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CONRAD'S EARLY VISION OF MAN: AN ANALYSIS OF
"ALMAYER'S FOLLY," "AN OUTCAST OF THE
ISLANDS," "THE LAGOON," "KARAIN," AND "THE
END OF THE TETHER."

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PREVIEW

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AN ANALYSIS OF ALMAYER'S FOLLY, AN OUTCAST OF
THE ISLANDS, "THE LAGOON," "KARAIN,"
AND "THE END OF THE TETHER"

by

Ronald J. Nelson

A DISSERTATION

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The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
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Department of English

Under the Supervision of Professor Walter F. Wright

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TITLE

CONRAD'S EARLY VISION OF MAN: AN ANALYSIS OF ALMAYER'S FOLLY,
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TETHER"

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To
my Mother
and
Father

PREVIEW

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Introduction

In his early fiction Conrad conveys artistically a vision of man which is remarkable for its insight into the human condition. His early works, however, have received insufficient critical attention to date. Accordingly, I shall attempt in this study to render a more complete justice to five of his early works which deserve more adequate treatment: Almayer's Folly, An Outcast of the Islands, "The Lagoon," "Karain," and "The End of the Tether."

By employing what Przemysław Mroczkowski refers to as "dynamic analysis,"¹ I shall attempt to discover Conrad's conception of man in the above works. What emerges from the detailed analysis is a more thorough understanding of Conrad's vision of man as a being who shares with men of all time fundamental proclivities which can, under certain circumstances, propel him toward destruction. Man is for Conrad in these early works a complex creature who yearns for fulfillment, but who rarely finds it. His search for gratification assumes a variety of forms, among them a need to realize his dreams, to have influence among those with whom he comes in contact, and to communicate meaningfully with

his fellow man. But Conrad saw man as being able to attain to only very limited success in satiating his longings. Man repeatedly undercuts his own efforts to succeed, not only by acting imprudently, but also by failing adequately to understand himself and his relationship to others. Moreover, he is at times thwarted by forces beyond his control. As a result of internal and external conflicts, man at times experiences a growing sense of unrest which saps his vitality and causes him dissatisfaction with himself and with others. Consequently, man, in the world of Conrad's early fiction, frequently develops into an outsider who, despite his desire to be an integral part of his world, becomes filled with the loneliness of separation.

This dark vision is occasionally relieved by moments of intense gratification, when a man is able to become intimate with another person. Such moments in which man can feel a bond with his fellow man are rare in Conrad's early works. Nevertheless, there is, in the works under consideration, a distinct movement toward greater communication between the characters.

Finally, I shall explore, where appropriate, some of the ways in which Conrad tries to reach "the secret spring of responsive emotions" in the reader.

Footnotes to Introduction

¹ Przemysław Mroczkowski, "A Glance Back at the Romantic Conrad: 'The Lagoon'," in Joseph Conrad: Centennial Essays, ed. Ludwik Krzyzanowski (New York: The Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences in America, 1960), p. 75.

Chapter One: Early Perspectives on Man in Almayer's Folly

Critical commentary on Conrad's first novel, Almayer's Folly (1895), has most frequently emphasized three areas of concern: the stylistic flaws of the novel, Conrad's success in the creation of the natives, and the deterioration of Almayer's personality. It has become something of a critical convention to regard Almayer's Folly as "a haphazard composition"¹ having no dominant center of interest² and characterized by "overwriting and rhetorical excess."³ Some critics see the shortcomings of Conrad's style in his first novel (which Gordan regards as the work of "a carefree amateur"⁴) as at least partially offset, however, by his effective presentation of the non-white characters. Graver, for example, finds Lakamba, Babalatchi, and Abdulla "refreshingly comic in their instinctive mixture of candor and cunning,"⁵ while Guerard considers Conrad "at his best" when portraying the old Rajah and "the statesman of Sambir" with ironic detachment.⁶ Moreover, Graver sees in Nina "one of the first figures through whom Conrad could express some of his fundamental attitudes about life."⁷ But the most commonly agreed upon area of critical observation seems to be the decline of the protagonist, which has been discussed in terms of the paralysis of will,⁸ self-pity and egotism,⁹ the

devastating effect of external forces,¹⁰ and Almayer's affinity to the poets and protagonists of fin de siècle literature.¹¹ On the whole, critics have given Almayer's Folly lukewarm praise and have relegated it to minor status in the Conrad canon. Moreover, although it has attracted critical attention, it remains one of Conrad's most neglected works.

In order to render a more complete justice to Almayer's Folly, however, one must examine closely the inhabitants of Conrad's fictional world. Such a study can be rewarding, because Conrad revealed through his characters and the situations into which he put them a remarkable insight into human nature for which critics have failed to credit him. That the novel is imperfectly written in many places should not blind us to its merits, which, when perceived, compel a favorable reassessment of the work. Conrad's perspectives on man's essential nature, as he transformed them into art, will be dealt with here in some detail. An attempt will be made to demonstrate how Baines's assertion that "the significance of the characters lies in what they reveal within the context of a certain predicament, not in what they are"¹² applies to Almayer's Folly. Emphasis will be placed not only on how they disclose what is universal in them, thereby providing us with more insight into man's basic nature, but

also on the essence of the bond between men and the inevitable results of weakening or destroying that bond.

Perhaps the best starting point for such a discussion is Conrad's recollections of Olmeijer (hereafter Almayer, as Conrad pronounced it phonetically), found in A Personal Record (1912), where Conrad fondly recalls the impact of the man Almayer on him and suggests the nature of the bond between them. One senses throughout the fictionalized, autobiographical account of their first meeting Conrad's empathy for Almayer effected by both his careful observation of and his sensitive identification with the man. For example, in his account Conrad discloses his concern for Almayer, which is evident in his attention to telling details of character: Almayer "shuffled his straw slippers uneasily," "mumbled," had "downcast eyes," and "breakfasted with us silently, looking mostly into his cup."¹³ Moreover, when he mentions that a smile appears whenever Almayer's name comes up and that the crew gives Almayer "side glances,"¹⁴ Conrad subtly suggests that his own view of Almayer is of a more sympathetic kind than that of the common run of people. The novelist's poignant observations are tantamount to an implicit confession of the kinship of a sensitive observer to a man who has fallen out of esteem among his fellow men and yet who is worthy of regard. In describing Almayer as being without "a spark of faith, hope or pride" and without "any

sort of sustaining spirit,"¹⁵ Conrad provides a further indication as to his kinship to the man. The absence of anything which might have helped Almayer to find fulfillment of any sort seems to have drawn Conrad to him. Conrad, moreover, seems to have felt an obligation to rectify the world's estimation of Almayer, to explore the factors involved in bringing Almayer to such an unenviable state, and to express artistically the results of his findings.¹⁶

Conrad's reflections about Almayer in A Personal Record also contain a fictionalized conversation with Almayer in heaven, in which Conrad expands upon the basis for his attempt in Almayer's Folly to immortalize this man who "did not understand his opportunities":

You came to me stripped of all prestige by men's queer smiles and the disrespectful chatter of every vagrant trader in the Islands. . . . I wrapped round its unhonoured form the royal mantle of the tropics and have essayed to put into the hollow sound the very anguish of paternity. . . .¹⁷

By his choice of a heavenly setting Conrad elevates Almayer to a place more worthy of him than the earth, where he lived "stripped of all prestige." Moreover, Conrad rescues his name from anonymity and suggests that, because it is now preserved eternally in a work of art, some measure of honor has been restored to Almayer. Although Almayer was a broken man, he had qualities which made him worthy of attention, and it is presumably for both these reasons that Conrad chose him to embody artistically "the very anguish of paternity."

What made Almayer especially memorable, Conrad tells us, was the belief which he held "with some force of conviction and with admirable consistency" that "nothing was ever quite worthy of [him]."¹⁸ There was in Conrad's eyes something of resiliency in Almayer, something which linked him with the eternal nobility of man, despite his at times imprudent behavior.

Without referring to Almayer by name, Conrad, in an earlier statement in his "Author's Note" (1895) to Almayer's Folly--while skillfully deflating an unnamed, myopic female critic who had disapproved of exotic literature as being "decivilized"--calls attention to the need to sense this more lasting kinship not only with the characters in such fiction, but also with the rest of mankind in the real world: "And there is a bond between us and that humanity so far away."¹⁹ Conrad subtly warns against seeing only "the strong outlines" and "miss[ing] the delicate detail"²⁰ because it is by doing so that one falsely assumes a superiority to others. He further suggests that one must be "content to sympathize with common mortals, no matter where they live" because they, like us, "must endure the load of the gifts from Heaven: the curse of facts and the blessing of illusions, the bitterness of our wisdom and the deceptive consolation of our folly."²¹ It is in this spirit of realization that one is, after all, no better or worse than any other human being that Almayer's Folly must be approached. Moreover, to become caught up in

how the characters in the novel react to what befalls them in the spirit of an objective participant is not only to share in the adventure of others' experience through the medium of this particular work of fiction, but also to explore again the depths of our own being, hopefully thereby to rediscover what is essential in us and to gain more of a sense of kinship with our fellow man.

Our main concern of course is the Almayer that we meet in the novel, and it is with him that we shall begin. Bradbrook's assertion that "Almayer is not clearly seen, because he is never presented from the outside"²² is valid, but it must be added that Conrad's intention was not a character drawn out in Dickensian detail, but rather a character that would be seen to be true to the inner eye of the reader. In this respect, Conrad provides abundant information to allow the reader a full perspective on Almayer. When Crankshaw asks

What, after all, does the book tell us about the man? A few abstract things about his make-up, things which apply equally well to hundreds of people all over the world; but little more. . . . There is little or nothing to fix the man as an individual unmistakable and unique,²³

he inadvertently suggests Almayer's universality but fails to give to those aspects of Almayer's personality which he refers to as "a few abstract things about his make-up" the emphasis they deserve. For it is these universals which draw the reader simultaneously to the essence of the fictional

Almayer and to his own depths. Almayer has a universality and, at the same time, a complexity which rewards close examination.

It seems likely that the fictional Almayer embodied at least three qualities which Conrad saw as belonging to most or perhaps all men, including himself. To begin with, man is often a fool, an accusation which Conrad himself had been stung with in his earlier days by Adam Pulman: "You are an incorrigible, hopeless Don Quixote."²⁴ When Conrad later transforms the actual Almayer into the fictional Almayer of A Personal Record and Almayer's Folly, he portrays them both as fools. He does so, however, in a manner which is sympathetic, whereas it could as easily have been derisive; thereby he suggests a positive attitude toward them. Elsewhere, Conrad expressed his essentially favorable attitude toward man, for example, in a letter to Cunningham Graham and in "The End of the Tether." In the former, he says, "Not that I think mankind intrinsically bad. It is only silly and cowardly,"²⁵ while in the latter he has Captain Whalley indirectly remark to the kindly Van Wyk, "They [men] might be silly, wrongheaded, unhappy; but naturally evil--no."²⁶ One of the things which contribute to man's imprudence, Conrad tells us in both A Personal Record and Almayer's Folly, is that he allows opportunities to pass him by.²⁷ It is in missing opportunities that man wastes his life, and we know

that this idea, by implication, had been for many years in Conrad's mind from his recalling Mme Delestang's caveat in A Personal Record: "Il faut, cependant, faire attention à ne pas gâter sa vie."²⁸

Secondly, when Conrad intimates in A Personal Record that Almayer was to represent "the very anguish of paternity," he immediately suggests a universality in Almayer which most critics have neglected. He extends Almayer's significance to every father of a daughter, who must, by virtue of the relationship, experience a greater or lesser sense of loss at the inevitable separation from the daughter. Louis Roberts sums up the situation succinctly: "Father loves daughter; the role of father becomes confused with that of suitor and then of lover; father makes plans for a future together with his daughter and thinks of himself as sacrificing for the girl-woman. When the girl becomes in fact a woman another man appears to whom she switches her allegiance; father is left alone; his sustaining dream of being loved by someone dependent upon him is shattered. The ego destroyed, the man, in fancy if not in fact, dies."²⁹ And it is this problem of universal implications that Conrad dramatizes in the novel--a problem which was of great personal interest to him: "My whole life, I've been obsessed by the relationship of father and daughter."³⁰

Lastly, it is possible that Almayer was meant also to suggest the pattern of man's life in general. That Conrad was inclined to think of some of his characters in this early period of his writing career in terms of their broader significance is clear from a letter to Garnett in which he speaks about Willems and Aissa of An Outcast of the Islands: "To me they are typical of mankind where every individual wishes to assert his power, woman by sentiment, man by achievement of some sort--mostly base."³¹ The life of the fictional Almayer as it emerges through the pages of Almayer's Folly seems to illustrate the outlook on life which Conrad expressed to Mme Poradowska in May of 1890: "A little illusion, many dreams, a rare flash of happiness: then disillusion, a little anger and much pain, and then the end--peace!"³² Seen from this dark view of life, Almayer's Folly ends on an appropriate note--"Allah! The Merciful! The Compassionate!"³³--one which reverberates with the sense of rightness at the conclusion of Almayer's disillusioned life.

What is universal in Almayer, however, goes beyond the vagueness of his being either a fool, a profoundly troubled parent, or an embodiment of the pattern of man's life in general. Almayer has a universality in terms of psychological completeness which gradually emerges the more we become engaged in what actions and thoughts Conrad has selected to give us out of the multitude from which he could choose.

The process by which the reader comes to grasp Almayer's ultimate complexity is perhaps best described by Conrad himself in a letter to Mme Poradowska, in which he tells her of his struggles with Chapter XI of the novel: "All is yet chaos, but, slowly, the apparitions change into living flesh, the shimmering mists take shape, and--who knows?-- something may be born of the clash of nebulous ideas."³⁴

In the same manner Almayer takes on a vitality which grips the reader because of Conrad's ability to present his protagonist with a fidelity to the details of man's basic nature. Moreover, Almayer's external behavior is convincingly related to his state of mind. Conrad masterfully interweaves in Almayer--as well as in Mrs. Almayer, Nina, and Taminah--the internal and the external. Bancroft correctly observes of this particular aspect of Conrad's genius, "Behavior is external, but motivation finds its answer in the intricate recesses of man's lonely being."³⁵

And it is in "the emotional and moral isolation of the individual"³⁶--in this case, Almayer's--that we find the delicate intertwining of the internal and the external. For example, Conrad carefully describes Almayer's mannerisms, those unconscious revelations of every man's character. Occasionally, Almayer shows signs of a latent determination in the shaking of a fist at Abdulla and the trader's settlement which appears to him "cold and insolent, and contemptuous

of his own fallen fortunes" (p. 20). But he is most often characterized as having weak mannerisms. He is said to have "shuffled uneasily" (p. 11) after having been summoned in the less than mellifluous voice of his spouse. When he at one point asserts that he is "no fool," the narrator's words undercut Almayer's assertion: Almayer "shivered in the night air, and suddenly became aware of the intense darkness" (p. 17). In this way Conrad suggests to the reader that what is important is not the words that are uttered, but rather the gesture that reveals the inner state of mind. When Mrs. Almayer attempts to ascertain the whereabouts of the treasure, Almayer is shown to be sitting "with rounded shoulders bending to the blast of this domestic tempest" with only an occasional "angry growl" (p. 38) at her. Within Almayer is an angry and wounded beast which, although tamed, still has some ferocity in it. Without a suitable outlet for the emotional build-up within him, however, Almayer can only mouth innocuous vaporings. By including such seemingly casual details, Conrad attempts to reach in the reader what he elsewhere referred to as "the secret spring of responsive emotions."³⁷

In order the more fully to understand the complexities with which Conrad endows this protagonist whose mannerisms mark him as a broken man, one must examine the significant aspects of his background which Conrad gives us in Chapters

One and Two. "Some twenty years or more" ago (p. 12) the young Almayer was "nothing loth" to leave his malcontent parents, one of whom "grumbled all day at the stupidity of native gardeners" while the other "bewailed the lost glories of Amsterdam" (pp. 12-13), and set off "to woo fortune in the godowns of old Hudig" (p. 12). In these few details Conrad reveals something of the young Almayer's basic, positive instinct to escape from an unfulfilling situation and into a more rewarding way of life (and at the same time foreshadows Nina's departure from Almayer for the same reason). Almayer was presumably then of a romantic turn of mind and filled with the eternal confidence of youth: he was "ready to conquer the world, never doubting that he would" (p. 13). His determination and aplomb, sketched so briefly at this early point in the novel, contrast dramatically with his completely broken state at the end of the novel. There is in Almayer's fate the opposite of the words of Pilsudski, which Morf takes to be "the theme of [Conrad's] best work": "Être vaincu et ne pas se soumettre est la vraie victoire."³⁸

The transformation of Almayer's positive instinct for fulfilling himself into its opposite can, moreover, be traced to his relationship with Tom Lingard, the Rajah-Laut. Having learned of Lingard's adventures through hearsay shortly after arriving at Macassar, the young and impressionable Almayer makes of Lingard "a hero" (p. 15). When Lingard

quarrels with Hudig, for example, Almayer sees the confrontation as "a battle of the gods" (p. 15). Almayer distorts reality by making these men greater than they are, and, since he desires greatness for himself, he readily allows himself to accept a position as a "kind of captain's clerk" (p. 15) when Lingard inexplicably demands of Vinck that he, Lingard, be given Almayer to do some "quill-driving" (p. 16) for him. Here Conrad shows Almayer as at least sensing in a relationship with Lingard a means to fulfillment however vague, but at the same time Conrad reveals Almayer's blind obedience to impulse which will later lead to his demise. The same ambiguous instinct permits Almayer to yield to Lingard's insistence that he marry the Rajah-Laut's adopted "daughter," despite misgivings which Conrad indicates with such phrases as "Almayer hesitated, and remained silent for a minute" (p. 16), "(old Lingard would not live forever)" (p. 17), and "I--of course--anything you wish, Captain Lingard" (p. 17). Almayer reluctantly agrees to go through with the marriage only for the guilders which, he imagines, will provide him with the means to a life of ease in "the big mansion in Amsterdam, that earthly paradise of his dreams" (p. 17). Apart from the importance of this moment to Almayer--suggested when Conrad tells us that Almayer "remembered well that time" (p. 17)--the scene has significance in that it again reveals the simultaneous working of

positive and negative forces in Almayer. That his dream has its basis in gross materialism and that, in marrying Lingard's "daughter," he is going against his conscience (which is itself perverted by racial prejudice) is at least partially counteracted, however, by an unconscious participation in one of man's uniquely positive qualities: the desire to improve his lot in life. There is in much of what Almayer does in the novel this combination of positive and negative influences: he has a vague basis for hope that he will be able to improve his life, but at the same time an undercurrent of forces which seem determined to defeat him is at work.

It is, of course, a fatal irony of the novel that Conrad has Almayer entrust his future to Lingard. Almayer is made by his creator to possess "inattentive eyes" (p. 12), and--if Plato was correct in his estimation of the eyes as "the natural doors and windows of the soul"³⁹--his powers of perception are likewise deficient. Almayer, for example, does not recognize the dictatorial stuff of which Lingard is made when the latter insists that Almayer marry his "daughter": "Millions I say! And all for her--and for you, if you do what you are told" (p. 16) and "Mind you, Kaspar, I always get my way. . ." (p. 17). Later, Almayer's lack of discernment is suggested when he is described as "expecting everyday the return of Lingard" (p. 28)--in the same way