

Shadows, Funerals, and the Terrified Consciousness in Frank Collymore's Short Fiction

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Frank Collymore (1893-1980) is a central figure in the development of West Indian literature, yet very little has been written about his fiction. Kenneth Ramchand's pioneering literary history, *The West Indian Novel and its Background*,¹ is typical in its account of Collymore's role in the developing literature. Ramchand's, like most versions of the history of West Indian literature, identifies the 1940s and 1950s as the pivotal moment in the literature's emergence in English. Collymore's role in this story is as founder and long-time editor of *Bim* (since 1942), a Barbadian literary journal which Ramchand hails as "the most West Indian periodical in the islands."² Collymore encouraged and published then unknown writers like Derek Walcott, George Lamming and Kamau Brathwaite, leading Edward Baugh to conclude that Collymore was "at the center of the West Indian literary awakening of the 1940s and 1950s."³ Yet Collymore was more than editor and mentor; he too contributed to the growing body of West Indian fiction with his short stories, which were brought together in a posthumous collection titled *The Man Who Loved Attending Funerals and Other Stories*.⁴ Despite Collymore's short fiction output, virtually no extended explorations of his stories have been published. Through readings of a number of Collymore's stories, I hope to add another dimension to the history of West Indian fiction and recuperate for Frank Collymore a place in the canon of West Indian literature.

One of the few examinations of Collymore's short stories appears as the Afterword to the collection *The Man Who Loved Attending Funerals and Other Stories*. In this Afterword, Harold Barratt writes that "Collymore's

themes...are not uniquely West Indian"; on the contrary, Collymore's writing treats the universal themes of "the dark underside of human beings" and "issues such as alienation and loneliness."⁵ Collymore himself helped to foster this myth of the universality of his writing. As an editor soliciting fiction for *Bim*, Collymore asked that short story writers "give us something with a wide appeal,"⁶ clearly underlining his wish not to pursue "a policy of exclusive West Indianness."⁷ In Collymore's stories, the narrative voices make repeated claims about things like "the essential condition of mortality" or "the essential loneliness of humanity."⁸

Despite these aspirations to universality, Collymore's stories are patently West Indian. What lends coherence to Collymore's stories is their depiction of the psychological dislocations of the near-white Creole middle class in Barbados in the years surrounding national independence. By looking at representative stories from his early, middle and late fiction, I make two arguments: first, that during the 30 years that Collymore published fiction, his stories became more and more marked in their West Indian subject matter; and second, that although some of Collymore's stories are apparently devoid of markers of West Indianness, even these unmarked stories provide a precise socio-psychological map of West Indian society.

A brief survey of Collymore's publication history will serve to illustrate the first of these claims. I divide Collymore's career into three time periods, each of which moves towards more identifiably West Indian material. Collymore began publishing his stories in *Bim* in 1942. During the next ten years, he published eleven stories, from "Proof" in 1942 to "Mark Learns Another Lesson" in 1951. Of these early stories, more than half deal with physically or mentally debilitated characters. His first story, "Proof," is set in Eastern Europe; the other stories either indicate a West Indian setting or no setting at all. Markers include West Indian place names, foods, or characters speaking in dialect. In this set of stories, race is never mentioned; the characters' speech patterns stand in for race so that Joe, the yard-boy in "The Snag," speaks in non-standard English and is presumably black, while Mark and his aunts speak British English, and are presumably near-white or high brown. The story "Shadows," which I will discuss in the second part of this paper, is exemplary of this time period. Although it is devoid of

historical markers and apparently empty of West Indian content, it is at every moment marked by its West Indianness.

During the next ten years, from 1952 to 1961, Collymore published only three stories: "The Story of the Tragic Circumstances Surrounding the Death of Angela Westmore," "The Man Who Loved Attending Funerals," and "Rewards and Chrysanthemums." The first and third stories have explicitly Barbadian settings; the second story contains the first mention of race in Collymore's fiction. During this period, Collymore slips into using Barbados as the setting for his fiction, and as the source of his content. As a result, social and geographical markers abound. Later in this paper, I will look at "The Man Who Loved Attending Funerals" as an allegory of a pivotal moment in Barbadian history—the transition from colonial status to independence.

The final decade of Collymore's career, from 1962 to 1973, intensified the trend set during the middle period. These stories range from the Naipaulian satire of "R.S.V.P. to Mrs. Bush-Hall," to the Walcottian allegory of "A Day at the Races." By this time, Collymore was not only comfortable with using West Indian settings but with pursuing some of the same themes as his contemporaries: race, the relationship of the middle class to the folk, the dubious legacy of colonialism. From this period, I will look at "To Meet Her Mother" as a story in which race, though never mentioned, is always present in heavily coded ways.

According to Barratt and Baugh, Collymore's fiction explores "issues such as alienation and loneliness"⁹ and "solitaries, eccentrics, psychotics even."¹⁰ Yet, these psychological explorations make more sense when seen in their West Indian context. For my discussion of the three apparently un-West Indian stories—"Shadows," "The Man Who Loved Attending Funerals," and "To Meet Her Mother"—I would like to introduce the notion of the "terrified consciousness" which Kenneth Ramchand adopts from Frantz Fanon to describe the fiction of Jean Rhys, Phyllis Shand Allfrey, and Geoffrey Drayton. Ramchand takes his inspiration from this famous passage of *Wretched of the Earth*:

Decolonization is always a violent phenomenon...The need for this change exists in its crude state, impetuous and compelling, in the consciousness and in the lives of the men and women who are colonized. But the possibility of this

change is equally experienced in the form of a terrifying future in the consciousness of another “species” of men and women: the colonizers.¹¹

Ramchand explains that “adapting from Fanon, we might use the phrase ‘terrified consciousness’ to suggest the White minority’s sensations of shock and disorientation as a massive and smoldering Black population is released into an awareness of its power.”¹² Yet Ramchand omits one significant component of the “terrified consciousness” which will become evident in my reading of “Shadows”: the West Indian Creole’s fear of darkness comes not only from the threat from without of the Black population coming to consciousness, but also from the fear of the blackness within—the potentially polluted, impure blood that the West Indian Creole equally dreads.

Ramchand uses the concept of the terrified consciousness to describe Antoinette in Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Antoinette’s world view is fixed by visions of black and white, obsession with shadows and darkness around her and within herself: “I forced myself to look out of the window. There was a full moon but I saw nobody, nothing but shadows”;¹³ “Everything was brightness, or dark. The walls, the blazing colours of the flowers in the garden, the nuns’ habits were bright, but their veils, the Crucifix hanging from their waists, the shadow of the trees, were black. That was how it was, light and dark, sun and shadow, Heaven and Hell.”¹⁴ Compare this vision with the first page of H.G. de Lisser’s novel, *Morgan’s Daughter*:

Up from the bottom of the ravine toiled a man, for the path was steep, and *light from the moon* penetrated but feebly into *depths obscured* by the heavy overhanging foliage. The sound of the waterfall which he faced was thunderous; he could see the *white gleaming watering flash* as he made his way to higher ground, but for the most part *darkness enshrouded him*, darkness and desolation. Soon the waterfall was on his left, and now the *blackness about him* was intense and he had to move forward and upward with caution. He had entered a *natural tunnel* which, even at noontide, was *gloomy*, and through which, thousands of years ago, the river which now precipitated itself on the

other side in a tumultuous cascade must have flowed.
(Emphasis added)¹⁵

As in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, darkness and light compete for narrative space in this introduction to the main character of *Morgan's Daughter*, a character who will be the novel's hero and villain, and who will at times appear as a white man and at other times as a black man.

The story "Shadows," published in 1942 and typical of Collymore's early stories, lacks any marker to indicate its time or place. The action is narrated by a raving lunatic who is given neither race nor nationality. Barratt compares the story's ambience to that of a Poe tale. The narrator begins by introducing himself as a well off recluse who was able to live off of his inheritance and never had to work. He also considers himself a writer. His dementia stems from his isolation. Feeling himself cut off from the rest of humanity, he stays within his house to escape from them. He blames all of his problems on this house: "So old, so very old, with the unforgotten lives of past generations of our family lying thick about it... That house," the narrator confides, "moulded me, made me what I am" (9).¹⁶

According to Baugh, the house's darkness "become[s] symbolic of the dark, secret places of his own mind."¹⁷ The story, Baugh continues, "may be read as a fable about the ways of evil and the terrors which the mind holds for itself."¹⁸ Baugh makes a coherent argument for the universality of "Shadows." Yet, while for Barratt the story evokes Poe, it also resonates with the above passages from Jean Rhys and H.G. De Lisser.¹⁹ The interplay of darkness and light structures "Shadows" just as it does *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Morgan's Daughter*. In a Caribbean context, this motif has definitively racial overtones of the "inherited personality traits,"²⁰ which Baugh delicately hints may be part of the story in "Shadows."

The story's imagery repeatedly returns to the archetypal images of Caribbean history as they appear in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Morgan's Daughter*: the shackles of slavery, the flames of slave revolt, the dark shadows of the islands' black populations. The narrator obliquely acknowledges this part of the story by describing the shadows that haunt him as "memories of some remote, ancestral past" (9). The story's setting—the narrator's house—is closely associated with these shadows. He calls the house "black" and "menacing" (14), the embodiment of the "shackles of the past" (15). The house and its shadows are the dark history of

the West Indies returning to torment the “well off” narrator.

His first wife is the catalyst for the narrator’s possession by these ghosts; he calls her the one who “realizes the unreal” (11). He marries her not for love, but from “a desire to establish power over another human being” (11). He tells us that he “bought” this woman, and compares her to “the slave born and bred to be sold at auction to the whims and desires of the lustful ever-conquering male” (12). Yet she is far from being a passive recipient of the narrator’s sadism. When he realizes what he has done, he grows to “hate and fear her” (13): he is repulsed by the desire within himself to subjugate her. She threatens him; she is continually described as possessing a “flame of unrest” (11), a “smouldering hatred...blazing in her heart” (12). Although he strangles her and puts out the “flame of her spirit” (13), he realizes that she will always haunt him as the embodiment of the horror he sees within himself.

“Shadows,” like other stories from the collection, describes the near white middle class West Indian who fears blackness: the threatening potential of the soon-to-be independent black majority of the islands, and the possibility that he carries black blood within himself. As in “The Man Who Loved Attending Funerals” and “To Meet Her Mother,” race dominates marriage as racially unmarked characters must continually insist on a pure European lineage. The narrator of “Shadows” projects his own “blackness” onto another, Elaine, and then kills her. He is driven mad in the end because he cannot come to terms with the Other within himself.

“The Man Who Loved Attending Funerals,” like “Shadows,” is narrated by a man who considers himself an outcast. On the surface, this story seems to have no apparent markers of Caribbeanness but, written in 1955, it can be read allegorically as a story about the end of the British Empire. The narrator is obsessed with maintaining propriety and tradition in the colony. He laments the loss of tradition and the fact that he is the only person who still dresses and behaves properly at the funerals he attends. He remembers as a young man how he “admired the elegant costumes of the gentlemen: the impressive, fascinating frock coats and top hats, their suave and mysterious blackness, their stateliness, their pageantry, their austerity: proud symbols of the dignity and authority of man!” (98) From his 21st birthday on, he insists on attending funerals in formal, black attire, even while others begin coming “in everyday wear: tweeds, serges, gaberdines [*sic*] of various

shades of blue, grey and brown.” “What is our society coming to?” he asks himself (102).

Although the narrator claims to be class and colour blind (99), this obsession with propriety and being “suitably attired” betrays his conservative, elitist love of tradition. At one point he reveals that as a young man he nearly married, but could not when he “learnt with amazement and horror that [his fiancée’s] grandmother had been the illegitimate child of a garrison officer and a common servant-girl” (101). Collymore develops this theme of the importance of lineage in match making in more detail in the story “To Meet Her Mother.” Elsewhere, the man who loved attending funerals hints at his own tainted blood by confiding that he never liked to play outside as a boy because “in the tropics the sun works havoc with one’s complexion” (98).

The story progresses towards its climax as the narrator has the premonition that his associates, the well off and well respected bourgeoisie of the island, are all destined to die very soon. Surrounded by doctors, accountants, and merchants, he “could see only leaden faces, saffron faces, waxen faces, livid faces, all of them almost drained of their living essence, all sealed with the sure expectancy of swiftly approaching death” (103). This impending doom, while never named, is the coming of national independence. The real revelation comes to the narrator when a couple of “urchins” turn his car’s mirror back onto him and he sees in his own reflection his impending doom. These lower class boys, boys from the folk, show him that he, the near-white middle class writer, belongs to this condemned class. Speaking in 1955, the narrator realizes with terror that national independence will soon bring about an end to the privileged position of his class.

As in many of Collymore’s stories, the protagonist of “To Meet Her Mother” is an upwardly mobile young middle class man, Fitzwilkinson Cumberbatch, “a clerk at a wholesale merchant’s in the city” (145). His relationship to the lower class people of the island is a precarious one: while he clearly despises the women he encounters on the bus who cannot afford to travel by any means other than public transportation, he is still one of them—at least until he can afford to purchase a car. He sees marriage as the quickest route to social improvement, although one fraught with danger, for he must be certain to marry the right woman. Sylphide represents a

potentially perfect marriage: her mother “was a Mrs. Robinson; but despite the surname, he was sure they were of Portuguese descent...It would be a step up the social ladder for him when the marriage came off” (146). Visiting her house, he finds his hopes confirmed when he sees “the large settee, the chairs—easy chairs and straight-backed chairs, the rug patterned with gigantic pink roses...everything bore unmistakable signs of quality...of money” (148).

But beneath this apparently perfect surface lurks a dark threat to Fitzwilkinson’s aspirations. For precisely the “light brown complexion of the girls and their dark hair” which Fitzwilkinson thinks “hinted at European ancestry” (146) also hint at African ancestry. What he eventually finds is that his perfect wife, Sylphide, is not so different from the women on the bus who so repulse him. She is less a real person in the story than an idea, or better an ideal, to which the protagonist aspires. He disembodies her completely, thinking of her, as her name suggests, as an “image” and “a creature of the air” (145) as opposed to the vulgar bodies which he encounters in everyday life.²¹ By dissociating Sylphide from her body, he removes her from the real historical entanglements of the Caribbean, allowing him to imagine her as untainted Europe rather than contaminated Barbados.

Though race is, as in so many of Collymore’s stories, only hinted at in “To Meet Her Mother,” in this story Fitzwilkinson’s preoccupation with women’s weight becomes a stand-in for race. Bodies automatically carry with them the potential for racial pollution. The fat women on the bus have an abundance of corporeality—a gross, overly present body which disgusts the protagonist. The women speak in Bajan English, as does the maid, in opposition to the standard English used both in the narration and in the protagonist’s speech. They are clearly marked as the black lower class that the narrator hopes to escape yet fears will always haunt him. Fitzwilkinson believes that fat women “were the revolting opposites of all that constituted his ideal of femininity” and that “he could never see a fat woman without being profoundly affected, almost nauseated” (144). This extraordinary reaction makes sense when it is remembered that Fitzwilkinson’s notion of femininity, as seen in his relationship with Sylphide, is tied to his own longings for whiteness and social improvement. The fat women on the bus

menace this aspiration. Blackness and fatness become conflated into one, and his repulsion for the fat “hucksters” depends upon this conflation.

In this light, the racial and social implications of the ending of the story become even more readily apparent. Arriving at Sylphide’s house, Fitzwilkinson, still willfully blind to reality, insists on seeing only what he wants to. Reading the name of her neighbourhood, the Cedars, he thinks “What a pretty name...how appropriate that his Sylphide should live in a house that bore such a romantic name” (147). But the narrator notes that he is “ignoring the fact that it was completely overshadowed by a large tamarind tree and nothing else” (147). In his haste to see Europe in everything connected to his loved one, he fails to notice the much more obvious presence of the Caribbean in her surroundings.

Finally, Fitzwilkinson is awakened to the fact that Sylphide might not represent the slender white European goddess that he wants her to be. Meeting her mother, he finds her to be the fattest woman he has ever met, in marked contrast to her lovely daughter. Still, he does not yet realize that Sylphide is anything less than “a creature of the air” (145) or “the living image of his dreams...fairy-like, ethereal” (149). She is, of course, just as real and corporeal as her mother, if not quite as corpulent. His desire for a bodiless Sylphide collapses when he realizes that the young girl in the picture whom he had mistaken for his loved one is, instead, a younger version of her now terribly obese mother. This realization that Sylphide too is a body and not the ideal embodiment of European culture that he desires, that she may turn out to be, like her mother, an apparently thin (white) young woman hiding the fat (black) woman within ultimately drives Fitzwilkinson from the house and away from Sylphide forever.

Collymore’s final story, “A Day at the Races,” narrates the process that his stories have undergone in their move towards more West Indian material. Mark, the young protagonist of two of Collymore’s earlier stories, is now a school child. As the child of middle class parents, Mark feels alienated from other boys; when the boys discuss the annual horse races that “everybody went to,” Mark is “forced to maintain a moody silence” (153) about these races of which he has no knowledge. The story details Mark’s desire to attend these races, and his eventual success in doing so. This desire to merge with the folk is typical of West Indian writing of that time period, from Sam Selvon to George Lamming to Derek Walcott.²² For this reason,

the ending of "A Day at the Races" is particularly telling. After Mark has been to the races, he reveals his real motivation in the final lines of the story. Considering the story's beginning, we expect Mark to feel pleased because he is no longer an outcast, no longer alienated; he has managed to be with the people he envies. Yet, this is not what pleases him. It is that none of his classmates could go to the races themselves and that they all want to hear his stories: "That day everyone crowded around Henry and Mark. He could now speak with authority" (166).

This story might be read as an analogy for Collymore's project as a whole. The story is about a middle class boy who goes slumming, collects the stories of those down below, and returns to tell those stories, to "speak with authority." This story sounds similar to Derek Walcott's autobiographical reflections in "What the Twilight Says" where he describes "two pale children staring from their upstairs window, wanting to march with that ragged, barefooted crowd."²³ "A Day at the Races" is a story about the desire to know the West Indian folk, the "proper" subject of Caribbean literature. Collymore spent three decades writing about another subject, the West Indian middle class; just when he arrives at this moment, of taking the "folk" as his subject, rather than "speaking with authority" about the island's black majority, Collymore stops writing altogether.

To return to my initial premise that Collymore's writing has not yet been accepted into the canon of West Indian literature, we might suppose that his writing has been labeled "not as palpably West Indian"²⁴ as that of others because of the group of West Indians he chose to depict. In his influential essay *The Pleasures of Exile*, written at the end of the boom in West Indian fiction in the 1950s, Lamming argues that the common denominator among writers creating a body of work known as West Indian literature is that "the substance of their books, the general motives and directions, are peasant."²⁵ From this premise, he laments that "one of the most popular complaints made by West Indians against their novelists is the absence of novels about the West Indian Middle Class."²⁶ Yet, Lamming need look no further than his own mentor, Frank Collymore, to see just such a writer—a writer who takes the West Indian middle class as his subject and treats this subject with as much depth and subtlety as any other West Indian writer.

Notes

1. Kenneth Ramchand, *The West Indian Novel and Its Background*. London: Faber and Faber, 1970.
2. Ramchand, 72.
3. Edward Baugh, "Frank Collymore," *Fifty Caribbean Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*. ed. Daryl Dance. N Y: Greenwood Press, 1986, 122-132.
4. Reinhard Sander and Harold Barratt, eds., *The Man Who Loved Attending Funerals and Other Stories* by Frank Collymore. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993.
5. Harold Barratt, "Afterword," in *The Man Who Loved Attending Funerals and Other Stories*, 167.
6. Frank Collymore, "What *Bim* Requires," *Bim* 1.3 (December 1943): 76.
7. Edward Baugh, "Introduction," *An Index to Bim: 1942-1972*. ed. Reinhard Sander. Trinidad and Tobago: UWI Extra-Mural Studies Unit, 1973, 11.
8. *The Man Who Loved Attending Funerals*, 52 and 97.
9. Harold Barratt, "Afterword," *The Man Who Loved Attending Funerals*, 167.
10. Baugh, "Frank Collymore," 124.
11. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. trans. Constance Farrington, NY: Grove Press, 1966, 11.
12. Ramchand, 225.
13. Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. NY: Penguin Books, 1966, 31.
14. Rhys, 14.
15. H.G. de Lisser, *Morgan's Daughter*. London: Macmillan Caribbean, 1980, 5. The novel was serialized in *Planters' Punch* from 1930-31 and first published in book form in 1953.
16. All page references to Collymore's short stories are taken from the edition of *The Man Who Loved Attending Funerals and Other Stories* indicated above.
17. Baugh, "Frank Collymore," 125.
18. Ibid.
19. These stories all incorporate elements of the Gothic, a genre that achieved popularity in the 18th and 19th centuries in Britain just as the English were coming to terms with their dark-skinned, colonial Others. In Charlotte Brontë's work especially, uncanny, Gothic elements are closely tied to this colonial context. The Gothic tradition passed to the Caribbean through early works (by white insider/outside) such as *Tom Cringle's Log* and *Warner Arundell*.
20. Baugh, "Frank Collymore," 125.

21. By definition, a sylph is as an "imaginary spirit of the air" or a "slender graceful woman or girl." Thanks to Alyson Kiesel for calling my attention to this connection.
22. "A Day at the Races" was published at exactly the same time that Kamau Brathwaite, Gordon Rohlehr, Eric Roach and Kenneth Ramchand were having their infamous "Savacou Debate" about the proper style and subject matter for West Indian literature. A summary of the debate is given in Laurence Breiner's "How to Behave on Paper: The *Savacou* Debate," *JWIL* 6:1 (July 1993): 1-10.
23. Derek Walcott, "What the Twilight Says: An Overture," *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays*. N Y: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1970, 22.
24. Barratt, "Afterword," *The Man Who Loved Attending Funerals*, 167.
25. George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile*. Ann Arbor, MI: Uof Michigan Press, 1960, 38.
26. Ibid.

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