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A SYMBOLIC PATTERN  
in  
CONRAD'S EARLY FICTION

by

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B.A., Montana State University, 1948

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requirement for the Degree of Mas-  
ter of Arts.

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I wish at first to put before you  
a general proposition: that a work  
of art is very seldom limited to  
one exclusive meaning and not neces-  
sarily tending to a definite conclu-  
sion. And this for the reason that  
the nearer it approaches art, the  
more it acquires a symbolic character.

--Joseph Conrad

## Chapter I

### Introduction

This study interprets Conrad's early fiction in terms of a pattern of symbols which carry the theme of the moral deterioration of western man in a primitive environment. It will attempt to demonstrate that in each of the several works treated by this examination the central character symbolizes the modern western man brought up in a social pattern which determines his actions and thus, depriving him of the free exercise of his will, weakens it; that he exiles himself among primitive peoples with the confident intention of exploiting them; that he allies himself with one of the primitive people, who symbolizes the irrational part of man's nature, in order to further his intention of gaining material wealth; that, as the result of this alliance, he loses his ethical sense; that, finally, he is destroyed by

the usurpation of his irrational over his rational nature. It will also attempt to demonstrate that the symbolic connotations of the characters are reinforced by the symbolic connotations of their environment. As the result of such demonstrations, the study attempts to show that, at the time he was writing these stories, Conrad felt that whatever ethical life western man attains he attains through social coercion, and that beneath the rational surface of western man's mind lurks a nature as primitive, savage and irrational as that of the Malays and Africans.

A study of this kind encounters many difficulties, not the least of which is the application of specific symbolic equivalents for characters, settings and action. For instance, the question might be raised as to whether Almayer can truly be considered symbolic of western man. Are all westerners bookkeepers? Are all Dutch? Are all heavy-set? The answer to each of these queries is, of course, "No," but these peculiarities of Almayer do not invalidate his symbolic significance. Like the other central characters--Willens, Carrier and Kayerts--he is, to all appearances, Conrad's conception of the typical man our social order produces, that is, a man neither very good or very bad, made weak by his necessary con-

formance to the mores of his society. Almyer is, however, an individual as well as a symbol and thus possesses qualities which separate him from all other individuals. A reader, then, must exercise caution and not accept explicitly the transference of parts of the narrative structure into inflexible symbols. In a study similar in intention and method to this one--an interpretation of The Turn of the Screw in symbolic terms--R. B. Heilman advises:

As in studying all good poetry, we must resist the impulse to line up, on a secondary level of meaning, exact equivalents for the narrative elements, for such procedure stems from the rude assumption that every part of the story is a precision-tooled cog in an allegorical machine. But we must be sensitive to parallels, analogies, intimations; thus, while preserving the fullness and flexibility of the work, we can investigate its extraordinarily moving tonal richness. 1

The validity of such a study depends much upon an accumulation of "parallels, analogies, intimations" and not on each parallel, analogy, and intimation in itself. Rather than on flawless and ingenuous argument, the truth of such a study relies on fidelity to the spirit or tone the critic feels in the work of art.

This approach to Conrad's fiction--seeing it in

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1. "The Turn of the Screw as Poem," Forms of Modern Fiction, ed. by William Van O'Connor, Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1948, p. 228.

terms of a symbolic pattern--is not without precedent; in fact, the bulk of recent criticism has followed this approach. R. W. Stallman analyzes Victory,<sup>2</sup> L. J. Halle, Jr. Heart of Darkness,<sup>3</sup> Morton Dauwen Zabel and Vernon Young<sup>4</sup> The Secret Sharer,<sup>5</sup> Albert Guerard, Jr.<sup>6</sup> and W. F. Wright<sup>7</sup> the bulk of Conrad's work--each mostly in terms of symbolism. However, only one pays particular attention to Conrad's earliest fiction.<sup>8</sup>

Guerard has written the most detailed and penetrating analysis of the implicit struggle between the rational and irrational mind, but always in terms of Conrad's later work. Whereas this study reveals Conrad's early preoccupation with "The something, or the nothing, that lies at the innermost center of a man,

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2. "Structure and Symbolism of Conrad's Victory," The Western Review, XIII (Spring, 1949), pp. 146-157.  
 3. "Joseph Conrad: An Enigma Decoded," Saturday Review of Literature, XXXI (May 22, 1948), pp. 7-8.  
 4. "Conrad: the Secret Sharer," New Republic, CIII (April 21, 1941), pp. 467-574.  
 5. "Joseph Conrad: Outline for a Reconsideration," Hudson Review, II (Spring, 1949), pp. 5-18.  
 6. Joseph Conrad.  
 7. Romance and Tragedy in Joseph Conrad.  
 8. Of the recent critics, Wright devotes most attention to the early fiction; therefore, he is considered throughout the body of this study.



when all the outer and all the inner wrappings have been peeled away...."<sup>9</sup> Guérard introduces the theory that Conrad's heroes descend to "the dark potentialities of their own nature"<sup>10</sup> in order to free themselves from these potentialities through recognizing their existence. This study, however, does not attempt to go beyond that initial step; the recognition that at bottom man's nature is impulsive, irrational and dangerous.

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9. L. J. Halle, Jr., op. cit., p. 7.

10. Op. cit., p. 37.

## Chapter II

### Almayer's Folly

#### Theme:

On a symbolic level, the theme of Almayer's Folly can be interpreted as the struggle between the civilized and the primitive consciousness. This struggle cannot be reduced to the simple terms of the deterioration of white men in the tropics nor of the whites' exploitation of the brown-skinned peoples, although these levels of meaning are also in the story. It is the purpose of this chapter to analyze Almayer's Folly in terms of a coherent pattern of symbols which will reveal a broader level of meaning than any hitherto discussed.<sup>1</sup>

#### Setting:

The location of Almayer's Folly, the east coast of

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1. For a discussion of criticism of Almayer's Folly, see Appendix.

Borneo, is usual in Conrad's work in that it isolates Almyer from his own society and places him where he is no longer fettered or bolstered by the conventions of western civilization. Neither is Almyer fettered by the conventions of eastern civilization, since he believes in his own superiority as a white man and <sup>believes himself to</sup> occupies a position of power. Such isolation of such a character allows Conrad to observe the disintegration of a man unchecked by the morals of his society, except insofar as they have become an integral part of his own character. Conrad achieves, then, a simplification of materials for clearer revelation of theme. By avoiding the many complications of everyday living that a complex society presents--which such novels as Nostramo and The Secret Agent show he is capable of handling well--Conrad strips his story of all but the essential elements.<sup>2</sup>

Sambir, the small Borneo settlement of his fiction, is located a short distance up the Pantai river and is bounded on one side by the jungle, in the center of which are unfriendly tribes, and on the other side by the sea, across which come the western exploiters. If one were

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2. His tendency to draw flat characterizations is also indicative of his simplification for symbolic effect.

to proceed up the river, he would come first to "Al-mayer's Folly," the partly finished house which Almayer has begun for the use of expected British officials; then to Almayer's trading-post and home; then, across the river, to Lakamba's blockade; then to the Arab trading-post; and finally to Fulangi's clearing, beyond which lies only the jungle. The sea, the jungle, the river, Almayer's trading-post and "Almayer's Folly" form a coherent pattern of symbols.<sup>3</sup>

The sea, connected with Almayer's past, connotes western civilization. From it Lingard first brought his power to stabilize the social structure of Sambir. From the sea, too, Almayer came, and toward it he looks for release from his distasteful existence among the natives. As the first chapter opens, Almayer stands on the brink of the river watching febris sweep past. He spots a tree, a branch of which rises upward "like a hand lifted in mute appeal to heaven against the river's brutal and unnecessary violence," and he feels an empathetic relationship toward it. He envies it its journey down to the sea, and he speculates how far out

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3. Frank Pease has noted that "Conrad's characters synchronize with their mise en scene in a continuity completely conspicuous (on his part) and completely satisfying." "Joseph Conrad," Nation, XIII (November 2, 1918), p. 511. Therefore, a duplication and integration of symbols result.

it will drift--"as far as Macassar perhaps." Almayer's thoughts then turn to Macassar, which represents his former uneventful life as a <sup>West Co.</sup> bookkeeper. Similarly, when Almayer has lost his daughter, he again looks to the sea, seeing it as a symbol of his past:

He had almost forgotten why he was there in Borneo, and dreamily he could see all his past life on the smooth and boundless surface that glittered before his eyes.

Tain's hand laid on Almayer's shoulder recalled him with a start from some country very far away indeed. 4

Whereas the sea connotes Almayer's past and the conscious order of western civilization, the jungle represents the dark and mysterious life of the East. It is, as Guerard says, "primarily the enemy of consciousness... a deliberate symbol of the savage and the subconscious mind." 5 The jungle creates an atmosphere of strife, degeneration and decay:

All around them in a ring of luxuriant vegetation bathed in the warm air charged with strong and harsh perfumes, the intense work of tropical nature went on: plants shooting upward, entwined, interlaced in inextricable confusion, climbing madly and brutally over each other in the terrible silence of a desperate struggle towards the life-giving sunshine above--as if struck with sudden horror

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4. P. 190.  
 5. Albert Guerard, Jr., Joseph Conrad, p. 36.

at the seething mass of corruption below,  
 at the death and decay from which they  
 sprang. 6

Yet it promises that from this decay and fierce struggle for life something new and strong and beautiful will emerge, the new trees, the new vines, and "immense red blossoms", all of which in their turn will decay and provide nourishment for still a new generation.

Between the sea and the jungle the river flows, a symbol of their interdependence and the union between the two; it is the flux of life itself which unites the civilized and the primitive, the conscious and the subconscious mind. All the action takes place on its banks. Significantly, the first chapter, which sets the tone for the entire novel, opens with Almayer gazing at the river down which he must go in order to return to Macassar and Europe, and closes with Nina gazing at the same river, up which is Lakamba's stockade, where Iain, her Malay lover, has gone. Like Kurtz in Heart of Darkness, Almayer later journeys up the river into the interior in order to bring back his daughter. Like Kurtz, too, Almayer's penetration into the interior ends in moral disaster.

The trading-post represents for Almayer the only bit of civilization on the east coast. The only white man in Sambir, he is proud of the fact that he also possesses the only flock of geese, a species of fowl <sup>characteristic</sup> apparently not native to the East. In this trading-post are the reminders of his past: an office, a safe, and ledgers full of neat rows of figures. Until his wife broke them, there were also the furnishings of a European home. All these material possessions are what he is able to bring to Sambir in order to preserve a link with his past.

Almayer himself has constructed a large building, in addition to the trading-post built earlier by Lingard, which he hopes will house the many engineers and administrators of the British Borneo Company when they arrive to bring order and security to the troubled affairs of Sambir. When the British relinquish their claim to the east coast, this house, dubbed by the Dutch "Almayer's Folly," is left unfinished—a symbol of his romantic dream of treasure, which he was too weak to acquire, and of his inability to complete his plans. In this house he dies, leaving it to its other inhabitants, a Chinese and a monkey.

*Mark Twain*

Characters:

Robert W. Stallman, writing an analysis of Victory in terms of symbols, says about fictional characters:

What we term the characters of a novel are certainly not characters of flesh and blood; they are nothing more than the author's verbal arrangements. Being composed of words, they function as the part symbols out of which the whole symbol is constructed. Because a novel is a product of language, a novel depends for its very life upon the word. Conrad's credo-- "Give me the right word and the right accent and I will move the world"--transposes into "Give me the right symbol and the right rendering and I will make a world." The right symbol is the one which best creates a potential scheme of relationships to the other symbols, so that each part elicits the potential meaning of the other parts to form a symbolic meaning of the whole. 7

The symbolic implications of the characters in Almayer's Folly do create a "potential scheme of relationships," one to another and to the setting.

Although Almayer may be considered as simply one human being provided with certain flaws which lead to his destruction, he can also be considered as a symbol of something more, an embodiment of certain characteristics of the western or rational mind. Almayer, "strong in mathematics," is by profession a bookkeeper, who recalls

...with pleasurable regret the image of Hudig's lofty and cool warehouses with their long and

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7. "The Structure and Symbolism of Conrad's Victory," Western Review, XIII (Spring, 1949), p. 146.



straight avenues of gin cases and bales of Manchester goods; the big door swinging noiselessly; the dim light of the place, so delightful after the glare of the streets; the little railed-off spaces amongst piles of merchandise where the Chinese clerks, neat, cool, and sad-eyed, wrote rapidly and in silence.... 3

Almayer's rationality is shown in his regret for the "long and straight" avenues of manufactured goods, for the time when every thing was in its place, even the neat, little Chinese, and when each minute of his day was regulated by higher authority.

His standard of values is based upon material well-being. He thinks of his first employer as "Hudig--the Master" and admires his astuteness, which has garnered so many silver guilders. His greater admiration for Lingard, with whom he has nothing in common, is based on the fact that Lingard has more wealth than Hudig. Almayer's ideal, toward which all his effort is directed,

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8. P. 5. It is interesting to note that David Daiches states in an essay on Conrad, "Even in his earliest work he was able to select and combine small numbers of images, each of which was almost symbolic in its suggestions, so that the result of the combination would be just the tone he was searching for." (Daiches then quotes the passage above about Almayer's past life.) "Here we can see the symbolic nature of the images and sounds presented, the precision of the adjectives, which also have symbolic qualities ("discreet Chinamen")." The Novel and The Modern World, p. 62.)

is to gain a fortune like Lingard's and return to Europe and there live in splendor. But Almayer, lacking the characteristic of introspection and self-analysis, does not realize that he is not another Lingard and that he is incompetent to cope with an environment which is primitive, passionate and unreasonable.<sup>9</sup>

Almayer's wife is his complete antithesis. A daughter of a Sulu pirate, she is in no way changed by her intercourse with the West, several years in a convent. While there she imagines her future life to be the

...usual life of a Malay girl--the usual succession of heavy work and fierce love, of intrigues, gold ornaments, of domestic drudgery, and of that great but occult influence which is one of the few rights of half-savage woman-kind.<sup>10</sup>

She assimilates only the superstitious element of the faith the sisters teach her. She keeps her cross and looks at it often with superstitious awe. When she finds herself married to Almayer (she has no choice in the matter), she tears down the pretty curtains he has hung and burns the furniture, actions symbolic of "her un-

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9. W.F. Wright comments, "Almayer is not originally aware of any weakness of personality. The representative of an ambitious mercantile firm, he comes to the Eastern tropics confident of material success and of wholesome adventure--'Ready to conquer the world.'" Op. cit., p. 126.

10. P. 22.

reasoning hate for civilization." She admires virility, passion and brute courage. In spite of her marriage to a white man, she lives like other native women. The most vivid picture of her is of a figure crouching in the corner of the house chewing betel-nuts. She represents, in short, savagery and irrationality.

From this marriage, by no means one of love, is born a daughter, Nina. Her physical appearance is indicative of her twin heritage. Her profile is her father's but the lower part of her face has the squareness of her maternal ancestors. Her dark eyes, characteristic of the Malays, have a gleam of superior intelligence. Her completely white dress contrasts with her jet-black hair. Conrad makes it plain that Nina is a half-caste and underlines the poignancy of her plight. Since her father and mother, the symbols of the two sides of her nature, live in mutual hate, she must finally choose between the two heritages, and she chooses the one which appears the most real, the most closely associated with life.

These three characters form both an antithesis and a synthesis. Nina is the synthesizing factor. With the advent of Dain, however, the balance is upset. He represents "the whole treasure of love and passion...the un-

restrained enthusiasm of a man totally untrammelled by an influence of civilized self-discipline." The passion that Dain embodies is basically physical, yet is not merely lust, for he is willing to sacrifice his life in order to be with Nina. His love is complete and unqualified in that he surrenders himself to "that woman that half belonged to his enemies" and becomes, as Nina realizes, her slave. This love, which entails the sacrifice of self to another, contrasts sharply with Almayer's love, to which he will not sacrifice his own ego, yet which paradoxically in its repression leads him to his final obliteration in opium.

The remaining characters of Almayer's Folly are of lesser importance. With the exception of Liard and several Dutch officers, who appear briefly, the population of Conrad's Sambir is completely Oriental. Babalatchi, Lakamba, Taminah and Abdullah form a background of intrigue. A monkey, which appears in the last pages of the novel, has a more symbolic meaning than any of the minor figures. It represents the most primordial nature of the East--the monkey in man.

#### Development of Theme:

With these interpretations of the symbolic connotations of the setting and the characters in mind,

the consistency of the dramatic symbolic relationships which make up the underlying theme of the novel becomes clear. The development of theme has been divided, for convenience, into five steps: (1) Almayer's marriage; (2) the birth of Nina and the resultant relationship between father, mother and daughter; (3) the advent of Dain, which precipitates a choice inherent in the relationship of the members of Almayer's family; (4) Dain and Nina's flight and Almayer's failure to recognize Dain's claim on Nina; (5) and Almayer's last years.

Almayer's marriage with the daughter of a Sulu pirate symbolizes the relationship between the West and the East. The western man desires to exploit the material possessions of the East but refuses to recognize that the East has anything else of value for him or that it holds any danger. The union between the two is born out of the West's desire to extract from the East its material treasure, just as Almayer wishes to tear out of the interior of Borneo diamonds and gold that will enable him to live magnificently in Europe. Like Almayer, the western man comes to the East arrogant in his callow complexion and without humility or love.

Just as Almayer rationalizes that he can dispose of his wife once he has gained wealth, the western man

imagines that he can divest himself of his contact with the savage society once he has exploited its material wealth. The situation is in a sense similar to that of the Faust-like motifs of literature, in which the heroes imagine they can forewear their pact with the dark, mysterious agent after they have gained what they believe to be the requisites to happiness. Like Faust, however, Almayer is not able to undo the past. His wife, crouched in the corner chewing her betel-nuts, remains "the bitterest thing of all; the greatest regret" of his life.

Almayer's removal to Sambir immediately after his marriage isolates him from his race. He occupies a position typical of the western exploiter in the East; he is accepted and yet not accepted. As long as he is backed by those inventions of the West which are so effective in gaining friends--fast ships and accurate cannon--the natives treat him with deference. Almayer, in turn, looks upon the natives with distaste and distrust. He is there for one purpose: to gain wealth; other than as implements and impediments to this end, the natives do not concern him. The typical westerner in the East, he remains in his little outpost of progress, wears his European white suits, and clings to the

bits of European civilization that he has brought with him.

The birth of Nina further enhances the tension already existing between Almayer and his wife. After his wife's initial outbreaks of temper, Almayer had sought to ignore her completely. The child complicates this denial of his marriage because he can no longer ignore the presence and influence of his wife upon the child. Since he wishes to do all he can to bring Nina up as a white girl, he sends her, against the wishes of his wife, to a Protestant family in Macassar to be educated.

When Nina returns, after spending her youth in a white society, Almayer, confident in the superiority of his race, fears that she will be ashamed of her mother. But after three months in Sambir, Nina feels that she has always lived there. When her mother relates the story of her youth and of her race, she listens eagerly.

...And listening to the recital of those savage glories, those barbarous flights and savage feasting, to the story of deeds valorous, albeit somewhat bloodthirsty, where men of her mother's race shone far above the Orang Blanda, she felt herself irresistibly fascinated, and saw with vague surprise the narrow mantle of civilized morality in which good-meaning people had wrapped her young soul, fall away and leave

her shivering and helpless as if on the edge of some deep and unknown abyss. Strangest of all, this abyss did not frighten her when she was under the influence of the witch-like being she called her mother. 11

Nina feels that her mother and her mother's people (the primitive East) have "a savage and uncompromising sincerity" which is preferable to the dollar-grabbing, "to the sleek hypocrisy, to the polite disguises, to the virtuous pretenses" of the white people. "The deep and unknown abyss" to which her mother is the guide attracts her more and more, and she becomes "gradually more indifferent, more contemptuous of the white side of her descent represented by a feeble and traditionless father." Rather than feel repulsion toward her mother, Nina is "irresistibly fascinated" by the savage life revealed to her.

Until the arrival of Dain Maroola, the Malay rajah from a nearby island, the family relationship among Almayor, his wife and Nina, though not harmonious, remains stable. Nina does not detach herself completely from her father nor relinquish the privileges of a white woman, the privileges to go unveiled and to enter into free discussion with the men of Sambir. Her union with savagery, as represented by her mother, is predomi-

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11. P. 42. Italics mine.



nantly passive. She is fascinated by the tales her mother tells her and she recognizes in the Malay temperament something more vital than she knew in Macassar among the whites. Dain, making her choice between her father and her mother imperative, draws her into active alignment with the East.

Whereas Almayer's wife suggests to Nina the East in its mystery and its savagery, Dain brings to her primitive, almost savage love. Almayer had shown Nina affection but not an affection she could understand or appreciate. He had shipped her off at an early age to a community in which she was unwanted and unhappy. She did not value his fixed, consuming concentration on attaining material wealth in order to provide for her a splendor in Europe ("Expedition! Gold! What did she care for all that?"), especially since, from her first experience in Macassar, she feels no affinity for the elaborate and false social superstructure of western society. When Dain appears she at once senses him to be the "embodiment of her fate, the creature of her dreams."

She recognized with a thrill of delicious  
fear the mysterious consciousness of her identity  
with that being. Listening to his words,  
it seemed to her that she was born only then  
to a knowledge of a new existence, that her  
life was complete only when near him, and she  
abandoned herself to a feeling of creamy hap-

piness, while with half-veiled face and in silence--as became a Malay girl--she listened to Dain's words giving up to her the whole treasure of love and passion his nature was capable of with all the unrestrained enthusiasm of a man totally untrammelled by any influence of civilized self-discipline. 12

Dain is what tips the balance and causes Nina to choose savagery, to follow her mother's rather than her father's desires.

Although Almayer's house is the scene of their first meeting, the jungle hides them in all their assignations. The jungle, "the friendly curtain of bushes," is their ally throughout; in fact, their love and the jungle are identified:

All the seething life and movement of tropical nature seemed concentrated in the ardent eyes, in the tumultuously beating hearts of the two beings drifting in the canoe, under the white canopy of mist, over the smooth surface of the river. 13

The jungle, too, presents their avenue of escape from both Almayer and the Dutch naval officers. When Dain is surprised with gunpowder in his ship, he must flee or be put to death. So powerful is his love, however, that he refused to leave unless Nina will follow him. The necessity of choice makes her position clear:

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12. P. 64. Italics mine.  
13. P. 69.

For years she had stood between her mother and her father, the one so strong in her weakness, the other so weak where he could have been so strong. Between those two beings so dissimilar, so antagonistic, she stood with mute heart wondering and angry at the fact of her own existence. It seemed so unreasonable, so humiliating to be flung there in that settlement and to see the days rush by into the past, without a hope, a desire, or an aim that would justify the life she had to endure in ever-growing weariness. She had little belief and no sympathy for her father's dreams; but the savage ravings of her mother chanced to strike a responsive chord, deep down somewhere in her despairing heart; and she dreamed dreams of her own with the persistent absorption of a captive thinking of liberty within walls of his prison cell. With the coming of Dain she found the road to freedom by obeying the voice of the new-born impulses, and with surprised joy she thought she could read in his eyes the answer to all the questionings of her heart. She understood now the reason and the aim of life; and in the triumphant unveiling of that mystery she threw away disdainfully her past with its sad thoughts, its bitter feelings and its faint affections, now withered and dead in contact with her fierce passion. 14

Qualities of her nature have been imprisoned within her and Dain represents their release. To her has been unveiled the "reason and the aim of life," love that mitigates the aloneness of the individual and provides the solidarity of human existence. To fulfill that love she must journey into the jungle to Dain, and she unhesitatingly does so. There in "the shadows of

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14. P. 152. Italics mine.

the forests that seemed to guard their happiness" she resolves her internal conflict in recognizing her primitive nature and its needs.

Almayer, who follows Nina into the heart of the jungle in order to save her from what he considers a debasing existence, does not succeed in convincing Nina that she cannot destroy the race barrier between herself and Dain. Nina informs him that she is herself part Malay, and furthermore that Dain gave her love whereas Almayer promised only gold:

"Could you give me happiness without life? Life!" she repeated with sudden energy that sent the word ringing over the sea. "Life that means power and love," she added in a low voice.

"That!" said Almayer, pointing his finger at Dain standing close by and looking at them in curious wonder.

"Yes, that!" she replied, looking her father full in the face and noticing for the first time with a slight gasp of fear the unnatural rigidity of his features. 15

Almayer recoils before Nina's assertion that Dain is the symbol of happiness, power, and love, of life itself. When Dain offers him a life with himself and Nina, Almayer's feeling of superiority will not allow him to accept. He is "a white man, and of good family. . . . It would be a disgrace . . . all over the island,

. . . the only white man on the east coast." He will not allow his love for Nina to overcome his sense of dignity and propriety, and he returns down the river to his trading-post, his little bit of western civilization, where he plans to forget completely the most genuine feeling he had ever known--his love for Nina.

Having refused to submit to his desire to follow Nina and accept her relationship to Dain, a desire which tore him inwardly to pieces, Almayer has only one reason to live--to forget Nina. His hopes for treasure vanished with the departure of Dain, who was to aid him; even his wife, having gone to live with Iakarba, is no longer around to nag him. Paradoxically, primitive life, which he would not voluntarily try to understand, completes its victory over him and swallows him into itself. His trading-post, with its desk, its revolving chair, its ledgers, reminds him of the person he is attempting to forget, and he sets fire to it. What remains to him in trading goods and boats the natives steal by night. He retreats to "Almayer's Folly," takes to smoking opium--itself symbolic of dreams and irrationality--and allows a Chinese opium addict to live with him.

Throughout these last pages, a monkey--a symbol which connotes both the most primitive savage and the

jungle--appears again and again. It perches on Almayer's shoulder and together they breakfast on bananas, "in the trusting silence of perfect friendship." When Almayer burns the trading-post, he takes the monkey under his coat to protect it, and together they move to "Almayer's Folly." There the monkey assumes charge of the household and guides any guests that might arrive:

The little animal seemed to have taken complete charge of its master, and whenever it wished for his presence on the verandah it would tug perseveringly at his jacket, till Almayer obediently came out into the sunshine, which he seemed to dislike so much. 16

The monkey, sharing Almayer's coat, Almayer's breakfast and "Almayer's Folly," symbolizes Almayer's complete degeneration from his abortive union with the East.

#### Conclusion:

In light of the symbolic overtones of the characters, setting and action of Almayer's Folly, the discerning reader finds a more inclusive theme than that of one man's tragedy. Almayer can be considered representative of the West, or more specifically the western consciousness, with its emphasis upon propriety, material wealth, rationality, and sublimation. His marriage to the Sulu girl, representing the shallow, calculated

union with the East--with irrationality, superstition, elemental passion--is held together only by the child Nina, synthesis of the two types of consciousness. Nina, however, rejects her father's dominance when it conflicts with the more vital forces of her nature which are aroused by the unqualified love Pain offers. Almyer, on the other hand, unwilling to merge with the primitive life, exerts the utmost willpower over his love for Nina in order to preserve his dignity as a white. His failure to come to terms with those qualities represented by the East ends in his complete absorption into them. The jungle takes back the land on which his trading-post stood, the natives steal his possessions, a Chinese leads him to adopt opium smoking, and a monkey becomes his companion.

Conrad idealized the East--described its beauty and made heroes of its natives, but he recognized that the westerner's haughty contact with it might end in moral disaster. In Youth Marlowe describes the East to a group of representative westerners, a man of finance, a man of accounts, and a man of law, as

...old, so mysterious, resplendent and sombre, living and unchanged, full of danger and promise....I have seen the mysterious shores, the still water, the lands of brown nations, where a stealthy Genesis lies in wait, pursues, over-

takes so many of the conquering race, who are proud of their wisdom, of their knowledge, of their strength. 17

Almayer is one of the men Harlowe speaks of, a man of accounts who, like a landman immersed in water, resisted blindly and was thus overcome by the very element which might have brought him life.

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17. Youth. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1924. Pp. 41-42.



### Chapter III

#### An Outcast of the Islands

##### Theme:

The development of theme in An Outcast<sup>1</sup> is in many respects simpler than that in Almayer's Folly since the conflict within Willems is not so pronounced. Where Almayer was weak and thus a prey to his environment, Willems is strong though ignorant of the forces within him which drive him to his sordid end. The development of theme, then, is the process of the encroachment of the primitive and irrational upon the character of Willems and the parallel disclosure and usurpation of the primitive and irrational nature within Willems. Thus it follows that the dominant symbols in An Outcast are those which have pre-

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1. An Outcast is used throughout this chapter as an abbreviation for An Outcast of the Islands.

viously been defined as connoting the East, that is, the jungle and the native woman. Mention of the sea is almost non-existent and hardly any of the action occurs directly within the confines of white civilization, Macassar and Almayer's trading post in Sambir. Representative of the West, in addition to Willems, is Lingard, who occupies a more important position in An Outcast than he does in Almayer's Folly. Since the symbolic overtones of these characters and settings are similar, in many cases identical, to those in Almayer's Folly, only a brief discussion of them is necessary here.

#### Setting:

The first part of the action in An Outcast takes place in Macassar, an important European settlement in the East Indies. To Willems Macassar means little, important things like billiards, poker and cocktails. It also represents Hudig, who carries on his exploitation of the East with such great profit through the exchange of trinkets, Manchester cotton stuffs and

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2. The choice of words and images is symbolic. As in "An Outpost of Progress," billiards is one of the magnificent achievements of civilization. The soft clink and orderly zigzagging of billiard balls, the sad-eyed Chinese racking up the scores, the plush decoration of the hotel--all create an atmosphere of assurance and methodicity.

opium for the valuable rattan and gutta. To Willems Macassar also represents Lingard, who gave him his first start there and found for him a place in Hudig's concern, and who carries on an exploitation even more lucrative than Hudig's. In Macassar, Willems finds life to be as simple as billiards; it is a game a clever man might win. In short, the European settlement represents for him, as it did for Almayer, the West, where life's phenomena, though they may zigzag like billiard balls, are controlled and move always "toward the inevitably successful cannon."

The Sambir of *An Outcast* is essentially the Sambir of *Almayer's Folly*. Though the time is earlier, the inhabitants are consistent with their characterizations as drawn in the first novel. Abdullah is not yet established in Sambir; Almayer occupies his trading post and dreams of immense riches; Mina is only a child; Lakamba is the titular ruler and Eabalatchi is his adviser; Iain Maroola is unknown; "*Almayer's Folly*" has not been built. Geographically Sambir and its environs are unchanged: there are still the jungle, the river, and the sea.

Although the sea has little overt symbolic significance in *An Outcast*, it represents the link between

Sambir and Macassar, the means by which Willems could escape back to the European settlement and western civilization. Almost each time it is mentioned, it carries that meaning. When Willems is overcome by his fear of the irrational, shadowy nature of life among the Malays, he pleads with Aissa to escape with him to the sea. Later, when his exile seems permanent, he looks to the sea for his escape; for there he could find white men,

Men like himself. Good men who would rescue him, take him far away where there was trade, and houses, and other men that could understand him exactly, appreciate his capabilities; where there was proper food, and money; where there were beds, knives, forks, carriages, brassbands, cool drinks, churches with well-dressed people praying in them. He would pray also. The superior land of refined delights where he could sit on a chair, eat his tiffin off a white table-cloth, nod to fellows--good fellows; he would be popular; always was--where he could be virtuous, correct, do business, draw a salary, smoke cigars, buy things in shops--have boots... be happy, free, become rich. (sic) 3

The sea, Macassar, Willem's home, the West mean material possessions: trade, houses, food, money, beds, knives, forks, carriages, cool drinks; and propriety: well-dressed people in church, respectful attention, dinner on a white table-cloth. If Willems could only

get to the sea, he could have these things and be happy.

The river, too, retains the same symbolic connotations that it has in Almayer's Folly. In An Outcast it suggests again the impersonal flux of life, the interdependence between the sea and the land, the journey into the heart of darkness. Babatchi sees it as such a symbol:

He stood with his face turned to the river, and it seemed to him that he could breathe easier with the knowledge of the clear vast space before him; then, after a while he leaned heavily forward on his staff, his chin fell on his breast, and a deep sigh was his answer to the selfish discourse of the river that hurried on unceasing and fast, regardless of joy or sorrow, of suffering and of strife, of failures and triumphs that lived on its banks. The brown water was there, ready to carry friends or enemies, to nurse love or hate on its submissive and heartless bosom, to help or to hinder, to save life or give death: the great and rapid river: a deliverance, a prison, a refuge or a grave. 4

The jungle, in its strict impersonality and its disdain of human endeavor, resembles the river, but whereas the river connotes both joy and sorrow, a refuge and a grave, the jungle is invariably somber. In An Outcast there is no hint of good in the jungle's unceasing struggle of life, a struggle more terrible

because it is absolutely silent. Willems

...looked into that great dark place odorous with the breath of life, with the mystery of existence, renewed, fecund, indestructible; and he felt afraid of his solitude, of the solitude of his body, of the loneliness of his soul in the presence of this unconscious and ardent struggle, of this lofty indifference, of this merciless and mysterious purpose, perpetuating strife and death through the march of ages. 5

The jungle, filled with "unconscious and ardent struggle," tempts "any passer-by to the solution of the gloomy problem of its depths." But "Nobody would accept the deceptive challenge." The jungle remains unexplored and mysterious, a symbol of the unconscious mind, which is an enigma and a danger to the white traders who live on its fringes.

#### Characters:

Three characters in An Outcast are of major importance: Willems, Lingard, and Aissa. Willems occupies the center of attention; the novel is concerned with Lingard and Aissa primarily in terms of their effect upon Willems. Conrad sets the keynote, as Dickens would say, of Willems' character and position in the opening paragraph of the novel, a paragraph which Conrad wrote immediately after Garnett suggested that he

write another novel:

When he stepped off the straight and narrow path of his peculiar honesty, it was with an inward assertion of unflinching resolve to fall back again into the monotonous but safe stride of virtue as soon as his little excursion into the wayside quarries had produced the desired effect. It was going to be a short episode--a sentence in brackets, so to speak--in the flowing tale of his life: a thing of no moment, to be done unwillingly, yet neatly, and to be quickly forgotten. He imagined that he could go on afterwards looking at the sunshine, enjoying the shade, breathing in the perfume of flowers in the small garden before his house. He fancied that nothing would be changed, that he would be able as heretofore to tyrannize good-humoredly over his half-caste wife, to notice with tender contempt his pale yellow child, to patronize loftily his dark-skinned brother-in-law, who loved pink neckties and wore patent-leather boots on his little feet, and was so humble before the white husband of the lucky sister. Those were the delights of his life, and he was unable to conceive that the moral significance of any act of his could interfere with the very nature of things, could dim the light of the sun, could destroy the perfume of the flowers, the submission of his wife, the smile of his child, the awesome respect of Leonard da Souza and of all the Da Souza family. That was the great luxury of his life. It rounded and completed his existence in a perpetual assurance of unquestionable superiority. He loved to breathe the coarse incense they offered before the shrine of the successful white man; the man that had done them the honour to marry their daughter, sister, cousin; the rising man sure to climb very high; the confidential clerk of Hudis & Co. 6

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6. Pp. 3-4. Italics mine.

This passage contains many thematic elements similar to those analyzed in the previous chapter on Almayer's Folly. Like Almayer, Willems is a European trader working for Hudig & Co. in Macassar. Like Almayer, Willems feels his unquestionable superiority over the natives and half-castes among whom he lives. Like Almayer, Willems has left the "safe stride of virtue" in order to better himself materially, and like Almayer he feels that the step away from the straight and narrow is not irrevocable. Willems' position is even further comparable to Almayer's in that he has married the half-caste daughter of Hudig.<sup>7</sup> At the point Conrad picks up his history, Willems occupies a respectable position in Macassar: he is financially well-off, respected by his white associates for his astuteness in business, and lionized by his innumerable relatives for his selfish beneficence toward them. The novel, then, is concerned with Willems' fall from this respectability into complete degeneracy and death.

More broadly interpreted, Willems symbolizes what Conrad seems to regard as the typical white exploiter

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7. This marriage, unlike Almayer's, was not contracted out of greed--Willems did not know Joanna was the daughter of his employer--but rather out of a desire for veneration and power.



in the East. One of the numerous agents of Western companies whose only purpose is to extract as much as possible from the native islanders, he resembles, as well as Almayer, Kayertz and Carlier of "An Outpost of Progress" and Camille Delcommune and Klein, the commercial agents whom Conrad met in the Belgian Congo. These men not only feel no responsibility toward the natives and the land they exploit, but they also do not fear their potential dangers. What marks them for failure is their confidence in their civilized consciousness--what might be termed, in contrast to black magic, their white wisdom.

Lingard, like Almayer and Willems, is also an exploiter of the primitive people, but the differences between his position and theirs are several. That he is first a sailor and second a trader is important, for Conrad admired men of the sea almost as a race apart. In An Outcast this disjunction between the traders who

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8. The reader need only be reminded of the contrast in The Nigger of the Narcissus between Donkin, the landsman, and such members of the crew as Belfast and Singleton. In Typhoon, too, there is an implicit contrast between the men on the ship and their kinsman at home. The list of such contrasts is extensive. Life at sea binds men together in a sort of solidarity that makes their ships, as Conrad often reiterates, little worlds in themselves.

are primarily business men and those who are primarily sailors is apparent in the characters of Willems and Lingard. Whereas the former "was hopelessly at variance with the spirit of the sea,"<sup>9</sup>

Tom Lingard was a master, a lover, a servant of the sea. The sea took him young, fashioned him body and soul; gave him his fierce aspect, his loud voice, his fearless eyes, his stupidly guileless heart. Generously it gave him his absurd faith in himself, his universal love of creation, his wide indulgence, his contemptuous severity, his straightforward simplicity of motive and honesty of aim. 10

Tom Lingard does not exchange his European goods with the natives only to enrich himself. Having discovered Sambir's rich resources and having navigated the treacherous entrance to the Pantai river, he guards his knowledge jealously--not in order that he can further enrich himself but in order that other traders, especially the Arabs, may not unscrupulously exploit the Malays. He wishes to control Sambir for its own good:

--he dreamed of Arcadian happiness for that little corner of the world which he loved to think all his own. His deep-seated and immovable conviction that only he--he, Lingard--

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9. The sea, it must be reiterated, is connotative of the West only as a means by which the exiles, Almayer and Willems, hope to return to their own race. It stands in opposition to the jungle; it is a means of escape. In its peculiar effect upon its inhabitants, it does not connote the West.

10. P. 13.

knew what was good for them was characteristic of him, and, after all, not so very far wrong. He would make them happy whether or no, he said, and he meant it. His trade brought prosperity to the young state, and the fear of his heavy hand secured its internal peace for many years. 11.

In spite of the difference in motive behind his enterprises in the East, Lingard resembles Willems in his immodesty, self-confidence, ego-mania. Since Lingard's life has been a success, he has the same "absurd faith in himself" as does Willems. "To Lingard-- simple himself--all things were simple." A thing is either right or it is wrong, and certain fortunate individuals like himself know which is which. He is, then, symbolic of a basic characteristic of the white man in the East-- complete confidence in the white man's wisdom. Although he is fond of the natives, he does not really love or understand them; his interest in their welfare is based on self-esteem.

Aissa blends the characteristics of both Almayer's wife and daughter, without, of course, any admixture of European heritage; she is completely Malay. She has Mrs. Almayer's hate for the white race, her deep irrationality, and her love of courage. She has Nina's fierce passion and possessiveness. When Willems first

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11. P. 200.

encounters her, her symbolic meaning is made evident:

Who was she? Where did she come from? Wonderingly he took his eyes off her face to look round at the serried trees of the forest that stood big and still and straight, as if watching him and her breathlessly. He had been baffled, repelled, almost frightened by the intensity of that tropical life which wants the sunshine but works in gloom; which seems to be all grace of colour and form, all brilliance, all smiles, but is only the blossoming of the dead; whose mystery holds the promise of joy and beauty, yet contains nothing but poison and decay. He had been frightened by the vague perception of danger before, but now, as he looked at that life again, his eyes seemed able to pierce the fantastic veil of creepers and leaves, to look past the solid trunks, to see through the forbidding gloom--and the mystery was disclosed--enchancing, subduing, beautiful. He looked at the woman. Through the checkered light between them she appeared to him with the palpable distinctness of a dream. The very spirit of that land of mysterious forests, standing before him like an apparition behind a transparent veil--a veil woven of sunbeams and shadows. 12

This passage emphasizes what Faucher observes about the groupings of images which, as a whole, have symbolic suggestion. Description of the jungle's mystery, its forbidding gloom, its poison and decay, its fantastic veil of creepers--all of which are enchancing, subduing, beautiful--merges into description of Aissa's dream-like figure in the checkered light. Who is

Aisca? "The very spirit of the land of mysterious forests...." She epitomizes in human form, "with the impalpable distinctness of a dream," the gloom, the tangle, and the mystery of the East.

Development of Theme:

The development of theme in An Outcast--the progressive absorption of Willems' identity into the horror of undisciplined and savage life--follows an unbroken path downward, a falling curve not interrupted by any waverings in direction. The element in Willems' character responsible for this unchecked descent is his unquestioning faith in his own wisdom. He believes that he is the sole master of his destiny, and that all his success is the inevitable result of his own astuteness. Above all he prides himself on his self-knowledge:

Willems knew all about himself. On the day when, with many misgivings, he ran away from a Dutch East Indian in Samarang roads, he had commenced that study of himself, of his own ways, of his own abilities, of those fate-compelling qualities of his which led him toward that lucrative position which he now filled. Being of a modest and diffident nature, his successes amazed, almost frightened him, and ended--as he got over the succeeding shocks of surprise--by making him ferociously conceited. He believed in his

genius and in his knowledge of the world. 13

Willems' "descent to truth," as Wright expresses his moral deterioration, can be divided into several steps: (1) his employment under Hudig, (2) his exile and fascination for Aissa, (3) his betrayal of Lingard, (4) and his attempted escape from Aissa. His employment under the unscrupulous Hudig is the first step downward toward his death on the banks of the Pantai, for in leaving Lingard's and accepting Hudig's employment, he accepts the willful, irresponsible exploitation of the Malays. His marriage to Joanna, though not so drastic as Almayer's marriage to the

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13. P. 6. Italics mine.

14. Willems, like Almayer, in his proud self-confidence, does not recognize any unalterable significance in his actions; he is his own moral arbiter. When his marriage to Hudig's daughter is no longer convenient to him, he deserts her and seeks to forget her. After he has stolen goods from the concern in which he occupies a position of trust, he seeks to make secret restitution and regards such restitution as complete absolution. But, as Wright has noted, Willems cannot escape his past. "The past, he thinks, cannot reach him, but Conrad has bound him to that past, since his mind is the product of all the mistakes which he has refused to acknowledge and transcend. For Conrad as for the contemporary psychiatrist, whatever is suppressed below the level of consciousness becomes a concealed disease of the mind and will tend to destroy it. Though Conrad was indifferent to the work of Freud, ... he could not confine art to the simple level of the conscious mind. For a tragic conflict to be significant, Conrad would have it involve the utmost depths of personality." (*Op. cit.*, p. 129.)

Sulu girl, is another step in the same direction. It gives him the opportunity to make his wife's half-caste relatives dependent upon his generosity, and thus contributes to his self-esteem and sense of superiority to the dark race. However, since he lives in a society dominated by the whites and spends most of his time at one of the social clubs, he has little intimate contact with the natives, and thus is unprepared for his exile--the result of his theft--<sup>15</sup>into the heart of Malay Borneo.

Willems' employment, his marriage, and his theft form really the prologue for the more important and major part of the action, which takes place in Sambir. When Willems reaches Sambir, he is isolated from his kind and the institutions and customs which keep him ethical in his own peculiar way. To be sure, Almayer is also in Sambir, but he maintains only the slightest contact with Willems, whom he regards suspiciously as an interloper and rival in Lingard's beneficence. Willems, then, is left to stew in his own emotions: his rancor at

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15. Willems' theft from Hudig does not have any intrinsic bearing on this theme; rather, it is an act which motivates his departure from Macassar to more direct contact with the Eastern race.

Hudig's ingratitude for his service; his disappointment at the lack of opportunity in Almayer's concern; his hate for the uncivilized life of Sambir, so sorely lacking boredom's curatives: cocktails, poker, and billiards. Allowed thus to ruminate in discontent and boredom, the more bitter because of his faith in his fate-impelled, successful destiny, he is readily susceptible to Aissa.

When Willems meets Aissa, the jungle, which before has seemed treacherous and evil, appears to be magical, full of life and promise. Just as the description of the jungle merges into a description of Aissa, Willems' admiration of the girl merges into an admiration for the environment and the mystery and savagery that both symbolize. She gives him a sense of power over the jungle: he feels that with one hand he can sweep all the trees into the river. But as soon as the two have parted from their brief and chance encounter, he feels uneasy:

With his returning wits came the fear of something unknown that had taken possession of his heart, of something inarticulate and masterful which could not speak and would be obeyed. 16

His innate sympathy for the new-discovered "something unknown...inarticulate and masterful" is objectified



in his thirst for the muddy water of the river. "He drank again, and shuddered with a depraved sense of pleasure at the aftertaste of slime in the water."

Whenever possible, Aissa and Willens meet secretly in the jungle--just as Pain and Nina do in Almayer's Folly--and each day she comes "a little nearer." Willens feels that he is giving up that part of him that makes him man, that he is losing his self, that he is slipping to ultimate destruction. Yet he cannot impede his descent and finally he capitulates completely, a capitulation symbolized by sexual intimacy:

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 He, a white man whose worst fault till then had been a little want of judgment and too much confidence in the rectitude of his kind! That woman was a complete savage, and...He tried to tell himself that the thing was of no consequence. It was a vain effort. The novelty of the sensations he had never experienced before in the slightest degree, yet had despised on hearsay from his safe position of a civilized man, destroyed his courage. He was disappointed with himself. He seemed to be surrendering to a wild creature the unstained purity of his life, of his race, of his civilization. He had a notion of being lost amongst shapeless things that were dangerous and chastly. He struggled with the sense of certain defeat--lost his

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17. Until this moment, Willens' meetings with Aissa suggest no sexual intimacy; however, his desperate journey at night to Aissa, with whom he remains several days, is symbolic of his surrender to the primitive.

footing--fell back into the darkness. 18

Willens loses himself among shapeless things, dangerous and ghastly. He falls into the darkness and relinquishes his white purity. On that note, the real climax of the novel, Part One ends.

Part Two details the result of the East's ascendancy over the mind of Willens: his betrayal of his benefactor, Lingard, the symbol of order and simplicity in the life of Sambir. The native politicians, using her passion for Willens and her hate for the West, persuade Aissa to induce Willens to guide Abdullah into the Pantai river by the route known only to Lingard and himself. Willens, having been rebuffed by Almayer in an attempt to borrow money for independent trading but still feeling for the natives "all the hate of his race, of his morality, of his intelligence," is governed by his passion for Aissa. He realizes that he will never be able to change her principles and that he will gradually be absorbed into hers. Nevertheless, he accedes to the request that he guide Abdullah's ship into Sambir.

In one of the most masterful and symbolic scenes in the novel, Willens struggles against the poison pervading his life. He has promised to guide Abdullah and Aissa is seeking to keep him firm in his bargain. Stand-

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18. Pp. 80-81. Italics mine.

ing by the fire which lights the edges of the black jungle, Willems is seized with fear--not simply fear for his life:

It was the unreasoning fear of this glimpse into unknown things, into those motives, impulses, desires he had ignored, but that had lived in the breasts of despised men, close by his side, and were revealed to him for a second, to be hidden again behind the black mists of doubt and deception. It was not death that frightened him: it was the horror of bewildered life where he could understand nothing and nobody bound him; where he could guide, and control, comprehend nothing and no one--not even himself. 19

Willems fears the irrational--"the horror of the bewildered life." But Aissa, symbolizing the very things he fears, has drawn "the spark of reason" from his features by physical seduction. Willems is mastered by "the unknown things," and, as Part Two closes, he is beating at the door of the natives' stockade in an attempt to reach Aissa.

When Lingard hears of Willems' betrayal (Willems goes guide the Arabs up the river), he is greatly offended, for he knows that the arrival of Abdullah means the departure of order and peace in the affairs of Sambir. He realizes, however, that he has brought Willems into Sambir and that he must dispose of him, for the safety of men everywhere. Before he finds Willems

he meets Babalatchi, a Malay statesman, whom he accuses of ingratitude for allowing Abdullah into Sambir. The Malay feels no remorse, however, for the loss of Lingard's benevolent despotism:

"You are strange, you white men. You think it is only your wisdom and your virtue and your happiness that are true. You are stronger than the wild beasts, but not so wise." 20

Babalatchi finds no rapport between himself and Lingard, for Lingard, with his great confidence in his own wisdom and his fear for what he cannot understand, sees only the oppression Abdullah's presence will bring.

When Lingard meets Aissa, he feels the same distrust and fear that Willems had felt:

Lingard, outwardly impassive, with his eyes fixed on the house, experienced that feeling of condemnation, deep-seated, persuasive, and masterful; that illogical impulse of disapproval which is half disgust, half vague fear, and that wakes up in our hearts in the presence of anything new or unusual, of anything that is not run into the mould of our own conscience; the accursed feeling made up of disdain, of anger, and of the sense of superior virtue that leaves us deaf, blind, contemptuous and stupid before anything which is not like ourselves. 21

Like Willems in his self-confidence, he is like Willems in his fear of the primitive mind, "of anything that is

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20. P. 226.

21. P. 254.

not run into the mould of our own conscience." Lingard's character is, however, too firm to be swayed by his feelings toward Aissa; he does not hesitate to mete out Willems' punishment.

The scene between Lingard, Willems and Aissa serves to underline and clarify the reasons for Willems' deterioration. Willems appeals to Lingard for understanding, the understanding of another white man in the midst of savages. All the blame of his degradation he lays on Aissa:

"I did not know there was something in me she could get hold of. She, a savage, I, a civilized European, and clever! She that knew no more than a wild animal! Well, she found out something in me. She found it out, and I was lost...." 22

Willems, unconsciously echoing Babalatchi's criticism of the white man's wisdom, paradoxically accuses Aissa, even though he admits that the potentiality was within himself, and it is the potentiality that he dreads:

"It isn't what I have done that torments me. It is the why. It's the madness that drove me to it. It's that thing that came over me. That may come again, some day." 23

But, even though he recognizes that such a potentiality lies within him, he persists in denying his own responsibility. In response to his denial that the evil was in

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22. P. 269.

23. P. 270.

him, Lingard replies, "Where else?" and returns down the river.

Willems is left alone with Aissa, his "sin," who,

...by the touch of her hand had destroyed his future, his dignity of a clever and civilized man; had awakened in his breast the infamous thing which had driven him to what he had done, and to end miserably in the wilderness and be forgotten, or else remembered with hate or contempt. He dared not look at her, because now whenever he looked at her his thought seemed to touch crime, like an outstretched hand. <sup>24</sup>

But Willems, instead of attempting to repent, as he had told Lingard he would do, seeks to regain his passion and renew his "madness" in Aissa's arms. As he holds her, he seems to be looking "into an immense and inevitable grave full of corruption, where sooner or later he must, unavoidably, fall." Just as in the two other crucial moments of Willems' life, his psychic union with unbridled primitivism is symbolized by his physical union with Aissa. Willems then realizes that he is "a lost man." As Wright has observed, Willems is "exiled by the corruption of his own mind." <sup>25</sup>

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24. P. 334.

25. *Op. cit.*, p. 131. Wright feels that in Willems' yielding to "the pressure of the primitive," he becomes "poignantly conscious of what he has lost." What Willems regards he has lost is not, however, as Wright suggests, indicative of true recognition of evil. Willems is poignantly conscious of his loss of prestige, of "beds, knives, forks, carriages, brass bands, cool drinks," and little else.

Willems is not in any way ennobled or improved by his "descent to truth." His contact with the East has, if anything, added to his corruption. This is evident in the last pages of the novel, when his wife Joanna, through Almayor's malicious machinations, comes to help him escape from his exile. Willems feels no love for her and no compunction about leaving Aicca. With his boundless trust in himself, he feels that he can escape into another existence,

...that all this, the woman, the madness,  
the sin, the regrets, all would go, rush  
into the past, disappear, become as dust  
.... 26

He does step into another existence when Aicca kills him with his own revolver.

#### Conclusion:

An Outcast of the Islands reveals the history of one man's moral and physical dissolution. On a symbolic level, it reveals the disaster which results when the western consciousness is swallowed up in the primitive irrationality of the East. Willems is symbolic of certain characteristics of the western man: confidence in his rational mind, glorification of material well-being, and a feeling of superiority with-

out responsibility to the primitive peoples. He has been trained from early youth to become a successful businessman. His life has been wrapped up in clever exploitation of the Malay people and in combining self-aggrandizement. His clever business sense leads him, however, to embezzlement, a crime he regrets only because he was caught. In exile, he loses none of his self-confidence and sense of superiority. He betrays Lingard, symbol of order and sanity in the jungle state of Sambir, in an effort to reestablish his material prosperity. In order to accomplish this betrayal, however, he must ally himself with the natives, whom he despises. Once he has joined them, he cannot extricate himself from the hold they have over him. His complete absorption into the primitive, as repeatedly symbolized by his physical intimacy with Aissa, symbol of the primitive, only draws into the reality of action the potential corruption of his character. Finally, in his ignorant self-esteem, he is destroyed in an attempt to escape the consequences of surrender to the East.



## Chapter IV

### "An Outpost of Progress"

"An Outpost of Progress," written in July, 1896,<sup>1</sup> is Conrad's most condensed treatment of the effect of the primitive on civilized white men. In this tale, which was inspired by an actual account given Conrad when he was in Africa,<sup>2</sup> two men take over a trading-post far up the Congo river. Six months later they become accomplices of the native bookkeeper in the exchange of the company's native employees for ivory. After this act, the white men's moral disintegration is swift, and, when the story closes, both men have died unnatural deaths.

Gordan relates that Conrad was very anxious to

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1. Though written in July, 1896, "An Outpost of Progress" was not published until a year later, when it appeared serially in the Cosmopolis (July, August, 1897). It appeared first in book form, along with five other stories, in Tales of Unrest in 1898.

2. Jean Aubry, op. cit., p. 128.

get the story out of the house and off to a publisher, because, according to Gordon, Conrad had not yet got the "poison of his African days" out of his system.<sup>3</sup> Conrad was, in effect, purging himself of the most harrowing experience in his life: his journey into the heart of darkness where he met face to face the possibilities of evil that lie concealed under the civilized consciousness. Since Conrad did not write fiction before that trip, it is impossible to compare his early thought with the thought expressed in the work we have; it is impossible to see just how much his scepticism as to there being any moral absolutes sprang from his contact with men who had not the restraining mores of society and had lost the "illusions" of loyalty, honor, and courage. It is certain, however, that the Congo trip profoundly affected both his physical and spiritual being, and that "An Outpost of Progress" does contain, "All the bitterness of those days, all my puzzled wonder

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3. Since both Almayer's Folly (1895) and An Outcast of the Islands (1896) were finished (Conrad worked on his first novel while on this trip) after Conrad's experience in Africa, they were probably affected by that experience. As Conrad states again and again both in his letters and in his prefaces, his approach to writing was more intuitive than intellectual. Speaking about "An Outpost of Progress," he wrote Garnett, "Things get themselves written...I always told you I was a kind of inspired humbug." (Edward Garnett, ed., Letters from Joseph Conrad, pp. 66-67.) At any rate, Conrad's treatment of the effect African primitive life has upon white men is almost identical to his treatment of the effect Malay primitive life has upon white men.

as to the meaning of all I saw--all my indignation at  
masquerading philanthropy..."<sup>4</sup>

Setting:

In "An Outpost of Progress," the sea is hardly mentioned. The boat which brings the two men to the outpost from the port on the sea is, however, always in their minds as the way by which they might escape back to civilization. Each day of their exile they search the river with their eyes in hope that they might see the boat. Finally, the boat does arrive--after it is too late--and its whistle is the call of civilization:

Progress was calling to Kayerts from the river.  
Progress and civilization and the virtues.  
Society was calling to its accomplished child  
to come... 5

The boat comes from the sea and by its nature connotes the sea. By its nature of mechanical construction, it also connotes directly western civilization; thus, the boat symbolizes both the sea and civilization.

As in the earlier works, the jungle and the river are the important symbols of setting. The description of the Congo and the African jungle parallels the description of the Pantai and the Malay jungle. All the action takes place on the banks of this traditional

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4. Gordan, op. cit., p. 242. Quoted from a letter to T. Fisher Unwin.

5. P. 116.

symbol of life, the antipodes of which are the antipodes of civilization and savagery, the rational and the irrational mind. The Congo, as ingress to the heart of darkness, connects the sea with the land, the civilized with the primitive. The river is to the white men as life is to them--without meaning:

The river, the forest, all the great land throbbing with life, were like a great emptiness. Even the brilliant sunshine disclosed nothing intelligible. Things appeared and disappeared before their eyes in an unconnected and aimless kind of way. The river seemed to come from nowhere and flow nowhither. It flowed through a void. 6

The jungle, as in the earlier work, is "throbbing with life," "mysterious," "struggling." It surrounds the small clearing of the outpost and seems to be pushing in upon it, and finally does so, as the rank grass usurps more and more of the compound. Moreover, the jungle portends danger that cannot be defined in terms of its savages and beasts:

Below the high bank, the silent river flowed on glittering and steady....And stretching away in all directions, surrounding the insignificant cleared spot of the trading post, immense forests, hiding fateful complications of fantastic life, lay in the eloquence of mute greatness. 7

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6. P. 92.  
7. P. 94.

Significantly, from the jungle do come "the fateful complications of fantastic life" which enmesh Kayerts and Carlier and disclose to them the possibilities of corruption that lie beneath the surfaces of their lives.

Characters:

Of the important characters in "An Outpost of Progress," not one is a woman. Makola, the African employee located permanently in the outpost, fulfills a function very similar to that of Aissa in An Outcast of the Islands, that is, he is the immediate cause of the white men's absorption into the primitive. Although he has learned some of the secrets of the white exploiters, he has in no way been assimilated into their culture. He despises the two white men who arrive at his station and does not hesitate to cheat them in his business accounts. The paradox—which is only a paradox superficially—of his character Conrad condenses into one sentence, "He spoke English and French with a warbling accent, wrote a beautiful hand, understood bookkeeping, and cherished in his innermost heart the worship of evil spirits." He is not bound by western civilization's moral code, and does not hesitate to sell his own people and serve the people he hates. At the beginning of the story, his

part in the theme is suggested:

...he dwelt alone with his family, his account books, and the Evil Spirit that rules the lands under the equator. He got on very well with his god. Perhaps he had prostituted him by a promise of more white men to play with, by and by. 8

Kayerts and Carrier are the fulfillment of this promise. Just as Willems and Almayer came to Sanbir, these two have come to the small clearing far up the tropical river without any knowledge whatsoever of the life they must make there. More like Almayer than like Willems, however, they are pitiful creatures without the inner force of character to drive them either to great good or to great evil:

No two beings could have been more unfitted for such a struggle. Society, not from any tenderness, but because of its strange needs, had taken care of those two men, forbidding them all independent thought, all initiative, all departure from routine; and forbidding it under pain of death. They could only live on condition of being machines. And now, released from the fostering care of men with pens behind the ears, or of men with gold lace on the sleeves, they were like those lifelong prisoners who, liberated after many years, do not know what use to make of their freedom. They did not know what use to make of their faculties, being both, through want of practice, incapable of independent thought. 9

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8. P. 87.  
9. P. 91.

As is implied here, Kayerts and Carlier are as much symbols for the majority of western civilized men as they are individuals; in fact, each is distinguished from the other by his former occupation more than by his character. Kayerts remembers nostalgically his life in government service:

He regretted the streets, the pavements, the cafes, his friends of many years; all the thoughts suggested by familiar things--the thoughts effortless, monotonous, and soothing of a Government clerk; he regretted all the gossip, the small enmities, the mild venom, and the little jokes of Government offices. 10

Carlier's former position, a cavalry officer, was in its lack of responsibility and its routine very much like Kayerts'; and he, too,

...regretted his old life. He regretted the blink of sabre and spurs on a fine afternoon, the barrack room witticisms, the girls of garrison towns.... 11

The former and present occupations of these men are significant in their connotations of western civilization, for they include the military, the government civil service and business of the most far-reaching sort, world-wide exploitation. Moreover, the two business-military/government men approach the exploitation of the

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10. P. 91.

11. P. 92.

upper Congo with the same naive confidence in success that motivated Almayer when he came to Sambir. Kayerts and Carlier, then, like Willens and Almayer, can be considered symbols of western men unacquainted with the dark potentialities of their own nature, who confidently place themselves without the bounds of their protecting civilization.

Development of Theme:

"They will form themselves there," one of the old employees tells the Managing Director of the Great Civilizing Company after the two white men have been landed at the isolated trading post far up the Congo. The remark is ironic, for the theme of "An Outcast of Progress" is the degeneration of Carlier and Kayerts when they no longer have society to hold them upright. Their first impression of "this vast and dark country" is loneliness and insecurity in the face of "a wilderness rendered more strange, more incomprehensible by the mysterious glimpses of the vigorous life it contained." Conrad, commenting on their inadequacy to endure in this wilderness, defines their position clearly, in fact too clearly and too explicitly--as if he wished to say, "See, this is the theme of the story, and, when Carlier and Kayerts



are destroyed, you will understand why."

Few men realize that their life, the very essence of their character, their capabilities and their audacities, are only the expression of their belief in the safety of their surroundings. The courage, the composure, the confidence; the emotions and principles; every great and every insignificant thought belongs not to the individual but to the crowd; to the crowd that believes blindly in the irresistible force of its institutions and of its morals, in the power of its police and of its opinion. But the contact with pure unmitigated savagery, with primitive nature and primitive man, brings sudden and profound trouble into the heart. To the sentiment of being alone of one's kind, to the clear perception of the loneliness of one's thoughts, of one's sensations--to the negation of the habitual, which is safe, there is added the affirmation of the unusual, which is dangerous; a suggestion of things vague, uncontrollable, and repulsive, whose discomposing intrusion excites the imagination and tries the civilized nerves of the foolish and wise alike. 12

Kayerts and Carrier cling together in their loneliness.

Kayerts cannot imagine facing the wilderness alone.

"The idea that he would, perhaps, have to bury Carrier and remain alone, gave him an inward shudder." Soon they are calling one another, "my good fellow" and solicitously looking after one another's health.

Significantly, they isolate themselves as much as possible from the jungle and the natives and try to ignore them--"They lived like blind men in a large room, aware only of what came in contact with them (and of that only imperfectly), but unable to see the general

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12. P. 89. Italics mine.

aspect of things." The superficiality of their contact with the natives is characterized by their observations upon a group who come to the outpost to trade ivory:

"Fine animals. Brought any bone? Yes? It's not any too soon. Look at the muscles of that fellow--third from the end, I wouldn't care to get a punch on the nose from him. Fine arms, but legs no good below the knee. Couldn't make cavalry men of them." 13

Having found a motley assortment of books and magazines, they find more reality in the adventures of d'Artagnan, Hawk's Eye and Father Goriot than in their life at the station. Among the magazines they find one containing an article that directly concerns them:

It spoke much of the rights and duties of civilization, of the sacredness of the civilizing work, and extolled the merits of those who went about bringing light, and faith and commerce to the dark places of the earth. Carlier and Kayerts read, wondered and began to think better of themselves. Carlier said one evening, waving his hand about, "In a hundred years, there will be perhaps a town here. Quays, and warehouses, and barracks, and--and--billiard rooms. Civilization, my boy, and virtue--and all." 14

Fortified by such noble conceptions of their part in civilizing the world, Carlier and Kayerts settle back comfortably to await the arrival of the steamer.

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13. P. 93.

14. P. 95. Italics mine. Note the similarity between Willems' and Carlier's description of civilization, in both of which commerce and billiards are strongly emphasized.

Out of the jungle, however, appear savages unlike the docile and ill company employees. They are tall and strong and carry weapons. Their speech sounds "like one of those impossible languages which we sometimes hear in dreams," and their songs resemble those heard in a madhouse. To these men, Makola, the real master of the outpost, trades the company employees for fine tusks of ivory while the white men sleep. When Carlier and Kayerts find what Makola has done, they refuse to have anything to do with the trade; they will, they assert, turn him over to the director when he arrives. But when Makola attempts to lift one of the heavy tusks onto the scales, Carlier gives him a hand. Kayerts gasps at the extraordinary weight of the ivory. Soon, having weighed all the tusks and locked them in a shed, they rationalize themselves out of all responsibility and determine to make the best of Makola's inhumanity. When Gobila, the aged chief of the native tribe, learns what has happened, he laments that the evil spirits have taken possession of the white men. In truth, Carlier and Kayerts have sold themselves to Makola. Gobila's lament takes on added meaning in the light of Makola's characterization and his promise to the "Evil Spirit that rules the land under the equator" that he would give it more white men to play

with.

As in Almayer's marriage and Willems' intimacy with Aissa, the two white men have taken the irrevocable step that speeds them to their complete degeneration, madness and death. Without the guardianship of society to take care of them, they have lost the principles, whether illusory or not, that give civilization its order and meaningfulness:

Kayerts and Carrier did not disappear, but remained above on this earth, that, somehow, they fancied had become bigger and very empty. It was not the absolute and dumb solitude of the post that impressed them so much as an inarticulate feeling that something from within them was gone, something that worked for their safety, and had kept the wilderness from interfering with their hearts. The images of home; the memory of people like them, of men that thought and felt as they used to think and feel, receded into distances made indistinct by the glare of unclouded sunshine. And out of the great silence of the surrounding wilderness, its very hopelessness and savagery seemed to approach them nearer, to draw them gently, to look upon them, to envelop them with a solicitude irresistible, familiar, and disgusting. 15

Kayerts and Carrier feel that that part of them which has kept the wilderness from seizing control of them has been forfeited by their acquiescence to Makola, the servant of the Evil Spirit. There is nothing now to hold back the insidious encroachment of the jungle's savagery.

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15. P. 108. Italics mine.

Once closer than brothers, the two white men now begin to bicker over the slightest triviality. Their life becomes absurd. Kayerts, nominally in charge, dismisses Carrier. Carrier calls Kayerts a "flabby, good-for-nothing civilian." They grow yellow and sick. Their supplies all but run out and the natives refuse to trade with them. Each day they expect the return of the boat, and each day they are disappointed. Finally, in a quarrel over two lumps of sugar, a quarrel which has all the absurdity of a nightmare, Kayerts murders Carrier. By killing a man, Kayerts, like Raskolnikov in Crime and Punishment, imagines he has put himself above society's moral code. He feels serene.

He had plumbed in one short afternoon the depths of horror and despair, and now found repose in the conviction that life had no more secrets for him; neither had death! He sat by the corpse thinking; thinking very actively, thinking very new thoughts. He seemed to have broken loose from himself altogether. His old thoughts, convictions, likes and dislikes, things he respected and things he abhorred, appeared in their true light at last! Appeared contemptible and childish, false and ridiculous. He revelled in his new wisdom while he sat by the man he had killed. 16

What society made him now appears ridiculous; the slough of his old self discarded, he revels in the new wisdom found in the release of the savage within him. As to

the sanity of Kayerts' mind and wisdom, Conrad leaves no doubt. Kayerts possesses the "wrong-headed lucidity which may be observed in some lunatics." Sitting by the side of the man he has killed, he congratulates himself on having found "peace" and the "highest wisdom," and, whistling a tune, falls asleep.

But from the river comes the whistle of the steamboat to awaken him--both from his sleep and from his madness:

He stood up, saw the body, and threw his arms above his head with a cry like that of a man who, waking from a trance, finds himself immured forever in a tomb. "Help! . . . My God!" 17

Kayerts has not escaped from the moral order of his society; he is bound to the machine in the river. The steamboat's whistle emphasizes that fact:

Progress was calling to Kayerts from the river. Progress and civilization and all the virtues. Society was calling to its accomplished child to come, to be taken care of, to be instructed, to be judged, to be condemned; it called him to that rubbish heap from which he had wandered away, so that justice could be done. Kayerts heard and understood. 18

Released from the trance of his madness, Kayerts hears and

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17. P. 115.

18. P. 116.

understands the call of society. His peace and highest wisdom vanish with his recognition that he has not escaped the bonds of civilization's morality, his own sense of right and wrong. His suicide upon the cross over the grave of a former exploiter symbolizes that his surrender to the primitive was really surrender to the primitive within himself; he judges his own corruption.

## Chapter V

### Conclusion

In terms of a coherent pattern of symbols, Conrad's early fiction shows the disaster which results when men brought up under the guardianship of western civilization place themselves in direct contact with primitive peoples. The apparent virtue of the white men, created by the demands of society, does not stand up to the strange, savage elements of their nature, hitherto suppressed to the level of the unconscious mind but released when the demands of society no longer exist. Unaware of what is happening to them, the white men gradually succumb to the horror of undisciplined, irrational behavior and become, severally, an opium addict, a betrayer, and slave dealers.

In working out this theme, Conrad used certain dominant symbols in each story, both of setting and of character. The sea, from which the white traders always



come and to which they wish to return when they feel the usurpation of the primitive, represents the western civilization, its order and rationality, which fostered them in ignorance of certain basic elements of their nature. The jungle, seething with dark life and ever encroaching upon the white men's settlements, represents the primitive aspect of the mind. The river, on the banks of which all the action is laid, serves as a symbol of the interdependence of the jungle and the sea, of the conscious and unconscious mind, and of the flux of life.

In each story, one or two of the characters represent, in human terms, what the sea and the jungle represent in environmental terms. In Almayer's Folly, Almayer represents the western man and mind, his wife the eastern; their daughter, though somewhat a fusion of the two, finally represents the victory of the eastern over the western mind. In An Outcast of the Islands, Willens represents the western man, Aissa the eastern. In "An Outpost of Progress," Kayerts and Carrier represent the western man, Makola the eastern.

The development of the theme in each of these stories shows many basic similarities. Almayer, a bookkeeper whose only experience with the Malay natives has been in the offices of Hudig & Co., confidently isolates

himself in a native settlement in Forneo. Willems, also one of Hudig's clerks, isolates himself even more irrevocably in the same settlement. Carlier and Kayerts, employees in a trading company, isolate themselves far up the reaches of the Congo.

Each of these men also forms some alliance with the primitive people which they consider they may surrender whenever they wish. Almayer marries a Sulu maiden as one of the conditions by which he is to become rich. Willems takes as his mistress a Malay girl, with whom he is infatuated, in order that he may become more powerful in Sambir than Lingard. Kayerts and Carlier acquiesce in the inhumanity of Makola in order that they may keep the ivory he has received in exchange for their employees.

In each story, this alliance with the primitive people results in the subordination of reason to irrationality in the minds of the western men. Almayer, refusing to grant the happiness of his daughter, turns to opium for solace and takes a monkey for his companion. Willems betrays the white men who might return him to western civilization and attempts to murder both his wife and his mistress. Kayerts and Carlier, the only white men at their post on the Congo, assume a nightmarish existence,

which finally results in the murder of Carlier and Kayerts' suicide.

It is apparent that, even in his earliest work, Conrad made use of symbolism to carry his attitude toward the nature of man and society, a symbolism which has been often remarked in his later work. The expression in these stories of the belief that society, in our civilization, dominates the individual and is responsible for both the good and the bad actions of its members, that the individual becomes so dependent upon society that his independence is likely to be disastrous, that below the level of consciousness exists a human nature primitive and irrational which must be mastered, helps us to understand his conviction in 1898 that "There is no morality, no knowledge and no hope: there is only the consciousness of ourselves which drives us about a world that, whether seen in a convex or a concave mirror, is always but a vain and floating appearance."

Appendix I  
Excerpts from Conrad's Letters  
to Cunningham-Graham

1  
December 20, 1897

...There is a,--let us say,--a machine. It evolved itself (I am severely scientific) out of a chaos of scraps of iron and behold!--it knits. I am horrified at the horrible work and stand appalled. I feel it ought to embroider,--but it goes on knitting. You come and say: "This is all right: it's only a question of the right kind of oil. Let us use this,--for instance,--celestial oil and the machine will embroider a most beautiful design in purple and gold." Will it? Alas, no! You cannot by any special lubrication make embroidery with a knitting machine. And the most withering thought is that the infamous thing has made itself: made itself without

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1. Jean Aubry, op. cit., p. 216. Conrad is here speaking of the universe.

thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. It is tragic accident,--and it has happened. You can't interfere with it. The last drop of bitterness is in the suspicion that you can't even smash it. In virtue of that truth one and immortal which lurks in the force that made it spring into existence it is what it is,--and it is indestructible!

It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions,--and nothing matters. I'll admit however that to look at the remorseless process is sometimes amusing....

January 14, 1898

...The machine is thinner than air and as evanescent as a flash of lightning. The attitude of cold unconcern is the only reasonable one. Of course reason is hateful,--but why? Because it demonstrates (to those who have the courage) that we, living, are out of life,--utterly out of it. The mysteries of a universe made of drops of fire and clouds of mud do not concern us in the least. The fate of a humanity condemned ultimately to perish from cold is not worth troubling about. If you take it

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2. Ibid., p. 222.

to heart it becomes an unendurable tragedy. If you believe in improvement you must weep, for the attained perfection must end in cold, darkness and silence. In a dispassionate view the ardour for reform, improvement, for virtue, for knowledge and even for beauty is only a vain sticking up for appearances, as though one were anxious about the cut of one's clothes in a community of blind men.

Life knows us not and we do not know life,--we don't know even our own thoughts. Half the words we use have no meaning whatever and of the other half each man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly and conceit. Faith is a myth and beliefs shift like mists on the shore: thoughts vanish: words, once pronounced, die: and the memory of yesterday is as shadowy as the hope of tomorrow,--only the string of my platitude seems to have no end. As our peasants say: "Pray, brother, forgive me for the love of God." And we don't know what forgiveness is, nor what is love, nor where God is. Assez!...

January 31, 1898<sup>3</sup>

...Yes. Egoism is good, and altruism is good, and fi-

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3. Ibid., p. 226.

delity to nature would be the best of all, and systems could be built and rules could be made,--if we could only get rid of consciousness. What makes mankind tragic is not that they are the victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it. To be part of the animal kingdom under the conditions of this earth is very well,--but as soon as you know of your slavery, the pain, the anger, the strife,--the tragedy begins. We can't return to nature, since we can't change our place in it. Our refuge is in stupidity, in drunkenness of all kinds, in lies, in beliefs, in murder, thieving, reforming, in negation, in contempt,--each man according to the promptings of his particular devil. There is no morality, no knowledge and no hope; there is only the consciousness of ourselves which drives us about a world that, whether seen in a convex or a concave mirror, is always but a vain and floating appearance....

4  
February, 1898

...You and your ideals of sincerity and courage and truth are strangely out of place in this epoch of material pre-occupations. What does it bring? What's the profit? What do we get by it? These questions are the root of every moral, intellectual or political movement. Into

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4. Ibid., p. 229.

the noblest cause, men manage to put something of their baseness; and sometimes when I think of you here, quietly, you seem to me tragic with your courage, with your beliefs and your hopes. Every cause is tainted; and you reject this one, espouse that other one as if one were evil and the other good, while the same evil you hate is in both, but disguised in different words. I am more in sympathy with you than words can express, yet if I had a grain of belief left in me I would believe you misguided. You are misguided by the desire of the impossible,--and I envy you. Alas! what you want to reform are not institutions,--it is human nature. Your faith will never move that mountain. Not that I think mankind intrinsically bad. It is only silly and cowardly. Now you know that in cowardice is every evil,--especially, that cruelty so characteristic of our civilization. But, without it, mankind would vanish. No great matter truly. But will you persuade humanity to throw away sword and shield? Can you persuade even me,--who write these words in the fulness of an irresistible conviction? No, I belong to the wretched gang. We all belong to it. We are born initiated, and succeeding generations clutch the inheritance of fear and brutality without a thought, without a doubt, without compunction, in the name of God....



February 8, 1899<sup>5</sup>

...L'homme est un animal méchant. Sa méchanceté doit être organisée. Le crime est une condition nécessaire de l'existence organisée. La société est essentiellement criminelle,--ou elle n'existerait pas. C'est l'égoïsme qui sauve tout,--absolument tout,--tout ce que nous abhorrons, tout ce que nous aimons. Et tout se tient. Voilà pourquoi je respecte les extrêmes anarchistes.--  
"Je souhaite l'extermination générale." Très bien. C'est juste et ce qui est plus, c'est clair. On fait des compromis avec des paroles. Ça n'en finit plus. C'est comme une forêt où personne ne connaît la route. On est perdu pendant que l'on crie: "Je suis sauvé."  
...Aussi, souvent, je n'y pense pas. Tout disparaît. Il ne reste que la vérité,--une ombre grisâtre et fuyante dont il est impossible de fixer l'image. Je ne regrette rien,--je n'espère rien, car je m'aperçois que ni le regret ni l'espérance ne signifient rien à ma personnalité. C'est un égoïsme rationnel et féroce que j'exerce envers moi-même. Je me repose là-dedans. Puis, la pensée revient. La vie recommence, les regrets, les souvenirs et un désespoir plus sombre que la nuit.

5. Ibid., p. 269.

## Appendix II

### Criticism of Almayer's Folly

When it appeared in 1895, Almayer's Folly did not receive much attention. The Nation's reviewer summed up his disgust with the statement that "Borneo is a fine field for the study of monkeys, not of men."<sup>1</sup> The reviewer for the Bookman praised the book highly for its emphasis upon Occident-Orient relations, which somehow must be settled:

Gradually the veil is being rent between the Occident and the Orient, and the pulses of civilized and barbarian life will soon beat in unison as one purpose and one goal bring men together and as knowledge of the conditions of mankind becomes universal.<sup>2</sup>

In his optimistic generalizations, this reviewer offered no comment upon the lack of promise in this novel of any such unison.

Most critics since the novel's first publication have not devoted much attention to the East-West conflict, which certainly is present in the novel. Edward Crankshaw is perhaps the most explicit of the critics who ignore completely any important meaning in Almayer's Folly

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1. Nation, LXI (October 17, 1895), p. 278.
  2. James MacArthur, "Almayer's Folly." Bookman, II (August, 1895), p. 39.

other than the fate of Almayer:

The book is concerned with a perfectly straight-forward issue, with a man who failed. It is in intention a rendering of a man's character and the final catastrophe resulting from the flaws in that character. 3

Other critics have seen in the novel what the tropics can do to a white man, while others have seen the imperialistic exploitation of the East. F. T. Cooper, writing in 1912, is characteristic of the critics' tendency to pass over Almayer's Folly as a study of the relationship between the two races; however, Cooper notes that relationship in Heart of Darkness in words which apply as well to Almayer's Folly:

It is nothing less than a presentment of the clashing of two continents, a symbolic picture of the inborn antagonism of two races, the white and the black. It pictures the subtle disintegration of a white man's moral stamina under the stress of darkness, the isolation, the immensity of the African jungle.... 4

Cooper's attitude toward Heart of Darkness suggests the struggle is more than social; it is inborn. Most critics, however, feel much the same as V. S. Pritchett, who, writing as recently as 1942, states flatly:

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3. Joseph Conrad, Some Aspects of the Art of the Novel, p. 63.  
 4. Some English Story Tellers, p. 15.

They [Conrad's Malay characters] represent consciously Conrad's reading of the bloody history of the islands, and of the historical time at which he was writing. 5

Only Albert Guerard, Jr. has bothered to explore hidden meanings, and his analysis is brief and unsatisfactory.<sup>6</sup> He interprets the novel in terms of Lingard, a character who appears only incidentally and hardly figures in the major part of the action. Guerard is interested in establishing a psychological theory, and, in order to do so, treats Lingard as if he had continued existence from The Rescue, a novel written later than Almayer's Folly with Lingard as the central figure. An analysis which depends for much of its validity on a characterization made in a later novel is ill-founded.

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5. "Malayan Novels." New Statesman and Nation, XXIII (January 31, 1942), p. 78.

6. Joseph Conrad, passim.

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