 Coffee, Biscuits and Fruit Pies: Hierarchies of Food in Joseph Conrad’s *The Nigger of the* “*Narcissus*”: *A Tale of the Forecastle*.

In a letter to Henry James on 30th November 1897, Joseph Conrad, referring to his recently completed novel, *The Nigger of the* “*Narcissus*”*,* wrote:

Dear Master

You gave me permission to send you my book. Here it is. It has the virtue of being brief. It has been lived. It is probably bad. Nothing so easy as recounting a dream, but it is impossible to penetrate the soul of those who listen with the intensité of its bitterness and its sweetness. (*CL1* 1986: 414 & Corrigenda *CL*2 1986: 473)

The reference to the “bitterness” and “sweetness” of Conrad’s *A Tale of the Forecastle[[1]](#endnote-1)* complements the artistic credo of his craft, set out in the famous “Preface” to the novel: “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see” (1946: 4). Critics have recognised Conrad’s appeal to the higher senses of his readers, asking them to ‘listen’ rather than read. But if considered within the context of Conrad’s letter to James, *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* becomes a story about the isolation and solidarity of the sea as a “microcosm of the earth” (Guerard 1957: 225) experienced through the prism of the lower sense of taste – its sweetness and bitterness – brought to vivid life by the references to food and eating. Meals and manners reinforce and pass judgement on these central themes creating a framework and a narrative unconscious. My intention then in this paper is to bring to the fore the appetites on board the *Narcissus* which represent the fine balance between harmony and transgression amongst the crew.

Jόzef Teodore Konrad Korzeniowski was born on 3rd December 1857 in Berdichev, Ukraine (part of the Russian Empire). *The Nigger of the* “*Narcissus*” is Conrad’s third publication and is critically recognised as the defining moment in establishing him as an author. Henry James wrote of the novel:

*The Nigger of the* “*Narcissus*” is in my opinion the very finest & strongest picture of the sea and sea-life that our language possesses – the masterpiece in a whole class. (*Portrait in Letters* 1996: 36)

Conrad claimed of the novel: “It comes from experience – and it’s stupid”, adding “[t]here are twenty years of life, six months of scribbling in that book – and not a shadow of a story” (*CL*1: 418). Drawing on his career as a sailor in the French and then British Merchant Navy, Conrad was more than familiar with life aboard a sailing ship, joining the real *Narcissus* as second mate in 1884 on its return journey to London from Bombay. Food in the French Merchant Navy was considered superior to that of its English counterpart and Conrad had his first experience of British naval food when he took up his position on the *Duke of Sutherland* in 1878 travelling from London to Sydney, tasting – possibly for the first time – hard tack, a type of unleavened biscuit made from flour and water, that plays such an important role in Conrad’s tale of the sea.

*The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* revolves around James Wait, a Caribbean sailor from St Kitts who upon boarding the *Narcissus* in Bombay, takes up residence in the forecastle and announces he is dying. The presence of both him and the disreputable Donkin (whose intention to “wallow, and lie and eat – and curse the food he ate” is usurped by Wait) (1946:12) – upsets the fine balance of the ship’s routine. In a letter to a “reviewer” of 9th December 1897 (later identified as the critic and editor W L Courtney), Conrad wrote of Donkin: “Donkin is an unhappy man. He is the only one of the crowd who is essentially unhappy”; whilst of Wait he wrote: “Jimmy pays with anguish for his want of courage but, till the last moment, is not unhappy” (*CL*1 1983: 421).

Donkin arrives on board wearing rags and looking as if “he had been scratched, spat upon, pelted with unmentionable filth” (1946: 11). His humanity is further put into question by his eating mannerisms:

Amongst the shadows of stanchions and bowsprit, Donkin munched a piece of hard ship’s bread, sitting on the deck with upturned feet and restless eyes; he held the biscuit up before his mouth in the whole fist and snapped his jaws at it with a raging face. (1946: 20)

The animalistic overtones reinforce the defensiveness of a man isolated from the moral codes of common human friendship and set the precedent for the rage and resentment that will manifest itself throughout the story. Donkin – “a startling visitor from a world of nightmares” (12) – represents the depths to which men will fall if they lose sight of their humanity. He stands as a reminder that if the crew do not uphold the “sentimental pity” they show for both him and Wait, they will descend to the level of beasts.

Within Donkin is a pent-up anger that threatens to disturb the solidarity of the ship. After finishing his food, he asks “in a contained voice”: “Where’s our water-cask?” This containment increases the sense of pressure that builds in Donkin before the final explosive act near the end of the story and reveals a deeply ingrained resentment. When Donkin moans to Wait, “There’s a blooming supper for a man”, the use of the term “man” sharply contrasts with the feral way in which he has eaten his food. But the conspiratorial whisper – “he whispered bitterly” – also sets food up as a site of contention in this story and captures the “bitterness” of Donkin’s life as expressed in Conrad’s letter to James.

The ship’s biscuit is positioned throughout the story as the lowest form of food and reflects Donkin’s lowly status, not least in the possibly unintentional narrative resemblance between the hard, crumbly texture of the biscuit and the description of Donkin, “caked with mud” as if his outer shell could break apart upon impact (11). It is meat that takes its place at the top of the gustatory ladder and it is meat that Donkin considers to be food suitable for men but there’s “Not a blooming scrap of meat in the kids. I’ve looked in all the lockers” (20). He has, in other words, gone through the “big ship”s fo’c’sle”, where the crew live in the hope that he will find food to steal. However, Donkin acts with the expectation that other members of the crew have also stolen and horded food, a supposition that all men are untrustworthy.[[2]](#endnote-2)

This supposition isolates Donkin from his fellow-crew members forcing him to gravitate towards the only other person on board who he believes to be of a lower status than him: James Wait, the “Nigger” of the title. Donkin, however, is further humiliated when, asking for “a bit of ’baccy”, Wait chastises the other man for his familiarity, “‘Don’t be familiar,’ said the nigger ... ‘We haven’t kept pigs together’” (21). The phrase, originally a French one establishes the relationship between food and community, with the phrase “keeping pigs” employed as a metaphor for a common bond. This metaphor is extended when the reader learns there are pigs on board the *Narcissus*: “Pigs grunted in the big pigstye”. Although the pigs are there for food, they also offer companionship, not least for the ships hand, Craik, who is affectionately called “Belfast”, insinuating an easy familiarity with the rest of the crew. He is seen “commune[ing]” with “the pigs” “through the silence of his meditation”. While Belfast “scratches the ear of his favourite pig”, a scene of common solidarity between the sailors is evoked as they discuss “the characteristics of a gentleman” (28). This friendly group of animals and men excludes Donkin, further isolating him from the bonds that tie humanity. There is a deeper irony in that the man who delivers the metaphor of communality – Wait – is also the man to then quickly dispel it as the “weak rattle” of his cough is “heard through the forecastle door” and the mood abruptly changes with the presence of “a subtle and dismal influence” (29). Wait’s illness – the authenticity of which haunts the minds of the men – not only disrupts the equilibrium of the ship, but undermines Donkin’s status as the object of “sentimental pity” (13).

Donkin’s characteristic moaning about the food is representative of the stereotype recognised by the crew: “They all knew him! He was the man that cannot steer, that cannot splice, that dodges work on dark nights … The sympathetic and deserving creature that knows all about his rights, but knows nothing … of the unspoken loyalty that knits together a ship’s company” (12). Donkin’s verbacious moaning is contrasted in the narrative against men such as Singleton – “tattooed like a cannibal chief” – and “a lonely relic of a devoured and forgotten generation” (9). This is a man who has “stood, still strong” despite his 45 years at sea, “as ever unthinking; a ready man with a vast empty past and with no future” (22). Singleton’s silent steadfastness conceals a gruesome unmentionable fact of the sea – that of cannibalism. Donkin’s complaining about the food on board insults the hardship of men who have been forced in times of desperate hunger to eat their fellow shipmates. However, the “unthinking” nature of Singleton also suggests that he comes from a generation of men who were forced to ignore the morality of their actions. These were men who “had been strong, as those are strong who know neither doubts nor hopes” (22). The narrative then brings in to the discussion, the “Well-meaning people [who] had tried to represent those men as whining over every mouthful of their food; as going about their work in fear of their lives” (22). This nostalgic view of sailors who do not complain over the nature of their food is romantic to say the least. Sailors suffered from all manner of ailments due to lack of proper nutrients and in the nineteenth century this hardship was addressed through the introduction of the “Pound and the Pint”. This provision included salted beef or pork, hard tack as well as peas, rice, oatmeal and flour and then later tinned meat. However, although these foods were not unhealthy, the way in which they were cooked – usually by boiling – meant they lost most of their nutritional benefits. Fresh fruit and vegetables were missing entirely from the menu and scurvy caused by a lack of vitamin C was rife. It wasn’t until 1844 that lime juice was made compulsory on all merchant ships, although as Neill Atkinson in *Crew Culture* points out lime juice was infinitely inferior to lemon juice in its anti-scorbutic value (2001:35).

Atkinson, in his examination of ships’ food rations in the nineteenth century, states that “the provisioning of a ship and the allocation of food and drink at sea were traditionally up to the master” and the sailors had little negotiating power (33). In the mid-nineteenth century legislation was brought in that made it compulsory for the master to agree food provisions with his crew before they signed on. In practice this was difficult to enforce and although it was stipulated that more than three complaints about the fare would warrant action on the part of the master, the reality was very different.  It wasn’t until the 1850s that the “Board of Trade Scale” (The Pound and the Pint) became universally accepted. This legislation put an end to the myth of “Men hard to manage, but easy to inspire; voiceless men – but men enough to scorn in their hearts the sentimental voices that bewailed the hardness of their fate”. Donkin and Wait become symbolic of the new generation of sailors who have “learned how to whine” (1946: 22) with Jimmy Wait’s terrible declaration that he is dying bringing added gravitas to the image of the moaning sailor.

Jimmy’s illness draws the attention away from Donkin, and is expressed and magnified during mealtimes: the men ate their “meals in silence and dread, for Jimmy was capricious with his food, and railed bitterly at the salt meat, at the biscuits, at the tea, as at articles unfit for human consumption – ‘let alone for a dying man!’” (31); while the spectre of death “this ever-expectant visitor of Jimmy’s” “sat by his side at every meal” (31). Wait’s capriciousness towards his food lends uncertainty, whimsy and impulsiveness to an environment in which routine, steadfastness and certainty underpins the equilibrium of the ship; and in his bitterness Jimmy sucks the enjoyment out of the focal point of every day on board ship: mealtime. In every way, he is like an unpredictable and antagonistic Hamlet. Poison – mostly in the form of verbal vitriol from Donkin – pervades the atmosphere, questioning the authenticity of Wait’s illness. The narrator goes so far as to admit that “we served him in his bed with rage and humility, as though we had been the base courtiers of a hated prince” (31). As a “small planet” (25), the “Narcissus” becomes Wait’s corrupted kingdom.

Wait’s capriciousness pushes Belfast to steal from the galley “the officers” Sunday fruit pie” to “tempt the fastidious appetite of Jimmy”. In doing so he “endangered not only his long friendship with the cook but also – as it appeared – his eternal welfare” (31). Podmore the cook – a position commonly referred to as “Doctor” on board ship – reinforces the inference that this stealing is a “bad symptom” of a more widespread illness. Wait’s physical illness has contaminated the crew with a psychological malady that threatens the certitude of the ship; but more worryingly, with a moral sickness – a fragile state measured by the availability of food. Wait’s incessant whining about the victuals has resulted in experienced sailors behaving out of character. Jimmy is never seen eating the pie, but the theft destroys the “mutual confidence” of the relationship between the men and the officers: “Such stealing in a merchant ship is difficult to check, and may be taken as a declaration by men of their dislike for their officers”. This immoral act sees the captain develop “cold eyes”; and Mr Baker, chief mate, “ceased to heap jocular abuse upon his favourites” (32).

The atmosphere is further poisoned by the “desire of virtue and the fear of ridicule” between which the men oscillate. If Jimmy is faking illness then the crew’s sympathy makes them look like fools. However, if they show no sympathy and his illness is real, they betray “the solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts … which binds men to each other” (4); the “respectable bond of a sentimental lie” (115). The uncertainty is made worse by Donkin’s “undreamt-of subtleties” that are “blown with his impure breath” into the “hearts” of the crew (34). His cunning is further expressed as he “grinned venomously” reinforcing images of corruption. As the men commune around their “tin dishes” at mealtime, the reticent Singleton is charged with dispelling the foulness of the “particularly disgusting” words that come out of Jimmy’s mouth (34). Although the “disgusting” nature of Wait’s words are never revealed, the disruption of a sacrosanct meal pushes Singleton into asking the question that nobody else dare: “Are you dying?”. As his words resound among the men – “a dropped tin fork rattled in a dish” – Jimmy “pulls himself together” and replies “Can’t you see I am?” (34). Even Singleton is reduced to “venerable mildness” by Jimmy’s declaration, represented by the act of lifting “a piece of soaked biscuit (‘his teeth’ – he declared – ‘had no edge on them now’) to his lips” and the conversation is declared over as “the dinner-tins were put away quickly” (35). But Singleton’s assertion to the men that Jimmy “will die” is quickly undermined by Donkin’s reminder that all men will die one day. The men are plunged once more into incertitude distrusting their own probably “misplaced” compassion: “All our certitudes were going … the cook had given us up for lost” as they all begin to identify as “a crowd of softies” (35). Meanwhile Jimmy is “cajoled, lectured” by the captain who ends up giving him a “pot of jam” (36). He is served coffee; he throws “sago and cornflour overboard” and demands “paregoric” (opium). Eventually he is moved to the deck house next to the galley where the cook can keep an eye on him. But the crew are “tainted” by his existence: “He would never let doubt die” (38).

The uncertainty bred by Wait’s illness results in a general lack of self-esteem among the men. But as the ship hits a storm the crew begin to pull together against another common enemy – the sea: “water more salt and bitter than human tears” (41). In the struggle, the *Narcissus* seems to “lose heart” while the sea tries to drown the cook “in front of my own stove!” as it “smashe[s] one of the galley doors” (41), thus positioning food at the centre of the ship and the point upon which the men and natural forces oscillate. Albert Guerard sees the crisis as a moment of “true solidarity” which is “created by the exigencies of the storm” (1957: 211) and when the ship is blown over and the men are left hanging on for their lives – some partly in and partly out of the “insatiable sea” (116) – Donkin attempts – through a food-related narrative – to undermine that fellowship: “We ‘ave been starved in this rotten ship, an’ now we’re going to be drowned for them black-‘earted bullies!” (58). But his attempt to breed discontent through reminders about the poor quality of the diet is countered by fantasies of good food:

Two elderly hard-weather shellbacks, fast side by side, whispered dismally to one another about the landlady of a boarding-house in Sunderland, whom they both knew. They extolled her motherliness and her liberality; they tried to talk about the joint of beef and the big fire in the downstairs kitchen. The words dying faintly on their lips, ended in light sighs. (59)

Food is comfort, security and warmth and fantasising about it wards off the hunger that stalks the decks of the near-sinking ship personified in the shape of Mr Baker who crawling “on all fours [he] resembled some carnivorous animal prowling amongst the corpses” (60). Donkin’s accusations against the officers, paints a ferocious picture of Mr Baker as a fierce animal or a cannibalistic creature, while the other enemy, the sea, emits an atrocious food-like quality as “[t]he waves foamed viciously, and the lee side of the deck disappeared under a hissing whiteness as of boiling milk” (60).

Despite the aspect of Mr Baker as a “carnivorous animal”, his purpose is honourable: to get some water for the men to drink. But it is Podmore, the cook, attempting to save the “wicked” crew from the fires of hell – “they will be warm enough before long” – who declares, “As long as she swims I will cook” and against the odds heads for the galley to make coffee (62). When it arrives in a pot, “they drank in turns” while Donkin “scrambled viciously, caring not where he kicked”. The coffee seemed “incredible”, it was “meeraculous” and “For many days we wondered, and it was the one ever-interesting subject of conversation to the end of the voyage. We asked the cook, in fine weather, how he felt when he saw his stove ‘reared up on end’” (63). The coffee has three purposes in this sequence: first it negates Donkin’s attempts to use food as a way of creating a unified sense of dissatisfaction; secondly, it secures food as a metaphor for the “determination to persevere and to succeed” through the words, “As long as she swims I will cook!”; and thirdly, it marks the end of this uncertain part of the story. The reader knows that the men live to see “fine weather” and talk about the miracle of the coffee to the “end of the voyage”. In other words, food restores certainty where previously only incertitude reigned.

After the coffee has sustained the men and given them strength to “wear ship”, the perspective of the narrative shifts. Mr Baker, who had previously crawled on all fours like a “carnivorous creature” now “pushed ahead, grunting, on all fours to show the way” (65). The threatening attitude is replaced with one of leadership. To show the crucial role that food – and the sense of taste – has played in this shift, the narrator states very clearly that the men, now “reprieved” from the “disdainful mercy” of the sea, “are not permitted to meditate at ease upon the complicated and acrid savour of existence, lest they should remember, and, perchance, regret the reward of a cup of inspiring bitterness, tasted so often, and so often withdrawn from before their stiffening but reluctant lips” (2007: 71).[[3]](#endnote-3) Guerard questions what is meant by the “cup of inspiring bitterness”, suggesting the “double-talk” could represent “life itself” (1957: 222-223). But within the context of the story, I would argue that the narrator uses the metaphor of food to describe the appreciation of life that one enjoys after a near-death experience. When the narrator laments the new generation of sailors who have “learnt how to whine” at the beginning of the story he is not only using food as the subject of their discontent but also using it as a metaphor to describe their discontent with life. But the flavour of life is different after a close shave with death. While the men clear out the forecastle, wringing out wet clothes and examining damaged property, they “crunched hard bread, arranging to ‘worry through somehow’”. They call each other “old man” and “sonny” in “cheery voices”. Food is no longer a site of contention but a shared privilege in a new life that has “start[ed] afresh as though we had died and had been resuscitated” (75).

Ironically, despite the outpouring by the narrator about the rebirth of the men, it is not long before the sailors “conveniently” forget their “horrible scare” (75) and Donkin begins to poison the minds of the crew again. Knowles calls into question the difference in the food that the crew and the mates are given to eat: “Could we all have the same grub as the mates? Could we all stop ashore till we got it? What would be the next thing to try for if we got that?” (76). This ideological image of “a wealthy and well-fed crew of satisfied skippers” (77) mocks the suggestion of any form of equality on board ship and reintroduces food as a site of contention.

Significantly, it is Podmore who extracts the truth from Wait. In contrast to the “inspiring bitterness” of the hot coffee, the cook draws Jimmy out of his malaise with a pot of cold tea sweetened with “some white cabin sugar” (84); the sweetness contrasts with the bitterness of the coffee, while the coldness relieves the hotness of the cabin (85); the fiery images of steam engines and the “galley fire” serve as metaphors for the fires of hell that Podmore fears for the crew: “Well, well. They will have a hot time of it. Hot! Did I say? The furnaces of one of the White Star boats[[4]](#endnote-4) ain’t nothing to it” (85). Podmore attempts to save Wait’s soul, scaring him with the reminder of his looming death, working himself up into an ecstasy of salvation until in contrast to the bitterness of life we are presented with the sweetness of death: “There were sweet scents, a smell of sulphur – red tongues of flame licking a white mist” (86). Podmore’s evangelical exaltation – “Don’t you see the everlasting fire … Jimmy let me save you!” – is ministered with yet more metaphors of cooking and burning with the cabin becoming “as hot as an oven” (87) corresponding with insinuations of Wait’s cooked up story and his inevitable fall into hell if he does not repent.

Podmore’s religious zealotry adds to the heat of the tension on board, with Mr Baker commenting on the growing disquiet amongst the men: “They’ve been simmering for the last month!” (90). As metaphor gives way to harsh reality, the reader’s attention is turned to physical rather than spiritual concerns as it is revealed that “the stores have been spoiled off the Cape” during the storm and when the headwinds die down, and the ship finds itself becalmed, violence erupts with Donkin throwing the belaying-pin, an act that isolates him entirely from the other men. Captain Allistoun asks the crew to explain their rebellious conduct, but they do not know what it is they are complaining about: “What is it – food?”, asks the captain (99). But if it is the food then the men are either reluctant to say so or do not know. Instead whining about rations has become symbolic of something inexpressible: a general feeling of disquiet which the men cannot articulate. Finally, Singleton, the reticent old seaman expresses the concern that all on board subconsciously feel announcing that Jimmy is “the cause of the headwinds” that prevent the ship from sailing close to land. “Mortally sick men – he maintained – linger till the first sight of land, and then die” (105). The men are on shortened rations, “half allowance of biscuit. Peas, sugar and tea had been finished long ago. Salt meat was giving out. We had plenty of coffee but very little water to make it with” (105). The men “took up another hole” in their belts as they go about their daily tasks, “hunger lived on board ... Not dead starvation, but steady, living hunger that stalked about the decks, slept in the forecastle; the tormenter of waking moments, the disturber of dreams” (105). Again, uncertainty, magnified by hunger, oscillates the men between an “unshaken fidelity” to Jimmy and the belief in Singleton’s words that Jimmy must die before they are freed from the becalmed sea.

As the men grow thinner due to lack of food, Donkin only “appeared thinner, as if consumed slowly by an inward rage at the injustice of men and fate” (106). Podmore and Donkin strike up an unlikely alliance strengthened by their distrust of their shipmates. Podmore cooks “remorsefully” believing that by providing sustenance for the “sinners” on board he will jeopardise his own eternal soul. Food preparation comes to hold a religious significance for Podmore whose righteous indignation subverts his judgement of the crew as his sympathies turn to Donkin as the “calumniated and persecuted person” (106). Food takes on a further moral dimension because its lack tests the men’s physical and psychological ability to overcome hunger offset by fantasising about what they will do when they get home. Remarkably Knowles declares “he could already smell home from there” as if home equals food. Others such as the “grizzled sea dogs” talk of their first night on land. Their thoughts turn to “steak and onions for supper ... and a pint of bitter” or “Ham an’ eggs three times a day” (108): the sweetness of life becomes a simple matter of regular meals.

With land in sight, Donkin considers his poverty-stricken position. Away from the ship he will no longer be fed and clothed. His mind turns to the money that must be in Wait’s chest: “instantly, his craving, hungry face from sallow became livid” (108). It is not physical hunger that pushes Donkin to complete moral dissolution but a psychological loss of dignity. Visiting Wait in his cabin, Donkin is irritated by Wait’s reference to when he gets home, “Time we did get home ... to get something decent to eat ... I am always hungry” (109). Wait repeats the script of a sailor looking forward to land as an attempt to ignore the knowledge that he will never eat a decent meal again. Donkin, too self-obsessed to understand this hisses, “I am ‘ungry too an’ got ter work. You, ‘ungry!” (109). Wait offers Donkin “a couple of biscuits in the lower bunk” as he “can’t eat them” despite his complaint that he is always hungry. Donkin dives in and comes up “his mouth was full. He munched with ardour”. Meanwhile Wait reminisces about a “Canton Street girl” who “Cooks oysters just as I like” (110). Unlike the other sailors Jimmy’s “reminiscences” are “mistook joyfully for images of an undoubted future”. He hungers for life but knows he will never eat those oysters and in this knowledge enjoys a paradoxical certitude that others cannot. In contrast, Donkin’s hunger, although physically manifested through his greed, is a deeper gnawing pain that cannot be satisfied by biscuits. In a futile and desperate attempt to assert his importance and superiority to Wait, he “plunged into the lower bunk, rooted in there and brought to light another dusty biscuit. He held it up before Jimmy – then took a bite defiantly” (111). Challenging Wait to stop him, he continues to swallow “another dry mouthful”. The scene not only serves as the moment that Donkin steals Wait’s money – the ship’s biscuit finally has worth – but reveals the bitterness, inferiority and resentment of the fact that Wait, a “nigger” has received all the attention, trust and care that Donkin longs for: “I’ve been treated worser’n a dorg by your blooming back-lickers ... They giv’ yer their grub, their water – yer will pay fur hit to me, by Gawd! Who haxed me ter ‘ave a drink of water?” (112). And then to convey the explosive nature that food plays on board in terms of hierarchy, equilibrium, fantasy, revenge and uncertainty, Donkin “flung at Jimmy’s head the biscuit he had been all the time clutching hard, but it only grazed, and striking with a loud crack the bulk head beyond burst like a hand-grenade into flying pieces. James Wait, as if wounded mortally, fell back on the pillow” (112).

Historically critics have considered *The Nigger of the*“*Narcissus*” as a social commentary on solidarity, isolation, anarchy and rebellion. In light of this criticism, the biscuit, as a symbol of inequality and poverty, becomes the anarchist bomb while its target – Wait’s body – becomes the object that fed the incertitude of a hungry crew fighting their own battle against an “insatiable sea” (116). But on land, hunger turns to thirst: “To the Black Horse! To the Black Horse! … Let’s have a drink together” (125). At sea food becomes a raison d’être within an environment where life is hard and fruit pies establish hierarchy. But food also exposes the “sentimental lie” which upholds the “effective and respectable bond” of the crew. *The Nigger of the “Narcissus*” is a story about the hunger for certitude in an uncertain and insatiable mercantile world.

1. The original sub-title ‘A Tale of the Forecast’ was subsequently changed to ‘A Tale of the Sea’ (N of N 2007: 420). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The theft of food on board a merchant navy ship was a serious crime which could prove fatal. Hunger and thirst drove many stranded sailors to cannibalism, a problem rife in the nineteenth century (see Simpson, A. W. Brian, 1986. *Cannibalism and the Common Law*. Middlesex: Penguin). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In the 1946 Dent edition, the sentence reads: “lest they should remember and, perchance, regret the reward of a cup of inspiring bitterness, tasted so often, and so often withdrawn from before their stiffening but reluctant lips” (N of N 2007: 71). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. “Passenger steam ships of the White Star Line, which plied between Liverpool and New York” (N of N 2007: 426, n.20).

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