

“Forget, and be at peace!”: The Double Betrayal in Conrad’s “Karain: A Memory”

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Abstract

Joseph Conrad’s “Karain: A Memory” (1897) is frequently discussed as a study of confrontation between the West and the East. However, Bruce Johnson, in his article “Conrad’s ‘Karain’ and *Lord Jim*” (1963), states that “there are many details in the story designed to bring Karain and the Englishmen together in the same illusion-haunted predicament.” This paper examines the illusion of friendship between Karain and Pata Matara and the illusion of friendship between the unnamed English frame narrator and Karain in relation to phantoms, and argues that “Karain: A Memory” can be read as a study of how emotional vulnerability leads to betrayal of friendship. The two characters, irrelevant to their cultural difference, find themselves caught “in the same illusion-haunted predicament.”

“Karain: A Memory,” Joseph Conrad’s fifth short story, was begun in February 1897 and finished in April of the same year. It first appeared in the November issue of *Blackwood’s Magazine* in 1897, and was included in the volume of five stories entitled *Tales of Unrest*, published by T. Fisher Unwin in April 1898. In his letter to Unwin, dated 14 April, 1897, Conrad writes: “I am sending you at last ‘Karain: A Memory’ the tale mentioned during our last interview.... I am rather behind with it but it has cost me some reflection—it has been in great part rewritten and is now I think quite satisfactory” (351). It is interesting to note, as Josiane Paccaud-Huguet points out, that in a letter to Edward Garnett dated 20 April, 1897, Conrad, in connection with the recent death of a friend of Garnett’s, advises him to learn to live with “phantoms”: “Wisdom says: do not fill the vacated place—never! This is the only way to a life with phantoms who never perish; who never abandon one; who are always near and depart only when it is time also for yourself to go. I can tell for I have lived during many days with the faithful dead” (352).

“Karain: A Memory” is also about the phantoms of friends “who never perish” and “who never abandon one.” The story is told by an unnamed frame narrator who was a member of a gang of smugglers selling firearms and ammunition to some natives in Mindanao seven years

earlier. They develop a kind of friendship with a charismatic Malay chief called Karain. During their last visit to Karain's domain, they are faced by a crisis when Karain makes a surprise visit to their schooner at night and asks for either a refuge in Europe or a potent charm to escape from the ghost of a friend whom he had killed unwittingly and managed to exorcise from his memories until recently. They give him a charm and part, but the significance of Karain's betrayal is confirmed by another betrayal which subsequently takes place in London seven years later.

Criticisms of "Karain: A Memory" can be divided roughly into two categories: those that discuss the story as a study of intercultural conflict between the West and the East, and those that discuss it as a study of illusion. The first category includes such criticisms as Ted Billy's in his *Wilderness of Words*, which focuses on how Conrad "contrasts the traditional orientation of the Malays with the obsessive egoism governing Western culture" (121), and Amar Acheraoui's "Colonial Encounters and Cultural Contests: Confrontation of Orientalist and Occidentalist Discourses in 'Karain: A Memory,'" which examines "the collision of Western and Eastern perspectives" by tracing "how far Conrad sets Orientalist and Occidentalist discourses in a productive dialectical relationship, using irony and derision to unsettle essentialist assumptions of identity and culture" (153).¹ On the other hand, those that belong to the second category include such criticisms as Lawrence Graver's in his *Conrad's Short Fiction*, which states that its theme is that "illusions have the power to conquer remorse and guilt" (32), and Bruce M. Johnson's "Conrad's 'Karain' and *Lord Jim*," which argues that "Conrad is far from thinking Karain merely a superstitious native and that there are many details in the story designed to bring Karain and the Englishmen together in the same illusion-haunted human predicament" (13).

In this article, I would like to take up the theme of the illusion of friendship in "Karain," and discuss in what sense Karain and the frame narrator can be said to have shared "the same illusion-haunted human predicament."

The first illusion of friendship

"Karain: A Memory" is regarded as "one of Conrad's earliest frame narratives...that anticipates Conrad's later important frame narratives" (Peters 49). It was made possible because "Despite the magazine's middle-class readership and bias towards right-of-centre politics, William Blackwood generously welcomed work that was artistically ground-breaking and politically sensitive, providing Conrad an opportunity to extend the narrative techniques he had experimented with in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*" (Knowles & Stape 1). For this reason, it is necessary for

the reader "to watch the teller as well as the tale" (Graver 31); the frame narrator is "not an objective omniscient narrator looking down on his creation from above" (Humphries 160). The narrative tone of the opening scene is positive. He recalls with assurance the idyllic beauty of the bay, Karain's resolute but restrained followers, and Karain himself, "the master of an insignificant foothold on the earth" (38).

However, as soon as the narrator's observation is focused on Karain in the third paragraph of Part I, perception verbs suggestive of uncertainty, such as "appear" and "seem," begin to crop up, and the narrative voice loses its ring of assurance. We are told that Karain's domain "*appeared* to be bounded only by the sky" and was full of a life that "*seemed* unaccountably empty of anything that would stir the thought, touch the heart, give a hint of the ominous sequence of days," and "*appeared* to [them] a land without memories, regrets, and hopes" (39; emphasis added). The frequent use of these verbs of uncertainty wakes up in the reader a vague suspicion against the insisted security, and this suspicion is intensified by the sense of uneasiness felt in the second description of the bay. The second description of the bay, unlike the first idyllic description, contains obscure and negative expressions, such as "a bottomless pit" (39), "a dropped thread" (39), and "a flash of darkness" (40). This sense of uncertainty is further intensified by the succeeding paragraph which for the first time presents Karain's mysterious attendant, "a silent old fellow" (39), who seems to possess "a burdensome secret of existence" (39).

Finally, the last two long paragraphs of Part I that introduce the metaphor of stage indicate a disparity between Karain's appearance in "the illusions of the stage" (43) and his reality in "the reality of the universe" (43). These paragraphs also evoke uncertainty and uneasiness in the reader by such phrases as "*an absurd expectation* of something heroic going to take place"; "one could not imagine *what depth of horrible void* such an elaborate front could be worthy to hide"; "his quality was *to appear clothed in the illusion* of unavoidable success"; and "he carried *the seed of peril within*" (40-41, emphasis added). For the above reasons, when the frame-narrator subsequently declares that Karain is his "very good friend" (42), it is not easy for the reader to accept these words at their face value, for he cannot help wondering on what grounds the narrator could make such a claim.

In Part II, Karain's relationship with the frame narrator is described in more detail. In the first half of Part II, Karain is presented as "a private gentleman" (46) making an unofficial visit to the schooner at night. The narrator believes that Karain makes these visits because he firmly believes that the Englishmen are "emissaries of Government" (46), more specifically, that

they are the emissaries of the government of Queen Victoria, whom he holds in respect and awe. He thus believes the three Englishmen to be gentlemen “as well born” (46) as himself.

This attachment to good birth may be the reverse side of his lack of confidence in his own birth. Karain’s mother, who was the ruler of a small Bugis state on the island of Celebes, married “a rich trader, a Korinchi man of no family” (48) after the death of her first husband, and Karain was “her son by that second marriage” (48). Karain still regrets his exile from his native country where, in spite of his “unfortunate descent” (48), he was appreciated not only for his valour but for his close association with those in power, and believes that the frame-narrator, who happens to have visited his native country, must have heard of his former reputation there, and therefore he alone can understand and appreciate his past glory. In other words, the friendship has been imposed on the frame narrator by Karain; Karain needed him to play the role of a well-connected friend to enhance his own splendour in the illusions of stage.

The second illusion of friendship

At the beginning of Part III, the narrator sums up his opinion of Karain after two years of intermittent contact. According to the narrator, Karain has “patience,” “foresight,” “fidelity,” and “steadfastness” (52). He seems “fearless” (52), but his “sagacity” (52) strangely lacks the ability to judge what can and what cannot be prevented. When pressed to acknowledge that there are certain things that cannot be prevented, he evinces resentment against being treated with injustice and strong desire to overcome it by violence: “sometimes we caught glimpses of a sombre, glowing fury within him—a brooding and vague sense of wrong, and a concentrated lust of violence...” (52).

The story then quickly moves on to Karain’s last visit to the schooner on a stormy night, prompted by the death of the old sword-bearer. The other two Englishmen involved in this gun-running, Jackson and Hollis, are introduced, not just as the narrator’s partners but also as individuals. For the first time, Karain is presented dramatically, and the three white men guess by intuition that Karain has come to them as “a fugitive” (57) exhausted by “the anger and the fear of a struggle against a thought, an idea” (57). It is said that at that moment Karain had “the power to awaken in the beholders wonder, pain, pity, and a fearful near sense of things invisible, of things dark and mute, that surround the loneliness of mankind” (58). This demonstrates that the life in Karain’s domain which at first sight “seemed unaccountably empty of anything that would stir the thought, touch the heart, give a hint of the ominous sequence of days” (39) is in fact quite capable of stirring the thought and touching the heart of even strangers. Moreover,

Karain's power to awaken in the beholders the feelings of wonder, pain, and pity, and even "a fearful near sense of things invisible" gathers strength as his tale progresses, and leaves a strong impression on the frame narrator.

The first thing that Karain tells them is that he and his friend Pata Matara "shared hunger, danger, fatigue, and victory" (62) during the war amongst the four states of Wajo, and have even saved each other's lives. Karain says "he was my friend" (62), in a way somewhat reminiscent of the narrator's words, "my very good friend." Karain and Pata Matara may have fought as equals in war, but in peace their social status differs. Pata Matara is "the chief of many villages round the great lake that is in the middle of [their] country as the heart is in the middle of a man's body" (62), and he is "the possessor of jewels, of lucky weapons, and of men's devotion" (63), but Karain is of "unfortunate descent" (48) and no more than "the chief of a stockade at the mouth of the river," collecting "tolls...from the passing boats" (63) for his half-brother, presumably his mother's son by her first marriage, and therefore a Ruler.

There is also a subtle difference between Pata Matara's reaction to his sister's elopement and that of Karain's. Pata Matara feels "grief" (64) which is understandable as he has lost his sister and has been disgraced by her. On the other hand, Karain's reaction of "anger and sorrow" (64) is second-hand in the sense that his feelings have been stirred by Pata Matara's calls of imprecation to his sister (64). Karain does not really share Pata Matara's feelings and even wonders why he should feel "anger and sorrow," but neglects to seek for an answer: "I was angry—and sorry. Why?" (64)

The subsequent two paragraphs that narrate their journey to Java are told mainly in the third person plural "we." However, after an old man tells them to desist from revenge, and especially after they come upon "a place where crumbling old walls had fallen amongst the trees, and where strange stone idols...seemed to live and threaten in the light of [their] camp fire" (66),² passages that adopt "we" are superseded by passages that adopt the first person singular, "I," suggesting a split in their relationship:

And on the road, by every fire, in resting-places, *we* always talked of her and of him. Their time was near. *We* spoke of nothing else. No! not of hunger, thirst, weariness, and faltering hearts. No! *we* spoke of him and her? Of her! And *we* thought of them —of her! Matara brooded by the fire. *I* sat and thought and thought, till suddenly *I* could see again the image of a woman, beautiful, and young and great and proud, and tender, going away from her land and her people. Matara said, 'When we find them we

shall kill her first to cleanse the dishonour—then the man must die.’ *I* would say, ‘It shall be so; it is your vengeance.’ He stared long at me with his big sunken eyes. (66, emphasis added)

There is a suggestion that while Pata Matara, whose motive of the journey is firm, wishes to talk only of revenge, Karain, whose motive for joining this journey of revenge has been rather impulsive, is beginning to suffer from “hunger, thirst, weariness,” and to feel his heart falter. Pata Matara broods by the fire trying to devise an effective way of revenge, while Karain conceives of an image of a woman who could console and soothe his present sufferings. Therefore, when Pata Matara says, “When we find them we shall kill her first to cleanse the dishonour—then the man must die,” (66) Karain responds half-heartedly, “It shall be so; it is *your vengeance*” (66, emphasis added). Pata Matara stares long at Karain, because he senses something dubious in Karain’s response.

The role of the first phantom

After two years of weariness and hardships, Karain’s impulse for revenge naturally weakens, but he cannot accept this fact because it amounts to betrayal of friendship. Therefore, he imposes on Pata Matara’s sister the role of a phantom with irresistible power to dissuade him from revenge and seek peace. It was said that “her beauty was extreme, *silencing the reason* and ravishing the heart of the beholders” (64; emphasis added), so she offers him an ideal pretext for being dissuaded from revenge. Pata Matara’s sister’s ghost appears in response to his need and gains strength as Karain’s circumstances are reduced further by the need to support Pata Matara by giving up the last handful of rice or water, covering him to keep off the cold, and nursing him in sickness.

Because Pata Matara’s sister was known for her beauty, the image that Karain conceives of her is mainly visual: “I saw her every day—always! At first I saw only her head, as of a woman walking in the low mist on a river bank. Then she sat by our fire. I saw her! I looked at her!” (68), and again, “I saw her!...I tell you I saw her long black hair spread behind her upon the moonlit water as she struck out with bare arms by the side of a swift prau” (68). Finally, he says:

“At night she looked into my face. And she was sad! Her eyes were tender and frightened; her voice soft and pleading. Once I murmured to her, ‘You shall not die,’ and she

smiled...ever after she smiled!...She gave me courage to bear weariness and hardships. Those were times of pain, and she soothed me” (69).

It is Karain himself who first proclaims that she shall not die. It is no wonder that after this his feelings quickly shift from anger and sorrow (64), to “joy and sorrow” (67), and then to “regret, tenderness and sorrow”(70).

The role of the second phantom

The circumstances surrounding the death of Pata Matara, the climax of the first half of Karain’s narrative, are too full of contingent elements to assert that Karain shot his friend intentionally. Karain and Pata Matara were on their way to Atjeh, but they *happened* to land in Delli because their vessel ran on a sandbank. Although they often lacked the money even to buy food, they bought a gun because they *happened* to be lucky and earned a little money. When Pata Matara gives the gun to Karain to shoot the Dutch trader, his sister *happens* to glance towards where Karain was and smile, which reminds him of the promise he made to her apparition that she shall not die, and so he cries out in vain to Pata Matara to return. His cry induces Pata Matara’s sister to throw herself in front of the Dutch trader in order to guard him with her body, and thus Karain *happens* to be left to shoot either Pata Matara’s sister or Pata Matara himself, as he cannot shoot the trader without shooting Pata Matara’s sister. We will never know what Karain might have done, if he had had the chance to shoot the Dutch trader without shooting Pata Matara’s sister. There is no doubt that the weakening of Karain’s determination to abide by his friend’s revenge by secretly indulging in a consoling illusion has affected Karain in shooting his friend. However, as Albert J. Guerard points out, it must be said that “he *involuntarily* shoots Pata Matara (91, the emphasis is Guerard’s), because the fact is that although Pata Matara had ordered him to shoot, Karain, who yearned for peace, no longer wished to kill anyone.

The confession strongly affects the frame narrator’s feelings. It seems to him that the cabin is “full of noiseless phantoms, of things sorrowful, shadowy, and mute” (74), and it makes him think of “the invincible illusions that can make life and death appear serene, inspiring, tormented, or ignoble” (74). For the second time he is exposed to illusions by Karain.³

The death of Pata Matara signals the end of the journey of revenge, because, as Karain had told Pata Matara, it was his revenge, not Karain’s (66). When Karain retires to a dark for-

est and gains peace, Pata Matara's sister's phantom disappears, because he no longer needs it to offer him a pretext and to soothe and console him. He says, "She came no more.... It was well. I did not want her; I wanted no one" (75).

In contrast to his sister's phantom that stood for peace, Pata Matara's phantom stands for violence. However, its appearance is reminiscent of his sister's. Pata Matara's sister's phantom appeared initially in response to his need when he was thinking hard: "I sat and thought and thought, till suddenly I could see again the image of a woman" (66). Similarly, Pata Matara's phantom appears when Karain is thinking back to his past; it appears when his feelings have been sufficiently soothed that he could afford to "[begin] to remember [his] wanderings" (75). At first the phantom just stares "fiercely with his big sunken eyes" (75), just as Pata Matara "stared long at him with big sunken eyes" (66) when he sensed something dubious in Karain's attitude for the first time. As in the case of the sister, Pata Matara's ghost reflects the reality of the past. The memory of Matara is closely connected in Karain's mind with Pata Matara's last words, "kill with a sure shot" (71), and his own act of violence, the actual shooting of Pata Matara.

The first betrayal of friendship

Karain may be "a lover of war and danger" (77), but he does not wish to kill for the sake of the killing. Yet, driven by Pata Matara's phantom that incites him to violence, Karain finds himself seeking not only danger, but "violence, and death" (75). Fighting in the Atjeh war, he might have appeared valiant to the strangers, but he had all the time wished to die and gain peace rather than kill: "he [Matara's ghost] ward off the blows...Why? I wanted peace, not life" (76). Karain wants Pata Matara's ghost to go away, but it will not leave him, because unlike his sister's ghost, it stands for Karain's deeply seated emotion.

Matara's ghost is a reflection of the violent side of Karain's emotionality: "a sombre, glowing fury within him—a brooding and vague sense of wrong, and a concentrated lust of violence" (52) that the frame narrator has sensed in him but Karain himself does not want to face up to. Not only the narrator but Karain himself recognizes it when he says later, "some day I will strike into every heart I meet" (77). At this juncture, Karain seems to have needed this violent energy to get him out of the crisis, as he could not have stayed in the forest for ever. Therefore he imposes on Pata Matara's phantom the role of giving him a pretext to give vent to his "concentrated lust of violence;" and thus by seeking "danger, violence and death" he finally manages to regain his former status as a valiant warrior.

However, once he has regained his status as a brave warrior, Karain again finds himself seeking peace of mind during the Atjeh war (75). It is to drive away his fear of this "lust of violence"—or "the seed of peril within" (41)—that Karain imposes on the old man the role of a wizard who can exorcise ghosts. Karain meets him for the first time when he has just returned from a pilgrimage. He may be wise, but "very lonely" (76), because he has lost all his family. The fact that he refuses for a long time to give Karain a charm that would make him safe, and only later agrees to give it to him "with a sigh and a smile" (76) suggests that he, like the three Englishmen, only reluctantly accepts the role of a wizard who can exorcise ghosts. The old man is "the old wizard" (50) or "the old sorcerer" (51) to the chiefs, "the old sword-bearer" (45) or "the old confidant" (47) to the narrator, yet to Karain he is first and foremost "father, mother, protection, refuge and *peace*" (76; emphasis added). It would not have mattered to Karain whether the old man was really a sorcerer or not, because he would have imposed that role on the old man anyway. Karain, by thus choosing to exorcise his friend's memories, confirms his betrayal of Pata Matara, and as a result, Pata Matara becomes one of "the cast-out and reproachful ghosts of friends admired, trusted, traduced, betrayed, left dead by the way" (83).

The second betrayal of friendship

After the death of the old man, to fill the vacant role of exorcising ghosts and to prevent Pata Matara's ghost from inciting him to violence, Karain is ready to seize on any form of charm that has the power to drive away the memories of Pata Matara. Partly because of his "unfortunate descent," Karain has from the beginning been fascinated by the Queen and shown great curiosity. For this reason, it does not come as a surprise that he readily accepts the Jubilee coin as a charm.⁴ The significance of the scene in which Hollis gives Karain the Jubilee sixpence as a charm does not lie so much in the fact that the three white men succeed in persuading Karain of its efficacy, but in the fact that the scene reveals the frame-narrator's vulnerability to illusions.

When Hollis returns from his cabin holding a small leather box, he reminds his partners that everyone has been haunted by the image of a woman or betrayed a friend in the past. Hollis has just returned from a six months' leave, and the fact that he has such things as "a bit of silk ribbon," "a girl's portrait," "a narrow white glove," and "a slim packet of letters" (82) suggests that he has been romantically involved with a girl at home, so he certainly knows what it means to be "haunted by some woman" (81). Similarly, Jackson's immediate reaction of protest at Hollis' cynicism seems to suggest that Jackson, who plays Spanish love-songs on his old gui-

tar (54), is also aware of what it means to have illusions. The only person who remains silent at this point is the frame narrator. However, when he sees Hollis' "amulets" (82), he experiences a strong emotional reaction accompanied by a vision of ghosts revealing his latent vulnerability to illusions, a vision reminiscent of the revelation that Marlow experiences in *Lord Jim* when he is faced by Jewel's fear of being abandoned by Jim (*Lord Jim* 313). This is the third and the last time that the narrator is exposed to illusions by the circumstances surrounding Karain's surprise visit to the schooner, following Karain's unsettling appearance and his confession of the killing of Pata Matara, and it is the most overwhelming of the three:

...it seemed to me, during that moment of waiting, that the cabin of the schooner was becoming filled with a stir invisible and living as of subtle breaths. All the ghosts driven out of the unbelieving West by men who pretend to be wise and alone and at peace—all the homeless ghosts of an unbelieving world—appeared suddenly round the figure of Hollis bending over the box; all the exiled and charming shades of loved women; all the beautiful and tender ghosts of ideals, remembered, forgotten, cherished, execrated; all the cast-out and reproachful ghosts of friends admired, trusted, traduced, betrayed, left dead by the way—they all seemed to come from the inhospitable regions of the earth to crowd into the gloomy cabin, as though it had been a refuge and, in all the unbelieving world, the only place of avenging belief.... It lasted a second—all disappeared. (82-83)

As the opening words, "it seemed to me" suggest, this experience is the narrator's personal experience, and it reveals him to be the most Western-minded amongst the three Englishmen. He has nearly been overwhelmed by this momentary experience, because he has always believed himself to be resistant to illusions. He is one of those men about whom Karain' says: "your people, who live in unbelief, to whom day is day, and night is night—nothing more, because you understand all things seen, and despise all else" (78).

Thus it does not come as a surprise that back in London the narrator fails to share Jackson's intense memories of Karain. As Ted Billy points out, "The narrator's chance meeting with Jackson, newly arrived in London, sets the stage for a final, locking scene that could provide a moral judgment on the outcome of the experience" (122). The narrator is afraid that the memories of Karain might expose him again to the vision of illusions, and therefore he chooses to believe in the busy London scenery—"all things seen"—and to despise Karain's memories.⁵

He cried, "Forget, and be at peace!" (84) to Karain when they parted and that is exactly what the narrator himself does here. He betrays Karain by denying the significance of Karain's memories and manages to retain his peace of mind, thus proving himself to be one of those men "who pretend to be wise and alone and at peace" (82).⁶ The fact that the peace he believes to have gained is only an illusion is suggested in his own description of the London scene in which he hears "a headlong shuffle and beat of rapid *footsteps*" and "a rumour vast, faint, pulsating, as of panting breaths, of beating hearts, of gasping *voices*" (88, emphasis added), reminiscent of Pata Matara's ghost in Karain's story.

Conclusions

Both Karain's illusion of friendship for Pata Matara and the frame narrator's illusion of friendship for Karain fail to survive their emotional vulnerability. Karain surrenders to his fear of his own lust for violence and betrays his friend by exorcizing his memories, and the frame narrator surrenders to his fear of being reminded of his vulnerability to illusions, and betrays Karain by disowning his memories.

Thus read, "Karain: A Memory" is a story of a double betrayal of friendship. Both Karain and the narrator choose to exorcise the memories of his friend to retain their illusion of peace of mind. In this sense, it may be said that, as Johnson states, both the Malay and the Englishman are "in the same illusion-haunted human predicament" (13), despite their cultural differences.

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Notes

1. There are also some articles in Japanese which discuss the theme of intercultural conflict in "Karain," such as Kaneko (2000) and Yoshioka (2002).
2. The descriptions of the carved images are reminiscent of Javanese Hinduism which flourished in the 13th and 14th centuries. The ruins of Hindu temples were scattered through villages and in the countryside, and some of the deities were thought to be capable of harm.
3. The frame narrator is exposed to illusions by Karain for the first time when Karain appears on the schooner at night, and awakens in the frame narrator "a fearful near sense of things invisible, of things dark and mute, that surround the loneliness of mankind" (58).
4. Erdinast-Vulcan holds the opposite view that it is Hollis who persuades Karain to accept the coin as a charm: "In making Karain believe in the charm, he [Hollis] makes it work for him" (33). The significance of the jubilee sixpence is discussed in several articles including Watts (2003) and Stape (2005).
5. Shamoto argues that the memories of Karain's story enable the frame narrator to grasp reality in London (75).
6. In contrast to Marlow, the frame narrator chooses to exorcise the memories of Karain, and therefore in this sense he does not anticipate Marlow as Paccaud-Hugue suggests. (*Joseph Conrad: Voice, Sequence, History, Genre* 127)