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DOI: 10.35765/pk.2024.4502.19

Denegation, Textuality and Intertextuality in “The Idiots:” Epistemological Transformation of Conrad’s Tale

ABSTRACT

“The Idiots,” published as part of Conrad’s first collection of short stories *Tales of Unrest* (1898), is, by far, the most minimalist of all his tales, therefore dubbed “pointless” by one of his critics. As such, it has mostly occasioned contextual readings to date, purely literary approaches to the story being few and far between. The present article offers a transformative reappraisal of this deprecated Conrad tale, in considering its artistic texture. A combined textual and intertextual approach proposed here reveals the presence, also in this Conrad story, of the modernist device of denegation (assertion of presence by absence, and vice versa) usually ascribed to William Faulkner, which helps resolve the issue of the tale’s ambiguous ending by defining it as the main heroine’s accidental drowning rather than suicide as it is usually seen in Conrad criticism. In its epistemologically transformative role, denegation likewise removes the odium of senselessness from “The Idiots” by identifying its covert, because denegatively construed, taboo theme of incest. The intertextual (Bakhtinian) reading of the story in Kristeva’s understanding of the term, and therefore through recourse to a later writer, i.e., Faulkner, does not only confirm the presence of the theme of incest in “The Idiots” but also reveals the American modernist’s unacknowledged indebtedness to this Conrad tale for some of the key motifs, if not its overall theme, of his most famous novel *The Sound and the Fury* (1929).

KEYWORDS: Joseph Conrad, denegation, textuality, intertextuality,
William Faulkner

STRESZCZENIE

Denegacja, tekstualność i intertekstualność w „*Idiotach*”. Epistemologiczna transformacja opowiadania Josepha Conrada

„Idioci”, opowieść, która ukazała się w pierwszym zbiorze opowiadań Josepha Conrada pt. *Tales of Unrest* (1898), jest chyba jego najbardziej minimalistycznym krótkim tekstem, który zyskał przez to u jednego z jego krytyków miano „bezsensownego”. Ze względu na swą lakoniczność opowiadanie było dotąd

Suggested citation: Branny, G.M.T. (2024). Denegation, Textuality and Intertextuality in “The Idiots:” Epistemological Transformation of Conrad’s Tale. © ⓘ *Perspectives on Culture*, 2(45), pp. 259–271. DOI: 10.35765/pk.2024.4502.19

Submitted: 12.09.2023

Accepted: 14.11.2023

głównie poddawane analizie kontekstualnej, wskutek czego czysto literackie podejścia do tekstu prawie nie istnieją. Niniejszy artykuł stanowi próbę epistemologicznego przewartościowania tego niedocenianego i krytykowanego opowiadania Conrada poprzez poddanie go wnikliwej estetycznej analizie. Zastosowane w tym celu eklektyczne, bo tekstualne i intertekstualne, podejście do tekstu ujawnia obecność w nim modernistycznej metody narracyjnej zwanej denegacją (potwierdzeniem obecności poprzez nieobecność i odwrotnie), zwykle przypisywanej Williamowi Faulknerowi, co pozwala na rozwikłanie zagadki niejednoznacznego zakończenia opowiadania poprzez jego zdefiniowanie jako przypadkowe utonięcie bohaterki opowiadania, nie zaś jej samobójstwo, jak chcą krytycy. Ponadto, denegacja pełni w tekście także inną transformacyjną funkcję, nadając wreszcie opowiadaniu sens poprzez wskazanie na jego denegatywnie skonstruowaną tematykę tabu dotyczącą incestu. Interekstualna (bachtinowska) interpretacja „Idiotów” w pojęciu Kristevej, a zatem poprzez odniesienie do pisarza późniejszego, tu Williama Faulknera, nie tylko potwierdza obecność tematyki kazirodztwa w opowiadaniu Conrada, ale także ujawnia literacki dług Faulknera wobec Conrada, i to nie tylko w kwestii denegacji, którą dotąd przypisywano temu pierwszemu, ale także w stosunku do tematyki oraz szeregu motywów najbardziej eksperymentalnej powieści Faulknera *Wściekłość i wrzask* (1929).

SŁOWA KLUCZE: Joseph Conrad, denegacja, tekstualność, intertekstualność, William Faulkner

Joseph Conrad's tale "The Idiots," which appeared in the writer's earliest short fiction collection *Tales of Unrest* (1898), is an apocalyptic story of woe set in a Breton community of Ploumar in France. The tale features the Bacadou family with four mentally retarded children, whose father Jean-Pierre, a republican, converts to Catholicism in a desperate hope of reversing the miserable fate. Instead, however, he himself drops dead at the hands of his wife Susan, in her equally desperate refusal to conceive any more wretched progeny when sexually assaulted by her spouse bent on correcting God's decrees. While on the run after the murder, pursued by one Mallot, a potential attacker and saviour in one, whom she mistakes for her husband, whether dead or alive, Susan drowns in high tide, allegedly by suicide, before ever facing the court.

"The Idiots" is one of those less known and underrated Conrad tales that have been relegated to the fringes of Conrad scholarship by definition, i.e., through the author's own disparaging comments, as for instance, in his 24th May 1896 letter to Edward Garnett: "I don't know whether it's worth anything" (Karl & Davies, 1983), or in Author's Note to *Tales of Unrest*, where he deprecates it as "closely derivative from Maupassant" (Baines, 1986, p. 214).

As by far the most minimalist Conrad tale, “The Idiots” has been dubbed “pointless” by Daphne Erdinast-Vulcan (1999, p. 83), one of the main authorities on Conrad’s short fiction, who sees it as “a narrative without a proper ending, without a moral” (84). The tale’s textual scantiness has called for its mostly contextual readings in Conrad criticism to date, i.e., in relation to current publishing preferences (Davies, 2009; Atkinson, 2015), literary trends, social contexts (Erdinast-Vulcan, 1999; Billy, 1997), factual evidence (Davies, 2009; Meyer, 1967), or Celtic background (Atkinson, 2015; White, 2000; Harrington, 2011). Thus, purely literary approaches to “The Idiots” are practically non-existent, with an exception of Ted Billy’s illuminating study of Conrad’s short stories (163–171).

The story’s combined textual and intertextual analysis proposed in this article reveals the presence, already in this early Conrad tale, of a modernist device of denegative narration¹ usually associated with the fiction of William Faulkner a generation later. A recognition of denegation in “The Idiots” helps decipher the ambiguity of its ending by identifying Susan Bacadou’s death as accidental drowning in high tide rather than suicide, as it is unanimously seen in criticism. The textual and intertextual² reading of the tale against Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* helps fill in some places of indeterminacy concerning the phenomenon of the genetic degeneration of the Bacadou progeny, the reasons for which are denegatively passed over in silence in the tale. By tackling the above issues, the present transformative reading of “The Idiots” attempts to reassess the story’s epistemology.

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“The Idiots” features denegative narration around the most controversial and ambiguous issue of the tale, i.e., Susan Bacadou’s death in the final scene, where Conrad teases the reader with contradictory statements and denegative miscuing in a truly modernist fashion, a technique clearly anticipating Faulkner’s own in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), in, for instance, Rosa Coldfield’s denegative stream-of-consciousness monologue on her

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- 1 In François Pitavy’s understanding, denegation, as applied to Faulkner’s fiction, is tantamount to asserting presence by absence, in the sense of a fact being the more present for the absence of the apparent reasons for that presence. Denegation is therefore more than a negation because it actually affirms what it negates (1989, p. 29).
 - 2 Intertextuality is defined here after Julia Kristeva, in the sense of a work of art being “part of a larger fabric of literary discourse, (...) including the future as well as the past” (Murfin & Ray, 2009, p. 249), as well as in terms of Bakhtinian dialogics defined as “one that permits numerous voices or discourses to emerge and to engage in dialogue with one another” (Murfin & Ray, p. 111; emphases of entries removed).

alleged love for Charles Bon, which abounds in declarations immediately contradicted by their denials only to be again revoked, and then again questioned, until the reader can no longer identify the truth of the matter, except by applying the denegative principle of an assertion of presence by absence, or vice versa, as the ultimate epistemological key to what appears to be the nearest to the truth:

(I did not love him; *how could I? I had never even heard his voice*, [...])
(...): *because I who had learned nothing of love, not even parents' love – (...) became not mistress, not beloved, but more than even love*; I became all poly-math love's androgynous advocate. (...) *I was not spying, though you will say I was. And even if it was spying, it was not jealousy, because I did not love him. (How could I have, when I had never seen him?)* (Faulkner, 1964, pp. 146–147; italics original; deitalicization for emphasis mine).

In “The Idiots,” written almost half a century before *Absalom, Absalom!*, the narration concerning Susan Bacadou's death at the close of the tale denegatively hovers between the real danger of an accident – what with the tide coming in, the wind gathering, and Susan's dread of her husband pursuing her whether dead or alive, intensifying – and the clearly teasing verbal insinuations of a possibility of suicide, which are immediately, time and again, dismissed by the psychological realist insights into the heroine's mind, in her repeating to herself: “I want to live. To live alone – for a week – for a day. I must explain to them” (Conrad, 2012, p. 73), as well as her reply to the pursuing Millot's inquiry as to where she is going, which is “Home!” (73).

Similarly, Susan's accident (rather than suicide) is denegatively prefigured by a warning that her mother Mme Leveille throws at her murderous daughter in passing, upon the latter leaving her house while on the run after the murder: “Susan! You will kill yourself there” (69). Clearly, the mother here is trying to warn her daughter against falling onto the rocks in low tide which soon changes into high ebb and drowns Susan. When denegatively perceived, the warning suggests the eventual absence of suicide by implying its presence. Mme Leveille's words sound ominous in the context of Susan indeed killing herself soon afterwards, while on the level of the story they function as a foreshadowing. From the denegative perspective, though, what makes the essential difference here, helping to interpret Mme Leveille's words properly, is the presence in them of the inconspicuous word “there,” which removes the suggestion of suicide for a discerning reader, by specifying the location where the presence of the rocks exposed by water could cause the death of a person accidentally slipping and falling on them. Besides, the linguistic structure of Mme Leveille's exclamation suggests a warning against an accident rather than a statement of the fact of suicide.

Furthermore, Mme Leveille's warning exclamation to her daughter is immediately preceded by her own frightened realization of the danger of herself accidentally falling into "the smooth darkness of the empty bay," considering her house's unfortunate location on a verge of a precipice: "She heard a stone roll a long time down the declivity of the rocky beach above the sands. She stepped forward cautiously, one hand on the wall of the house, and peered down" (68–69). Denegatively, though, it is from Susan's very mother that we learn soon afterwards about her daughter's alleged suicide rather than accident. Hence, immediately following Susan's death, we see her mother predictably "dry-eyed" (74), and thus callous as usual, sitting on the ground with her clogs off and an inseparable umbrella by her side, as usual, pitting herself for being a victim of her daughter's careless behaviour, and wailing over the dismal prospect of her only child being buried in unconsecrated ground, while the procession with Susan's body carried on a hand-barrow by gatherers of sea-weeds passes by. At this very moment, rather than mourning her daughter, she is engaged in a conversation with the Marquis of Chavanes, whose sympathies in the matter of her own misery under the circumstances, she is typically trying to enlist in order to secure his enduring favours and support.

The fact that the alleged truth of Susan's manner of death comes from the mouth of this rich, egoistical, and self-centred woman of business, whose reaction to the news of her daughter murdering her husband is reproach, self-pity, and abandonment, undermines the veracity of her off-the-cuff verdict of suicide, pronounced immediately after the event that she neither witnessed, nor showed any authentic interest in investigating. Her interpretation of Susan's death is the less credible for it being uncritically picked up and condoned by the Marquis, with his reputation for greed and authoritarianism, but no knowledge whatsoever of the manner of Susan's death, except a complaisant satisfaction at Jean-Pierre's own sudden demise as his radical political opponent in the upcoming elections. However, paradoxically, and ironically enough, in showing more sympathy for the dead woman than does her own mother, by offering to speak to Church authorities on her behalf to have her buried in consecrated ground, the Marquis as if denegatively confirms the manner of Susan's death by accident rather than suicide, even though he does so in his own egoistic interest of seizing the Bacadou estate.

What else, paradoxically, and denegatively, takes away the brunt of the supposition of suicide from Susan's tragic drowning, is the very word "suicide," which appears in the tale long before the accident, but only once, and, as if, in passing. The word is likewise used metaphorically, albeit in a context that links it to the last scene, which is the more proof of its denegative function of asserting the absence of suicide by the presence of the

very word that denotes it. The context is one of the rocks, which, are, however, presented as “bar[ring] the way to the sea, with the fury of madness bent upon suicide,” where the word “suicide” refers to the rock’s preventive rather than damning role in human suicide, if only because the sandy passage between the hills, which was left in the wake of the tide, resembled “an unnavigable river of mud” (63), and hence a space hardly conducive to drowning. The word “suicide,” uttered at this point of the narrative might then function as a denegative foreshadowing of the lack of suicide in the final scene of the story, thus suggesting the absence of suicide by its prefigured presence.

Furthermore, the final scene of the tale abounds in narratorial statements of the surreptitious danger lurking in a sudden slipping on the rocks and stresses the treacherously creeping nature of the tide that imperceptibly, because rather gently, envelops its victim, all that set against Susan’s determination to live at all cost and return home to explain to everyone, including the police, what the rationale behind her killing her husband was:

The tide was *creeping in quietly*, putting out *long impatient arms of strange rivulets* (...). Under the night the *pools grew bigger with mysterious rapidity* (...). Susan splashed her way back for a few yards *without being able to get clear of the water that murmured tenderly* all around her and, suddenly, with a spiteful gurgle, *nearly took her off her feet*. Her heart thumped with *fear*. This place was *too big and too empty to die in*. Tomorrow they would do with her what they liked. But *before she died she must tell them* (...) that there are things no woman can bear. She *must explain* how it happened. ... She splashed through a *pool, getting wet to the waist, too preoccupied to care* (71; emphasis added).

The above passage leaves little room for doubt as to what really happened and that Susan is truly frightened by the prospect of an accidental death by drowning before being able to explain herself to the police, and too preoccupied with thinking about “tomorrow” to even care about “now,” which alone rules out the option of suicide.

Her miscommunication with Millot, whom she takes for the ghost of her husband chasing her, or Jean-Pierre risen from the dead, frightens her out of her wits, especially when Millot confirms that he is alive and coming for her, meaning to rescue her, of course, at which point “she had screamed, ‘Alive!’ and *at once vanished* before his eyes *as if the islet itself had swerved from under her feet* (...). Far below he saw the water whitened by *her struggles*, and heard one *shrill cry for help*” (73; emphasis added).

The moment of her death is as teasingly denegative in description as is the run-and-chase scene. The suddenness of her fall may both point

to an accident and suicide in effect of her misconstruing the identity of her pursuer and the dread that his answer produces in her, which either makes her lose control over her movements and slip, or jump, the latter possibility implied by the *as if*, or Unreal Past particle, which precedes the statement pointing to an accident caused by a loss of control on slippery ground. However, as we learn from the psychological realist insight into her thoughts, she intended to return home from the Raven via “a natural pier of immense and *slippery* stones” (72; emphasis added) connecting the islet with the land. What is more, Millot, the only actual witness to her death, ominously referred to as a man who “feared nothing, having no religion,” which was bound to “end badly some day” (71), all throughout his chase keeps reverting to an apprehension that she might slip and fall by accident any time: “He was saying to himself: ‘Look out! Some lunatic. An *accident* happens soon’” (73). Likewise, her physical “struggles” with the current and her “cry for help” stand in a sharp contradiction to any supposition of suicide. This brings us to the issue of the tale’s epistemology. Largely hinged on denegative narrativity, as demonstrated above, the final scene of the story, similarly to Rosa’s section in *Absalom, Absalom!*, is deliberately built around contradictory evidence, thus anticipating the modernist precept of the relativity of truth.

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The story’s fragmented narrativity, consisting of “listless answers” and “indifferent words heard in wayside inns or on the very road those idiots haunted,” is paralleled by fragmented imagery of the Bacadou children dismembered by both their mental disability and the landscape from which they merge, their faces “glid[ing] past the carriage,” “the bullet head with close-cropped hair (...), its chin in the dust. The body (...) lost in the bushes growing thick along the bottom of the ditch” (53), “the glance [of another] (...) unseeing and staring, (...) without leaving any trace on the misshapen brain of the creature” (54).

Hence, Conrad’s story is construed around silences, absences, and missing links, especially with regard to the phenomenon of retardation, the reasons for which can be to some extent conjectured through a combined textual and denegative evidence provided by Conrad’s text, and a contextual and intertextual one coming from outside of it. The former reveals the presence in the tale of certain covert internal analogies and parallels, which can help fill in the places of indeterminacy, especially if combined with contextual evidence, i.e., the decadent vogue of the day (Davies, 2009, p. 13), and intertextuality. All that, topped with a recognition of the presence of denegation as a governing narrative device in

Conrad's story should transform its critical reception from 'pointlessness' to 'pointedness.'

All three textual parallels of the story, none obvious or conspicuous, concern one and the same issue of a connection between the children and their social milieu, the latter surfacing throughout the tale in three different configurations: the family, Ploumar community and Breton peasantry, all three constituting the missing pieces in the larger jigsaw puzzle of the potential reasons for the children's mental disability.

The first parallel concerns the disguised, suppressed, or falsely conjectured lunacy of some members of the Bacadou and Levaille families alluded to at various points of the narrative, i.e., be it, respectively, the senility in Susan's father-in-law; the alleged lunacy of Susan's own father testified to by Mme Levaille upon learning about her daughter's murder of her husband; or Susan's own alleged and inherited lunacy as implied by Mme Levaille in her spiteful conjectures following Susan's criminal act. Opinions about Susan Bacadou's alleged lunacy circulate after the murder among those that hardly know her except by witnessing her erratic run just before drowning, which includes the compassionate Millot and the Marquis, as well as those that know her very well, like her own uncompassionate mother, who, significantly, bewails Susan's not having died in infancy, or been born "simple – like [her] own," which once again suggests heredity as the culprit (68).

The second parallel visible in the story involves an analogy in Conrad's use of the same fragmented imagery to describe the Bacadou children as quoted above, and Millot, as a member of the Ploumar community, when, quite tellingly, he is mistaken by Susan for her dead husband. He appears as somehow "familiar" to her, his "face" peering for her in the dark: "in the intense obscurity amongst the boulders," "visible in its own sheen that made a pale stain in the night" (69). A striking similarity in Conrad's fragmented rendering of the idiot children and a member of the Ploumar community, who, for all Susan knows at this point, appears to be their father, paradoxically, seems to confirm their genetic affinity, thus providing the key to the story's main missing link of the reasons for the children's mental retardation in a small hamlet where people must have intermarried for centuries and hence not only resembled one another to the point of confusion, but also, as manifested in the Bacadou children, most certainly suffered from different disabilities, the subject which is enveloped in a denegative silence in the tale but surfaces in Conrad's fragmented imagery. Hence, denegation as applied in "The Idiots" appears to be more than a mere aesthetic device, for it likewise carries a crucial thematic message, which at last gives the story its sense.

The third parallel to the effect in the tale is one between the retarded children and the local peasantry, via Jean-Pierre, whose "indifferent"

glance at the cot “along his shoulder” upon the birth of the third child is likened by the narrator to “a deformity of peasant humanity (...), [their] slow[ness] of eye and speech,” which camouflage their feelings in the likeness of “a clod” of the land they till, “fertile and inert, cold and unfeeling, ready to bear a crop of plants that sustain life or give death” (58). Interestingly enough, the consecutive passage contrasts Susan’s daily business around the household with her father-in-law’s “immovab[ility]” (59) and her children’s inertness and indifference analogical to their father’s as well as the whole peasant community’s of the Breton province, as described in the previous passage. Hence, when, like that “clod” of land, the Bacadou children “never smiled, never stretched [their] hands to her, never spoke; never had a glance of recognition for her” (59), they resembled what they had been born of, i.e., the aforementioned “deformity of peasant humanity (...) slow of eye and speech.”

All three parallels seem to point to a quaint, as if genetically conditioned, connection between the retardation of the Bacadou children and the analogical stultification of will, slowness, inertness, and disintegration (fragmentation, decadence) of their threefold milieu, whose sheer size, isolation and antiquity implied by its Celtic provenience, inevitably bring to mind associations with ingrownness and therefore incest, with the resultant potentiality for mental retardation surfacing in the Bacadou children, as well as physical disfigurement suggested in the story through its grotesque imagery of “black denuded boughs, (...) gnarled and twisted, as if contorted with pain” (63). For instance, Jean-Pierre’s demented father is described denegatively as “twisted with rheumatism” (55). Moreover, the story’s very setting is referred to as “a barren circle of rocks and sands” (57), implying both the infertility of the land and the degeneration of its offspring moving around in the vicious circle of incestuous practices. And Jean-Pierre’s shock at the sheer number of his children born into imbecility does not really change much: “Three! All alike! Why? Such things did not happen to *everybody* – to *nobody he heard of*. *One –. But three! All three*” (60–61), for, all that the deep meaning of his words suggests is that not every family in the hamlet and the vicinity has such children as theirs, and that in those to her families that do, they do not come in such numbers.

This transformative reappraisal of the story is further condoned by other detail to the effect in the tale, if only the Bacadou couple’s own wedding procedure, hardly deserving of the name of a ceremony, which invites more questions than it gives answers to but makes perfect sense when seen in this light. Hence, the Bacadou couple’s wedding procession is likened by Conrad to a funeral cortege, accompanied by solemn tunes, with guests all clad in black, and sombre looking, as if sharing in the conspiracy of silence sealed with communal drunkenness to which all guests succumb,

lying around drunk to death for the whole day afterwards, as if in a realization that there is nothing to look forward to in this marriage. The procreational futility of the occasion is implied by the wedding procession “scaring the little birds that darted away in troops right and left” (56).

Jean-Pierre’s off-the-cuff decision to marry Susan, with no courtship beforehand and no engagement afterwards – incidentally, in the exact likeness of Judith Sutpen’s in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, and in similarly incestuous circumstances – is taken by the republican Bacadou one-sidedly and almost overnight, as if surreptitiously, to a tacit agreement of his father, both “talking in hoarse tones,” with “the rays of the setting sun (...) between the outhouses” and “[o]ver the manure heap (...) a mist, opal-tinted and odorous” (55). The very circumstances of this conversation imply corrupt sexuality associated with incest, in this context indicating a close kinship between the couple to be wed. The promptness of the decision, as if taken for granted because made with hardly a need for words either between the father and the son or between the future spouses, confirms the above, and suggests that the couple must have known each other forever in this tiny hamlet, even if they were, for some time prior to the wedding, separated for a year or so, by the groom serving in the military and the bride staying in Paris with a Breton family. Susan’s return home because of homesickness for “the hilly and green country, set in *a barren circle of rocks and sands where she had been born*” (57; emphasis added) implies a contradiction in terms between a promise of fertility, happiness and hope, and the reality of sterility, disappointment and resignation. Hence, it is their right of birth that dooms Susan to inertness in succumbing to the force of habit, the centuries-sanctioned vicious circle of Ploumar’s incestuous practices, and Jean-Pierre to shedding off his worldly republican convictions for parochialism in his persistence in the vile ancestral ways sanctioned by the very land and soil from which they both sprang up.

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The theme of incest in “The Idiots” becomes the more apparent for the tale’s intertextual dialogic confrontation with William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. The most obvious similarity between the two texts involving the motif of ‘idiocy’ reveals the basic difference in its application by both writers: in Conrad’s tale, unlike in Faulkner’s novel, where the idiot boy Benjy Compson has his own narrative section, the Bacadou children are deprived of a voice. Thus, in “The Idiots,” mental retardation is construed denegatively, as an absence serving to assert a significant

presence confirmed by that absence and thereby made the more present for it, the presence being the story’s taboo thematics of incest, which, in Faulkner’s novel written twenty years later, apparently no longer required such camouflaging.

In blaming Benjy’s idiocy on her husband’s family, Mrs Compson implies an unspoken, but otherwise textually confirmed, presence of incest and miscegenation in the Compson household – for Benjy appears to be a product of both. In this, Mrs Compson seems to be the very embodiment of her potential prototype Mme Leveille, who also blames her husband for an apparent lunacy that she recognizes as hereditary in her daughter’s murder of her husband and her alleged suicide. Through Bakhtinian dialogics in the Kristevian recourse to Faulkner’s novel, Susan’s alleged hereditary ‘lunacy’ may be seen as related to the taboo of incest as applied to both the Leveille family and the Ploumar community, the subject on which Conrad’s story is duly silent.

Similarly, Mrs Compson’s own promiscuity with regard to incest in her family, which is suggested in Faulkner’s novel in her favouritism of her eldest son Jason and her naming Benjy after her beloved brother Maury until his mental retardation surfaces, finds its prototype in the adventurous lifestyle of Mme Leveille in Conrad’s story, where she is said to be “perpetually moving,” and “very seldom sle[eping] for two nights together in the same house; (...) the wayside inns (...) the best places to inquire as to her whereabouts” (60), which may put the identity of her daughter’s father in the incestuous Ploumar milieu in question and thus possibly account for the mental retardation of her grandchildren.

Apart from sharing with Conrad’s story the same markers of the presence of the taboo theme, e.g., a dilapidated condition of the house and a declining one of the family, *The Sound and the Fury* likewise reveals Faulkner’s unacknowledged debt to Conrad’s tale for a number of associated motifs: the idea of suicide by drowning; darkness; shadow imagery; muddiness; a watch/clock; and a ride to the cemetery. Just to signal the relatedness of some of this less apparent imagery to the theme of incest in each case, let me briefly elaborate on the last three, the topic otherwise deserving a separate study.

Thus, the heroine of “The Idiots” is described as “soaked and muddy” as if she “[has] been rolling in mud” (65), when she enters her mother’s house after the murder, even though at this point, i.e., before her actual drowning, there appears to be hardly any reason for her muddy appearance. Hence, ‘muddiness’ appears to function here as a marker of Susan’s loss of innocence, just as it does in *The Sound and the Fury*, in relation to Caddy, the incestuous sister of her two brothers – Benjy and Quentin, when she muddies her drawers as a child.

The motifs of a clock in Conrad and a watch in Faulkner refer to the incestuous ancestral pasts of their Breton and Southern families and communities, respectively, which cannot be remedied because they are already past. In Conrad's story, the faceless clock on the Ploumar church tower, described as "a pallid face without eyes" (62), appears to the drunk Jean-Pierre as the embodiment of anonymity in his mad search for the real culprit to blame for his children's degeneracy. In Faulkner's novel, the family's ingrownness in effect of incest is symbolized by a single-handed watch that Quentin Compson inherits from his father and grandfather in the family's incestuous vicious circle. And finally, in both texts a ride to the cemetery suggests eventual acknowledgement of incestuous ancestry as the main reason for idiocy in the family.

To conclude, a recognition of the presence of denegation in "The Idiots," whether in the textual or intertextual context, performs a transformative role in both an epistemological reappraisal of the story in removing from it the odium of senselessness, and in giving Conrad his due with regard to his precursorship over Faulkner in the application of denegation.

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