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Tania Zulli*

“Undesirable Immigrants”: The Language of Law and Literature in Joseph Conrad’s “Amy Foster”

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Abstract: Over the last few decades, the field of law and literature studies has increasingly focused on the importance of literary texts in the interpretation of legal doctrines developing wider perspectives on society and on the law’s effect on the community itself. By considering the dynamic relationship between narrative works and legal documents, the present analysis proposes a reading of Joseph Conrad’s short story “Amy Foster” (1901) which focusses on the investigation of the social and political aspects of migration in late nineteenth-century Britain. Echoes of the migrant figure as represented in Conrad’s story can be found in the Aliens Act, the law passed by the British government in 1905 to regulate the flux of migrants from Eastern Europe. Taking into account the legal value of the Aliens Act and the social consequences of its application, the article will first examine general views on migration at the beginning of the twentieth century, and will later explore the language used in the statute and its relevance in the short story. To this end, the notion of “undesirable immigrant,” first introduced to describe migrants with well-defined characteristics, is anticipated by Joseph Conrad in “Amy Foster” whose protagonist, Yanko Goorall, is an emigrant from Eastern Europe. Conrad’s fictional representation of Goorall as an “undesirable immigrant” allows us to reflect on how his writing deals with (and anticipates) events and socio-cultural trends.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, Aliens Act, law and literature, legal and literary language

1. Starting from the first half of the twentieth century, the study of literature in relation to legal doctrines has been widely debated by scholars in both fields, leading to interesting analyses which have gradually consolidated this interdisciplinary connection and expanded the areas of interpretation, laying the foundation

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of the Law and Literature movement.¹ By comparing the literary and legal reading of texts, scholars of the Law and Literature movement have suggested some basic features as the starting point of their method of analysis, such as the linguistic investigation of law, the study of narrative structures in legal texts, and the role of literature in the interpretation of Acts.² Ronald Dworkin, for example, has proposed to improve the understanding of law “by comparing legal interpretation with interpretation in other fields of knowledge, particularly literature,”³ enhancing the role of hermeneutics in the understanding not only of both kinds of texts, but also of the whole cultural environment. In his *Poethics and Other Strategies of Law and Literature* (1992), Richard Weisberg has validated the study of law through literary sources and techniques, arguing that lawyers should replicate the aesthetic dimension of literature by relying on an accurate and clear language in order to preserve precision and persuasiveness.⁴

Law has its own specific language establishing a conventional system that expresses values and ideas. Moreover, it is a tool sharing the modes of operation of a society and it can only be understood in relation to the culture in which it is employed. In turn, literature offers valuable instruments to increase social awareness: if one believes that “texts are always ‘worldly’, situated within a particular socio-historical context and contributing to it,”⁵ it is clear that the value of specific literary texts must also be considered in light of their capacity to trigger symbolic meditations on the “destiny of community.”⁶ In these terms, Conrad’s story, “Amy Foster,” offers the opportunity to analyse migration from a social point of view, authorizing the author’s poetical belief in the authority of words as “symbols of life, [with] the power in their sound or their aspect to present the very thing you wish to hold up before the mental vision of your readers.”⁷

¹ Among the most influential studies published on law and literature, see James Boyd White’s *The Legal Imagination* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1973); Richard Posner’s *Law and Literature: A Misunderstood Relation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Ian Ward’s *Law and Literature. Possibilities and Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

² Critics of the law and literature movement distinguish two main fields of study: “law in literature” which focuses on the theoretical examination of literary texts in relation to studies by legal scholars, and “law as literature” which concentrates on the application of literary techniques on legal texts (See Ward, *Law and Literature*, 3).

³ Ronald Dworkin, “Law as Interpretation,” *Critical Inquiry* 9.1 (September, 1982): 179–200, 179.

⁴ See Richard Weisberg, *Poethics and Other Strategies of Law and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

⁵ Ward, *Law and Literature*, 32.

⁶ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 56.

⁷ *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 2, ed. Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 200.

2. From the 1880s, a number of laws were introduced all over Europe to regulate the entry of immigrants from colonized countries.⁸ Britain followed this legal trend and, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the need to control the access of particular ethnic and religious groups from nearby nations led to the introduction of the Aliens Act on August 11, 1905. Although other laws on migration had been passed before,⁹ the Aliens Act was the first modern law to be considered as an expression of the political and ideological ideas about race, religion and nationalism at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁰ The passing of this law had been preceded by a long period of political agitation during which the Liberal and Conservative parties, together with boards, associations and other political groups had carried forward different, often opposing actions, such as the appointment of the Royal Commission on Aliens Immigration (1902) on the one hand, and the Liberal Party objection to immigration restrictions on the other.¹¹ After taking effect on January 1, 1906, the Aliens Act was deemed inconsistent and ambiguous by many contemporary historians and politicians for two main reasons: first, even if it didn't mention any specific ethnic group, it was clearly addressed to persecuted Jews travelling from Eastern Europe to Britain, and second, it lacked soundness in that permission for entry was granted verbally by immigration officers and not through written documents. Moreover, the motives for its instability were also to be looked for in wider political terms, as “it was enacted by an enfeebled Conservative government at the very end of its period of office and was left to be executed by an unwilling Liberal government.”¹² As a matter of fact, the contradictory feelings about the Aliens Act were a clear testimony of the need to rethink – both in political and cultural terms – the British social structure and to cope with the tensions ensuing from increasing European mobility.

8 In particular, immigration to and from Australia, North and South America, and South Africa was regulated by the circulation of a large number of international laws. See Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Color Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

9 An Aliens Act had been passed in 1793 and had remained in force until 1836. However, it mainly aimed at strengthening the country internally and reinforcing the government by regulating the immigration of refugees escaping from the French Revolution and the political spies who might enter Britain during the Napoleonic Wars.

10 In particular, the Conservative backers of the legislation, claimed that the aliens weren't Christians.

11 See Bernard Gainer, *The Alien Invasion: The Origins of the Aliens Act of 1905* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1972), 190.

12 Jill Pellew, “The Home Office and the Aliens Act, 1905,” *The Historical Journal*, 32.2 (June 1989): 369–385, 370.

The origins of Jewish migration must be traced back to the 1880s when large numbers of immigrants fleeing persecution in the Russian Empire moved to London; problems of overcrowding, and fears for the spread of criminality and disease were frequently discussed in political circles as well as by the press. The events that Conrad might have had in mind when writing the story of Yanko Goorall, an emigrant from the Carpathians shipwrecked on the coast of Kent, may be looked for in the historical and political background of late nineteenth-century Russia. In 1882, the Russian minister of internal affairs, Nikolai Ignatyev, proposed a series of temporary regulations that limited the social and economic participation of Jews in Russia and Russian Poland. These regulations, known as May Laws, were enacted by the Emperor Alexander III in May 1882 and, although cited as temporary measures, they remained in force until the Russian Revolution in 1917. As a consequence, thousands of immigrants were forced to leave their countries, many of them intending to reach the United States travelling via the United Kingdom or Germany. At that time, no system of registration regulated the number of immigrants in Britain, and the Aliens Act was considered an important instrument of control to this end.

Conrad completed his last sea voyage on the clipper *Torrens* in 1893 and one year later he gave up his career on the sea to live permanently in Britain. These were the years in which he published some of his most famous works – *Almayer's Folly* (1895), *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897), *Heart of Darkness* (1899), and *Lord Jim* (1900). Over this period he cultivated his interest in European and international politics, as his letters and occasional pieces demonstrate. Such interest would recognizably be the material for his fictional writing, too, since “in the stories he wrote, [Conrad] tried to make relevant to his contemporary readers events he had either lived himself during his years working as a seaman or had heard about or found mentioned in passing in a newspaper. This effort involved discussions about politics [...] reading, studying books he ordered from libraries, or conducting historical research.”¹³

Influenced by the historical and social revolutions that had led his family to exile in Vologda when he was only a child, Conrad had experienced the atmosphere of political activism in Russia, inheriting through his father, Apollo Korzeniowski, and his mother, Ewa Bobrowska, patriotic and nationalist ideologies which would then result in the refusal of Russian policies, as he

¹³ Richard Ambrosini, “A Memoir “in the shape of a novel”: Making the “still voice” of Conrad’s Polish Past Resonate in a Personal Record,” *Conrad’s Footprints*, ed. Wiesław Krajka (Boulder, Lublin, New York: Marie Curie-Skłodowska University Press, Columbia University Press, 2018): 37–55, 37.

showed in his novels *The Secret Agent* (1907) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911), as well as in the essay “Autocracy and War” (1905).¹⁴ Moreover, his views on immigration were certainly influenced by his own personal experience: as the son of two exiles, he had to come to terms with an existence spent “[walking] the Waste Land from his childhood on.”¹⁵ Conflicting feelings of displacement and acceptance were to characterize his life even after he was a naturalised British citizen. His sense of belonging – “I am more British than you are” he would tell David Bone in 1923¹⁶ – was often undermined in a country where he would be considered, till the very end of his life, as “our guest.”¹⁷ The author’s desire to test that sense of belonging, together with the question of refusal, took shape in “Amy Foster” via a seemingly general analysis of “the essential difference of the races.”¹⁸ Both Conrad’s life experiences and his knowledge of contemporary politics in relation to the issues of migration were, therefore, crucial in the writing of this short story.

3. “Amy Foster” was first serialised in the *Illustrated London News* between December 1901 and January 1902 and later formed part of the collection *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 1903. Even if the story’s protagonist is not a Jew, his journey replicates the experience of thousands of immigrants who were travelling from Eastern Europe early in the twentieth century, when immigration to Great Britain was at its peak, prompting increasing social and political antipathy towards the ‘aliens’.

The tale is told by Dr Kennedy, a country doctor who practices his profession in the area of Colebrook, a village on the coast of Kent. Kennedy, whose previous career as a surgeon in the Navy had led him to travel across “continents with

14 On Conrad’s commitment to the political cause as inherited by his parents, Laurence Davies interestingly claims that “[Conrad] grew up carrying a burden of sacrificial duty, an imperative he admired for its demands on courage and tenacity but, in his life as exile, sailor, author could never follow absolutely.” Laurence Davies, Introduction to *The Selected Letters of Joseph Conrad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), xix.

15 As Ian Watt states, “the very absoluteness of his exile [...] set in the course of Conrad’s thought in a different direction from that of his peers. [T]he son of Apollo, the defeated orphan, the would-be suicide, the inheritor of the Polish past, [Conrad] had walked the Waste Land from childhood on.” Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 32.

16 David Bone, *Landfall at Sunset* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1955), 160.

17 Virginia Woolf, “Joseph Conrad,” in *The Common Reader* (London: The Hogart Press, 1948): 282–291, 282. In this regard, reactions were varied. What upset Conrad the most were the patronising comments on his command of English. Ironically, the worst offender was Robert Lynd, who was actually an Irish nationalist. Lynd described Conrad as a ‘literary homeless’, a man “without either country or language.” Robert Lynd, “A Set of Six,” *Daily News*, August 10, 1908, in *Joseph Conrad. The Critical Heritage*, ed. Norman Sherry (London: Routledge, 1973), 211.

18 *Collected Letters*, 2: 402.

unexplored interiors,”¹⁹ is known in scientific societies for his naturalist studies, while he is popular among the village inhabitants for his “talent of making people talk to him freely” (AF, 106). Among the many tales he listens to with “inexhaustible patience” (AF, 106), the story of Yanko Goorall, the only survivor of a shipwreck on the shores of Colebrook, excites his compassion.

A “reluctant transmigrant”²⁰ hoping to go to America, but shipwrecked in Britain, Yanko Goorall undergoes a difficult process of adaptation. The narrative concentrates on his condition of estrangement, isolation and suffering, but his voyage by sea also finds an echo in real shipwrecks that had taken place in those years. One historical incident that has been identified as a source for Conrad’s story is the report of the *Elbe*, an ocean liner directed to New York which foundered in the North Sea near Lowestoft on January 31, 1895.²¹ Providing accommodation for about eight hundred steerage passengers, the *Elbe* was very popular among Eastern European immigrants hoping to reach the United States. The catastrophic event of the *Elbe* sets the stage for the story of the *Herzogin Sophia-Dorothea*, the emigrant-ship coming from Hamburg on which Yanko Goorall has been travelling. According to the Aliens Act, the *Elbe*, as well as the *Herzogin Sophia-Dorothea*, fall under the definition of ‘immigrant ships’, as they carry “more than twenty alien steerage passengers.”²² As a steerage passenger on board this ship, Yanko Goorall suffers all the strain of a dangerous and unpredictable sea voyage, which he shares with “uncounted multitudes of people – whole nations – all dressed in such clothes as the rich wear” (AF, 114). While conveying the double perspective of individual crossing and mass migration, Conrad also confronts the level of literary writing with that of social investigation. The description of the journey is expressed in real, lifelike terms:

19 Joseph Conrad, “Amy Foster,” in *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’, Typhoon, Falk and Other Stories*, ed. Norman Sherry (London: Everyman’s, 1974), 106. Further references in the text abbreviated as AF.

20 David Glover, *Literature, Immigration, and Diaspora in Fin-de-Siècle England. A Cultural History of the 1905 Aliens Act* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 132.

21 The sinking of the *Deutschland* in 1875 and that of *Prince Alice* in 1878 are also considered two possible sources for the description of the shipwreck in “Amy Foster.”

22 The Act makes a clear distinction between “passengers” and “steerage passengers”: “The expression “passenger” in this Act includes any person carried on the ship other than the master and persons employed in the working, or service, of the ship, and the expression “steerage passenger” in this Act includes all passengers except such persons as may be declared by the Secretary of State to be cabin passengers by order made either generally or as regards any special ships or ports.” Aliens Act, August 11, 1905, 8.

Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Edw7/5/13/contents/enacted> (Last access May 28, 2019).

It was a low timber dwelling — he would say — with wooden beams overhead, like the houses in his country, but you went into it down a ladder. It was very large, very cold, damp and sombre, with places in the manner of wooden boxes where people had to sleep, one above another, and it kept on rocking all ways at once all the time. He crept into one of these boxes and laid down there in the clothes in which he had left his home many days before, keeping his bundle and his stick by his side. People groaned, children cried, water dripped, the lights went out, the walls of the place creaked, and everything was being shaken so that in one’s little box one dared not lift one’s head. (AF, 114)

The representation of mass migration takes its shape in the figure of a single character whose point of view conveys a realistic portrait of the tragic destiny of the emigrants, “passing through years of precarious existence with people to whom their strangeness was an object of suspicion, dislike or fear” (AF, 113).²³ This double perspective is at the core of Conrad’s fiction, whose strength lies in the compromise between factual reality and individual destiny. As Laurence Davies affirms, “Conrad balances the living present against the doom of the universe; [...] he does indeed take the fate of humanity to heart, for all its cosmic insignificance. Otherwise, as one of many examples, he never could have written, “Amy Foster.””²⁴ In the case of “Amy Foster,” these two aspects – the analysis of the living present and the universal dimension of the story – mingle and revive each other; the plot and the characters always aim at a totalizing view of the human condition, while clinging to the contingency of life.

Yanko Goorall is no exception, and his experience shows that messages of hospitality and solidarity must pass through concrete practices of social acceptance. When he finally gets on the shores of Colebrook, he seems to undergo the same process of control reserved to immigrants on their arrival at British ports. The Aliens Act envisaged the presence of an immigration officer and a medical inspector who would decide to withhold or agree the emigrants permission to landing.²⁵ After his dreadful sea journey, Yanko is finally locked in Mr Smith’s woodshed where he is subjected to close inspection, conducted by both Mr Smith and “a medical inspector,”²⁶ namely Dr Kennedy. The question is immediately clear to Smith: Yanko is an “escaped lunatic” (AF, 120). Dr Kennedy, instead, abstains from giving any sort of judgment and later supports the

²³ Apart from being a report of the hardships suffered by the migrants, the description of Yanko’s journey is also “a critique of the British response to Polish refugees.” Thomas McLean, *The Other East and Nineteenth-Century British Literature: Imagining Poland and the Russian Empire* (London: Palgrave, 2012), 171.

²⁴ Laurence Davies, ““With all that multitude of celestial bodies”: Conrad’s Sense of Scale,” *The Conradian*, 43.1 (2018): 99–120, 118.

²⁵ See Aliens Act, 3.

²⁶ Aliens Act, 3.

emigrant's integration in the community. Several other examinations will follow to sanction the status of the newly arrived castaway at Colebrook (is he a Hindoo? A Basque? Does he speak Spanish, Italian, German?), but his real identity is never truly established. Eventually he is shown compassion by Amy Foster, the maid in Mr Smith's service who slips out of the house early the next day to give Yanko a piece of bread. This act sanctions the shift from his status as an emigrant to that of an exile looking for support and longing to integrate.

Despite its focus on the migrant's individual condition of solitude and desolation, Conrad's narrative establishes important connections with the complex European background of boundary crossing. The reasons for Yanko's departure from his native country are not political. In fact, he is not fleeing government persecution, but escaping from poverty. He leaves his hometown through a bogus organization hiring poor mountaineers (including Yanko) who pay for their journey by selling cattle and small pieces of land. As he tells Kennedy,

three men had been going about through all the little towns in the foothills of his country. They would arrive on market days driving in a peasant's cart, and would set up an office in an inn or some other Jew's house. There were three of them, of whom one with a long beard looked venerable; and they had red cloth collars round their necks and gold lace on their sleeves like Government officials. They sat proudly behind a long table; and in the next room, so that the common people shouldn't hear, they kept a cunning telegraph machine, through which they could talk to the Emperor of America. The fathers hung about the door, but the young men of the mountains would crowd up to the table asking many questions, for there was work to be got all the year round at three dollars a day in America, and no military service to do. (AF, 116)

The three men ironically evoke the Aliens Act, in which "the immigration board for a port shall consist of *three persons* summoned in accordance with rules made by the Secretary of State under this Act out of a list approved by him for the port comprising fit persons having magisterial, business, or administrative experience."²⁷ 'Like Government officials', the false bureaucrats stage a sort of theatrical farce in which they replicate part of the administrative organization lying behind the migration system. Dressed in fake uniforms, they pretend they are using a telegraph to talk to the Emperor of America who decides about the emigrants' destiny. The rules provided by the Secretary of State are here replaced by the background presence of well-off Jews who assist the false board of impostors. Conrad is also alluding to Jewish support systems for the traffic of migrants regularly portrayed in the newspapers of the time; in fact, the opinion was shared that refusing entrance to poor immigrants would also stop

²⁷ Aliens Act, 4, *my emphasis*.

such networks from bringing poor people to England through scams involving clothes and money, just as in Yanko’s case. The ironic reference to Jews in the story does not conform to the historical representation of Jewish refugees seeking improved economic conditions in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century. If Yanko (who is actually Catholic) is the personification of such a group of emigrants,²⁸ the Jews in the story fall into a different category of wealthy owners, such as the “Jew inn-keeper” (AF, 117) to whom Yanko’s father sells a cow to gather the money for his son’s journey.

References to the migration system abound in the narrative, testifying to Conrad’s awareness of the historical and political moment he was experiencing from a wide, European viewpoint. Even if he did not mention contemporary legal and political actions on migration in his essays and letters, he was deeply aware of their impact on society and would take into account common attitudes on immigrants as threatening to the social order.²⁹ Conrad’s knowledge about the legal status of migrants may be inferred by his description of Yanko’s condition. Despite his problems of adaptation,

it would not be true to say that Yanko’s difficulties are a product of his being excluded from the civil rights available to British subjects. Yanko’s precise legal status is never directly broached, but what we do learn about him is consistent with changes in the position of aliens brought about by the 1870 Naturalisation Act. In law, there was no barrier to a marriage between Amy and Yanko; however, as a government review of naturalization noted in 1901, ‘a woman who is a British subject ceases to be a British subject by marrying an alien’, and Yanko’s death would have done nothing in itself to alter this fact. Importantly, the 1870 Act had made it possible for a ‘foreigner’ like Yanko to own property, so that he could accept the wedding gift of a cottage and an acre of land from Mr Swaffer, his employer.

28 Curiously enough, Conrad conveys the experience of emigrant Jews by presenting a Catholic character. Actually, Conradian readers are familiar with his habit to disguise political or social thoughts under the veil of irony. As Kim Salmons notes about *The Secret Agent*, “Conrad repeatedly protested that his novel was neither philosophical nor political. But he was famous for misleading his audience, and his friends. Robert Wilson claimed that Conrad had to make his works acceptable in Christian countries ‘because the sale of his books became his major means of supporting his family’ and as such he buried ‘his ideas so deeply in his fiction that few knew what he was saying.’” Kim Salmons, “Anarchy, Vegetarianism, and *The Secret Agent*,” in *Food in the Novels of Joseph Conrad. Eating as Narrative* (London: Palgrave, 2017): 83–96, 93.

29 As David Glover maintains, “‘Amy Foster’ was written during a phase which saw a marked rise in organised hostility towards ‘aliens’ – that is, during the months between the official foundation of the British Brothers’ League in Stepney on 9 May and the setting up of the Parliamentary Pauper Immigration Committee on July 31, 1901, two pressure groups arising from opposite ends of the sociopolitical scale. Moreover, from 1894 to 1898, a bill seeking to reduce alien immigration had been brought before Parliament nearly every year. If Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski ever ceased to think of himself as a foreigner, it would not have been in 1901.” Glover, *Literature, Immigration, and Diaspora*, 131.

In both instances, Yanko's encounter with the legal system publicly ratifies a personal bond.³⁰

As for Conrad himself, in all of his fiction "he brought to bear an immigrant's perspective, uniquely coloured by his Polish experience and French and British Merchant Marine histories, on the ambiguities and paradoxes in English life."³¹ In his literary depiction of the emigrant he contemplated a range of cultural and racial stereotypes giving shape to national anxieties about foreignness. In "Amy Foster," Yanko Goorall embodies otherness in a multiplicity of aspects, allowing the author to anticipate points of view and cultural tendencies. In a few words, Goorall's status could be read as an archetype of the figure of the "undesirable immigrant" as featured in the Aliens Act.

4. In "Amy Foster," the relationship between narrative writing and social understanding is strengthened through Yanko Goorall whose characterization establishes a direct link with the socially acknowledged image of the "alien" as it was described in essays, newspaper articles, and reports at the time when Conrad's story was written. This image was later to be present in the Aliens Act as that of the "undesirable immigrant." Conrad anticipates this definition through the character of Yanko Goorall or, more simply, he fictionalizes a social figure that was already well known at the end of the nineteenth century.

From a legal viewpoint, the Aliens Act introduced the definition of "undesirable immigrant" by following a set of precise criteria, exposed some exceptions and gave directions on how immigration officers may withhold leave or repatriate them. Entrance might be granted to those "seeking admission [...] solely to avoid prosecution or punishment on religious or political grounds [...] involving danger of imprisonment or danger to life."³² Apart from a few other exceptions, all the other immigrants were considered "undesirable" and unlikely to be given the right to remain. The language of the Act can be immediately recognized as underpinning refusal more than enhancing hospitality. Rules are given in terms of negation ("shall not be landed," "shall withhold leave," "cannot show") and also positive statements are conveyed through negative, mandatory forms ("leave to land shall not be refused," "nor shall leave to land be withheld"). This gives us an idea of both the sociopolitical response to migration at that time and of the emotive conditions underlying the treatment of immigrants. As far as the question of Yanko's acceptance is concerned,

³⁰ Glover, *Literature, Immigration, and Diaspora*, 136.

³¹ Allan Simmons, "How Joseph Conrad Formed an Identity as an English Novelist," *Language&Literature*, September 27, 2007, <https://culture.pl/en/article/how-joseph-conrad-formed-an-identity-as-an-english-novelist#2> (Last access May 22, 2019).

³² Aliens Act, 8.

Conrad's short story sets the environment of the immigrant's reception by following standards similar to the Aliens Act. In fact, the same terms of negation are used to describe the villagers' conduct towards the “horrid-looking man” (AF, 118) who is received with “rough and hungry tones” (AF, 118), shouted at and hit.

According to the Act, an immigrant should be considered an “undesirable immigrant” under specific conditions: “(a) if he cannot show that he has in his possession or is in a position to obtain the means of decently supporting himself [...]; or (b) if he is a lunatic or an idiot [...]; or (c) if he has been sentenced in a foreign country with which there is an extradition treaty for a crime [...]; or (d) if an expulsion order under this Act has been made in his case.”³³ On his arrival at the village, Yanko fulfils at least two of these conditions: he does not have the means of supporting himself and he is considered by the village inhabitants as both a lunatic and an idiot. Described as “a hairy sort of gipsy fellow” (AF, 118), “an unfortunate dirty tramp” (AF, 120), a “troublesome lunatic,” “a sort of wild animal” (AF, 126), and “an excitable devil” (AF, 132), Goorall does not only embody the notion of “undesirable immigrant,” but also expands its meaning. As any ‘unwelcome immigrant’, Yanko is a victim of isolation and despair as well as the object of scorn and offence. His major obstacle is the inability to communicate in the language spoken in the village (that is, English), and he is never totally accepted, even when he marries Amy Foster and becomes the owner of a cottage that Mr Swaffer has given him in return for saving the life of his granddaughter. Yanko contributes to the disruption of the community balance in various ways: he unsettles the economic stability of Amy's parents who cannot rely on her wage after she marries him, he speaks an incomprehensible, “unearthly language” (AF, 117) and has manners and behaviours that the villagers find quite disturbing.³⁴

Seen in the perspective of the social and cultural setting of the period, this literary representation introduces a figure more complex than the emigrant embodying threats to national identity. Here, the polysemic value of the expression “undesirable immigrant” carries a double pragmatic meaning leading back to the socio-historical context of anarchism. At the end of the nineteenth century, the reasons for the immigrants' ‘undesirability’ would focus on exclusion based on ethnic diversity on the one hand, and on implicit conceptual links with social violence and political agitation on the other. In particular, anarchism

³³ Aliens Act, 4.

³⁴ As Kennedy notes, the villagers criticize Yanko's manners: “They wouldn't in their dinner hour lie flat on their backs on the grass to stare at the sky. Neither did they go about the fields screaming dismal tunes.” (AF, 132)

had clear historical referents around ideas about race and resettlement promoting widespread anxiety about immigration. The literary representation of anarchists in this period focuses on the influence of foreign racial groups on British culture, which resonates with arguments against political exiles. In literary terms, the main problem seemed to be the resistance of both groups to cultural assimilation. As Elizabeth Miller affirms, “Xenophobic accounts of Jewish immigrants’ intractable resistance to assimilation, which implied that they would never be fully subject to the British state, much less culturally subject to the English nation, linked Jews to state-rejecting anarchists. Yoking the two together fed a climate of anti-immigration sentiment focused on racial and national intactness.”³⁵

As already shown, up to 1906 immigration was a major issue in Conservative political campaigns and, when the Aliens Act was passed in 1905 the question of aliens and asylum seekers was regularly debated in the press in light of their association with anarchists. Also for Conrad, immigration was connected – at least in part – to anarchism. As he wrote to Galsworthy in December 1905, after publishing “Amy Foster,” he had worked on an “Anarchist story” and “another of the sort.”³⁶ Both short stories, “The Anarchist” and “The Informer” were published in 1906, and one year later, in 1907 Conrad published *The Secret Agent*, based on the attempted blowing up of the Greenwich Observatory on February 15, 1894. He had been discussing anarchism and anarchist activities with his friend Ford Madox Ford who had also provided him with anarchist literature and memoirs.³⁷ In *The Secret Agent* Conrad connects three main periods (and as many events) of his life – namely, 1886, when he visited the Russian Embassy for the release of his status as Russian subject; 1894, the year of the of the Greenwich bombing; and the years from 1905 to 1907 when the novel was written.³⁸ These periods are linked in the narrative through the common theme of immigration and the reception of political refugees.

In *The Secret Agent*, Conrad replicates a late nineteenth-century literary cliché: connections between immigrant Jews and exiled anarchists abound in the fiction of this period promoting anti-immigration sentiments on the basis of anarchist revolutions. However, his position on this subject is more complex

³⁵ Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, “Exile London. Anarchism, Immigration, and Xenophobia in Late-Victorian Literature,” in *Fear, Loathing and Victorian Xenophobia*, ed. Marlene Tromp, Maria K. Bachman, Heidi Kaufman, (Columbus, The Ohio State University Press, 2013): 267–285, 277.

³⁶ *Collected Letters*, vol. 3: 300.

³⁷ See Ford Madox Ford, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (London: Duckworth & Co., 19249), 229–231.

³⁸ See Robert Hampson, *Conrad’s Secrets* (London: Palgrave, 2012), 99.

than it may seem. For example, in a letter to William Blackwood written in October 29, 1897, Conrad spoke about foreign revolutionaries and he claimed – maybe thinking about himself – that “England had not only given refuge to criminals. There was a greatness in that mistaken hospitality which is the inheritance of all parties. Of course I do not defend political crime. It is repulsive to me by tradition, by sentiment, and even by reflexion. But some of their men had struggled for an idea, openly, in the light of day, and sacrificed to it all that to most men makes life worth living.”³⁹

As a prototype of the “undesirable immigrant,” Yanko Goorall anticipates somehow the social and cultural position of the anarchist. In his later novels, Conrad was to develop the figure of the “undesirable immigrant” by giving it a strict ‘political’ connotation. This would be in line with the change in the subject-matter of his fiction. As from 1904, in fact, he had turned his attention to political subjects and published his three political novels: *Nostramo* (1904), *The Secret Agent* (1907), and *Under Western Eyes* (1911). Gaetano D’Elia and Dominic Bisignano state that “Amy Foster” “represents a decisive step taken by Conrad in his gradual turning from the East and the sea to the West and land of *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*.”⁴⁰ This is certainly true. More than that, “Amy Foster” denotes the evolution of the character as an expression of current forms of xenophobia, demonstrating Conrad’s interest in the analysis of the complexities and contradictions of a society shaped by the “Western race”.⁴¹ Despite his declarations of indifference – “But, my dearest, really I read nothing and I never look at the papers, so I know nothing of politics and literature,”⁴² he would write to Aniela Zagórska in 1898 – his genuine interest in the events and trends that changed Europe was to be found, ‘in the shape of his novels’.⁴³

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³⁹ Laurence Davies, *The Selected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, 72.

⁴⁰ Gaetano D’Elia and Dominic Bisignano, “Yanko, The Man Who Came from the Sea: A Note on Conrad’s “Amy Foster,” *Conradiana* 11.2 (1979): 165–176, 175.

⁴¹ Joseph Conrad, *The Rescue* (London, Dent, 1920), 11.

⁴² *Collected Letters*, 2: 138.

⁴³ See Joseph Conrad, “A Personal Record,” in *The Mirror of the Sea and A Personal Record* (London: Wordsworth, 2008), 217.

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