

# Conrad and Woman: Through an Analysis of the Correspondence with Marguerite Poradowska

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How did Joseph Conrad (1857–1924) regard woman? The opening lines of Chapter Two of *An Outcast of the Islands* (1895), for example, contain an allusion to a woman which evokes her mysteriousness:

Like a beautiful and unscrupulous woman, the sea of the past was glorious in its smiles, irresistible in its anger, capricious, enticing, illogical, irresponsible; *a thing to love, a thing to fear*. It cast a spell, it gave joy, it lulled gently into boundless faith; then with quick and causeless anger it killed. But its cruelty was redeemed by the charm of its inscrutable mystery, by the immensity of its promise, by the supreme witchery of its possible favour. (Emphasis mine)<sup>(1)</sup>

Here, the omniscient narrator compares the sea of the past to a woman trying to define her nature. But at the same time, the narrator unwittingly reveals his view of woman in this passage. Though it is ambivalent and thus not so simple, was the author's voice the same as the narrator's?

Conrad is known as a writer who wrote nautical tales full of exotic adventures and political novels. He explored the moral failures of the destructive heroes in his own dramatic fictional world. Therefore, there is the general impression that he is a "masculine" writer who wrote little about women and was indifferent to them. In relation to this, Conrad's characterization of women was often pointed out stereotypical or awkward. The critic who pointed this out in a comparatively early period was Thomas Moser. In the 1950s, Moser maintained that heterosexual love was not congenial to Conrad's creativity and attributed the "near paralysis" in dealing with the subject to the author's fear of woman.<sup>(2)</sup> In the 1960s, Bernard C. Meyer advanced Moser's view in his psychoanalytic biography. Meyer saw a fear of woman in most of Conrad's male characters and interpreted this as a projection of the author's own fear, attributing it to the fact that he lost his mother early in life.<sup>(3)</sup> Furthermore, Jeffery Meyers recently supported Bernard Meyer by attributing Conrad's misogyny to the episode that his proposal of marriage was turned down by the three French women, including Marguerite Poradowska.<sup>(4)</sup> Earlier studies have exerted an enduring influence upon later scholars and an image of a misogynistic writer has been established to a certain extent.

Averting concentration from his work to his life, Conrad looks to have had little relation to women: his mother's death in his early childhood, nearly twenty years' sea-faring life, his marriage at thirty

seven years of age. Letters and biographies about him, however, reveal several unknown facts and episodes about Conrad. For example, the women he formed intimate relationships with were surprisingly many. Names such as Eugénie Renouf, Alice Show, Émile Briquel, Marguerite Poradowska, and Jane Anderson can be listed beside that of his mother, Evelina Korzeniowski, and his wife, Jessie George. Among them, one of the most important women when considering Conrad's view of woman is Marguerite Poradowska because he revealed his thoughts and emotions in his letters to her. An examination of their relationship will reveal his attitude towards woman. The correspondence with her is a valuable document in order to fully appreciate his view of woman. Therefore, she is the key person to solve the issue of woman in his work.

This essay is an attempt to understand Conrad's view of woman by focussing on his relationship with Poradowska through careful reading of the texts of the letters to her. By so doing, a new light will be shed on the problem of the description of women because the two are closely intertwined. The purpose of this paper is to illuminate the description of women which has been undervalued in nearly a half century of criticism written on Conrad.

Conrad carried on a lively correspondence with Marguerite Poradowska (1848-1937) from 1890 to 1895. He wrote her nearly one hundred letters during those five years. Since his letters are frank and full of affection, the possibility of an affair was suggested by some biographers. But it was not to her that he wrote his first letter. According to *The Collected Letters* of the Cambridge edition he wrote three letters to Alexander Poradowski, Poradowska's husband in February 1890. Poradowski was Conrad's distant cousin who lived in Brussels. And Conrad introduced himself in his first letter written on 5 February. The reason why he wrote letters to his cousin pertained to his plan to travel to the Congo. At this time he planned to go to the Congo, so he applied to the Société Anonyme pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo. Though Captain Albert Thys promised him the command of the company's river-steamer there was no correspondence after the interview with him. Therefore, Conrad seemingly tried to exert Poradowska's influence because he knew that she had important connections with the administrators of the company.<sup>(5)</sup> His main purpose to write his letters to Poradowski was to secure his position in the Congo.

Despite the fact that he achieved his original purpose, Conrad maintained an active correspondence with Poradowska. The question that lingers, however, is what induced him to write close to one hundred letters to her over the next five years. The answer to this question seems to be implied in the third letter to her. Since Poradowski died on 7 February, the recipient of his letters had changed from the husband to the wife on 4 February. In his letter dated 14 February 1890 he writes the following:

J'ai fini Jaga — deux fois.— Je ne Vous en ecris rien sous le charme de cette lecture.<sup>(6)</sup>

[I have finished *Yaga* — twice. I shall write nothing to you about it while I am still under its charm.]

*Yaga* he mentions here is a novel about Ruthenian life by Poradowska which appeared serially in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, an eminent Paris journal, in 1887. She had published two novels when he entered into correspondence with her and had become an established writer by 1896.<sup>(7)</sup> Though Conrad himself was to publish his first novel in 1894 he had started to write it in the autumn of 1899 according to his recollection.<sup>(8)</sup> This means that he had already written the beginning of *Almayer's Folly* at this time. In this letter he expresses her as being “bonne, aimante, dévouée et courageuse” (“kind, loving, devoted and spirited”) (38). He seems to have felt an immediate attraction to her because only nine days had passed since he first met her. One of the main reasons for this was the fact that she was a writer. This is evident in his preoccupation with her work, which dominated much of his correspondence with her.

Conrad's letters to Poradowska generously abound with references to her work. They can be seen in almost all of his letters. First, let us take a look at the contents of the references closely in order to reveal how he regarded her work. The letter dated 3 February 1893 seems to convey his feeling towards her work most concisely. It begins with the following passage:

Ma chère Tante. Merci de Votre bonne lettre et de la Revue.— Les nouvelles de votre succès, de l'appréciation de Vos talents que Vous avez gagnée a la pointe de Votre plume me remplissent de joie. Moi qui a toujours cru — et prédit— Votre succès j'en suis très fier mais point du tout surpris. — (123)

[My dear Aunt, Thanks for your kind letter and the *Revue*. The news of your success, of the recognition of your talents that you have won at pen-point, fills me with joy. I, who have always believed in and predicted your success, am very proud, but not at all surprised.]

The work Conrad mentions here is her *Popes et popadias* which serially appeared in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* in 1892. Though her *Demoiselle Micia* (1889) had already won one of six French Academy prizes (59), he heartily rejoices her success as the word “joie” (“joy”) shows. Expressing his congratulations on her success as a writer he sings the praises of her work in the latter half of the quotation. Such expressions of praise for her work can be often seen in his letters and it is one of the main characteristics of his correspondence.

These praises, however, are neither mere abstract admiration nor flattery. In the second paragraph of the letter just quoted, Conrad makes a concrete comment on the characters of Poradowska's *Popes et popadias*:

C'est dans des courts recits (short story) que l'on voit la main du maitre. Je ne peux pas

dire que vos figures ont du relief.— Pour moi elles sont absolument vivantes: le Prêtre et sa femme, l'enfant cherchant les remèdes pendant une nuit d'orage, le vétérinaire, la grand-mère avec le chat ils sont tous là distinct, se mouvant respirant dans l'atmosphère que Vous leur avez créée au milieu des paysages que Vous avez peints.— Du reste c'est rempli des traits charmants — d'observations fines, des choses prises sur le vif. (123)

[It takes a small-scale narrative (short story) to show the master's hand. I cannot say that your characters have relief. For me, they are absolutely alive: the priest and his wife, the child in search of medicine on a stormy night, the veterinarian, the grandmother with the cat — all are distinct, living and breathing in the atmosphere you have created for them, in the midst of the landscapes you have painted. Moreover, it is full of charming touches — of discriminating observations, of things taken from life.]

He praises her work here because it painted a vivid picture of the people, so that he felt them to be like real people. Interestingly, in the letter dated 6 April 1892 he compares her to Flaubert by saying: “Vous me rappelez un peu Flaubert dont je viens de relire *Mme Bovary* avec une admiration pleine de respect” (“you remind me a little of Flaubert, whose *Madame Bovary* I have just reread with respectful admiration”) (109). As some critics discussed, Gustave Flaubert was one of the novelists who had the greatest influence on Conrad.<sup>(9)</sup> He admired Flaubert's dedication to art and his power of observation “seeing life as it is.” Therefore, solid realism was also one of the characteristics of Conrad's work. Though he wrote to Arnold Bennett “realism in art will never approach reality,”<sup>(10)</sup> he thought that it was an indispensable means to attain reality and make readers realize something beyond it, reality or the truth of life. Conrad praised Poradowska's power of observation in her work and it was not a “gallantry” as Baines conjectured.<sup>(11)</sup>

Conrad's comments on Poradowska's work were essentially based on his own view of literature though it was tinged with his personal feelings. The passage in the letter dated 2 February 1894 will serve to demonstrate this. Referring to her *Le Mariage du fils Grandsire* just published he confides to her as follows:

Mon appréciation de Votre livre — de tout livre — est purement *émotionnelle*.— De l'ouvrage, du travail, de la ciselure — si je puis m'exprimer ainsi — je ne peux guère juger; et comme l'émotion est une affaire personnelle mon jugement ne peut qu'être incomplet et bien souvent incorrect. Vous voyez donc que je perd la joie de “celui qui sait” et voit l'oeuvre d'art dans son entier.— Mais il m'est permis — heureusement — de m'oublier dans la contemplation des images charmantes, d'écouter la *musique* des mots écrits; de vivre la joie, de respirer dans l'air, de partager les joies et les douleurs, les espérances, et les regrets qui remplissent ce coin de l'Univers que Votre plume de Magicienne a créé. (146, emphasis mine)

[My appreciation of your book, of any book, is purely *emotional*. Of the craft, the workmanship, the chiselling, if I may so put it, I can scarcely judge. And as emotion is a personal affair, my judgement can only be incomplete and often incorrect. So you see I miss

the joy of 'one who knows' and sees the work of art in its entirety. But I am at liberty — happily — to lose myself in the contemplation of entrancing images, to listen to the *music* of written words, to live the joy, breathe the air, partake of the joys and sorrows, the hopes, and the regrets which fill this corner of the Universe created by your magical pen.]

Here, he reveals how he was charmed by her novel and thus his appreciation of her work was emotional. But the intention of this passage is not to confide the incompleteness or subjectiveness of his judgement on her work but to convey his affection for them. And interestingly, the words he used strikingly echo those of the Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* written three years after this letter:

All art, therefore, appeals primarily to the senses, and the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through the senses, if its high desire is to reach the secret spring of *responsive emotions*. It must strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting, and to the *magic suggestiveness of music* — which is the art of arts. (Emphasis mine)<sup>(12)</sup>

Though he rarely revealed his view of literature he expresses himself in this celebrated literary manifesto: the aim of literature is to reach the spring of “emotions” and in order to attain this it must be, for example, like suggestive “music.” The words used in this literary manifesto echo those he used for her work. The coincidence of the words in the two passages demonstrates that he thought that her work had the essential element he sought for literature as art.

Since he appreciated and loved her work it is not surprising that Conrad was influenced by Poradowska. Though his immersion in the French writers' work was pointed out by some critics, Poradowska's influence upon him has not been argued until recently. Susan Jones, a contemporary critic, convincingly argued this point. She made it clear that he was influenced by her work pointing out the similarities between *Demoiselle Micia* (1888) and *Chance* (1914).<sup>(13)</sup> Though critics have been reluctant to admit her influence regarding her as a “second rate” writer,<sup>(14)</sup> Conrad was, in fact, influenced by her through loving her work. This fact demonstrates the depth of their literary association.

However, Conrad not only wrote about Poradowska's work in his letters to her. He wrote about his own work as well. Since he was building *Almayer's Folly* (1894) and *An Outcast of the Islands* (1895) during the correspondence with her, the references to the two novels can be seen in many of the letters. Especially the letters of 1894 abound with references to *Almayer's Folly*. For example, in the letter dated 7 January 1894 he writes: “Si Vous êtes une petite fille bien sage je Vous laisserais lire mon histoire d'Almayer quand je l'aurai fini” (“If you are a well-behaved little girl, I shall let you read my story of Almayer when I have finished it”) (143). In his letter dated 16 April 1894 he lets her know

the process of the creation: “le chapitre XI est fini (9000 mots) — plus long mais bien plus mauvais que les autres. Je commence le XII dans un quart d’heure” (“Chapter XI is completed (9000 words) — longer but much worse than the others. I am beginning Chapter XII in a quarter of an hour”) (152). His letter dated 24 April 1894 begins: “Ma chère Tante. J’ai la douleur de Vous faire part de la mort de M. Kaspar Alamayr qui a eu lieu ce matin a 3<sup>h</sup>” (“My dear Aunt, I regret to inform you of the death of Mr Kaspar Almayer, which occurred this morning at 3 o’clock”) (153). Also, in the letter dated 10 October 1894 he confides about his new book, *An Outcast of the Islands*: “J’avance tout doucement avec un vagabond sous chaque bras dans l’espoir de les vendre a Fisher Unwin” (“I progress very cautiously with a vagabond under each arm, in the hope of selling them to Fisher Unwin”) (179). These reports are, so to speak, various kinds of inside stories about the creation of art. Therefore, if Poradowska had not been a writer of close acquaintance he could not have revealed these things. As he became acquainted with editors and writers such as Edward Garnett, Ford Madox Ford, and Stephen Crane later on, she would be the only person he could speak about his work in those days.

Furthermore, Conrad’s references to his work were not mere superficial reports. He also revealed the difficulty of creation in his letters to Poradowska. For example, in the letter dated 29 March or 5 April 1894 he writes about the progress of *Almayer’s Folly* as follows:

Pardonnez-moi de ne pas avoir écrit plus tôt mais je suis en train de lutter avec Chap XI; *une lutte à mort* Vous savez! Si je me laisse aller je suis perdu! Je Vous écris au moment de sortir. Il faut bien que je sorte quelquefois Hélas! Je regrette chaque minute que je passe loin du papier. Je ne dis pas de la plume car J’ai écrit fort peu, mais l’inspiration me vient en regardant le papier. (150, emphasis mine)

[Forgive me for not having written sooner, but I am in the midst of struggling with Chapter XI; *a struggle to the death*, you know! If I let go, I am lost! I am writing to you just as I go out. I must indeed go out sometimes, alas! I begrudge each minute I spend away from the page. I do not say from the pen, for I have written very little, but inspiration comes to me while gazing at the paper.]

Similarly, in the letter dated 27 December 1894 he writes as follows referring to *An Outcast of the Islands*:

La chose est faite. J’ai changé mon titre. Ce sera: “An Outcast of the Islands.” Et la chose elle même est changée. Tout est changé excepté le doute. Tout — excepté la peur de ces phantômes que l’on évoque soi même et qui si souvent refusent d’obéir la cervelle qui les a créés.— Enfin. Voilà le chap. VIII terminé. Encore quatre! *Quatre siècles d’agonie* — quatre minutes des délices et puit la fin — la tête vide — le découragement et le doute éternel.— (192, emphasis mine)

[The thing is done. I have changed my title. It will be: *An Outcast of the Islands*. And

the thing itself has been changed. Everything has been changed except doubt. Everything, except the fear of the ghosts which one evokes oneself and which often refuse to obey the brain that has created them. Here is Chapter VIII finished at last. Four to go! *Four centuries of agony* — four minutes of delight and then the end — an empty head — discouragement and eternal doubt.]

Though the words “lutte” (“struggle”) and “agonie” (“agony”) in the two letters may sound somewhat exaggerative it was not so because he had two difficulties he had to tackle, that is, the problem of language and acceptance. First, unlike other writers English was for him a foreign language completely different from his mother tongue: Polish. Secondly, he had the anxiety that his novels might not appeal to the taste of the general public. Therefore, writing novels in English was agonizing, as he confided. For example, a sentence in the letter dated 6 January 1908 addressed to Galsworthy reflects such an anxiety: “I suppose there is something in me that is unsympathetic to the general public”.<sup>(15)</sup> According to biographies he seems to have felt his foreignness actually all his life. He was conscious of and desired popularity as a writer while he sought serious literature as art. These mental afflictions made writing novels for him more difficult than in the case of other writers. Therefore, it can be easily guessed that he could go on writing novels by revealing his various thoughts and feelings to Poradowska who was a fellow writer of close acquaintance and who understood him completely.

Conrad also wrote about other writers than Poradowska and himself. For example, in the letter dated 29 October or 5 November 1894 he makes an interesting comment on Sarah Grand's novel. He writes without reserve:

La critique serieuse traite les “Heavenly Twins” de Mme Sarah Grand avec le mepris qui lui est du. Mais! — le livre a passé par 10 éditions et l'auteur a empoché 50,000 francs. Le monde est un sale endroit. — Du rest cette femme est détraquée et bête par dessus le marché. Imaginez Vous un imbecile qui deviendrait fou. C'est d'un triste et d'un affreux. Un vrai cauchemar, quoi! — (183)

[Serious criticism treats *The Heavenly Twins* by Mme Sarah Grand with the scorn it deserves. But! — the book has gone through ten editions and the author has pocketed 50,000 francs. The world is a dirty place. Moreover, this woman is confused and stupid into the bargain. Imagine stupidity gone mad. It is sad and frightful. A real nightmare, indeed!]

Sarah Grand is a feminist author and her *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) is a novel which described the so called New Woman who chose not to pursue the conventional bourgeois woman's career of marriage and motherhood. In the 1880s and 1890s New Woman novels were popular in England and *The Heavenly Twins* especially enjoyed great popularity. But Conrad's comment here is caustic and wry. As the last decades of the nineteenth century, the *fin-de-siècle*, was the era of the *Yellow Book* and thus

“art for art’s sake” in the English literary history, Conrad was one of the writers who sought literature as art. Therefore, it would be natural that he made a highly critical comment on Grand’s novel. And if he had regarded Poradowska as a second-rate writer he could not have written such a severe comment on other writer in the letter.

Furthermore, it should not be missed that Conrad also criticized Poradowska’s work though he praised them in many of his letters to her. In the first half of the letter just quoted he makes a concrete comment on her novel:

Il Vous faut pour Votre roman une catastrophe non seulement dramatique mais encore caracteristique. L’avez Vous? Un petit employé polonais ne ressemble pas un petit employé français (com[m]e Maupassant les connaissait bien!) et si Vous voyez la difference clairement (comme je n’en doute pas) Vous ferez quelque chose de beau. Je suppose que ce sera plutot une etude de femme. N’est-ce pas? (183)

[Your novel needs a climax which is not only dramatic but also characteristic. Do you have it? A minor Polish employee does not resemble a minor French employee (how well Maupassant knew them!), and if you see the difference clearly (as I am sure you do), you will make something fine. I suppose it will really be a study of woman. Isn’t that so?]

Unlike Sarah Grand’s case, his tone is frank and convincing, so this is more advice than criticism. Perhaps he could give her such advice since he had already published his first novel *Almayer’s Folly* at that time. Moreover, he also discussed her *Marylka* when he visited her in Brussels (151). Judging by these facts and episode, it can be said that he had a professional relationship with her, and that he was on equal terms with her regarding her as a fellow creative artist.

The equal relationship with Poradowska is distinctly shown in the words Conrad used to her in some letters. Though he always addressed her as “Tante” (“Aunt”) in the four letters he used the word “ami” (“friend”). For example, the letter dated 14 September 1893 closes as follows:

Aussitôt mon retour je Vous écrirai. En attendant je Vous embrasse bien fort et suis toujours Votre affectionné neveu et *ami* très fidèle J. Conrad. (129, emphasis mine)

[As soon as I return, I shall write to you. Meanwhile I embrace you heartily and am always your affectionate nephew and very faithful *friend* J. Conrad.]

Furthermore, he uses the word “amitié” (“friendship”) in the letter dated 12 July 1894:

En attendant il est bon de penser a Votre vraie et tendre *amitié*. Cela adoucit bien des choses. Je baise Vos mains. (160, emphasis mine)



[In the meantime, it is good to think of your true and tender *friendship*. That indeed sweetens many things. I kiss your hands.]

In a sense, the relationship between these two people is represented by how they address each other. In the correspondence with Poradowska, he addresses her as “ami” (“friend”) and defines his relationship with her as “amitié” (“friendship”). This means that he accepted her as his equal in spite of the difference of age and sex. Perhaps the fact that they shared the same interest in literature, enabled him to assume such an advanced attitude towards her. He must have felt that Poradowska, an established writer, was intellectually his equal. This is the most important characteristic in his relationship with her.

Finally, a single sentence from his letter will serve to sum up his relationship with her. He writes in the letter dated 18(?) August 1894: “Avec Vous je n’ai pas de fierté, ni fausse honte ni aucuns autres sentiments que ceux d’affection de confiance et de gratitude” (“With you I have no pride, neither false shame nor any feelings other than those of affection, trust, and gratitude”) (169). Though the object of this analysis is concerned only with *his* letters<sup>(16)</sup> we can deduce that he formed an intimate and equal relationship with Poradowska through the five years’ correspondence.

As has been analyzed, Conrad formed an intimate relationship with Poradowska through their shared interest in literature. This made his letters lively and full of affection. But it seems that their relationship cannot be explained adequately by the interest in literature. The reason is because his letters are often too lively and affectionate. In fact, some biographers suggested the possibility of an affair with her though their tones were subtly different. What drew him near to her to write such passionate letters, in addition to their shared interest in literature? Next, this essay will consider the circumstances in which he was placed, in order to investigate his relationship with her more further.

As is well-known Conrad went to the Congo in 1890 just after he entered into correspondence with Poradowska. Though it is still a mystery as to why he attempted to go, he sailed for Africa in May 1890 for a stay of three years. His experience there was sublimated into such a masterpiece as *Heart of Darkness* (1899). The second most important element that must be taken into account when considering his relationship with her, is the experience of the Congo journey. On his way to Africa he set about writing a letter to her. In the letter dated 10 June 1890 he writes passionately:

Par exemple: entre autres choses que je voudrai oublier sans y parvenir, je voudrai perdre le souvenir de ma charmante Tante. Naturellement c’est impossible; par consequent je me rapelle, et je suis triste. Ou êtes-Vous? Comment êtes-Vous? M’avez-Vous oublié? . . . Pour rendre l’existence tant soit peu supportable il me faut des lettres; beaucoup des letters. De vous entre autres. (53-4, ellipsis mine)

[For example: among other things I should like to forget but cannot — I should like to forget the memory of my charming Aunt. Naturally, it is impossible. Consequently, I remember and am sad. Where are you? How are you? Have you forgotten me? . . . In order to make my existence even slightly bearable, I need letters, many letters. From you, among others.]

Here, he frankly reveals his feelings for her and seeks her letters heartily. Though it was only four months since he met her for the first time in Brussels he could not forget her. In those days, he had few friends and there were no relatives for him in England. Though he also exchanged correspondence with Tadeusz Bobrowski, his uncle was a severe and practical guardian to Conrad and he felt he could not reveal all of his thoughts and feelings to him.<sup>(17)</sup> Therefore, the person he missed most in the long and lonely journey was Poradowska. It would be natural for him to miss her. She had the bond of literature, and understood him completely. He found out the meaning of her existence which he had not thought of before through the journey.

As his diary and letters reveal the journey into the heart of darkness was for Conrad neither exciting nor heroic as he had expected. The Congo at that time was under King Leopold's notorious exploitation and he saw human avarice and cruelty under the cause of altruism and philanthropism. Therefore, it was rather a depressing and miserable journey. In such disappointment he wrote a long letter on 26 September 1890. His affection for Poradowska is more frankly and keenly expressed:

Devan qui soulagerai-je mon coeur si ce n'est devant Vous?! En Vous parlant j'ai la certitude d'être compris au demi-mot. . . . En vérité en lisant Vos chères lettres j'ai oublié l'Afrique, le Congo, les sauvages noirs et les esclaves blancs (dont je suis un) qui l'habitent. J'ai été heureux pendant une heure. Savez que ce n'est pas une petite chose (ni une chose facile) de rendre une créature humaine heureuse pendant *toute une* heure. Vous pouvez être fière d'y avoir réussi. Aussi mon coeur va vers Vous dans un élan de gratitude et d'affection la plus sincère et la plus profonde. (59-60, ellipsis mine)

[Before whom can I ease my heart if not before you?! In speaking to you, I am certain of being understood down to the merest hint. . . . Indeed, while reading your dear letters I have forgotten Africa, the Congo, the black savages and the white slaves (of whom I am one) who inhabit it. For one hour I have been happy. Know that it is not a small thing (nor an easy thing) to make a human being happy for an *entire hour*. You can be proud of having succeeded. And so my heart goes out to you with a burst of gratitude and the most sincere and most profound affection.]

In this letter, he definitely expresses that her letters are a source of joy and he was consoled by them. In other parts of this letter he writes about his irritation and hatred against the circumstances, especially his colleagues, which are reminiscent of Marlow's complaints in *Heart of Darkness*. He must have felt the same bitterness as Marlow did for the human folly. Moreover, his health was poor

because he was suffering from a fever and an attack of dysentery. In such circumstances he seems to have been consoled by her letters. Through the ordeal of the journey his relationship with her grew and he formed a deep attachment to her. Though his uncle, Tadeusz Bobrowski, regarded his correspondence with Poradowska as a flirtation, Conrad's deep affection and trust in her was born and strengthened through the ordeal of the Congo journey.

Therefore, the letters written after the Congo journey increase in frankness and familiarity as compared with ones written before. Upon returning from Africa in January 1891, Conrad visited Poradowska in Brussels, after which he immediately wrote a letter on 8 February. This letter distinctly reflects the meaning of her existence for him:

Je ne sais pas comment Vous exprimer ma reconnaissance pour Votre bonté. Malade comme Vous l'êtes Vous pensez à moi! Ce n'est pas encore le fait des services que Vous voulez me rendre qui me touche. C'est surtout de savoir qu'il y a au monde quelqu'un qui me porte intérêt, dont le coeur m'est ouvert, qui me rend heureux. (70)

[I do not know how to express my gratitude for your kindness. Ill as you are, you think of me! What touches me is not simply the fact that you want to be of service to me. It is above all to know that there is in the world someone who takes an interest in me, whose heart is open to me, who makes me happy.]

As the first half of the quotation shows, he was thinking of working as a sailor and continued to look for work, asking Poradowska for help after the Congo journey. According to Baines' biography he sailed with the *Torrens* two times in 1892. In 1894 he sailed with the *Adowa*, which was his last voyage as a sailor.<sup>(18)</sup> Though she made an effort to find him a job and he temporarily worked at the shipping company he could not find a satisfactory job. Moreover, he was suffering gout, neuralgic pains, and a recurrent attack of malaria. In such a precarious situation he was building his first novel *Almayer's Folly*. As the latter part of the quotation impressively reveals he was placed in the situation of solitude and depression because his early circle of acquaintances in England was not so wide. Thus it would have been natural for him to seek the association of Poradowska who understood and helped him. She was, in fact, the only person he could trust and confide everything in at that time. This explains the increasingly apparent expressions of frankness and affection to her. It can be said that the experience in the Congo made him realize how important Poradowska was, which created the foundation of their solid relationship. This fact should not be missed when considering his relationship with her.

The five years, from 1890 to 1895, was for Conrad a period of metamorphosis from a seaman to a novelist. It is true that he was finding a job at sea as his letters show but his desire to write was stronger than it looks. In the "Author's Note" of *An Outcast of the Islands* he emphasized that he was

persuaded by Edward Garnett to write. But he had started writing his second novel before he met Garnett. He wrote to Poradowska on 18 (?) August 1894 that he had begun to write a short story calling it “Two Vagabonds” (169). Though he consistently tried to create an impression that he had entered the world of literature by chance, this simply was not so. For example, in *A Personal Record* (1912) he recollected that he showed the manuscript of *Almayer's Folly* to a young man from Cambridge named Jacques.<sup>(19)</sup> Moreover, he wrote to Edward Noble on 28 October 1895 referring to *Almayer's Folly*: “It took me 3 years to finish the “Folly”. There was not a day I did not think of it” (252). However, according to the note in the Cambridge edition, he spent five years on the manuscript. These episodes show that his impulse to write was stronger than he pretended. In such circumstances to have a correspondent who can understand his agony of creation must have meant a lot to him. Poradowska played a crucial role in metamorphosing him into a writer. Therefore, literary intercourse should not be underestimated when considering his relationship with her. It is the most important element in his correspondence with her. The Congo journey, in the end, gave him the opportunity to realize the importance of her and to strengthen his affection for her.

As has been outlined, Conrad established a close and equal relationship with Poradowska through their shared interest in literature during his earlier years. It is evident that she was the most intimate person to him, when analyzing the first half of the 1890s. However, the possibility of an affair with her has been pointed out by some biographers, though their insinuations were different. For example, Baines pointed out the episode that Bobrowski warned Conrad against becoming too involved with her.<sup>(20)</sup> Though I maintained that his affection for her was based on sharing the same interest in literature with her, it is still possible that he felt love for her as a man and contemplated a marriage with her. What was the truth? To inquire into the real state of the affair will lead researches more deeply into the emotional aspect of his relationship with her. Here, I want to examine his letters to her by focusing on this point.

Though Baines discarded the possibility of an affair with Poradowska<sup>(21)</sup> it is a fact that there are several phrases, sentences, and passages that can be read as those of love letters. In the letter dated 5 March 1892 Conrad comments frankly on the line of conduct she chose for her relative. He closes this letter as follows:

Je Vous dis tout cela car je Vous aime beaucoup, Vous admire immensément et je Vous baise les mains en disant au revoir — si Vous voulez encore me connaître a mon retour. (106)

[I tell you all this because I love you very much, admire you immensely, and I kiss your hands in saying *au revoir* — if you still wish to know me on my return.]

Of course, the word "aime" ("love") is not necessarily used to mean heterosexual love. Therefore, it is possible to interpret this word as an expression of affection for an intimate friend or relative. But she had consulted with him about her family problem and it is not too farfetched to interpret it as such in this context. Though he used "Vous," not "tu" in the form of address, it was written with capital letters. It is possible to think that he intentionally used "Vous" in order to maintain his distance.

Though the word "aime" ("love") is still ambiguous in the example above, its meaning seems to move towards certainty as time advanced. On 6 April 1892 Conrad wrote a letter from port Adelaide, in Australia. This is a passage from this letter:

Du reste Vous savez bien que si je n'écris pas souvent je ne Vous en aime pas moins. . . . Vous concevez bien que si je ne Vous aimais pas tant je ne ressentirai pas avec toute cette amertume les tricheries de votre destinée. (109-10, ellipsis mine)

[Moreover you know very well that if I do not write often I love you none the less. . . . You can well understand that if I did not love you so much I would not resent so bitterly the tricks that Destiny has played on you.]

As can be seen the word "aime" ("love") appears two times in this letter. In the first sentence of the quotation he uses it in order to make an excuse for the arrears. In the preceding part of the letter he writes that he has been exceptionally busy and in a kind of an intellectual torpor. But in fact it was only one month that he neglected to write a letter. And in the second sentence "aime" is used in the subjunctive mood. Here, he refers to the sacrificial conduct Poradowska took, and his consideration for her is felt in this sentence. The range in the meaning of the word "aime" becomes more definitive in the second usage.

In addition to the definitive word like "aime," several passages can be seen which signify the special intimacy with Poradowska in Conrad's letters. For example, on 19 October 1892, six months after the preceding quotation, he wrote: "Dites moi tout ce que Vous faites" ("Tell me all you are doing") (119). And on 25 December 1893 he further wrote:

Je Vous envoi en même temps mes souhaits de la nouvelle année. Entre nous c'est une ceremonie puisque Vous devez savoir que pas une journée de ma vie (et de la votre) ne se passe sans que je ne Vous souhaite tous les bonheurs possibles et imaginables. (137)

[At the same time I send you my best wishes for the new year. Between ourselves, it is only a formality, since you must know that not a single day of my life (and of yours) passes without my wishing you all possible and imaginable happiness.]

In the second sentence, he expresses his affection for her distinctly by using a double negative. His

strong feeling can be felt in the use of the auxiliary verb “devez” (“must”). Of course, it is possible that we take these words as only a formality or convention of the letter. However, the similar and more affectionate expression can be seen in the letter dated 30 January or 6 February 1895, a year later: “Vous devez savoir que je pense a Vous tous le jours” (“you must know that I think of you every day”) (199). This expression is more direct and a formality cannot be felt here. Furthermore, on 2 April 1895, two months later, he wrote: “Pensez a moi qui Vous aime bien qui souffre et se rejouit avec Vous” (Think of me who loves you well, who suffers and rejoices with you”) (207). Here, his attitude is more expressive and positive because he asks Poradowska to think of him. In this way, his expression of affection for her gradually became frank and direct. This change shows that his feeling for her deepened through the writing of letters over a period of time.

Judging from these letters, is it not possible that Conrad loved Poradowska? It seems to me that the definite answer to this question cannot be gotten only by the letters he wrote. It will remain a mystery forever unless some biographical evidence surfaces because it concerns inner feelings of the human being. However, by analyzing his correspondence it is possible to come near to the intent of his feeling for her and define it by words. The following passage of the letter dated 27 December 1894 seems to reflect the nature of his affection and his view of her most definitively:

Je pense si souvent à Vous! Tous les jours. Et je m’imagine Vous voir la plume a la main — la clarté de la lampe sur Votre tête pensive — la feuille blanche devant Vous — et le travail de l’imagination qui fait vivre dans la joie ou dans la souffrance tout ce monde d’âmes sans corps sous Votre front! (192)

[I think of you so often! Every day. And I imagine seeing you, pen in hand, lamplight on your pensive head, blank paper before you — and the working of your imagination, which brings to life, in suffering or in joy, that whole world of bodiless spirits from beneath your brow.]

Conrad’s language here is a little like that of a romantic youth and the adoration for her can be felt in this passage. But it is significant that the figure of Poradowska in his imagination is of her engaged in the creation of art. Therefore, this passage shows that he admired and respected Poradowska as a writer. In fact, adoration and respect for her can be felt in many of his letters. From this analysis it can be deduced that he had neither prejudice nor fear for her and hence he was not the misogynist as some critics have maintained.

The relationship between Conrad and Poradowska has been made light of or viewed negatively by critics. One of the main reasons might be due to the fact that the correspondence with her was broken off on 11 June 1895. This sudden break caused some biographers to conjecture that Conrad suggested marriage to her. For example, Jeffery Meyers attributed the cause of his misogyny to the event in

which he was rejected by the three French women including Poradowska. But the relationship with her was completely different from the passing association of the other two. Moreover, he married Jessie George on March 1896 after a short engagement. A chain of events enabled the critics to interpret the break in correspondence negatively. Apparently, there is a gap between the letters dated 11 June 1895 and 16 April 1900 in the Cambridge edition. But any sign of catastrophe cannot be seen in the existent letters. As to this point some critics pointed out that the correspondence was kept up after 1895 because on 20 December 1897 Conrad wrote to Aniela Zagórska, Poradowski's sister: "A few days ago I had news from good Margot (428)." According to the note in the Cambridge edition, "Margot" is evidently Poradowska. This sentence in his letter demonstrates that the correspondence with her was continued after 1895 if not so frequently. Therefore, an apparent gap in the correspondence would mean that she suppressed or destroyed his letters. It is possible to conjecture that he suggested a proposal of marriage to her judging by the affection shown in his letters. But even if it had been so, the correspondence with her was kept up and their relationship did not change. In *Heart of Darkness* he described Marlow's aunt sympathetically whose portrayal was evidently based on Poradowska. This means that their relationship did not change even if there had been some bitter experience with her. This is because his affection for her was essentially based on the shared interest in literature and there was the strong bond of literature between them.

It is necessary to look at a portrait of Poradowska in order to elicit Conrad's view of her, even though the information available now is limited. As has already been shown, when Conrad and Poradowska entered into correspondence with one another she had written two books and had become an established writer by 1895. Though it is difficult to know why she became a writer, Baines' biography offers useful information on this point. According to Baines, her father, Emile Gachet, had been a distinguished scholar and she herself had taken up writing.<sup>(22)</sup> Looking into the background of the latter half of the nineteenth century, the period in which she was brought up, however, artistic professions such as writing and painting were generally regarded as "masculine" activities. It is reported that even the famous writers like Swinburne, Moreau, and Baudelaire expressed strong disapproval of women who engaged in artistic activities.<sup>(23)</sup> Especially Victorian England, when Conrad entered into correspondence with Poradowska, was a patriarchal society. Though from the 1870s, the professional and social emancipation of women went forward on the lines advocated in John Stuart Mill's *Subjection of Women* (1869),<sup>(24)</sup> a number of legislative measures which consigned women to the home, excluded them from the world of work and public life. Women were kept from the vote and from most remunerative employment because it was assumed that their proper place was in the home, bearing and raising children.<sup>(25)</sup> The traditional patriarchal family in the Victorian Age, dominated by the father and bolstered by law, was regarded by many people as the essential building block of a civilized society.<sup>(26)</sup> Therefore, despite the legal constraints of marriage it was the life-plan for most women to avoid being unmarried.<sup>(27)</sup> The ideal figure of Victorian women is distinctly

symbolized in the phrase “Angel in the House.” Seen in this historical background it can be said that Poradowska who chose writing as a profession and continued to write novels after her husband’s death was rather an advanced and independent woman. It is reported that she did not marry again despite Charles Buls’ proposal (Ixii). And the intimate and equal relationship with the intellectual and independent woman shows an aspect of Conrad’s view of woman. We can conclude from the relationship with her that he had an unconventionalized and advanced view of woman.

One more point that can be deduced from the preceding analyses is that Conrad was not a misogynist as Meyer maintained. If he had had a fear or hatred of woman he could not have carried on a lively correspondence with Poradowska. It is interesting that Ruth Nadelhaft, a feminist critic, attributed the male characters’ fear of women in Conrad’s novels not to the author, but to the critics.<sup>(28)</sup> Joan Smith’s book provides a deep insight into this point. She revealed that “misogynies” had a long history in English society, from the Roman period to the present day. She maintained that it was created in the patriarchal culture and distorted human relations.<sup>(29)</sup> The theory of Conrad’s misogyny has been formed in such an historical background. Though it has often been pointed out that he is a writer who could not describe women fully, the assessment of his portrayal of women has been undervalued by male critics’ prejudice or carelessness. Of course, this does not mean that Conrad was completely free from prejudice against woman. It is true that there are several references which reflect the narrators’ prejudiced view of woman. For example, Marlow in *Chance* (1912) often expresses such a view of Flora and generalizes woman. But the author’s view should not be equated with that of the characters’ or narrators’. In many of his works, his women characters are described convincingly and sympathetically.

In relation to Conrad’s misogyny it has been pointed out that his women characters were strong and self-assertive; his male characters’ fear of them were equated with the author’s own. For example, Aïssa, in *An Outcast of the Islands*, follows Willems closely and shoots him to death. Therefore, she was regarded as a typical *femme fatale*. But she is not such a type because she kills him mistakenly from jealousy. Conrad’s women are neither threatening nor the cause of the male characters’ ruin, as Meyer maintained. With regard to the powerful women in Conrad’s work, one of the keys to solve this question is to focus upon the epoch in which he was living. At the turn of the century when he was writing his early novels the feminist movement gradually spread throughout English society. Parallel to this movement, the New Woman who sought emancipation from the Victorian cult of true womanship appeared and many stories about them were written. Both the New Woman and the New Woman novels provoked a tremendous amount of controversy.<sup>(30)</sup> Though the New Woman novels have often been considered at best topically interesting, and dismissed by most critics, it is possible to conjecture that Conrad’s portrayal of women was influenced by them. In fact, there are some evidences that can be interpreted as such in his novels. For example, Mrs Hervey in “The Return” (1897) cannot bear her husband’s conventional bourgeois way of living and tries to run away with her friend. In *The Secret*



*Agent* (1906) the omniscient narrator refers to Mrs Verloc as a “free woman”<sup>(31)</sup> which suggests the New Woman. And the most interesting woman character in Conrad's novels is Aïssa in *An Outcast of the Islands*. Aïssa who captivates Willems by her physical charm and shoots him to death was regarded as the typical *femme fatale* and the hero's hate and fear for her were regarded as the author's. But to seduce Willems was not her intention and she kills him accidentally. However, the *femme fatale* is an image that became popular during the closing decades of the nineteenth century, characteristic of the art and literature of the Aesthetes, Decadents, and Symbolists. On this point, it can be said that Conrad's characterization of women was influenced by the fashion of the *fin-de-siècle*. More interestingly, Virginia Allen points out that the development of the imagery of the *femme fatale* was associated with the nineteenth century growth of feminism.<sup>(32)</sup> She further maintains that the *femme fatale*, independent of male control, and threatening men, reflects the fears of generations of men.<sup>(33)</sup>

An interesting point about Conrad's characterization of women is that some of them are described as intellectuals and politically conscious. Antonia in *Nostramo* (1904) often discusses the future of the fatherland, Costaguana Republic with Decoud. She is also described as an advanced woman in Sulaco because she speaks about politics with Decoud in public. She does not care about rumours and lives alone without marrying anyone after his death. Similarly, Nathalie in *Under Western Eyes* (1910) discusses the future of Russia with her family and friends. As she studies English literature with the narrator she thirsts for knowledge. And she speaks to Razumov and takes a positive attitude towards him. These intellectual and advanced women in Conrad's novels are reminiscent of Poradowska. Poradowska who chose writing as her profession and continued to write after her husband's death without marrying was perhaps the most intellectual and advanced woman Conrad knew. It is possible to think that the correspondence with her might have exerted some influence upon his characterization of women.

Joseph Conrad, regarded as a misogynistic writer who could not describe women fully, established an intimate relationship with Poradowska through their correspondence. The period they were carrying on the correspondence was his apprenticeship and the relationship with her was formed mainly through their shared interest in literature. It was strengthened through the Congo journey, one trial and tribulation in his life. In the relationship with her he regarded Poradowska as his equal because she was a fellow writer. Seen in the historical background of the latter half of the nineteenth century, Poradowska was an intellectual and advanced woman. This equal relationship with her shows an aspect of Conrad's advanced view of woman. Though his attitude towards women in real life and the description of women in his work must be treated separately, the relationship with Poradowska compels us to reconsider the problem of the description of women which has been undervalued by the critics' preconception and prejudice towards Conrad. He described many women fully, and some of

them are described as intellectual and advanced. Much of his work shows that his view of woman is more complicated than has been pointed out. Therefore, it is not proper to label him a misogynist. One of the keys to solve this problem is to turn our eyes to the period where he was writing to Poradowska because some of his women characters distinctly show that he was influenced by the literary fashion of the *fin-de-siècle*.

(This paper was read at the 40th annual meeting of the Hokkaido Branch of the English Literary Society of Japan held at Hokkaido University on 8 October 1995.)

#### Notes

- (1) Joseph Conrad, *An Outcast of the Islands* (London: Heron Books, 1968) 12.
- (2) Thomas Moser, *Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline* (Harvard UP, 1957) 65.
- (3) Bernard C. Meyer, *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytic Biography* (Princeton UP, 1967) 68.
- (4) Jeffrey Meyers, *Joseph Conrad: A Biography* (London: John Murray, 1991) 134.
- (5) Jocelyn Baines, *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1975) 108.
- (6) Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies (eds.), *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, Vol. 1: 1861-1897 (Cambridge UP, 1983) 38. As the original letters are written in French, English equivalents will be given in brackets. Quotations and notes from this book will be given in parentheses in the text.
- (7) Baines 109.
- (8) Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record* (London: Heron Books, 1968) 225.
- (9) See Cedric Watts, *A Preface to Conrad* (London: Longman, 1982) 104-6; Yves Hervouet, *The French Face of Joseph Conrad* (Cambridge UP, 1990).
- (10) *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad* Vol. 2: 1898-1902, 390.
- (11) Baines 109.
- (12) Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"/Typhoon/Falk* (London: Heron Books, 1968) 5.
- (13) Andrew M. Roberts (ed.), *The Conradian: Conrad and Gender* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993) 59-74.
- (14) Baines 109.
- (15) *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad* Vol. 4: 1908-1911, 9.
- (16) Cf. J. H. Stape, "A Calendar of Letters Addressed to Joseph Conrad" in *Conradiana: A Journal of Joseph Conrad Studies* (Texas Tech UP, 1991), Vol. 23, No. 1, 45-7. According to Stape there are only the three existing letters of Poradowska to Conrad.
- (17) Baines 26.
- (18) *Ibid.*, 127-8.
- (19) *A Personal Record* 236-7.
- (20) Baines 123.
- (21) *Ibid.*, 124.
- (22) *Ibid.*, 108-9.
- (23) Virginia M. Allen, *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon* (New York: The Whitson Publishing Company, 1983) 190.
- (24) George M. Trevelyan, *English Social History: A Survey of Six Centuries Chaucer to Queen Victoria* (Penguin Books, 1986) 565.
- (25) Mary L. Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England* (Princeton UP, 1989) 79.
- (26) Joan Perkin, *Victorian Women* (London: John Murray, 1994) 73-4.

- (27) Ibid., 75.
- (28) Luth Nadelhaft, *Feminist Readings: Joseph Conrad* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) 8.
- (29) Joan Smith, *Misogynies: Reflections on Myths and Malice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989).
- (30) Cf. Ann Ardis, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (Rutgers UP, 1990).
- (31) Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, (Cambridge UP, 1990) 189.
- (32) Allen ix.
- (33) Ibid., x. Cf. Rebecca Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late Victorian "Femme Fatale": The Kiss of Death* (London: Macmillan, 1992) 126-62.