

## Racism and *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*

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*The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1897) foreshadows, even suggests prescience of, present-day social concerns—racism, the unionization of labor, socialism/capitalism, whereas the other major sea tales such as *Typhoon*, "The Secret Sharer" and *The Shadow-Line* are more at a remove in their impact on the contemporary reader, given that these have more to do with the Merchant Service as such. It is true that *Typhoon* brings in the coolie trade, but it is an episode of the distant imperial past, more remote to people in the developed rather than the developing countries. *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* also enjoys priority because it is, in the words of Henry James, "the very finest and strongest fiction of the sea and sea-life that our language possesses—the masterpiece in a whole class" (Stape and Knowles 367), a view which is not merely "typical of the affection in which the novel is held" (Knowles and Moore 278) but is a reflection of its remarkable impact on the reader. In an interview in 1931, William Faulkner stated: "The two books I like best are *Moby Dick* and *The Nigger of the Narcissus*" (Qtd. Stape 227–28). The continuing relevance and topicality of *The Nigger* were curiously confirmed in 2009 when Reuben Alvarado, owner of WordBridge Publishing in the Netherlands issued *The N-word of the "Narcissus,"* replacing the offensive term "nigger" with "n-word" in Conrad's tale, the first of the publisher's Classic Texts series "featuring texts with a message for moderns, made accessible to moderns." This edition sidesteps the issue of race, important historically and culturally, and particularly today as a crucial cause of conflicts within and between nations.<sup>1</sup>

The opening scene of the tale is arresting, and it sets the stage. Members of the cast—Baker, Belfast, Wamibo the Russian Finn, the two Norwegians, Singleton—are shown, while the Captain, off-stage, is referred to—almost a kind of portrait gallery. The importance of the Merchant Service to the thematics is clear from the outset; in a letter to Arthur Quiller-Couch of 23 December 1897,