sympathise with common mortals no matter where they live; in houses or in huts” (*Almayer’s Folly* 3-4). According to Richard Saveson, Conrad’s early novels show so-called primitive races as more inwardly stable than their psychologically troubled Western counterparts. In his Malay novels and *Lord Jim*, Conrad portrays the natives of the islands as having “an even balance between intellectual and instinctive” traits (163). However, Conrad’s sympathetic attitude towards natives, like Wallace’s, was rare. Meynell’s views were symptomatic of the increasing hostility in European societies towards indigenous peoples, and indeed towards all things considered “savage,” as threats to the stability of Western civilization.

By 1890, anthropologists saw an urgent need to record the customs of the apparently dying primitive races before they went extinct. In an 1875 lecture, the evolutionary anthropologist Augustus Pitt-Rivers had already urged the preservation of primitive customs. He blamed contact with white civilization, particularly Britain, for the destruction of tribal cultures, and called it the moral duty of the white races to construct at least a record of the peoples they were contributing to destroying (Brantlinger 181). European governments since the 1870s had been aggressively exterminating native peoples and rationalizing their demise as either unavoidable or inevitable according to social evolutionary laws. Of all the groups marked for extinction, the Australian Aborigines became the focal point of degeneration fears among anthropologists of the *fin de siècle*. Evolutionary anthropologists like Pitt-Rivers and E. B. Tylor believed the apparent lack of progress of tribal societies like the Aborigines was a sign of inferiority that naturally slated them for extermination by the superior Europeans.⁷ In terms of Darwinian laws, the Aborigines were especially primitive; their isolation on the Australian continent had apparently left them out of the natural movement of all living things towards higher development. As Stuart Macintyre explains, “from the perspective of evolutionary biology, Australia had been cut off from the process of continuous improvement brought about by the competition for survival, and constituted a living museum of relic forms” (145). From their cave paintings to their family structures to their ceremonies and myths, the Aborigines were considered rare specimens of Stone Age people who could provide scientific data regarding the way civilizations evolved or degenerated.

Of all their customs, anthropologists had noted early on that male initiation rites were central to the belief system of tribal societies, but obtaining accurate information about them was problematic. As late as the 1880s, studies of male initiations remained sporadic, yielded inconsistent data, and were generally marred by the ethnocentric views which had, since the first records of their existence among Australian tribes in 1804, blinkered any objective observation of the ceremonies (Spencer and Gillen, "Notes" 153). In a paper read on 16 August 1883, at a monthly meeting of the Geographic Society of Australasia, John F. Mann expresses the common prejudice of the period: all primitive races were one homogeneous group following similar barbaric customs and were at a low evolutionary level that preceded religious belief. Mann explains that the once numerous but now disappearing Australian tribes are "almost identical" and that their "present low standard" is the result of degeneration from an "original stock" that was "much superior to the present race" (27). Although he finds that their elaborate ceremonies, in particular initiation rites, show signs of higher complexity, he conjectures that these are remnants of earlier developments lost through cultural degradation (45). Such ethnocentric and hostile views made native peoples distrustful of Europeans, and resulted in their refusal to divulge any details on the rites.

The obscurities surrounding the initiation ceremonies began to dissipate with the work of two men who had been studying the social customs of indigenous tribes in the 1870s. The botanist A. W. Howitt and the French missionary Lorimer Fison had been living for years with Australian Aborigines,

and their analyses of aboriginal family structures had produced, among numerous other works, the *Kamilaroi and Kurnai* (1879), a landmark study that had given anthropologists the first detailed account of primitive social practices. Like other evolutionary theorists, both men were concerned with understanding the customs of the dying races before they became extinct. In Howitt's address in 1890 to mark the opening of the Royal Society of Victoria's first Australian department devoted to aboriginal studies, he stresses the need to record the disappearing native traditions. Significantly, he notes that "the secret ceremonies of initiation to manhood . . . are most important as furnishing a key to many otherwise puzzling customs" (17). Howitt and Fison's studies were the earliest reliable contributions to the expansion of knowledge concerning the initiation ceremonies which were increasingly seen as being of paramount significance to indigenous tribes.

Building on the work of men like Howitt and Fison, Sir James Frazer's monumental study of magic and religion, *The Golden Bough*, marked a crucial change in how ethnographic material was gathered and interpreted and led to more accurate information regarding male initiation rites. Frazer applied new methods of categorizing existing data on primitive cultures in that he drew much of his information from the reports of missionaries, ethnographers, and colonists who had had direct contact with natives. In *The Golden Bough*, Frazer presents his influential theory of the dying and resurrecting god of vegetation, a universal myth which he argues forms the basis of all primitive rituals and reflects the universal desire of natives to control nature through magic. Frazer calls initiations "rituals of death and resurrection" (225) and reveals that they share the following

universal characteristics: boys around the age of puberty are first forcibly separated from their mothers by elder men and shamans disguised as ancestral spirits; they are then isolated in the bush by the men in a previously prepared sacred ground where the uninitiated are not allowed; next, the shamans retell mythic legends of the tribe, reveal sacred objects to the boys, and perform rituals of scarification to symbolize the death of their previous identities; and finally the initiates are ceremonially reintegrated into the tribe as newborn men who are now allowed to marry. Frazer concludes that the purpose of the symbolic killing of boys during initiations seems to be for them to acquire a higher social status by adopting an animal totem and becoming adults of the tribe (226-30). The tremendous influence of Frazer's *Golden Bough* established the basic model of male initiations in all subsequent anthropological studies.

While Frazer himself was an armchair anthropologist, the first categorical study of aboriginal initiation rites from firsthand observation was produced by Sir Baldwin Spencer and Frank J. Gillen. Spencer was hired as a botanist during the Horn Expedition of 1894 into Central Australia and met Gillen at the tiny colony of Alice Springs, which was located near a large aboriginal population. Taking advantage of Gillen's position as Sub-Protector of the local Arunta tribe and his friendly relations with them, Spencer became, along with Gillen, an honorary member of the tribe in order to be permitted to witness a male initiation ceremony held at Alice Springs in November 1895.⁸ The event yielded the raw material for *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899), a massive two-volume study that drew on theories articulated in *The Golden Bough*. Indeed, Frazer himself

supervised the work and remained Spencer's lifelong mentor and associate.⁹ Significantly, the study revealed that male initiations were not merely puberty rites. These ceremonies, in which men of all ages participated, had a much profounder significance as large numbers of tribes travelled great distances to attend the elaborate and solemn rites. Unlike the savage cannibals of popular imagination, the Aborigines not only were relatively peaceful, but also had some form of religious belief expressed by the initiation rites that was highly complex and crucial to their well-being. Spencer concluded that the goal of the rites was not only to pass on traditions but also to maintain social cohesion. He explains that an initiation "has the effect of strengthening all who pass through it. It imparts courage and wisdom, makes the men more kindly natured and less apt to quarrel" (*Native Tribes* 1: 272). The rites, then, primarily developed self-restraint and goodwill in the initiates and made them into mature men who maintained peaceful relations with each other and close ties with ancestral spirits.

Evidence suggests that Conrad most likely consulted such anthropological studies when he was applying concepts and structures from primitive initiation rituals in his stories. Given that Conrad had "formed the habit of reading books that would assist him in his writing" (Tutein ix), many of which were outside the field of literature, it is unlikely that he would have overlooked the latest anthropological discoveries when exploring male initiations.¹⁰ Frazer's *Golden Bough* must have served as a rich source early on. According to Robert Hampson, Conrad certainly knew about Frazer and may even have met him through a mutual acquaintance; in tales like *Heart of Darkness* and "Falk," among others, Hampson

finds numerous traces of data appearing in Frazer's work.¹¹ One thing is certain: Conrad, through friends in his literary circle, received a copy of the *Fortnightly Review* in 1900 which contained an article from Frazer's *Golden Bough*, "The Roman Saturnalia and Kindred Festivals," concerning ritualistic sacrifices of scapegoat kings (172). Through Frazer's book alone, with its numerous re-editions and vast amount of references to other works on tribal customs, Conrad may have encountered Spencer and Gillen's studies, which, not coincidentally, began appearing in 1896, the same year he started *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."*

Conrad's interest in the concept of male initiation dates back to his own youth and is reflected in his reading and later experiences as a sailor. In childhood, Conrad read boys' adventure tales and was particularly enamoured of Frederic Marryat's sea stories, several of which, including *Peter Simple* (1834) and *Mr. Midshipman Easy* (1838), portray the initiation into manhood of their young male protagonists. During the writing of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* Conrad probably reread these earlier influences, since, in 1898, he wrote "Tales of the Sea," an essay filled with admiration for Marryat's work. Conrad's career in the merchant marine later took him to some of the exotic places that had fascinated him as a boy. He had a particular affection for Australia, a country of which he facetiously considered himself "a fellow citizen" due to his work on Australian ships (Knowles and Moore 25). From 1879 to 1893, he had undertaken five voyages to Australia which included several months on shore. While nothing is known of Conrad's excursions on the mainland, as Najder indicates, his "knowledge of local conditions and even of the slang" is evident in stories like

“The Planter of Malata” (*Chronicle* 62). During this time, it is very possible that he gained some knowledge of aboriginal customs from local journals and by mingling with inhabitants. In 1879, for instance, he was in the port of Sydney working in a warehouse for five months and could have run across Australian scientific journals on George Street where he got “intimately familiar with his surroundings” (Knowles 10).¹² A letter to A. T. Saunders in 1917 reveals that he spent five weeks at Minlacowie in 1880 (Knowles and Moore 25), a tiny port located on the Yorke Peninsula where the aboriginal Narangga tribe lived alongside white farmers (Macintyre 146). On a personal level, Australia also yielded experiences that matured Conrad. While he was a young crewman on the *Loch-Etive*, he helped rescue the survivors of a sinking Danish brig in 1880, an experience which made him lose his youthful illusions of an adventurous life as a sailor after he witnessed the “cynical indifference” of the sea towards “human suffering and courage” (*Mirror* 255). Not surprisingly, Conrad decided to call the essay in which he recorded these events “Initiation.”

While Conrad was writing *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* from the summer of 1896 to the winter of 1897, reports on aboriginal initiation rites were beginning to appear out of Australia. Conrad could have consulted Spencer and Gillen’s four-volume *Report on the Work of the Horn Scientific Expedition to Central Australia*, which includes a detailed account of initiations among the Arunta, as an edition was published in England in September 1896. Before Conrad completed *Heart of Darkness* in 1899, Spencer and Gillen had published several articles on initiation rites in journals such as *The Proceedings of the Royal*

Society of Victoria.¹³ Included in the same journal alongside their reports was a series of detailed articles on aboriginal initiations by R. H. Mathews, an Australian land surveyor who was an authority on their customs. An even more likely source of information for Conrad was Spencer and Gillen's landmark best-seller, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, a work which, as Bronisław Malinowski puts it, "affected and modified" many of the subsequent studies on the subject which relied heavily on its data (Stocking 96).

By 1915, when Conrad started *The Shadow-Line*, a novella in which he returned to the theme of initiation, detailed studies on tribal cultures and their customs, including initiation rites, had become plentiful as the topic continued to engage widespread scientific and popular interest well into the 1920s. The concept of rebirth among primitive tribes was by now well known; as Jane E. Harrison puts it in *Ancient Art and Ritual* (1913), "[with] the savage, to be twice born is the rule, not the exception" (104). This was the period in which Frazer's *Golden Bough* began to have an impact on literature and led writers like T. S. Eliot to use the "mythic method" in poems such as "The Waste-Land" (1922) to portray the spiritual desolation of modern secular societies (Hampson 189). Conrad was not only familiar with such works, but he also had acquaintances from whom he could get information on the rites. Among these were Bronisław Malinowski, who gave Conrad an inscribed copy of his *The Family among the Australian Aborigines* in 1913 (Najder, *Chronicle* 483),¹⁴ and E. L. Watson, a young author to whom Conrad offered advice on his novel *The Mainland* (1917), a *Bildungsroman* set in Australia (Karl and Davies 6: 119).

Long after Conrad's death, mid-twentieth-century studies of initiation rites made it clear that indigenous peoples had a form of religion which had been hitherto misunderstood. Mircea Eliade's interpretation of the rituals stands as the most revealing and accurate. Building on previous studies and later developments in anthropology on the subject of primitive customs and beliefs, Eliade's work offers key insights that are visible in Conrad's use of the male initiation motif. Eliade is critical of fin de siècle views of indigenous races as barbaric and pre-religious, and argues that their long existence before European contact proves their "spiritual creativity." He indicates that "religious creativity is independent of technological progress," and races like the Aborigines "elaborated a magnificent religious system, though their technology remained elementary" (*Australian* xvii). Primitive man essentially perceives the world as arising from and being maintained by an interaction between "the sacred" and "the profane." Using Rudolf Otto's formulation, Eliade defines the "sacred" as any event or object that reveals the power of the "numinous" (from Latin *numen*, or god), that is, one that reveals the divinity in the mundane world (*Sacred* 9). The profane is anything in the daily world that does not show forth the essence of being. In primitive thought, a balance had to be maintained between the sacred and the profane through rituals in order to keep all things in creation vitalized. In *Australian Religions* (1973), Eliade outlines the basic beliefs of the Aborigines, a group still considered, as it was in Conrad's period, as a model of the earliest human society. The Aborigines believed that accessing the sacred through ceremonies was a method of reviving the time when the universe was created by "Supernatural Beings." These mythical

ancestors not only made everything in the world out of a primordial chaos, but also established customs, institutions, and ceremonies for their human progeny to maintain contact with the original creation (50). This period of first origins is known as the *Alchuringa* or “the Dream-Time.” Reenacted during initiation rites, the “Cosmogonic return” was filled with the potential to regenerate society, as it recreated the beginning of the world when everything was perfect (56).

Most significantly, initiation rites were necessary for the regeneration of the world. For the Aborigines, initiated men were responsible not only for maintaining favorable social ties between themselves and other tribes, but also keeping the world from degenerating back into primordial chaos. Eliade explains that “the ‘world’ must be kept alive and productive,” and the “ritual reactualization of the mythical history reactivates communication with the Dream Time, regenerates life, and assures its continuation” (61). Reconnecting with the sacred was an act that benefitted the entire community. “The ceremony involves the tribe as a whole,” Eliade elucidates, not just the young novices; it is “through the repetition, the reactualization, of the traditional rites, [that] the entire community is regenerated” (4). The Aborigines feared the loss of such rituals and the devastating impact it would have on the world: “Should the sacred ceremonies be neglected and the social customs despised,” Eliade explains, “the world will regress to the darkness and chaos that existed before the Dream Time” (65). The degradation of tribal societies, which was such a cause of concern in Conrad’s time, seemed to confirm these fears, as contact with Europeans, who considered the Aborigines as evolutionary throwbacks, destabilized their entire belief system.

Central to all initiation rites was the death and rebirth of the novice. For boys to become spiritualized into the adult world, the initiated elder men needed to sever all ties with the profane world of childhood, which was linked to attachment to the mother. Primitive man characterized this transition as the death of the old identity of the initiate. As Eliade explains, “the man of the primitive societies does not consider himself ‘finished’ as he finds himself ‘given’ on the natural level of existence. To become a man in the proper sense he must die to his first (natural) life and be reborn to a higher life, which is at once religious and cultural” (*Sacred* 187). The result of the initiations is thus “equivalent to a spiritual maturing” that follows the symbolic death to a previous state of ignorance (188). Shamans, the spiritual leaders of the tribe, were responsible for performing the ceremonies with the assistance of elder men who had already survived their initiations. Decorated in bestial designs to represent ancestral spirits, the men, arriving at night waving bull-roarers, traditional wind-instruments that made terrifying noises, would pretend to capture the boys from their mothers. The shamans then brought the initiates into a sacred ground they had prepared in an uninhabited wilderness located far from the village. Here, the initiates underwent ordeals and scarifications that were designed to test their fortitude and courage, and to serve as visible marks of spiritual transformation. During their seclusion in the bush, shamans taught them the mythic history of their tribe and revealed sacred totemic objects. The return of the initiates to the village, often after weeks of trials, was characterized as a rebirth, with the women greeting the newly born men into the tribe (Eliade, *Australian* 84-95).

As we will see in the analysis of the novellas in relation to the above pattern, Conrad seems to be using male initiation as a motif to comment ironically on the degeneration of spiritual values in Western civilization. The composite pattern he applies, which draws on numerous anthropological studies, functions as a template which he places over a modern setting. This allows the text to function subversively by contrasting sacred and secular beliefs. Conrad, I suggest, is showing that, compared to so-called primitive cultures, which had always maintained a sacred understanding of the world until the coming of the white man, modern civilization has lapsed into moral degeneracy. He felt that theories of degeneration and their underlying imperialist agendas were symptomatic of a culture that had lost its spiritual grounding. Conrad seems to have shared Malinowski's view that spiritual traditions strengthen a civilization. "A society which makes its tradition sacred," Malinowski observes, "has gained by it an inestimable advantage of power and permanence" (*Magic* 40). As a result of the destabilization of religious traditions, which were the repository of ethical values, spiritual beliefs in Western civilization have devolved into what Eliade calls "pseudo-religions and degenerated mythologies"; in the "desacralized" modern world, traditions have been rendered obsolete and replaced by the largely unrestrained pursuit of material wealth and a devotion to political ideologies (*Sacred* 208-09). In the following chapters, I will argue that Conrad challenges the evolutionary theories of his period and reflects on the loss of sacred beliefs in Western culture through the regenerative paradigm of male initiation rites.

Chapter 2

Secular Initiations: *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*

. . . we understood the subtlety of his fear, sympathised with all his repulsions, shrinkings, evasions, delusions — as though we had been over-civilised, and rotten, and without any knowledge of the meaning of life. We had the air of being initiated in some infamous mysteries. . . .

– *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* (421-22)

In his preface to Thomas Beer’s biography of Stephen Crane, Conrad describes *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* as his “first consciously-planned attempt to render the truth of a phase of life in the terms of my own temperament with all the sincerity of which I was capable” (*Last Essays* 316). Written in 1922, this essay shows Conrad’s belated admission of the debt he owed Crane, the American author whom he had befriended in 1898. The “phase of life” to which Conrad seems to be referring is that of the threshold between youth and maturity, a theme which he had begun to explore in his fiction after being captivated by Crane’s novel *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) about a young soldier’s coming of age during the American Civil War. When *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* was first serialized in the *New Review* in 1897, critics like W. L. Courtney immediately saw Crane’s influence; in *The Daily Telegraph*, he wrote that Conrad “has determined to do for the sea and the sailor what his predecessor had done for the war and warriors” (Rude 188). Although Conrad initially denied such claims, Crane’s fiction, as one critic puts it, was “the catalyst for Conrad’s imagination” (Wertheim 81). Yet Conrad went deeper in his study of manhood than Crane had

managed. Conrad was not only older and more experienced than Crane, but he was also better informed about the primitive roots of male initiations.¹⁵ In *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* Conrad draws on real events from his past and merges them with data he gathered from anthropological studies on tribal societies to comment critically on contemporary issues regarding Darwinian evolution. Set in the late nineteenth century, the story presents an unnamed narrator's account of the voyage of a British merchant vessel, the *Narcissus*, on its hazardous journey from Bombay to London and the complications that arise from the scheming of two devious new sailors. Far from being merely an autobiographical sea story, the novella closely follows the tripartite pattern of a male initiation rite, symbolically portraying the separation of the crew from the profane world, their entry into a liminal phase where they confront ancestral beings in the sacred zone of the sea, and their ironic reincorporation into a modern secular society that fails to see the spiritual value of their experience.

One of the main obstacles that has until recently prevented critics from reading *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* as a male initiation story is that it apparently lacks a central protagonist. Marking a break from the realism of Conrad's two earlier novels, *Almayer's Folly* (1895) and *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* has an impressionistic style that suggests Stephen Crane's influence. As Crane had done in *The Red Badge of Courage*, Conrad evokes the sense impressions of his characters through striking imagery. But Conrad approaches the subject in a radically different way, evidenced primarily through his use of the narrative voice. Whereas Henry Fleming, the

youthful soldier of Crane's book, is seen through a traditional third-person omniscient narrator, Conrad employs a highly unusual technique. The narrative voice, oscillating throughout the novella between first and third persons, has long been considered an artistic flaw, which early readers particularly criticized. Vernon Young believes it is "awkwardly handled" (119), while Marvin Mudrick calls it "a gross violation of the point of view" (290). More recent critics see the novella's narrative style as part of a complex design. According to W. R. Martin, Conrad, rather than focusing on a specific protagonist with a limited identity, immerses the reader in the journey itself by rendering the narrator nearly invisible. The central purpose of this technique is to reinforce the idea of human solidarity through adversity (53). Tobias Boes comes closest to the mark by recognizing that *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* is a tale of character formation. However, while the novella "presents itself as a *Bildungsroman*," Boes claims that the process it shows is "one in which the formation of the individual Self has been entirely subordinated to the development of a collective identity" (123). Yet reading the story as a "collective" *Bildungsroman* robs the novella of its anthropological dimension and ignores the unnamed narrator's private growth to maturity.

The problematic narrative voice, I contend, is best understood in terms of the male initiation motif. A careful look at the shifts in the narrative voice shows that the unnamed narrator matures during the events of the voyage. In this regard, David Manicom's interpretation of Conrad's narrative technique is most accurate. For Manicom, the tale is an unnamed crew member's creative reconstruction of his memories of the homeward voyage of the *Narcissus* (105). Using a third-

person omniscient viewpoint in the first chapter, the narrator begins by describing the events aboard the *Narcissus* from a distance, but his voice gradually becomes a more specific identity, oscillating throughout the middle of the story between the third-person “they” and the first-person plural “we.” The narrator emerges as a crewman primarily during moments of adversity in which the solidarity of the men is most called upon, and is finally visible as a fellow sailor, using the first-person “I,” only in the last scene of the novella. I would argue that Conrad intentionally fashioned a narrator who moves towards greater self-consciousness through his creative reconstruction of the ordeals he endured as a crewman aboard the *Narcissus*. In *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”* the narrator, in effect, recasts his experience of self-realization into a modern male initiation rite.

By using the initiation motif in a contemporary setting, Conrad seems to be suggesting that initiatory experiences still exist in Western civilization, albeit in secular form. Like initiates in primitive rites, Conrad’s sailors go through inwardly transformative ordeals while isolated in a natural environment, but they do so without the interpretive framework of sacred rituals. Modern individuals in secular societies are not prepared by any tribal elders or shamans to understand their experiences as part of a process of spiritual maturation within a mythic structure. As a result, they must formulate their own private understanding of what were understood in primitive cultures as sacred encounters. As Barbara Myerhoff puts it, “modern secular societies . . . fall far short of offering the totality of expression and significance found in genuinely sacred contexts.” Individuals are thus left to “develop rituals and employ symbols in increasingly

private contexts” when they face a “diffuse, fragmented world with shattered or hollow consensual structures” (126). The unnamed narrator’s retelling of the voyage of the *Narcissus* becomes a private myth based on archaic traditions and rituals. Since, in tribal communities, initiations were performed to either prevent or alleviate a spiritual crisis, we may infer that primitive initiations in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* function as a regenerative paradigm. Myerhoff explains that private rituals “begin with a cultural problem, stated or unstated, and then work various operations upon it,” the results of which are “reorganizations and reinterpretations of the elements that produce a newly meaningful whole.” Part of the change effected is “the appropriate shift in consciousness” by which the individual is reoriented towards a new sense of meaning (129). By accessing the original symbols and spiritual structures through which his forebears understood the world, the narrator, like Conrad, is thus attempting to regenerate the authentically human in his own spiritually barren secular civilization.

The opening chapter of *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”* which shows the sailors of the *Narcissus* preparing for the ship’s departure to London, symbolically reenacts the separation phase of a male initiation rite. Chief mate Baker’s roll call to muster the crew before the voyage functions as a separation ceremony, which is a necessary step before entry into the liminal zone where the symbolic death and resurrection of the initiates will take place. Throughout the story, the ship’s officers embody the elder initiated males of tribal societies whose role was to prepare the sacred ground and supervise the ceremonies. Baker, an experienced sailor who works closely with the crew, appears throughout the

voyage as an initiatory guide, overseeing their development and directing their actions. His name is symbolic of his role. According to numerous anthropological studies, the image of “baking” the initiates was common. R. H. Mathews, for example, demonstrates how initiations in Australia involved fire ceremonies in which “novices are smoked,” mainly with the intention of purifying them of their old identities (“New England” 133). Significantly, the opening chapter takes place entirely at night, the time when the separation ceremonies invariably began. Spencer and Gillen note that, among the Arunta, “the youth to be initiated is seized early during the evening” by the elder men and taken to the sacred ground (“Notes” 147). In the opening scene, Baker steps into the light which spills onto the deck from the officers’ cabin at night. As the sailors gather in front of him, they are described as being without identities in the shadows: “in the illuminated doorways, silhouettes of moving men appeared for a moment, very black, without relief, like figures cut out of sheet tin” (*Nigger* 294). According to Victor Turner, before rebirth, the initiates had to be “a tabula rasa, a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group” (103). Echoing this idea, beside Baker stands a “youngster” who is holding a lamp: “they could see [Baker’s] round, broad face with a white paper before it, and beside his shoulder, the sleepy head, with dropped eyelids, of the boy, who held, suspended at the end of his raised arm, the luminous globe of a lamp” (*Nigger* 306). The image implies that the elder officers hold the knowledge, symbolized by the lamp, by which the sailors will spiritually mature as men during the voyage.

Circular imagery suggests that the ship itself represents a ritually prepared

sacred ground. According to Mircea Eliade, the Australian Aborigines “prepare a circular ring of earth” in which “the preliminary ceremonies will later take place” (*Birth* 5). Mathews offers a more detailed description of a sacred ground among the Darkinung tribe. He notes that near the tribal village shamans arranged a large “circular space” and linked it by a “narrow pathway” to a smaller circle located far out of sight in the bush (“Darkinung” 2). This dual circle and connecting path, with their obvious embryological imagery, symbolize the process of rebirth in the rites: the neophyte leaves the profane world of the larger circle, traverses a sacred path, and returns with a more specifically defined identity in the smaller circle. The roll call follows a similar pattern. As Baker calls the sailors’ names, each of them moves one at a time from the “shadowy mob of heads” on one side of the ship, passes into the “circle of light” projected from the boy’s lamp, and then steps “into the shadows on the port side of the quarter deck” (*Nigger* 306). Eliade elucidates that a “return to shadows is beneficial” and “indispensable” in initiations as it signals the return to a pre-formed state of being necessary for attaining a higher mode of consciousness. A “provisional regression into Shadows,” he explains, “is equivalent to an immersion in the inexhaustible source, where all modes of being are already found *in potentia*” (“Shadows” 12). The circular movement from shadows into light and then back into shadows during the roll call thus echoes an initiate’s return to an embryonic stage during the separation phase and implies that the crew has now entered the sacred ground.

The two new sailors who come aboard, Donkin and James Wait, take on the role of the ancestral beings whom the initiates encounter in the sacred zone.

Before they could be reborn as mature men, initiates had to be symbolically killed by ancestral beings. These spirits, considered as creator gods and progenitors of the tribe, were responsible not only for the destruction, but also for the reformulation of their identities. According to Eliade, “a considerable number of initiation rites and ordeals reactualize the motif of death in darkness and at the hands of Divine Beings” (*Birth* 9). Invariably, these ancestral spirits have a “demonic aspect” as they “represent the world of transcendent and sacred realities” (19). These spirits frequently took on a dual aspect. Spencer and Gillen point out that among the Arunta, “two spirits who lived far away in the Western sky,” bearing a name that meant “made of nothing,” came to transform the “shapeless beings” that then inhabited the barren earth into men and women (“Notes” 146). Conrad also divides the role of the ancestral beings into two characters: a disruptive trickster figure and a demonic spirit. Together, they perform the actions that, in primitive initiations, symbolically destroyed and renewed the novices.

In *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”* Donkin is a devious white sailor who functions as a trickster figure. Manipulative and lazy, he lies and cheats throughout the voyage to get out of doing his duties and disrupts the routine of the ship. Donkin shares many characteristics common to a trickster, an ambivalent creator god that has had a long cross-cultural history and appears, as Robert Pelton points out, in myths and folktales of “nearly every traditional society, sometimes as a god, more often as an animal” (1). Mac Linscott Ricketts defines the trickster as a duplicitous spirit that demonstrates a combination of destructive and creative qualities, a being that exists at the edge of chaos in which paradoxical

possibilities arise. More specifically, Donkin exhibits traits which Ricketts associates with a negative trickster. He is, like Donkin, “a prankster who is ... insatiably hungry, inordinately vain, deceitful, and cunning toward friends as well as foes; a restless wanderer upon the face of the earth; and a blunderer who is often the victim of his own tricks and follies” (327). Significantly, references to Donkin show that he is not altogether a man. He appears as “a startling visitor from a world of nightmares” (*Nigger* 301), and an “indomitable scarecrow” (302), while the torn coat with ragged tails he wears is like a “black fantasy” (303). Like most tricksters, Donkin also has a bestial appearance and particularly resembles “a sick vulture with ruffled plumes” (412), which places him squarely within an initiatory setting. As Eliade indicates, “Divine Beings who play a part in initiation ceremonies are usually imagined in the form of beasts of prey” (*Birth* 15).

Spencer and Gillen also found that the mythical ancestors were “intimately associated with “the animals or plants whose name they bore” (“Fire Ceremony” 23). Despite his destructiveness, Donkin is a necessary catalyst for change among the crew. Pelton points out that the trickster typically “ties cosmic process to personal history, empowers divination to change boundaries into horizons, and reveals the passages to the sacred embedded in daily life” (3). The trickster by definition distorts reality, disorients initiates and thereby prepares them for their transformation in the liminal phase in which all expected order is overturned. His subversive actions return things to chaos and thus allow a regeneration of life forces from primordial conditions. While Donkin’s deceptive behavior makes the crew undisciplined, he simultaneously allows them to discover their weaknesses

and strengths and thereby gradually prepares them for their symbolic rebirth.

Associated with the disruptive trickster is the monstrous devouring spirit embodied by James Wait, the black sailor of the title. During the journey at sea, Wait, like Donkin, shirks his duties. Affected by a cough from the outset, he feigns a graver illness to avoid doing his work on the *Narcissus*. For the entire voyage he uses the misplaced sympathy of the crew to get what he wants. Playing upon their weaknesses, Wait, allied with Donkin, disrupts the routine of the ship by continually displaying dissatisfaction with everything the sailors do to try to comfort him. Most interpretations of Wait cast him as a thoroughly evil figure. But although he certainly has diabolical traits, biblical readings of Wait as “demonic,” such as John Lester’s, are too reductive (Lester 88). Viewing Wait from a Christian perspective robs the text of its greater complexity and entirely overlooks the initiation motif. Conrad certainly seems to have intended Wait to be symbolic. Although he was drawing on his memories of a black sailor he had met on the real *Narcissus* in 1884, an American named John Barton who died during the voyage, Conrad was clear in his note to the American edition of *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* that Wait plays a figurative role. He states that “in the book he is nothing: he is merely the centre of the ship’s collective psychology and the pivot of the action” (Conrad, qtd. in Boes 122). Wait is therefore related to the consciousness of the crew and acts as a “pivot” upon which their rebirth depends.

Several characteristics associated with Wait strongly suggest that he is playing the part of an ancestral spirit during the crew’s initiation. Arriving late for the roll call, Wait appears as an almost supernatural giant, not part of the human

world: “The nigger was calm, cool, towering, superb . . . He was naturally scornful, unaffectedly condescending, as if from his height of six foot three he had surveyed all the vastness of human folly and had made up his mind not to be too hard on it” (*Nigger* 308). His giant stature parallels the huge figures that were made out of earth by numerous tribes during the rites. According to Mathews, the Darkinung of Australia made a “colossal” figure of dark earth, representing the original ancestral being, which the initiates had to confront on the narrow path between the two sacred circles (“Darkinung” 2). Wait’s dark skin also has highly suggestive connotations. Mathews writes that “all the men participating in the ceremonies . . . have their bodies painted jet black” to signify that they represent ancestral beings (7). Eliade associates the color black, ubiquitously appearing in male initiations, with “Cosmic Night, the undifferentiated totality, the unformed, the secret” (“Shadows” 6). The darkness that Wait embodies is thus symbolic of the preformed chaos from which all things originate and into which the neophytes descend for germination before rebirth. Two other features of Wait identify him as an ancestral being. During the roll call, when Wait’s head is visible in the boy’s lamp, it is described as “vigorously modelled into deep shadows and shining lights” while his face resembles a “mysterious” and “repulsive mask” (*Nigger* 309). The use of hideous facial covering is universal in male initiations. Such ornamentation was designed to frighten the novices while indicating that the shamans were incarnations of ancestral spirits. Eliade explains that during the separation phase of the rites, boys were typically “seized by unknown, often masked men, and carried far from their familiar surroundings” (*Birth* 9).

Moreover, Wait's persistent cough, a symptom of the fatal illness he carries, is reminiscent of a bull-roarer, a device used to mimic the voice of the ancestral being. His cough always appears larger than life; during the roll call, it is a "metallic, hollow, and tremendously loud" sound which reverberates across the ship and resounds "like two explosions in a vault" (*Nigger* 309). Among Australian tribes, the bull-roarer is a hollow wind instrument made of wood and string; when whirled, it produces what Frazer describes as "a booming sound" that "resembles a hollow roar." He explains that the word for "bull-roarers" is almost identical cross-culturally and refers to "a spirit of the dead." From his data, Frazer gathers that "the being who swallows and disgorges the novices at initiation is believed to be a powerful ghost or ancestral spirit, and that the bull-roarer, which bears his name, is his material representative" (228). Wait's cough, then, is suggestive of the menacing voice of the initiatory divinity he embodies.

Death imagery, suggesting that the crewmen of the *Narcissus* have been cut off from their former identities, surrounds them in the separation phase. Throughout the first chapter, the sailors are often described as being dead or in graves. During initiations, neophytes, while awaiting rebirth through the rites, are considered dead to the profane world. Eliade explains that "in the scenario of initiatory rites, 'death' corresponds to the temporary return to Chaos; hence it is the paradigmatic expression of the end of a mode of being" (*Birth* xiii). After the men get their gear aboard and sit in their cramped bunks, their room is described with images of death. "Over the white rims of berths stuck out heads with blinking eyes; but the bodies were lost in the gloom of those places, that

resembled narrow niches for coffins in a whitewashed and lighted mortuary” (*Nigger* 299). Once the role call is over and the men go to sleep in the forecastle, similar imagery appears: “The double row of berths yawned black, like graves tenanted by uneasy corpses” (312). Eliade elucidates that “passing from the profane to the sacred world in some sort implies the experience of death; he who makes the passage dies to one life in order to gain access to another” (*Birth* 9). The symbolic death of the crew implies that, after being taken into the sacred ground by the elder officers and encountering the ancestral spirits, they are now liminal beings dead to their old identities and ready to enter the transformative phase of their initiation.

The three middle chapters of the novella portray the liminal phase of a male initiation, which begins with entry into a primordial wilderness. The sacred ground, to which the initiates are forcibly taken by the elder men to undergo their ordeals, was commonly located in a natural, untamed region. Such segregation had several purposes. It not only disoriented and frightened the initiates but also signaled their status as being no longer among the living. Turner points out that initiates in the wilderness are typically considered dead. As “liminal entities,” they are “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention” (95). Eliade interprets their position as being temporarily immersed in the “primordial Chaos” of first creation out of which they will be reborn through the rites (*Birth* 34). In *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”* the sea takes the form of the liminal wilderness. With the crew now prepared by the elder officers, the departure of the *Narcissus* in the morning is

described with initiatory imagery. The sea, for instance, is described as “sparkling like a floor of jewels, and as empty as the sky” (*Nigger* 317). Such recurrent images of value and emptiness reflect the potential for renewal in the liminal zone. As Myerhoff explains, liminality is not only a chaotic state but also “anti-structure”; initiates, emptied of their identities, are “sources of renewal, possibility, innovation and creativity” (117). Celestial imagery appearing in male initiations surrounds the movement of the ship into this sacred space: “The passage had begun, and the ship, a fragment detached from the earth, went on lonely and swift like a small planet . . . A great circular solitude moved with her, ever changing and ever the same” (*Nigger* 319). Ceremonies of entry into liminality often involved throwing neophytes up to the sky. Spencer and Gillen describe how, among the Arunta, boys were “taken one by one and tossed into the air” and caught by the men (“Notes” 144). Joseph Campbell interprets this act as symbolizing the separation of the boys from earthly attachments to gain access to the spiritual, or non-terrestrial, truths of the men’s group (*Masks* 88).

Central to the transformation of the initiates during liminality is their confrontation with the ancestral beings that test their fortitude and courage. In *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”* Wait, the devouring monster who saps the morale of the crew, provides the sailors with their first challenge: to overcome their fear of death. In tribal societies, this was considered an anxiety associated with the attachment of the boys to their mothers. On a greater scale, the mother represented the profane world of desires and comforts which were opposed to the responsibilities of maintaining ties to the spiritual world and upholding tribal lore.

As Jane L. Harrison puts it, a boy undergoing initiation “is to cease to be a woman-thing and become a man” (106). Any contact with women during the liminal phase was universally seen as a pollutant and severely punished (Eliade, *Birth* 7). Invariably, rebirth was possible only when initiates realized their own mortality, and it was the role of the elder men and shamans to make initiates experience death, the opposite of the mother’s world of irresponsibility and safety.

In *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”* the crew faces two forms of death, one false, the other real. Wait presents to the sailors a false death which acts as a demoralizing force that degrades their courage. Once Captain Alistoun allows Wait, who is feigning the severity of his illness, to rest in his cabin, the cohesion among the men aboard the ship deteriorates. Wait uses death as an excuse to avoid working on the ship; he frightens the crew by claiming that he might die if overtaxed, and he manipulates them into providing him with every possible comfort while continually berating them for not doing enough for him. The narrator recalls that the “obnoxious” Wait “thrust” the idea of imminent death at them “many times a day like a boast and like a menace” and “seemed to take a pride in that death which, so far, had attended only upon the ease of his life” (*Nigger* 325). Throughout the voyage, Wait figuratively swallows the men in self-doubt. “He would never let doubt die,” the narrator confesses. “He overshadowed the ship. Invulnerable in his promise of speedy corruption he trampled on our self-respect, he demonstrated to us daily our want of moral courage” (335). Gustav Morf interprets Wait’s degenerative effect on the crew as a psychological evocation of their laziness. By caring for him, they are projecting their own

“desire of being a child again assured of the mother’s tender care” rather than performing their exacting duties aboard the ship (197).

The crewmen have an authentic experience of death during a sea storm encountered by the *Narcissus* off the coast of Africa, an event which takes the form of an initiatory ordeal. According to Eliade, the rebirth of the initiates during the rites requires a return to the origins of humanity, an act he calls “the Cosmogony.” For primitive cultures, the creation of the world by the ancestral beings is considered a paradigmatic moment upon which all succeeding events are based. During liminality, the cosmogony returns the initiates to the first act of creation and thus revives the ancestors and their regenerative powers. As Eliade puts it, “since the initiation ceremonies were founded by the Divine beings or the mythical Ancestors, the primordial Time is reintegrated whenever they are performed” (*Birth* 6). The voyage of the *Narcissus* around the Cape of Good Hope is presented as a cosmogonic return during which the ancestral being is overcome and the crew reborn. The trajectory of the ship, which traces its route around Madagascar, Mauritius, and East Africa, is symbolically suggestive when taken in relation to Wait’s ancestry (*Nigger* 336). During the fin de siècle, scientists were debating whether Asia or Africa was the location of human origins. During 1891-94, the Dutch archeologist Eugène Dubois had discovered in Java the first bones of *Homo Erectus*, which he was convinced was the missing link between ape and man. His revolutionary evidence was a hot issue, and his theory was contested by Charles Darwin and others who supported the hypothesis that East Africa was the cradle of humanity (Dubois 2). Echoing these recent

archaeological debates, the *Narcissus* takes a cosmogonic voyage towards what was at the time believed to be one of the sites of human beginnings, East Africa, while carrying Wait, a sailor of African descent.

During the severe storm through which the *Narcissus* passes, ritualistic imagery suggests that the men have returned to the primordial chaos before the creation of the world. Novices were made to feel as if they were being rent apart by their regression into primal darkness through severe tests of endurance and courage, which typically included lengthy exposure to cold, darkness, and food deprivation. In addition, shamans made awful noises with instruments to terrify the initiates and keep them awake. The crew experience similar trials in their struggle with the sea. The narrator recalls: “There was no sleep on board that night . . . Nothing seems left of the whole universe but darkness, clamour, fury — and the ship. And like the last vestige of a shattered creation she drifts, bearing an anguished remnant of sinful mankind” (*Nigger* 341). Initiates were also commonly obliged to keep silent during the rites, partly to make them reflect on their mortality (Mathews, “Darkinung” 7). Similarly, aboard the ship, the fury of the storm stuns the endangered crew into reflective silence: “In all that crowd of cold and hungry men, waiting wearily for a violent death, not a voice was heard; they were mute, and in somber thoughtfulness listened to the horrible imprecations of the gale” (*Nigger* 348). Reinforcing the ritualistic imagery, the storm makes sounds that are reminiscent of the initiatory instruments used by shamans: “the night moaned and sobbed to the accompaniment of a continuous loud tremor as of innumerable drums beating far off” (342).

Because the liminal experience was so dangerous, initiated elders always supervised the rituals. Paralleling the role played by initiatory guides, the officers watch over the men as the ship confronts the storm. The officers appear as superhuman beings or strangely ornamented initiatory elders. In their oilskin coats and hats in the rain, “[t]hey were fantastically misshapen,” the narrator recalls, and “they resembled men strangely equipped for some fabulous adventure” (338). More specifically, it was common for ritual masters to be dressed in bestial costumes that represented totem animals of the tribe (Spencer 134). Baker resembles one of these animal masters who guides and encourages the initiates during their liminal ordeals. When the storm damages the *Narcissus* and makes it list on its side, the sailors have to crawl for the entire night to do their duties and survive. Baker, grunting encouragingly to the men “like an energetic porpoise” (*Nigger* 348), moves “on all fours with the movements of some big cautious beast” (362) on the deck along with them. When Baker is at one point “in the dark on all fours” assisting the crew, he is compared to “some carnivorous animal prowling amongst corpses” (365), which suggests that the crewmen have not yet emerged from their liminal status as dead beings.

During the storm, the ship, described as a woman in labor, embodies the second womb in which the initiates will be reborn. Just as a womb is the natural threshold into life through the mother, the *Narcissus*, as sacred ground, is the threshold of the crew’s second birth. As Turner points out, imagery commonly found in liminality includes “not only death, darkness, and the wilderness, but also the womb” (95). The sacred ground typically had feminine features; among

many tribes, it was oval or triangular, with “the apex pointing in the direction of the women’s camp” (Mathews, “New England” 129). Echoing these concepts, the *Narcissus* is described as a “narrowed circle” (*Nigger* 343) that sustains the lives of the sailors. In imagery suggesting childbirth, the feminine ship “rolled, restless, from side to side, like a thing in pain” (337) as she struggles through the stormy sea. Despite the battering she receives from the gale, the *Narcissus* participates in the maturation of the sailors: “The ship knew, and sometimes would correct the presumptuous human ignorance [of the crew] by the wholesome discipline of fear” (338). Further implying that the rebirth of the men is imminent, the ship is associated with the feminine image of doorways. Doors appear universally in initiations during the liminal phase and represent “the boundary between two stages in life” (Van Gennep 59). When the storm forces open all the doors on the *Narcissus*, it tosses the crewmen’s personal objects, symbolizing their old identities, into the waters (*Nigger* 340). The sea itself appears as the primordial chaos, which in this case suggests the amniotic water from which all life arises. Bearing the brunt of the sea’s attacks and earning the men’s “profound affection,” the ship is portrayed as a motherly figure: during the tumultuous moments of their rebirth, she exhibits the “unselfish toil of a delicate woman upon the slender thread of whose existence is hung the whole meaning and joy of the world” (338).

The death of the initiates before rebirth is typically represented by scarification ordeals, which are symbolically reenacted when the sailors rescue Wait. While the ship is half-submerged in the sea during the storm, Wait is trapped in his water-logged cabin. The crew’s rescue attempt becomes a

harrowing ordeal, as the only way to free him is to get through the overturned carpenter's shop, which is strewn with nails of every description. Participating in the operation, the narrator describes the scene with ritualistic language. While Wait yells for help, the narrator recalls how they had to dig their bare hands into the nails to clear the room: "very much hurt, [we] shook our hands, scattering nails and drops of blood. We passed up our hats full of assorted nails to the boatswain, who, as if performing a mysterious and appeasing rite, cast them wide upon a raging sea" (355). Given the phallic symbolism of the blood and nails, the imagery recalls the ubiquitous practice of genital mutilation during initiation rites. According to Frazer, shamans performed scarifications, including circumcision, with the goal of "indicating the change from youth to manhood" (228). The Christian imagery is equally striking, as Conrad conflates it with that of primitive rites. The carpentry shop itself is suggestive of Christ's profession in youth (Mark 6.3) and his death on a wooden cross, while the nails and bloody hands of the crew imply the stigmata. This combination of primitive and Christian imagery suggests that the narrator perceives their trials as part of a universal experience of death and rebirth which occurs only through a series of ordeals and sacrifices. Significantly, rescuing Wait, a sailor whom they have grown to hate, strengthens their sense of communal duty. The narrator recalls that whereas the "secret and ardent desire of our hearts was the desire to beat him viciously with our fists about the head," the crewmen instead showed self-restraint and "handled him as tenderly as though he had been made of glass" (*Nigger* 360). Once clear of the storm, the ship continues her voyage with the men aboard feeling reborn. The

narrator writes that “from that time our life seemed to start afresh as though we had died and had been resuscitated,” and feels he has lost his previous identity: “All the first part of the voyage . . . was lost in a haze, like an ineradicable suspicion of some previous existence” (385).

After the storm, the crew of the *Narcissus* undergoes a second test of character, this time from the trickster figure, Donkin, who attempts to start a mutiny. His speech to the crew takes the form of a subverted sacred teaching. In addition to performing scarifications, shamans invariably provided initiates with “instruction in tribal myths” in order to relate their suffering to a spiritual tradition (Malinowski, *Magic* 39). In *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”* the crew faces two forms of instruction: the tempting ideologies of Donkin and the strict discipline of Captain Alistoun. Donkin, nursing his own grievances against the captain, perceives that the men have become conceited in believing that it was their own prowess which allowed them to survive the storm, and he uses their pride to foment a revolt. According to Spencer and Gillen, in order to temper the arrogance and egotism that often arose from the initiate’s newly gained status as a man, the Arunta concluded their initiations with ceremonies of purification known as “ordeals by fire” (*Native Tribes* 1: 272). While the crew wavers between duty and revolt, lightning appears in the night sky. These natural fireworks, which make the *Narcissus* look “like a charred ship enclosed in a globe of fire” (*Nigger* 388), symbolically suggest that the crew is now participating in a fire ordeal which is testing their sense of communal duty.¹⁶ Donkin tempts the men into demanding personal comforts rather than following the orders of the officers. In a

mockery of a religious sermon, he uses Wait as an example of their mistreatment. He appears as a “black idol” in the “white shrine” of his cabin (390), while Donkin’s words are “hopeful doctrines” that delude the men into thinking they could become “wealthy and well-fed skippers” of their own ships (388).

Captain Alistoun prevents the mutiny by reminding the crew of their duty to the ship. Although a small man, the old captain is “hard as adamant,” has a “steely gaze” (416) and a “calm voice” (419), and displays the self-restraint and courage he has developed in his own initiatory experiences throughout his sea career. References to earlier events in his life, such as the mutiny he faced down as a young captain on a China voyage, show that he has survived many ordeals through which he matured as a man (420). Called “the Master” throughout the tale, Alistoun stands in for the master of the initiation rites. He and his officers echo Spencer and Gillen’s data which indicate that fire ceremonies were usually “under the immediate control of one special old man” who “governed the whole camp” and was always accompanied by “three of the elders” through whom he “would give his orders and everything would work with perfect regularity and smoothness” (*Native Tribes I*: 280). The captain also has three men working with him, Creighton, Knowles, and Baker, officers with whom he always consults and who stand beside him during the present crisis. Showing courage and self-restraint, Alistoun ends the mutiny peacefully by exposing the cowardly nature of Donkin in front of the crew. Having witnessed the secular equivalent of sacred teachings from their captain, the crewmen temper their arrogance and return to duty.

Any reincorporation into society following an initiation rite requires a

ceremonial separation from liminality, a transition that is represented in the novella by the death and funeral of Wait. Although already transformed by the rites, initiates were still liminal entities while in the sacred ground, and they had to be reintegrated into the profane world. Initiates were never simply given back to their village unprepared. Arnold Van Gennep explains that all movements between the sacred and profane were fraught with danger, and thus shamans organized “rites of leave-taking” for the initiates (35). In *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus,’* the result of not performing a purification ceremony is represented by the dead calm that hits the ship. On its way home, the *Narcissus* is stranded at sea for days without wind in its sails, and the crew is forced to witness the slow deterioration of Wait, whose illness has become fatal. Just as the ship cannot return home, the men are symbolically stuck in liminality. As Eliade explains, the “cleaning off of all traces of the sacred world and the ceremonial return to ordinary life” were a necessity without which the initiations would fail (*Australian* 88). Once Wait finally dies, his funeral represents the ritual that was needed to carry the ship home. Significantly, the captain breaks ship protocol by allowing Baker rather than himself to give Wait his last rites. Baker, who has been the initiatory guide throughout the voyage and performed the roll call in the opening scene, now completes the initiation of the crew by casting Wait into the sea. When a loose nail snags Wait’s corpse on the way down the plank, Belfast yells out to the dead body as he pushes it over, “Jimmy, be a man!” (*Nigger* 442). Belfast’s cry suggests that the crew’s trials with Wait have made them into mature men. Now that they have attained a greater level of self-awareness, a wind stirs

the sails and lets the ship break out of its liminal stasis.

The return of the *Narcissus* to England in the final chapter is portrayed as an ironic reincorporation into society. Rather than being ritually greeted by elated tribal members, the crew is faced with an indifferent secular society that reduces men to anonymity. In tribal communities, the return of initiates was celebrated as a stupendous event that regenerated the entire tribe. Frazer explains that “[w]hen at last the lads, now ranking as initiated men, are brought back with great pomp and ceremony to the village, they are received with sobs and tears of joy from the women, as if the grave had given up its dead” (241). By contrast, when the *Narcissus* arrives in London, she enters an impersonal, mechanized port where “a swarm of strange men, clambering up her sides,” take possession of her “in the name of the sordid earth,” and she “ceased to live” (*Nigger* 447). Instead of family members and tribal leaders welcoming them from the dead, the men on the *Narcissus* encounter only curious strangers. There are only “[s]allow-faced men in high hats; two bareheaded women; ragged children, fascinated, and with wide eyes” who greet the crew. When one of the women “screamed at the silent ship — ‘Hallo, Jack!,’” she did so “without looking at any one in particular” (446). The lack of personal relationship between the sailors and their onlookers emphasizes the desacralized condition of the modern world in which ceremonies of reintegration following an initiatory ordeal no longer exist.

Whereas, in primitive societies, initiates who came back were typically granted a higher social status as men who were now responsible for the upkeep of sacred traditions, in a secular civilization the trials faced by the crew have no such

social value. Once on shore, the sailors of the *Narcissus* are diminished upon reincorporation into their society. Their sacrifices are disregarded, as the sailors have merely performed a routine task; in their civilization, they are economic units whose value is determined solely in terms of money. The only pseudo-ritual in which the sailors participate is that of collecting their pay in the shipping office. In a spiritually sterile “white-washed” and “bare” room, a rude clerk now takes the place of Baker and calls the men to receive the only meagre value placed upon them by their indifferent society. Unlike Baker, the clerk is hardly a man; reflecting the spiritual barrenness of his society, he resembles a sickly “caged bird” behind the wire grating of the pay cubicle. The formerly powerful figures aboard the ship are all reduced by these bureaucratic procedures. Even Captain Alistoun, at sea so imposing, now sits before “a little table with piles of gold and notes on it” and “appeared subdued by his captivity” (449).

For the crew of the *Narcissus*, there is neither shaman nor tribal myth with which to unite their experience to a sacred ideal. According to Malinowski, male initiations ideally ended with a spiritual reorientation of the initiate towards a relationship with “higher powers” (*Magic* 39), but contemporary London is entirely secularized. Frazer explains that, following his return, the initiate was given an animal totem which stood for his spiritual connection to the ancestral beings he had overcome in liminality. The animal totem would then be, “if not his guardian spirit, at least linked to him in peculiarly intimate relation” (272). In *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”* a desacralized version of the totemic adoption of an animal appears when the crew gathers for a final drink at the aptly named “Black

Horse” tavern. Van Gennep explains that the “rite of eating and drinking together” is “a rite of incorporation, of physical union, and has been called a sacrament of communion” (29). Significantly, the novella ends with the narrator appearing as a first-person character whose last glimpse of his former shipmates is of them going to the Black Horse. In the narrator’s view, the crew, standing in sunshine and entering the pub, embody what the initiatory experience gave him. Like them, he has attained a degree of maturity through his ordeals.

In modern civilizations, however, the initiatory trials are internalized. The narrator, by reconstructing and psychologically reliving the voyage, has achieved a private understanding of his experiences. He recalls in particular Charley, a young sailor hardened after their shared ordeals on the *Narcissus*, as rejecting the coddling of his weeping mother, who came to meet him at the quay. In writing, he now understands this event better: “I was passing him at the time, and over the untidy head of the blubbering woman he gave me a humorous smile and a glance ironic, courageous, and profound, that seemed to put all my knowledge of life to shame” (*Nigger* 452). The narrator’s apparently limited “knowledge of life” when Charley smiled at him implies that the narrator was perhaps himself the most immature sailor aboard the *Narcissus*, and that Charley had understood the nature of manhood before he did. The narrator only came to understand his ordeals from a mythic perspective by reshaping the events through the regenerative paradigm of primitive initiations.

Chapter 3

Subverted Initiations: *Heart of Darkness*

“This initiated wraith from the back of Nowhere honoured
me with its amazing confidence before it vanished altogether.”

– *Heart of Darkness* (61)

Pleased with the way *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* had turned out (Garnett 79-80), Conrad soon embarked on further explorations of the male initiation theme in *Heart of Darkness*. The publication of *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* had earned Conrad not only a good deal of critical acclaim but also the friendship of the writer who had partly inspired it, Stephen Crane. Crane was equally impressed with Conrad’s novella; once he moved to England in 1898, he insisted that the two authors be introduced to each other by their mutual publisher, Sydney Pawling (Nettels 267-69). Conrad immediately sensed that “there were profound, if not extensive, similitudes in [their] temperaments” (*Last Essays* 338), and the ensuing friendship included exchanges of literary ideas and story drafts. Their acquaintance soon yielded more tales from Conrad’s pen exploring the nature of manhood.¹⁷ His admiration for Crane’s tale “An Open Boat” (1897) spurred him to write “Youth” (1898), a short story based on his experiences as a young sailor. A critical success, it was Conrad’s first story to feature Charlie Marlow, the old shipmaster who recounts life-changing events in his career to fellow sailors. By February 1899, Conrad had finished *Heart of Darkness*, the second installment of what he intended to be, along with *Lord Jim* (1900), a trilogy featuring Marlow. The three stories, “each inspired by a similar moral

idea,” as Conrad puts it (Karl and Davies 2: 231), never appeared together as he had envisioned. But in a letter to David Meldrum, he writes that even the full-length novel *Lord Jim* was never “planned to stand alone. HoD was meant in my mind as a foil, and Youth was supposed to give the note” (2: 271). *Heart of Darkness* functions contrastively by subverting the regenerative paradigm of male initiations Conrad had already applied in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* and that appears on a larger scale in the Marlow trilogy. *Heart of Darkness* is a tale within a tale, and, in turn, an initiation within an initiation. Using a tripartite structure, an unnamed narrator has reconstructed Marlow’s account of his disturbing journey in the Belgian Congo to find a rebellious ivory trader named Kurtz into a subverted male initiation with damning implications for Imperial Europe.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad is deliberately subverting the adventure story genre popular in late-Victorian England. Rather than being merely for the amusement of the masses, adventure fiction functioned as an imperial mouthpiece that spread British propaganda through entertainment. As Andrea White puts it, “adventure served imperialism” (172). Stories by popular authors such as Rudyard Kipling and Robert Louis Stevenson, in which white Christian adventurers, soldiers, and colonists heroically struggled against merciless “savages,” perpetuated and capitalized on the imperialist project of subjugating “inferior races” in the colonies under the guise of a benevolent civilizing mission. Adventure fiction brought to Victorian readers the comforting illusion that Britain was aiding the very nations she was in fact oppressing and despoiling of the resources and territories that allowed her trade and her empire to prosper.

Conrad was particularly irritated by writers of adventure fiction who trivialized the anthropological data that were coming out during the fin de siècle. Anthropological studies, which indicated the similarities of tribal customs to those of Western civilization, and thus implied a human kinship between colonized races and Europeans, were being used for entertainment by writers such as Rider H. Haggard and Grant Allen. In their best-selling novels, both writers particularly drew on, and distorted, data from Frazer's *Golden Bough*, to capitalize on the public's fascination with primitive cultures and the apparent threat they posed to Western civilization (Carraciollo 98-9). Haggard's *She* (1895), an adventure novel in which an ancient white sorceress is discovered in Africa by a professor, played on degeneration fears and racial theories of the period. In his preface to *The Great Taboo* (1890), Allen openly expresses his "profound indebtedness, for the central mythological idea embodied in this tale, to Mr. J. G. Frazer's admirable and epoch-making work, *The Golden Bough*," and he adds that his intention is to "popularize" Frazer's ideas in his adventure story. His book, about Europeans stranded on a desert island who are made into gods by a local tribe, propagated ethnocentric views of natives as childish and violent savages. According to Edward Garnett, Conrad found Haggard's fiction "too horrible for words" (9), while in a letter to Aniela Zagórska in 1898 he bemoans the shoddy state of the British novel and calls Allen "a man of inferior intelligence" (Karl and Davies 2: 137). Since Conrad was himself using anthropological material like Frazer's to explore moral truths, popular writers like Haggard and Allen were for him the epitome of men who had sold out to the imperialist project.

Conrad often indicated that he meant *Heart of Darkness* to be subversive. Drawing on his own disturbing experiences in the Belgian Congo as a steamer captain in 1890, he wanted his tale to reveal the evils of European imperialism in Africa, a venture he describes in “Geography and Some Explorers” (1924) as “the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration” (*Last Essays* 236). Following the serial publication of *Heart of Darkness* in *Blackwood’s Magazine* in 1899, Conrad, in a letter to William Blackwood, defended his story by stating that exposing “the criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling civilizing work in Africa is a justifiable idea. The subject is of our time” (Karl and Davies 2: 139-40). In *Academy and Literature*, Garnett indicates in his review of Conrad’s *Youth: A Narrative, and Two Other Stories* (1902), which included *Heart of Darkness*, that Conrad was “intent on unmasking the benevolent pretensions of the essentially commercial endeavour, and subverting the genre that had constructed the subject as such was an effective means of doing so” (Garnett, qtd. in White 173-74). To subvert the adventure story, Conrad returned to much the same theme and method as in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* by again exploring male initiations in a contemporary setting. But this time, he overturned the regenerative paradigm to emphasize the moral degeneracy of imperial Europe at the fin de siècle.

Heart of Darkness is not Marlow’s story but rather an unnamed narrator’s reconstruction of the tale Marlow told his listeners aboard the *Nellie*. While the majority of the novella retells Marlow’s experiences in the Congo, encompassing the entire work is a frame narrative in which the narrator and three other former

sailors listen to Marlow's account. Since everything is ultimately seen from the narrator's perspective, how he has decided to present Marlow's tale is the key to understanding the text. Having himself been deeply affected by Marlow's retelling of his harrowing experiences, the narrator has reshaped what he heard by using a specific pattern with symbolic resonances to reveal the deeper truth of his story. Seymour Gross explains that the narrator and Marlow have both changed inwardly. For Gross, "the manner in which [the narrator] describes things serves to reveal the delusion of his moral innocence, a delusion which Marlow's tale is to shatter" (183). In his reconstruction, then, the narrator shows his own initial naivety and traces his progress towards self-awareness.

The narrator's relationship to Marlow is best understood through recent criticism which has challenged the idea that Marlow is only a thin disguise for Conrad's own views. According to White, Marlow "is not so much Conrad's spokesman as a strategic innovation that served his purposes in disrupting the generic adventure story and its essentially dangerous monolithic illusions" (177). Bernard J. Paris sees Marlow as a "mimetic character," that is, one who has his own psychological motivations and develops over the course of the story (4). In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow is retelling a "major transformative event" in his life (5) which he has not entirely understood. Paris sees his desire to retell his experiences as "an effort by Marlow both to express and resolve his inner conflict" (6). Indeed, Marlow is talking to his listeners precisely because he does not fully comprehend what he witnessed. Marlow is thus a character in the frame narrator's story whose views are subjective, partial, and in many instances ethnocentric.

Only the narrator has a more comprehensive understanding of Marlow's tale and has structured it accordingly. Hampson believes that Conrad, and by extension the frame narrator, are applying the "comparative method" used by Frazer in *The Golden Bough* by "juxtaposing myths, legends, practices from different times and different places" to gauge where his civilization stands on the scale of social evolution (180). Yet, whereas the Darwinian model placed Western culture at the highest level of development, Conrad is using the regenerative paradigm of male initiations to question this ethnocentric formulation.

The opening scene of the frame narrative takes the form of a subverted separation rite. On the *Nellie*, a ship docked in the Thames harbor sometime in the late nineteenth century, five men have come together: the unnamed narrator who is describing the events, Charlie Marlow, the Accountant, the Lawyer, and the Director of Companies. This group of men resembles the gathering of a brotherhood of initiates during a rite of passage. Yet, though they were all once sailors and thus share the "bond of the sea" (*Heart* 3), the last three men are now representatives of worldly power in the secular civilization of England. While in primitive rites, as Mircea Eliade explains, entire tribes came together and were regenerated by the communal experience of the sacred during the ceremonies of initiation (*Birth* xii), these men have quit sea life for secure positions on land in private enterprises, and thus do not uphold the communal interests of their society. The sacred ground in which male initiations take place is here represented by the ship. While she bears a female name, and thus embodies the second womb in which initiatory ordeals were practiced, the *Nellie* is a "cruising yawl" (*Heart* 3).

The comfort associated with a pleasure boat reflects the lack of ordeals encountered by men in secular civilizations and suggests that, despite their high social positions, these ex-sailors are spiritually undeveloped. As White puts it, because they are “capitalized and frozen into their professions as though they did not exist outside of them” (181), the men will not comprehend Marlow’s tale.

Marlow himself appears as an inverted shaman. Cross-culturally, shamans, the “medicine men” of a primitive tribe, were highly unusual individuals (Eliade, *Australian* 128). A shaman invariably experienced a mental disturbance sometime in youth and was thought to possess magical powers (129). He was a venerated figure who initiated the young men of his tribe not only through ordeals, but also by recounting sacred myths. Similarly, Marlow “did not represent his class” and is different even from his listeners as he “still follows the sea.” He is “not typical” (*Heart* 6) partly because he has “a propensity to spin yarns” that differ from those of other seamen. However, whereas shamans retold sacred myths of profound meaning that promoted social cohesion in their tribe, Marlow recounts “inconclusive experiences” (8) that have had a disturbing personal impact on him. The narrator therefore describes Marlow as a subverted shamanic figure: “with his legs folded before him, he had the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus-flower” (10). According to Eliade, “sacred knowledge and, by extension, wisdom are conceived as the fruit of an initiation,” and “the same symbolism is found in Buddhist tradition” (*Sacred* 198-99). But Marlow, portrayed without the lotus-flower of enlightenment, is a figure of incomplete wisdom; he is still “not very clear” about the profounder meaning of the ordeal he

went through in Africa (*Heart* 8).

Before Marlow begins his tale, the frame narrator contextualizes Marlow's experiences within a cosmogonic framework. In primitive societies, while initiates awaited their rebirth in the darkness of the sacred ground, shamans retold the mythic origins of the tribe, an act with both individual and communal repercussions. As Eliade elucidates, "it is the entire world that symbolically returns with the candidate, into cosmic night, in order that it may be created anew, that is, regenerated" (*Sacred* 195). In a similar move, the narrator goes back in British history. With the coming of darkness, the narrator's attempt "to evoke the great spirit of the past upon the lower reaches of the Thames" by recounting the "memories of men and ships" that had passed on the river (4) is equivalent to a retelling of the cosmogonic myth. Going chronologically backwards in time, he first revives the expedition of the Victorian explorer Sir John Franklin, whose ships were lost in the Arctic, and then moves further back by evoking the memory of Sir Francis Drake, the pirate and circumnavigator of the Renaissance. For the narrator, such men, whether they were "[h]unters for gold or pursuers of fame," believed in the ideals of their civilization and were thus "bearers of a spark from the sacred fire" (*Heart* 5). Among the Aborigines, such reiteration of cultural origins served to reawaken the ancestral spirit within the initiate and "reveal to him a history in which he is existentially involved." The initiate realizes that "not only is he the result of those endless wanderings and performances of mythical Ancestors; in many cases he is the reincarnation of one of those Ancestors" (Eliade, *Australian* 57). However, the narrator's reconstruction of British

maritime history as a noble endeavor shatters when Marlow takes over the tale.

Like the narrator, Marlow performs a shamanic act by reviving the past in the present. Continuing the cosmogonic movement begun by the narrator, Marlow takes his listeners even further back, this time to the earliest known period of British history, to “when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago — the other day” (*Heart* 6). Through his Roman anecdote, Marlow suggests that modern secular empires have no sacred beliefs. In his view, that which “redeems” imperial conquest is not a rational ideology, but rather “an unselfish belief in the idea — something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to” (7). An insight into Marlow’s thoughts may be derived from Wallace’s *The Wonderful Century* (1898), which contrasts the different moral attitudes of older and more recent empires to their conquests. Condemning the “scramble for Africa” that began in 1884 at the Berlin Conference, Wallace claims that the extermination policies of modern empires will rank in history as worse than those of the Spaniards who conquered the natives of the Americas. The main difference is that the Spaniards’ belief that “they were really serving God in converting the heathens, even at the point of a sword, was a genuine belief shared by priests and conquerors alike – not a mere sham, as is ours when we defend our conduct by the plea of introducing the ‘blessings of our civilization’” (372). By shifting the cosmogony to Marlow’s personal ordeals in Africa, the narrator subverts the concept of communal myths. Initiatory experiences like Marlow’s still occur, but without socially sanctioned rituals they have become interiorized psychological trials, essentially private myths, that result in an inconclusive transformation of

the individual. For the narrator, Marlow's entire tale comprises the liminal phase of his own psychological ordeal, for it is through Marlow's story that he matures.

The separation phase of Marlow's initiation consists of his recollection of how he got his job in Africa, and what he saw there before meeting Kurtz. Male initiations typically began with a separation ritual performed by initiated men that severed novices from all ties with the feminine world. Eliade indicates that in primitive tribes, entry into the sacred ground was impossible without the "separation of the novices from their mothers, and, in general, from all women" (*Birth* 4). In Marlow's case, this pattern is subverted, as it is the women who inadvertently prepare him for what will turn out to be an initiatory ordeal. When Marlow returns to England after working on ships in Asia, his male relations on the continent "did nothing" to help him find new employment. Instead, his well-connected aunt manages to secure a position for him as steamer captain for an ivory company in the Belgian Congo. Even he finds the arrangement unusual: "would you believe it? — I tried the women. I, Charlie Marlow, set the women to work — to get a job. Heavens!" (*Heart* 9). In the only instance where his full name is mentioned, Marlow not only fails to sever himself from the women and his old identity, which was essential for the process of death and rebirth to begin, but he is also even more firmly connected to the profane world. As "Charlie Marlow" he will become a mere statistic for the ivory company once he goes to the head office to sign his name on the contract.

Upon his arrival in Belgium, Marlow undergoes a mock ceremony that reverses all of the typical elements of a separation ritual. Rather than death

imagery being associated with Marlow, which would imply his departure from the profane world, it is the city itself that is lifeless. Remaining unnamed and thus embodying all modern secular metropolises, the Belgian city is filled with death imagery. Marlow finds the office located on “a narrow and deserted street in deep shadow” and surrounded by high houses that stand in “dead silence.” Upon entering, he has to ascend an “ungarnished staircase, as arid as a desert.” Unlike tribal communities, for which sacred beliefs formed the core of society, modern cities, with their emphasis on rationality and material wealth, are spiritually dead. By describing the Belgian city throughout his tale as a “whited sepulcher” (11) and “the sepulchral city” (88), a biblical image of religious hypocrisy and spiritual barrenness, Marlow is implying that European civilizations at the fin de siècle, despite outwardly professing Christian piety, use religion to mask political ideologies, and thus bear no sign of potential regeneration.

Once inside the office, Marlow encounters company workers who put him through a bureaucratic process that is a near parody of a separation ritual. The office women are the first to meet Marlow and prepare him for his journey. In primitive initiations, female members of the tribe played an important part in the preliminary ceremonies. Among Australian Aborigines, women typically took part in “corroborees,” songs and dances expressing their feelings about the coming death of their sons (Spencer and Gillen, *Natives Tribes* 1: 261). Playing a motherly role, a white-haired secretary “wearing a compassionate expression” (*Heart* 11) guides Marlow through the routine of signing on as an agent, all the while with “an air of taking an immense part in all [his] sorrows” (12). However,

the two other women Marlow encounters, a thin woman and a fat older one who are “knitting black wool,” reflect the spiritual sterility of the proceedings. As Ian Watt indicates, the weavers are an allusion to the classical Greek Fates that controlled the destiny of every human life. Although Watt is puzzled as to why Conrad has only two weavers since, in the classical model, they form a triad, he suggests they may be a reference to a “death and rebirth ritual” (Watt 46). In terms of initiation, the missing little girl in the child-woman-crone triad implies that the corresponding process of birth-death-rebirth in primitive rituals no longer exists in a secular society. Grounded in rational ideologies, Marlow’s civilization sees the world from a purely biological and material perspective. The weavers, who are “guarding the door to Darkness,” introduce “youths with cheery and foolish countenances” (*Heart* 12), not into a sacred ritual of death and resurrection, but, as Watt puts it, into “the horrors of the secular hell” in colonial Africa (Watt 48).

Whereas tribal initiations always included the neophytes’ relatives, who were deeply involved in the rites, the men in the office are total strangers who are indifferent to Marlow’s fate. When Marlow meets the company owner, whom he ironically describes as the “great man himself,” this individual is far from being a wise master who personally supervises the initiations. The short figure of “pale plumpness in a frock coat,” who has “his grip on ever so many millions,” shows no interest in Marlow and spares only “forty-five seconds” of his time to acquire his signature on the contract. A further implied parody of male initiations is Marlow’s statement that he is “not used to such ceremonies” as he walks into the

doctor's room for a routine check up (*Heart* 12). Whereas preparations for entry into the sacred ground were typically made by shamans, who were also known as "doctors" (Mathews, "Darkinung" 5), Marlow is greeted by an inverted shaman. In secular civilizations, the doctor's role has been desacralized and changed into that of a scientist who works at an emotional distance from his patients. As John W. Griffith points out, the company doctor's examination of Marlow's cranium for signs of potential insanity "seems to be satirizing the craniological ideas of [Cesare] Lombroso" (160). Lombroso believed that cranial distortions revealed the "ferocious instincts of primitive humanity, and the inferior animals" and provoked criminal behavior (Greenslade 29). Not only does the company doctor promote the ethnocentric theories of his civilization, which equate primitive societies with savagery, but he also tells Marlow that his test is only "interesting for science" and of no practical use to him on his journey (*Heart* 13). Unlike the shamans, whose tasks included frightening the initiates to strengthen their courage, the doctor, in Marlow's estimation, is merely a "harmless fool." When Marlow is finally ready to leave for Africa, the entire affair has left him feeling like an "impostor": "I felt as though, instead of going to the center of a continent, I were about to set off for the center of the earth" (14). This image inverts the typical celestial imagery of a separation rite in which initiates are taken by "tribal brothers" and "thrown up into the air and caught" to symbolize their departure from the profane realm (Spencer 132). Marlow is instead even more deeply submerged in the mundane world, and instinctively feels he has been left spiritually unprepared.

Marlow's arrival in the Belgian Free State of Congo, where he witnesses the exploitation of the natives, further subverts the separation phase of his initiation. Once initiates were taken away from the women, the elder men and the shamans would typically disguise themselves in monstrous masks and drag them to the sacred ground for their ritual killing in the wilderness. These initiatory events appear in subverted form when Marlow reaches the coasts of Congo. While on the river heading towards his assigned trading station, he realizes that the entire European trade network in Africa is a means of brutal exploitation hidden behind the pretense of civilizing the natives. With soldiers and traders being dropped off at various points along the coast, the whole business seems to him like a "sordid farce acted in front of a sinister backdrop." Rather than being separated from the feminine world and joining the male group, Marlow feels disconnected from the men of his own civilization. In a crowd of Europeans on the ship carrying them to their trading posts, Marlow feels alone: "my isolation amongst all these men with whom I had no point of contact . . . seemed to keep me from the truth of things" (*Heart* 15). While secular Europe consists of isolated individuals pursuing personal ambitions, the Africans whom Marlow sees paddling on the river appear more united in their tribal life: "They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks — these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast" (16). Significantly, Marlow describes their faces as "grotesque masks," an image which recalls the disguised shamans whose role was to separate initiates from the

profane world. However, while masks typically signaled the arrival of ancestral spirits, the Congolese are exploited and powerless to effect any change.

Instead of a ritual death, Marlow witnesses the subjugation of the natives who are being used for manual labor by the ivory company. Heading towards his station, Marlow stumbles upon a clearing in a forest which is a dumping site for sick laborers. The “grove of death” (23) is a replica, albeit in subverted form, of an initiatory sacred ground. As Mathews observes, the aboriginal model consists of a large circular clearing which branches out into a narrow path linked to a smaller circle deep in the wilderness (“Bora Ceremonies” 414). Similarly, Marlow first sees “a vast artificial hole” by the road, the purpose of which he “found it impossible to divine”; he then nearly falls into a “narrow ravine” and finally steps into “the gloomy circle of some Inferno” (*Heart* 19) where he encounters the dying laborers. Rather than neophytes awaiting their symbolic death and rebirth in the sacred ground, the sick natives are “nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation lying confusedly in the greenish gloom.” As one of them reaches out to Marlow, he notices that “the man seemed young — almost a boy” and wore “a bit of white worsted around his neck.” The fact that the dying Congolese is a youth in this context suggests he is an allusion to an initiate who is to be ceremonially slain in the sacred ground. However, due to the interference of secular European civilization, the sacred rites of the Congolese and their regenerative powers have been disrupted. Marlow’s confusion as to why the dying youth is wearing the cloth implies that there are no equivalent sacred rites of manhood in his own secular civilization. “Where did he get it? Was it a badge — an ornament — a

charm — a propitiatory act? Was there any idea at all connected with it?” (20). In initiations of the Lower Congo, novices traditionally wore white body paint to indicate that they had been killed by ancestral beings prior to their rebirth (Frazer 251). In contrast, death here has been reduced to a biological fact and white to a meaningless color.

The separation phase required the guidance of ritual masters and included a group of initiates who underwent the ordeals together, but all of the men with whom Marlow works in the Congo appear as subverted variants of these models. Wearing monstrous disguises that represented “divine or ‘demonic’ beings,” the elder men and shamans in primitive initiations acted as guides to the initiates (Eliade, *Birth* 21). Ironically, the company officials appear as mock demons and function as inverted initiatory guides. The manager who runs the trading station is a “flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil” (*Heart* 19). He was “from his youth up employed in these parts” (26) and thus groomed by his secular civilization to be an unquestioning servant of company owners rather than a genuine leader. Unlike an initiatory master, he is the epitome of mediocrity; with no special abilities, intelligence, originality, or even organizational skills, the manager commands neither fear nor respect, but rather “inspires uneasiness” (25). Despite his position of power, Marlow sees him as hollow, most likely having “nothing within him” (26). Similarly, the brickmaker is a “young aristocrat” (28) who does nothing practical and is there mainly seeking a promotion in the company. He is “pitiless” towards the natives, whom he considers criminals and orders to be punished at the slightest “transgression,” while he privately collects their sacred military weapons

(30). Marlow sees him as another hollow demon, a “papier-mâché Mephistopheles” who has “nothing inside but a little loose dirt” (31). As representatives of their secular society, the manager and the brickmaker have not undergone initiation rites, and thus remain spiritually empty.

The European ivory traders appear as a subverted initiatory brotherhood. Calling themselves the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, the men are in Africa strictly to acquire personal wealth. In a mockery of the Freemasons, who use “consciously elaborated and ritualized symbolism” in their secret societies (Biedermann 144), this “devoted band” of ivory traders is “sworn to secrecy” (*Heart* 36). Whereas Masonic groups claim to believe in God and uphold the moral values of their society, Marlow describes these men as “sordid buccaneers” whose only intention is to “tear treasure out of the bowels of the land,” and whose actions have “no moral purpose” (37). By contrast, neophytes who undergo rites of passage together form a strong emotional bond which Victor Turner calls *communitas*: those participating in the ceremonies feel a “state of oneness and total unity” when enduring ritual ordeals together and develop a sense of brotherhood which forms the basis of the moral values they bring back to their community (Myerhoff 117). The ivory traders, however, are entirely motivated by self-interest as they “beguiled the time by back-biting and intriguing against each other” to “get appointed to a trading-post where ivory was to be had” (*Heart* 29). Emphasizing their spiritual emptiness, Marlow ironically describes them as “a lot of faithless pilgrims” who “were praying” to ivory (27). In Marlow’s subverted initiation, then, he has received neither guides nor fellow initiates, but has instead

witnessed the greed of European imperialists who act under a “philanthropic pretence” (28).

Marlow’s entry into the liminal phase of his initiation begins when he captains a steamer up the Congo River towards the Inner Station. The upriver journey Marlow and the pilgrims take to find Kurtz, the brilliant ivory trader who has become a renegade from his own civilization, takes the form of a cosmogonic return to a primordial earth. Eliade explains that the neophyte’s submersion into the dark space of the sacred ground, which was always in a wilderness, embodied “a symbolic retrogression to Chaos” and was a necessary step that dissolved the neophyte’s previous identity before the process of rebirth could begin (*Birth* xiii). Marlow describes the steamer journey in similar terms: “Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth” (*Heart* 41). Just as “the killing of the initiate is represented as a swallowing by a gigantic monstrous Being, usually a Snake” during liminality (Eliade, *Australian* 91), the Congo River, which Marlow since childhood had thought resembled an “immense snake uncoiled” (*Heart* 9), seems to swallow the steamer.¹⁸ Death imagery suggests that the men aboard are experiencing a process of liminal erasure, in which their attachments to the profane world, including their memories and identities, vanish. As the steamer “penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness,” Marlow feels that “[w]e were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms.” When morning arrives, they find themselves in “a white fog . . . more blinding than the night” (48), which is an image suggesting liminal death. Among the Congolese,

initiates were often painted white to symbolize that they were dead (Eliade, *Birth* 58). The crew appears to be undergoing a similar experience as Marlow feels the steamer is “on the point of dissolving” in the white fog: “The rest of the world was nowhere, as far as our eyes and ears were concerned. Just nowhere. Gone, disappeared; swept off without leaving a whisper or a shadow behind” (*Heart* 49).

During the native attack on the steamer, however, it becomes evident that only Marlow shows any sign of transformation in the liminal phase. When the steamer comes near the Inner Station, the tribe protecting Kurtz tries to repel the white men with arrows and spears, an act that functions as an initiatory test of courage for Marlow and the crew. As they face death, Marlow notices the “contrast of expressions” between the European and African members of the crew. Whereas the white men are “greatly discomposed” and have a “look of being painfully shocked” by the assault, the cannibals that Marlow had pressed into naval service “had an alert, naturally interested expression; but their faces were essentially quiet” (50). Their courage seems to derive from having undergone male initiations, as indicated by their ornamental scars and filed teeth. Only Marlow appears to pass the test of courage by maintaining his composure and captaining the steamer successfully through the ambush. Marlow’s symbolic death is linked to his native helmsman, who dies during the assault. Just as the spear that ends his life is a phallic symbol recalling the circumcisions that took place during liminality, the blood that gets on Marlow’s shoes connects him to his death. Marlow becomes “morbidly anxious” (57) to remove his bloody shoes and flings them overboard, which is an image of initiatory divestiture that suggests he

alone is involved in a process of transformation.

The Russian sailor the steamer encounters near the Inner Station is the first of two ancestral beings in Marlow's initiation. The son of an Orthodox archpriest who ran away from home to find himself, the young sailor had inadvertently blundered into Kurtz in the Congo and now worships him. Known in Conrad criticism as "the harlequin" because of Marlow's description of him in his ragged, multicoloured patchwork coat (64), he is also a cognate of the trickster figure. Marlow refers to him in almost supernatural terms: "His very existence was improbable, inexplicable, and altogether bewildering. He was an insoluble problem. It was inconceivable how he had existed, how he had succeeded in getting so far, how he had managed to remain — why he did not instantly disappear" (68). James Morgan interprets the Russian sailor from a Jungian psychological perspective. According to Carl G. Jung, the Harlequin is "an archetype of initiation." Like the trickster, he is "an ancient chthonic god" whose role is to disrupt the known world, and he "represents a stage rather than a goal in [the] psychological development" of initiates (Morgan 100). As a creation deity, the harlequin/trickster typically causes confusion, overturns rational knowledge, and creates disorder to provoke self-reflection. But the Russian sailor functions subversively. Although he should, as a trickster, lead to what Jung describes as the "descent into the cave of initiation and secret knowledge" and the subsequent "restoration of the whole man" (98), he does not provoke any such change in Marlow. The Russian sailor is instead entirely self-absorbed in his veneration of Kurtz. As a man, he is immature, with a "beardless, boyish face, very fair, no

features to speak of" (*Heart* 65), and displays an "unreflecting audacity" which misleads him into seeing Kurtz as a godlike figure (68). Though the Russian sailor does guide Marlow to Kurtz, his disappearance into the jungle without having effected any changes implies that Marlow's transformation will be problematic.

Appearing as a spectral, charismatic, semi-divine figure, the enigmatic Mr. Kurtz functions as a demonic ancestral being in Marlow's initiation. Kurtz, the gifted ivory trader who has apparently gone mad and established himself as the leader of a Congolese tribe, resembles what, in primitive beliefs, is considered a "Culture Hero."¹⁹ According to Eliade, numerous primitive groups believed that the "Supernatural Beings" who first formed the earth were at some point followed by other creation deities known as "Culture Heroes" (*Australian* 42-68). The latter established the institutions in which customs and beliefs were later practiced by their human descendents (*Birth* x). Similarly, Kurtz, the multitalented genius, appears as a nearly superhuman purveyor of Western culture and progress. He is not only a painter, a journalist, an eloquent public orator, and a skilled ivory trader, but was also, upon arriving in Africa, a passionate advocate of spreading the moral ideals of his culture and what he believed were the benefits of civilized life to the Congolese through the trading stations. The emphasis Marlow places on Kurtz's powerful voice further marks him as an ancestral being. As Malinowski points out, the initiatory spirit was primarily identified by its voice (*Magic* 39). Shamans used bull-roarers to simulate the sound of the ancestral spirit particularly in the liminal phase of the rites where it was a continual reminder of the presence of a divine being. Before meeting him, Marlow becomes obsessed with hearing

Kurtz speak, and he continually refers to his great eloquence. For Marlow, “the man presented himself as a voice,” and “of all his gifts the one that stood out preeminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words — the gift of expression” (*Heart* 58).

Yet Kurtz is a subverted ancestral being, as his own civilization manipulates his talents for profit rather than applying them for the benefit of society. He is essentially a tragic figure whose potential as a “Culture Hero” is wasted. As Marlow ironically puts it, “[a]ll of Europe went into the making of Kurtz” (63), which implies that the moral ideals of his society are inextricably linked to the profit-driven political ideologies of imperialism in Africa. While using Kurtz’s moral idealism to provide a mask of philanthropic rhetoric, the company primarily needs him for his ability to extract large amounts of ivory from the Congo. And though the company has “entrusted him with the making of a report, for its future guidance” (57), Marlow overhears the manager ridiculing Kurtz’s idealistic vision: “And the pestiferous absurdity of his talk... ‘Each station should be like a beacon on the road to better things, a center for trade, of course, but also for humanising, improving, instructing.’ Conceive you — that ass! And he wants to be manager!” (40). The other ivory traders do not share Kurtz’s genuine moral beliefs, and he is thus envied and hated for his success. When it is reported that Kurtz has evidently gone mad and used violence to terrify a native tribe into appointing him as their leader, a move that essentially threatens the ivory trade, he is targeted for removal from his station. According to Cedric Watts, Max Nordau’s model of the “highly-gifted degenerate” who applies his “brilliant

faculties” for “the satisfaction of his basest propensities” gave Conrad the “initial idea for Kurtz’s psychology” (226-27). In *Degeneration* (1895), Nordau attacks fin de siècle artists as criminally insane degenerates who propagate socially destructive ideas. But theories such as Nordau’s were part of the covert political ideologies of the period in which charismatic men like Kurtz who had moral ideals were stigmatized by those in power and thus removed as potential rivals for positions of public authority. Whereas a tribal society would revere Kurtz as a shaman, secular Europe discredits him as criminally corrupt and thereby prevents him from functioning as a cultural leader.²⁰

While his contact with Kurtz eventually leads Marlow to a new perception of the world, his inability to comprehend the true nature of Kurtz’s psychological condition will leave him only imperfectly changed. When Marlow thinks of Kurtz as “the lone white man turning his back suddenly” on his own culture and “setting his face towards his empty and desolate station,” he confesses he “did not know the motive” (*Heart* 39). Expressing the widespread fear of degeneration in fin de siècle Europe, Marlow believes Kurtz’s contact with “savages” has made him go into an atavistic decline. Griffith explains that the “idea of colonists going mad in the tropics was a common Victorian stereotype,” and that Kurtz was an easily recognizable type to the average reader fed on lurid tales in popular fiction and scientific reports of white men “going mad” in the colonies (128). Marlow, a representative of the same cultural prejudice, perceives Kurtz as an “initiated wraith” who has participated in “unspeakable rites” (*Heart* 63) and become a “wandering and tormented thing” (82) whose mind, degraded by the wilderness,

has been taken over by savage instincts. In Marlow's view, the jungle takes on monstrous attributes: "[the wilderness] had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation" (59). When they finally meet, Kurtz, a victim of the manager's plan to remove him from the Inner Station by having deliberately delayed the rescue operation, is already fatally ill. To Marlow, Kurtz appears to be half-dead already: he is an "atrocious phantom," a bald "apparition" with a "bony head" (74), who is no more than a "Shadow" (75) of a man. Marlow's civilization has left him incapable of seeing that Kurtz is in the process of being spiritually reborn.

Much of the imagery associated with Kurtz strongly suggests that he is in the liminal phase of an initiation rite. Not only is the death and shadow imagery surrounding Kurtz common to liminal beings, but the wilderness that seems to have consumed Kurtz is also suggestive of the swallowing monster that keeps initiates in its belly before disgorging them in a new form. Kurtz's private hut, which is at the tail end of the snake-like Congo River, indicates his liminal status. Whereas, in Marlow's Eurocentric view, the severed "heads on the stakes" which form a fence around Kurtz's private hut seem to be signs of his murderous "lack of restraint" (71), they are more likely symbolic indicators of Kurtz's liminal condition. As for the hut itself, initiates were commonly segregated in such dwellings while in the bush. Moreover, Eliade explains that "to be enclosed in the initiatory hut symbolizes the maternal womb" in which the initiates were reborn (*Birth* 7). Even the raids Kurtz launches on other villages with his natives, which

to Marlow appear to be motivated by his “appetite for more ivory” (*Heart* 70), are more likely initiatory tests of fortitude. Mary H. Kingsley indicates that, in West African secret societies, initiates were “inured to hardship” by being forced to “make raids so as to perfect themselves” (259). Despite Kurtz at one point stating to Marlow that he knows “perfectly” what he is doing with the natives, Marlow, without any understanding of sacred rites, nevertheless believes Kurtz has suffered an “incredible degradation” (*Heart* 82), and that “his soul was mad” (83).

Kurtz in fact seems to have consciously rejected his own civilization, most likely after realizing that the moral ideals it professes are lies, and he has chosen to stay with the Congolese tribe as an alternative society. As Griffith puts it, Kurtz “makes a conscious decision to remove himself from his cultural moorings” by returning to the natives (49). While to the white men Kurtz appears to have descended into savagery, such a Eurocentric perception disregards how the natives view him. Arnold Van Gennep observes that, in tribal cultures, strangers like Kurtz were considered dangerous pollutants: “A stranger is sacred, endowed with magico-religious powers and supernaturally benevolent or malevolent,” and rites of passage are “intended to make him neutral or benevolent” (29). Indeed, evidence suggests that Kurtz is undergoing an initiation once practiced by the Congolese. Frazer explains that in the Lower Congo many tribes formed secret societies called “Ndembo” in which initiations took place. The shamans would establish a new branch of their guild in a district where “an epidemic of sickness” occurred. Echoing Kurtz’s situation, an “albino” was always chosen as leader. The branch itself was located “in a great thick forest” that was “near water,” the

huts of the guild were “fenced,” and uninitiated people were killed if they came anywhere near the “sanctified persons” (251). Kurtz’s natives most likely willingly adopted him as their leader in the hope of magically stemming the “sickness” of the European invasion. At an earlier point, Marlow notes that during the steamer ambush their shouts sound like “unrestrained grief,” and that their actions seem “purely protective” rather than aggressive (*Heart* 53).

Marlow’s partial transformation comes with Kurtz’s death. When the ivory traders take the dying Kurtz away on the steamer, they inadvertently interrupt his initiation rite. In what is most likely a purification ceremony, three shamans and an African woman, who appears to have been supervising Kurtz’s rebirth and acting as a symbolic mother, attempt a ritual for him on the shore as the steamer is departing. But the fearful ivory traders open fire on the natives and thus leave Kurtz’s initiation incomplete. His dying words, “The horror! The horror!” (86), suggest Kurtz’s realization that his own civilization, for which he had such high moral ambitions, is spiritually dead. Since the goal of male initiations was to make the novice confront death, and thus become acquainted with his spiritual identity, Marlow identifies what he has learned from Kurtz by contrasting their experiences of death. Marlow is unable to grasp the full extent of his own experience, as he has never gone as far as Kurtz in his initiatory ordeal. Although, like Kurtz, he has “wrestled with death,” he views it as “the most unexciting contest you can imagine. It takes place in an impalpable greyness, [...] in a sickly atmosphere of tepid scepticism, without much belief in your own right, and still less in that of your adversary” (87). Marlow’s experience of death is

entirely desacralized. Being too firmly socialized into his secular society, in which “scepticism” withers all “belief” and thus nullifies the terrifying ordeal of encountering the sacred, Marlow, the simple sailor, achieves only partial wisdom. By contrast, Kurtz, to whom he vows to remain loyal, “was a remarkable man” for having managed to separate himself from his culture. Unlike Marlow, he “stepped over the edge” to experience an initiatory death; and thus his final cry of “horror” is a “moral victory” because “it was the expression of some sort of belief” gained through confrontation with the sacred (88).

Marlow’s reincorporation into European society proves problematic. Without any rituals of separation from liminality, he suffers from psychological shock. Rites of separation from the liminal phase were traditionally performed to ease the transition between the sacred and profane worlds, a change that was characterized as a return from the dead. Marlow, by contrast, ironically states, “No, they did not bury me” as they had Kurtz (87). When Marlow arrives from Africa, rather than being reintegrated with ceremonies involving the whole tribe, he is alone and is unable to readapt to society. If the function of an initiation rite is to mold the character of the novice to fit into the tribe, Marlow’s ordeals have done the exact opposite. Back in the profane world of the “sepulchral city,” Marlow reacts to his own secular civilization with disgust. Compared to his experiences in the Congo, the “knowledge of life” of most people has become an “irritating pretence” (88) to him. He now perceives “commonplace individuals” as primarily engaged in petty activities behind illusions of “perfect safety” (89) which prevent life-changing encounters with the sacred.

In a final subversion, the women Marlow meets in his reincorporation phase do not fulfill the crucial role they play during the return of initiates to tribal communities. Among the Aborigines, women act as mothers who accept the reborn men into the tribe. As Sir Baldwin Spencer indicates, these “fire ceremonies,” which were performed for purification, included a rite in which the novice must endure “kneeling on a fire” in front of the women in order to be allowed back into the community (135). In what seems an ironic subversion of such rites, Marlow recalls that he “was not very well,” and that his “temperature was seldom normal” upon his return, which suggests that the initiation rite is now an internalized psychological ordeal that must be dealt with privately. Reflecting the materialistic standpoint of his society, Marlow’s “dear aunt,” the inverted mother figure who had instigated his initiation, offers to help nurse his body back to health, though in fact it was his “imagination that wanted soothing” (*Heart* 89).

The conversation with Kurtz’s mourning fiancée, the Intended, shows the results of a secular civilization that, instead of providing sacred rites, relies on comforting illusions. In a letter to William Blackwood, Conrad suggests that his story be viewed from the perspective of this final scene: “the interview of the man and the girl locks . . . the whole 30,000 words of narrative description into one suggestive view of a whole phase of life” (Karl and Davies 2: 417). The “phase of life” to which Conrad is referring, identical to his earlier description of his intentions in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”* is most likely that of a man’s transition from youthful ignorance to mature manhood. This correlation is implied when Marlow finds out Kurtz felt compelled to participate in the ivory trade in

Africa, not out of greed, but because he “wasn’t rich enough” to marry (*Heart* 94). As Frazer points out, in tribal cultures only initiated men could have a wife, and “it would be a scandal if they married before” (251).²¹ Kurtz’s failure to return reflects the failure of his civilization: The lack of initiation rites, and the loss of sacred beliefs that underlie them, result in a society based on the pursuit of wealth at the expense of human life. Marlow, by lying to the grieving Intended that Kurtz’s dying word was her name, is thus equating, not her, but Kurtz’s unfulfilled, or intended, life with “the horror” of secular civilizations, which leave men inwardly stunted and the society spiritually and morally dead.

Whereas initiates typically received a higher social status upon their return, Marlow and the narrator have both acquired the dubious roles of subverted shamans. The narrator, by retelling Marlow’s ordeals, seems to have raised his level of self-awareness, an idea which is suggested when he quietly “raises [his] head” once Marlow falls silent. Marlow, sitting apart from the others on the *Nellie*, is now “in the pose of a meditating Buddha” (*Heart* 95). This pose implies that, in the narrator’s view, he has also dispelled some of his earlier ignorance by having reflected on his experiences. But Marlow, like the narrator, is a subverted modern shaman; few individuals are capable of receiving insight from their obscure instructions as there are neither sacred communal myths nor rituals uniting a secularized society. Unlike the other men on the *Nellie*, only the narrator, who has reconstructed Marlow’s account by using the regenerative paradigm of male initiations, appears to have understood its deeper implications.

Chapter 4

Spiritual Initiations: *The Shadow-Line*

It was the last ordeal of that episode that had been maturing and tempering my character – though I did not know it.

– *The Shadow-Line* (106)

Although *The Shadow-Line* was first serialized in the *English Review* from September 1916 to March 1917, Conrad's original idea for the story came during the fruitful period of 1897-1900, when he was exploring the theme of male initiation. *The Shadow-Line* presents an unnamed captain's recollections of his first command of a sailing vessel in the Gulf of Siam, a voyage in which he matured by overcoming his fears while stranded on his ship with a sick crew. As he had done with *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* and *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad drew heavily on his own experiences as a sailor, this time on his only captaincy of a ship, the *Otago*, on which he had endured similar adversities in 1888. But for reasons that remain open to speculation, Conrad abandoned the project at its inception in 1900. In his friend Richard Curle's copy of *The Shadow-Line*, he wrote: "This story had been in my mind for some years. Originally I used to think of it under the name of First Command. When I managed in the second year of the war to concentrate my mind sufficiently to begin working I turned to this subject as the easiest. But in consequence of my changed mental attitude to it, it became The Shadow-Line" (Karl 770). *The Shadow-Line* resurfaced in Conrad's imagination shortly after his shock over the outbreak of World War One in 1914 during a visit to his native Poland. The story is largely the result of his attempt to

deal psychologically with the war and his concern over the participation of his eldest son Borys in the conflict. Dedicated to Borys and the entire generation of young men heading into the horror of war, *The Shadow-Line* presents Conrad's reexploration of male initiation rites by using the tripartite structure he had already derived from anthropological data and applied in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* and *Heart of Darkness*. This time Conrad emphasizes the spiritual aspects of an initiation as a counterpoint to the loss of moral values in the West.

Despite being a late work, *The Shadow-Line* cannot be properly understood without considering the context in which Conrad first conceived it. In this regard, we must again turn to the influence of Stephen Crane. According to Jeremy Hawthorn, Conrad may have stopped working on "First Command" either from "the pressure of other work or [as] a result of some less material problem — some psychological block." While Hawthorn feels that such "conjecture is necessarily inconclusive" (xiii), evidence suggests that Crane's untimely death at the age of twenty-nine was the traumatizing event that undermined Conrad's project. Just as Crane's appearance in Conrad's life galvanized his imagination in 1896, his death seems to have had the opposite effect. Crane, with whom Conrad had developed a solid friendship, died in June 1900 from childhood tuberculosis that was aggravated while he was in Cuba covering the Spanish-American War of 1898, and this loss left Conrad "shocked and distressed" (Knowles 40). In what Nina Galen interprets as a commemorative gesture to Crane, Conrad completed *Lord Jim*, the final tome in the Marlow trilogy, in July 1900 by ending it with Jim's sacrificial death. Galen explains that in his tale of a young captain who tries

to atone for his guilt over abandoning his ship during a crisis, “the outcome of the story — Jim’s very fate — had become inextricably involved with the fate of Stephen Crane” (14). Conrad was composing his novel throughout the final months of Crane’s life, and as his health deteriorated, Conrad’s tale also changed. Galen suggests that Conrad’s “sense of responsibility for the fatal illness of his friend” ended up shifting his original intentions for *Lord Jim*. In a late essay, Conrad admitted feeling guilty over his inadvertent role in his friend’s death. Conrad had convinced his publisher William Blackwood to fund Crane’s fatal voyage to Cuba, a trip his impoverished friend could not afford. Conrad writes, “now and then I feel as though that afternoon I had led [Crane] by the hand to his doom” (*Last Essays* 339). Thus, while Conrad had originally intended his novel to be “modeled in part upon the theme of courage” in Crane’s fiction, the plot “became subverted, after Crane became fatally ill, by the theme of guilt and abandonment” (Galen 13).

Significantly, Conrad had at this time also abandoned the initiation theme, which he had been exploring ever since reading Crane’s *Red Badge of Courage*. Letters of the period reveal that Conrad was planning to write two other stories with initiatory overtones, both of which were affected by Crane’s death. According to Zdisław Najder, “[a]bout the middle of September [1900], Conrad began writing ‘Typhoon,’ although originally he thought about starting ‘First Command’” (*Chronicle* 267). Less than a year after Crane’s death, Conrad managed to complete “Typhoon,” but it became an ironic tale that, as William W. Bonney points out, is an “inversion” of what Conrad had attempted in *The Nigger*

of the “*Narcissus*” (34). The “imperceptible clod” Captain MacWhirr, an opposite of the self-composed Captain Alistoun, successfully steers his ship through a storm but fails to be inwardly transformed (35). As for “First Command,” which Conrad clearly intended to be another tale of male initiation, the project, it seems, became emotionally identified with Crane, and he thus set it aside indefinitely. With the support of Crane suddenly gone, Conrad, still uncertain about his future as a writer and feeling once more isolated as a Polish immigrant in England, fell into a severe depression. In 1901, his “spirits and productivity flagged” (Najder, *Chronicle* 272), and Conrad fell into one of the worst creative droughts of his career, writing some of his most pessimistic stories such as “Amy Foster,” about a Polish peasant who is shipwrecked in England and dies misunderstood by his adopted community, and “Falk,” about a captain who descends into cannibalism while stranded at sea. By 1903, Conrad had mostly stopped writing sea fiction, and was focusing instead on land-based political novels like *Nostramo* (1904) and *The Secret Agent* (1910). The death of Crane, then, seems not only to have prevented Conrad from writing “First Command” but also to have steered him away from writing autobiographically based male initiation stories. Not until much later did unforeseen events impel Conrad to reexplore his earlier theme.

Conrad’s visit to Poland in 1914, his first return since 1895, seems to have provided the necessary impetus for him to revive “First Command.” As Gary Geddes puts it, “*The Shadow-Line* is a temperamental composition, a book written directly out of the intellectual and emotional distress of the war” and Conrad’s “emotionally charged return to Poland” (83). Along with his wife Jessie and their

two sons, Conrad inadvertently stumbled into the outbreak of the Great War (1914-18), a cataclysmic event that added to the painful memories of his difficult childhood as the son of Polish patriots exiled to Siberia for participating in the 1863 uprising against Imperial Russia. The trip and the complications he had in returning to England during the war left Conrad despondent. In early 1915, his correspondence reveals his depression and creative lethargy. In a letter to Mrs. Wedgwood on January 28, 1915, Conrad writes: "It seems almost criminal levity to talk at this time of books, stories, publication. This war attends my uneasy pillow like a nightmare. I feel oppressed even in my sleep and the moment of waking brings no relief" (Aubry 2: 168). As Deborah Romanick points out, Conrad at this time needed "the 'steadying influence' of the 'autobiographical form'" (248) to deal with his memories. By March 1915, he had begun *The Shadow-Line*, the only major work of fiction he would write that year. The departure of his son Borys to join the war that August provided Conrad with a profounder reason to reexplore the nature of mature manhood. While his son and other youths were undergoing what Conrad called "the supreme trial of a whole generation" (*Shadow* 111), he was well aware that modern warfare was a dehumanizing experience.

Conrad was incensed at the way the new mechanized conflict was being waged and saw it as a symptom of the moral degeneration of Western civilization. In his 1915 essay "Poland Revisited," Conrad mostly blames the European conflagration on the ideology of progress, which he believed was "impressively disclosed by this war" through its use of dishonorable new stealth weapons like

mines and submarines. He writes: "Mankind has been demoralized...by its own mastery of mechanical appliances. Its spirit is apparently so weak now, its flesh has grown so strong, that it will face any deadly horror of destruction and cannot resist the temptation to use any stealthy, murderous contrivance" (Conrad, qtd. in Schwarz 81). In "The Nursery of the Craft" (1905), Conrad had already expressed his opinion of warfare in stating that there is a distinction between societies that act out of sacred belief and those that do not. "War itself," he writes, "can be a sacred act if properly respected. To apprehend the true aspect, force, and morality of war as a natural function of mankind one requires a feather in the hair and a ring in the nose, or, better still, teeth filed to a point and a tattooed breast." By evoking the image of a primitive man bearing initiatory marks as a positive model, Conrad seems to be suggesting that a society which perceives the world as sacred is perhaps spiritually superior to a secular one that provides only "the comfort and adornment of our bodies and the elevation of our minds" at the expense of moral development. Yet, for Conrad, Western civilization was "bound to the chariot of progress," and there was "no going back" to sacred beliefs such as those found in tribal cultures (*Mirror* 261).

In an attempt to revive the spiritual aspects of male initiations and express how they operate in modern societies, Conrad composed *The Shadow-Line* with unfamiliar anthropological structures, which readers have tended to misconstrue. The most common source of confusion is the apparent supernatural element in the work. While the story appears to be a straightforward tale of a young captain's growth into maturity during his first command, the "ghost" of the former captain

which seems to be threatening the ship has led to much critical debate. Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, for instance, derides *The Shadow-Line* as a failed *Bildungsroman*. According to her, while Conrad gave an “explicit directive that the novella should be read as a *Bildungsroman*,” he “blatantly violates the proprieties of realism” by adding a ghostly character where there should not be one (127). Yet Erdinast-Vulcan is mistaken in assimilating a *rite de passage* to the essentially secular model of the *Bildungsroman*. Whereas the latter identifies a literary work in which a character matures from youth into adulthood and towards a vocation through a series of trials, the former has its roots in primitive religious beliefs in which a male novice is guided by shamans in his confrontation with the sacred.²² Though Conrad does state in his Author’s Note that his aim in *The Shadow-Line* was to present “the change from youth, carefree and fervent, to the more self-conscious and more poignant period of maturer life” (*Shadow* 111), his tale does not have the typical features of a *Bildungsroman*. If we apply Tobias Boes’s definition of such stories as “narratives of socialization, in which ambitious young protagonists work their way to the inside of the power structures that govern their time, attempt to hew for themselves a position of privilege, and characteristically fail” (116), then the captain’s ordeals in *The Shadow-Line* clearly have no similarity whatsoever to what, for Boes, is basically a bourgeois drive for upward mobility. Conrad was instead applying concepts from his knowledge of anthropology to depict his protagonist’s maturation.

Conrad was annoyed by the persistent criticism of the supernatural in *The Shadow-Line* and felt the need to defend his work. Early on, partly to deflect

unsympathetic comments, he adamantly emphasized the autobiographical nature of the novella. In a 1917 letter to Helen Sanderson, he writes: “I never either meant or ‘felt’ the supernatural aspect of the story while writing it. It came out somehow and my readers pointed it out to me. I must tell you that it is a piece of as strict autobiography as the form allowed” (Karl and Davies 6: 64). Conrad’s insistence that *The Shadow-Line* was drawn from his own experience at sea, however, did not mean he had compromised its artistic integrity. As Geddes points out, “he was eventually obliged to admit that it was much more than a record of past events” (108). When Sidney Colvin refused to review the book because he had no background in its East Asian setting, Conrad insisted that the “locality does not matter.” The story is, as he puts it, “experience . . . transposed into spiritual terms — in art a perfectly legitimate thing to do, as long as one preserves the exact truth enshrined therein” (Aubry 2: 183). Feeling finally that he should clarify his intentions, Conrad added an Author’s Note to the 1920 edition of *The Shadow-Line*. In it, he points out the crucial difference between “the supernatural” and “the spiritual.” For Conrad, “the mere supernatural” is “but a manufactured article, the fabrication of minds insensitive to the intimate delicacies of our relation to the dead and to the living.” The “world of the living,” Conrad stresses, is itself a place in which the sacred is visible at times, as it contains “marvels and mysteries acting upon our emotions and intelligence in ways so inexplicable that it would almost justify the conception of life as an enchanted state” (*Shadow* 110). He seems to be hinting here that *The Shadow-Line* is an exploration of the spiritual process of death and rebirth, a concept

common in tribal cultures but no longer resonant in the secular perception of readers in the West. Far from being a *Bildungsroman* or a ghost story, then, *The Shadow-Line* is Conrad's attempt at an older age to reevaluate his own transformative confrontation with the forces of nature through the regenerative paradigm of male initiation rites.

Unlike the nearly invisible narrators of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* and *Heart of Darkness*, the one in *The Shadow-Line* intimately addresses his reader and indicates that he is a ship's captain retelling the events that matured him. Having reflected on his ordeals, he realizes that he has undergone a "universal experience" of male maturation that allowed him to leave behind "the gate of mere boyishness." Because "all mankind had streamed that way," reflecting on his trials has permitted him to recognize the "landmarks of the predecessors" (*Shadow* 3); he sees that his experiences were equivalent to the trials of youths during their initiation into manhood. The captain has creatively reformulated his story within a tripartite structure that draws significantly on concepts and symbolism from primitive initiation rites but is recast in a modern setting. Bearing the subtitle "A Confession," the novella also uses Christian religious imagery which merges with that of tribal rituals. In Christian tradition, the confession of sin is normally delivered to a priest. However, due to the secularization of Europe at the fin de siècle, when the tale takes place, the narrator is instead presenting to the reader his confession of how he overcame his self-doubts during his first command. Religious imagery in this context implies that, in a secular civilization, initiations from youth to manhood exist only in the form of private psychological

ordeals in which the one recounting the events uses fragments of religious structures to reshape, and thus tries to come to terms with, the deeper significance of his otherwise bewildering encounter with the sacred.

In *The Shadow-Line*, the separation phase of the narrator's trials is triggered by a depression that reflects the psychological nature of modern initiatory experiences. He recalls that his ordeals began soon after he felt his life as a sailor had become meaningless. "I was more discontented, disgusted, and dogged than ever. The past eighteen months, so full of new and varied experience, appeared a dreary, prosaic waste of days. I felt—how shall I express it?—that there was no truth to be got out of them" (6). His dissatisfaction and lethargy, which even he could not comprehend, led him to impulsively quit a job which seemed to offer every accommodation. The steamer on which he worked, which shipped cargo for the British Empire in Eastern ports, had a good captain and crew, and the work was easy.²³ He confesses, "I certainly hadn't been so comfortable in any ship or with any commander in all my sea-going days" (12). But these apparent benefits are precisely what created his psychological impasse. In tribal societies, the primary role of male initiation rites was to sever boys from attachment to their mothers, who were providers of comfort and protection. The narrator's trouble-free job aboard the steamer took the form of a symbolic mother, providing for his material needs and not exposing him to any significant dangers. The result was psychological stagnation, or, as he puts it, "that obscure feeling of life being but a waste of days, which, half-unconsciously, had driven me out of a comfortable berth, away from men I liked, to flee from the menace of emptiness"

(19). Rather than participating in a rite of separation from the mother prepared by tribal elders, the narrator's own stifled instincts impelled him to sever himself from his daily environment. Because his secular civilization did not provide any ritual framework for his private crisis, he was initially confused about his unconscious motivation, which he notes "was an impulse of some sort" (20), such that "common sense had nothing to do with" his sudden decision to leave his job (15). In his reconstruction of the events, however, the narrator implies that he was psychologically undergoing an initiatory experience.

Significantly, the narrator describes his mental condition in terms of an illness that occurs during puberty. He calls the sense of "spiritual drowsiness" (19) that induced him to change his life "the green sickness of late youth" (5). This expression is a key initiatory image which suggests that he was suffering from attachment to what, in tribal societies, would be considered the profane feminine world. Hawthorne points out that the "green sickness" was, according to nineteenth-century diagnoses, a psychosomatic ailment that temporarily constricted the menstrual flow in young women at puberty. He finds "the application of the term 'green sickness' to a man unusual" (xxvi). Yet, the narrator's depression seemed to be a psychological version of menstrual blockage, a concept best understood in relation to the scarification ordeals of male initiations. In tribal societies, scars were inflicted on initiates to purify them of their mother's blood and replace it with the spiritual blood of the men. Among the Australian Aborigines, scarification took the form of circumcision and subincision. While a circumcision severed the protective covering of the penis and, as Joseph

Campbell puts it, symbolically “release[d] the full manhood from occlusion in the mother womb” (“Initiations” 99), a subincision consisted of cutting the length of the penis from the underside. Campbell explains that the subincision, which was “frequently referred to as a ‘penis womb or vagina,’” indicated that “the male has been intentionally converted by the operation into a male-female” and had become an androgynous spiritual being who awaited rebirth as a man (*Masks* 103). As Mircea Eliade elucidates, it is probable that “the original model” for such genital scarification “was the menstrual flow.” In imitation of the “women’s mysteries,” males had to purify their own blood. “Just as the women get rid of ‘bad blood’ by menstruation,” Eliade adds, “the initiate can expel his mother’s blood by laceration of the subincision wound” (*Australian* 92). In *The Shadow-Line*, the narrator’s “green sickness” implies that the sense of meaninglessness brought about by his safe job was the psychological equivalent of the comforts of the natural world of the mothers from which boys in tribal societies had to be separated in order to become mature men.

When the narrator officially quits his job, white imagery suggests that he has begun to separate himself from the profane world and will place himself in the position of a liminal being. In many primitive cultures, white was the color of initiatory death. In the Lower Congo, for example, Frazer speculates that, “because negro children are born pale or nearly white,” the color is most likely attributed to the spiritual process of being twice born (251). Thus, when the narrator goes to the Harbor Office to resign, white symbolizes his separation from his old identity: “It was a lofty, big, cool, white room, where the screened light of

day glowed serenely. Everybody in it — the officials, the public — were in white” (*Shadow* 7). Before deciding on his next move, the narrator goes to a nearby hotel. Just as initiates were segregated from their familiar surroundings during the separation ceremonies, the hotel is a temporary dwelling symbolizing that the narrator is now between two modes of being. Eliade explains that the “symbolism of segregation” expresses the ambivalent stance of initiates: “there is always the idea of a death to the profane condition, but this signifies transformation into a ghost, as well as the beginning of a new life” (*Birth* 15). The hotel the narrator enters not only has “white, pillared pavillions” but also is “still as a tomb” (*Shadow* 7). Emphasizing his separation from his previous identity in the profane world, the narrator feels “detached from all earthly goings on” (16).

Taking the place of the elder males who prepared the sacred ground for novices, Giles, an older captain whom the narrator meets at the hotel, sets him up with his first command. Having heard favorable things about the narrator, Giles has secretly arranged to have him command a ship sailing out of Singapore whose captain recently died. Just as initiated elder men were venerated for their courage and high moral standing, “Captain Giles had prestige” and “was credited with wonderful adventures and with some mysterious tragedy in his life (11). The tragedy implies that Giles is a man who has matured through his many ordeals at sea. He is not only a captain of “great experience” (32) who is well respected among his peers, but also a father figure to the narrator; holding a smoldering pipe in his “big, paternal fist,” he provides the narrator with valuable insights. Significantly, Giles equally takes the role of a shaman, which is suggested by the

fact that the narrator feels he resembles a “churchwarden” more than a sailor. He appears as a threshold figure who establishes the conditions out of which the narrator will emerge as a new man. Giles is often in “doorways,” wears a “white tunic” from which a “heavy gold watch chain” hangs, and exudes “an atmosphere of virtuous sagacity” (22). Most importantly, his greater self-consciousness as an initiated elder makes him “a man from whom you would expect sound advice, moral sentiments” (10). He tells the narrator to beware of immature men like the lazy sailor, Hamilton, who lives in the hotel. Not only is he an “offensive loafer” (18) who has a “stiff, arrogant dignity” about him (30), but Giles also calls Hamilton a “nice boy,”²⁴ a term for a sailor whose time in Eastern ports, where British sailors had easier commissions, had made him “go soft” (12). His warning parallels the main danger initiates had to avoid during their ordeals: any desire for comfort was a sign of attachment to the mothers who naturally sought to protect their boys from harm and thus kept them from maturing.

When the narrator signs on to his first command at the Harbor Office, flight and death imagery imply that he is in the process of departing from the profane world. Captain Ellis takes the place of a tribal chief, who typically had a godlike status and sanctioned the initiation rites. The narrator describes him as the harbor’s “supreme authority,” who “looked upon himself as a sort of divine (pagan) emanation, the deputy-Neptune for the circumambient seas” (24). By signing the contract, the narrator becomes a ship’s captain for the first time and feels that he has been inducted by an elder leader into “the fellowship of seamen,” which was “stronger than age and station” (28). The flight imagery that follows

suggests that the young captain is now in the initial stages of a process of spiritual transformation. Elated by his first command, he feels “as if all of a sudden a pair of wings had grown on my shoulders. I merely skimmed along the polished floor . . . I floated down the staircase. I floated out of the official and imposing portal. I went on floating along” (28-29). In primitive rites, initiates were often ornamented with feathers during the separation phase. Frank J. Gillen indicates that among the Arunta “certain elderly members of the tribe . . . carefully paint and decorate [the novice] with the down of the eagle-hawk” before taking him into the sacred ground (169). Adornment with feathers symbolizes the neophyte’s flight from the women’s terrestrial world and his union with the spiritual realm of the men. When the captain leaves the harbor to join his new ship, death imagery further implies his separation. He now feels “a deep detachment from the forms and colours of this world” (*Shadow* 29). Just as initiates were typically guided to the sacred ground at night by a paternal figure, Giles accompanies the captain at night to the pier. As a symbolic indication that he has died to his old identity, the ship that takes him away is a “white ghostly steamer” (38). More death imagery appears in an early manuscript of *The Shadow-Line*: as the steamer passes other ships anchored in the harbor, they seem “still and silent as if all the crews were dead. They were like tombs” (119).

The sailing vessel which is to be the captain’s first command has all the characteristics of a sacred ground. He describes the ship not only as feminine but also in terms of its qualities of perfection and eternal life. When the captain first sees her in port, he experiences an immediate emotional attachment; he perceives

her as “a harmonious creature” that “had preserved the stamp of her origin” and would “never look old” because of her magnificent design. She also exudes life-giving qualities that dispel his depression. “Her hull, her rigging filled my eye with a great content. That feeling of life-emptiness which had made me so restless for the last few months lost its bitter plausibility, its evil influence, dissolved in a flow of joyous emotion” (42). A deleted line in the original manuscript further suggests that the ship is the sacred ground in which the captain will be rejuvenated: “Every fibre of my being vibrated and it seemed to me that life had come to me only then, that I had been dead only a minute before” (Hawthorne xxvi). The ship is thus a second womb in which the captain, now dead to his old identity, awaits spiritual rebirth through his coming ordeals. Her departure from port, in which he feels that she had “disengaged from the material conditions of her being” (*Shadow* 42), signals the end of the separation phase and the beginning of the captain’s entry into the sacred zone.

In a scene which parallels the segregation of novices in the sacred ground, the liminal phase of the captain’s initiation begins with a private moment of self-reflection. Once separated from their tribe, initiates were invariably taken to a remote place in the bush, normally some form of hut in the wilderness, in which they were required to meditate in isolation on their liminal condition. The shamans, who first prepared the huts, later introduced the neophytes to the line of ancestral succession to which they belonged and the traditions they were to uphold as men. Such self-reflection was necessary for reawakening the cognizance of the initiate’s spiritual nature as a living incarnation of his ancestors

(Eliade, *Australian* 57-58). In the captain's case, with the ship functioning as a sacred ground in the wilderness of the sea, the commander's cabin is the equivalent of an initiatory hut. Sitting in the captain's chair for the first time, he notices his own reflection in a mirror across the room and ponders the "succession of men" that had preceded him. He seems to hear a voice, "a sort of composite soul, the soul of command," whispering to him that through his coming ordeals as captain he too will be involved in a "searching intimacy with [his] own self" (*Shadow-Line* 44). Barbara Myerhoff indicates that in some rites of passage "the neophyte stares into a looking-glass until the face of an ancestor appears and merges with his own." She explains that the "identification between the ancestor behind the glass and the living descendant in front of it literally presents a picture of genealogical continuity between the living and the dead, and allows the initiate to pass into a new state of being" (112). Although there is no shaman to reconnect him to any tribal ancestors, through self-reflection the captain realizes that, having inherited the mantle of command, he is "the latest representative" of a "dynasty" which is "continuous not in blood" but in its maritime traditions (*Shadow* 44). Accepting his new responsibilities also gives him a sense of greater maturity; he feels that he has already "left behind" his "youth" and is gradually "becoming more self-conscious" (45).

Within the sacred ground of the ship, the captain encounters two characters who function as ancestral beings. The first to appear is the trickster figure, as embodied by the chief mate, Mr. Burns. When he first meets him in the commander's cabin, Burns is an upright officer who had worked under the former

captain. But as the story progresses, he clearly becomes a symbolic threshold figure who acts as a catalyst for the transformation of the captain. Once he falls ill with the fever that infects the entire ship's crew, Burns overturns the captain's sense of reality by continually bringing up the specter of the former captain's "ghost," which, in his delusional state, he feels is intent on leading the ship to destruction. The allusion to fire in Burns's name indicates the type of initiation the captain is undergoing. One of the most common misunderstandings about primitive initiation rites is the assumption that they were performed only at puberty. Hawthorne, for instance, seems perplexed as to why the story would include implications of puberty rites when the captain is around thirty, the same age Conrad was during his command of the *Otago* (xxv). In fact, however, initiations were not reserved for adolescents. Spencer and Gillen found that, among the Arunta, male initiations were "spread out over a long period of years, the first taking place at about the age of ten or twelve years" while the final and "most impressive one," the fire ceremony, was not passed through till "the age of at least twenty-five or even thirty" ("Notes" 143). In these purification ceremonies, as Eliade points out, novices were "roasted" by an ancestral being in preparation for their rebirth (*Australian* 93). The captain's trial by fire takes the form of a deep anxiety that he is an inadequate commander; and during the voyage he feels that his ineptness will lead to the death of the crew. Yet, his fears are brought about by inexperience rather than lack of skill, a fact which Burns's continual testing of his sanity will bear out. Despite the disturbing effect of Burns, the trickster is an ambivalent creation deity. When acting beneficially, Pelton explains

that he is “a symbol of the liminal state itself and of its permanent accessibility as a source of recreative power” (35). Through his interactions with Burns, the captain will symbolically be transformed during a crucial moment of the voyage.

Closely linked to the trickster figure is the demonic ancestral being, a role played by the “ghost” of the former captain. In male initiations, the terrifying demon that was to perform the symbolic slaying of the neophytes was often a “ghost or spirit of the dead” (Frazer 242). As the young captain’s predecessor, the dead captain is literally the ancestor of his first command. Burns’s recollection of his former captain reveals that his demonic qualities derived from his mental instability and the threat it posed to the crew. The former captain’s obsessive violin playing alludes to his initiatory role. Burns tells the new captain that, as his predecessor’s mental health deteriorated, he “spent most of his time day or night playing the violin. That was when the fit took him. Very loud, too” (*Shadow* 47). Just as an ancestral being was always identified by the frightening noise of whirling bull-roarers, the dead captain is associated with the sound of his violin, which terrifies his crew as it signals his deepening descent into madness. Even more telling is a deleted dream sequence that appears in the original manuscript. The young captain, at one point exhausted from his ordeals, retreats to his cabin and dreams of the Bull of Bashan, a biblical figure from the Psalms. In the dream, he imagines himself confronting the fierce black beast across a fence, and then sees the ghost of the dead captain standing in the doorway of his cabin (*Shadow* 123). The juxtaposition of the bull and the ghost not only associates his

predecessor with the bull-roarer of primitive initiations but also suggests that he is a demonic threshold figure that the new captain must overcome through courage.

Just as the young captain's earlier depression was a sign of his attachment to the feminine world, his predecessor's mental disturbance seems to have had a similar root. Burns reveals that the old captain often left his ship "loafing at sea for inscrutable reasons" and stranded his crew in port for long periods in order to have contact with a woman on shore. Since women were considered a pollutant in the sacred ground, his association with her implies his entrapment in the feminine world. In a photograph he finds in the cabin, the young captain perceives her as a "sorceress of the slums" with whom the former captain was having an affair at the expense of his responsibilities to the ship. Symbolizing a devouring mother figure who "towered over him" in the picture, she was "an awful mature, white female with rapacious nostrils and a cheaply ill-omened stare in her enormous eyes." She is, furthermore, like the old captain, associated with a sinister musical instrument, as the "guitar or mandolin" in her hand seems to be "the secret of her sortilege" (48). Burns significantly adds that, for all his sternness and experience, his former commander was "afraid to die" (77). Unlike males in tribal societies who were taught to overcome their fear of death through initiation rites, the former captain was unprepared by his secular civilization and thus remained psychologically immature. As an ancestral demon, his ghostly presence, as evoked by Burns during the voyage, tests the new captain's sanity by presenting the terrifying image of a man who was destroyed by his attachments to the profane world.

The captain, however, is not entirely alone in his trials, as the crew takes the form of an initiatory brotherhood. Since male initiation rites were intended to strengthen tribal unity, they were never undertaken alone. A group of neophytes undergoing initiations, as Spencer and Gillen point out, would usually include all eligible young men of an extended family (*Native Tribes* 1: 180). When the captain first meets his crew, he refers to them as members of a family rather than mere hired hands. In retrospect, he is cognizant that he joined this initiatory brotherhood only after he had died to his old identity. “Having thrown off the mortal coil of shore affairs,” he recalls, “I felt myself familiar with them and yet a little strange, like a long-lost wanderer among his kin” (*Shadow* 60). Although the crew also matures during the coming voyage, the captain focuses on his own experience. As a commander, his initiation differs from theirs. Whereas the sailors are tested physically, the captain, whose task is to protect and guide his men, must maintain self-control in the face of death and avoid lapsing into madness, a point suggested by his remaining healthy while the entire crew succumbs to fever.

Ransome, the ship’s cook, is the captain’s guardian in the liminal phase. While he is “the best seaman of the ship” (56), he has a “weak heart” which prevents him from doing hard labor. Facing the “deadly enemy in his breast” (60) on a daily basis suggests that he embodies the ideal of manhood in tribal societies. His constant proximity to death, which has matured him, also allows him to remain calm throughout the crisis that strikes the ship and be ready to sacrifice himself for the safety of the crew. John Batchelor believes that he is “a Christ-like figure whose name indicates that he is a type” and suggests that the tale itself may

be a “Christian allegory” (249). Indeed, the captain continually refers to Ransome not only as “intelligent, serene” (*Shadow* 74), and “unfailing” in his duties (81), but also as exuding inner perfection: “The man positively had grace” (60).

However, the captain is clearly mixing and comparing religious customs to express a universal vision. The fact that Ransome is the ship’s cook indicates his initiatory role. Just as chief mate Baker prepares, or “cooks,” the initiate sailors in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* by guiding them through the voyage, in this case Ransome is responsible specifically for the captain’s development. In male initiations, as R. H. Mathews points out, a “brother-in-law” typically accompanied each neophyte into the sacred ground and was known as the “guardian” who supported him during the rites (*Wandarral* 32). Frequent references to his closeness to the captain imply that Ransome is his spiritual double, a role traditionally taken by the guardian in tribal initiations.

When a fever strikes down the crew and a lack of wind immobilizes their ship, one can see in this double misfortune a parallel to the liminal nonexistence of neophytes during their segregation in the bush. Throughout the tale, the captain equates the illness which the crew picks up in a Malaysian port with the swallowing beast of male initiations. Symbolically devouring the crew’s health, “the fever devil” (*Shadow* 85) behaves like a malevolent spirit testing the men’s fortitude. The captain recalls how “that disease played with us capriciously...It would go from one man to another with a lighter or heavier touch, which always left its mark behind, staggering some, knocking others over” (70). Linked to Burns, the fever’s “predestined victim” whom it turns into a ranting trickster

figure, it is “an invisible monster” that “ambushed in the air, in the water, in the mud of the river-bank.” Compounding the crisis, a “dead calm” suddenly takes the wind out of the sails in mid-voyage and strands the ship at sea. Just as initiates were temporarily considered dead to the known world while in the belly of the beast, the captain describes the dead calm as a highly unusual, and thus liminal, phenomenon that defies logic: “There was no sense in it. It fitted neither with the season of the year nor with the secular experience of seamen as recorded in books ... Only purposeful malevolence could account for it” (71). The dead calm is also associated with fire imagery. We again see an allusion to the primitive concept of cooking initiates during the rites: when the captain is on deck one night, he feels that “a great over-heated stillness enveloped the ship and seemed to hold her motionless in a flaming ambience” (67). As the heat of the climate and the fever persists, the captain also describes their suffering in biblical terms: “The last few days had been for us like the ordeal of the fiery furnace” (72). This image of the ordeal by fire from Daniel 3 further suggests that the men are undergoing a spiritual metamorphosis.

At the height of the crisis, the captain recounts how he began writing a diary of the unfolding events, an act which functions as a private version of sacred instructions in myth. With the dead calm persisting and Burns testing his sanity by continually warning him about his ghostly predecessor, the captain turns inward for psychological relief. Diary writing, in terms of male initiations, takes the place of the sacred teachings which neophytes received from shamans. Eliade explains that it is “during the period of segregation, that is to say when they are reputed to

be swallowed up into the monster's stomach or found in the Shadows of Hell, that the initiates are instructed in the religious traditions of the tribe" ("Shadows" 11). But with the absence of shamans in his secular civilization, the captain must rely on himself. He realizes in retrospect that "in conditions of moral isolation" diary writing not only provides relief but also develops a profounder self-knowledge. A passage from his diary reveals that he felt he was undergoing a metaphysical experience of the sacred. Using cosmogonic terminology, the captain writes that, in the blackness that has engulfed the ship, he is "losing the notion of time" (*Shadow* 86) as physical reality seems to be dissolving: "There is something going on in the sky like a decomposition; like a corruption of the air, which remains as still as ever." He also realizes that these ordeals have allowed him to leave behind his youthful ignorance: "fifteen days ago . . . or fifteen centuries. It seems to me that all my life before that momentous day is infinitely remote, a fading memory of light-hearted youth, something on the other side of a shadow." As for his sense of responsibility towards his crew and the self-doubt regarding his ability to save the ship, he describes the pressure in religious terms: "It's like being bound hand and foot preparatory to having one's throat cut" (87). In associating himself with a sacrificial animal, the captain suggests that his symbolic death by ancestral beings is at hand.

The captain's spiritual renewal is symbolized through water and fire imagery. Following the ritual slaying of initiates by ancestral beings, ceremonies of rebirth typically involved water and/or fire, two elements with naturally purgative qualities. According to Eliade, "the most important concluding rituals

are the fire ceremony and the washing,” as through these acts the novice “shows his spiritual transformation” (*Australian* 93). As the captain mans the helm and anxiously awaits a wind to stir the sails, his sense of impending doom in the unearthly blackness that has surrounded the ship parallels the final dissolution of the initiates before their rebirth. He remembers that it was “impossible to shake off that sense of finality,” and that the “quietness” which had come over him “was like a foretaste of annihilation” (*Shadow* 89). The sick crew who work incessantly to keep the sails ready are already symbolically dead. “Those men,” the captain recalls, “were the ghosts of themselves, and their weight on a rope could be no more than the weight of a bunch of ghosts” (90). At the same time, their suffering ennobles their characters: “The wastage of ill-health seemed to idealise the general character of the features, bringing out the unsuspected nobility of some, the strength of others” (82). Once Ransome leaves the deck after nearly sacrificing his life by helping unfurl the sails, the captain lets go of the helm and enters the darkness of the ship, which he feels “must have been the darkness before creation” (93). This cosmogonic image of dissolution in primordial chaos is followed by a sudden rainstorm. He recounts how “suddenly the darkness turned into water” as a “heavy downpour” sweeps over the ship (94). The rain acts as a baptismal washing that merges Christian and pagan concepts of purification through water. Arnold Van Gennep explains that “[b]aptism has most often been regarded as a lustration, a purging and purifying rite, i.e., a final rite of separation from the previous world” (63). The transition from darkness to water here implies

that the captain, having been submerged in the primordial chaos and maintained his composure in the face of death, is now about to resurface in a new form.

Burns, the trickster figure who embodies the purifying fire, reappears to complete the process of rebirth.²⁵ In a passage suggesting the imminent slaying of an initiate by an ancestral being, the drenched captain feels the ship is “poised on the edge of some violent issue, lurking in the dark” (*Shadow* 94). Blinded by the darkness and rain, he stumbles over what he believes to be a large animal lying on the deck, an event that symbolizes the ritual confrontation with an ancestral being. “It was something big and alive. Not a dog — more like a sheep, rather. But there were no animals in the ship. [. . .] It was an added and fantastic horror which I could not resist.” The nature of the captain’s fear at this pivotal moment is telling. He recalls that he was “awfully scared; not as a man is scared while his judgment, his reason still try to resist, but completely, boundlessly, and, as it were, innocently scared — like a little child” (95). When he realizes that he has fallen over Mr. Burns, who had staggered to the deck in a large fur coat, the bestial image reinforces the chief mate’s role as a trickster figure. As Pelton elucidates, “The trickster speaks — and embodies — a vivid and subtle religious language, through which he links animality and ritual transformation” (3). Eliade further points out that, during their ritual killing by ancestral beings, initiates “assimilate the divine essence of the initiatory animal and hence are restored to life in it” (*Birth* 23). Rebirth is also suggested by the Christian symbolism of the sheep and the child. The sheep, which alludes to Christ, the sacrificial lamb that died to his animal body and was spiritually resurrected for the love of humanity, indicates

that the captain has achieved maturity partly by his willingness to lay down his life for his crew. By describing his fear as childlike, he is providing a symbol at once of the death of his immature self and of the birth of his new identity as a mature man. The combination of primitive and Christian imagery in this climactic confrontation with Burns implies that the captain's initiatory transformation embodies the essential process of spiritual death and resurrection found in both sets of beliefs.

The beginning of the reincorporation phase of the captain's initiation is signaled by Burns's crazed laughter during the rainstorm, an act which functions as part of a separation ritual from liminality. Among the Aborigines, only "purified" novices "may safely come back to the secular world." Both "washing" and fire had the same purpose in this case: "to annihilate all traces of the sacred world" (Eliade, *Australian* 94). When the ship again stalls in a dead calm, indicating that a separation rite has not yet been performed before the ship can return to the profane world, it is Burns who provides a solution. Just as initiates typically needed courage to defeat the demonic spirit, Burns shouts at the crew that "boldness" is the only way to confront the ghost of the former captain. Calling him an "old murderous ruffian" (*Shadow* 96) and an "old dodging Devil," Burns "screamed piercingly" into the darkness around the ship and burst into "a loud laugh" that had a "screeching over-note of defiance" (98). The ritualistic laugh represents the trickster's creative energy, which is used to counteract the fear of the demonic ancestral being. As the captain steers for land with a sudden strong wind behind the ship, he reflects on how Burns had helped them. "By the

exorcising virtue of Mr. Burns' awful laugh, the malicious specter had been laid, the evil spell broken, the curse removed. We were now in the hands of a kind and energetic Providence" (103). The imagery again links primitive and Christian rites: with the "spell" removed, "Providence" protects the ship on its homeward journey.

Rather than being reincorporated into society through sacred rituals, the captain and crew are ironically greeted by doctors as they return to civilization. Having broken free from the dead calm, the ship, under a strong wind, returns to the Eastern port from which it departed. Symbolically, the ship's circular journey has taken "forty days" (104), the period of time usually associated with spiritual seclusion in Judeo-Christian tradition. Frederick J. Masback finds in *The Shadow-Line* echoes of the "night sea journey" and the biblical tale of Jonah, who was swallowed by a whale and then spiritually renewed after forty days (328). However, the captain's spiritual initiation has an ironic twist; although he has matured through the journey, there is no public acknowledgement of his success, with neither family nor women of the tribe to celebrate his rebirth. Instead, naval surgeons are deployed by harbor patrol boats to aid the fever-ravaged ship before it reaches port. Whereas shamans typically performed rites of reincorporation, these doctors belong to the secular world; when they find the exhausted and sleep-deprived captain wearing "a blue and gray striped sleeping suit" rather than a uniform, their "disgust was extreme" (*Shadow* 104). According to Eliade, sleep deprivation is one of the most common ordeals faced by initiates: "Not to sleep is not only to conquer physical fatigue, but is above all to show proof of will and spiritual strength." In the captain's case, it also marks his coming to maturity as a

commander, since “to remain awake is to be conscious, present in the world, responsible” (*Birth* 15). The captain’s “sleeping suit” equally suggests that the ship has just emerged from liminality, which among Australian tribes was perceived as the Dream Time, and also explains the reaction of the doctors. They have brought aboard medical instruments in case they need to operate, but their disappointment at facing instead a sick crew hints at a deeper problem: secular civilizations, through their emphasis on scientific progress, have no shamans equipped to deal with the spiritual problems of their people.

Just as his initiatory experience was primarily a psychological ordeal, the captain’s reincorporation into society is private rather than public. In primitive initiations, the neophytes who had survived the ordeals were commonly presented to a shaman who would teach them their new roles as adult members of the tribe. Captain Giles, whom the captain meets once more at the hotel, again takes the place of a shaman. Though the captain has gained a higher social status by maturing as a naval commander, the community to which he has returned follows no sacred traditions, and Giles can therefore offer him advice only on a private level. Having heard of his ordeals, Giles tells the captain, “a man should stand up to his bad luck, to his mistakes, to his conscience,” a principle the captain himself learned to follow during his moral isolation at the height of the crisis. The captain’s attainment of greater self-knowledge, however, has also raised his awareness of the spiritual condition of his society.

Rather than feeling united with his own people, which was the ultimate goal of tribal initiations, the captain instead feels that something is fundamentally

lacking in the very structure of his civilization. Disillusioned by life on shore, he informs Giles that he plans to leave at once on a new voyage and points out that people ashore who have not undergone trials such as his appear “just a lot of skittish youngsters that have never known a care in the world.” Giles essentially agrees with his judgment and remarks that the process of male maturation is something that “so many of them youngsters don’t understand” (*Shadow* 108). The increasingly mechanized modern world, which, at the time, was replacing sailing ships with safer steamers, was soon to lack opportunities for men to have initiatory experiences such as the captain’s. In the final scene, the departure of Ransome from life as a sailor underscores that the model of solidarity and compassion he embodies, and which was to a degree normative on sailing ships, was also vanishing. The exit of this initiatory guardian and Christ-figure and the disappearance of spiritual rituals in secular societies suggest that the moral values such models and practices sought to inculcate in future generations of men are gone.

Conclusion

Conrad perceived in tribal cultures a regenerative paradigm that was missing in his own secular civilization. From his scientific reading, he appears to have recognized that male initiation rites provided both spiritual and pragmatic benefits for an individual and his community. Redmond O'Hanlon believes that Conrad, faced with the spiritual vacuum of modern secular society, "refused to indulge himself in semi-religious hopes," and instead "turned for intellectual comfort to contemporary scientific psychology and anthropology." O'Hanlon feels that in these sources Conrad's "mind could at least rest in a sense of the human community, with its fears and desires, structured and shared and recognisable" (25). Indeed, initiation ceremonies were a combination of social and religious instruction: they not only assisted adaptation to tribal society, but also fostered spiritual belief and moral development. Spencer and Gillen revealed at the turn of the nineteenth century that such practices among Australian tribes made men less apt to quarrel, while later twentieth-century studies such as those of Victor Turner provided evidence that rites of passage inculcated ethical values in initiates. Turner found that the rites "[gave] recognition to an essential and generic human bond, without which there could be no society" (97). Ideally, the communal experience of the sacred through group participation in the ceremonies led to closer relations among all social ranks and thus strengthened tribal cohesion.

By contrast, Conrad was disgusted with the false piety of his own civilization, in which the doctrines of religious tradition were being used to legitimize covert political ideologies.²⁶ Degeneration fears of the *fin de siècle* and

the politically motivated misrepresentation of evolutionary theories were, for Conrad, signs of moral decay in Western culture. The so-called primitive peoples were dying out not as a result of their own biological inferiority, as social Darwinists argued, but rather from imperialist agendas that conveniently used scientific progress and Christian philanthropy as pretexts for exploitation. With the secularization brought about by the predominance of rational ideologies, religious belief in the late-Victorian period declined to the point that Christianity failed to provide spiritual fulfillment and strengthen social bonds. Whereas initiation rites intimately united entire tribes, families, and individuals in sacred rituals, secular societies used dispassionate laws to enforce public behaviour. Conrad was essentially critical of the secular democratic state. Zdzisław Najder explains that he blamed the system for “depersonalising and emasculating its citizens, for turning them into cogs of a huge socio-economic machinery,” and, most importantly, “for getting rid of traditional bonds and institutions, [and] for atomising the human community” (“Rousseau” 84). It was thus the degradation of traditions that upheld ethical values in favour of economic profit and scientific progress which led Conrad into seeing in tribal cultures and their sacred beliefs a model of renewal.

By applying the paradigm of male initiations in his fiction, Conrad is suggesting that in modern secular societies, art takes over the role once played by sacred traditions as a potential means of cultivating emotional bonds in society. In his “Preface to *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus,’*” Conrad expresses his belief that it is art, and not science, that has the ability to guide moral conduct. The “aim of art,”

he states, “is not in the unveiling of one of those heartless secrets which are called the Laws of Nature,” but is rather an expression of “truth” in a beautiful form (710). Since it appeals primarily to the senses, art has the power to stir the emotions into compassion: “[art can] awaken in the hearts of the beholders that feeling of unavoidable solidarity; the solidarity in mysterious origin, in toil, in joy, in hope, in uncertain fate, which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world” (708). Conrad’s aesthetic ideal parallels the moral awakening achieved through initiation rites. Because neophytes are joined in a common struggle while stripped of their social rank and identity during liminality, they can recognize that they are part of “undifferentiated humankind: all that is universal, innate, whole and unified” (Myerhoff 117). The moral function of art, then, like that of a male rite of passage, is to rouse one into a cognizance of the commonality of the human condition, or what Conrad calls “solidarity.” In his novellas, Conrad’s unnamed narrators are thus performing a regenerative act. Their attempt to redefine and revive modern man through the paradigm of male initiations in their narratives has the socially unifying power Conrad ascribed to art: it has the potential to “bind together all humanity” (*Preface* 706) by providing a revelation of “the truth of life” in “a moment of vision” (710).

Notes

¹ See chapter 1, “The Mechanism of the Universe,” in Hunter’s *Joseph Conrad and the Ethics of Darwinism* for more on the pessimistic post-Darwinian climate in which Conrad was writing.

² See Griffith’s discussion of the way Conrad’s fiction is informed by the debate between the degenerationists (social Darwinists) and progressionists (evolutionary theorists) in *Joseph Conrad and the Anthropological Dilemma*, 76-83. Griffith believes that “Conrad might have been familiar with the debate over degeneration through his reading” (80).

³ “Degeneration,” according to B. A. Morel’s use of the term in 1857, referred to “a morbid deviation from an original type.” Most social Darwinists such as the psychologist Henry Maudsley, the eugenicist Francis Galton, the New Woman Janet E. Hogarth, and the physician Max Nordau applied this conveniently vague definition of the term. See also part 3, “Mind and Body,” in Talia Shaffer’s *Literature and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*.

⁴ For more on Wallace’s attack on theorists who he claims deliberately distorted what he and Darwin had actually written, see *Darwinism: An Exposition of the Theory of Natural Selection* (London: MacMillan, 1889).

⁵ Darwin’s theories tend to imply that natural competition among men should not be obstructed by governmental laws. For Darwin and other like-minded evolutionists, European civilization was the highest form of society; and the social elite, men with wealth and power, were naturally the best suited to procreate and eradicate inferior races. See Brantlinger’s discussion of how such

ideas gave social Darwinists carte blanche to apply eugenics to tribal cultures in *Dark Vanishings*, 265-68.

⁶ Natural selection was in fact a slow process that only changed the biological structure of species under extreme circumstances and produced minor adaptive transmutations. According to Brantlinger, even Darwin himself stated as much in *Origin of Species*: “natural selection acts solely by accumulating slight, successive, favorable variations, [and] it can produce no great or sudden modification; it can act only by short and slow steps” (261). Social Darwinists conveniently sidestepped this fact; how the “inferior races” managed to survive for centuries before European contact was never officially stated.

⁷ For more on the political ideologies that underlay much of the apparently philanthropic concern over the preservation of the dying traditions of native peoples, see chapter 8, “Darwin and After,” in Brantlinger’s *Dark Vanishings*.

⁸ The expedition resulted in a four-volume book in 1896, *Report on the Work of the Horn Scientific Expedition to Central Australia* by Sir Baldwin Spencer, E. C. Stirling, and Frank J. Gillen. While the first three volumes consist of Spencer’s botanical studies of Australia, the fourth is entirely devoted to aboriginal customs by Stirling, including a lengthy and detailed account of male initiations by Gillen. See especially Gillen’s “The Rites of Circumcision and Subincision — Lartna and Arrilta” in volume 4.

⁹ See “Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen: Getting Down to Bedrock in Central Australia,” pages 87-98 in Stocking. See also Spencer’s detailed letter of 12 July 1897 to Frazer regarding the Arunta initiation rites on pages 3-11 in

Spencer's Scientific Correspondence with Sir J. G. Frazer and others (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1932).

¹⁰ See Amy Houston's "Joseph Conrad and Alfred Russel Wallace." Houston points out that, in his letter of 13 December 1898 to William Blackwood, Conrad stated that for *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands* he had referred to "undoubted sources — dull, wise books," which included Wallace's *The Malay Archipelago* (30). See also Yves Hervouet, "Why Did Conrad Borrow so Extensively?" *The Conradian* 9.2 (November 1984): 53-68. Hervouet concludes that all of Conrad's most significant works "constitute complex networks of borrowings, quotations, allusions, and echoes, and pose the problem of deciding exactly what Conrad intended his reader to identify" (67).

¹¹ Both the writer and critic Edmund Gosse and Sydney Colvin, the director of the British Museum Library, were friends of Frazer's and had worked with him on some of his projects. Colvin also had a long-standing friendship with Conrad and gave him access to all kinds of obscure articles in the museum, some of which were sources Frazer himself had used. Gosse helped Conrad with names while he was composing "Falk" in 1901 (Hampson 171-72).

¹² In a letter to his uncle, Tadeusz Bobrowski, Conrad reveals a chance meeting in 1879 with "some captain" who offered him a job. This was probably William Henry Eldred, an English seaman and geographer who later became a founding member of the Geographical Society of Australasia, a group that from 1885 onward began the publication of a scientific journal (Knowles 10). Eldred could have suggested some Australian scientific journals to Conrad.

¹³ In 1897 alone, Spencer and Gillen published “The Engwura,” “An Account of the Engwura or Fire Ceremony of Certain Central Australian Tribes,” and “Notes on Certain Initiation Rites of the Arunta Tribe.”

¹⁴ One can only speculate about what they discussed, but the fact that Malinowski, a disciple of Frazer’s, had given him a book on the Aborigines suggests that they probably touched on male initiation rites, and that some of the information Conrad had gleaned from Malinowski found its way into *The Shadow-Line*. Malinowski was ahead of his time in perceiving initiations as complex and creative religious ceremonies. Mircea Eliade’s religious interpretation of tribal initiations strongly echoes Malinowski’s data. A longtime admirer of Conrad’s even before they met, Malinowski made several references to him in his field diaries. See *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (London: Routledge-Keegan Paul, 1967), 16, 46, 53-54, 99.

¹⁵ For all his admiration of Crane’s *Red Badge*, Conrad finally had his reservations about what Crane had accomplished. As Rude points out, in a letter to Cunninghame-Graham, he wrote of Crane, “The man sees the outside of many things and the inside of some” (188). When Jim Conklin is dying in a forest clearing, for instance, Crane uses striking religious imagery as Henry Fleming and another soldier witness the horror of his death throes: “They began to have thoughts of a solemn ceremony. There was something rite-like in these movements of the doomed soldier. And there was a resemblance in him to a devotee of a mad religion, blood-sucking, muscle-wrenching, bone-crushing. They were awed and afraid” (Crane 296). While such passages may have

triggered Conrad's imagination, he must also have been aware that Crane did not develop these ideas, as such ritual imagery is confined to isolated scenes.

¹⁶ See also *The Ritual Process*, 96-98. Turner explains that *communitas*, or shared struggle in liminality, is a humbling experience that "tempers the pride" of the neophyte, and in this way shapes moral behaviour.

¹⁷ Interestingly, Conrad describes his first meeting with Crane at a London restaurant in 1898 with initiatory imagery. Conrad writes that "S. S. Pawling presided at the initiatory feast" and was "a much bigger man than either of us and possessed of a deep voice, looked like a grown-up person entertaining two strange and small boys" (*Last Essays* 322).

¹⁸ See in particular Eliade's description of the "Rainbow Serpent" (from the aboriginal word, *Ungud*, meaning "belonging to the water"). *Ungud* was the main "Supernatural Being" the Aborigines evoked during initiation rites in order to keep the world vitalized (*Australian* 76-79). Conrad must have known something of the Rainbow Serpent and used it as a contrastive image. When Marlow is in the head office in Belgium, he notices a map of subjugated Africa which has "all the colours of the rainbow" and the serpentine Congo River "dead in the center" (*Heart* 9). The image suggests that the principal force that dominates the world now is no longer a sacred rejuvenating being but rival secular governments that carve up and devastate the earth out of greed.

¹⁹ It must be noted that Conrad believed he failed in his portrayal of Kurtz. In a letter to Elsie Hueffer, he states, "What I distinctly admit is the fault of having made Kurtz too symbolic, or rather symbolic at all" (Karl and Davies 3:

211). Indeed, much of the imagery associated with Kurtz, such as shadows, darkness, death, and madness, triggers negative emotions in Western readers. Significantly, the very same imagery is considered positive in tribal cultures such as those under discussion, which see darkness and violence as aspects of sacred traditions. Rather unfairly, critics tend to read Kurtz as an insane tyrant, but on closer inspection he is an idealistic victim of the ideology of progress. All we known about Kurtz is what others say about him: Marlow's Eurocentric views and the deliberate depiction of him as a madman by the ivory company officials make Kurtz appear evil. In fact, the manager and the pilgrims are the representatives of imperial brutality; however, in response to the banality of their characters, critics tend to minimize their evil behavior and vilify the more flamboyant Kurtz. See Patrick Brantlinger's *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1988), 268-72. Brantlinger takes issue with Lionel Trilling, who sees Kurtz as a "hero of the spirit" for venturing out of his own culture and discovering dark truths about human nature. Brantlinger, whose view is representative of the vast majority of critical interpretations of Kurtz, is appalled that anyone can argue that Kurtz is anything but "an abomination, a hollow man, with a lust for blood and domination" (268).

²⁰ Conrad seems be contrasting Kurtz with a tribal shaman as he shares many qualities with such a spiritual and cultural leader. Gillen remarks that "the medicine men . . . are doubtless men of considerable imaginative powers, and their influence over their patients is very often remarkable" (180). When a shaman undergoes his initiation, he is considered to have died and been resurrected after

an ordeal in the wilderness in which an ancestral spirit “removes, with the aid of his invisible *atnongara*, the viscera of the dead man and furnishes him with a completely new set of internal organs.” When he is brought out of the cave, Gillen explains, “he comes to life again, but in a condition of insanity” (181). Similarly, Kurtz is a highly gifted man who is often referred to as “hollow” and mad from his struggle with the monstrous African jungle. See pages 180-81, “Making of Medicine-Men,” in *Report on the Horn Expedition*, and Eliade’s “The Medicine Men and Their Supernatural Models” in *Australian Religions*, 128-54.

²¹ See also Eliade’s *Australian Religions*, 175-76: “In all corroborees, [the initiate] is now to take a principal part; he may take unto himself a wife, and in all probability one, perhaps two, have already been assigned to him. . . . Until the rites of *lartna* and *arrilia* are performed a native is not allowed to have a wife.”

²² According to Jerome Buckley, even if a story “splendidly develops some of the characteristic themes” of a *Bildungsroman*, such as Conrad’s *Lord Jim*, it essentially belongs to “other categories of the novel” (18). Buckley sees Conrad’s “Youth” as a *Bildungsroman*, but he entirely ignores *The Shadow-Line*. See *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1974).

²³ Throughout Conrad’s writing, steamships, as opposed to sailing vessels, are antithetical to manly endeavors and epitomize mechanization and progress. In *The Shadow-Line*, the steamer is a symbol of the degeneration of manhood in modern societies as it saps the life-urge of sailors like the narrator. For more of his views on sail versus steam, see “Nursery of the Craft” in *Mirror of the Sea*.

²⁴ According to the OED, “nice” derives from the Latin word, *nescire*, meaning “not to know,” and is synonymous with “ignorant.” This root definition squares with the male initiation motif. The ignorance of men like Hamilton was to be replaced by maturity and wisdom through the rites.

²⁵ Regarding the trickster/fire relationship, Hans Biedermann states: “In general, because of the ambiguous nature of fire, the gods and other supernatural beings associated with the element . . . are essentially ‘tricksters’” (130).

²⁶ Despite losing faith in the Roman Catholicism of his devout family in Poland, Conrad was not against the moral value of spiritual traditions. In “Conrad’s Catholicism” in *Conradiana* 15.2 (1983): 111-26, William Burgess finds that whereas Conrad “largely rejected the dogma and the rituals of his Church,” he did not entirely abandon the “faith of his fathers” (118). John Lester convincingly argues that Conrad transposed his religious instinct onto his “two vocations” (3), sailing and writing, both of which he often describes in religious terms. For Conrad, the sea is “a hallowed ground,” and sailors and explorers were men “bearing in [their] breast[s] a spark of the sacred fire” (*Last Essays* 240); of fiction he writes: “a man who puts forth the secret of his imagination to the world accomplishes, as it were, a religious rite” (Aubry 2: 89). Conrad’s ironic portrayal of religious characters throughout his fiction reflects his anger towards those who professed a belief but acted immorally: “[T]he most galling feature [of Christianity] is that nobody – not a single Bishop of them – believes in it” (Knowles and Davies 2: 468-69).

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