1

Conrad, Women, and the Critics

Nothing is more familiar to readers of Joseph Conrad than the image of the author as a lonely seafarer, drawing on the memories of life on board ship to construct the tales that sustained his career as a writer. We can easily picture the sensitive, displaced individual fashioning modernist narratives of dislocation and despair upon the moral framework of a male community to which he gave priority, and from which, above all, women were excluded. The conventionalised view is highly selective, but it has nevertheless proved remarkably enduring, and has reduced the value of much of the work that fails to fit its frame of reference. My purpose is to challenge the prevailing image of Conrad and to offer an alternative to its tenacious hold on the critical tradition. But before such a powerful paradigm can be overturned, it needs to be understood in the light of its long history. This chapter focuses on the construction of Conrad's public image, beginning with an account of Conrad criticism (including the earliest notices of his published work), at the same time considering the marketing strategies used by various editors and friends to promote his fiction. Subsequently, I explore the ways in which his biography has been understood and disseminated in the light of the received critical tradition.

Conrad's association with the sea established his reputation as an author of exotic adventure told from within a predominantly male discourse. The marketing of his early novels capitalised on the portrait of the sailor turned writer, a gentleman of the Polish 'szlachta'[1] who transformed the voyages of his youth into tales expressing nostalgia for the male seafaring community (as in 'Youth' and 'Typhoon'). For example, in 1904, *T.P.'s Weekly* published an unsigned biographical article to promote

[1] The term 'szlachta' has no equivalent in English. It refers to a hereditary class of landowning gentry established initially in medieval Poland, and to which Conrad's father belonged. See Ch. 2 n. 5.

the serialisation of *Nostromo*, drawing attention to the masculine tone of the writer's former life and its compatibility with his current authorial intention. His unnamed biographer observed that he 'wanted things always to be shipshape, in his writings as at sea'. While Conrad had previously endeavoured 'to turn his Conway boys into fine seamen', he now applied the moral incentives of the 'ancient and honourable craft' of seamanship to his new career as a writer.[2] Advertisements in the journal complemented the masculine image, with instalments of *Nostromo* sandwiched between notices for 'Three Nun's Tobacco' and ' "Citizen", the World's Best Boot for Men'. Prior to the serialisation of *Nostromo*, the tone of male exclusivity associated with the initial representation of Conrad had also been supported by the contexts in which his early works appeared. *Heart of Darkness* (1898–9), *Lord Jim* (1899–1900), 'Youth' (1898) and other short stories were published in *Blackwood's Magazine*, a literary journal suffused with the character of the gentleman's club, often imperialist in perspective and at times jingoistic in tone.[3]

The popular impression of Conrad as a male-oriented author of nautical tales coincided with his reputation for awkwardness with women. When Lady Ottoline Morrell expressed a desire to meet Conrad, the writer Henry James deterred her: 'But, dear Lady . . . he has lived his life at sea . . . he has never met "civilised" women.'[4] Lady Ottoline's later comments on Jessie Conrad corroborated this line of thinking. She saw Conrad's relationship with his wife not as one of compatibility, but one where Jessie merely represented 'a good and reposeful mattress for this hypersensitive, nerve-wrecked man, who did not ask from his wife high intelligence, only an assuagement of life's vibrations'.[5] The undignified description of Jessie, emphasising her passive role

[2] *T.P.'s Weekly*, 22 January 1904, 113. The Conway was a naval training ship of the time, of the type represented in *Lord Jim*.

[3] *Blackwood's* had initially developed out of a Tory response to the Whig *Edinburgh Review* in 1817. Thomas Power O'Connor founded *T.P's Weekly* in 1902. Designed to reach a wide audience, it was nevertheless sober in presentation. O'Connor was also well known in turn-of-the century journalism for his establishment of the *Star* and the *Sun*.

[4] Lady Ottoline Morrell, *Ottoline: The Early Memoirs of Lady Ottoline Morrell*, ed. Robert Gathorne-Hardy (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 240.

[5] Ibid. 241.

and lack of sophistication, confirmed a popular image of the author's indifference to female companionship.

This reductive view of Conrad shows considerable persistence. With varying degrees of subtlety, the popular image still reflects the isolated sailor of exotic Polish origins transformed into a man of letters, who married beneath him to provide himself with a housekeeper, but who still preferred male camaraderie to the society of women. In 1960, Graham Hough extended the argument to include Conrad's literary audience. He insisted on Conrad's inaccessibility to women readers, locating the author's work in a 'male world':

> In my experience very few women really enjoy Conrad, and this is not only because the feminine sensibility so often ceases to function at the mere mention of a topsail halyard, but because the characteristic concerns and occupations of the woman's world play such a very small part in Conrad's work.[6]

The presence of women characters in Conrad's novels has caused the greatest difficulties for such critics. Even by the 1980s some commentators could only account for Conrad's inclusion of female roles in his novels by referring to the author's commodification of them. Edward Said identified a list of 'substances' occupying Conrad's imagination, which the author drew upon as organising materials for his narratives: 'Lingard's gold, Kurtz's ivory, the ships of sailors, Gould's silver, the women that drew men to chance and romance'.[7] Meanwhile, some feminist critics continue to interpret Conrad's narratives as unremittingly patriarchal, reading into his presentation of women a blatant and uncomplicated misogyny. Joyce Carol Oates, for example, is convinced that Conrad's 'quite serious idea of a "heroine"' is always someone 'who effaces herself completely, who is eager to sacrifice herself in an ecstasy of love for her man'.[8] Drawn in by his lasting reputation, critics have dismissed the possibility that women have had any positive impact on Conrad's creative

[6] Graham Hough, *Image and Experience: Studies in a Literary Revolution* (London: Duckworth, 1960), 214.

[7] Edward Said, *The World, The Text and the Critic* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 106.

[8] Joyce Carol Oates, *Contraries: Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 84.

life, that they have taken a valid position in his fiction, or that Conrad spoke to women readers.

Yet the evidence of his letters and essays suggests a much more complex relationship between Conrad, the women in his life, and the female characters of his narratives. While biographers and scholars have privileged Conrad's correspondence with his many male literary friends, his letters to Marguerite Poradowska, Emilie Briquel, Constance Garnett, his wife Jessie, and others reveal an identification with women that has gone largely unnoticed. One preliminary reference will serve as an example of the material that has been neglected or dismissed. Early in his career as a writer Conrad made a remarkable confession to his close friend Mrs Helen Sanderson, in a letter congratulating her on the birth of a daughter. The tone of the letter frankly expressed his anxieties as a father, and his somewhat bewildered and rather distanced early relationship to his son Borys (who had been born the year before, on 15 January 1898). Most arresting in this letter is the following remark: 'I do not mind owning I wished for a daughter. I can't help feeling she would have resembled me more and would have been perhaps easier to understand.'[9] This statement so baffled one commentator that he dismissed it with an air of disbelief: 'His explanation for his preference is to say the least, extraordinary, for it carries the implication that he viewed himself as having more in common with girls than with boys.'[10]

Conrad's identification with the female sex in this letter offers a starting point for a critical re-evaluation. If, similarly, Conrad identified with the daughters of his fiction, how might we reread the roles of Nina, Aïssa, Winnie Verloc, Freya, Alice Jacobus, Flora de Barral, Adèle de Montevesso, whose sense of exclusion from the central narratives of men often match Conrad's self-confessed feelings of dislocation and despair?

In order to address this issue we need first to gain a historical perspective on the formation of critical attitudes to the subject of Conrad and women, showing the ways in which the expectations of the market place (set against Conrad's ambiguous

[9] Letter to Mrs Helen Sanderson, 26 February 1899, *CL* 2, 173.

[10] Bernard C. Meyer, *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytic Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

attitude to the marketing of his novels), the early reception of his fiction, and the construction of the author's public persona created a precedent for a lasting view of his artistic incentives. Attempts were underway early on to deconstruct the prevailing image after Conrad's death, but they were soon overshadowed by the influence of critics of the 1940s and 1950s who recovered Conrad's work for modernist studies. These critics promoted the conventionalised view because it fitted with their particular agenda, and they often dismissed the material that failed to accommodate their themes.

I

In the light of subsequent criticism, it is something of a paradox that the earliest critical responses to Conrad's women characters were favourable. Following the publication of *Almayer's Folly* (1895), several critics considered that the *only* merit of his first novel resided in his presentation of female figures. *Literary World* (Boston) described the novel as 'a rather dull and dreary story', but one in which the scenes between Mrs Almayer and her daughter Nina show 'remarkable insight into the point of view of the Eastern woman'.[11] The London *Daily News* praised the characterisation of Nina Almayer,[12] while the New York *Bookman* described her presentation as 'masterly'.[13] Conrad's early Malay novels gained a limited reputation for the author, not for the rigorous intellectual component for which the works of the middle period became associated, but for their qualities as exotic 'romances'. H. G. Wells considered that the 'gloom' of *Almayer's Folly* was only relieved by the 'rare beauty' of the love story, and that *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896) showed great authenticity as 'real romance'.[14]

In fact, contrary to the reviewers' assumptions, even at this early stage of his career Conrad was writing against rather than aligning himself with popular or conventional generic forms.

[11] Unsigned review, 'Fiction: *Almayer's Folly*', *Literary World* 27 (18 May 1895), 155.
[12] Unsigned Review, *Daily News*, 25 April 1895, 6.
[13] James MacArthur, 'New Books: Romance in Malaya', *Bookman* 2 (Aug.–Sept. 1895), 39–41.
[14] H. G. Wells, review, *The Saturday Review*, 16 May 1896, 509–10.

He brings the influence of French realism (from his reading of Flaubert, Maupassant, and Pierre Loti) to the genre of exotic romance, where his protagonists operate, not in a fantasy world of adventure, an 'empire of the imagination',[15] but in a bleak world of colonial opportunism. Nina Almayer's conflict of identity—split as she is between the influences of her Europhile father and native mother—disturbs the harmony of the romance closure. And the shifting narratorial perspectives of *Outcast* allow the reader to question the function of Aïssa's role as *femme fatale* of a tale of imperialist adventure. As Aïssa's presence increasingly disrupts political negotiations (between white and native factions), Conrad comments on the way in which women are denied access to the action in the masculine world of the adventure novel, while the female presence represents both the (white European male's) romantic desire for oblivion, and the threat of 'the other' whom he wishes to overpower and colonise. To the male protagonist Willems, the eroticism of Aïssa's enticing gaze represents the palpability of a weapon: 'he felt the touch of a look darted at him' (68–9)—'hard, keen, and narrow, like the gleam of sharp steel' (71). Willems's experience complies with the trope of male abandonment of identity to the enchanting but deadly threat of the *femme fatale*. But Aïssa's sense of Willems's alterity is presented with equal force, complicating the notion of a fixed imperial subject embodied in the white European male. To her, Willems also represents the exotic 'other' and from her perspective, his sense of colonialist superiority is enduring. He fails to concede any real autonomy to her. Instead, he takes exception to her cultural and religious customs, 'tearing off her face-veil' and trampling on it 'as though it had been a mortal enemy' (39), expecting her to abandon her people

[15] Reference to H. Rider Haggard, *She* (1887; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994). Conrad may have been alluding to the name of Haggard's protagonist, Ayesha in his novel. Haggard's male protagonists explore 'the heart of the darkness' of Ayesha's Africa (261). See also a further allusion to Haggard's novel in Conrad's 'The Lagoon', *Tales of Unrest* (1898; London: Dent, 1947), 187–9, in the sense of dislocation experienced by the white man on entering the lagoon. Haggard also remarked how 'three modern Englishmen . . . seemed . . . out of tone with that measureless desolation' during their river journey in Africa (70). See also Andrea White, *Joseph Conrad and the Adventure Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 99. White compares Haggard to Captain Marryat or Charles Kingsley: 'Haggard initiated a certain shift in the genre of adventure fiction that subverted some of its most traditional claims concerning the imperial subject.'

without offering her either Christian compassion or honesty in return, but concealing from her instead the fact that he is married. Conrad allows Aïssa a moment of clarity as she realises Willems's moral weakness and 'the tremendous fact of our isolation' (250)—the kind of recognition we usually associate with the Conradian hero. Yet her tragedy, like Willems's, emerges from a failure of vision. She is unable to acknowledge that she provides only temporary consolation for Willems, a transitory appeal in the face of his loss of identity and exile from the white man's world. When Willems's wife and son arrive at Aïssa's encampment and Aïssa shoots her lover from grief and despair, Conrad to some extent presents her role sympathetically, from the perspective of the native woman habitually betrayed by the white man. Aïssa's crime of passion, which will be repeated by two of Conrad's later heroines, Mme Levaille ('The Idiots') and Winnie Verloc in *The Secret Agent*, initiates a recurring theme in the fiction in which women play an important role in the critique of imperialism (both in colonialist and European settings).

The early critics' praise of Conrad's female characters reflects the substantiality of their roles in the plots of the Malay fiction rather than the ambiguity of their position within a critique of imperialism. But these views also reflect the expectations of critics testing a new arrival to the market for fiction. Just as the publisher William Blackwood, who initially gave Conrad an opening in *Blackwood's Magazine*, anticipated that he might develop into another Stevenson or a Kipling, reviewers of this period probably felt that he would go on producing exotic romances, maturing as a narrator of patriotic tales or adventure stories.

However, Conrad's reputation for the invention of romance roles for female characters would soon be eclipsed by the publication of *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* in 1897. Review after review regretted that 'the only female in the book is the ship herself'.[16] While *Literature* and *The Academy* both found Conrad's dismissal of 'hackneyed themes'[17] more challenging than most, the publications with a wider and less strictly literary readership

[16] Unsigned review, *Daily Mail*, 7 Dec. 1897, 3. There are women in *The Nigger*—the master's wife and Archie's mother—but these hardly count as substantial roles.

[17] Unsigned review, *Literature*, 26 March 1898, 354; and unsigned review, *The Academy* 1 January 1898, 1.

felt otherwise. James Payn, in *The Illustrated London News*, regarded Conrad's omission of the romance plot as something of an affront to the reader, comparing Conrad with the then famous writer of the sea, Clark Russell, who 'is so far complaisant to his readers as to admit a petticoat on board, even at the risk of the Queen's Regulations'. He warned the author of *The Nigger* that his readers, 'not content with ships and his ships' crews . . . may land and leave him'.[18]

With the publication of *The Nigger* a critical pattern begins to emerge in relation to Conrad's work. Reviewers of the more popular publications indicated that a steady diet of popular romance, aimed at a wide female readership, was Conrad's safest guarantee of sales. But at the same time his reputation was deliberately being fostered in a different way, first by W. E. Henley, who serialised *The Nigger* in *The New Review* (1897),[19] and then by William Blackwood, who soon realised that Conrad's work would be unlikely to reach the audiences commanded by Captain Marryat or Rider Haggard. These publishers promoted the image of the author as a writer for a somewhat select, coterie audience, thus initiating his reputation as what would later be termed 'modernist'. Their aim (one that coincided to some extent with Conrad's intellectual preference), was to avoid capitulating to the stale plots and characters required by the popular market.

Conrad desired popularity, yet shunned the writing of a 'popular novel'. He refused to send 'The Return' to *Pearson's Magazine*, even though this popular journal had expressed interest in his early work, and he informed T. Fisher Unwin that the piece was 'too good for any blamed magazine'.[20] In 1902 he

[18] James Payn, *Illustrated London News*, 5 Feb. 1898, 172. It is interesting to note that Rider Haggard had gained great success with *King Solomon's Mines* (1885; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) in spite of the narrator's admission that 'there is not a *petticoat* in the whole history' (9). But Haggard adhered to the genre of 'boy's own' adventure, whereas Conrad's more overtly philosophical style in *Nigger* broke the conventions of the adventure tradition.

[19] See Peter D. McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 22–67, for a discussion of Conrad's shaping of the *Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* for the audience of the 'Henley circle'.

[20] Letter to T. Fisher Unwin, 5 Nov. 1897, *CL* 1, 405. Conrad later thought less of 'The Return' (published in *Tales of Unrest*, 1898). In the Author's Note he referred to this story as 'a left-handed production' (viii).

wrote to George Blackwood (William's nephew) that 'it is an unspeakable relief to write for *Maga* [*Blackwood's*] instead of for "the market"—confound it and all its snipperty works'.[21]

In his discussion of the commercial background to the modernist novel, David Trotter outlines the circumstances in which the literary market of this period facilitated the somewhat ambiguous position of a writer like Conrad. The marketing of fiction underwent a significant change by the end of the 1880s. The demise of the 'three-decker' novel that had supplied circulating libraries like Smith's and Mudie's since the 1820s made room for the marketing of single novels at competitive prices. This climate gave rise to the bestseller, supplying publishers with the bulk of their revenue. But the single-volume novels simultaneously established a different sort of market. Publishers also produced higher-priced volumes for little profit, appealing to readers of literary taste in order to foster their reputation for supporting 'good' literature.[22] They soon realised that Conrad could be marketed in single volumes in this way (although, as Conrad discovered, the financial rewards for the writer were slight).[23]

Experimental writers like Conrad struggled to establish themselves financially in the new system, but, as Peter Keating has remarked, the advent of the single volume at least enabled them to make contact with a minority readership that was sympathetic to their work.[24] Garnett, Henley, and others all encouraged Conrad in his writing of sea stories whose philosophical tone prevented their assimilation into the genre of conventional

[21] Letter to George Blackwood, 28 Jan. 1902, *CL* 2, 375. Many of Conrad's early short stories were published in literary journals rather than popular magazines: 'The Idiots' in *The Savoy* (1896); 'An Outpost of Progress' in *Cosmopolis* (1897); 'The Lagoon' in *The Cornhill* (1897).

[22] David Trotter, *The English Novel in History* (London: Routledge, 1993), 64. Trotter argues that this situation in the marketplace gives rise to the modernist novel.

[23] See also Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund, *The Victorian Serial* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1991), 243–5, who remark on the modernist characteristics, even of the serial version of *Lord Jim: A Sketch*, published in *Blackwood's*. The plot fails to advance in the traditional manner by adding new episodes to Jim's life in a directly linear fashion. Instead the narrative goes on 'circling back to report again and again' a single important moment (the jump from *The Patna*).

[24] Peter Keating, *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel 1875–1914* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1989), 405.

adventure fiction. The image of Conrad as the lonely sailor-turned-writer, dedicated to truth and authenticity, resistant to the pull of the marketplace, fitted well with the redirection of his work towards an intellectual élite. To some extent his failure to supply the endless heroines of popular romance accommodated the image of Conrad cultivated by the publishers of 'good' literature for a marginal readership.[25] His movement away from the subject of romance after the early Malay fiction (however sceptical the treatment) precipitated an enduring dismissal of his abilities and even desire to write about or for women.

II

In fact, relatively few Conrad novels and short stories contain no women characters, but by 1903 his reputation (fostered partly by literary friends and editors) had been firmly established on the strength of a series of narratives associated with the masculine world of the sea. This theme reached the status of a commonplace in Conrad criticism after the publication of *Tales of Unrest* (1898), and *Lord Jim* (1900), narratives that contained only limited female roles. The earlier praise for the women of the Malay fiction was replaced by references to the few 'subsidiary sketches of savage womanhood' used 'as figures to fill a space in the background of his painting'.[26]

Jewel's role in *Lord Jim* may be slight, but she fulfils an important function in Conrad's critique of romanticism in this novel. For Jewel, Jim's 'suicidal' act questions the validity of *her* status as 'heroine'. His decision to face death at the hands of Doramin, rather than escape with her, signifies his renunciation of the life she offers him and constitutes the habitual betrayal of the woman of indigenous or mixed race by the white man. Her accusation to Marlow and Stein, that 'you always leave

[25] See Alan Judd, *Ford Madox Ford* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 77. Conrad discussed at length the problem of genre and popularity in the context of his collaborations with Ford Madox Ford. They set themselves an 'exercise' in writing for the market with *Romance* (1903), in which they aimed not to achieve 'great literature', but to write instead 'an exotic thriller that would be as successful as R. L. Stevenson's books'.

[26] Unsigned review, *Glasgow Evening News*, 30 April 1903, 2.

us—for your own ends' (348) disturbs the male narrators' empathetic view of Jim. Marlow fails adequately to justify Jim's actions to Jewell, and Stein offers her his weakest defence of Jim's action, retreating to a position of patronising moral superiority over the woman by claiming that she simply fails to understand him. Marlow's subsequent account of Jewel's courageous and practical expression of loyalty to Jim, right up to his death, serves only to strengthen *her* moral position.

The publication of *Nostromo* in 1904 elicited further disappointment from the *Daily Telegraph*, specifically for Conrad's 'disinclination to concern himself with the delineation of feminine nature'. The reviewer found promise in the figure of Mrs Gould, but, he lamented, 'it is only a sketch' that is 'never permitted to develop'.[27] Yet Emilia Gould's function in the narrative is not merely a symbolic one. Her growing self-consciousness of the 'plaster-cast' pose of the colonialist women shows a development in characterisation.[28] Initially she glides gracefully between the elegant spaces of her husband's residence, occupying the role of benevolent colonialist. However, her increasingly strained relations with a distant husband suggest her emerging disillusionment with Charles Gould's ambitions. Towards the end of the novel Conrad identifies the full extent of her insight, her recognition of a hollow sacrifice to her husband's obsessive enterprise in acquiring the San Tomé silver:

> An immense desolation, the dread of her own continued life, descended upon the first lady of Sulaco . . . lying passive in the grip of a merciless nightmare, she stammered out aimlessly the words—
> 'Material interests.' (522)

The physical manifestation of Mrs Gould's painful inward vision transforms her formerly optimistic pose. Though sparingly drawn, the figure of Mrs Gould plays a fundamental part in generating the critique of capitalist venture central to the novel.[29]

[27] Unsigned review, *Daily Telegraph*, 9 Nov. 1904, 4.

[28] Jim Reilly, *Shadowtime: History and Representation in Hardy, Conrad and George Eliot* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 35. Reilly observes that the Sulacan women, whom Conrad presents as powdered 'till they looked like white plaster casts' (73) dramatically symbolise the effect of political stasis in *Nostromo*.

[29] In fact Conrad will return repeatedly to the presentation of gender to explore the way in which imperialism manifests itself in acts of individual consciousness as much as in relationships between nations. His presentation of the relationship

But Conrad again failed to accommodate popular tastes. One reason lay partly in critics' response to the newsworthiness of women at this time. In the rise of public interest generally in the 'Woman Question', and in the wake of increased activity in the Suffragist Movement, as well as the publication of the New Woman novelists, Conrad's immediate male contemporaries were all producing galleries of women characters from a variety of social classes and backgrounds.[30] Henry James is perhaps the most obvious comparison, along with H. G. Wells, J. M. Barrie, Arnold Bennett, and John Galsworthy.[31] Indeed, Bennett had identified the new 'democratising' principles of popular fiction that called for the representation of the 'mystery' of the ordinary woman, rather than that of the idealised woman of romance (Mrs Gould to some extent occupies the latter category, at least initially). In his Preface to *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908) Bennett remarked that he knew he must choose for his heroine 'the sort of woman who would pass unnoticed in a crowd'.[32]

As Conrad attempted to alter his marketing strategies and reach a wider audience at this time, he began to work on a novel that emphasised the role of a working-class female protagonist. He later insisted that in *The Secret Agent* (1907) he had originally intended to convey 'the history of Winnie Verloc'.[33] But as he developed the narrative he expanded the roles of Verloc and the anarchists. While Winnie's actions are fundamental to the outcome of the story, some critics felt that the larger social theme of the novel obscured her central role in the domestic plot. Again in *Under Western Eyes* (1911), Conrad's striking

between Almayer and his daughter Nina, Aïssa and Willems, Charles and Emilia Gould, Peter Ivanovitch and Tekla, de Barral and Flora, Zangiacomo and Lena, de Montevesso and Adèle, all demonstrate that imperialism may be expressed as a complex interaction, not just between races and nations, but between the private and public domain.

[30] See Scott McCracken, 'Postmodernism, a *Chance* to Reread?', in Scott McCracken and Sally Ledger (eds.), *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) for a discussion of Conrad's response to the New Woman Novel.

[31] See Alfred Habegger, *Henry James and the 'Woman Business'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), for a discussion of James's relationship to the popular traditions.

[32] Arnold Bennett, *The Old Wives Tale* (1908; London: Grosset and Dunlap, 1911), vi.

[33] Letter to Ambrose Barker, 1 Sept. 1923, in Jean-Aubry, *Life and Letters*, ii. 322.

representation of women caught up in Russian political struggles failed to alter the popular view of Conrad's texts as male-oriented narratives lacking in a heroine acceptable to contemporary, popular tastes.

Paradoxically, when Conrad did produce his romance for women, with its 'ordinary' female protagonist in *Chance* (1913),[34] the old critical legacy prevailed in spite of the outstanding economic success of this novel. It is true that Sydney Colvin's favourable review in *The Observer* precipitated a run of critical congratulations.[35] But when the late romances finally brought Conrad the longed-for popularity and financial reward, and despite his emphasis on the themes of gender and the role of women in some of the later novels, the now well-established assumptions about Conrad and women were never entirely dispelled. In 1914, the year of *Chance*'s publication in the United States, for example, a highly disparaging account of 'Conrad's Women' appeared in the New York *Bookman*. The reviewer, herself a woman, complained of a lack of complexity in the presentation of Conrad's female characters: 'it is not *their* development, *their* psychology which matters in Joseph Conrad's books'. They sustained an unconvincing two-dimensionality, she remarked, in which they remained 'always the passive factor, never the active or positive force.'[36]

Colbron's assessment was in fact inaccurate given the number of 'active' female roles in the fiction. Nina follows an individual path against her father's will. Aïssa, Mme Levaille, and Winnie Verloc resort to murder, Antonia Avellanos, Winnie Verloc's mother, Sophia Antonovna, the governess in *Chance*, all act autonomously and independently of the male protagonists of the novels. Colbron's chief objections amounted to what she regarded as the lack of interiority of Conrad's women characters, a reservation to be echoed by Henry James in his critique of *Chance* in *The Times Literary Supplement* in the same year,

[34] See Owen Knowles, *A Conrad Chronology* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1989), 89. The appearance of *Chance* in book form on 18 Sept. 1913 was delayed by a binder's strike at Methuen. About fifty copies survive with the original 1913 title page.

[35] From W. L. Courtney and others in *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Daily Chronicle*, and *The Manchester Guardian*.

[36] Grace Isabel Colbron, 'Joseph Conrad's Women', *The Bookman* 38 (Jan. 1914), 476–9.

when he suggested that the narrative convolutions somewhat obfuscated the portrait of the female protagonist.[37] Edward Garnett's review of *Chance* was also less than favourable, perhaps because he made the mistake of many subsequent critics, that of conflating narratorial and authorial voices in this novel. When he remarked that 'perhaps in Marlow's dislike of feminism the author's shadow is projected too obtrusively on the curtain', he failed to identify Conrad's use of Marlow as an unreliable narrator.[38] In fact, in this novel Conrad gives a deliberately oblique presentation of the central female protagonist, one in which he distances himself from a complex narratorial web of definitions and assumptions about women.[39]

What characterises most critics' responses in this period is a rhetoric that masked the lack of objectivity in their readings.[40] Complaints veered between a critique of Conrad's idealisation of women, and a sense that he failed to idealise them adequately. We hear far more, from both male and female critics, of what *they* felt about women than of how Conrad actually presented them, and they often expressed a curious sense of strain in discussing the subject. They ceased to apply critical distance and frequently reshaped Conrad's characterisation of women according to lingering Victorian platitudes privileging the role of 'Angel in the House'.[41] According to one reviewer of *The Rescue* (unsigned, but probably Garnett), Conrad 'has none of Turgenev's faith in women as a self-sacrificing redeemer of man' when writing about 'love'.[42] This says more about the reviewer's perspective on women than Turgenev's. Conrad himself had praised Turgenev for his female characters, not for their

[37] Henry James, 'The Younger Generation', *Times Literary Supplement* (2 April 1914), 158; part one of this review was published in the issue for 19 March 1914, 133–4. Revised and enlarged as 'The New Novel' in *Notes on Novelists with Some Other Notes* (London: Dent, 1914), 249–87. See Ch. 4 for a discussion of this review.

[38] Edward Garnett, *Nation*, 24 Jan. 1914, 720–2.

[39] See Ch. 4.

[40] See Richard Curle, *Joseph Conrad: A Study* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1914), 145–51: Curle disagreed with prevailing views of Conrad's indifference to creating women in the fiction, but his eulogies are overdone. As another critic comments, Curle protests too much (Robert Lynd, 'Mr Conrad's Fame', *New Statesman*, 4 July 1914). Today Curle merely sounds patronising to women: 'Winnie Verloc is tragic because her devotion has the unconscious grandeur of a real woman's lack of an ordered sense of proportion.'

[41] Poem by Coventry Patmore (1854–63).

[42] Unsigned review, *Nation*, 17 July 1920, 503–4.

salvation of men, but because the author 'understood them' on their own terms.[43]

Garnett was far from isolated in his attitude. Right up to Conrad's death, critics display their discomfort with his presentation of women while offering their own highly conventional preferences. Arthur Symons recapitulated the prevailing critical line in his 1925 retrospective, in which he presents the familiar rhetoric on Conrad and women as an unanswerable question: 'Why is it that no woman has ever been the centre of these stories? . . . unlike every other great novelist, his women are for the most part nameless shadows.'[44] Critics failed either to resist or to address this searching question, but continued to assert that Conrad's lasting voice arose from within what they considered to be a predominantly masculine milieu.

III

I have suggested that the marketing of the early fiction for a coterie audience contributed towards the formation of critical assumptions about Conrad and women. But marketing alone cannot bear the responsibility for critical tastes. One possibility, then, is that so much critical disapproval must surely indicate a serious flaw in the fiction. However, a body of counter-evidence shows that a minority of earlier critics approved of Conrad's presentation of women, or remained unperturbed by the elusiveness that provoked Arthur Symons's remarks.

Polish criticism of the same period found no such difficulty with Conrad's work. In her review of the 1904 Polish translation of *Lord Jim*, Emilia Wesławska noted that in spite of the marginal presence of the female character, the love plot 'is permeated by romanticism; only a Slav could have written it'.[45] There may be an element of partisanship in her desire to appropriate

[43] Joseph Conrad, 'Turgenev: 1917', in *Notes on Life and Letters* (1921; London: Dent, 1949), 46.

[44] Arthur Symons, *Notes on Joseph Conrad With Some Unpublished Letters* (London: Myers, 1925), 8.

[45] Emilia Wesławska, 'Prezedmowa do *Lorda Jima* w przekladzie z 1904 t', (Preface to *Lord Jim* in the 1904 translation), *Lorda Jima* (Warsaw: Silorski, 1904). Excerpts trans. by Bruce Teets in *Joseph Conrad: An Annotated Bibliography*, ed. Bruce Teets (New York and London: Garland, 1990), 33.

Conrad's achievement for the homeland, yet Wesławska unconsciously located a distinction between English and Polish readings of Conrad's women at that time. The Polish writer Wincenty Lutosławski reiterated her view in 1930, when he detected the 'Polishness' of Conrad's presentation of the female role and the romantic situation in *Outcast*.[46] It is worth emphasising that many turn-of-the-century English reviewers were reading Conrad in the context of the British nineteenth-century novel, or the romanticism of Wordsworth and Coleridge.[47] While Conrad undoubtedly drew on this tradition (he frequently alluded to Dickens and Thackeray[48]), the Polish critics recognised in his interpretation of romanticism a distinctly national character that derived from a quite different form: the Polish romantics of the 1820s and 1830s. The romanticism of Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855) and Juliusz Słowacki (1809–49), with its highly politicised and self-reflexive content, emphasised themes of loyalty, betrayal and self-doubt. Drawing on this context, the Polish critics perceived, in the early Conrad novels, a romanticism in which the expression of the dilemma of male heroes did not necessarily deny the presence of a 'female' voice. The emphasis in Wesławska's review lay not so much on the gendering of the characters, rather on the gendering of the text.[49]

[46] Wincenty Lutosławski, 'A Visit to Conrad in 1897,' *Blue Peter* 10 (Dec. 1930), 638–40.

[47] For discussions of Conrad in relation to Wordsworth and Coleridge see Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 78–81. Watt sees in the Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* a continuity with Wordsworth's Preface to *The Lyrical Ballads*. See also Michael P. Jones, *Conrad's Heroism: A Paradise Lost* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), 30–7; David Thorburn, *Conrad's Romanticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 149–52; Sandra Dodson, '*Lord Jim* and the Modern Sublime,' *The Conradian* 18 (Autumn 1994), 77–101.

[48] See Frederick R. Karl, *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979), 187, 272.

[49] See Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays,' in *The Newly Born Woman*, eds. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, trans. Betsy Wing (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 63–4, 83–8, 91–7. Cixous's well-known notion of 'écriture feminine' has some relevance for understanding Polish critics' early responses to Conrad's work. Many feminists have rightly argued that Cixous propagates biological essentialism by reversing the gender status of Lacanian psychoanalytic thought and denoting the fragmentation of texts as their 'feminine' component. Nevertheless her description is useful here as it helps to dismantle conventional notions of Conrad's texts as unreservedly 'masculine'. In *Heart of Darkness*, for example, Marlow constantly interrupts the linear pattern of his narrative,

The Polish allusions in Conrad's writing are particularly important in the context of his representation of women, a theme I shall discuss fully in the next chapter. While passive heroines appear frequently throughout nineteenth- and twentieth-century European fiction, I believe Conrad borrowed the striking, somewhat gothic image of the silent woman (Arsat's lover in 'The Lagoon', Mrs Gould, Hermann's niece in 'Falk'), directly from the Polish romantics. The figure of the hermitess in Mickiewicz's *Konrad Wallenrod* (1823), for example, provides one such model for Mrs Gould in *Nostromo*. Mickiewicz's hermitess, deserted by her husband when he chooses to follow nationalist duties over domestic happiness, languishes in self-imposed isolation and silence in her tower. Likewise, Mrs Gould, described as 'the lady of the medieval castle' (68), characterised by her silent placatory gestures towards an uncommunicative husband, represents the figure of the abandoned wife, victim of her spouse's obsession with his professional life.

George Gissing, one of the few British critics to comment on Conrad's distinctive treatment of this trope in his fiction, wrote to Conrad in 1903: 'Wonderful, I say, your mute or all but mute women. How, in Satan's name, do you make their souls speak through their silence?'[50] Gissing was perhaps more perceptive than most, but we must accept the degree to which the initial reception of Conrad's work in Britain and America was influenced by a somewhat different literary tradition from that of his Polish romantic heritage. Conrad's often schematic mode of representation, emphasising the exteriority of the woman, must have been quite alien to those who admired the lively 'realism' of Thackeray and Trollope, the psychological interiority of the Brontës' and George Eliot's heroines and, amongst his contemporaries, Henry James; or even the sensationalism of Mary Braddon and Mrs Wood, Rhoda Broughton and Marie Corelli,

his final words trailing off inconclusively into a series of dots. See Watt on 'delayed decoding' in *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, 169–79. See also Jane Ford, 'James Joyce and the Conrad Connection: The Anxiety of Influence,' *Conradiana* 17:1 (1985), 3–17. See also Ch. 2. Conrad's use of 'defamiliarisation' techniques found their roots to some extent in the work of the Polish Romantics, who experimented with form, subverting generic expectations and patterns of linear narrative.

[50] George Gissing, letter of 1903, quoted in R. L. Mégroz, *Joseph Conrad's Mind and Method: A Study of Personality in Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1931), 94.

whose daring or desperate heroines formed the central focus of their texts. Moreover, his highly sceptical treatment, although sympathetic to the social marginalisation of women, would be unlikely to attract those readers of the New Woman novels who might prefer something more directly polemical.[51] However, a greater sympathy for Conrad's presentation of women did begin to emerge during the two decades following his death. Although his work suffered a period of relative obscurity during the 1930s, a few, often sensitive, but now neglected critical studies offered greater insights than had appeared during his lifetime. Gustav Morf, following the theme of earlier Polish critics, associated the shadowy quality of many of Conrad's female figures with his memory of a powerful mother-figure lost in early childhood.[52] And R. L. Mégroz unequivocally addressed the critics' doubts:

> The question has often been asked, why *Chance* should have turned the commercial tide for its author, and indubitably the right answer is that it appeals to the intelligence and feelings of women readers.[53]

He is the first critic not to be baffled by the favourable reception of *Chance*, nor by the response of women readers. Neither does he confuse authorial intention with the misogynistic tone of the narrator's voice: 'Marlow's half-facetious generalizations must not be taken too seriously, of course.'[54] He considered that *Chance* alone established Conrad as a successful creator of female characters, and, like Morf, placed them in a wider European context. In spite of the predominance of male figures who 'hold the stage' in Conrad, Mégroz argued that 'it should not be concluded that women play a small part in the Conradian world'.[55]

Chance was again recognised as a major novel in 1948. F. R. Leavis included it, along with *Victory* (1915), amongst the canonised works of *The Great Tradition*.[56] Leavis paid greater attention to the male protagonists of the novel than the female,

[51] See Ch. 4 n. 5.
[52] Gustav Morf, *The Polish Heritage of Joseph Conrad* (London: Sampson, Low, Marston, 1930).
[53] Mégroz, *Joseph Conrad's Mind and Method*, 193.
[54] Ibid. 193.
[55] Ibid. 191–2.
[56] F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (1948; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), 222–47.

but his definition of the canon at least left an opening for subsequent studies of those Conrad novels emphasising women's roles and exploring issues of gender.

But such possibilities were soon to be foreclosed by a much more influential critical model. The idea of a decline in Conrad's work began to take shape, emerging ultimately with greatest prominence in the pantheon of modernist studies in the 1940s and 1950s. Under this paradigm Conrad's modernism constituted his major phase, where his male heroes offer a critique of European colonialism and capitalist venture. Literary commentators recognised in the philosophical dilemmas of Conrad's earlier male protagonists their own disillusionment with a modern industrial Europe and its imperialist drives.[57] The popular press had welcomed the publication of the late romances, but reviewers who represented the more self-consciously literary journals began to develop a nostalgia for the abstraction of the early works. There is no necessary connection between modernism and the absence of female characters, but in Conrad's case, his supporters promoted those works as modernist in which women feature less prominently, making these texts paradigmatic of his 'genius'.[58] This bias was misleading in the sense that he did develop female characters whose experiences resemble those of his male (modernist) protagonists, and it was also selective because it neglected to appreciate different forms of experimentation. Conrad's confrontation with the challenge of writing about women in the latter part of his career was regarded as a denial of his aesthetic principles. His alleged inability and lack of desire to write for and about women was now, paradoxically, turned to the advantage of those who wished to promote his modernism.

[57] See David Daiches, 'Joseph Conrad', in *The Novel and the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939; rev. edn., 1960), 25–62. The distinction between the pre- and post-Second World War editions of David Daiches's essay on Conrad in *The Novel and the Modern World* exemplifies the shift in the critical reception of Conrad at this time. Whereas Daiches's 1939 edition focused on the picturesque locations of the Malay novels and described Conrad as a writer of situations rather than of individuals, the revised 1960 text emphasised Conrad's 'despairing politics' and the conflict of male individual and society.

[58] See also Bonnie Kime Scott (ed.), *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), for discussions of the position of women and women's writing in modernism.

The 'decline' paradigm is initially put forward after his death by John Galsworthy[59] and Edward Garnett,[60] and echoed most notably by Virginia Woolf, who was one of the first to privilege the middle over the late works for their strong links with the modernist agenda. Woolf claimed that 'he never believed in his later and more sophisticated characters as he had believed in his early seamen' and, that 'the world of Conrad's later period has about it an involuntary obscurity, an inconclusiveness, almost a disillusionment which baffles and fatigues'.[61] Woolf uses the words 'involuntary' and 'disillusionment' as if Conrad were somehow writing against his will in this later period. She failed to acknowledge any merit in the later novels, dismissing them because she felt they no longer stimulated the rigorously confrontational relationship of text and reader characterised by the earlier sea stories. If we accept that Woolf's experiments with stream-of-consciousness deliberately aimed at an investigation of the interior workings of the minds of her characters, then we can see why she would not privilege Conrad's late novels.

But in 1918, Conrad announced that 'the angles of my vision, my methods of composition will, within limits, be always changing'.[62] In the late work Conrad explored more fully the formal structures of popular genres such as sensation novels, the historical novel, and melodrama. He also investigated the relationship of gender and genre, responding more specifically to the role of women in popular forms. He reversed the patterns of his formerly passive heroines, to some extent liberating his female protagonists from the constraints of inactivity and stasis on the periphery of the text. In both *The Arrow of Gold* (1919) and *The Rover* (1923), for example, he destabilises the conventional 'boy's own' plot by offering the heroine the active role. Unfortunately these later experiments have gone unrecognised because they do not resemble the more obviously 'modernist' explorations of language and strenuously philosophical issues addressed in his earlier phase.

[59] John Galsworthy, 'Reminiscences of Conrad' (1924) in *Castles in Spain and Other Screeds* (London: Heinemann, 1927), 74–95.

[60] Edward Garnett (ed.), *Conrad's Prefaces to his Works* (London: Dent, 1937), 34. Garnett expressed his disappointment that Conrad's greatest success should have arrived with his 'weakest work'.

[61] Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader* (London: Hogarth Press, 1925), 289–90.

[62] Letter to Barrett H. Clark, 4 May 1918, in Jean-Aubry, *Life and Letters*, ii. 204.

Thus Woolf prefigured the most enduring tone of later Conrad criticism. She claimed for the early works the privilege of moral integrity. She suggested a lasting respect for the author's use of those narrative methods which aligned themselves most appropriately with her own modernist themes. Without attempting to address the nature of Conrad's later experiments, she saw in the late fiction a decline in Conrad's powers, associating his 'disillusionment' and 'fatigue' with a revisionist preoccupation with the romance genre.

A nostalgia for the predominantly male-oriented texts was never entirely dismantled in intellectual circles. Even Leavis's inclusion of *Chance* and *Victory* in the canon was heavily qualified by a dismissal of the very last novels: 'Conrad enjoyed a vogue in the early nineteen-twenties, when he was bringing out a series of inferior novels.'[63] Leavis expressed the by now conventional nostalgia for the early work, claiming that Conrad 'had too good reason to feel that he was regarded as the author of *Lord Jim*; the writer of stories about the sea, the jungle, and the islands, who had made some curious ventures outside his beat, but would yet, one hoped, return to it'.[64] Moreover, Leavis sustained the reductive assumptions about Conrad and women as the weakest aspect of the work, associating the famous utterance about 'adjectival insistence'[65] (initially used to describe the exposition of 'the darkness' and 'the horror' in *Heart of Darkness*) with Conrad's presentation of 'The Intended' and other female roles. Following E. M. Forster,[66] Leavis believed that Conrad's failure to find expression for 'the unknown', whether represented by the experience in the Congo, or the character of women, revealed his inability to objectify his subject with adequate clarity: 'he is intent on making a virtue out of not knowing what he means.'[67] Leavis's interpretation suggests the mistrust of an empiricist for the phenomenological aspects of Conrad's writing. His criticisms anticipate Wayne Booth's distinction between 'showing' and 'telling',[68] a distinction that owes much to Henry

[63] Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, 247. [64] Ibid. 247–8. [65] Ibid. 198.

[66] E. M. Forster, *Abinger Harvest* (1936; London: Edward Arnold, 1940), 135: 'the secret casket of his genius contains a vapour rather than a jewel'.

[67] Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, 199.

[68] Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), Ch. 1, 'Telling and Showing', 3–20.

James's theory of narrative outlined in 'The Art of Fiction' (1884). Leavis objected to Conrad's tendency to 'tell' rather than 'to show'. He saw in his account of the 'mystery' an imprecision, a failure to provide an 'objective correlative', to use T. S. Eliot's term. The endurance of empiricist thought in British and North American criticism might well account for much of the adverse interpretation of women in Conrad, since their characterisations so often seem 'mysterious' and incomplete.

Thomas Moser consolidated dominant opinions in 1957 when he published his influential thesis of *Achievement and Decline*.[69] He clinched the prevailing tone by dismissing the later work: 'any reader making a resolute effort to forget who wrote these books will immediately perceive that they are failures'.[70] Ultimately Moser's theory amounts to a judgement of taste, but it is also one that codifies the increasingly pervasive tendency in Conrad criticism to bifurcate the canon, even more thoroughly than Woolf and Leavis, into middle and late works. The Malay novels were relegated to the status of 'apprentice work'.[71] Conrad's strengths (based on his modernist strategies) were recognised in the work from *Heart of Darkness* to *Under Western Eyes*, failure and decline exemplified (except for *The Shadow-Line* (1917), which has no female characters) by the novels published between the years of *Chance* and *Suspense* (the latter, unfinished and published posthumously in 1925, is usually ignored altogether). Moser's theory depends above all on his assertion that Conrad's decline was rooted in an inability to write about women and sexual relationships. He reinforced Garnett's view that 'we are not sure that we like Mr Conrad best as a novelist of love',[72] with a repetition of the familiar note of regret, as he asked: 'Why did Conrad cease those explorations into moral failure in

[69] Thomas Moser, *Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957). For foreunners of Moser's thesis see M. C. Bradbrook, *Joseph Conrad: Poland's English Genius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1941), 11. Bradbrook registered the falling away of Conrad's abilities during his 'relaxed old age'. See also, Douglas Hewitt, *Conrad: A Reassessment* (Cambridge: Bowes and Bowes, 1952), 89. Hewitt identified 'a retreat' from the complexities of the early novels. Paul Wiley, in *Conrad's Measure of Man* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1954) was one of the few critics to offer an alternative to this theme.

[70] *Achievement and Decline*, 180.

[71] Ibid. 50.

[72] Unsigned review (probably Garnett), *Nation*, 17 July 1920, 503–4.

the masculine world that had enabled him to achieve artistic success?'[73]

The persistence of this theory is marked by the number of critical works still devoted to a very small portion of the Conrad canon,[74] while studies of Conrad's romanticism that ostensibly oppose Moser's thesis ultimately avail of his themes.[75] In fact, most of the major responses to Moser draw attention, by their titles alone, to the continuing influence of his bifurcation of Conrad's work.[76] The privileging, almost exclusively, of the 'modernist' middle work still prevails in Conrad studies.[77] Most of the important recent additions to Conrad criticism, while often questioning the hegemony of 'achievement and decline', continue to favour modernist themes—scepticism, existentialism, 'the modern temper'.[78] Some take issue with Moser, but almost none takes account of *Suspense*, a novel that reveals some of Conrad's most striking responses to the presentation of gender in popular fiction.[79]

[73] Moser, *Achievement and Decline*, 102. See also Albert J. Guerard, *Conrad The Novelist* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958) who adumbrated Moser's theories.

[74] See Jacques Berthoud, *Joseph Conrad: The Major Phase* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*; Arnold E. Davidson, *Conrad's Endings: A Study of the Five Major Novels* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984).

[75] See e.g. George Thomson, 'Conrad's Later Fiction', *English Literature in Transition* 12:4 (1969), 174; Thorburn, *Conrad's Romanticism*, p. xiv: 'after 1907 . . . Conrad deserted his best instincts', and returned to 'the debased Romantic mode'.

[76] Gary Geddes, *Conrad's Later Novels* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1980); Daniel R. Schwarz, *Conrad: The Later Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1982).

[77] See Jeffrey Meyers, *Joseph Conrad: A Biography* (London: John Murray, 1991), 269. Meyers sums up this view when he speaks of the irony of Conrad's artistic career—'poor sales for his greatest books and popular acclaim for his late, inferior work'.

[78] See Mark Wollaeger, *Joseph Conrad and The Fictions of Skepticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Otto Bohlman, *Conrad's Existentialism* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991); Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991). Erdinast-Vulcan, 139–47, 172–85, for example, argues against the more reductive aspects of the 'achievement and decline' theory, but nevertheless believes in a form of 'decline'. She suggests that Conrad's later work, in its attention to the 'unreality of the world', constitutes a 'surrender' to the Nietzschean outlook that he had so far resisted throughout his career.

[79] Robert Hampson, *Joseph Conrad: Betrayal and Identity* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), takes issue with 'achievement and decline'. See also Richard Ambrosini, *Conrad's Fiction as Critical Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); see Ch. 8 for bibliography of critical work on *Suspense*.

Feminist and postcolonialist theory has at last recovered some of Conrad's neglected early and late novels and new perspectives on the canon are beginning to emerge.[80] Even so, surprisingly few thoroughly contest 'achievement and decline' as a measure of Conrad's work. Rather than exploring the complexity of Conrad's position in relation to the marketplace, they continue instead to advance the assumption that Conrad himself felt degraded by his later connection with 'the popular, the romantic, and the feminine'.[81] And while alternatives to the enduring theory continue to emerge with greater frequency, we have to admit that two of the most influential feminist essays on Conrad deal with *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*, and only two book-length feminist studies currently exist.[82]

[80] See e.g. Christopher GoGwilt, *The Invention of the West: Joseph Conrad and the Double-Mapping of Europe and Empire* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995), 103, on Conrad's displacement of 'patriarchal assumptions of imperialism'; see also, Gail Fincham and Myrtle Hooper (eds.), *Under Postcolonial Eyes: Joseph Conrad After Empire* (Rondesbosch: University of Cape Town Press, 1996).

[81] Robin Truth Goodman, 'Conrad's Closet', *Conradiana* 30:2 (1998), 86. See also, Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *One of Us: The Mastery of Joseph Conrad* (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1996), 186. Harpham observes that there are strong and weak moments throughout Conrad's oeuvre, but he nevertheless concedes: 'There does seem to be a consensus that *The Nigger of "The Narcissus"*, "The Secret Sharer", *Heart of Darkness*, *Nostromo*, and *Lord Jim* stand on one side of the great divide, and *An [sic] Arrow of Gold*, *The Rover*, and *An Outcast of the Islands*, on the other.'

[82] Heliéna Krenn, *Conrad's Lingard Trilogy: Empire, Race, and Women in the Malay Novels* (New York and London: Garland, 1990); Ruth Nadelhaft, *Joseph Conrad: A Feminist Reading* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991); Nina Pelikan Straus, 'The Exclusion of the Intended from Secret Sharing in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 20:2 (Winter 1987), 123–7; Padmini Mongia, ' "Ghosts of the Gothic": Spectral Women and Colonized Spaces in *Lord Jim*', in Andrew Michael Roberts (ed.), *Conrad and Gender* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), 1–16. Other essays on Conrad and women include Gordon Thomson, 'Conrad's Women', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 32 (1978), 442–65; Karen Klein, 'The Feminist Predicament in Conrad's *Nostromo*', in *Brandeis Essays in Literature*, ed. John Hazel Smith (Waltham, Mass.: Department of English and American Literature, Brandeis University, 1983), 101–16; Susan Lundvall Brodie, 'Conrad's Feminine Perspective', *Conradiana* 16 (1984), 141–54; Monika Elbert, 'Possession and Self-Possession: The "Dialect of Desire" in *'Twixt Land and Sea*, in *Conrad and Gender*, 75–146; Heliéna Krenn, 'The Beautiful World of Women: Women as Reflections of Colonial Issues in Conrad's Malay Novels'; Padmini Mongia, 'Empire, Narrative and the Feminine in *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness*', in Keith Carabine, Owen Knowles, Wiesław Krajka (eds.), *Contexts for Conrad* (Boulder, Colo.: East European Monographs, 1993). For discussions of *Chance* see Ch. 4.

Andrew Michael Roberts, a champion of 'alternative' readings of Conrad, identifies the current problem. In spite of expanding critical possibilities, in practice Roberts finds that still only a small section of the 'earlier' canon is studied in schools and universities and represented by theorists of Conrad's fiction. Making his selection for the Longman Critical Reader, Roberts's choice was ultimately governed by this enduring fact: 'I decided, with some regret, that I could not dedicate much space . . . to Conrad's late work.'[83] With the advent of feminism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism we have ostensibly left the value judgements of the New Criticism far behind. Yet the hegemony of 'achievement and decline' theory still hovers tenaciously, however well disguised, over Conrad criticism of the last five years, and over what is presumed to be worthy of study.

The barrage of criticism levelled against Conrad's treatment of women in general, and against the late fiction in particular, has thus far obscured any serious discussion of *why* he may have encountered difficulty in this area of his work, and what he *did* achieve in spite of his self-confessed anxieties about producing popular romances. After *Chance*, with its elusive portrait of an ordinary woman attempting to form an autonomous identity, Conrad went on to give us Lena, who achieves the 'real' victory of the novel;[84] Rita da Lastaola, who resists the conventional closure of romance fiction and chooses an independent existence without the hero; Arlette, who actively determines the outcome of her romance plot; and Adèle de Montevesso, whom Conrad finally gives a voice and who directly confesses to a male auditor the narrative of her failed marriage. It is therefore a great paradox of Conrad criticism that the early image of Conrad as writer for men, initially used by the reviewers of the popular press to attack the sea stories, ultimately sanctioned the neglect of the *late* works, and the privileging of Conrad as a model of modernist principles. The extent of the influence and power of this critical paradigm has left little room for alternative perspectives of Conrad's complex relationship to his women characters, and his confrontation with the issues of gender throughout the fiction.

[83] Andrew Michael Roberts, Preface, *Joseph Conrad* (London and New York: Longman, 1998), p. ix.

[84] John Batchelor, *The Life of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994), 235.

IV

A succession of biographies similarly play down the importance of women in Conrad's life. The infrequency of his association with women during his career at sea represents only one area of emphasis. Supported by the 'achievement and decline' model, biographers repeatedly associate the failure of Conrad's late work with an inability to relate to women in his private life.[85]

A subtle marginalisation of the position of women in the biography begins with the tendency to emphasise Conrad's relationship with his father, Apollo Korzeniowski, the writer, rather than exploring the energetic figure of his mother Ewa. Marguerite Poradowska, a French writer who played a fundamental part in Conrad's transformation from seaman to writer occupies a subsidiary role as 'moral support' rather than that of creative influence.[86] And Jessie Conrad, penalised for her lack of sophistication and literary ability, is pictured as a passive drudge who could offer Conrad little more than domestic comforts. The ultimate effect is to promote the image of Conrad as a man in a man's world, a portrait which Frederick Karl wryly admits makes him into a 'rough-hewn sailor who preferred male-bonding to female companionship'.[87]

The impact of Conrad's mother on his development as a writer has yet to be thoroughly explored. Although Zdzisław Najder undoubtedly admires Ewa Bobrowska, his biography of Conrad devotes only a page and a half of the first chapter to detailed comment on her life (while Apollo Korzeniowski's background, education, and political interests are described at length over twenty pages).[88] Yet in *Conrad's Polish Background*, Najder reveals that a considerable number of her letters and

[85] See Meyer, *A Psychoanalytic Biography*; Zdisław Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 363; Cedric Watts, *Joseph Conrad: A Literary Life* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 125.

[86] See Ch. 3.

[87] Karl, *Three Lives*, 279. It is interesting to note that the association of Conrad with a male world extends even to photographs and paintings of the writer. None of the biographers record the fact that the last painting of Conrad was executed by an Irish female artist, Alice Sarah Kinkead (d. 1926) in 1924 (see letter from Edith Oenone Somerville to A. S. Kinkead, 27 June, 1924, Somerville Archive, Drishane House, West Cork. See also Otto Rauchbauer, *The Edith Oenone Somerville Archive in Drishane* (Dublin: Irish Manuscripts Commission: 1995)).

[88] Najder, *A Chronicle*, 3–32.

documents survive, offering suggestive insights into her character and ambitions, her strong attachment to husband and son, and her impact on Conrad as a child.[89] Perhaps because Ewa died young, and because Conrad's father was himself a writer and translator of considerable ability, as well as a substantial political figure, some biographers have been tempted to focus on Apollo's role in Conrad's early childhood. But Ewa was herself an educated woman who read widely and completed many translations.[90]

Bernard Meyer's psychoanalytic biography of 1967 does in fact attach great significance to the relationship of mother and son. However, he uses the fact to reduce the positions of Marguerite Poradowska and Jessie Conrad, implying that Conrad constantly shunned deep relationships with women, rejecting them as a means of revenge for the loss of his mother as a young child. Ignoring the complex rhetorical strategies of Conrad's letters to Poradowska suggesting a relationship of empathy and equality residing beneath their highly formal surface patterns, Meyer insists that Conrad addressed Poradowska with the love of a 'weeping child for a compassionate mother',[91] and that he ultimately kept her at a distance (in spite of the fact that he asked her to translate his first novel and take full credit as author). Meyer assumes that the break in the extant correspondence (between 1896 and 1900) can be explained by 'the pique of a woman scorned' when Conrad withdrew his attentions.[92] Yet there is no proof that *Conrad* had not been refused in an offer of marriage. Whatever actually did happen during those years, Conrad and Poradowska subsequently resumed their correspondence. She visited Conrad and Jessie in England and helped to finance Jessie's sisters' education.[93] But according to Meyer, Conrad emerges as a man who avoided relationships with women, from whom he constantly contemplated escape, preferring the isolation of bachelor life and the company of close male friends.

[89] Zdzisław Najder (ed.), *Conrad's Polish Background* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), Ch. 1. [90] See Ch. 2.

[91] Meyer, *A Psychoanalytic Biography*, 101. [92] Ibid. 107 n. p.

[93] Letter to Marguerite Poradowska, 10 May 1900, *CL* 2, 266 n. 4. On this occasion Jessie included a note to Conrad's letter: 'I can never thank you enough for all you have done for the girls.'

The image of Conrad's wife Jessie plays into the established view in most biographies, often leaving the reader with the sense that Conrad would have preferred to remain single, marrying solely to acquire a housekeeper and typist.[94] Her 'unsuitability' for the role of partner for the great writer emerges as a prominent theme, as critics feel compelled to list her shortcomings, ranging from a lower-class background to a mind 'too undeveloped for her ever to be able to give Conrad proper companionship'.[95] Fortunately, a few biographers have granted that 'there was a kind of instinctive affinity'[96] between Conrad and Jessie, in spite of intellectual and social differences, or that Jessie's loyalty 'was more valuable to him than intellectual equality would have been'.[97]

However, a perception of Jessie's intellectual inequality prevails. Jeffrey Meyers cites Dame Veronica Wedgwood, whose parents 'found her a bore',[98] and T. S. Eliot's review of Jessie's first book of memoirs disqualifies her as a potential biographer of Conrad:

> Mrs Conrad must have buried in her mind much that would be interesting and important in the world of letters. If this had been exhumed and dealt with by an experienced biographer the reminiscences might have been really vital.[99]

Jessie's so-called intellectual failures have been underscored by an unfavourable account of her physical size.[100] The attention

[94] Karl, *Three Lives*, 341: 'she possessed emotional and psychological qualities which fitted exactly into what he needed . . . a straightforward, devoted, quite competent young woman.'

[95] Jocelyn Baines, *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1969), 6.

[96] Roger Tennant, *Joseph Conrad: A Biography* (New York: Atheneum, 1981), 104.

[97] Batchelor, *Life*, 57.

[98] Meyers, *Joseph Conrad*, 144.

[99] T. S. Eliot, 'Short Reviews: Jessie Conrad, *Joseph Conrad As I Knew Him* (London: Heinemann, 1926)', *Criterion* 5 (Jan. 1927), 159.

[100] Biographers have frequently drawn attention, in more or less inappropriate terms, to her stately figure. See Baines, *A Critical Biography*, 171, who talks of her 'tendency to become fat'; Meyer, *A Psychoanalytic Biography*, 167 n. b, who, drawing on Ford and Woolf's disparaging remarks about Jessie, speculates that 'her progressive obesity was at least partly the result of her utilizing overeating as a means of warding off depression and anger'; and Meyers, *Joseph Conrad*, 237, whose caption to a late photograph reads 'Jessie Conrad, 1926: Grotesquely obese and loaded, like a gypsy fortune-teller, with heavy beads'.

given to Jessie's physique seems gratuitous, since this material sheds no light on the Conrads' actual relationship. The positive elements of this long-lasting marriage are mostly played down: the affection, the loyalty, the friendship and devotion on both sides are obscured by the emphasis on Jessie's lack of sophistication, intellectual ability, or a slim figure. Instead, the hackneyed images of woman as distraction or burden on the creative male confirm the view that Conrad's misfortune lay in his apparently spontaneous decision to marry, and his immediate sense of entrapment after the ceremony.

Without accounting for the narratorial distance between author and protagonist, Meyer alleges that Conrad reproduced his horror of domesticity in his fiction. He remarks of *Outcast*: 'Like Willems, Conrad's behaviour invokes the image of a trapped man constantly plotting his escape.'[101] When in April 1897 Conrad began writing 'The Return', Meyer concludes that Conrad's problems with the story reflect his disgust with Jessie's pregnancy at that time: 'his comment "I hated while I wrote", referred no less to Jessie's creation than his own.'[102]

Meyer identifies Conrad's position with that of Alvan Hervey in 'The Return'. But Conrad's self-confessed difficulties with the writing of this story ('the only instance in my life when I made an attempt to write with both hands at once', p. viii) could equally well have referred to his failure to produce a satisfactory heroine in *Mrs* Hervey. *Her* disillusionment with an empty middle-class marriage of convenience constitutes one of Conrad's earliest attempts to present the painful despair of female isolation within a domestic situation. Taken in the context of Conrad's later heroines (Bessie in the play *One Day More*, Winnie Verloc, Flora de Barral, Rita de Lastaola, Adèle de Montevesso), Conrad's 'Ibsenian' heroine Mrs Hervey could be seen as the first of a line in Conrad's exploration of *female* entrapment.

Biographers have been swift to cast Jessie in a pejorative role in relation to Conrad's creativity. But they never really address the issue of what might have become of him *without* her. There

[101] Meyer, *A Psychoanalytic Biography*, 119.

[102] Ibid. 128. See also Karl, *Three Lives*, 591. As if Conrad bore no responsibility for these events, Karl likewise explains Jessie's second pregnancy as her 'means of maintaining some place in Conrad's life' since she could not hope to attract him on equal terms intellectually.

is a tendency to emphasise his achievements in the light of his sense of terrible isolation within marriage, rather than speculating on what he might not have achieved without the support of a devoted wife.[103] His self-awareness of his 'idiosyncrasies, strange moods, and unusual behaviour' was acute.[104] His psychological make-up had been shaped by the frequency of traumatic events in his life. The exile from Poland in early childhood, the loss of his parents, the sense of displacement and guilt at leaving the homeland, the instability and uncertainty of the life at sea had all contributed towards a habitual pattern of depression and recurring periods of inhibition in his creative life. These patterns had been established well before his marriage to Jessie (his letters to Poradowska refer frequently to his sense of psychological instability). Inevitably Conrad would never have been an easy partner, and marriage required considerable adjustments from both parties. In his letters to Garnett, Conrad empathised with his young wife's situation. The inexperienced Jessie had been forced abruptly to come to terms with Conrad's habitual depressions, 'the darkness and bitterness' that was 'beyond expression'. Absorbed by the intensity of his pain, Conrad was unable to lighten his wife's anxieties. 'Poor Jess feels it all,' he remarked, 'I must be a perfect fiend to live with.'[105]

The short story 'Amy Foster' (1901) has often been interpreted as an expression of isolation in his marriage.[106] It tells of an exile 'washed up' on a foreign shore, taken in by an empathetic woman. But she is eventually coerced by the weight of public opinion that has alienated him and she too becomes estranged from him. Conrad's presentation of Amy reminds us of Jessie's description of her own sense of dislocation on her honeymoon as she listened to her husband, during a bout of illness, speaking deliriously in an incomprehensible language:

To see him lying in the white canopied bed, dark-faced, with gleaming teeth and shining eyes, was sufficiently alarming, but to hear him muttering to himself in a strange tongue (he must have been speaking

[103] In *A Personal Record* (1912) Conrad acknowledged that 'I had never been made aware of the even flow of daily life, made easy and noiseless for me by a silent, watchful, tireless affection' (101).

[104] Najder, *A Chronicle*, 200–1.

[105] Quoted in Najder, *A Chronicle*, 201.

[106] 'Amy Foster', first published in *Illustrated London News*, later in *Typhoon and Other Stories* (1903).

Polish), to be unable to penetrate the clouded mind or catch one intelligible word, was for a young, inexperienced girl truly awful.[107]

Seen from the perspective of a man who identified with Jessie's position as well as his own, and who *sought* a family in England rather than shunned it, the tragic closure of Conrad's story expressed a real fear of losing his new-found security. Conrad's recollections in *A Personal Record* express only too well the extraordinary intensity of his attachment to a lost family. His need to rebuild that sense of belonging through friends and family in England was a matter of survival, perhaps the only compensation for the traumas of his youth. Richard Curle remarked on the importance for Conrad of a secure domestic environment:

Like so many sailors Conrad was never so happy as when he was in his own home. His dynamic spirit required the familiar atmosphere of well-known faces and accustomed objects for its peace.[108]

There is no evidence to suggest that the marriage in itself exacerbated Conrad's depressive illness or his long-term sense of isolation, and his sons' memoirs illustrate the way in which their devoted and affectionate father enjoyed a close family life, often seeking relaxation by joining in their childhood games.[109]

Jessie's health was far from perfect, and although she suffered considerable pain from severe knee injuries, she diligently nursed Conrad through countless depressions, and his severe breakdown in 1910. John Conrad presents a striking image of his mother's sacrifice, as she stood over the stove, leaning against the doorjamb, wearied by continuous discomfort, 'a candlestick in one hand while she stirred a saucepan with the other'. He remarks that there were times when she had been typing all day 'and her stoicism gave way in a flood of tears', but that 'it was not in her nature to fly off the handle' or storm out of the house.[110]

[107] Jessie Conrad, *Joseph Conrad As I Knew Him* (London: Heinemann, 1926), 35. The extract also provides a little counter-evidence for those who emphasise her inability to write.

[108] Richard Curle, *The Last Twelve Years of Joseph Conrad* (London: Sampson, Low, Marston, 1928), 134.

[109] Borys Conrad, *My Father, Joseph Conrad* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1970), 54, recalls his father reading to him frequently as a child from Kingsley, Fenimore Cooper, and Captain Marryat. John Conrad, *Joseph Conrad: Times Remembered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 165, remembers midnight chess games with his father.

[110] John Conrad, *Times Remembered*, 78.

Indeed, little reflection has been given to *her* needs in the relationship, to the nature of her sacrifices, her input into Conrad's creative life, or to her considerable enjoyment of her role as 'the writer's wife'. Whatever trials this marriage brought for both parties, and whatever the discrepancies in their background and education, there can be no doubt that the relationship sustained Conrad's career as a writer. Conrad never expressed in writing anything but admiration for and devotion to Jessie.[111] Both Borys's and John's memoirs convey the sense of their mother's extraordinary ability to cultivate an atmosphere of domestic well-being, which Conrad also continually recognised. One frequent visitor to the household acknowledged that 'to [Jessie], too, was due much of Conrad's success, as he has been heard to say again and again'.[112] Jessie's talents as organiser and nurturer gave him a sense of security after a life of dislocation and displacement, and her tireless contribution gave him the space in which to pursue his literary career.

We are now in a position to evaluate Edward Garnett's response to Jessie's second volume of memoirs, published in 1935.[113] He wrote to Jessie accusing her of damaging her husband's reputation with her 'vindictiveness', 'jealous' nature, and use of a 'common' tone. He added insult to injury by suggesting she had 'very little critical sense', so could not possibly understand 'what an outrage' her book was 'on good taste and good feeling'.[114] Jessie dismissed Garnett's vitriolic attack with a few succinct and well-turned phrases, expressing her pride in producing a faithful portrait of Conrad and rightly adding: 'He has made his mark, and made it my dear Edward with no *inconsiderable* help from me.'[115]

[111] See letter to Galsworthy, 5 March 1907, Jean-Aubry, *Life and Letters*, i. 44. Conrad describes how Jessie 'heroically' devoted herself to their sons' care during a harrowing period when Borys had contracted the measles, followed by pneumonia: 'Jessie is wholly admirable, sharing herself between the two boys with the utmost sincerity . . . Nothing is right, good or even possible unless the mother is there.'

[112] Grace Willard, 'Conrad the Man', *New York Evening Post Literary Review*, 9 Aug. 1924, 952, in *Joseph Conrad: Interviews and Recollections*, ed. Martin Ray (London: Macmillan, 1990).

[113] Jessie Conrad, *Joseph Conrad and His Circle* (London: Jarrolds, 1935).

[114] Letter from Edward Garnett to Jessie Conrad, 11 July 1935, in *The Conradian* 19: 1 and 2 (1995), J. H. Stape and Owen Knowles (eds.), *A Portrait in Letters: Correspondence To and About Conrad* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), 256.

[115] Letter from Jessie Conrad to Edward Garnett, 14 July 1935, *A Portrait in Letters*, 257.

The biographical material shows the cumulative effect of a particular mode of presenting women in relation to Conrad. The traditional image of Conrad as author for men prevails, strengthened by the conventionalised view of his infrequent associations with women, his indifference to them, his strange choice of a wife, and his security in a predominantly male milieu. We might begin to dismantle reductive assumptions about Conrad's writing by first rehabilitating the role of women in his life.[116]

Throughout his career Conrad refuted his categorisation as writer, exclusively, of the sea. He complained to Richard Curle, 'I do wish that all these ships of mine were given a rest.'[117] But critical assumptions become traditionalised by constant repetition, authorised by prevailing critical practices. At the end of the twentieth century the lasting image of Conrad as writer for men has been sustained by a reductive theory, ensuring that his later investigations into the representation of women have been largely neglected. Only by rethinking aspects of the biography, reinstating the importance of female influences on Conrad, and exploring the fiction from the perspective of his confessed identification with the female sex, can the place of women be recovered from the predominantly masculinist tendency of Conrad criticism.

[116] For references to some of Conrad's important friendships with women see Karl, *Three Lives*: Harriet Capes, 532, 690; on Jane Anderson, 784–5, 790–1; on Agnes Tobin, 701, 706; on Aniela Zagórska, 496–7, 881–2.
[117] 14 July 1923, Jean-Aubry, *Life and Letters*, ii. 316.