

Wojciechowska / Skolik / Szczepan-Wojnarska (eds.)

# Joseph Conrad and Femininity

Echoes and Resonances



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# Passages – Transitions – Intersections

Volume 14

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Anna Marta Szczepan-Wojnarska (eds.)

## **Joseph Conrad and Femininity**

Echoes and Resonances

With 9 figures

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University  
in Cracow

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*In memory of Zdzisław Najder*

*He was one of us.*



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## Acknowledgements

This volume is dedicated to Professor Zdzisław Najder whose work has profoundly shaped our reading and understanding of Conrad in Poland and beyond. He was not only a Conrad scholar but also laid the foundations for our shared understanding of Conrad's writing and introduced us to Conrad studies.

He was an outstanding scholar, the founder of modern Conrad studies, and the author of the canonical biography of Joseph Conrad, which was the fruit of over forty years of research, *Joseph Conrad: A Life*. Based on correspondence, accounts from family archives and his recollections of his friends and publishers, this distinguished biography reveals Conrad's dramatic choices, and his struggles and loneliness. It also follows the novelist's lifelong pursuit of proper words.

Professor Najder was involved in publishing Conrad's works by writing, translating, and editing the writer's written legacy. Najder's research and efforts to popularise Conrad's literary achievement changed the way we process the Conradian works and literature in general. Najder indeed broadened our literary horizons by approaching Conrad with passion, yet without exaggeration or pathos; instead, he was personally committed and emphasised the issue of Conrad's fidelity to his ideals.

Professor Najder was more than a mere researcher. His words were a testimony, not only scholarly but also deeply personal. He taught his students that literature was hardly escapist, rather reflecting our responsibility towards the world and others. In dedicating this monograph to him, we hope to continue the research he had begun and to carry forward his inspiring vision of Conrad studies.

The volume examines "Conrad and Femininity." In fact, Professor Najder examined the women referenced in Conrad's life and letters, beginning with those closest to him, that is his mother, grandmother, and wife, to others who appeared in his later life and literary works. However, discussing women and femininity, a distinctive woman in the life of the great scholar cannot be

overlooked: his wife, Halina Najder, who accompanied Zdzisław Najder throughout his research on Conrad as the translator and proof reader of his contributions, and his constant companion at conferences, symposia, lectures, and other scholarly undertakings. Professor Najder, we are in Your debt.

Joanna Skolik  
Anna Marta Szczepan-Wojnarska  
Sylvia Janina Wojciechowska

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## Introduction

The name of Joseph Conrad is not exactly the first name which comes to a mind interested in the aspects of femininity discernible in twentieth-century Anglophone literature. However contested the claim may sound, Conrad has been mainly associated with masculinity, or, as Susan Jones once posited, with an image of an author mainly viewed as:

[...] a lonely seafarer, drawing on the memories of life on board ship to construct the tales that sustained his career as a writer. We can easily picture the sensitive, displaced individual fashioning modernist narratives of dislocation and despair upon the moral framework of a male community to which he gave priority, and from which, above all, women were excluded. The conventionalised view is highly selective, but it has nevertheless proved remarkably enduring, and has reduced the value of much of the work that fails to fit its frame of reference. (1999, p. 5)

Endorsing Susan Jones's position challenging the prevailing image of Conrad as engaging with a predominantly male discourse, the book entitled *Conrad and Femininity. Echoes and Resonances* is unconventional in its critical intent, countering the established criticism of the Conradian legacy. It is expected to attract readers by virtue of the unusual perspective that is directed at the feminine rather than the masculine. On the one hand, the feminine focus resonates with the contemporary interest in women as agents, while, on the other hand, it also highlights and continues the significance of female scholarship in Conradian criticism. Remaining in a dialogic position with their male Conradian colleagues, the contributors to the volume, all women, continue the critical endeavour initiated by Debra Romanick Baldwin, the editor of *The Routledge Companion to Joseph Conrad* (2024), which exclusively voices feminine readings of Conrad.

The premise of this volume is indicated in its subtitle, namely *Echoes and Resonances*. The scholars are interested in the echoes of Conrad's extensive reading and his life experiences that are discernible in his prose and in their resonance in his works, and also the Conradian resonances in the world of literature. This conceptual division is reflected in the structure of the volume, a

volume which opens with the contributions by researchers, firstly, tracing the models of femininity upon which the writer drew in his fiction and, secondly, exploring Conrad's subsequent exploration into the established views on women. These are finally expanded into both intertextual and transmedial inquiries.

## Part 1. Icons and Ideals: Mapping the Feminine in Conrad's World

The volume, which gathers exclusively female scholars to elaborate upon the feminine in Conrad's legacy, opens with the section *Icons and Ideals: Mapping the Feminine in Conrad's World* to unearth the historical, socio-cultural, and philosophical traditions that ground Conrad's outlooks on the nature of the feminine. Kim Salmons's chapter "Sanctity and Silence: Ewa Korzeniowska and the Marian Imprint on Conrad's Fiction" is the first discussion in this section and introduces the most important woman in Conrad's life, his mother. Salmons examines how Ewa Korzeniowska shaped a Marian model of the maternal in his fiction. Conrad's mother serves as both an icon and an ideal permeating his personal and professional development. Silent or absent female figures act as moral anchors, reflecting both loss and authority. Through reading of works such as "Heart of Darkness," *Under Western Eyes*, and *The Secret Agent*, the chapter traces how maternal endurance, mourning, or inversion embodies this influence. Ultimately, Conrad's maternal figures reveal the tension between personal memory and cultural constructions of a destabilising maternal presence.

The following chapter in this section "The Elusiveness of Conrad's Polishness: The Encoding of His Cultural Heritage on His Female Characters" explores how Conrad transforms his Polish cultural heritage into a universal literary language, particularly through his female characters. Joanna Skolik argues that these women function as carriers of memory and tradition, mapping femininity across cultural and individual boundaries. Drawing upon the concepts of liminality, postmemory, and denegation, the chapter demonstrates how Conrad's Polishness remains present, yet often concealed, in his writing. The analysis draws on examples from *Lord Jim*, "Heart of Darkness," *Nostromo*, "Amy Foster," "Falk," *The Secret Agent*, *Chance*, and *Under Western Eyes*.

The section closes with Alexia Hannis's "Patriarchy, Materialism, and Subversive Christianity in 'Falk: A Reminiscence.'" The chapter uncovers the story's engagement with patriarchal-materialist apprehensions of the feminine and the nuanced particularities of human experience that complicate and subvert those conventions. Referencing Charles Taylor, Hannis interprets the pattern of religious allusions throughout the inner narrative that, in gesturing towards mystery and compassion, invite a hesitant stance on femininity whose changing aspects signalled the advent of modernity and modernisation.

## Part 2. Femininity Unbound: Contestation, Power, and Identity

The subsequent section of the volume, entitled *Femininity Unbound: Contestation, Power, and Identity*, investigates several female figures in Conrad's novels whose life attitudes range from female martyrs to militant individuals who, at certain moments, embody both life attitudes. A link between these two positions is the act of liberating themselves from the constraints of passivity and imposed limitations of social roles, thereby enabling the discovery of their personal identity. Conrad's heroines realise that they are significant members of society. They possess their own strength, the right to refuse and speak for themselves, which stems from their own dignity rather than from the generosity of others.

The opening chapter of this section, entitled "Invisible yet Present – A Modernist Transformation of the Polish Romantic Female Protagonist in Joseph Conrad's *Victory*," is authored by Anna M. Szczepan-Wojnarska. This chapter explores the legacy of Polish Romanticism in Conrad's oeuvre, analysing its presence in the context of literary works and epistemological perspectives. Szczepan-Wojnarska argues that the author of *Victory* addresses the modern confrontation between human capacity for perception and the ethical decision to see or not to see, as well as the ability to reveal oneself to others alongside the decision to remain visible.

In the chapter entitled "Fatherhood, Fidelity, and Women's Autonomy in Joseph Conrad's *Chance* and *Victory*," Ellen Burton Harrington discusses the influence of paternal figures and the patterns that shape various kinds of pre-conceptions regarding romance and intimate relationships. Conrad's female protagonists are predominantly depicted as loyal daughters rather than self-confident, passionate lovers. In this study, Burton Harrington draws intriguing comparisons engaging with the father and formulates new questions with regard to fidelity in the context of Conrad's prose.

Pei-Wen Clio Kao's chapter "Becoming-Woman, Performativity, and Islandness in Joseph Conrad's 'Freya of the Seven Isles'" re-reads Joseph Conrad's "Freya of the Seven Isles" through the lens of critical island studies, emphasising the autonomy and fluidity of the concept of the island rather than their colonial framing as remote and isolated Others. While the novella depicts a love-triangle between Freya, Jasper, and Heemskirk, thus echoing Dutch-English colonial tensions, the analysis emphasises how Freya's rebelliousness and manipulative agency mirror the performative, elusive identity of the islands. Drawing on Deleuze's concept of "becoming-woman" and Butler's theory of "performativity," the chapter argues that both Freya and the islands resist capture and subordination by patriarchal colonial power.

The section closes with Brygida Pudelko's considerations on femininity, confronting social and political reality addressed in the chapter "May Sinclair's

and Joseph Conrad's Criticism of Militant Feminism." Pudełko highlights that Conrad supported women's rights campaigns, despite his reputation of a somewhat conservative writer. Moreover, the scholar compares May Sinclair's *The Tree of Heaven* and Conrad's *Chance*, and argues that Sinclair and Conrad were barely naïve enthusiasts of feminism.

### Part 3. Framing Femininity: Portraits, Pages, and Cultural Imagery

While Section Two, *Femininity Unbound: Contestation, Power, and Identity*, engages with a range of female figures featured in Conrad's fiction, Section Three, examines the manner in which femininity is visualised in Conrad's works. This issue is explored either with reference to literary portraits, or, alternatively, through an analysis of the women featured in the illustrated editions or on the book covers of Conrad's published works. In "A Portrait of the Mother: The Classical Canvas in *A Personal Record*," Sylwia Janina Wojciechowska opens the discussion on an autobiographical note. By close reading the sections in *A Personal Record* which contain references to Conrad's prematurely deceased mother, Ewa (Ewelina) Korzeniowska, Wojciechowska charts the classical patterns beneath Conrad's representation of his mother in the narrative. The scholar argues that, however incomplete Ewa's featuring in *A Personal Record* might seem, it does indeed convey the depth of affection on part of the reminiscing *persona*. Wojciechowska argues that a juxtaposition of the fragments in consideration with Book XI of the Homeric *Nekuia* helps approach the unexpressed in Conrad's narrative, while also contribute certain traits to the mother's literary portrait. Interestingly, these correspond to those displayed in the mother's black-and-white portrait as preserved in the Conradian archives.

The subsequent chapter continues upon the visual representations of women in Conrad's published work. In contrast to the previous reading, this part is focused upon Conrad's fiction by centering around the illustrations of Freya, a memorable female figure in Conrad's "Freya of the Seven Isles." In a chapter entitled: "Women in the Frame: Artistic Visions of Conrad's Freya," Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech examines six illustrated book editions of the short story. The Conradian researcher identifies the patterns and divergences in how Freya's image is constructed in a variety of publications ranging from 1942 to 2003. Significantly, the scholar notices that only rarely is Freya depicted in solitude; instead, in most cases she is featured in male company, which exposes the underlying gender politics of the narrative, its publishers, and its implied readers.

Section 3 closes with Tania Zulli's semiotic analysis of the covers of Joseph Conrad's works. For her examination, Zulli chooses two Italian editions of *La Freccia d'Oro/Il Salvataggio* (1958) and *Vittoria* (1964) by Bompiani. Ap-

proaching the publications through the lens of Peircean semiotics, the scholar argues that, apparently, the Bompiani covers provide a visual and cultural window into the reception of Conrad's work in postwar Italy. Zulli pertinently observes that semiotic elements such as imagery, colour, and composition contribute to constructing femininity within Conrad's literary universe and within the context of their reception. The scholar notes that the negotiatory status of the images as poised between romanticised objectification and subtle empowerment reflects both historical publishing trends and evolving critical perspectives on the Conradian legacy. Thus, the section ends on a polemic note.

#### **Part 4. Echoes of Influence: Conversations on Femininity**

Since this volume follows in the footsteps of an excellent Conradian, namely Susan Jones, who, at the turn of the new millennium, published a groundbreaking monograph, *Conrad and Women* (1999), this publication continues the feminine interest after a quarter of a century later, in 2025. It closes with an interview with the scholar. The interview, entitled *Conrad and Women after 25 Years* is conducted by Debra Romanick Baldwin who formulates a series of engaging questions touching upon the political, philosophical, and literary in Conrad's featuring of femininity. We hope that, with this interview, several points for engaging explorations of femininity are highlighted and that our Readers will be willing to further explore the feminine elements in Conrad's works – now and in the years to come.

Sylvia Janina Wojciechowska  
Joanna Skolik  
Anna Marta Szczepan-Wojnarska

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**Part 1:**

**Icons and Ideals: Mapping the Feminine in Conrad's World**



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Kim Salmons (St Mary's University, London)

## Chapter 1: Sanctity and Silence: Ewa Korzeniowska and the Marian Imprint on Conrad's Fiction

### Abstract

This chapter argues that Joseph Conrad's mother, Ewa Korzeniowska, exemplified the archetypal Polish Catholic mother, and that her life and memory exerted a Marian imprint on Conrad's fiction. Drawing upon Marian theology, particularly the titles of the Virgin Mary as Theotokos, Mater Dolorosa, and Stabat Mater, this chapter contends that Ewa's early death and her saintly remembrance within the family offered Conrad a maternal model inflected by sorrow and silence. This archetype is reimagined in the narrative structures of Conrad's fiction, where absent or silent female figures serve as moral touchstones, embodying both loss and authority. By reading Conrad alongside Marian studies, such as Marina Warner's *Alone of all her Sex* [1976] and through psychoanalytic perspectives such as Julia Kristeva's "Stabat Mater" (1977; trans. 1987) this chapter situates the maternal as a structuring absence in Conrad's works. The argument reframes Conrad's fictional women not as marginalised or silenced in a purely patriarchal sense, but as elevated into archetypal, quasi-sacred positions, whose absence exerts a Catholic narrative force. In "Heart of Darkness" [1899] (2006) and *Under Western Eyes*, [1911] (2008) the Marian trace emerges in the endurance of women and their association with sorrow and mourning. While in *The Secret Agent* [1907] (2007) the heroism of the self-sacrificing mother becomes "unscrupulous" and the Stabat Mater inverted. Ultimately, this chapter proposes that Conrad's maternal figures reflect the unresolved tension between childhood memories of his mother as a silent and suffering Mater Dolorosa and the modern cultural inscription of the maternal as destabilizing and unable to anchor a morally declining world.

**Keywords:** femininity, Matka Polka, Stabat Mater, Mater Dolorosa

### Introduction

In a *Personal Record* (2008) Conrad describes his mother as "representing nobly the ideal of Polish womanhood" (p. 230). She was the archetypal Matka Polka (Polish Mother): "In essence, the Polish Mother is a model of womanhood the product of [Poland's] complex history, which created the image of a heroic woman, capable of extraordinary sacrifice for the good of the homeland, focused

above all on family rather than herself” (Imbierowicz 2012, p. 430). Conrad, as a young child described himself as “Pole, Catholic, Szlachcic, Konrad” (Karl 1979, p. 53) defining the inextricable link between Polishness and Catholicism. As Skolik contends “Catholicism was the mainstay of Polishness.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, to be a Polish mother is to be a Catholic mother. Although references to Ewa’s suffering in exile and her early death from tuberculosis have been marginally explored – Najder, Watts and Meyer focus mainly on Conrad’s father Apollo – her position as the Mater Dolorosa (suffering mother) and how this image combined with that of Conrad’s “beautiful, quiet, but spirited” mother (Ford 1925, p. 76), has not been given the full attention that it deserves. Conrad may have moved away from religion during his adult life, but Krajka has observed that “Conrad’s alpha and omega was Catholicism” and his early years in Poland would have been centred around the Catholic church (2018, p. 82), legitimizing an interrogation of Catholic feminine tropes.

Sue Jones has explored more fully the figure of Ewa, acknowledging her as “the ideal of Polish womanhood” (1996, p. 38) and recognizing her influence on the women in Conrad’s fiction as a “measure of moral certitude” (ibidem). But her view of Polish womanhood is primarily centred on the “romantic tradition” the archetypal self-sacrificing woman with only a hint of the Catholic image of Mary acknowledged in the role of nurturing mother (ibidem). However, although Jones does not frame her analysis in doctrinal theology, her interpretations strongly support my own argument in that she identifies Ewa as a moral and cultural template for Conrad’s fictional portrayal of women. Her discussion of Polish Catholic cultural influences offers a context where the Marian figure – a mother, martyr, and moral centre – is a pervasive cultural archetype, even if she does not label it as such.

Frederic Karl sees Ewa as a composite of Dulcinea and Penelope, “idealised and untouchable,” a confluence of the two being “the Great Mother’ who lay behind all femaleness” of whom Conrad, looking back twenty years only had a “dim memory” (1979, p. 102). Karl sees a similar composition in Miss Haldin (representing the romantic love that Ewa experienced for Apollo) and Mrs. Haldin (as the mother needed by the family). Meanwhile Diana Knight explores Conrad’s memory of his mother in *A Personal Record* as a “familiar figure... dressed in the black of the national mourning” while preserving “the awe of her mysterious gravity” (2008, p. 204), a foreshadowing of the character of Emilia Gould. Jones takes those shadowy memories and similarly connects Ewa’s integrity to Emilia Gould while juxtaposing her bravery and self-sacrifice to Winnie’s mother, Mrs. de Barral and Mrs. Haldin; and her courage in the face of exile to Jewell, Aissa, Lena, Flora and Rita (2004, p. 24).

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1 See Skolik, “Patriotic upbringing in Szlachta families 1850–1950.” Unpublished paper.

These explorations of Conrad's female characters may mirror the moral and maternal qualities of Ewa, but they overlook the crucial connection between the *Matka Polka*, the *Mater Dolorosa* and the Catholic imprint imposed on Ewa and, by extension, on Conrad's memory of her. Apollo's depiction of Ewa after her death, infused with "mysticism, religiosity, Messianism, and Mariolatry" (Karl 1979, p. 61), would have, as Karl observes, left "grooves in the young Conrad's brain that would not reveal themselves for another twenty-five years" (Karl 1979, p. 62). This chapter seeks to show how these grooves are manifested in Conrad's maternal figures.

## 1. Ewa Korzeniowska

Ewelina Korzeniowska was born in 1833, one of six children (four brothers, the most prominent being Tadeusz and Stefan and a sister Teofila whose premature death occurred in 1851). Ewa died of tuberculosis on 18 April 1865 aged 32, when her son was just seven years old. On a trip to Poland as an adult, Conrad read her letters to his father, Apollo, artifacts that reveal much about Ewa's personality and her own revolutionary zeal (*Selected Letters*, p. 135, n. 6).<sup>2</sup> These letters inform Conrad's account of his mother in *A Personal Record* in which he replays the testament of his Uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski in describing Ewa's personality. In comparing her passing to the "moral loss" the family suffered when her sister Teofila died, Conrad quotes Bobrowski as follows:

Your mother – of far greater beauty, exceptionally distinguished in person, manner and intellect – had a less easy disposition. Being more brilliantly gifted, she expected more from life ... she was torn by the inward struggle between her love for the man whom she was to marry in the end and her knowledge of her dead father's declared objection to that match. (*PR*, p. 230)

Bobrowski goes on to claim that the impossibility of denying a "sentiment so deep and so true" meant that "she could not have been expected to preserve her mental and moral balance" (*ibidem*). However, Tadeusz also described his sister as a "Madonna" (Karl 1979, p. 36) claiming the opposing forces within her were finally reconciled in her role as mother to Konrad and wife to Apollo:

Meeting with calm fortitude the cruel trials of a life reflecting all the national and social misfortunes of the community, she realised the highest conceptions of duty as a wife, a mother and a patriot, sharing the exile of her husband and representing nobly the ideal of Polish womanhood. (*PR*, p. 230)

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<sup>2</sup> "Few of these letters have survived as many of them could have been incriminating" (Najder 1994, p. 24).