

JOSEPH CONRAD

MELODRAMAS, CHARACTERIZATION, AND FEMALE CHARACTERS  
IN  
THREE WORKS BY JOSEPH CONRAD:  
*THE SECRET AGENT, UNDER WESTERN EYES, AND VICTORY*

By

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## ABSTRACT

The novels of Joseph Conrad present the reader with plots full of action, mystery, political intrigue, and moving depictions of human nature. The emotional intensity of the novels' characters, and of the action unfolding around these characters, however, often leads critics of Conrad's novels to attack the works as being melodramatic. The present study explores the aspect of melodrama in Conrad on the hypothesis that such criticism of the works may actually stem from a misunderstanding of the images and themes Conrad attempts to convey. The discussion centres around the significance of Conrad's focus on characters and characterization. I hope to show how several of his most realistically constructed female characters actually diffuse the sense of melodrama in the novels.

I begin with a brief history outlining the development of melodrama in both nineteenth-century theatre and the Victorian novel in order to provide a framework for a discussion of the element of melodrama in Conrad. In the chapter that follows the introductory discussion, I begin to examine the aspect of characterization in the novels. *The Secret Agent* (1907) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911) are the works considered in this chapter. Much of the discussion centres around the actions of Winnie Verloc and Natalia Haldin as I consider how the similarities and differences in the portrayal of each character contribute to, or detract from, the sense of melodrama in each novel. In the final section of the thesis, I continue to examine the aspects of characterization and melodrama in Conrad's *Victory*, and through the character of Lena in particular. Her

influence on the events in *Victory* is even greater than the influence that Winnie and Natalia have on the events in their stories. The strength and integrity that Conrad gives to Lena suggest that she is the portrait of the ultimate heroine, and the standard against which both Winnie and Natalia can be measured. The argument that *Victory* offers little more than a melodramatic plot, filled with exaggerated emotion and spectacle, is hard to accept after examining the realistic presence that Lena brings to the novel. Through a detailed study of all three characters, I hope to show that Conrad's novels may be considered melodramatic, but only when the element of characterization is not fully explored. The capacity for suffering and endurance that Conrad presents through his heroines creates a believable and moving account of human existence.

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## PREFACE

Joseph Conrad's fascination with the desires and motivations that drive the human will takes his readers into a fictional world wherein the characters experience a whole spectrum of emotion. The men and women in Conrad's novels love, hate, suffer, endure, and find both fellowship and betrayal through their interactions with each other. The mystery, intrigue, and excitement of Conrad's narratives support the development of his characters, often contributing to a growing sense of the reader's emotional involvement with the story. Together, the combination of Conrad's emotionally intense characters and his action-filled narratives creates a moving literary experience for the reader; it is an experience, many argue, that is altogether too moving, too emotionally charged, and too filled with needless sentiment.

Critics of Conrad's novels often attack the work as melodramatic. The perception that the unfolding action of Conrad's narratives relies on exaggerated emotion and heightened sentiment forms the basis of such criticism. The purpose of the present study is not only to examine some of the existing criticism pointing to aspects of melodrama in Conrad's writing, but also to suggest how much of this criticism stems from a misunderstanding of the images and themes Conrad attempts to convey. The tendency to look primarily at the physical events of Conrad's novels and tales often leads to the conclusion that the works are indeed melodramatic. A closer examination of his focus on characters and characterization, however, reveals how several of his most

realistically constructed female characters actually diffuse the sense of melodrama in Conrad's writing.

The complete writings of Conrad, in some 22 volumes, include a large number of novels, novellas, tales and short stories. The discussion that follows, however, focuses specifically on three of the novels that display a particularly strong tie to each other: *The Secret Agent* (1907), *Under Western Eyes* (1911), and *Victory* (1915). All three works combine action-filled narratives with an array of outstanding studies of character. The female characters in the novels provide the most consistent images of strong, independent heroines. It is for this reason that I confine my discussion of melodrama and characterization in Conrad to these three novels in particular, and to their women protagonists.

The opening chapter of this study attempts to establish a concrete literary frame of reference from which to study aspects of melodrama in Conrad. The discussion begins with a close examination of René Wellek's work in the area of literary criticism. Wellek's study of literary theory emphasizes the importance of examining all literature from the proper frame of reference. The subsequent argument traces the history of melodrama through both nineteenth-century theatre and the Victorian novel. Marvin Carlson's study of the theatre outlines the origins of melodrama on the nineteenth-century stage, while Michael Irwin's study of the Victorian novel reveals how melodrama in both nineteenth-century literature and theatre develops along parallel lines. The general discussion of melodrama in the opening chapter of this study sets the

appropriate frame of reference for the remaining chapters to continue with a further discussion of melodrama in the works of Conrad.

Chapters two and three continue to examine aspects of melodrama in Conrad, but begin to look, in greater detail, at the effect characterization has on any action or events labeled melodramatic. In chapter two, the literary criticism of Albert Guerard, Frederick R. Karl, F.R. Leavis, and J.I.M. Stewart provides the basis for beginning a discussion of characterization and melodrama, while the female characters from both *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* become the focus of a detailed study centering around the novels themselves. The actions of Winnie Verloc and Natalia Haldin occupy much of the discussion, as I consider the similarities and differences in the way Conrad portrays both characters, and subsequently, how each woman contributes, or detracts from, the sense of melodrama in the novels.

The final chapter considers the impact that the character of Lena has on the unfolding action in *Victory*. Her significance as a character capable of diffusing any sense of melodrama within the novel sets a standard against which both Winnie and Natalia can be measured. It is Lena's strength and integrity that complete Conrad's image of the heroine, while her realistic and enduring presence in the novel ultimately allows the novelist to present a meaningful portrait of human experience.

## Chapter 1: Conrad and the Spectre of Melodrama: An Introduction

The question of how best to approach a work of literature is one that every reader/critic must consider each time he or she prepares to study a literary work. The “approach” or “method” brought to the literature must not twist, bend ,or in any way dismiss the actual events of the narrative as the author sets them down. The reader/critic who takes it upon him or herself to interpret the events of a novel, by turning to theories unrelated to the primary work itself, runs the risk of misunderstanding the author’s purpose. René Wellek introduces his study of literary theory with a section devoted to outlining the “definitions” and “distinctions” used in speaking about any great work of literature. At the end of chapter one, “Literature and Literary Study”, the author stresses that each work of literature is both “general and specific”, or “general and individual” (Wellek 19). Wellek expands on his observation, noting that any single literary work has both individual characteristics, and shares common properties with other works. This being the case, one can generalize concerning works of art. Literary criticism and literary history, according to Wellek, attempt to show a work’s individuality. Individuality, he maintains, can only be shown, however, “in universal terms on a basis of literary theory” (19). Wellek continues to outline the fundamental elements of his literary theory, and specifies the only ways in which this theory, as he defines it, can be properly applied to any piece of writing.

Wellek introduces the idea of “literary theory” as a concept in its own right, but quickly links it to the introduction of “literary criticism” proper. While he draws a distinction between the two ideas, Wellek cautiously adds that the concepts are not mutually exclusive of each other. Literary theory is any study purporting to examine “the principles of literature, its categories and criteria” (39). Literary criticism is the specific “study of concrete works of art” (39). The two methods, Wellek notes, necessarily implicate each other:

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Obviously, literary theory is impossible except on the basis of a study of concrete literary works. Criteria, categories, and schemes cannot be arrived at in vacuo. But, conversely, no criticism or history is possible without some set of questions, some system of concepts, some points of reference, some generalizations. (39)

The importance of such criteria, categories and schema to any single piece of literature, furthermore, is equaled only by the significance that the overall quality of the writing holds in itself.

The constituents of both literary theory and literary criticism clearly point to the need for prose that is both aesthetically pleasing and intelligently written. Wellek emphasizes the effect a piece of well-written work has on its reader. His discussion of both literary language and characterization outlines how sympathetic characters and outstanding prose contribute to a reading experience that is both entertaining and edifying. The reader comes away from the novel with a sense of personal enjoyment, but, more importantly, has also gained some new insight into human nature.

The power of literary language, Wellek contends, lies deeper than just its strictly referential capabilities. In addition to providing a framework of past literature as a point

of reference, literary language possesses an expressive side, which allows it to convey tone and attitude, thus influencing the attitude of both the reader and the author alike (23). Characterization allows the author to reveal both the collective and the individual nature of human beings. Each man, woman, and child in a given story may have two distinct components to his or her “self”, that which is a “type” or communal self, and that which is the individual or unique “self”. Through a novel’s characters, the type may be emphasized just as easily through the individual as the individual may be emphasized through the type (33). In this way, the reader sees how readily any one work may fit into the canon of both a particular author’s body of work, and into the body of great literature as a whole. At some point, most writing derives from the same essential frame of reference. For Wellek, this frame of reference is life, and the experience of the human spirit. “The novelist”, he emphatically states, “can teach [us] more about human nature than the psychologists” (33). Wellek’s emphasis on the importance of the novelist naturally extends to include the importance of the actual novel as well.

Wellek lays down a logical sequence for examining literature, beginning with the author and his or her work itself: “The natural and sensible starting-point for work in literary scholarship is the interpretation and analysis of works of literature themselves” (139). Wellek’s earlier emphasis on both the aesthetical and technical aspects of writing reemerges as he begins to discuss the importance of the primary work to any serious literary study: “Many studies of the novel”, he notes, “are not content to consider it merely in terms of its relations to the social structure but try to analyze its artistic methods--its points of view, its narrative technique” (140). In stressing the artistic

methods of a literary work, Wellek places as much significance on how a piece of writing arrives at its meaning as he does on the actual meaning of the work itself. It is not enough for readers and critics to simply look at a novel and decide what it “means”, or what message it is trying to convey. The most thoughtful and complete readings of a novel will be those that also consider how the style of the writing contributes to the overall ‘experience’ of the work. The author’s individual style holds an integral place in the discussion of Conrad’s work, and figures significantly in the discussion of the three novels under consideration here in particular.

The narrative structure and characterization of *The Secret Agent*, *Under Western Eyes*, and *Victory*, work together to reveal Conrad’s focus on the condition of human life. The hopes and dreams of ordinary men and women, juxtaposed against their trials and suffering, become the subject of a most extraordinary tale. Conrad’s sensitivity to the motivation and desires of the solitary individual allows him to tell the story of the human spirit we all share. The *Secret Agent*, *Under Western Eyes*, and *Victory* all deal, in some form or another, with the subjects of intrigue, betrayal, love, compassion, sacrifice, and perhaps most significantly, human suffering and endurance.

Conrad’s emphasis on the principles of compassion, betrayal, sacrifice, and endurance as part of the shared human condition places at least one female character at the heart of each novel. The author’s concern with portraying strong, sympathetic female characters is an aspect of his work that Conrad’s critics and readers tend to overlook. The impact that characters like Winnie Verloc, Natalia Haldin, and Lena have on their

respective stories, however, figures significantly in much of the existing criticism surrounding the novels' overall tone and narrative construction. Conrad's women are the subjects of his portrayal of love, betrayal, and sacrifice; they are the ones who inevitably suffer the most, and endure with the least complaint. Their worlds are the worlds of violence, mystery and intrigue, and it is for this reason that critics of Conrad's work often refer to both the female characters and the fictional worlds of *The Secret Agent*, *Under Western Eyes*, and *Victory* as melodramatic constructions.

In applying the term melodrama to these three texts in particular, critics are careful to note that the implication does not suggest that the works are necessarily poorly conceived or written on the whole, but rather that they appeal to a heightened sense of emotion and feeling that move both the story and the reader away from situations and outcomes that are 'immediate' and 'real'. The suggestion that Conrad's later works are more susceptible to sentimental and melodramatic treatment generally prompts more severe criticism of *Victory*, often viewed as an inferior work for this very reason. J.I.M. Stewart emphasizes this point in his study of the life and works of Joseph Conrad:

What does seem to be clear about the inferiority of the work in his [Conrad's] final phase is that inferiority's involuntary and, as it were, unconscious character. If his themes turn merely melodramatic, as Virginia Woolf believed, and if the vision grows dull or sentimental, the explanation is not that -- at least in any major undertaking-- he is deliberately making concessions to a larger and less instructed public. It is rather, one comes to feel, a matter of intellectual and emotional fatigue, of a protective induration such as frequently accompanies premature senescence. (Stewart 34)

Most worthy of note in Stewart's statement is the very clear condition he puts on his observation; if Conrad's vision grows "dull" or "sentimental", then there may be some truth to Stewart's contention that the novelist suffered more from "intellectual and emotional fatigue" than he did from general lack of vision. One might argue, however, that a careful study of *Victory*'s characters, and that of Lena in particular, provides sufficient evidence demonstrating just the opposite tendency in the novel as a later work. Lena is perhaps the most convincing and enlightening of the female characters from the three novels in question. Her ability to evoke a sympathetic response from the reader actually prevents the events of the story from becoming overly dramatic and sentimental. By shifting the critical focus away from 'action' and on to 'character', the novel frequently criticized for its lapses into incredible melodrama takes on a stark reality that shocks with its sense of immediacy and urgency.

The strong characterization of the women in *Under Western Eyes* and *The Secret Agent* works in a similar way. The sympathetic portraits of Natalia Haldin, Tekla, and Sophia Antonovna support Conrad's very realistic portrayal of the human spirit's capacity to love and endure. He manages this despite placing them in the middle of violent revolutionary discord and upheaval. Winnie Verloc poses somewhat of a problem. She is undeniably the centre of *The Secret Agent*'s unfolding action, and is its most completely developed character. Her strength and presence in the beginning of the novel, however, begin to unravel near its conclusion. As her character continues to come undone, critics and readers must consider how effective she truly is as a means through which Conrad can convey the theme(s) of his work. As each woman's

development is measured against the completed image of the heroine portrayed in *Lena*, the understanding of how each novel is, or is not melodramatic must necessarily change as well. Before any further explorations into either specific characters or novels can be made, however, a concrete literary frame of reference must be established. The establishment of just such a frame is where we now turn our attention.

As much of the critical attention focused on Conrad centres around the contention that many of the novels tend towards sentiment and melodrama, a consideration of several of these positions is the most appropriate starting point.<sup>1</sup> Stewart's comments on the melodramatic tendencies of Conrad's later work are noted above, and bear a close resemblance to similar opinions expressed by both F.R. Leavis and Frederick R. Karl. In *A Reader's Guide To Joseph Conrad* (1960), Karl suggests that *Victory* concludes with an "aesthetically unsatisfactory ending" (265), an ending that is perhaps no "worse than that of *Nostromo*, *Under Western Eyes*, and *Chance*" albeit, but one that nonetheless "suddenly transforms the novel from noble tragedy into trite melodrama. Exactly as *Under Western Eyes* loses its impetus after Razumov's dramatic confession to Miss Haldin, so *Victory* ends its dramatic thrust with Lena's triumphant death" (266). Leavis makes a similar observation about the events in *Victory*, adding that the action is melodramatic enough "as to invite the cinematographer" (236). The perceived melodrama in all three cases focuses specifically on the melodrama of the novel's action, but unsurprisingly pays little attention to the aspect of characterization. The

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<sup>1</sup> The word melodrama itself comes from the Greek melos, meaning song.

concern with action, in turn, stems naturally from the basic definition of exactly what it means for a work to be melodramatic.

Most simply put, melodrama is any action, thought, speech, spectacle, or combination of the above that uses or appeals to a heightened sense of emotion and exaggerated expression. The presence of sentimentality in melodramatic ‘art’ is equaled only by the presence of comparable violence and spectacle in many cases. In the case of literature, the idea that both the reader and the text itself are moved beyond the realm of established “reality” prompts much of the criticism leveled at any work considered melodramatic. Beyond this basic definition, however, the meanings and forms of melodrama are much less clear. Visual art, literature, theatre, opera, really any genre now recognized as belonging to the broad category known as ‘liberal arts’ has its own form of melodrama. While each derives its form from the basic definition given above, its further development and adaptations are specific to the needs and requirements of that form’s particular genre. The sense of melodrama in a painting is different from that found in an operatic aria, and neither conveys the exact type of melodramatic tone expressed through a piece of literature. The development of melodrama in the theatre, however, parallels the development of melodrama in the novel along several lines. The presence of melodrama as a distinct form in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theatre reflects back on the literature of the era, making the history of both the theatre and the Victorian novel a logical point from which to begin examining aspects of melodrama in Conrad.

Marvin Carlson devotes a considerable space in his book, *Theories of the Theatre* (1993), to a discussion of the place melodrama holds in the history of theatrical writing and production. He begins his discussion with the uncomplimentary views of the French novelist and playwright Victor Hugo (1802-85), and continues to develop both a definition and defense of the melodramatic form through the views of Hugo's contemporaries, most noticeably through those views belonging to Charles Nodier (1780-1844), Guilbert de Pixerecourt (1773-1844), and François Ponsard (1814-67).

Carlson cites Hugo's condemnation of melodrama as the lesser part of a dramatic trio involving comedy and drama (Carlson 214). The trio of melodrama, comedy, and drama is actually the second of its type, the first one being a combination of "the *drame*", "comedy", and "tragedy". Unlike the *drame*, melodrama fails to "combine the best features of comedy and tragedy" (214). While tragedy appeals to "women interested in the passions and emotions", or the "pleasures of the heart", and comedy appeals to the "thinkers, interested in human beings and their motives", or the "pleasures of the mind"; melodrama "appeals to the general crowd interested in action-filled plot and sensational effects" (213). It is, according to Hugo, "vulgar and inferior" to both comedy and tragedy (213). Carlson expands on the mounting criticism of melodrama, and continues to define its particulars with respect to the views of both 'romantics' and 'classicists'.

In comparing the relationship between melodrama and romantic drama, Carlson notes that "melodrama had been scorned by both classicists and romantics" (213). Few people, he adds, examined its particular requirements, and few defended it as a genre "worthy of serious consideration" (214). François Ponsard, Carlson notes, is one of the

few critics who does consider the particular requirements of the melodramatic genre. In an 1852 review, Ponsard makes the following comments:

I would call any play either a drama or tragedy if it were primarily concerned with the representation of character, the development of passions, or the recreation of the spirit and manners of a period, and it subordinated the plot to this dominant idea. Any play on the contrary, which seeks only to astonish and move the spectator by a rapid succession of adventures and unexpected turns would be a melodrama. Each of these works has its own particular laws which must be observed. (quoted in Carlson 214)

Carlson follows Ponsard's careful distinction of melodrama from tragedy with an account of Charles Nodier's praise of melodrama as a "valid and worthy form".

In the introduction to *Guilbert de Pixerecourt's Théâtre Choisi* (1841), Nodier presents what is perhaps the most extensive defense of melodrama in the theatre. He stresses its moral function, its emphasis on justice and humanity, its stimulation of virtue, "its arousal of tender and generous sympathy, and above all, its embodiment of the 'morality of the Revolution' which showed that 'even here below, virtue is always rewarded and crime is never without punishment'"(214). As a representation of justice, humanity, and due punishment for sin and vice, melodramatic theatre "replaced the departed Church as a source of moral instruction, and the uncontested contemporary popularity of the genre explains why crime ha[d] never been so rare, especially among the lower classes"(214).<sup>2</sup> New Romantic dramas may show the artistic potential of melodrama by elevating it with "artificial pomp of lyricism", but often are not always

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<sup>2</sup> Nodier's original passages are found on pages two and three of his introduction to *Théâtre Choisi*. The full English translations quoted in this chapter, however, are taken from Carlson.

Pixerecourt makes a simple, but strong, claim for all but two of his plays: "I have represented in my dramas the three unities [time, place, and action] as much as possible. I have always thought that there should be complete unity in a dramatic work" (215). Carlson continues to make a case for the presence of continuity in melodrama, noting that Pixerecourt's concept of unity is not merely confined to the text of the play itself, but on the contrary extends to a "unity of vision between writing and production" (215). The demand for such an all-encompassing unity, he adds, necessarily calls for a "single theatre artist involved with the entire process" (215). Once again, Pixerecourt's own words offer the clearest explanation of exactly what it is that his "unity of vision" involves: "A theatre piece can only be well conceived, well constructed, well set into dialogue, well rehearsed and well played under the auspices and by the efforts of a single man having the same taste, the same judgment, the same mind, the same heart, and the same opinion" (215). When one considers the importance Pixerecourt places on the involvement of the same single actor at every stage of the theatrical process, it is not hard to see how melodrama in the novel and melodrama in the theatre develop along side each other. What is the novelist if not Pixerecourt's single artist?

Pixerecourt's defense of melodrama for its adherence to the unities naturally extends itself to his condemnation of romantic drama for its disregard of those same unities. If the apparent problems with romantic drama confined themselves to a simple disregard for the principles of time, place, and action, there might still be some greater quality compensating for the perceived lack of unity. Carlson notes, however, that Pixerecourt finds no such excellent quality in romantic drama, and furthermore,

continues to criticize it for “its multiplication of scenes, and most of all for its lack of morality and its interest in the lowest vices adultery, rape, incest, parricide, [and] prostitution”(215). Such plays, Carlson adds, were considered “evil, dangerous, immoral, and devoid of interest or truth” (215), not only by Pixèrecourt, but also by several of his contemporaries. Bearing this in mind, Carlson asks a pertinent question: “What then prevented Pixèrecourt from making common cause with the neo-classicists, who shared this same complaint” (215). The answer, once again, lies in the particulars of the melodramatic style. Its language, Carlson contends, is just one aspect that prevents Pixèrecourt from aligning totally with the neo-classicists. Melodrama’s interest in spectacle, and mixing of tones also proves problematic. Carlson cites the neoclassic critic, Jean Louis Geoffroy, noting that such mixing of tones and reliance on spectacle “clearly offended” (215) both Geoffroy and many of his colleagues. In writing on Pixèrecourt’s *La Rose Blanche et la Rose Rouge* (1809), Geoffroy states that the “determining characteristics of melodrama are the abuse of pantomime and machines, combats, dances, the mixing of tragedy and low comedy, declamation, and bombast”(215). Having said this, however, Geoffroy declares that melodrama is nonetheless “still a popular and durable form” (215). Melodrama’s popularity and durability carry the genre into, and indeed through, the early twentieth-century. The English stage becomes the centre of focus for twentieth-century melodrama, taking over much of the attention that had, up until this point, rested in French productions.

The years 1900-14 mark a rising symbolism in English theatre, and as such give rise to both a new breed of actors and new methods of acting. In his collection of

essays entitled *Plays, Acting, and Music* (1909), Arthur Symons identifies three kinds of actors. The first type are those who seek “reality”. They are the actors who “seem to portray real people in real situations” (Symons 65). The second type of actor, Symons maintains, “depart[s] from nature”. Actors in this category employ superb artistry and technique (65). The third type of actors are “those who do not act at all, but simply reflect the essential mood or soul of the drama” (65). They are the actors who “think on stage”, and are ultimately the ones that “touch the depth of the human condition” (65). It is this third type of actor, in Symons’ opinion, that represents the epitome of the English theatre.

Symons’ critique of the English stage does not end with the mere outlining of its most recent developments in terms of player and content, but rather launches into an attack on the quality of those developments. English actors, Symons declares, “are addicted to physical action”, a phenomenon, he notes, “which often distracts from the soul of the drama” (171). Symons makes this argument in the essay “On Crossing Stage to Right”, and expands on his criticism of the preference for physical action in yet another essay, “A theory of the Stage”. Carlson adds his own contribution to the discussion of physical action in the theatre, maintaining that “great drama must be a mixture of life and beauty” (Carlson 303). Carlson’s argument for a mix of beauty and life in theatre aligns closely with Symons’ contention that action, and only action, brings little to a theatrical production: “Action alone is a violent thing which has been scornfully called melodrama” (Symons 200). Carlson rounds out Symons’ argument, concluding that it is “life and action that dominate the modern prose theatre” (303). The

twentieth-century novel, on closer examination, might be said to possess much of this same attention to both action and life.

The roots of twentieth-century literature lie in nineteenth-century writings. The melodramatic aspects of Victorian fiction play an integral part in the development of the early-twentieth century novel, and in Conrad's work in particular. Unsurprisingly, the element of melodrama in nineteenth-century literature meets with as much, and often more, opposition than does the theatre of that same era. Michael Irwin's chapter in Ian Gregor's book, *Reading the Victorian Novel: Detail into Form*, deals exclusively with readings of melodrama in Victorian fiction. The qualities and particulars of the melodrama Irwin outlines not only parallel the development of melodrama in the theatre, but also prove pertinent to later discussions of the role melodrama plays in all three of the novels under consideration in this study.

Like Carlson, Irwin begins his study by examining exactly what melodrama entails in his specific context, namely the Victorian novel. Once again, the element of spectacle comes to the forefront, this time taking the form of natural phenomena, and daring acts of bravado. Scenes of storm, fire, flood, murder, and last minute rescue are just a few among many of the 'fantastic' events characteristic of Victorian melodrama. The influence of the melodramatic form on the Victorian novel, according to Irwin, reflects the popularity of melodrama in nineteenth-century theatre (Irwin 15). Irwin's establishment of the few basic elements contained within a melodramatic scene do not, however, absolutely determine whether or not an entire work is melodramatic, and he is careful to note as much. Far from applying absolutes to any conception of melodrama as

a genre, Irwin is emphatic in his contention that it is nearly “impossible to retrieve the word ‘melodramatic’ as a critical term” (16). *The Oxford English Dictionary*, he notes, “summarizes almost adequately what seems to have become the normal and inescapable meaning of the adjective: ‘Characterized by sensational incidents and violent appeals to the emotions’” (16). Having acknowledged the commonly accepted understanding of what melodrama “is”, Irwin then takes the definition one step further by asking why some writing (Shakespeare's tragedies, and all Jacobean drama for example) may contain sensational incident and violent emotional appeal and yet not be considered melodramatic, while the term is readily applied to other works with similar characteristics. Irwin’s focus is not on the melodrama itself, but rather on how the realistic and melodramatic aspects of Victorian fiction might be reconciled: “The novelist”, he adds, “deals with everyday life and must take account of the fact that ‘extremity’ of various kinds is intrinsic to it” (16). If the author must account for the ‘extremities’ of every day life in his or her writing, then the reader is no less responsible for recognizing these ‘extremities’ in his or her assessment of a novel.

What may initially appear as an undue use of sensation and an overwhelming appeal to the emotions may, in the end, be the most effective way of conveying a very ‘real’ situation. Melodramatic contrast provides perhaps the most vivid method of distinguishing between the middle and working classes. Irwin’s own comments on the role melodrama plays in portraying class divisions support such a contention. The “sufferings of the poor”, according to Irwin, “can only emerge as a deafening blare” (18). The plight of generally downtrodden characters emerges in an equally melodramatic, yet

often meaningful pattern. In the Victorian novel, intense emotion, or the “unbearable stress of feeling”, as Irwin calls it, translates into sickness: “Illness is the melodrama of individual physical existence” (18). From this perspective, the presence of melodrama in Victorian literature not only reflects aspects of the same melodrama in nineteenth-century theatre, but actually goes one step further by fulfilling a specific purpose outside the intention of mere entertainment and popular appeal. Whether or not any one melodramatic incident succeeds in conveying a more comprehensive view of the emotion and/or intensity of the situation at hand, however, depends on both the novelist’s ability to write, and the reader’s ability to perceive the emotion and intensity of the scene.

How then does one judge the effect melodrama has on a literary work? Irwin suggests that only contrast and balance truly bring stability and credibility to melodramatic episodes within a novel. The kind of excitement that the melodramatic “episode” creates should never be more or less trivial than the emotion aroused by the main action of the novel (19). Any episode that exceeds or underestimates the emotion garnered by the entire novel throws the balance of the text out of proportion, and risks negating any clarity and vision the melodrama might bring to the plot.

It is not, however, reasonable to expect that all good melodrama in Victorian fiction must, or indeed can, be metered out precisely event by event. Irwin emphasizes the impossibility of the task, noting that such measurement would prove difficult with works “that while ostensibly ‘realistic’ are in fact melodramatic in their very conception” (19). Irwin cites *Jane Eyre* as an example of just such a work. In commenting on *Jane*

*Eyre*, Irwin notes that the “extravagances of the action are means towards dramatizing the conflict . . . The exotic story is necessary not to create but to express the dilemma that is central to the novel” (19). The task set before the reader, then, is to discern when a novel is, indeed, melodramatic in its conception, and when the novelist has simply gone too far.

Irwin reminds the reader, however, that the distinction between the two extremes is not so easily made. Mitigating factors almost always play a role, and the reader must be aware of specific patterns that hold almost consistently through novels that are melodramatic in their entire conception, and those that are merely episodically melodramatic. Irwin is emphatic in his contention that the case of women and children suggests one such pattern. They are, he notes, “more apt to melodramatic treatment”, adding that this is often directly related to their “helplessness. . . Even the poor man [can] strike a blow for himself; the helpless women [have] no such resource” (19). Irwin continues to expand on his argument, pointing to what he identifies as the same common and consistent complaining in George Eliot. He cites Wakem from book six of *Mill on the Floss* by way of example: “We don’t ask what a woman does-- we ask who she belongs to” (*Mill on the Floss* 426). Conrad’s tendency to focus melodramatic attention on his female characters manifests itself clearly in his writing, and in the three novels in question in this discussion in particular. These same women are also the means, however, by which melodrama can be, and, in the case of *Victory* and *Under Western Eyes*, is diffused. This is the idea the thesis will explore in later chapters. At

present, Irwin's concern, and therefore the concern of this chapter, turns to overcoming the problems of equilibrium that the abuse of melodrama creates.

Paramount to any further consideration of melodrama in the Victorian novel is the understanding that these previously mentioned problems of equilibrium can be overcome (20). Irwin stresses this point, and once again turns to the example of the nineteenth-century stage for his proof. The "staged melodrama of the period", he notes, allows for excesses of different kinds to achieve an "aesthetic equilibrium" through the "mix" (23). Irwin explains exactly what this mix entails: "[It is] not merely that extraordinary virtue [is] set against extraordinary malice: there might be proportionately exaggerative friendship, conviviality, domesticity, patriotism" (23). Irwin also notes that "sardonic humour" may act as a powerful "controlling influence", but adds that "realism" [makes] it hard for the novelist to work this way (23). Whatever the obstacle to overcome, the primary concern is always with maintaining the "mix".

Melodramatic episodes standing in isolation from other events in the text pose one of the greatest threats to any novel's overall balance or "mix". Irwin turns once again to Eliot as a frame of reference, this time citing an example from the second book of *Middlemarch*. The scene in question is one in which Lydgate falls in love with a Parisian actress, and subsequently witnesses her murder of her husband on stage (Eliot 150-51). The "mix" in this episode, Irwin maintains, "is wrong" (24). In a more specific criticism of the scene, he suggests that it is a "miscalculation" on Eliot's part, adding that "in the more various and energetic context of the last two books of the novel the episode would seem less crude" and garish (24). In "serious Victorian fiction",

melodrama normally functions as metaphor: “The author finds a vivid equivalent for reality too elaborate or too extended to be briefly depicted” (26). Like the previously mentioned principles of melodrama, however, the principle of metaphor can, and does, go awry when proper care is not exercised in its use.

Irwin points to what he feels is an “unusual kind of metaphorical failure” in Eliot’s *Mill On the Floss*. By literally drowning her heroine at the end of the novel, Eliot, he maintains, “turns figure into fact” (26). Irwin indicates Eliot’s numerous and detailed allusions to the idea that Maggie is figuratively drowning, by describing everything out of which Maggie must work to pull herself. When the girl does actually meet with a violent watery death, however, Irwin insists that the “metaphor doubles back on itself and becomes meaningless” (26). Whether the reader agrees or not with Irwin’s interpretation of the final episode in Maggie Tulliver’s life, the issue in contention seems to be one of correspondence. Irwin argues along this line himself, plainly stating that the “problem with melodramatic metaphor tends to be one of ‘correspondence’” (27). The sequence of unfolding events in any novel is one that, according to Irwin, should be felt by the reader instinctively or by reflection, to be “faithfully equivalent to the slower, looser reality that is summarized” (27). Irwin’s contention that the reader should feel the equivalence in the sequence of a novel’s events holds true not only for Victorian fiction, but for literary work in all eras.

Equivalence and correspondence become primary concerns as the melodramatic content of Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, *Under Western Eyes*, and *Victory* is examined in more detail. The difficulty in maintaining an integral sense of balance between the novel's "melodramatic" episodes and the greater "reality" of the remaining text, translates into problems of correspondence and equivalence. This problem is perhaps most pronounced in *The Secret Agent*, especially in an episode in which Winnie plunges to certain death beneath the waters of the Channel. The episode fails for several reasons, all of which lead back, in some way, to the idea of an essential "mix" which must be balanced whenever possible. With *The Secret Agent*, the "mix" poses an especially difficult case for both the author and the reader, because it incorporates elements of characterization that are as and, in many ways, more crucial to the sense of melodrama in a scene than the scene's physical action itself.

The issues of balance, correspondence and equivalence emerge once again in *Under Western Eyes*, but this time are met with considerably more success by the author. The episode in which Razumov makes his horrible confession to Natalia is an incredibly intense, emotional moment. The tone, the setting, even the language of the scene are set to create a melodramatic episode in grand proportions. Consider the following passages: in this first passage, Razumov struggles to confess his part in Victor's death, and Natalia grows increasingly anxious to have the whole story:

'Do you know why I came to you? It is simply because there is no one anywhere in the whole great world I could go to. Do you understand what I say? No one to go to. Do you conceive the desolation of the thought--no one--to--go--to?'

Utterly misled by her own enthusiastic interpretation of the two lines in the letter as visionary, under the spell of her own dread of lonely days, in their overshadowed world of angry strife, she was unable to see the truth struggling on his lips. What she was conscious of was the obscure form of his suffering. She was on the point of extending her hand to him impulsively before he spoke again.

‘An hour after I saw you first I knew how it would be. The terrors of remorse, revenge, confession, anger, hate, fear, are like nothing to the atrocious temptation which you put in my way the day you appeared before me with your voice, with your face in the garden of that accursed villa.’

She looked utterly bewildered for a moment; then, with a sort of despairing insight went straight to the point.

‘The story, Kirylo Sidorovitch, the story!’

‘There is no more to tell!’ He made a movement forward, and she actually put her hand on his shoulder to push him away; but her strength failed her, and he kept his ground, though trembling in every limb. ‘It ends here on this very spot.’ He pressed a denunciatory finger to his breast with force, and stood perfectly still. (*UWE* 327-28)

Several paragraphs later, Natalia begins to feel the full effect of Razumov’s confession, and finds herself at a loss for both words and thought:

Her hands were lying lifelessly, palm upwards, on her lap. She raised her grey eyes slowly. Shadows seemed to come and go in them as if the steady flame of her soul had been made to vacillate at last in the cross-currents of poisoned air from the corrupted dark immensity claiming her for its own, where virtues themselves fester into crimes in cynicism of oppression and revolt

‘It is impossible to be more unhappy...’ The languid whisper of her voice struck me with dismay. ‘It is impossible...I feel my heart becoming like ice’. (329)

This episode succeeds, and indeed moves the reader to feel for both the betrayer (Razumov) and the betrayed (Natalia) for precisely the same reasons that the episode in

*The Secret Agent* fails. The “mix” is absolutely balanced. The height of emotion created in the scene corresponds to the mounting sense of tension built from the beginning of the narrative. The strength and integrity of Natalia’s character add to the credibility of the entire episode. The influence of Natalia’s presence on the unfolding action in *Under Western Eyes* is matched by the same presence that Lena demonstrates in *Victory*. The scenes in which Lena first struggles with Ricardo, and finally when she dies as the result of a gunshot wound, convey a sense of emotion that not only matches the narrative integrity of the confession scene from *Under Western Eyes*, but, as will be shown later, actually exceeds it in both equivalence and intensity.

Irwin’s discussion of equivalence and balance in the melodramatic episodes of Victorian fiction offers an important insight into the “extravagance” of writing for which Conrad is so often criticized. Irwin notes that episodes in Victorian fiction that are attacked as extravagant are really “defective because of failure of equivalence” (27). The same might be said when the episodic melodramatic moments in Conrad’s writing fail. The reader’s ability to both perceive and appreciate Conrad’s use of an extremely intense and emotional moment often determines whether the episode is deemed a failure or a success. Readers, Irwin notes, “may understand or be induced to understand the implications of melodrama, and still say the chapter does not work for them” (30). The key to understanding such a contention on the reader’s part, he suggests, lies in the modern theatre, where elements of Victorian melodrama may still be seen occasionally. It is, he adds, easy to make enjoyable, but hard to make believable or serious. The establishment of a clear literary framework outlining the particular details and

requirements of melodrama in nineteenth-century literature and theatre provides a gauge against which the use of similar melodrama in Conrad can be measured. Furthermore, a closer examination of the emphasis that Conrad places on characterization reveals how the problems of correspondence, equivalence, and seriousness might be diffused by even one properly constructed character. The success or failure of Conrad's novels does not lie in the actual physical events of the stories themselves, but rather in the success or failure his characters display in providing a credible vision of the human experience lying at the heart of each novel Conrad writes.

CHAPTER 2:  
A Purpose in Hope:  
Female Characters in *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*

In his study of the life and works of Conrad, Stewart reports Jessie Conrad's recounting of the time she happened upon her husband weeping in their oldest son's bedroom, convinced of the son's sudden death, for no other reason than that his deeper instincts told him it was so. Stewart cites Jessie Conrad: " 'At such moments he was to me a son as well as a husband'" (Stewart 18). Stewart goes on to say that Jessie Conrad's attitude may have "irritated Conrad's friends", yet hastens to add, "but there can be no doubt whatever that she was a strong and courageous woman" (18). The same can be said for the most prominent of Conrad's female characters in *The Secret Agent*, *Under Western Eyes*, and *Victory*. They are all, in their own right, strong and courageous women. In all three novels, the female characters occupy the central focus of the unfolding narrative, and give the works a sense of humanity and spirit the novels might not have otherwise.

The contention that much of Conrad's most emotionally charged writing tends to offer little more than melodrama and overblown sentiment fails to account for the impact that characterization has on the narrative. Conrad's sympathetic and realistically constructed women exert a considerable influence on their stories. Each female character offers the necessary realistic balance to the melodramatic action unfolding

around her, in many cases providing the focal point for the “aesthetic equilibrium” needed to maintain the proper “mix” for her story.

While many critics maintain that Conrad’s writing becomes less potent as he draws closer to the end of his literary career, the same cannot be said of his characters. Conrad’s grasp on the female character in particular seems to grow with each novel he writes, thus by the time the reader reaches *Victory*, he or she is faced with a complete portrait of a sympathetic and powerful female heroine. The portrait begins with *The Secret Agent*, and a character like Winnie Verloc. Winnie offers the first real glimpse of Conrad’s attempt to place a female character at the centre of one of his novels. Her success as a centre is limited, however, and the attempt is picked up and carried out later in *Under Western Eyes*, through more convincing characters like Tekla, Natalia Haldin and Sophia Antonovna. It is essential to begin examining the influence that Conrad’s female characters have over the novels with a discussion of *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*. Once an initial framework for studying the novels’ female characters is established, that same framework can then be applied to *Victory*. It is Lena herself who will ultimately set the standard against which the reader may measure all the female characters; and it is through her example that Conrad portrays the strongest vision of human spirit.

A wide range of critical opinion centres around both *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*. The similarities in theme and character between the novels lend themselves to a comparison of the works, and critics go back and forth in order to determine which is really the better of the two novels. While it is not the intent of this

discussion to comment exhaustively on any one of the existing debates surrounding the novels, it is useful to look at several of these arguments to set a framework for both the current discussion of *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*, and later a discussion of *Victory*.

Although many critics disagree on the overall literary merit of the first two novels, most argue that both works are better than *Victory*, regardless of where they stand in relation to each other. Albert Guerard's critical study of *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* begins with the author's firmly stated belief in the superior quality of both novels. In the opening paragraph of a chapter he calls "Two Versions of Anarchy", Guerard says "*The Secret Agent* (1907) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911) stand appealingly between the visionary, experimental early masterpieces and the sentimentalities of *Chance* and *Victory*" (Guerard 218). Both books, Guerard maintains, are "intelligent, carefully planned novels showing a major change from the impressionist to the realist method" (218). In commenting on particular aspects of style in the novels, he further notes that both *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* "show a new mastery of suspenseful plotting, [and] a new power to dramatize scene and crisis directly" (218). Guerard's perspective on the novels to this point is clearly structural. His emphasis on language and theme reflects a common focus of criticism of all three novels. Guerard's reference to the "sentimentalities" of *Chance* and *Victory*, however, opens yet another line of critical thought, this one pertaining more specifically to Conrad's later novels. The issue of melodrama figures significantly in the analysis of many scholars as a criticism first leveled at *Chance*, and expanded on in later detailed

studies of *Victory*. Guerard's emphasis on the element of melodrama in Conrad's writing, however, would benefit from a closer examination of the emphasis Conrad himself places on the different characters within his stories, and on several of his female characters in particular.

Winnie Verloc is perhaps the only female character amongst the women in these three novels who receives as much, and in some cases more, critical attention than the novels' male characters. Her importance to *The Secret Agent* is such that she becomes the moral and structural centre of the story. Stewart stresses the importance of Winnie to the story, noting that "although the book had been *Verloc* while [Conrad] wrote it, and was *The Secret Agent* when he published it, he maintained that it was essentially the story of Winnie Verloc" (171).

F.R. Leavis confirms this, and comments on the overall construction of the novel with respect to both *Nostromo* and *Victory*, stating that *The Secret Agent* "is much more indubitably a classic and a masterpiece" (Leavis 240). Leavis contends that the work is "truly classical in its maturity of attitude and of the consummateness of the art in which this finds expression" (240). He focuses on the subtlety of the novel's irony, attributing the effect to what he identifies as the "interplay of contrasting moral perspectives" (240). The "matter", Leavis notes, "the 'story' is that of a thriller--terrorist conclaves, embassy machinations, bomb-outrage, detection, murder, suicide; and to make, in treating such matter with all the refinements of his craft, a sophisticated moral interest the controlling principle is, we recognize, characteristic Conrad" (240). This controlling "moral interest" is Winnie, of course:

What Mrs. Verloc is comes out only bit by bit--the perfection of the structure of the book shows itself notably in the way in which we are put in possession of the necessary knowledge about her at the right time. We see her serving in the shop with intimidating aplomb, taking the frequentations of the revolutionists as a matter of course, and, placid good wife to a good husband, being tactfully solicitous about his health and comfort. His business, she knows, entails these and other associates, late absences from home, and occasional trips to the Continent; further, she doesn't inquire. (243)

By focusing on Winnie's seemingly unquestionable devotion to her husband, Leavis brings out yet another essential aspect of her character, namely her capacity to take in and endure in silence everything that happens around her.

It never occurs to Winnie that she should question her husband on the legitimacy of his business, nor does she contest her lack of inclusion in Verloc's activities. She is in many ways shut out of the daily workings in Verloc's life, despite being in a position where she should be his most intimate partner. She raises no complaints, however, because she is not in the marriage for reasons of personal gain and companionship, but rather so that she will have a means of looking after her disabled brother, Stevie. Winnie and her mother are alike in their concern for Stevie. Leavis notes that Mrs. Verloc and her mother "both as a matter of fact sacrifice themselves for Stevie" (244). The self-sacrificing nature of Winnie and her mother becomes the key to each woman's capacity, indeed fate, to suffer. It is each woman's ability ultimately to endure, however, which determines whether she will sink into melodrama, or develop as a triumphant heroine.

Sacrifice, and its close association with the women characters in *The Secret Agent*, lies at the centre in much of Stewart's discussion of the novel. He reiterates

Leavis' praise of the novel as a finely constructed thriller, and comments on the selflessness of the work's 'beautiful' and 'innocent' characters: "Winnie Verloc, Winnie's mother, and Winnie's brother are several types of that humbleness, innocence, and helplessness which must perpetually suffer in a world in which a mere mean and obtuse egoism. . . . operate[s] in disregard of those moral imperatives which alone give dignity to human life" (Stewart 175). Stewart's remarks on Conrad's portrayal of humbleness, innocence and dignity emphasize the suffering of Conrad's female characters, and reinforce the idea that it is, indeed, through these female characters that the magnitude of Conrad's tale is finally revealed.

Guerard's focus on Winnie's character touches on the same sympathy, compassion and humility already mentioned by Leavis and Stewart, but generally offers a less enthusiastic appraisal of her overall nature. Guerard begins his argument by commenting on the narrative and thematic structures of *The Secret Agent*, paying close attention to Winnie's place in the novel's structure. According to Guerard, Conrad's interest in both politics and darker comedy acts as a sign of "normalization" in the novel. Winnie, he maintains, acts as yet another sign of "normalization". Guerard encourages the reader to consider both the "close attention and sympathy given Winnie Verloc, and the very fact that she has been so successfully created" (220). Guerard refers the reader back to Conrad himself in commenting on Winnie's importance to the novel: "Conrad", he notes, "claimed she was the book's imaginative centre" (220). Guerard's discussion of Winnie does not, however, end here; he goes on to point out what he sees as some serious flaws in her character.

While it is certainly fair to say that Winnie emerges as the most central character in the novel, her role as the “imaginative centre” is somewhat problematic. Guerard identifies the problems with the portrayal of Winnie’s character, noting that while she emerges as a strong and significant presence,

the portrait is not entirely free of the old misogyny; the attention at last becomes (like that of Comrade Ossipon himself) a terrified “scandalized” attention. *Under Western Eyes* rather shows the real advance towards an understanding at once mature and compassionate of women; there is not a trace of gratuitous or obsessive denigration in the lifelike portraits of Natalia Haldin, Mrs. Haldin, Tekla, or even Sophia Antonovna. ( 220)

Guerard’s criticism of the “scandalized attention” Conrad focuses on Winnie comes down to a matter of whether or not critics and readers believe her character is credible. While Winnie, he argues, is ingeniously conceived and successfully portrayed in the initial stages of the novel, he quite rightly notes that something about her character does not hold true through the end of the narrative. Whether this is an example of Conrad’s “misogyny”, however, is questionable.

Conrad’s portrayal of Winnie, as a sympathetic character, suggests anything but a misogynistic attitude towards her. Guerard comes closer to defining the problematic nature of Winnie when he speaks about the comedic tone of the narrative structure, and the difficulty of sustaining a sympathetic identification with her: “The macabre comedy is so successful, and Ossipon’s growing horror and disgust so vivid, that it effectively destroys much of our sympathy for Winnie” (230). Once again, Guerard quickly identifies the core concern with character; in this case, the concern being the reader’s difficulty in sustaining some sort of sympathetic impulse towards Winnie. His

explanation of why this is so, however, only partially serves as an authoritative comment on the overall situation. Guerard's comparison of the similarities in theme between *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* points out the features of thematic interest that make both novels great works, and offers a more comprehensive explanation of why Winnie's character is not entirely successful at the novel's conclusion.

As novels in the mystery/ thriller genre, Guerard notes that their political interests, particularly the "psycho-political" interests of *The Secret Agent*, display an unequaled understanding of the underpinning social movement for the time in which they are written: "They [the novels] recognized that the melodramatic fringe of society (the world of connivance between the police and petty criminal, of agent-provocateur and police informer, of thought-crime and torture and confession, of antichrist and revolutionary exile) could also be, symbolically, and morally, at the very heart of society and corrupting it" (220). As the events of the story unfold, the melodramatic undertones become more obvious. The violence, the heightened sense of suspense, and the intense emotional involvement on the part of the reader all contribute to the mounting sense of melodrama in the narrative. The realistic and sympathetic portrayal of Winnie throughout the first two thirds of the novel, however, is strong enough to hold the melodrama in place. The events that unfold around Winnie are melodramatic, but she initially is not. If the reader's sympathy for Winnie is destroyed by the end of the novel, this does not happen because of the narrative's macabre comedy, or because any other character has such an extreme response to her, but rather because Winnie effectively destroys that sympathy herself. When she gives up the composure she has

maintained throughout the first part of the novel, Winnie slips into the melodramatic background of the work's final chapters.

Two episodes comprise what is arguably the turning point in Winnie's character. The first of these includes her discovery of Stevie's death, and the description of her state of mind up until the point when she actually kills Verloc. The second episode picks up immediately following Verloc's murder, and follows the action through to Winnie's suicide. Although the novel continues for several pages after this, the story essentially ends with the death of its main character. Time becomes a key factor at this point. In a matter of hours, Winnie learns the truth about her brother's death, and kills her husband before plunging to her own death off the cross-Channel boat. As the compacted chronological frame of the narrative adds to the heightened suspense and emotional impact of the story, the precarious balance on which Winnie rests begins to sway, and her rapid transformation from a well-constructed, composed and sympathetic character into a piece of melodramatic narrative brings the novel to an exciting, albeit somewhat halting, conclusion.

The heart of Winnie's character, indeed the heart of the novel itself, lies in the first of the two previously mentioned episodes. Winnie has only recently learned of Stevie's violent death, and having figured her husband's part in this death, must now sit and listen to his absurd and selfish contention that it was better for Stevie to die than for anything to happen to him: “ ‘Do be reasonable, Winnie. What would it have been if you had lost me’” (*TSA* 214). Verloc's insistence that he never meant any harm to fall on the boy does nothing to ease Winnie's incredulity at the cruel and callow nature of the

whole situation. As the recent events run through her mind, Winnie's private musings reveal a lifetime of this same pain, anguish and personal sacrifice for the safety and comfort of another:

With the rage and dismay of a betrayed woman, she reviewed the tenor of her life in visions concerned mostly with Stevie's difficult existence from its earliest days. It was a life of single purpose and of a noble unity of inspiration, like those rare lives that have left their marks on the thoughts and feelings of mankind. But the visions of Mrs. Verloc lacked nobility and magnificence. She saw herself putting the boy to bed by the light of a single candle on the deserted top floor of a 'business house', dark under the roof and scintillating exceedingly with lights and cut glass at the level of the street like a fairy palace. The meretricious splendor was the only one to be met in Mrs. Verloc's visions. She remembered brushing the boy's hair and tying his pinafores--herself in a pinafore still; the consolations administered to a small and badly scared creature by another creature nearly as small but not quite so badly scared; she had the vision of the blows intercepted (often with her own head), of a door held desperately shut against a man's rage (not for very long); of a poker flung once (not very far), which stilled that particular storm into the dumb and awful silence which follows a thunderclap. And all these scenes of violence came and went accompanied by the unrefined noise of deep vociferations proceeding from a man wounded in his paternal pride, declaring himself obviously accursed since one of his kids was a 'slobbering idjut and the other a wicked she-devil'. It was of her that this had been said many years ago. (219-220)

Winnie's simple, yet loyal and loving, care for her brother emphasizes the sense of ultimate betrayal she experiences at the hands of both her selfish, unthinking husband, and her abusive, uncaring father. The entire paragraph is a portrait of a lifetime of suffering that touches the soul, and cannot help but move the reader to sympathize with a woman who has suffered so long, and endured so much because of her love for another human being.

Betrayal, love, self-sacrifice, and ultimately endurance lie at the heart of every great female character Conrad introduces. The capacity and the need for human beings to reach out and be a part of each other in a way that transcends the notion of individual selfishness comprise the better part of the human condition, and inform not only *The Secret Agent* but also every other story Conrad undertakes to tell. Winnie is consigned to a life of suffering and self-sacrifice from the very first chapters of the novel. Her acceptance and actual embracing of everything this role has to offer make her final actions both understandable and confounding at the same time.

The murder of Verloc is a horrible moment of tension and excitement. In an attempt to placate Winnie, Verloc calls for her to join him on the sofa in “a peculiar tone, which might have been the tone of brutality, but was intimately known to Mrs. Verloc as the note of wooing” (234). Winnie goes to her husband as she has always done in the past; her attention to his summons, however, is the last she will ever pay him:

She started forward at once, as if she was still a loyal woman bound to that man by an unbroken contract, her right hand skimmed slightly the end of the table, and when she passed on towards the sofa the carving knife had vanished without the slightest sound from the side of the dish. Mr. Verloc heard the creaky plank in the floor, and was content. He waited. Mrs. Verloc was coming. (234)

Conrad shifts the narrative focus at this point, moving into the mind and behind the eyes of Verloc himself. Each movement is mapped out in minute detail, and as the shadow of Winnie bearing the carving knife moves across the ceiling, the narrative tension becomes almost unbearable:

He [Verloc] saw partly on the ceiling a clenched hand holding a carving knife. It flickered up and down. Its movements were leisurely. They

were leisurely enough for Mr. Verloc to recognize the limb and the weapon. They were leisurely enough for him to take in the full meaning of the portent, and to taste the flavour of death rising in his gorge. His wife had gone raving mad--murdering mad. They were leisurely enough for the first paralyzing effect of this discovery to pass away before a resolute determination to come out victorious from the ghastly struggle with that armed lunatic. They were leisurely enough for Mr. Verloc to elaborate a plan of defense, involving a dash behind the table, and the felling of the woman to the ground with a heavy wooden chair. But they were not leisurely enough to allow Mr. Verloc the time to move either hand or foot. The knife was already planted in his breast. (234)

It is not until the episode concludes that the reader realizes the entire murder has taken only a matter of seconds. The mounting tension of the event itself is emphasized by Conrad's close attention to the specific details of the scene. The horrifying image of Winnie's shadow creeping across the ceiling towards Verloc takes on an even greater urgency, because Conrad relates the entire incident as if it were happening in slow motion. The reader has ample opportunity to feel the same terror at Winnie's encroaching presence as Verloc does himself. The heightened emotion and sheer violence of the entire episode contribute to a sense of mounting melodrama in the final chapters of the novel. The sense of melodrama does not fully emerge, however, until Winnie runs into the street and throws herself on the mercy of Ossipon, beginning a rapid descent into a melodramatic mode of her own.

Terrified, Winnie resolves first to drown herself in the Thames, and then considers the possibility of escaping abroad. It is at this precise moment that Mr. Ossipon appears, making the feasibility of this second plan more likely. Believing at first that it is actually Verloc who has died in the explosion that killed Stevie, Ossipon comes calling on Winnie in the hope of making a favourable impression on the grieving

widow. His shock at finding Verloc murdered in his home, and in such a grisly state, disturbs him greatly; he agrees nonetheless to help Winnie escape from the city.

Winnie's relief at narrowly avoiding the unfathomable horror of a fourteen-foot drop from the gallows (the punishment for a murder such as the one she commits) manifests itself in her overly emotional display of gratitude to Ossipon as the two fugitives sit on the carriage of a train departing from London. Ossipon watches the clock, anxiously counting each of the eight minutes before the train leaves. Winnie has considerably less composure by now: "Eight minutes more. For the first three of these Mrs. Verloc wept violently and helplessly without pause or interruption. Then she recovered somewhat, and sobbed gently in an abundant fall of tears. She tried to talk to her saviour, to the man who was the messenger of life" (260). Winnie's exaggerated and tremendously misguided opinion of the wonderful way in which Ossipon acts as her "saviour" becomes even more obvious as she offers her outstretched arms to him and openly weeps: "'How could I be so afraid of death! Tom, I tried. But I am afraid. I tried to do away with myself. And I couldn't. Am I hard? I suppose the cup of horrors was not full enough for such as me. Then when you came. . . . I will live all my days for you Tom!'" (260). These words are the last we hear Winnie utter. Ossipon takes her money, and jumps from the train shortly after it begins moving. The next news about Winnie is merely a newspaper headline reporting her death: "Suicide of Lady Passenger from a cross-Channel Boat" (266). The final paragraph of the news report describing the incident concludes only that "an impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang for ever over this act of madness or despair" (266). While the act in and of itself can hardly be

called melodramatic, the problem with the cross-Channel boat episode lies entirely within Winnie's characterization. The sentiment and emotional intensity surrounding her character during this particular scene raise doubts as to whether her behaviour truly corresponds with the composure and strength she demonstrates through the first two-thirds of the novel. The sense of melodrama surrounding the episode goes back to Irwin's concern with equivalence, and the idea that the emotional intensity of a single moment in a novel must not exceed or underestimate the emotion of the entire literary work. In this case, it is not the equivalence of a particular moment's emotional intensity that is in question, but rather the equivalence of the emotional intensity displayed through a particular character.

Winnie's immediate response to the murder she commits, and really even to her actual attack against Verloc itself, is not entirely surprising, especially after considering the events that lead up to their occurrence. When measured against both the mercy that Natalia, Sophia and Tekla extend to Razumov, and the purposeful action that Lena undertakes on behalf of Heyst, however, Winnie's final expression of outrage against her husband fails to convey a sense of either satisfaction or closure. Winnie cannot, understandably, bring herself to feel any sense of kinship with Verloc, and she takes action against him well beyond the point of being able to save Stevie from his horrible fate. There is little meaning in the murder, and even less in the final act of violence and terror she commits against herself. Although she starts as a character with admirable strength, integrity, and compassion, Winnie's final act of self-destruction hangs like an

umbrella of melodrama over the final events of the rapidly unfolding story, and one cannot help but feel that Conrad has lost control of Winnie's character.

Having said this, the aforementioned problems of characterization cannot completely overshadow the excellent qualities of what is arguably one of Conrad's finest novels. *The Secret Agent* is an exciting, tightly constructed narrative, and Winnie offers a vivid depiction of the isolation in human suffering and the power in human love. Conrad continues, and indeed enhances, his portrayal of isolation, suffering, love, and endurance in *Under Western Eyes*. While the novel deals with a completely different society (Russian society) than the one found in *The Secret Agent*, and favours action within a community over action within a domestic setting, the novels are not dissimilar in their overall themes.

The similarities between the two novels are perhaps more striking than their differences. Leavis notes this, and is careful to emphasize the excellent qualities of both *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*, although he too maintains that *Under Western Eyes* is not a masterpiece in the same sense as *The Secret Agent*. It remains, however, a "most distinguished work, and must be counted among those upon which Conrad's status as one of the great English masters securely rests" (Leavis 252). Leavis sees the similarities between the novels primarily in terms of theme. In comparing *Under Western Eyes* to *The Secret Agent*, Leavis contends that

it is related to *The Secret Agent* not only by the revolutionists, but by the theme of isolation (for this figures a great deal in the book--Winnie Verloc jumps to her death from the night Channel-steamer at least as much to escape the void in which Stevie's death followed by Ossipon's desertion has left her as from fear of the gallows). *Under Western Eyes* has for theme moral isolation as represented by the case of the Russian student Razumov. (252)

What Leavis neglects to mention in his discussion of theme in both *Under Western Eyes* and *The Secret Agent* is the similarity in the strong representation of suffering, love and endurance as they are seen through the female characters. These themes are perhaps the most common to human experience, and as such are integral to the body of Conrad's work and not just to any one novel alone.

As noted above, Guerard's recognition of Natalia Haldin, Mrs. Haldin, Sophia Antonovna and Tekla as superior portraits of understanding and mature compassion stresses the aspect of character that is for the most part absent from the criticisms of both Stewart and Leavis. In focusing on these female characters, Guerard is able to offer a different opinion of the place *Under Western Eyes* holds in the Conrad canon, while successfully identifying and defining the heart of the novel: "[*Under Western Eyes*] is, except for the brief *Shadow Line*, the last book in which Conrad was importantly involved and also the last in which he could, importantly not sentimentally, involve his readers. . . . It is Conrad's final and in some ways most moving treatment of his central story of betrayal and self-punishment" (Guerard 221, 231). The overall tone of the novel, Guerard adds, "is compassionate, and especially toward the sufferings reported by Tekla and Sophia Antonovna" (223). He credits *Under Western Eyes* with a narration "so timed and phrased as to help create sympathy for the despised and the damned"

(252-53). Guerard's recognition of the overall importance of characterization to the theme and formal structure of *Under Western Eyes* emphasizes the way in which Conrad uses characterization to reinforce his exploration of the human condition.

When Stewart's interest shifts from a discussion of the structural aspects of *Under Western Eyes* to a closer examination of the story's men and women themselves, he too finds in the novel traces of genuine human spirit and emotion that are not present to the same extent in *The Secret Agent*. In keeping with his earlier criticism of the novel's sliding hold on its characters, however, Stewart is reluctant to identify any one persona as possessing actual "character" or personal integrity: "Character", he maintains, "is perhaps inadequate, since the term cannot quite be stretched to cover expiatory action taken in the light of an achieved self-knowledge . . . in *The Secret Agent* there is no question of anybody coming near it. *Under Western Eyes* exhibits the spectacle of an authentic purification through suffering, and is a book in the great tragic tradition" (Stewart 208). Stewart actually directs this specific comment to Razumov. It can, however, be just as easily applied to the female characters in the novel. Tekla, Sophia and Natalia, in particular, all come to varying degrees of self-knowledge. In doing so, they find the means ultimately to endure through the suffering they face, and thus avoid becoming part of the melodrama in the fictive world surrounding them. It is the credibility these women possess with the reader as strong, yet sympathetic and compassionate, characters that allows them to succeed where Winnie fails, and gives *Under Western Eyes* the realistic edge missing from the exciting, but overwhelming, conclusion of *The Secret Agent*.

Like Winnie, the women in *Under Western Eyes* occupy a good deal of Conrad's attention in the story. Although the novel begins with a government assassination that quickly brings the male protagonist, Razumov, to the centre of the plot, the action that unfolds around Razumov is heavily influenced by, and often interpreted through, the eyes of one or more of the female characters. The various male characters in the novel offer their own perspective on the usefulness of women in general, and comment on the specific attributes of the novel's female characters in particular. Peter Ivanovitch, the 'great' feminist revolutionary, declares ““no, we have no classes. But we have the Russian woman. The admirable Russian woman! I receive most remarkable letters signed by women. So elevated in tone, so courageous, breathing such a noble ardour of service. The greatest part of our hopes rests on women”” (*UWE* 146). Bold and ridiculous words when uttered from his mouth; Ivanovitch never produces any of these letters. Furthermore, his deplorable treatment of the woman employed to keep house for him negates any lofty claims to feminism he has. The admirable qualities of Tekla, Sophia and Natalia are clear. The fact that all the hope and assurance for the future rests in these women is obvious. Peter Ivanovitch, however, is hardly the character most fit to reveal the strength and worth of the “admirable Russian woman”.

The Professor of Languages, who acts not only as the novel's main narrative voice but also fills the role of close confidant to Natalia, offers an equally flattering, and more credible, opinion of the overall character of women. When Razumov suggests that Natalia, the “admirable Russian girl”, may be a fool for all he is concerned, the language professor admonishes him, saying:

when you have lived a little longer, Mr. Razumov, you will discover that no woman is an absolute fool. . . . though even the credulous, silly as they may be, unhappy as they are sure to be, are never absolute fools. It is my belief that no woman is ever completely deceived. Those that are lost leap into the abyss with their eyes open, if all the truth were known. (197)

Once again, the image of suffering and sacrifice is one that stands out most prominently in the professor's praise of women. His contention that no woman ever steps unknowingly into a situation, the end result of which can only be personal heartache and loss, credits women with an outstanding capacity for both foresight and comprehension. Conrad emphasizes suffering not only as an inevitable part of human life but as a lot most appropriately taken up by the women, because of their unfailing capacity to both understand and endure.

Tekla is perhaps the best example of the inevitable and unfailing capacity of woman to suffer and endure. Her position as Ivanovitch's housekeeper exposes her to a multitude of abuses at the hands of the great "feminist"; it also allows her the opportunity to speak extensively with Razumov, and it is during her conversation with him that she reveals exactly how well she understands the situation in which she finds herself. Tekla is not fooled by the waxy speech and overblown rhetoric of Ivanovitch for even a moment. She looks Razumov in the face and vehemently says "Peter Ivanovitch is an awful despot" (233). After warning Razumov about the dangers of bringing Natalia to Ivanovitch and his band of revolutionaries, Tekla offers her own moving account of the state in which the majority of Russian citizens live: "You may call me Tekla, then. My poor Andrei called me so. I was devoted to him. He lived in wretchedness and suffering, and died in misery. That is the lot of all us Russians,

nameless Russians. There is nothing else for us, and no hope anywhere, unless. . . Unless all these people with names are done away with” (237). Tekla offers her assistance to Razumov at this point, and comments more specifically on her usefulness to him as a woman: “I would know how to keep dumb. We women are not so easily daunted by pain. I heard Peter Ivanovitch say it is our blunt nerves or something. We can stand it better. And it’s true” (237). Tekla is, of course, speaking of physical pain and torture here, but each woman’s capacity to silently endure through mental anguish is no less impressive.

The professor’s kindness towards Natalia, and his efforts to help her over the grief of her brother’s death, show extreme kindness and sensitivity on his part. Natalia is ultimately able to overcome the tragedy, however, because she looks outside her suffering and sees a need greater than that felt by either her or her immediate family. She recognizes that her individual pain is only part of the wider suffering she shares with the whole of Russian society. Tekla adopts a similar attitude, placing her own misfortunes aside in order to see the greater picture of pain before her, and seeks to find a way in which she can help alleviate that pain. Sophia Antonovna provides perhaps the most comprehensive picture of mature wisdom and compassion in action. Her added years of experience and involvement allow her a rich store of hindsight from which the younger women cannot yet draw.

During one of several occasions on which Sophia and Razumov speak, Razumov acknowledges her as the “old revolutionary hand, the respected, trusted, and influential Sophia Antonovna” (256). He takes the opportunity to reflect on every detail of Sophia’s

appearance, motions and words: “She was more representative than the great Peter Ivanovitch. Stripped of rhetoric, mysticism, and theories, she was the true spirit of destructive revolution. And she was the personal adversary he had to meet” (257). Ironically, in many ways, Razumov could not be more wrong about Sophia’s character. Her magnanimous defense of Razumov at the end of the novel suggests she has never truly been his adversary; her status as a character stripped of any pretensions to rhetorical greatness and theoretical brilliance gives her a dignified air of authority that Ivanovitch never conveys.

Ivanovitch’s efforts to entice Natalia into his camp of followers provide him with the opportunity to promote both the revolution and his feminist ideas. In an emotionally charged discussion with the young woman, Ivanovitch appeals to Natalia’s affection for her late brother, declaring, ““the sister of Victor Haldin cannot be without importance. . . . It’s simply impossible. And no woman can remain sitting on the steps. Flowers, tears, applause--that has had its time; it’s a medieval conception. The arena, the arena itself is the place for women!”” (155). Ivanovitch’s assault on Natalia continues, as he appeals to her sense of community and responsibility to the Russian nation: ““How is it, Natalia Victorovna, that you have kept aloof so long. . . . You must come out of your reserve. We Russians have no right to be reserved with each other”” (152). Ivanovitch makes a fatal mistake, however, when he looks Natalia in the face and, practically shaking her, says, ““I want you to be a fanatic”” (153).

Although Natalia’s insight into what she sees as the future greatness of Russia has little to do with death and suffering, she suggests that the current political and social

unrest is a necessary step in the struggle for unity and harmony. Once again, her perspective becomes clear during a conversation with her friend and teacher, the Professor of Languages. As the two friends are discussing an earlier exchange between Natalia and Sophia, Natalia confesses that she told the older woman that she hoped to “see the time when all this would be forgotten, even if the name of [her] brother were to be forgotten too” (310). When she asks the professor if he can possibly understand what compelled her to say such a thing, he replies “you think of the era of concord and justice”. Natalia responds, saying “yes, There is too much hate and revenge at work. It must be done. It is a sacrifice--and so let it be all the greater. Destruction is the work of anger. Let the tyrants and the slayers be forgotten together, and only the reconstructors remembered” (310). While Natalia does not deny or absolutely condemn the role violence plays in bringing about social change, she hopes that ultimately the process of rebuilding the nation will be more significant than its destruction, and that it will be the healers, and not the assassins, who are venerated in the minds of people for years to come.

Earlier in the novel, Natalia comments on the type of violent revolution that Ivanovitch and many of his followers advocate, noting that there is very little that is either glamorous or noble about this kind of action. In yet another private conversation with the Professor of Languages, Natalia says:

I want to tell you this. . .A violent revolution falls into the hands of fanatics and of tyrannical hypocrites at first. Afterwards comes the turn of all the pretentious intellectual failures of the time...the unselfish and the intelligent may begin a movement--but it passes away from them.

They are not the leaders of a revolution. They are its victims: the victims of disgust, of disenchantment.(158)

In her brief, yet passionate, description of the manner in which violent revolution is brought about, Natalia displays her keen awareness of the suffering in not only her own life, but in the lives of every man, woman and child living in the Russian state. Like Tekla, she sees the compassion and the need behind the hatred. Their simple, unfailing faith and love for all that is good in human nature act as beacons of continuity in the centre of a rapidly unraveling world. While everything crumbles around them, they find the strength from within to endure.

With her sensitivity to, and recognition of, the gentler side of human nature, Natalia understands the ‘human spirit’ behind the violent revolutionary action. She succinctly isolates and expresses the emotional and physical need behind the force inciting people to act, and at the same time reveals what form, and in what time, the most beneficial action will take place: “I would take liberty from any hand as a hungry man would snatch a piece of bread. The true progress must begin after. And for that the right men shall be found. They are already among us” (158). Razumov, the spy, has contempt for the entire revolutionary movement. Not once, however, does he refer to a concrete reason, or even his own experience, to explain his feelings. Like Ivanovitch, he couches his sentiments in over-dramatic generalities and vague examples: “He saw his youth pass away before him in misery and half starvation-- his strength give way, his mind become an abject thing. He saw himself creeping, broken and shabby, about the streets--dying unattended in some filthy hole of a room, on the sordid bed of a

Government hospital” (69). It is Razumov in this case, and not Natalia, or Tekla, or any of the other women in the story, who end up being pulled into the melodrama unfolding around them. Razumov’s exaggerated anxiety and manic ramblings undoubtedly stem from the underground world of politically motivated criminal activity into which he finds himself unwillingly drawn. The Russian society in *Under Western Eyes* exists along the same conditions of revolutionary exile and connivance between police and criminal that rock the very foundation of society for the London revolutionaries and their families in *The Secret Agent*. How each character deals with the situation at hand, however, depends entirely on the attitude he or she adopts to the social surroundings in which he or she must live.

Sophia Antonovna offers an enlightening perspective on Razumov in particular, and proceeds to expand this perspective as a critique of male/ female differences in general. Sophia is an extraordinarily perceptive individual. In this respect, she is not unlike Natalia. She (Sophia) too has the opportunity to have a private conversation with Razumov, and is immediately alerted to a sense of hostility and alertness despite his supposed friendship with the late Victor Haldin. She confronts Razumov with this realization, and engages in a very blunt conversation. She rebukes him quietly, saying ““you like other men are fastidious, full of self-love and afraid of trifles...What you want is to be taken in hand by some woman”” (242). Sophia’s observation becomes prophecy as a deaf and broken Razumov is indeed “taken in hand” by Tekla at the end of the novel.

Sophia continues her critique of the sexes, commenting in particular on the masculine sense of passion:

That's where you men have an advantage. You are inspired sometimes both in thought and action. I have always admitted that when you *are* inspired, when you manage to throw off your masculine cowardice and prudishness you are not to be equalled by us. Only, how seldom . . . Whereas the silliest woman can always be made of use. And why? Because we have passion, unappeasable passion . . .

You men can love here and hate there and desire something or other--and you make a great to-do about it, and you call it passion! Yes! While it lasts. But we women are in love with love, and with hate, with these very things I tell you, and with desire itself. (248)

With these words, Sophia confirms in no uncertain terms the impression that has been steadily growing from the earliest parts of the novel, namely, that it is the women who comprehend the intricate workings of the situation, and they will be the ones left standing when all the men have fallen. The extraordinary compassion and understanding that Natalia, Tekla and Sophia show for both their fellow Russian citizens in general, and for Razumov in particular, hold consistently through the novel. The personal strength and integrity that each woman demonstrates stem from the knowledge that there is always something she can do to ease a part of the current pain and suffering, and that, in the end, there is always hope.

By returning to Russia and making her life a living monument to the question "what then", Natalia is the strongest visual presence of hope for the future: "She lived in a town 'in the centre' sharing her compassionate labours between the horrors of over crowded jails, and the heartrending misery of bereaved homes. She did not spare herself

in good service" (346). After everything she experiences, Natalia is still able to maintain her fledgling hope for the era of "concord and justice":

I must own to you that I shall never give up looking forward to the day when all discord shall be silenced. Try to imagine its dawn! The tempest of blows and of execrations is over; all is still; the new sun is rising, and the weary men united at last, taking count in their conscience of the ended contest, feel saddened by their victory, because so many ideas have perished for the triumph of one, so many beliefs have abandoned them without support. They feel alone on the earth and gather close together. Yes, there must be many bitter hours! But at last anguish of hearts shall be extinguished in love. (345)

Natalia never loses her sense of hope and faith in the future, because her vision of the world moves outside her immediate being in a way that Winnie's vision never truly moves. Both women suffer and sacrifice selflessly for others around them; Natalia, however, maintains her knowledge of self-worth and purpose.

Purpose and hope define what is essentially the difference between Winnie and the host of women in *Under Western Eyes*. Purpose and hope allow Tekla, Natalia, and Sophia to forgive, endure, and carry on with their work. Winnie finds both lacking in her life, and as such has no reason to live. In the end, it is this same purpose and hope that ultimately determine whether a character succeeds as a sympathetic portrayal of strength and integrity, or lapses into a piece of the melodramatic background supporting the narrative. Characters that have hope and purpose succeed; those that do not fail.

If one criticism could be made of the women in *Under Western Eyes*, it is that they actually achieve very little despite their determination to carry on. Tekla tends to the needs of a badly broken Razumov, but there is really little she can do for him. Natalia cares for the immediate needs of the poor and hopes ceaselessly for the future,

but, in the end, Conrad leaves her with her hope and little else. Sophia is left with a host of unanswered questions, not the least of which is what can be made of the treachery of Razumov. Some years later, the language professor raises this very issue with the older woman, who, in defense of Razumov, replies, ““there are evil moments in every life. A false suggestion enters one’s brain, and then fear is born—fear of oneself, fear for oneself. . . .but tell me, how many of them would deliver themselves up deliberately to perdition. . . . rather than go on living, secretly debased in their own eyes? How many?”” (347). Conrad leaves the matter here; his narrator asking only: ““who would care to question the grounds of forgiveness and compassion”” (348). The impression of something distinctly unfinished or unsatisfied settles over what is otherwise a fine novel; it is perhaps for *Victory*, then, to settle some of the unfinished matters, and complete Conrad’s portrait of the feminine heroine.

## CHAPTER 3:

### Portrait of a Heroine: Lena and *Victory*

In his author's notes to the beginning of *Chance* (1914), Conrad outlines the deceptively simple nature of the individual: "The history of men on this earth since the beginning of ages may be resumed in one phrase of infinite poignancy: They were born, they suffered, they died. . . Yet it is a great tale! But in the infinitely minute stories about men and women it is my lot on earth to narrate. I am not capable of such detachment" (*Chance* 10). Conrad's lack of detachment manifests itself in his novels in many different forms and through many different characters. This becomes particularly evident as the reader considers the chain of events that lead up to the tragic outcome of the men and women in *Victory*. In both *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*, Conrad begins to create strong, patient, sympathetic female characters, with whom the reader identifies. In *Victory*, however, Conrad completes the image of human suffering and endurance so often seen in many of his previous works. Through the story of Lena and Heyst, the reader receives Conrad's full account of human experience. His character, Lena, reveals the full extent of Conrad's attachment to, and participation in, that experience he so diligently portrays. Lena is born; she suffers; she dies, and she lives on, giving meaning to others through her suffering. She is, indeed, Conrad's greatest heroine.

Like Winnie, Natalia, and so many of the other female characters in Conrad's novels before her, Lena is quiet, often viewed as reserved. Her most daring and flamboyant moments come near the end of the novel when she first wrestles with Ricardo, and later, when she actually succeeds in making a laceration to his arm, turning his own knife against him. Her actions leading up to the altercation with Ricardo, however, are limited primarily to her intimate and detailed talks with Heyst. The initial escape to Samburan is the most physical action Lena undertakes in the first hundred or so pages of the novel. Like Winnie and Natalia, however, Lena's impact on her story is not based on her physical presence in the novel, but rather is measured by her subtle influence on the unfolding narrative.

The subtlety of Conrad's female characters, and of Lena in particular, poses a serious critical dilemma. The tendency to dismiss many of Conrad's heroines as characters who are both relegated strictly to the background of the story, and subjected to the worst kind of melodramatic treatment, extends to a more serious criticism of Conrad's work as being mysogynistic. The argument for melodrama in the novels under consideration is a weak one at best, having its greatest claim in the somewhat unbalanced characters of *The Secret Agent*, and virtually no claim in *Victory* at all. The suggestion that these works portray their heroines in a mysogynistic light, however, reveals the extent to which the critic/ reader misunderstands both the female character's role as long-sufferer, and the positive, affirming image Conrad puts forward by portraying his women in such a role.

The emotion and humanity the female characters bring to each of their respective novels must be measured in terms of their capacity to discreetly suffer and endure through the hardships they encounter. The stark “reality” of the emotional, and in Lena’s case, the physical pain endured diffuses any melodramatic action unfolding around the women. The preceding chapter discusses the varied success Conrad achieves in the construction and presentation of his other female characters. We have considered both where they fail and where they succeed. In this final chapter, we will examine how the best characteristics of the heroine, from both *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*, finally come together in a heroine who is arguably Conrad’s strongest and most sympathetic female protagonist, Lena.

Lena, despite her importance to the novel, is not the first character introduced to the reader. While it becomes increasingly clear that Lena, like Winnie in *The Secret Agent*, is the character around whom *Victory* actually revolves, the reader must wait for her “leading man” to bring her into the story. The first few pages of *Victory* provide the reader with a description of the male protagonist, or rather a description of what Axel Heyst is not. The narrator says “there was no reason to think that Heyst was in any way a fighting man” (*Victory* 9). Heyst’s self-imposed isolation and his reluctance to mix with his surrounding community suggest a reclusive inclination similar to the earlier aloofness and social malaise seen in characters such as Razumov, and to a certain extent Mr. Verloc. It is Heyst’s inability, however, or at the very least his perceived inability to raise any kind of emotional response to the circumstances he encounters, that sets him apart from the other two characters. Neither Razumov nor Verloc appears to have much

difficulty expressing their feelings of anger, displeasure, delight, fear, and longing. When faced with the distraught Morrison, however, Heyst does not fare as well. Feeling a compulsion to help ease the man from dire financial straits, Heyst expresses his willingness to give Morrison money. Morrison's subsequent moving display of gratitude leaves Heyst in an uncomfortable position, because he does not know how to respond to the former's overwhelming emotional state: "He [Heyst] was incapable of outward cordiality of manner, and he felt acutely his defect. Consummate politeness is not the right tonic for an emotional collapse" (18). With one carefully placed sentence, Conrad successfully outlines the core of Heyst's nature, and does so with a sense of emotional detachment and understatement matched only by that of the character he has just described. Heyst continues to struggle with his "consummate politeness" throughout the novel, and finds in Lena the loving foil to his emotional detachment.

The sheer force of the influence that Lena has on Heyst's final ability to express and feel a deeper emotional awareness makes it all the more confounding that so many critics tend to look at her as a nonentity when compared with characters like Heyst, Ricardo, or even Mr. Jones. Stewart offers a rare defense of Lena's character, arguing that her credibility actually sets her apart from the narrative of the story itself:

With the possible exception of Mrs. Gould--Lena ends as the most convincing of all Conrad's women. And she does this in the face of a further disability. The melodramatic part of the story--which must again be stressed as much of the larger part, so far as a count of pages goes--bears particularly hard upon her. It is not easy to remain at all real when at grips with such a simulacrum of lust as Ricardo. Moreover, the mere mechanics of the suspense-story played out on Samburan are not quite worthy of her. Basically the motivation of her final actions is fine and true. But the point at which she first feels she has to conceal

something from Heyst--the fact of her having encountered Ricardo--is clumsily fabricated. (227)

Stewart perceptively identifies the sense of "realness" that makes Lena's character convincing. His contention, however, that she remains one of the few convincing and realistic components in an otherwise melodramatic tale warrants closer consideration.

The "melodramatic" part of the story "bears particularly hard" on Lena not by chance, but by careful design on Conrad's part. It is not a miracle that Lena remains "real" amidst the atrocities that go on around her; Conrad never expects anything less of his heroine. Lena is the embodiment of human suffering and endurance; she represents the life, hope and love expressed in all his novels. Lena remains real, because she must. The reality she brings to the novel is proportionate to the seemingly unreal events that go on around her. The balance or "mix" of events is, as Irwin would argue, equivalent, because Lena essentially diffuses any mounting sense of melodrama through her realistic presence. To say, then, that *Victory* is primarily a melodramatic novel is also to deny the importance of Lena's character to the overall integrity of the narrative. Ironically, denying Lena's importance is precisely what critics, like Betty Vanderwielen, do when they attempt to define her character according to considerations outside actual events in the novel itself.

Vanderwielen begins her critique of Lena's character with a statement about her girl's general appeal to the reader. According to Vanderwielen, "Conrad's Lena is not the most appealing heroine. Initially lusterless, even vapid, her only genuine claim to admiration results from her misguided attempt to rescue Heyst at the end of the novel"

(Vanderwielen 201). Vanderwielen disregards much of the actual novel itself, choosing instead to base her general lack of enthusiasm for Lena's character on notions of gendered roles: "In creating Lena", Vanderwielen states, "Conrad has created a woman desperately anxious to perform her gender--and her most frustrating obstacle is Axel Heyst's stolid unwillingness to perform his" (202). Vanderwielen concludes her argument with the remark that "Conrad's Lena, in particular, obviously was raised in accordance with phallocentric dictates, and that underlying ideology continues to inform her subsequent actions throughout the novel" (202-03). Vanderwielen's argument contains little that can be substantiated by actual facts from the novel. Conrad says practically nothing about Lena's childhood, and the little he does reveal bears no resemblance to Vanderwielen's discussion of "phallocentric dictates". Furthermore, Vanderwielen fails to identify the particulars of these "phallocentric dictates" in any detail. By reducing Lena's actions to a set of prescribed gender expectations, Vanderwielen limits the scope, motivation, and hence the meaning of Lena's behaviour. Conrad's thoughts on Lena offer a more comprehensive view of her nature, because they consider her overall significance in relation to her place in the actual story itself.

In his author's note to *Victory*, Conrad introduces Lena to his readers as a character with both inner strength and an enduring presence:

When the moment came for her meeting with Heyst I felt that she would be heroically equal to every demand of the risky and uncertain future. I was so convinced of it that I let her go with Heyst, I won't say without a pang but certainly without misgivings. And in view of her triumphant end what more could I have done for her rehabilitation and her happiness. (xli)

The emphasis Conrad places on Lena's heroism and ultimate sense of accomplishment negates the notion that she is little more than a gender norm, and offers little support for conventional feminist critiques of the novel.

Elsewhere, Vanderwielen offers yet another variation of her feminist critique of the novel, suggesting that "one of the most compelling aspects of *Victory* lies in the realization that it is the female protagonist, not the male, who insists on reproducing the patriarchal model. It is Lena who demands that Heyst give her a name. . . . From their first meeting, it is Lena who forces the active role upon Heyst, claiming the passive role as her right" (Vanderwielen 204). Lena does, indeed, insist that Heyst give her a name, and in doing so forces him to take an active responsibility in their developing relationship, but her later actions and exhortations to her lover suggest that she is claiming anything but the passive role as her right.

Lena's understanding of her particular situation reveals her insight into what is actually a shared human experience. She is able to take the individual conditions of her unique circumstance and apply them to her place as a member of a greater collective, whether it be the tiny community on Samburan, or the much larger community of women in general. In doing so, she presents an emotional, but considerably less sentimentalized, view of her own situation and of women in general. During one of several intimate conversations with Heyst, Lena relates the details of her ordeal with Schomberg, and confesses how she finally gathered the courage to deal with his unsolicited attentions and advances: "'A girl'", she says, "'can always put up a fight. You believe me? Only it isn't easy to stand up for yourself when you feel there's nothing

and nobody at your back. There's nothing so lonely in the world as a girl who has got to look after herself" (85). Lena credits Heyst with her strengthened confidence in dealing with the hotel owner, but does so in a manner that avoids the heightened sentimentality of turning her into either a fairy tale princess, locked in the lowest depth of a dungeon, or the stereotypical paragon of silenced virtue and moral fortitude. The idea of her capacity to endure through suffering does come through clearly, however, and the end result is a sincerely touching sentiment about the strength and significance of human love, rather than a melodramatic wrenching of the reader's sentiments and emotions. Lena is no more a helpless maiden than Heyst is a knight in shining armour. They are both human, both alone, and desperately in need of each other's companionship. Their feelings are strong, simple and sincere.

Heyst echoes Lena's remarks about her own strength, the strength of women in general, and goes one step further in crediting her with the strength and abilities he cannot see himself possessing. At the end of the novel, Heyst comments on Lena's display of cunning and courage in the face of Ricardo's attack, saying:

no doubt you acted from instinct. Women have been provided with their own weapon. I was a disarmed man, I have been a disarmed man all my life as I see it now. You may glory in your resourcefulness and your profound knowledge of yourself; but I may say that the other attitude, suggestive of shame, had its charm. For you are full of charm. (404)

The image of the disarmed and powerless man is one that continues to surface in the narrative. Vanderwielen rightly states that "Heyst inevitably presents an image of powerlessness when he fails to take an active role in defending his property" (Vanderwielen 206-07). It is not just Heyst, however, who is left powerless. Ricardo is

physically disarmed by Lena when she takes his knife; her effect on his emotional state leaves him powerless to execute his plans with any degree of mental alertness. Ricardo's fascination with her appearance, motions, and the few words he hears Lena speak, causes him to suspend the suspicious nature and cruel logic that have made him an asset as Mr. Jones' associate thus far.

Mr. Jones touches on the emotional disarming of his companion, expressing what is perhaps the only truly mysoginistic view in the novel. He attributes Ricardo's carelessness and apparent betrayal to a growing enchantment under Lena's "charm":  
“A woman had intervened! A woman, a girl, who apparently possessed the power to awaken men’s disgusting folly” (387). Mr. Jones continues his tirade against the wiles and wit of women in conversation with Heyst. He brings himself to the level of Heyst’s ear, and ominously whispers “can you understand their power. . .Can there be a more disgusting spectacle? It’s enough to make the earth detestable” (391). Mr. Jones’ exaggerated and grotesque behaviour is more fitting to a caricature than a realistic character, and contrasts with the intense, yet simple and honest, emotions of Lena and Heyst. His railing about the “power” of women, however, does open up an essential dimension of the novel. Whether it is emotionally, or through their physical actions, the women in *Victory* play a major role in moving the plot and conveying the story to the reader.

As a supporting character, Mrs. Schomberg receives little, if in fact any, critical attention from Conrad’s readers; yet her actions are such that they begin to open up the narrative. She talks with Davidson about both the whereabouts of Heyst and the events

that have taken place since the last time he (Davidson) left the hotel. It suddenly occurs to Davidson that "she might be aware of other facts" (40). The narrator offers further insight into her character, adding "this was a very amazing discovery to anyone who looked at Mrs. Schomberg. Nobody had ever suspected her of having a mind. . . . One was inclined to think of her as an It--an automaton, a very plain dummy, with an arrangement for bowing the head at times and smiling stupidly now and then" (40). Clearly anything but an automaton, Mrs. Schomberg, in fact, plays an integral part in helping Lena escape with Heyst. Davidson's amazement at the discovery of Mrs. Schomberg's role in the escape prompts his bemused, and not altogether complimentary, response: "'That woman that you would say hadn't the pluck to lift her little finger'" (44). While Davidson has considered Mrs. Schomberg a nonentity up until this point, the narrator offers a somewhat different, but equally unflattering, view of the whole situation.

Unlike Lena, Mrs. Schomberg is allowed no capacity for a nurturing, compassionate nature. If she has been able to help Lena and Heyst, it is only because she sees a benefit to herself in doing so. The narrator's response to Davidson's wonder at the whole outcome of events clearly illustrates this:

I thought she must have some interest of her own to serve. She was too lifeless to be suspected of impulsive compassion. It was impossible to think that Heyst had bribed her. Whatever means he had, he had not the means to do that. Or could it be that she was moved by that disinterested passion for delivering a woman to a man which in respectable spheres is called matchmaking? (44)

The narrator's fleeting allusion to kindness in Mrs. Schomberg's actions is quickly overshadowed by the suggestion that any compassion that might have entered her actions is really only a "disinterested passion". His view is one which neither Davidson nor Heyst accepts. Both men give the hotel manager's wife considerably more credit for her part in the escape than the narrator is willing to concede.

Motivation aside, no one believes that the escape could ever have come about without Mrs. Schomberg's intervention. Heyst admits as much when he is finally able to catch up with Davidson himself. His own disbelief in the cunning of the otherwise sufficiently cowed Mrs. Schomberg mirrors the response of his friend. As he talks briefly with Davidson about the flight to Samburan, Heyst remarks "'she's more resourceful than one would give her credit for'" (55). Accustomed by now to the events as they have unfolded, Davidson is able comfortably to reply "'women often are'" (55). He later supplements this comment, adding "'there's a lot of unexpectedness about women'" (55). Davidson's musings on the resourcefulness and unexpectedness of women echo Peter Ivanovitch's ridiculous platitudes on the greatness of the Russian woman in *Under Western Eyes*. While Davidson's statements are not the banal ramblings of Ivanovitch, he too displays a general misunderstanding of exactly what it is that the women he encounters actually stand for, and what they are able to accomplish.

Even after explaining to the narrator himself that Mrs. Schomberg is, indeed, a quietly resourceful person, and hearing Heyst attest to the same thing, Davidson continues to quiz him, still marveling that Heyst is even able to have a conversation with Mrs. Schomberg: "'How did you get around her, Heyst? How did you think of it? Why,

she looks too stupid to understand human speech and too scared to shoo a chicken away. Oh the women, the women! You don't know what there may be in the quietest of them'" (56). Heyst, however, finds nothing particularly remarkable in her actions, and says as much: "'She was engaged in the task of defending her position in life'" (56). He further adds, "'it's a very respectable task'" (56). Heyst understands the motivation behind Mrs. Schomberg's actions perfectly. With Lena out of Schomberg's grasp, there is little chance that Mrs. Schomberg will be turned out by her husband for the young violinist.

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Finally convinced of her intelligence and capability, Davidson readily picks up the logic of Heyst's explanation, and comes to some conclusions of his own:

He believed, now, that the woman [Mrs. Schomberg] had been putting it on for years. She never even winked. It was immense! The insight he had obtained almost frightened him; he couldn't get over his wonder at knowing more of the real Mrs. Schomberg than anybody in the Islands, including Schomberg himself. She was a miracle of dissimulation. (59)

While once again somewhat overstated, Davidson's insight into Mrs. Schomberg's character reveals that her actions are deliberately thought out, and not the spontaneous and frantic scheming of a hysterical and stunned individual. The "great escape" is really nothing more than her helping two people to quietly leave one place to take up residence in another.

The act of taking Lena to the island itself is one that Davidson and the narrator find as interesting as Mrs. Schomberg's role in helping the two lovers escape in the first place. The subject stimulates a lengthy discussion between the two characters, and prompts them to draw some definite conclusions about both Heyst and the situation he

creates for himself. The reader learns about most of this conversation second hand as the narrator recalls the conversation between Davidson and himself. He begins by saying

Davidson shared my suspicion that this was in its essence the rescue of a distressed human being. Not that we were two romantics, tingeing the world to the hue of our temperament, but that both of us had been acute enough to discover a long time ago that Heyst was. (51)

Whether Heyst is really a romantic or not, at this point in the novel, is yet to be seen. His earlier discomfort in dealing with Morrison on an emotional level, and his continued detachment from Lena despite caring deeply for her, would seem to suggest, however, that this is not the case at all. Both Davidson and the narrator appear either to misunderstand, or to be completely ignorant of, the nuances in Heyst and Lena's relationship. The temptation, then, for the critic/reader, who takes both Davidson and the narrator at their word, is to over-sentimentalize and become melodramatic about the event.

Davidson's uncanny knack of foreshadowing does, however, emerge as one of the most significant moments in the conversation. He comments on Heyst's bravado in stealing away with Lena:

I shouldn't have had the pluck . . . I see a thing all around as it were; but Heyst doesn't, or else he would have been scared. You don't take a woman into a desert jungle without being made sorry for it sooner or later, in one way or another; and Heyst being a gentleman only makes it worse. (51)

From this moment on, the reader is prepared for the isolated couple to face the worst. The machinations of Schomberg and the arrival of Mr. Jones and Ricardo at the hotel are not unexpected twists to the plot, but rather are anticipated events. The reader does

not know precisely what will happen; he/she only knows that Heyst and Lena will not be left alone peacefully on the island. It is the waiting and the anticipation that give the story its suspense, and it is this suspense that allows Conrad to build interest and emotional involvement in the novel without resorting to melodramatic techniques. The requisite equivalence and correspondence are met by both the sequential building of events and the careful attention Conrad pays to the motivations of Lena's character. The inevitable arrival of Mr. Jones and Ricardo on the island is prefaced by the hateful stories Schomberg feeds the two men while they are guests at his hotel. The animosity that erupts on Samburan is set in motion long before Mr. Jones and Ricardo ever invade Lena and Heyst's privacy. As the story reaches its rapidly unfolding conclusion, Lena's final heroic efforts to preserve the love and peace she has found culminate in a highly believable and triumphant scene of self-sacrifice and endurance.

Even before the final exhilarating moments of the novel, however, the key to avoiding a melodramatic narrative hinges on Conrad's returning once again to a focus on Lena and the way in which the story unfolds around her. The first time Heyst sees Lena, she is sitting on stage as a member of Zangiacomo's orchestra. Her petite frame inside the white dress catches Heyst's attention immediately, and his interest continues to grow as he witnesses the conductor's wife cruelly pinching the poor girl. Lena herself says little about the unwarranted attack, perhaps, as the narrator reveals, because "she was no chatterer" (192). His description of Lena continues as he notes that "she was rather silent, with a capacity for immobility, an upright stillness, as when resting on the concert platform between the musical numbers, her feet crossed, her hands reposing on her lap"

(192). The image of Lena presented here emphasizes both her quiet nature and the different levels of suffering she undergoes at the hands of other people. In this case, the suffering takes the form of physical abuse inflicted upon her by Mrs. Zangiacomo.

While Lena chooses to remain silent about the pinching incident, it would be a mistake to equate her silence with a retiring or defeated nature in general. When Heyst approaches and questions her about the pinching incident, Lena quickly responds ““it wouldn’t have been the first time. And suppose she did [ pinch Lena’s arm harshly]--what are you going to do about it ?”” (73). Lena throws the responsibility to act back onto Heyst, and continues to do so for a good part of the novel. She takes control of the situation indirectly by inciting Heyst to act. With the exception of his intervention on behalf of Morrison, Heyst’s first instinct up to this point has been to avoid getting involved. As the narrative progresses and Heyst continues to grow more attached to Lena, his policy of noninvolvement must necessarily change. It becomes impossible for him to remain detached.

Lena’s attempts to define herself through Heyst provide some of the most moving testaments of human companionship in the novel, and set the stage for much of the action that is to follow. During yet another of their intimate conversations, Lena turns to Heyst and says ““do you know, it seems to me, somehow that if you were to stop thinking about me I shouldn’t be in the world at all!”” (187). As Heyst slowly begins to realize how much Lena means to him, his response to her is similar. The once detached man finds it harder and harder to separate himself from the girl he has supposedly “rescued”, especially since “every time she spoke to him she seemed to abandon to him something

of herself --something excessively subtle and inexpressible, to which he was infinitely sensible, which he would have missed horribly if she were to go away" (188). Ironically, in the end, it is Heyst who is perhaps most defined by the relationship. The effect Lena has on him is profound: "The girl he had come across, of whom he was not yet accustomed, with whom he did not yet know how to live; that human being so near and still so strange, gave him a greater sense of his own reality than he had ever known in all his life" (200). Sometime later, Heyst considers the possibility of losing Lena, and his sheer anxiety at the thought of being separated from her is immediately apparent:

The vague apprehension of a distant future, in which he saw Lena unavoidably separated from him by profound and subtle differences; the skeptical carelessness which had accompanied every one of his attempts at action like a secret reserve of his soul, fell away from him. He no longer belonged to himself. There was a call far more imperious and august. (245)

The dramatic intensity of this particular passage on the reader is twofold. It is first and foremost a strong statement about the depth of attachment and compassion between Lena and Heyst, but, like Davidson's earlier foreboding about the dangers of bringing a woman into the jungle, Heyst's "vague apprehension" about being separated from Lena foreshadows the events that transpire at the novel's conclusion. The sense of tension and suspense continues to mount as a natural outcome of the story as it has unfolded thus far.

Lena's growing dependence on, and attachment to, Heyst attest to her own need for the companionship of her lover, and add to the continually growing portrait of human love, suffering and endurance Conrad depicts. For Lena, Heyst

had given to life a savour, a movement, a promise mingled with menaces, which she had not suspected were to be found in it--or, at any rate, not by a girl wedded to misery as she was. She said to herself that she must not be irritated because he seemed too self-contained, and as if shut up in a world of his own. When he took her in his arms, she felt that his embrace had a great compelling force, that he was moved deeply, and that perhaps he would not get tired of her so very soon. She thought that he had opened to her the feelings of delicate joy, that the very uneasiness he caused her was delicious in its sadness, and that she would try to hold him as long as she could--till her fainting arms, her sinking soul, could cling to him no more. (246)

Lena's distress and confusion at what she also recognizes as Heyst's sense of detachment create a different kind of suffering for her, suffering that is not physical, but emotional.

Heyst's inability to completely open himself to the love and sympathy she offers is an emotional dagger she feels acutely; yet her compassion for him prompts her to put her own injured feelings aside, and focus on the circumstances and events that cause Heyst to have such a cold and distant manner. Lena is capable of such personal selflessness because of the strength of her character. Her encompassing generosity and compassion for the people around her proceed from the same nurturing disposition that prompts Natalia and Sophia to care for Razumov, and Winnie to care for Stevie. Strength in this respect comes from the denial, and not the indulgence, of self. This is a lesson that Heyst has yet to learn.

Lena's response to Ricardo is completely different. Her feelings toward him contain nothing akin to companionship or fellowship. Conrad introduces a different Lena here, a woman who has cunning and confidence. She is the Lena who knows exactly what she needs, and what she must do to accomplish the task. After leading Ricardo to believe that she might have some information about Heyst's supposed hidden wealth,

Lena basks in the satisfaction of her own wit: "Womanlike, she felt the effect she had produced, the effect of knowing much and of keeping all her knowledge in reserve. So far, somehow, this had come about by itself" (298). Her blatant deception does not strike her as improper or personally dangerous for even a moment. Her only thought at this time is for Heyst, and the harm he might come to if she does not lie:

She was not ashamed of her duplicity. With a woman's frank courage, as soon as she saw the opening she threw herself into it without reserve, with only one doubt--that of her own strength. She was appalled by the situation; but already her aroused femininity, understanding that whether Heyst loved her or not she loved him, and feeling that she had brought this on his head, faced the danger with a passionate desire to defend her own. (298)

This Lena, the Lena with fire in her spirit, the woman of action, the woman who will defend Heyst at all costs is the Lena the reader sees for the rest of the novel. She once again pushes aside her own needs and concerns, and gives wholeheartedly to Heyst. The doubt she has in her ability to finish the task is matched only by her courage to at least try and her determination to succeed, despite the strength of the forces working against her.

Lena's "aroused femininity" and her display of a "woman's frank courage" precipitate her growing determination. Her love for, and desire to protect, Heyst are not so much newly found as they are finally recognized. When Lena opens herself up fully to the depth of her compassion and understanding, she is able to draw on all the subtle strength she has, and it is then that she is able to see most clearly and act most proficiently.

Ricardo's initial discovery of Lena prompts the attack on her physical being that triggers both her defensive and offensive instincts. The scene is an incredibly tense one

that brings the reader to the height of his/her emotional involvement in the story, not allowing for a moment of relief until the tale is complete. Ricardo skulks around Heyst's house carefully concealing himself so that he is not discovered. The scene gathers momentum quickly from here on:

When he put out his hand towards the motionless folds it was with extreme caution, and merely to push the stuff aside a little, advancing his head at the same time to peep within. A moment of complete immobility ensued. Then, without anything else of him stirring, Ricardo's head shrank back on his shoulders, his arm descended slowly to his side. There was a woman in there. The very woman! (288)

Waiting so long for this woman he has heard so much about, Ricardo rushes in without a second thought: "After a quick glance over his shoulder, which hunters of big game tell us no lion or tiger omits to give before charging home, Ricardo charged, head down, straight at the curtain. The stuff, tossed up violently by his rush, settled itself with a slow, floating descent into vertical folds, motionless, without even a shudder in the still, warm air" (289). The attack and ensuing wrestling match act as a violent sort of catharsis for Ricardo, but it is more than that for Lena.

Ricardo's sudden and violent entry into the protective shell of her life on Samburan is a moment of recognition for Lena. Conrad does not haphazardly throw the detail in for shock and entertainment value, but rather to complete the development of a character he has meticulously constructed from the earliest pages of the novel. Lena's acute awareness of the danger she is in deflates any melodramatic tone rising from the mounting tension of Ricardo's attack:

She was never in doubt of the nature of the danger. She defended herself in the full clear knowledge of it, from the force of instinct which is the

true source of every great display of energy...This new enemy's attack was simple straightforward violence. (292)

Lena's understanding of the situation brings her character full circle, and offers a complete picture of the human capacity to love, lose, suffer, and ultimately endure: "She was no longer alone in the world now. She resisted without a moment of faltering, because she was no longer deprived of moral support; because she was a human being who counted" (292). The recognition that she is no longer alone recalls Lena's earlier conversation with Heyst in which she declares that a woman who does not have to look after herself is capable of any great task or strength. Having found the strength she needs through her companionship with Heyst, Lena prepares to undertake the final act of selflessness that culminates in her final suffering, and allows her the ultimate victory.

The novel's closing sequence unfolds rapidly while managing to maintain the strict attention to detail Conrad is so careful to include from the beginning. There is no turning back from the moment that Lena declares her intention to protect and defend Heyst. Her purpose remains as steady as the narrative itself. The narrator reveals as much, declaring "womanlike, all her faculties remained concentrated on her heart's desire--on the knife--while the man went on babbling insanely at her feet, ingratiating and savage, almost crazy with elation" (397). Vanderwielen considers Lena's final act of sacrifice to Heyst, but offers a defeated view of that sacrifice. Lena, according to Vanderwielen, "operating on a patriarchal ideology, considers herself preeminently victorious--she has consummated the ideal of herself as the embodiment of feminine nothingness, the emptiness which holds itself fundamentally open to masculine

domination” (Vanderwielen 209). Vanderwielen’s argument is hard to accept, however, when the critic/reader considers that at the end of the novel, it is indeed Lena, and not Heyst, Ricardo, or even Mr. Jones who has the upper hand.

When Mr. Jones’ stray bullet finds its way into Lena’s delicate frame, her act of self-sacrifice is complete, and her devotion to Heyst is forever sealed through the strongest bond of all, blood. She is not alone, even in death. Lena is not victorious because she saves Heyst and wounds Ricardo. She does not succeed because she exemplifies the ultimate in feminine virtue, but rather because she embodies a cycle of human experience. Lena lives a full life from birth until death. In the process, she learns to love another more than herself. There is no greater or purer lesson than this. Karl comments on the final moments of the novel, noting that they are fine moments, because “*Victory ends when it must, with Heyst’s recognition of the active role he should have played in the human scene. There amid the wreckage that he has helped create, he finally recognizes Lena’s triumph as the victory that has regenerated even while destroying him. The rest is silence*” (249). Lena has always recognized the need to be a part of the “human scene”. As she leans close to him and whispers ““who else in the world could have done this for you”” (406) , a final awe falls over the narrative as Heyst too finally realizes what his life should truly be about. His answer is: ““no one in the world”” (406). Lena’s compassion, integrity and strength allow her to struggle against, and overcome, the mediocrity of her immediate existence. She, like no other character, knows for certain what it is to live, to die, and ultimately to endure.

## AN AFTERWORD

Stewart cites Edward Garnett's description of Conrad as "a man so masculinely keen yet so femininely sensitive" (Stewart 17). Conrad's portrayal of the feminine characters in *The Secret Agent*, *Under Western Eyes* and *Victory* demonstrates both his sensitivity to, and his admiration of, the feminine capacity to nurture, suffer, endure, forgive, and positively effect change through acts of selflessness. The portrait that begins with Winnie continues to develop in the characters of Natalia, Sophia, and Tekla. The sense of credibility and sympathy lacking from the final images of Winnie's character surfaces readily through all three women in *Under Western Eyes*. Natalia's hope for the future of peace and unity in her country gives her life meaning in the midst of chaos, and allows her the strength to work for change and regeneration in the broken lives of the people around her.

The notion that human beings must live not only for the immediate but rather work for change beyond the moment reaches its fullest expression in Lena, who not only endures hardship in life but triumphs over suffering through her death. The ultimate transcendence of her character's spirit actually brings about the concord and harmony for which Natalia can only hope. The compelling portrait of genuine love, suffering, and endurance presented through Lena's character suggests not melodrama, but rather the "real life drama" of being human. For Conrad, there can be no better tale.

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