

Student's Name

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Outline for term paper

On Conrad's Portrayal of Women in *Almayer's Folly* and *The Secret Agent*

- ❖ Conrad addresses the woman question through descriptions and roles of his women characters. Women in both novels are portrayed as a counter force to the destructive tendencies of men, and yet they are often ultimately the destroying force that finishes off their male counterparts. The women exist under oppressed circumstances, dealing with some hardship that decreases their ability to choose their fates, and are primarily quiet beings that are misunderstood or underestimated by men, but their power emerges with profound effects on the lives of the protagonist men. While not necessarily the morally superior sex, women are viewed as creatures worthy of respect and even fear with an intense capacity for emotion and the ability to make decisions which greatly affect those around them. They are a force of destruction throughout the novels, but their destruction serves to break free from not only the restrictions placed upon themselves, but those patterns which drive male characters to their ends and make up the plot direction of the books.
- ❖ The women exist in an underprivileged state. They invariably have some hardship which they deal with constantly, mostly having to do with a lack of choice.
 - Nina's status as a half-cast woman
 - Mrs. Almayer was taken from her culture and family and forced to marry a man who never attempted to love her.
 - Taminah is a slave girl who has little else but to sell pastries and do what is expected of her. People barely notice her existence.
 - Quote
 - Winnie Verloc was in constant charge of her brother Stevie, a burden and her life's purpose. She married Verloc not out of choice for herself, but for her brother's welfare.
 - "She has never understood why Winnie married Mr. Verloc. It was very sensible of her, and evidently had turned out for the best, but her girl might naturally have hoped to find somebody of a more suitable age" (30).
 - A sacrifice. Winnie did make a choice, but she acted selflessly. The decision benefited her brother and her mother.
 - Interesting that even her mother is blind to the conscious choice to let go of her own dreams for others.
 - "She remembered brushing the boy's hair and tying his pinafores – herself in a pinafore still; the consolation administered to a small and badly scared creature by another creature nearly as small but not quite so badly scared" (178).
 - Her selfless disposition learned from childhood. Contrasts sharply with Verloc's selfish disposition.
- ❖ How women are (or are not) understood by men

- Emotional vacancy, inability to comprehend them when in grief.
 - Almayr fails to understand his daughter's emotions. He does not see that she is grieving in her own way
 - Quote
 - ◆ Self-serving love
 - Dain recognizes that he does not understand Nina's emotions. He concludes that she is divine
 - "He doubted her love no more than he would have doubted the fact of his own existence, but as he lay looking ardently in her face, watching her tears, her parted lips, her very breath, he was uneasily conscious of something in her he could not understand. Doubtless she had the wisdom of perfect beings" (121).
 - ◆ Nina is very much in tune with emotion. Conrad visibly paints a separation between the sexes. Woman here is tied to emotion, and man is in awe of it.
 - Mr. Verloc confuses practicality with emotion. He is anxious for his wife to get over her grief, and does not allow her appropriate sympathy
 - "He expected, of course, his wife to be very much upset, but he wanted her to pull herself together. He needed all her assistance and all her loyalty in these new conjunctures his fatalism had already accepted" (171).
 - ◆ Ironic tone
 - ◆ His needs are places above hers. Self-serving love.
 - "This was not reassuring to Mr. Verloc, in whose view the newly created situation required from the two people most concerned in it calmness, decision, and other qualities incompatible with the mental disorder of passionate sorrow" (171).
 - ◆ Emotionally absent man
 - ◆ Highly, obsessively, rational.
 - Heart of Darkness
 - Women live in their own worlds and we must not destroy them for fear that ours will get worse and we may need refuge.
 - ◆ Women as this alien species, almost, however respected. Important though this statement is at first offensive.
- ❖ Symbolic view of woman portrayed in beauty with the color white juxtaposed with the color black.
 - "...while she stood there all in white, straight, flexible, graceful, unconscious of herself, her low but broad forehead crowned with a shining mass of long black hair that fell in heavy tresses over her shoulders, and made her pale olive complexion look paler still by the contrast of its coal-black hue" (10).
 - "To this girl Nina often spoke; the other inhabitants of Sambir seldom or never heard the sound of her voice. They got used to the silent figure moving in their midst calm and white-robed, a being from another world and incomprehensible to them"(23).
 - "He looked at the man's brown shoulders, at the red sarong round his waist; at the tall, slender, dazzling white figure he supported. He looked at the white dress, at the falling masses of the long, black hair" (125).

- “The light thrown down by the shade fell dazzlingly on the white pillow sunk by the weight of her head reposing with closed eyes and dark hair done up in several plaits for the night” (41).
- ❖ Power held by these women as pictured in the narrative voice
 - Nina
 - Winnie Verloc:
 - “She kept still as the population of half the globe would keep still in astonishment and despair, were the sun suddenly put out in the summer sky by the perfidy of a trusted providence” (180).
 - Her reserve is given immense gravity.
 - Compared to the sun, that all powerful force so present and so symbolic Conrad’s novels
- ❖ Evidence of their power to change things in their actions
 - “He saw it clearly and believed he was a strong man. He had always prided himself on his unflinching firmness. And yet he was afraid. She had been all in all to him. What if he should let the memory of his love for her weaken the sense of his dignity? . . . What if he should suddenly take her to his heart, forget his shame, and pain, and anger, and – follow her! What if he should changed his heart if not his skin and made life easier between the two loves that would guard her from any mischance! His heart yearned for her. What if he should say his love for her was greater than . . . ‘I will never forgive you, Nina!’” (124).
 - “She drew back and fastened her eyes on his in one of those long looks that are a woman’s most terrible weapon; a look that is more stirring than the closest touch, and more dangerous than the thrust of a dagger, because it also whips the soul out of the body, but leaves the body alive and helpless, to be swayed here and there by the capricious tempests of passion and desire; a look that enwraps the whole body, and that penetrates into the innermost recesses of the being, bringing terrible defeat in the delirious uplifting of accomplished conquest” (110).
 - “(Later we learn from Babalatchi’s report to the Malay Rajah he serves, Lakamba, that the corpse’s face was actually destroyed by Mrs. Almayer, who “battered the face of the dead with a heavy stone, and...pushed him amongst the logs” [AF, PP. 169-70] in order to pass the dead man off as Dain Maroola, a Malay pursued for murder by the Dutch authorities.” (206 Fried).
 - Mrs. Almayer is an essential part of the plot to help Nina and Dain escape. She does something quite gruesome to help them. Almayer himself fails to notice that this is happening right under his nose.
 - “Into that plunging blow, delivered over the side of the couch, Mrs. Verloc had put all the inheritance of her immemorial and obscure descent, the simple ferocity of the age of caverns, and the unbalanced nervous fury of the age of bar-rooms” (193)”.
 - Then she becomes free – more quotes
- ❖ Nina’s footsteps as a symbol of her presence and her power. They are of subtle but great importance, though described as light the book, until the end when they are too permanent for Almayer to completely erase.

- Once in, he was invisible; and hidden there, leaning against the smooth trunk of a tall palm, he waited with gleaming eyes and an assured smile to hear the faint rustle of dried grass under the light footsteps of Nina” (40).
 - This is an image of a dainty woman, but she also has much significance to him. The very sound of her footsteps holds his attention, his emotion, his excitement.
- “His own house was very quiet; he could not hear the sound of his wife’s voice, nor the sound of Nina’s footsteps in the big room, opening on the verandah, which he called his sitting-room, whenever, in the company of white men, he wished to assert his claims to the commonplace decencies of civilization” (58).
 - The absent sounds of the women make him uneasy. It alerts him to the tragedy of Dain’s supposed death. He knows something is amiss just by the absence of sound. He wants to hear Nina’s footsteps in the place where he attempts to keep hold of civilization. Nina’s footsteps are important to him as well as to Dain.
- “To Ali’s great dismay he fell on his hands and knees, and, creeping along the sand, erased carefully with his hand all traces of Nina’s footsteps. He piled up small heaps of sand, leaving behind him a line of miniature graves right down to the water” (126).
 - A physical sign remains of Nina, and Almayer must erase it physically in an attempt to get rid of her mentally.
 - “More importantly, the passage links Almayer’s project of hyperbolic forgetting with a project of erasure, as if not only the imprint of Nina’s footsteps in the sand, but Almayer’s entire store of memories of her, early and late, were so much writing that now had to be undone . . . here one might be tempted to argue that because Almayer’s efforts to do away with all traces of Nina’s footsteps result, not in the restoration of a perfectly smooth surface, but rather ‘small heaps of sand’, ‘a line of miniature graves right down to the water,’ the passage shows that genuine erasure is impossible. But I think it would be truer . . . the passage defines erasure as a visible marking over a preexisting writing.” (212 Fried).