

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

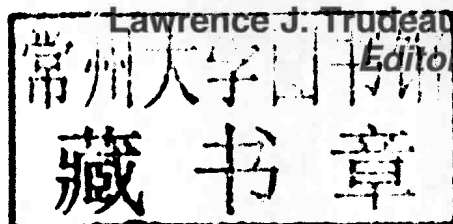
TCLC 301

Volume 301

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short-Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**

Lawrence J. Trudeau
Editor



Farmington Hills, Mich • San Francisco • New York • Waterville, Maine
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**Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism,
Vol. 301**

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WCN: 01-100-101

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27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI, 48331-3535

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 76-46132

ISBN-13: 978-1-5699-5751-6

ISSN: 0276-8178

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

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Preface

Since its inception *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by some 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 1000 authors, representing over 60 nationalities and nearly 50,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, "there is nothing comparable available." TCLC "is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own."

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. The great poets, novelists, short-story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, TCLC helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in TCLC presents a comprehensive survey of an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Volumes 1 through 87 of TCLC featured authors who died between 1900 and 1959; beginning with Volume 88, the series expanded to include authors who died between 1900 and 1999. Beginning with Volume 26, every fourth volume of TCLC was devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers. With TCLC 285, the series returned to a standard author approach, with some entries devoted to a single important work of world literature and others devoted to literary topics.

TCLC is part of the survey of criticism and world literature that is contained in Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (CLC), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (NCLC), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (LC), *Shakespearean Criticism* (SC), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (CMLC).

Organization of the Book

A TCLC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parentheses on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the author's name (if applicable).
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication information of each work is given. In the case of works not published in English, a translation of the title is provided as an aid to the reader; the translation is a published translated title or a

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- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included. Criticism in topic entries is arranged chronologically under a variety of subheadings to facilitate the study of different aspects of the topic.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Citations conform to recommendations set forth in the Modern Language Association of America's *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed. (2009).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** describing each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors who have appeared in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *TCLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces a paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Almayer's Folly

Joseph Conrad

(Born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski) Polish-born English novelist, essayist, and short-story writer.

The following entry provides criticism of Conrad's novel *Almayer's Folly* (1895). For additional information about Conrad, see *TCLC*, Volumes 1, 6, and 291; for additional information about the novella *The Heart of Darkness*, see *TCLC*, Volume 13; for additional information about the novel *Nostromo*, see *TCLC*, Volumes 25 and 298; for additional information about the novel *Lord Jim*, see *TCLC*, Volumes 43 and 297; for additional information about the short story "The Secret Sharer," see *TCLC*, Volume 57; for additional information about the novel *The Secret Agent*, see *TCLC*, Volume 293; for additional information about the novel *Under Western Eyes*, see *TCLC*, Volume 295.

INTRODUCTION

Almayer's Folly, the first novel by Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), tells the story of a Dutch merchant in Borneo whose narrow-mindedness and fantasies of wealth and power bring about his self-destruction. Kaspar Almayer dreams of finding a hidden gold mine that will allow him to return in triumph to Europe, where he will marry off his beautiful half-Dutch, half-Malay daughter, Nina, and secure the respect of his peers. This plan unravels, however, when Nina falls in love with the Balinese prince who is supposed to help Almayer locate the mine. In the early decades of Conrad criticism, *Almayer's Folly* was largely overlooked as an inferior early work that lacked the complexity and depth of such classics as *The Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *Lord Jim* (1900). In the years following World War II, scholars gradually began to reevaluate *Almayer's Folly*, first as a key to understanding Conrad's mature works, then increasingly on its own merits. The novel is frequently studied in terms of its focus on race and colonialism and critics have been divided in their assessment of its basic message on these subjects. Some scholars have seen the narrator as sympathizing with Almayer's chauvinistic views, while others have regarded the novel as a cautionary tale in which Almayer's racism blinds him to the political forces at play in Sambir and hastens his downfall.

PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

Almayer is a Dutch trader who has struggled for twenty-five years to make a living in the Bornean village of Sambir. Having grown increasingly dissatisfied with life in the remote colony, he makes several desperate attempts to se-

cure enough wealth to leave the island. The most conspicuous of these is "Almayer's Folly," a half-finished house he constructs to receive the British, whom he expects to conquer Sambir and the surrounding territory. The invasion does not occur, and Almayer's Folly is left to rot. In another attempt to gain financially, Almayer marries the adopted Malay daughter of his business partner, Captain Lingard, despite viewing non-Europeans as inferior. Lingard, a renowned navigator known to the locals as "Rajah Laut," or "King of the Sea," reputedly knows the location of a secret gold mine on the Pantai River, and Almayer clings to the hope of sharing in the wealth long after Lingard has "disappeared" to Europe. Fully aware of Almayer's reasons for marrying her, Mrs. Almayer despises her husband and attempts to instill distrust for whites in their daughter, Nina, who received a Western education in Singapore but gravitated toward her mother's culture after experiencing the chauvinism of the Europeans she encountered there.

This tension culminates when Nina becomes entranced by Dain Maroola, a charming Balinese prince who has promised to help Almayer locate the mine. Almayer refuses to see his daughter married to one of the "natives" and believes that Nina's refinement and his future riches will overcome any European suitors' prejudices against a "half-caste" woman. Mrs. Almayer, however, approves of the match between Nina and Dain. One day, while Dain is coming to meet Nina, he is ambushed and barely escapes, leaving his jewelry on the corpse of one of his companions to disguise the fact that he survived. Because Dutch sailors were killed in the skirmish, Dain is wanted by Dutch authorities, who suspect Almayer of concealing him. Almayer leads the Dutch officers to the corpse, but they are still suspicious and resume their search. Learning of his wife's desertion and of Dain and Nina's romance from the slave girl Taminah, Almayer hurries to meet the two before they elope. Unable to convince Nina to return with him, a reluctant and heartbroken Almayer arranges for the couple's escape from the Dutch soldiers. Deprived of both his daughter and his imagined fortune, Almayer sets fire to his home and retires to the ruins of Almayer's Folly, where he spends his few remaining days in an opium-induced stupor.

MAJOR THEMES

Like Conrad's more famous works, *Almayer's Folly* explores a variety of political and psychological issues and features characters facing problems that lack a clear cause or an obvious solution. As a daydreamer, an absentee

husband, and, later, an opium addict, Almayer testifies to the insidious power of self-delusion. The first few lines of the novel announce that Almayer is living in the realm of fantasy, using his "dream of splendid future" to escape "the unpleasant realities of the present hour." Almayer's recollections of his days as a young merchant are vivid and full of "pleasurable regret," and he has a great capacity for imagining a better life in Europe: "crowning all, in the far future gleamed like a fairy palace the big mansion in Amsterdam, that earthly paradise of his dreams, where . . . he would pass the evening of his days in inexpressible splendour."

The clarity that characterizes Almayer's memories and fantasies is missing from his observations of the present. He fails to notice, for example, that Nina, whom he naively calls "little girl," does not share his enthusiasm for the "glorious life" that awaits them in Europe. He is also unaware of his wife and Nina's preparations to run away. The extent of Almayer's detachment from reality becomes apparent when he hears of Dain's supposed death. Oblivious to the possibility that Nina could have any feelings for Dain, he criticizes her for failing to console him: "Have you no sympathy? Have you no word of comfort for me? I that loved you so." Almayer's preoccupation with racial purity contributes to his self-delusion, causing him to underestimate his Malay counterparts in trade and to presume that the Dutch officers will respect him simply because he is white. In both his career and his family life, Almayer allows himself to be seduced by the prospect of easy success and fails to notice obstacles until it is too late to avoid them.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Initial reviews of *Almayer's Folly* were positive. Conrad himself, however, regarded the novel as a failure that was overrated by the press. For much of the twentieth century, commentators tended to agree with Conrad's assessment of the work. John H. Hicks (1964) claimed that while Edward Garnett, who was instrumental in getting *Almayer's Folly* published, considered it "a remarkable first novel, that conviction is not generally shared by important Conrad critics today." Analyses of the book frequently noted its lack of polish, especially in comparison to Conrad's later works. Leo Gurko (1959) suggested that the novel was written "with the sporadic enthusiasm of an amateur," in contrast to *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), a novel closely linked to *Almayer's Folly* that marked Conrad's attainment of "semi-professional status." R. A. Gekoski (1978) found aspects of the novel's plot unconvincing. He claimed, for example, that Nina "unaccountably" leaves Almayer "without remorse or misgiving," and that Conrad's attempt to explain her decision "merely has the effect of cheapening the human value of the scene."

Other critics saw *Almayer's Folly* as a prototype for Conrad's later, more influential novels and stories. Ted E. Boyle (1965; see Further Reading) suggested that the novel "con-

tains the embryonic forms of many of the themes and character types with which Conrad dealt in his later work." Hicks contended that critical indifference toward the novel is the result of an oversimplified reading. He identified two important but generally overlooked themes in the tale: the complexity and mutability of human loyalties and the difficulty of recognizing illusions, especially those that shape one's worldview. Hicks attributed much of the book's force to these two elements, focusing on how Almayer places his allegiance to the European race above his fidelity to his daughter. As *Almayer's Folly* came to occupy a minor but significant role in Conrad's canon, some critics began to appreciate it on its own merits. Donald C. Yelton (1967) argued that Conrad's "great talent" is discernible "in the firm delineation of the principal characters, in much of the expository prose, and in a number of admirably conducted individual episodes." Even supposed defects, such as a lack of suspense, have been reinterpreted as evidence of a deeper purpose. Allan H. Simmons (1989) suggested that readers are meant to know "what will happen and, indeed, why" so that they will be more interested in the novel's resolution.

As with many of Conrad's works, *Almayer's Folly* has attracted critical attention for its exploration of imperialism and colonialism. Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri (2005) observed, "Critical opinion regarding Conrad's treatment of these issues . . . has been sharply divided. For some readers Conrad's works embody the dominant imperial discourse, for others they subvert it." Scholars also disagree about the significance of the distinction Conrad makes between "savage" and "civilized" in the novel. Paul Kirschner (1968; see Further Reading) suggested that the "picture of slavery, intrigue, and casual recourse to violence" among the Malay characters "is not drawn for its own sake, but as a roundabout comment on our world" and that Conrad was "making a statement about man." Simmons (1997) argued that the narrator, if not Almayer himself, undergoes a shift in attitude toward the non-European characters in the novel, initially subscribing to "the (stereotypical) Occidental attitudes of the Europeans" but coming to appreciate the viewpoint of the islanders. Simmons described this change as moving "from a *colonising* perspective to a *colonised* perspective," a shift that Tom Henthorne (2008) maintained Conrad himself underwent during the composition of the novel. Similarly, Masood Ashraf Raja (2007) characterized *Almayer's Folly* as a work "refuting or, at least, complicating the charge of racism" attached to Conrad's later novels and short stories.

Michael J. Hartwell

PRINCIPAL WORKS

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CRITICISM

Leo Gurko (essay date 1959)

SOURCE: Gurko, Leo. "Conrad's First Battleground: *Almayer's Folly*." *University of Kansas City Review* 25.3 (1959): 189-94. Print.

[In the following essay, Gurko discusses Conrad's development as a novelist from *Almayer's Folly* to *An Outcast of the Islands*, focusing on the symbolic use of nature in both works. Gurko argues that nature is "lushly ornamental, animatedly irrelevant" in the first novel but assumes a central role in the second.]

The first two novels of Joseph Conrad, *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*, take place in the Malay Archipelago, but his treatment of the Malayan scene undergoes a remarkable transformation from one to the other. *Almayer's Folly*, written off and on over a five-year period with the sporadic enthusiasm of an amateur, relegates nature to a lushly ornamental, animatedly irrelevant role in the background of the story. *An Outcast of the Islands* had a different birth, and bears the marks of a man painfully climbing from an amateur to a semi-professional status. The leap forward in the aesthetic maturity of the author is staggering. Despite occasional lapses, nature is as close to the heart of this second novel as it was to the periphery of the first.

The skillful manipulation of external detail in *An Outcast of the Islands* is evident from the start. Willems, playing billiards and dispensing gratuitous advice, causes even the billiard balls to stand still "as if listening also." The sea, before the coming of steam and the Suez canal, extracts from Conrad a passionate farewell.¹ The contrast of silence

and sound is dramatized by the leaping of a fish "which measured the profundity of the overpowering silence that swallowed up the sharp sound suddenly." From the sky Conrad plucks a splendid simile for Aissa: "Over the courtyard and the house floated a round, sombre, and lingering cloud, dragging behind a tail of tangled and filmy streamers—like the dishevelled hair of a mourning woman." (*An Outcast of the Islands*, New York, 1925, p. 241) In the wind he finds a movement to embody the hysterical scenes made by Mrs. Willems in Almayer's house:

Those scenes, begun without any warning, ended abruptly in a sobbing flight and a bang of the door, stirred the house with a sudden, a fierce, and an evanescent disturbance; like those inexplicable whirlwinds that rise, run, and vanish without apparent cause upon the sun-scorched dead level of arid and lamentable plains.

(*Outcast* [*An Outcast of the Islands*], 303)

As Lingard describes the gold mine up the river that will make them all rich, he amuses Almayer's small daughter by building a house of cards; its sudden collapse subtly indicates the hollowness and fragility of their dream of wealth. The unused office, filled with furniture Almayer thought necessary to successful trading, is brilliantly imaged as "a temple of an exploded superstition."

The linkage between Willems and nature springs to life almost from the moment that he arrives in Sambir. Sunk in sloth and moral inertia—a frame of mind Conrad has made peculiarly his own province—the disgraced Dutchman is obsessed by what surrounds him:

He heard the reproach of his idleness in the murmurs of the river, in the unceasing whisper of the great forests. Round him everything stirred, moved, swept by in a rush; the earth under his feet and the heavens above his head. The very savages around him strove, struggled, fought, worked—if only to prolong a miserable existence; but they lived, they lived! And it was only himself that seemed to be left outside the scheme of creation in a hopeless immobility filled with tormenting anger and with everstinging regret.

(*Outcast*, 65)

The river and the forests are not "arranged" to reflect the emotions of the man, in the traditional romantic fashion. They are themselves, and therefore perfectly convincing. By juxtaposing their intense activity and Willems' intense inactivity, Conrad not only heightens each but uses the one to alter the other. For this "natural" reminder of his withdrawal from life prepares Willems for his extraordinary encounter with Aissa which immediately follows.

He sees her for the first time in the midst of the jungle ablaze with light at high noon, and now ensues one of the magnificent descriptions of sexual impact:

High above, the branches of the trees met in a transparent shimmer of waving green mist, through which the rain of

yellow rays descended upon her head, streamed in glints down her black tresses, shone with the changing glow of liquid metal on her face, and lost itself in vanishing sparks in the sombre depths of her eyes that, wide open now, with enlarged pupils, looked steadily at the man in her path. And Willems stared at her, charmed with a charm that carries with it a sense of irreparable loss, tingling with that feeling which begins like a caress and ends in a blow, in that sudden hurt of a new emotion making its way into a human heart, with the brusque stirring of sleeping sensations awakening suddenly to the rush of new hopes, new fears, new desires—and to the flight of one's old self.

(*Outcast*, 69)

The corrupt and corrupting jungle becomes the perfect ecological setting for Willems' fall: "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 and 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." (*Outcast*, 70).

Civilization and barbarism struggle within Willems just as life and death struggle in the jungle. The two conflicts, juxtaposed and analogously linked, immensely reinforce the emotion of the man. Since this emotion is uncontrollably sensual, it comes appropriately enclosed in the bosom of the wildest, most untamed, most thickly tangled nature. For Willems' journey in the novel is from man to animal, from the large city of Macassar and the smaller but no less human settlement of Almayer to the dark enclosure of the Malay jungle. Every stage of this steep psychological descent is accompanied by a similar progression in the physical frame of nature. The way in which these two levels of progression are fused dramatically not only marks off Conrad's second novel from his first but establishes that successful vision of the relationship between man and the sensory universe which is to become one of his supreme achievements.

The deepening struggle in Willems passes through a series of sharply defined stages, each in a suggestive liaison with nature. Conrad makes both him and Aissa superb physical specimens of their races, somehow in keeping with the dramatic grandeur, even the grandioseness of their surroundings. Willems' first sudden sense of his descent into nightmare has a relevant setting:

He looked round wildly. Above the shapeless darkness of the forest undergrowth rose the treetops with their high boughs and leaves standing out black on the pale sky—like fragments of night floating on moonbeams. Under his feet warm steam rose from the heated earth . . .

(*Outcast*, 80)

The warm steam beclouds his mind, overwhelms his senses, causes him to imagine himself falling to some unpredictable doom.

He struggled with the sense of certain defeat—lost his footing—fell back into the darkness. With a faint cry and an upward throw of his arms he gave up as a tired swimmer gives up: because the swamped craft is gone from under his feet; because the night is dark and the shore is far—because death is better than strife.

(*Outcast*, 81)

Other figures in the later novels are to jump or intend jumping to their destruction. In the darkness Jim jumps from the *Patna* to the everlasting dark hole of the lifeboat. Flora de Barral, in *Chance*, is about to leap from a cliff when Marlow's appearance restrains her. Conrad wraps moral degradation or despair in the physical act of falling. At the end, in a final irony, Willems is drained of all feeling for Aissa while she continues to love him more violently than ever. Their embrace, under these decaying circumstances, culminates in Willems' last vision of his fall into a final corruption:

He stood still and rigid, pressing her mechanically to his breast while he thought that there was nothing for him in the world. He was robbed of everything; robbed of his passion, of his liberty, of forgetfulness, of consolation. She, wild with delight, whispered on rapidly, of love, of light, of peace, of long years . . . He looked drearily above her head down into the deeper gloom of the courtyard. And, all at once, it seemed to him that he was peering into a sombre hollow, into a deep black hole full of decay and of whitened bones; into an immense and inevitable grave full of corruption where sooner or later he must, unavoidably, fall.

(*Outcast*, 339)

Inside his confused and tormented consciousness Willems falls and rises a dozen times over, his surroundings serving as the ladder on which his descents and ascents are effected, as a barometer recording their vibrations.

The emotional struggle between the white man and the Malay woman takes place at one point under the shadow of a gigantic tree. Its size reduces them to a minuscule focus, yet protects their human warmth from the merciless coldness of the cosmos:

The solitary exile of the forests, great motionless and solemn in his abandonment, left alone by the life of ages that had been pushed away from him by those pigmies that crept at his foot, towered high and straight above their heads. He seemed to look on, dispassionate and imposing, in his lonely greatness, spreading his branches wide in a gesture of lofty protection, as if to hide them in the sombre shelter of innumerable leaves; as if moved by the disdainful compassion of the strong, by the scornful pity of an aged giant, to screen this struggle of two human hearts from the cold scrutiny of glittering stars.

(*Outcast*, 154)

Nature, however, is seldom so tender. The novel being a study of degradation, and particularly sexual degradation,