

Joseph Conrad's *Guys and Dolls* (and Scarecrows and Dummies)

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The action in Joseph Conrad's novel *The Rescue* takes place off the western coast of Borneo, in about 1860. Here Captain Lingard is planning an armed insurrection to restore his friend Hassim to power in Wajo. However a private yacht – the *Hermit* – interrupts his plans by becoming stranded in the area. The yacht contains an assortment of Europeans, and the bulk of the novel traces the doomed love relationship between Lingard and the unhappily married Mrs Travers, who is on the *Hermit* with her husband. A succession of accidents forces Lingard to transfer the married couple to a derelict ship – the *Emma* – and tensions between the two get steadily worse as Mrs Travers becomes more and more infatuated with Lingard.

The first section of Part IV of the novel is devoted in its entirety to a long and bitter discussion between Mr Travers and his wife. She has changed into clothes belonging to Hassim's sister Immada that she has found on the *Emma*, an action that provokes a sarcastic query from her snobbish and racist husband: "Indulging your taste for fancy dress?"

Mrs. Travers clasped her hands behind her head. The wide sleeves slipping back bared her arms to her shoulders. She was wearing a Malay thin cotton jacket, cut low in the neck without a collar and fastened with wrought silver clasps from the throat downward. She had replaced her yachting skirt by a blue check sarong embroidered with threads of gold. Mr. Travers' eyes travelling slowly down attached themselves to the gleaming instep of an agitated foot from which hung a light leather sandal. (264–5)¹

Travers reacts further when his wife proposes to go on deck wearing these clothes, prompting her to point out:

"And let me tell you that those clothes are fit for a princess – I mean they are of the quality, material and style custom prescribes for the highest in the land, a far-distant land where I am informed women rule as much as the men. In fact they were meant to be presented to an actual princess in due course. They were selected with the greatest care for that child Immada." (274)²

¹ All quotations from works by Joseph Conrad are taken from volumes in the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad where these are available. Where no such edition exists at the time of writing, as in the case of "Falk", *Nostramo*, *Chance*, *The Arrow of Gold* and *The Rescue*, quotations are taken from the texts of the Dent Collected Edition.

² In Conrad's "Karain" we learn that Karain's mother – like Immada, a Wajo princess – was also a ruler. It is worthy of note that Conrad displays this item of knowledge about the power exercised

Her husband is not satisfied, telling her that she looks “simply heathenish” in her adopted costume. Although her heart is heavy, Mr Travers’s comments “seemed to force the tone of levity on to her lips”, and she replies, “negligently”, “As long as I don’t look like a guy” (275).

For Diana Knight, this response confirms that Mrs Travers “does not want to be male, but a female who, like Immada, is seen in her society as equal to a man, and afforded the same opportunities” (Knight 2004: 242). Mrs Travers’s comment about women ruling as much as the men in this “far-distant land” supports the general thrust of Knight’s claim. However Knight appears to assume that the word “guy” here is the familiar North American slang term for a man. This is almost certainly not the case. The OED’s third meaning for guy: “a man, a fellow” is described as “originally U.S.” and some British examples are provided from the mid-nineteenth century, but Conrad is unlikely to be using American slang in the second decade of the twentieth century, when this part of the novel was composed – and Mrs Travers is even less likely to be doing so in the middle of the nineteenth century. Moreover, Mrs Travers’s adopted dress may provoke her husband’s anger, but from the description provided it is not at all one to suggest masculinity. Indeed, the fact that Mr Travers’s eyes travel “slowly down” before his “lurid stare” attaches to “the gleaming instep of an agitated foot” strongly suggests that his wife’s “heathenish” attire sets off her femininity, increases her sexual attractiveness for her husband, and triggers rather than neutralizes his sexual desire for her.

Readers who spent their childhood in Britain before about 1990 are more likely to understand what Conrad almost certainly has in mind here. Guy Fawkes’s attempt to blow up the Houses of Parliament in 1605 was for nearly four centuries commemorated in Britain with bonfires on the fifth of November.³ The OED’s first definition of “guy” used as noun reads as follows.

An effigy of Guy Fawkes traditionally burnt on the evening of November the Fifth, usually with a display of fireworks. [...]

Guys were formerly paraded about in the streets on the anniversary of the “Gunpowder Plot” (Nov. 5). They are now more frequently exhibited by children collecting money for fireworks during the days preceding Nov. 5.

The figure is habited in grotesquely ragged and ill-assorted garments [...].

Mrs Travers is not sarcastically telling her husband that at least she does not look like a man, but that her un-English clothing is not such as to make her look like a Guy Fawkes effigy dressed in “grotesquely ragged and ill-assorted garments”. At the end of *The Rescue* the *Emma* is blown up when the character Jörgenson lights with his cigar the gunpowder stored by Lingard in the hold of the ship – a finale that calls to mind the gunpowder in the cellar of the Houses of Parliament that Guy Fawkes and his fellow conspirators failed to ignite.

This appears to be the only unambiguous example of the noun “guy” used to mean “effigy”

by women in a foreign culture twice in his fiction.

³ Although the OED entry suggests that the custom survives today, my native informants tell me that this is not the case. See: <https://bonfirenighttraditions.co.uk/blog/penny-for-the-guy/>

in Conrad's fictional and non-fictional writing,⁴ but there are some interesting marginal cases. "Guy" has a verb form: the OED gives: "transitive. (Originally Theatrical slang.) To make an object of ridicule or derisive wit, to ridicule by innuendo; to trifle with a theatrical part." (This, incidentally, is not a bad description of Mrs Travers's mockery of her husband in the quoted passages.) In his Author's Note to the collection *Tales of Unrest* Conrad notes of one of the stories – "The Lagoon" – that "I have lived long enough to see it gayed most agreeably by Mr Max Beerbohm in a volume of parodies entitled *A Christmas Garland*" (6).

Before the era of plastic masks and polystyrene filling, guys were traditionally stuffed with rags or straw and often had heads formed from papier-mâché. An 1878 review of Harrison Ainsworth's novel *Guy Fawkes* by George Augustus Sala describes Ainsworth's Fawkes as "more monstrous, and more ridiculous, than any straw-stuffed Guy with a pipe in his mouth and his thumbs stuck out the wrong way that was ever consigned to a Lewes or a Guildford bonfire" (Sala 1878: 558). The Sussex towns named are not chosen at random. Today both are eminently respectable, but the Wikipedia entry for "Guy Fawkes Night" reports (without citing a source) that on November 5th "Towns such as Lewes and Guildford were in the 19th century scenes of increasingly violent class-based confrontations, fostering traditions those towns celebrate still".

Mrs Travers's mention of the guy can be linked to Conrad's habit of reversing the characteristics of animate and inanimate entities so that living things are described as objects, and objects are described as having lifelike qualities. I have elsewhere argued that this habit very probably owes something to the influence of Charles Dickens, and that for both writers it is used to mirror a society that treats people as things and that ascribes self-determination to inanimate objects (Hawthorn 1973: 74). The habit is especially marked in that most Dickensian of Conrad's novels, *The Secret Agent*. In this novel

Not only are people treated as things (even a police constable is described "as if he, too, were part of inorganic nature"), but objects start to assume a weird life of their own. A gentleman's coat texture "has a characteristic of elastic soundness, as if it were a living tissue"; the gas-jets in the Verlocs' shop seem to have a life of their own; [...] and a mechanical piano plays tunes without even the help of a piano stool. (Hawthorn 1973: 75)

Closely related to the figure of the guy in Conrad's fiction are the figures of the doll and the dummy. All three are inanimate representations of the human figure, and all three offer Conrad the symbolic possibilities attached to a human figure reduced to an inanimate object.

In "Falk", for example, the character-narrator recalls how his attention was drawn to the people on board the *Diana*, a ship berthed near to his own, and captained by the German Hermann.

⁴ However, in his Preface to the jointly written *The Nature of a Crime*, written to accompany the story's first publication in book form in 1924, Ford Madox Ford describes reading parts of the story aloud to his collaborator, and comparing Conrad's listening face to that of "a terribly sick man, of a convulsed face, of fingers contorted. Guido Fawkes beneath the *peine forte et dure* looked like that" (166).

On the ship were four children, and “sometime before I knew Hermann to speak to, I received on my hat a horrid rag-doll belonging to Hermann’s eldest daughter” (149). The daughter in question, named Lena, seemed – the narrator remarks ironically – to be the only person on the *Diana* in trouble,

and in due course I perceived that the health of the rag-doll was more than delicate. This object led a sort of ‘in extremis’ existence in a wooden box placed against the starboard mooring-bitts, tended and nursed with the greatest sympathy and care by all the children, who greatly enjoyed pulling long faces and moving with hushed footsteps. [...] It was wonderful the way these children would work up their compassion for that bedraggled thing I wouldn’t have touched with a pair of tongs. I suppose they were exercising and developing their racial sentimentalism by the means of that dummy. (157)

If the doll is treated as if it were living by the children, in the course of the story we learn Falk’s secret: he has eaten human flesh and thus treated a human being as a source of food. This takes us back to *The Secret Agent*: when the Assistant Commissioner is shown Stevie’s remains after the premature explosion of the bomb given to him by Verloc, a “waterproof sheet was spread over that table in the manner of a table cloth, with the corners turned up over a sort of mound – a heap of rags, scorched and blood stained, half concealing what might have been an accumulation of raw material for a cannibal feast” (70). *The Secret Agent* also has its dummies. Michaelis’s elbow presents “no appearance of a joint, but more like a bend in a dummy’s limb” (37); in his final conversation with her, Verloc tells his wife to remove her veil as “One can’t tell whether one is talking to a dummy or to a live woman” (193); and at the end of the novel the Professor tells Ossipon “You sit at your beer like a dummy” (230). Exactly what sort of dummy Conrad expects his readers to bring to mind in these instances is hard to be certain about, but most likely he has in mind tailors’ or shop dummies.

However the most sustained involvement of a dummy in a Conradian work comes in *The Arrow of Gold*. In Part 1, Chapter 2 of this novel George, Blunt and Mills have gone to Blunt’s house and are talking.

Mills without a word flung himself on the divan and, propped on his arm, gazed thoughtfully at a distant corner where in the shadow of a monumental carved wardrobe an articulated dummy without head or hands but with beautifully shaped limbs composed in a shrinking attitude, seemed to be embarrassed by his stare. (21)

It transpires that the dummy – on which Blunt has bestowed the title “the Empress” – was used when Henry Allègre was painting Doña Rita: “That dummy had been made to measure years before. It had to wear for days and days the Imperial Byzantine robes in which Doña Rita sat only once or twice herself; but of course the folds and bends of the stuff had to be preserved as in the first sketch” (240). The dummy is referred to on several occasions in the novel, and Andrew Roberts argues that it represents what both Blunt and George wish of Rita – “that her personality disappear, leaving him with her body on which to project his fantasy of the ‘woman of all time’. This fantasy

links George to Allègre, casting Rita in the role of the dummy on which Allègre draped the clothes denoting the roles that he imposed on it and on Rita alike” (Roberts 1992: 531–2).

Throughout the novel Rita is associated with stillness, although this is far from meaning that she does not talk. A long speech of hers to George concludes as follows:

“Did you ever hear of anything so stupid as this affair?” she concluded in a tone of extreme candour and a profound unreadable stare that went far beyond us both. And the stillness of her lips was so perfect directly she ceased speaking that I wondered whether all this had come through them or only had formed itself in my mind. (100)

It is the stillness of her lips, not what she says (and she says a lot), that is for George “perfect”. Roberts argues that Rita’s stillness associates her “with a statue, a painting or a dummy – with motionless, inanimate objects” (Roberts: 536). Rita is actually neither still nor silent, but a succession of men, including George, attempt to impose these qualities on her. However George’s admission that her “unreadable stare” “went far beyond us both” is representative of the fact that throughout the novel he is torn between joining with other men to turn Rita into an object, and admitting to a partially suppressed awareness that she is in fact an independent woman with a will of her own.

Both Mrs Travers and Rita object to being compared to a dummy, both assert their own independent selfhood in the face of attempts by men to reduce them to obedient passivity. The dummies may be of different sorts but the rejection rests on a shared refusal to shrink to what men want them to be. The dummy in *The Arrow of Gold* is without head and hands, and the symbolism here is so obvious as to be almost embarrassing: no means to think, no means to engage creatively with the world. On one occasion George tries to imagine what the missing head of the dummy was like. “I represented it to myself very lonely, without features, like a turnip, with a mere peg sticking out where the neck should have been” (45).

The most common use of a turnip to represent a head at the time of writing was either for a November fifth guy, or, in particular, for a scarecrow. A typical scarecrow would have a body stuffed with straw and turnip for a head – but often with no legs. And if dolls and dummies are often associated by Conrad with oppressed women, scarecrows are more usually associated with men. In Conrad’s *Chance* Flora de Barral, who is one of a succession of young women adopted by the feminist Mrs Fyne, leaves the Fyne household and writes to tell Mrs Fyne that she has eloped with Captain Anthony. Mrs Fyne is convinced that the planned marriage is being entered into only so that Flora’s father, the fraudster de Barral, will be provided for. Mrs Fyne sends her husband, accompanied by Marlow, to London to prevent the marriage, and Fyne confronts Captain Anthony. But the attempt to prevent the marriage has the opposite effect from the one intended.

To him enters Fyne, wound up, if I may express myself so irreverently, wound up to a high pitch by his wife’s interpretation of the girl’s letter. He enters with his talk of meanness and cruelty, like a bucket of water on the flame. Clearly a shock. But the effects of a bucket of water are diverse. They depend on the kind of flame. A mere blaze of dry straw, of course ... but there can be no question of straw there. Anthony of the *Ferndale* was not, could not have been, a straw-stuffed

specimen of a man. There are flames a bucket of water sends leaping sky-high. (262)

Much like the convoluted plot of the novel, Marlow's labyrinthine development of the straw metaphor here is not easy to follow. However the suggestion is clearly that Captain Anthony is a principled character possessed of an inner strength rather than a straw-stuffed weakling who would burn up like a November fifth guy. Scarecrows and toys were also stuffed with straw, so there is no guarantee that this comment is meant to evoke a likeness to an effigy of Guy Fawkes, and although Conrad frequently uses "scarecrow" metaphorically to suggest human figures that are thin and wasting away,⁵ on at least one occasion it is the hollowness that they share with the November fifth guy that is underlined. In the long scene in *Victory* in which Lena manages to deprive Ricardo of his knife, Ricardo indulges the idea that she might play a useful role in his criminal activities, and his comment on this might suggest a familiarity with L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (1900) on Conrad's part.

And, I say, what a decoy you will make! Jee-miny!"

He was carried away, but his face darkened swiftly. "No! No reprieve. What do you think a fellow is – a scarecrow? All hat and clothes and no feeling, no inside, no brain to make fancies for himself. No!" (340)

Such scattered references to straw-stuffed figures in these later works make it possible to explore some more indirect hints involving other human effigies in Conrad's works. For example, early on in *Heart of Darkness* Marlow reports a long conversation with the Manager, and comes to understand that this individual wishes to talk to him because he believes (incorrectly) that Marlow has influence in Brussels. Marlow tolerates the imposition. "I let him run on, this papier-mâché Mephistopheles, and it seemed to me that if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him, and would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt, may be. He, don't you see, had been planning to be Assistant-Manager by-and-bye under the present man, and I could see that the coming of that Kurtz had upset them both not a little". (68–9). What precise force "papier-mâché" has here is hard to fix. Invented in the second century CE in China, the material's history in Europe starts in France, as its name may suggest (although some accounts attribute the origin of the term to French workers in England). By the nineteenth century it was a well-established cheap alternative to porcelain for the manufacture of dolls' and puppets' heads, and might be used both by commercial manufacturers and private hobbyists. However the association with Mephistopheles does suggest a puppet show or a

⁵ In *An Outcast of the Islands*, for example, Almayer tells the outcast Willems to clear out: "Don't you see you frighten the child – you scarecrow!" (79). In *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, Donkin is referred to as "the indomitable scarecrow" (15). In *Nostramo* there is reference to "the barefooted army of scarecrows" (56), while in *Under Western Eyes* Razumov, visiting Ziemianitch's place of abode, encounters a "wet and bedraggled creature, a sort of sexless and shivering scarecrow" (29) washing glasses. And in *The Shadow-Line* we are told that the sick and emaciated Mr Burns "looked like a frightful and elaborate scarecrow set up on the poop of a death-stricken ship to keep the sea-birds from the corpses" (103).

carnival float more than a children's doll.

Papier-mâché and hollowness might seem as insubstantial a link to an effigy of Fawkes as is the term “straw-stuffed” in *Chance*, but the heavyweight support of T. S. Eliot can be called on to strengthen the case that hints of the Guy Fawkes effigy may be found in *Heart of Darkness*. Eliot's 1925 poem “The Hollow Men” includes a quotation from *Heart of Darkness* on its title page: “*Mistab Kurtz – he dead*”, and at the opening of the poem, under the title, we find the epigram “*A penny for the Old Guy*”. Eliot's hollow men, like a November fifth guy, have headpieces filled with straw. But why should Eliot link Kurtz with a Guy Fawkes effigy? Of Kurtz, Marlow famously declares:

I think the knowledge came to him at last, only at the very last. But the wilderness had found him out early and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude – and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core. . . . (104)

In the second section of the poem Eliot also implicitly links the hollow men with scarecrows: “In a field | Behaving as the wind behaves”.⁶ Like scarecrows, these men have no inner resources and no ability to act against rather than in submission to external forces.

Both Conrad and Eliot found in the Guy Fawkes effigy and the scarecrow a perfect representation of the hollowness and lack of inner strength that they observed in some inhabitants of the world around them, and these hollow individuals are all male. No female character in Conrad's fiction is described as hollow, and when women are described or treated as dummies the critique is directed not against these women but against the men responsible for the description or the behaviour. In *The Rescue*, in contrast, Mrs Travers's sarcastic observation that at least she does not look like a guy matches her possession of inner strength and her determination to assert her independence as a woman who is in no way inferior to her husband. Much the same is true of Rita in *The Arrow of Gold*, whose sustained resistance to male attempts to turn her into a passive object of the male gaze has only recently started to receive appropriate recognition from critics prepared to move beyond the view that Conrad's later novels are best viewed as evidence of his “decline”.

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⁶ *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*. (London, 1969), 84.

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