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Conradian *femmes fatales* – Winnie Verloc, Freya, the Governess, and Susan Bacadou: Utterly Evil?

Conrad has drawn, at times, definitely offensive women [...]. It is in such figures that Conrad instills all the venom of his hatred of insincerity and vapid pose. (Curle 158)
a belief in a supernatural source of evil is not necessary; men alone are quite capable of every wickedness. (UWE 151)

Joseph Conrad has undeniably been treated as a writer whose literary domain gyrated around a meticulous portrayal of the life of men and their adventures. Hence, there has always been an impression that the figure of a woman could be less analysed, and would therefore be a less significant section of Conradian criticism. It seems enough to quote here a few scholars to get a glimpse at Conrad's approach to women in his literary fiction. For instance, Susan Jones in her article "Representing Women: Conrad, Marguerite Poradowska, and *Chance*" asserts that for many critics the explanation of Conrad's failure to portray women in a more active way is the fact that "in drawing on his experiences as a sailor Conrad had comparatively little experience of women" (59). Moreover, while referring to this aspect of Conrad's fiction, Bernard Meyer in his *Joseph Conrad. A Psychoanalytic Biography* maintains, as quoted by Monika Malessa-Drohomirecka,

that the evident difficulties which the writer experienced in portraying the nature of relations between the sexes were caused by complexes which had arisen as a result of traumas and bitterness experienced in his youth and that the unconvincing nature of his literary portrayals of women was basically due to his ignorance and fear of them. (25)

A similar assumption is made by Neville Newhouse who acknowledges that Conrad's descriptions of women represent "a serious

failure of communication” and adds that “Conrad invests femininity with an aura of sacred distance. His women, just because they are women, are set apart” (74), a statement functioning as an echo to Marlow’s assertion about women in “Heart of Darkness”: “It’s queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own” (YS 59).

Women are therefore usually positioned in a fantasy domain of exquisiteness and, therefore, as indifferent to, and taken from, the ruthlessness of the mechanisms prevalent in the male world, being “protected and enshrined within the domestic sphere” on account of the fact that “the outside world of imperialist adventures is too harsh for [them] to survive and to understand” (Kao 118). The most straightforward assertions may be those expressed by Thomas Moser in *Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline*, who remarks on “Conrad’s fear and hostility towards women in his female characters” (qtd. by Iwashimizu 147), and Malessa-Drohomyrecka, who avers that Conrad’s “attitude towards women was ambivalent and indecisive. On the one hand he sought their company, while on the other he was afraid of them. It was as if something was pulling him back and keeping him from fully committing himself” (38).

Therefore, there seems to be a sharp division between Conrad’s portrayal of men and women. This partition is perceivable in the fact that the male protagonists, while taking a precise path between virtue and vice, good and iniquity, and while taking recourse to knowledge as the token of their powerfulness, are presented as overshadowing and overwhelming their female counterparts as far as proclivity towards action and evil is concerned. In Conrad, women very often function as being feeble and inert, displaying neither the bravery nor the moral commissions and failings of men, and seem to be “conceived of in terms of the roles they play vis-à-vis men,” as suggested by Padmini Mongia (135). Therefore, it is held, even when Conrad does allow his female protagonists to be evil, cunning, depraved, and influential, their actions seem to be rather mean, one-dimensional, predictable, and insignificant. They appear to be incapable of activity, depravity, and atrocious behaviour. But

I cannot agree with the view that female characters in Conrad's literary world are invariably offered an inferior position in relation to male characters, occupying the background of the story at best. Female protagonists in Conrad's literary output are many a time responsible for shaping the development of the stories, appearing as equal to the male characters who, as argued by Heliéna Krenn, "achieve their deepest recognition of truths about themselves through the mediation and instrumentality of women" (105), who become "essential for the demarcation of masculinity" (Mongia 135).

However, in this paper I am not going to study all categories of women in Conrad's literary output but only a few examples whose powerfulness, influence over men, and iniquity are visible in their intensity. Since the notion of evil for Conrad stands for a diverse reality,¹ the ensuing analysis of wicked women will therefore be of multifaceted character. It will be achieved by juxtaposing women inclined to crime, deceit, pride, passion and a detrimental influence upon men (Winnie Verloc from *The Secret Agent*, the gorgeous and influential Freya ["Freya of the Seven Isles"], the criminal and mentally disturbed Susan Bacadou ["The Idiots"], and finally the malicious governess from *Chance*), and will thus defend the hypothesis that although "female characters emphasize the weaknesses of Conrad's heroes" (Turner 155), this less frequently analysed aspect of Conradian fiction discloses its potential to be considered one of the most significant.

A second hypothesis is that Conrad's portrayal of wicked and influential women is deeply embedded in previous literary depictions of evil female characters, drawing on, among others, John Milton's epic *Paradise Lost* and his portrayal of the first, gorgeous yet destructively influential woman, Eve. This premise is offered here as an extension of the assertion voiced by D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke, who claims that "Kurtz is a descendant from a tradition that features the hero-villains of Gothic tradition such as Ann Radcliff's Montoni in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and goes back to Milton's Satan and

Faust" (12), an extension which presupposes that Conradian evil female characters can be perceived as descendants of the Miltonian Eve despite obvious discrepancies between them.

In my article "Sublimely Gifted but Destined to Fall: A Comparative Study of Conrad's Kurtz and Milton's Satan as the Archetype of Evil Genius," it has been suggested that "the publication of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* has effectively reopened the partly forsaken 'box' with archetypes so as to trigger novel philosophical, religious and literary reflection upon their indispensable value in constructing the narrative framework" (Giza 173). And in evidence of this affirmation, Eve – an archetype of the first woman capable of both good and evil – has succeeded in attracting unprecedented literary attention. This hypothesis is confirmed by the phenomenon that the reality of evil, assuming such shapes as powerful, albeit furtive force, a tempting influence, and a deceiving feeling of freedom from any established rules proves to be more charming than its opposite, the concept of good denoting truthfulness, honesty or humility. Besides, if we turn our attention to the literary ground and accentuate the narrative process of writing, "it is easier to draw a bad character than a good one" (Gardner 99). Thus, the figure of Eve has become ubiquitous and so often reshaped that one can justly assert that it is very deeply embedded as a literary archetype and has displayed the potential to inspire both those who create and those who read.

Even though Eve in Milton's *Paradise Lost* is presented as utterly evil and fallen after the Fall in Book 9, the first signs of her proneness to wickedness and transgression are already visible prior to Adam and Eve's sin of disobedience, when she is still in her unfallen state. This proclivity, in the form of vanity, is detectable in Book 4, where one can observe Eve admiring her own reflection in a pond. It is likewise detectable in her unusual request to Adam to separate their chores a few moments prior to Satan's temptation of them. But it is most visible in her being tempted by Devil, disguised as a toad, while she sleeps (the Foe chose Eve as the weaker vessel and inferior to Adam, who is very often presented as being full

of knowledge and sensibility). She is therefore the one with whom Satan tries to initiate cooperation, and she progressively shows a readiness to respond to Satan's enticement.

However, Eve's full-blown proclivity for evil, cunning, hatred and harmful influence upon Adam is detectable a few moments prior to and, obviously, after the Fall. The most detectable influence of Satan's powerful temptation of Eve is her doubting in God (assuming Him to be a liar) and His caring love towards Adam and Eve while admiring the beauty of the forbidden fruit and entering into the intricate and cunning logic embedded in her by Satan.

It is just on account of those doubts that Eve willingly disobeys the behest of God and eats the forbidden fruit, believing Satan more than God. And after the sin of disobedience she assumes the multifaceted attire of evil. First of all, she is transformed into a feminine temptress, a "transgressor" (Milton 11.164) and Adam's "snare" (165) who exerts a harmful influence upon Adam, an influence that assumes several shapes. The most injurious one is obviously associated with her tricking Adam into eating the forbidden fruit. And a few lines later we observe that Adam "scrupled not to eat, / Against his better knowledge, not deceived, / But fondly overcome with female charm" (9.998-99). The ultimate form of this type of influence, however, is detectable in Eve's attempt to definitely reject God while offering suicide as a solution to their predicament, a resolution not realized by Adam and Eve. It is, however, the solution that is implemented by both Winnie in *The Secret Agent* and Susan Bacadou in "The Idiots," two women who are unable to cope successfully with the burden of the criminal acts that have been committed by them as a way of protecting them against atrocities of their spouses. Emotionally and psychologically shattered by their husbands, these two women resort to murder, and eventually to suicide, which is perceived by them as the only option.

Apart from the detrimental influence upon Adam, Eve – "Philistean Dalilah" (Milton 9.1061), "possessed" (1137), "perverted" (10.3) and "that bad Woman" (837) – is brimful with such negative emotions as anger, hate, obstinacy, and guile (the

perfect visualization of the personality of the governess from *Chance*); she is a contemptible *femme fatale* and all those epithets function as attributes of the archetype of Eve as a wicked, scheming and tempting woman. Eve is likewise full of cunning greed, both firmly believing in Satan's lies more than in Adam's instructions and driving her futile attempt to overthrow the existing hierarchical order with Adam as her superior. Eve is also gloating in her sinful state. However, the most slanderous portrayal of the fallen Eve – subject to transformation through the course of the epic from a blameless, servile woman into a cunning agent of Devil – is offered by the furious Adam in Book 10, a portrait realized in the evil women in Conrad's literary work.

Therefore, establishing possible parallels between presentations of evil women in Conrad's literary output and Milton's Eve may introduce an exploration of further dimensions in studies of Conradian fiction, opening new fields for an interdisciplinary analysis, accentuating the fact that both the evil women in Conrad and the Miltonian Eve can be perceived as examples of *femmes fatales*.

The term *femme fatale* points to one of the archetypes one can find not only in the literary domain but also in the social context of the Victorian Era. This archetype indicates a not entirely predictable or controllable female character who is perceived as a menace or threat to a man on account of her not accepting restrictions imposed upon her by the male procedure of shifting her only to the domestic domain. Besides, although the *femme fatale* has generally been associated with a tempting, and therefore treacherous and powerful woman, exerting a seductive influence upon men (the governess/Freya/Winnie), she is also "vibrant and courageous, becoming somewhat intoxicating, and very different from her female counterparts such as the idealized domestic woman, or the shunned and ill-used fallen women" (Hedgecock xv). She is the one who blatantly rebels against conformist attitudes and while refusing to acknowledge and accept the domestic realm and its limitations, she is "regarded as unruly and dangerous" (Atkinson

xxi). Moreover, as has been affirmed by Nina Auerbach, the *femme fatale* plays the part of a “magic woman, who breaks the boundaries of family within which her society restricts her” (1), and even that of a fallen woman who embodied “everything in womanhood that was dangerously, tragically, and triumphantly beyond social boundaries” (150), having its literary archetype in Milton’s epic *Paradise Lost* where, as is claimed by Auerbach, “Milton’s Eve gives powerful argumentative voice to her longing to reign rather than serve” (155).

Importantly, the *femme fatale* has been presented as capable of employing her charms in order to entice men into perilous situations and criminality, very often killing them in the process; but on the contrary, while defending her integrity and life against a tyrannous husband, she may likewise become the victim of her own devious scheming (Susan, Winnie). What is of importance here is that the portrayal of the *femme fatale* functions as “a clear indication of the extent of the fears and anxieties prompted by shifts in the understanding of sexual difference in the late nineteenth century” (Doane 1) and, on account of this type of presentation, such a beautiful and tempting woman can act as a herald of the threat of female sexuality and power over men. Significantly, the male characters who are tempted by the *femme fatale*’s exceptional beauty and charm tend to concentrate mostly on her sexual attributes (Freya, Winnie). It can therefore be suggested that it is the males’ narrative that exposes *femmes fatales* as distinctly sexual and very often deadly, rather than their own deeds, thoughts or intentions. And finally, it is of importance to add that Conrad “was apparently drawn to *femmes fatales*, even sardonically and perhaps self-critically enjoying imperilling his male characters” (Turner 144).

Significantly, the depiction of iniquity and maliciousness (especially in the character of the governess), a powerful and calculating influence over a husband (Winnie) and other men (Freya and the governess), crime and murder (Winnie and Susan), and seductive temptation of these paragons of the *femme fatale* can be enhanced by a reference to Shakespeare, who, in Mark Antony’s funeral oration in *Julius Caesar*, voices the

truth that the “evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interrèd with their bones” (3.2.76-77). Evil is more enthralling than its opposite, as Lady Macduff succinctly notes – “I am in this earthly world, where to do harm / Is often laudable, to do good sometime / Accounted dangerous folly” (Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth* 4.2.76-78).

Giorgia Grilli in her *Myth, Symbol, and Meaning in Marry Poppins* declares that “Joseph Conrad’s *Chance* is another example of the literary treatment of the governess depicted as monstrous [...] who delivers the coup de grace to [Flora’s] innocence and devastates her faith in herself” (141). As a contrast to the Miltonian Eve, a dynamic and multi-dimensional character, the governess appears to be all the time acting as a one-dimensional woman endowed only with negativity, cunning, and evil. Grilli adds that the “governess is never named, and this anonymity and insistence on the impersonal intensifies the sinister aspect of this figure who evades specificity to become the universal agent of evil” (141).

The first reference to this mysterious character (Winnie is likewise marked with mysteriousness) is tinged with condemnation, since the reader is informed that Flora de Barral, a defenceless and neglected young girl, has been entrusted to the care of the governess who has straightforwardly despised and manipulated not only Flora but also her father. And this disparaging portrayal of the governess “who closely resembles a villain from a sensational novel” whose “actions are deliberately malicious” (Wright 82), cunningly playing the part of mother to Flora, is unfolded and reiterated many times, for example as follows:

She didn’t care for the child a bit, and [...], she bullied de Barral in a very lofty fashion. [...] she [Mrs. Fyne] told me however that even in the Priory days she had suspected her [the governess] of being an artificial, heartless, vulgar-minded woman with the lowest possible ideals. But de Barral did not know it. He literally did not know anything. (C 73)

Like the postlapsarian Eve, who proposes to Adam the sinister plan of mutual suicide so as to avoid the direct consequences

of their sin of disobedience, the governess, referred to as “an intriguing person hatching a most sinister plot under her air of distant, fashionable exclusiveness” (90), is characterized as a woman prone to constant scheming and formulating iniquitous plans (one of those involves marrying her nephew to Flora de Barral). Both Eve and the governess readily resort to sneakiness, which they treat as an approach towards those around them in order to achieve some benefit for themselves. While taking recourse to her cunning, Eve desires to obtain a morsel of independence from the superior Adam, whereas the governess’s approach is mostly dictated by greed and yearning for power. The stunned narrator – while remarking at the same time the governess’s iniquitous influence upon men who are forced to deal with her: “I conclude she would have carried out whatever plan she might have formed. I can imagine de Barral accustomed for years to defer to her wishes” (91) – points out the unheard-of situation of the master being accustomed to heeding the whims of his servant! The depiction is further enhanced by the following assertion:

It is evident to me that Mrs. What’s-her-name would have had her atrocious way with very little trouble even if the excellent Fynes had been able to do something. She would simply have bullied de Barral in a lofty style. There’s nothing more subservient than an arrogant man when his arrogance has once been broken in some particular instance. (92)

And similar depictions accentuating the governess’s proclivity for methodical cunning and plotting abound later on in the story.

However, the inclination toward intrigues is not the only aspect of her wickedness. Like Eve, the governess is full of such negative traits as hatred and rage: “The woman was mad. ‘Oh! Mrs. Fyne, don’t tell me she wasn’t mad. If you had only seen her face’” (139), and ungovernable passions that are graphically signified by her change in appearance: “Medusa’s head with serpentine locks” (118) whose “teeth looked as though she wanted to bite [Flora]” and with “eyes [...], quite dry, hard and small in a lot of horrible wrinkles” (120). One of the first

references to the sources of those menacing emotions is offered by Marlow in the following words:

And that the secret of her envenomed rage, not against this miserable and attractive wretch, but against fate, accident and the whole course of human life, concentrating its venom on de Barral and including the innocent girl herself, was in the thought, in the fear crying within her. (103)

What follows immediately after this assertion is a comprehensive analysis of the governess's personality and her abominable manner of conduct, which has always been focused upon hating all her charges, because she is seemingly incapable of experiencing positive emotions whatsoever. Significantly, she has been channelling wickedness and contempt not only towards those who have been under her charge, but towards herself as well, so that she appears in a similar light to the Miltonian Satan (and also partially to the Miltonian Eve and Conrad's Winnie), who shouts that he is forced to carry hell within him despite being in Paradise.

Nevertheless, it would be justified to propose the hypothesis that the governess is an even more advanced example of the evil female character than other Conradian wicked women. She discloses one trait that is not detectable in Winnie, namely hypocrisy. Therefore, the governess can be regarded as the most advanced incarnation of evil. While portraying Flora de Barral, Marlow clearly asserts that

[s]hehe [Flora] stood, a frail and passive vessel into which the other [the governess] went on pouring all the accumulated dislike for all her pupils, her scorn of all her employers (the ducal one included), the accumulated resentment, the infinite hatred of all these unrelieved years of – I won't say hypocrisy. (119)

And, so as to enhance the sinister and even "insect-like" character of the governess, Marlow adds that she "revelled in the miserable revenge – pretty safe too – only regretting the unworthiness of the girlish figure which stood for so much she had longed to be able to spit venom at" (120). However, despite

the meticulous analysis of the wickedness of the governess offered by Marlow, the most proper and succinct assessment of this sinister character, in my opinion, is suggested by Mrs. Fyne when she is explaining to Flora the intricacies of the surrounding world: "It is your former governess who is horrid and odious. She is a vile woman. I cannot tell you that she was mad, but I think she must have been beside herself with rage and full of evil thoughts. You must try not to think of these abominations, my dear child" (140).

Freya from the novella "Freya of the Seven Isles," a "siren seemingly controlling the waters" (Turner 154), who is portrayed as eroticism incarnate, "holding an explicit physical power over men" (143), is likewise endowed with an exceptional gift for manipulation and exerting influence upon the men who are within the range of her seductive and dominating activity. Moreover, similarly to Eve, Freya, "that infernal girl" ("Freya of the Seven Isles," *TLS* 221), the Lady of the Isles, is presented as possessed of physical beauty and overwhelming attractiveness. Both Milton's Eve and Freya are gorgeous and, being aware of this powerful attribute, they are not reluctant to use it in order to manipulate men who are within the reach of their influence. Eve employs her charm so as to convince Adam to her course of thinking and rejecting God's behest. Freya, on the other hand, uses her beauty in order to protect her father against a possible predicament instigated by Heemskirk.

Besides, emphasizing her extraordinary position in the male world, as the story unfolds Freya emerges as an unconstrained, resolute, fearless, vengeful, but sensible and proud woman. She is in fact a complicated and rounded character, determined to be the mistress of her own fate. Being aware of her dignity and significance, she is eventually powerful enough – despite her initial apprehension of the commander of the *Neptune* which results partly from her care towards her father – to exert influence upon two men who are closely associated with her life and activity, Jasper Allen and Heemskirk.

Her influence over Jasper is detectable from the very beginning of the story, in which the power of her sway is juxtaposed

with her exceptional beauty, which many a time facilitates this process. Freya is a stunning temptress who can go to any lengths to exert influence and dominance over Jasper. She is so conscious of her power that she does not wish to be dependent on, and controlled by, Jasper or in fact by any other man. This is detectable not only in her body language but most importantly in her straightforward assertion to Jasper that she is, and will always be, a woman who is not to be restricted by anyone, an approach very similar to Eve's resolve to split up her and Adam's chores in the Garden of Eden, and thus to question her inferiority to Adam but also strive for independence and freedom in their relation. However, it is the type of influence that has been greatly stimulating Jasper during his enterprise focused upon making Freya his beloved spouse. Despite the fact that he has been under the powerful sway exerted by Freya, Jasper is presented as having willingly plunged into this net of subjugation because he took it for a challenge, the ultimate reward for which will be the possibility to call Freya his beloved wife. However, the dream is shattered when he loses his boat (regarded by him as a sacred haven or sanctuary where he could eventually hide and possess his beloved Freya) and when he is confronted with the truth that Freya never really loved him.

As far as the second man is concerned, Heemskirk is likewise entangled in a net of encounters and interactions with Freya. However, this relation is completely different from that between Freya and Jasper; it is marked by Freya's trepidation for her father's well-being which, in line with her father's own manner of reasoning, is dependent upon Heemskirk's favour. Nevertheless, despite initial apprehension (detectable, for instance, in her inexplicable laughter and tension), Freya becomes more and more powerful, gradually both increasing her influence over Heemskirk and diminishing his power over her, and eventually becoming a torture for him. Hence, the "desire-tormented Dutchman" (180) is dominated by Freya's bold approach towards him which is detectable in several aspects of her behaviour. Firstly, despite his high social position, she openly mocks him when talking to her father. Secondly, she

verbally attacks Heemskirk, displaying “a fury of an atrocious character altogether incomprehensible to a girl like Freya” (187). Finally, she emotionally abuses and infuriates him by loudly playing the piano, the symbol of her emotional dominance over him. At the end of the story the narrator offers a precise portrayal of her power over Heemskirk and Jasper, claiming that “Freya haunted them both like an ubiquitous spirit, and as if she were the only woman in the world” (211).

Like Eve, Conrad’s Winnie Verloc and Susan Bacadou are both female characters who are prone to changes and transformations from benevolence to iniquity. They are delineated through the prism of their inability to carry the heavy weight of the crime they have committed against their husbands in extremely dangerous moments instigated by the spouses. This powerlessness eventually leads to suicide, which in the case of Winnie functions as “the inexorable conclusion of the eruption of unthinking savagery which begins when she is forced to realize that all her self-sacrifice on her brother’s behalf has been mistaken and in vain” (Sudbury 34). Like Eve prior to her fall, both Winnie and Susan, at the beginning of the two narratives, are described as taciturn, reserved, and rather quiet women trying to fulfil their familial, matrimonial, and social duties as dutifully as possible: Verloc’s wife is “a woman of very few words” (SA 245), who very often “had no sufficient command over her voice” (246), and Susan Bacadou is simply a “quiet wife” (“The Idiots,” TU 60) and a contented woman who does not like to be gossiped about, and tries to do her chores well.

Moreover, like the prelapsarian Eve, Winnie, up to the moment of her brother Stevie’s demise, is characterized by the exceptional care, obedience and love she directs towards him, and conditionally towards her husband, Mr. Verloc. A similar character is detectable in Susan who is shown as a caring and loving mother who “watched with other eyes; listened with otherwise expectant ears” (“The Idiots,” TU 63) staying constantly close to “the cradle, night and day on the watch, to hope and suffer” (64), spending “long days between her three idiot children and the childish grandfather” (64). Like Eve, who, at

the start of her existence with Adam in the Garden of Eden, is presented through the prism of matrimonial attraction marked with surrender and obedience towards her husband, Winnie, as well as Susan, is portrayed as a caring and loving woman, “[Stevie’s] only sister, guardian, and protector” (SA 262), who “glanced at him from time to time with maternal vigilance” (10), and who “used to come along, and carry him off to bed with her, as into a heaven of consoling peace” (167).

Similarly to the beautiful prelapsarian Eve, who is marked with blissful indifference, on account of her certainty that Adam will take care of everything, Winnie – likewise endowed with beauty – is depicted as being indifferent or even oblivious to the surrounding world as long as she is sure that she and her brother are safe and protected by the presence of Mr. Verloc. The reader is informed that Winnie has an air of lack of concern, and is not capable of any vehement protestation; she displays a self-reliant approach to life and her “philosophy consisted in not taking notice of the inside of facts” (154).

However, like the Miltonian Eve whose blissful existence is obliterated after her fall, both Winnie and Susan experience drastic events that overturn their tranquil existence and push them eventually into murder and evil. Winnie’s façade of goodness, obedience, insouciance, love, and care is utterly shattered after Stevie’s death, and Susan’s peaceful existence is ruined by her husband’s attempt at rape. Those are the moments during which the two women access their hidden reservoirs of frustration, madness, despair, hate, criminality, and yearning for suicide, but most importantly the capacity for action. Hence, the deeds and the manner of thinking of these beautiful and loving women change for the worse after the two critical incidents.

As with the Miltonian Eve, whose process of deterioration begins while she is sleeping, and is tempted by Satan disguised as a toad, both Winnie’s and Susan’s shattering moments are associated with evening and night. The attempted rape of Susan takes place in the evening (“The Idiots,” *TU* 76) as does Winnie’s premonition that something bad may actually happen in

the near future (the incident happens just after her mother's departure): her "heart for the fraction of a second seemed to stand still too. That night she was 'not quite herself,' as the saying is, and it was borne upon her with some force that a simple sentence may hold several diverse meanings – mostly disagreeable" (SA 178). And from this moment on Winnie becomes apprehensive about Stevie's safety, and even more so after he and her husband depart to see Michaelis. And it is just this fancy (enhanced by the sense of apprehension and anxiety resulting from her brother's departure) that eventually explodes into a gigantic form of evil and crime after she hears about her beloved brother's death.

Significantly, it is not in the personality of Winnie but rather in her appearance, regressing "physically, Hyde-like, after Stevie's death" (Harrington 59) that the first detectable change is seen. After having eavesdropped upon Chief Inspector Heat's account about Stevie's atrocious death, the reader is offered a vision of Winnie's alteration: "her lips were blue, her hands cold as ice, and her pale face, in which the two eyes seemed like two black holes, felt to her as if it were enveloped in flames" (SA 209-10). Importantly, a change of appearance is likewise detected in Susan. She is described as a "deranged [...], mad, [...], miserable [...], accursed, [...], wicked, [...], horrible woman" ("The Idiots," *TU* 74-76) who, upon entering her mother's house after killing her husband, appears as a lunatic with "blazing eyes" (75). In *The Secret Agent*, the reader then observes the subsequent change in Winnie:

[the] palms of her hands were pressed convulsively to her face, with the tips of her fingers contracted against the forehead, as though the skin had been a mask which she was ready to tear off violently. The perfect immobility of her pose expressed the agitation of rage and despair, all the potential violence of tragic passions. (SA 212)

Later we are even offered the vision of Winnie, a "savage woman" (285; this epithet is repeated one more time in Chapter 12 so as to enhance the impression), assuming a gothic deathlike appearance: "It was as if a corpse had spoken" (247), and the

change peaks in her physical manifestation, stamped with ferocity, a few moments prior to killing her husband:

A tinge of wildness in her aspect was derived from the black veil hanging like a rag against her cheek, and from the fixity of her black gaze where the light of the room was absorbed and lost without the trace of a single gleam. [...] Her face was no longer stony. Anybody could have noted the subtle change on her features, in the stare of her eyes, giving her a new and startling expression. (259-60)

She assumes a serpent-like form (functioning here as a clear reference to Milton's epic and the figure of Satan), as Ossipon observes while he is helping her after the murder:

He felt her now clinging round his legs, and his terror reached its culminating point, became a sort of intoxication, entertained delusions, acquired the characteristics of delirium tremens. He positively saw snakes now. He saw the woman twined round him like a snake, not to be shaken off. She was not deadly. She was death itself. (291)

and eventually she assumes the form of utter nothingness at the end of the story, devolving "into a primitive past" (62), as is claimed by Ellen Burton Harrington.

Winnie's distorted appearance corresponds to the transformations in her thoughts and activities after she is informed about her brother's death, and the same happens to Eve after her sin of disobedience. Both women become marked with extraordinary activity and dynamism. While analysing the alteration that Winnie undergoes, Olga Binczyk asserts that

Grief after her brother's death triggers in Winnie an outburst of psychological and physical strength [...]. Having stabbed her husband to death in cold blood, for the first time in her life she feels a "free woman" who can command "her wits, [...] her vocal organs," and be "in an almost preternaturally perfect control of every fibre of her body." (124)

And she immediately feels hatred towards her husband for murdering her brother:

And there was the paralyzing atrocity of the thought which occupied her. [...] "This man took the boy away to murder him. [...] Mrs. Verloc's

whole being was racked by that inconclusive and maddening thought. It was in her veins, in her bones, in the roots of her hair. [...] her teeth were violently clenched, [...] she was not a submissive creature. (SA 246)

She methodically assumes a habit of slyness so as to carry out the creeping thought of inflicting on her husband the same fate as he inflicted on her beloved brother. In the middle of her frenzy the reader is informed that Winnie was “clear-sighted,” “cunning,” “unhurried” and that her “brow was smooth” (261), in the manner of a professional killer who is capable of murdering in cold blood. As a resolute person she meticulously implements her sinister idea and becomes a murderess, like Susan Bacadou.

There is, however, a difference between those two murderesses. Winnie kills her husband with premeditation and careful planning, but Susan commits her crime impulsively and quickly, to protect her safety and integrity as a woman:

And he would come. I begged him and Heaven for mercy. . . . No! . . . Then we shall see. . . . He came this evening. I thought to myself: “Ah! again!” . . . I had my long scissors. I heard him shouting . . . I saw him near. . . . I must – must I? . . . Then take! . . . And I struck him in the throat above the breast-bone. . . . I never heard him even sigh. . . . I left him standing. . . . It was a minute ago. How did I come here? (“The Idiots,” *TU* 76)

However, the vehement emotions associated with these two criminal deeds are felt similarly by two women; both Winnie and Susan are theoretically capable of committing murder again if they were placed in similar situations: “I would tear you to pieces, I would kill you twenty times [...]. How many times must I kill you – you blasphemer! Satan sends you here. I am damned too!” (84), shouts Susan insanely at the vision of her dead husband. This testifies to their potential for evil and criminal tendencies that are very likely to be unearthed in dire straits.

But is it really possible that these Conradian examples of wicked women are ontologically unwavering in their wickedness? Are they really without thoughts, deeds, or circumstances that could, at least a little bit, extenuate the gravity of their

crimes? Is it really credible that there is not a morsel of good in their psycho-moral constitution? Can they only be seen as stagnant constructs incapable of change? Are they then to be read as having been enchanted by the overwhelming lure of iniquity and their powerful influence over men? The answer to all these questions is negative.

The moment the reader is disposed to question the established views upon these literary characters as purely iniquitous, seductive, scheming, and prone to crime, one is certain to unearth some fresh lines of interpretation. Putting their iniquity aside for a moment, the reader can perceive them from a slightly different perspective.

Undeniably, the governess is generally presented as demonstrating malice, wickedness, and jealousy towards the children who have been entrusted to her care. She is iniquity and cunning incarnate, manipulative enough to steer and dominate not only the young inexperienced girl Flora but also her knowledgeable and experienced father. However, at one moment Marlow seems to extenuate the governess's conduct by asserting that, in part, her code of behaviour has been motivated by fear of losing her passing beauty and youth and, as it is asserted by Leonard Orr, "thwarted desires and a sense of social entrapment" (261). Hence, the general assessment of her manner and life cannot be only one-dimensional. She is mostly evil and cunning, but the mitigating force of her suffering from self-repression and anxiety connected with the passing of time and her looks may therefore present her in a more sympathetic light.

Freya, with her seductive and tempting approach, is likewise motivated by trepidation: anxiety over her father's prosperity and well-being which is seemingly jeopardized by the presence and activity of the Dutch authorities. While being perceived in this light, it is possible to analyse Freya's dealing with Heemskirk as a means of protecting her father against possible outbursts of anger and fury from the Dutch captain. Therefore, it seems inaccurate to regard Freya only as a seductive and scheming *femme fatale* whose activity will inevitably lead to Jasper's ruin (taking the form of loss of his beloved ship). Accordingly, she

may be seen as a loving daughter who vehemently fights for her father, who, on account of the terror inspired by Heemskirk, “let the beggar treat him with heavy contempt, devour his daughter with his eyes, and drink the best part of his little stock of wine” (“Freya of the Seven Isles,” *TLS* 160).

Winnie Verloc’s and Susan Bacadou’s murders of their husbands cannot be treated as casual deeds at all; they are conducted in self-defence (Susan) and as the powerful reaction against the inexplicability of her beloved brother’s suffering and pointless demise (Winnie). Their crimes are therefore not capricious acts but rather function as outcries against injustice and the suffering, pain, and anguish they experience on account of their husbands’ brutality and iniquity. And, as Jetty de Vries has put it, “restricting ourselves to the evidence of the novel itself we might feel that she is only technically a criminal. Conrad certainly considers Winnie’s crime as a crime passionnel, or in other words as a crime committed in extreme emotional duress” (13).

There is not any doubt that the dire straits and distressing episodes (the loss of a beloved member of the family, the fear of being raped by one’s husband, social stigmata, the anxiety stemming from loss of attractiveness and winsomeness) that Conrad’s *femmes fatales* are forced to go through make these women defiant, confirming in that way their innate dynamism and multifacetedness. Therefore, due to the effects of these challenging experiences, they cannot be merely perceived as utterly wicked. Rather, they are exposed as being trapped in dead-end situations (especially Winnie, Freya, and Susan). What is more, upon closer scrutiny the reader perceives them as being entrenched in the tragic triad of the vicious circle, as I have analysed in a previous article.² Nevertheless, they have recourse to revolt as portrayed by means of theoretical concepts framed by Albert Camus. Generally, their resistance against the tyranny they encounter causes them to discover autonomy outside the given discourse of power.

In his Foreword to Camus’ *The Rebel*, Herbert Read sheds some light upon the concept of rebellion and it is crucial to grasp some of these theoretical points in order to comprehend *femmes*

fatales' standards of behaviour more thoroughly. He draws the reader's attention to the fact that "revolt is one of the 'essential dimensions' of mankind" which is, in truth, "a principle of existence" (viii), and more importantly, it is "the basis of the struggle." In fact, mutiny is the "origin of form, source of real life" (x). These propositions classify those women who eagerly avail themselves of such an approach – manifesting its force in evil and commission of crime – as grasping an opportunity to unearth their own subjectivity. By doing so they condemn themselves "to a make-believe world in the desperate hope of achieving a more profound existence" (Camus 54), which cannot be found in the reality dominated by male authority and superiority. Camus writes that

Rebellion is born of the spectacle of irrationality, confronted with an unjust and incomprehensible condition. But its blind impulse is to demand order in the midst of chaos, and unity in the very heart of the ephemeral. It protests, it demands, it insists that the outrage be brought to an end [...]. Its preoccupation is to transform. (10)

The insurgency launched by Conradian *femmes fatales*, recognized as a defence of their own rights, legitimizes their struggle when they find themselves in an irrational situation, since, in their heart of hearts, they sense that some things have gone absolutely awry (mostly Winnie and Susan).

To conclude, although, as is asserted by Jones in *Conrad and Women*, "the presence of women characters in Conrad's novels has caused the greatest difficulties for critics" (7), because he was a writer of sea stories centred on men, the effort to analyse women characters in Conrad's literary oeuvre and examine their hidden potential and possibilities is worthwhile. They are worth exploring not only because Conrad's later fiction puts distinctly more emphasis upon women and their importance in the world dominated by men. It is likewise significant on account of the fact that these women, especially the evil ones, function as realizations of "Conrad's 'metaphysics of darkness' which is to be traced in each [example] of Conrad's fiction," as is emphasized by Roya Roussel (qtd. by Binczyk 123).

The truth is that despite the fact that they “usually remain in an idealized and imaginary realm of subtlety and beauty, removed from harsh realities” (50), as is asserted by Wiesław Krajka in *Isolation and Ethos*, women, whose diverse portrayal “owes much of its profundity and uniqueness to the works of the Polish romantics, in particular to the ambivalent attitude toward female self-sacrifice and self-denial in the tradition of Polish romanticism” (Kao 127), do play fundamental roles in shaping male subjectivity. In line with Mongia, they function as “a medium of exchange within a world of masculine power” (145), playing a variety of roles and functions that allow readers “insight into the complicated negotiations of power that mark relations between the sexes and races” (147). They likewise are able to unearth their own subjectivity while taking recourse to both evil – perceived in the Conradian literary domain as a significant section of societal reality and a fundamental requirement of the development of human consciousness – and crime, which often appears as the only alternative for them on their way towards self-discovery, self-knowledge and freedom.

NOTES

¹ Evil as a significant constituent of existence for both Conrad and Milton is analysed by a wide number of critics. Milton’s vision of iniquity is studied by, among others, such scholars as Eustace Tillyard in *Milton*, Arnold Stein in *The Art of Presence*, John Armstrong in *The Paradise Myth*, Stanley Fish in *Surprised by Sin* and Raphael Werblowsky in his *Lucifer and Prometheus: A Study of Milton’s Satan*. As for Conrad’s perception of evil, one can take recourse to such works as *Joseph Conrad: His Moral Vision* by George A. Panichas, *Joseph Conrad – The Major Phase* by Jacques Berthoud or lesser-known works of criticism such as *Out of Eden* by Paul Kahn, Part II of the book *A History of the Heart* by Ole Høystad, Chapter II of *Facing Evil* by John Kekes. All those works of criticism, generally, perceive iniquity not only as something heinous in its nature. It is likewise presented as an important reality, an integral part of life-time experiences enabling one to solve eternal dilemmas, as well as a fundamental phase of the development of human consciousness. What is more, the nature of iniquity is intrinsically associated with man’s proud nature and ensuing rebellion as a symptom of the abuse of free will or betrayal of fellowship and rejection of social responsibility. Wickedness is often allied with the

concept of alienation – assuming many forms – designating a state of mind as well as of body.

² Even though my article entitled “Trapped in a Vicious Circle of the Tragic Triad Miltonian Satan and Conradian Kurtz’s Process of Unearthing Authentic Identity” focuses upon both Satan and Kurtz as being ensnared in the tragic triad, the premises of this phenomenon can likewise be applied to Conradian *femmes fatales*. The phenomenon is described by Viktor Frankl who holds that nobody is sure to be spared from coping with three commonly experienced realities in existence: the pain perceived as the reality of anguish, the death as the reality of our mortality (transitoriness of human life), and the guilt as the reality of our human imperfection. Those three polarities of the tragic triad comprise a great section of the life of man, and more importantly, they cannot be avoided. However, as well as being appalling, their significance arises from the fact that they are stimuli to steady development, to self-discovery.

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