

“[A] GLOWING GOLD TINGE ON THE WATERS OF THE PANTAI”: CONRAD’S CHALLENGE TO THE NARRATIVE OF ECONOMIC SUCCESS IN *ALMAYER’S FOLLY*¹

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Abstract: The exotic setting of Conrad’s *Almayer’s Folly* suggests the novel’s affinity to the adventure romance, a genre popular in the final decades of the nineteenth century. However, readers expecting a story of dangerous exploits in the remote lands (or seas) must be disappointed. As Andrea White showed in *Joseph Conrad and the Adventure Tradition*, Conrad challenges the romance convention by contrasting a life full of adventures, which can only be glimpsed from afar, with the protagonist’s mundane existence. The aim of my paper is to take White’s argument further, and to present Conrad’s first novel not only as a challenge to the late-Victorian romance tradition but also to any narrative of (economic) success which accompanied colonial ventures. Conrad exposes both the myth of the adventurer, whose luck coupled with daring enables him to find a treasure, and the myth of a self-made man, whose perseverance and hard work in the colonies ensure his financial success.

Keywords: *Almayer’s Folly*, the imperial romance, Victorian realist conventions, self-made man, colonialism

In a 1903 letter to Kazimierz Waliszewski, Conrad described himself as a *homo-duplex*, a double man, to explain his ambiguous position as a Pole writing in English about English characters.² The phrase, Conrad indicated, “ha[d] in [his] case more than one meaning,”³ and it has been since discussed by generations of Conrad critics as signifying not only the writer’s double national loyalties but also his conflicting commitment to romantic and positivist values, the transitional nature of his writing posited between Victorianism and modernism, as well as his fascination with liminal spaces (“twixt land and sea”) and characters of double (racial, national) identity. Such

¹ This article is based on the paper which was first presented at the conference “Joseph Conrad. Twixt Land and Sea” organised by the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn and University of Warsaw. I would like to thank the participants of the conference whose questions and comments helped me to write the article in its final form.

² *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad. Volume 3. 1903-1907*, eds. F. R. Karl, L. Davies, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988, p. 89.

³ *Ibid.*

duality was further reflected in Conrad's "contradictory politics,"⁴ and in generic hybridity of his fiction, which took much from the late Victorian imperial romance yet never quite departed from the more "serious" fiction. Cedric Watts feels thus justified in stating that "if any god presides over Conrad's best work, it is the god Janus [...] the two-headed god: he looks in opposite ways at the same time; he presides over paradox; and he is the patron of janiform texts."⁵

The janiform quality was manifest in Conrad's fiction from the very beginning of his writing career. His first novel, *Almayer's Folly* published in 1895, not only described characters inhabiting a liminal sphere between two cultures, but it was itself a "generic misfit" combining conventions of the popular imperial romance and the experimental style characteristic of modern fiction.⁶ On publication of the novel, Conrad "was hailed [...] as a trafficker in the exotic,"⁷ and even the cursory reading of the contemporary reviews of *Almayer's Folly* reveals that the novel was often included into the category of adventure romance. H. G. Wells discussed it as an example of "local colour stories,"⁸ for example, and the author of an unsigned review for the *Guardian* described it as "one of the most charming romances that has been our fortune to read for many a long day" and as "a romance in all senses of the word" featuring "essentially romantic personalities."⁹ Other readers, like Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster, recognised that "Conrad was not a Captain Marryat or a James Fenimore Cooper" but they would hardly recognise him "as one of their own."¹⁰ Conrad's own attitude to the reviews was (characteristically) ambiguous. On the one hand he tried to explain in the "Author's Note" that *Almayer's Folly* offered an important departure from the conventions of imperial romance and that the choice of the exotic setting simply allowed him to present his ideas more clearly, especially that "the picture of life, there as here is drawn with the same elaboration of detail, coloured with the same hints", and "there is a bond between us and that humanity so far away"¹¹ regardless of the physical and cultural distance between the characters and the English readers. Yet, for reasons which are not quite clear, the "Author's Note" was not published until 1921, when collected editions of Conrad's works were brought out in Britain and the USA.¹² In fact, Conrad, who was "aware of the market," might have "tried to gauge that elusive entity, British taste" in order to "let his

⁴ P. B. Armstrong, "Conrad's Contradictory Politics: The Ontology of Society in *Nostromo*", *Twentieth Century Literature* 1985, vol. 1(31).

⁵ C. Watts, *A Preface to Conrad*, London & New York: Longman, 1982, p. 7.

⁶ N. Manocha, "The Inimitable Joseph Conrad" [in:] *Critical Approaches to Joseph Conrad*, ed. A. Szczeszak-Brewer, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2015, p. 96.

⁷ D. Hewitt, *English Fiction of the Early Modern Period 1890-1940*, London & New York: Longman, 1988, p. 27.

⁸ H. G. Wells, Unsigned review of *Almayer's Folly* [in:] *Conrad. The Critical Heritage*, ed. N. Sherry, London & Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973, p. 53.

⁹ Unsigned review of *Almayer's Folly* [in:] *Conrad. The Critical Heritage*, p. 37.

¹⁰ N. Manocha, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

¹¹ J. Conrad, "Author's Note" [in:] *idem, The Lingard Trilogy. Almayer's Folly. An Outcast of the Islands and The Rescue*, ed. A. Purssell, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 2016, p. 5.

¹² I. Watt, *Essays on Conrad*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003, pp. 36-38.

fiction work for him indirectly rather than to announce his subversion quite so overtly” and thus benefited from the (problematic) classification of the novel as an imperial romance, which was a popular genre.¹³

If *Almayer's Folly* flirts with the imperial romance, however, its relation to this kind of fiction is neither stable nor wholehearted. Ian Watt points out that “though seeming to follow, [the novel] actually undermines the prescriptions of popular romance.”¹⁴ The plot of the novel, as Andrew White’s analysis demonstrates, “signals a major shift in genre convention,” as “[a]dventure is only glimpsed, afar off, never in fact to be realized, at least not by Almayer [...] Instead of journeying to open seas, wide veldts, or expanses of shimmering desert, we experience Almayer’s claustrophobia in the forest-choked river village of Sambir. Instead of heroic deeds, Almayer achieves nothing [...] adventure takes place in the past, only faint echoes surviving in a few lingering legends and nostalgic reminiscences.”¹⁵ *Almayer's Folly* constitutes, instead, a critical commentary on the genre. The aim of this article is to take White’s argument further, and to present Conrad’s first novel as a challenge not only to the imperial romance tradition but also, more generally, to the narratives of (economic) success accompanying colonial ventures prevalent in the nineteenth century. Conrad exposes both the romantic myth of the bold adventurer, whose luck coupled with daring enables him to find a treasure, discover new lands and confirm the superiority of white Europeans, and the positivist myth of the self-made man following the ideals of progress, improvement, and the ethos of work which ensure his economic success in the colonies.

Such myths were perpetuated in Victorian fiction, where colonies functioned not only as the canvas for adventure, but also the area to be explored and exploited, a source of wealth and a space where the characters could carve their fortunes, either through adventurous exploits or, more prosaically, through hard work, thus proving their worth as the members of the “superior race.” As Edward Said puts it, “[t]he colonial territories are realms of possibility, and they have always been associated with the realist novel.”¹⁶ Although the attitudes to imperialism represented in nineteenth-century writing were ambivalent,¹⁷ Victorians could hardly be ignorant of the fact that colonialism was to a large extent the engine of improvement and development of European empires. Since it affected the lives and fortunes of so many British people, the “business of the empire” thus became “everyone’s business.”¹⁸ In Victorian fiction, emigration to the colonies often constituted “a way of rewarding deserving—sometimes undeserving—characters while underlining social or personal problems they were leaving behind,”¹⁹ an outlet for ambitions which for different reasons could

¹³ A. White, *Joseph Conrad and the Adventure Tradition: Constructing and Reconstructing the Imperial Subject*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993, p. 119.

¹⁴ I. Watt, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹⁵ A. White, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

¹⁶ E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London: Vintage, 1994, p. 75.

¹⁷ P. Brantlinger, *Victorian Literature and Postcolonial Studies*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009, p. 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

not be realised at home, and a resolution to the plot. In *Vanity Fair*, for example, both Joseph Sedley and William Dobbin make their money and career in India, much like Peter Jenkyns in Gaskell's *Cranford*. Charles Dickens's Mr Peggotty and Emily emigrate to Australia to make a new start, and so do the Micawbers. Anthony Trollope's John Caldigate proves his worth in Australia, where he becomes a gold digger and thanks to his perseverance, abstinence and hard work manages to make a fortune for himself. Yet, although the empire was a source of immense wealth for England and other European powers, it functioned for much of the nineteenth century, as Edward Said maintains, "as a codified, if only marginally visible, presence in fiction." The colonies were like servants or "the outcast populations" in being "profitable without being fully there."²⁰

Indeed, whereas imperial romances were set outside Europe, either in the colonies or in the yet undiscovered lands, realist novels of the period tended to present the colonial reality indirectly, or "off-stage". The readers were usually provided with either a mere glimpse of life in the colonies, or with second-hand narratives of economic success achieved by characters who returned to England or bequeathed their money to impoverished heirs at home. Such stories, however, could be likened to the lies Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* had in store for Kurtz's Intended so that she, like other women, could "stay in that beautiful world of their own."²¹ Conrad's own novels offer a more disagreeable and disconcerting picture of the colonial world. Although his desire to recover the marginalised voices of the colonised remains arguable, in *Almayer's Folly* he nevertheless challenged imperial ideology by re-imagining and re-writing stories of economic success into stories of moral inadequacy and resulting economic failure with all its ugly details.

Almayer's Folly begins with the protagonist, "the only white man on the east coast that is a settled resident,"²² looking at the river at sunset, "at that time [when] the sinking sun would spread a glowing gold tinge on the waters of the Pantai" and dreaming his "dream of splendid future,"²³ which he wants to secure by "diamonds of fabulous value [and] [...] gold mines of enormous richness" apparently to be found in the interior.²⁴ Almayer's fantasies, however, are strongly contrasted with "the unpleasant realities of the present hour"²⁵ or his surroundings, which bear witness to his former failures. His "his new but already decaying house,"²⁶ which was built in expectation of the establishment of the British Borneo Company for the use of the Company's agents and engineers, became an all too evident symbol of his failure when it finally appeared that the English would not come. The house, which remained empty and left to dilapidate, surrounded by "decaying planks, and half-sawn beams [...] piled up in

²⁰ E. Said, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

²¹ J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, London: Penguin Books, 1994, p. 69.

²² J. Conrad, *Almayer's Folly* [in:] *idem, The Lingard Trilogy...*, p. 84.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

inextricable confusion,”²⁷ was called “Almayer’s Folly,” a name reflecting the impracticality of Almayer’s dreams of wealth and splendour. Significantly, Almayer’s success remains always in the realm of the protagonist’s dream, always in future, an unfulfilled hope never to be realised. This clash between dreams, which seem to be inspired by the imperial romance, and the more prosaic reality is a central theme in Conrad’s novel and one which it shares with Victorian realist fiction often critical of characters whose “imaginary dramas”²⁸ obliterate the more mundane reality and prevent them from accepting the truth.

Kaspar Almayer’s hopes of future splendour were evidently encouraged by the accounts of wonderful exploits of the “Rajah-Laut” (the King of the Sea), as Captain Lingard was known among the Malays. His own dreams and aspirations were, however, of a more “unromantic” nature, as he concentrated on wealth rather than any other form of distinction. White indicates that “the heroic vision that informed the hopes and intentions of other adventurers has been reduced [in *Almayer’s Folly*] to a rather mean-spirited commercial endeavour.”²⁹ Indeed, even though Almayer did look up to Lingard as a man who “discovered a river,”³⁰ he was more interested in the ways Lingard’s legendary wealth might ease his own way up the economic ladder. Almayer’s path to success is not, therefore, the one taken by adventurers, or “all those bold spirits” who were “reckless, keen in business, not disinclined for a brush with the pirates that were to be found on many a coast as yet.”³¹ Rather, he attempts to secure his position through his commercial endeavours and, even more substantially, through the benefits he hopes to reap from Lingard’s discoveries.

Almayer’s career seems inspired more by the ideals of positivism, based on the assumption that trade and industry constitute the basis of progress, than by narratives of adventure.³² Almayer himself initially seems to follow in the footsteps of the numerous successful self-made characters to be found in Victorian fiction. His father was “a subordinate official employed in the Botanical Gardens of Buitenzorg” and was “delighted to place his son in [old Hudig’s] firm”³³ believing that for his son it would be an excellent opportunity to make a career. Kaspar Almayer evidently saw his job as the first step up the social ladder and was happy to leave “the meagre comforts of his parental bungalow”³⁴ in order to “woo fortune,” ready to “conquer the world, never doubting that he would.”³⁵ When he was befriended by Captain Lingard, Almayer believed it to be a sure sign of his progress in the world. He admired Lingard for his

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁸ G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, London: Penguin Books, 1994, p. 159.

²⁹ A. White, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

³⁰ J. Conrad, *Almayer’s Folly*, p. 10.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³² A. Bross, “*Szaleństwo Almayera a polski spór o materializm*” (transl. W. Kozak) [in:] *Conrad a Polska, Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia i świat*, ed. W. Krajka, Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2011, p. 134.

³³ J. Conrad, *Almayer’s Folly*, p. 8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

“boldness” but even more for “enormous profits of his ventures.”³⁶ In representing Almayer’s career, Conrad evokes ideology promoted by Samuel Smiles, who in his extremely popular and influential book *Self-Help* (1859) argued that the growth of the nation and the whole British Empire was possible thanks to a set of characteristics he attributed to the English people:

One of the most strongly marked features of the English people is their indomitable spirit of industry, standing out prominent and distinct in all their past history, and as strikingly characteristic of them now as at any former period. It is this spirit, displayed by the commons of England, which has laid the foundations and built up the industrial greatness of the empire, at home and in the colonies. This vigorous growth of the nation has been mainly the result of the free industrial energy of individuals; and it has been contingent upon the number of hands and minds from time to time actively employed within it, whether as cultivators of the soil, producers of articles of utility, contrivers of tools and machines, writers of books, or creators of works of art. And while this spirit of active industry has been the vital principle of the nation, it has also been its saving and remedial one, counteracting from time to time the effects of errors in our laws and imperfections in our constitution.³⁷

The values that Smiles evokes in this passage correspond with the ideals of positivism, which Conrad learnt to appreciate, and which he particularly admired in the British. As Kennedy indicates, Conrad “approved of what he saw as a particularly English tradition of service—the work ethic, duty, and efficiency.”³⁸ Although Almayer was of Dutch rather than British descent and he sees Amsterdam rather than London as his European “home”, he nevertheless sympathises with the British and shares a conviction that they are to be imitated since they “knew how to develop a rich country.”³⁹

Significantly, although in his book Smiles concentrated on knowledge and education, he nevertheless was deeply aware of the importance of material wealth which made progress possible and which, for Almayer, constituted the very essence of his endeavours, as it was to become the visible sign of his success. While watching the river and dreaming of his future splendour and of “gold he had failed to secure; gold the others had secured—dishonestly, of course—or gold he meant to secure yet, through his own honest exertions,”⁴⁰ Almayer seemed to evoke the ideals promoted by Smiles. In fact, however, he simply expressed thoughtlessly an ideologically potent belief that the colonies constitute a good ground for honest men to fight for and achieve success. However, Almayer’s declaration of his “honest exertions” is doubly ironic, thus challenging the ideal promoted in the realist novel of the nineteenth century. First of all, Almayer must have been aware that his exertions were far from honest, since he was involved in the illegal trade in gunpowder with the Malays,

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³⁷ S. Smiles, *Self-Help. With Illustrations of Character, Conduct, and Perseverance*, ed. P. W. Sinnema, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 37.

³⁸ V. Kennedy, “Conrad, Efficiency, and the Varieties of Imperialism,” *Conradiana* 2012, vol. 44(2-3), p. 163.

³⁹ J. Conrad, *Almayer’s Folly*, p. 28.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

which was to be used against the Dutch and thus threaten the political stability on the islands. Moreover, all his material capital came to him not so much as a result of his exertions as through his marriage to Captain Lingard’s adopted daughter.

In many nineteenth-century novels, marrying into a wealthy and socially superior family crowned the protagonist’s efforts to improve his social standing. Almayer, however, followed another path available for Victorian characters, and got “an heir-ess” of inferior social standing for his wife. Like Edward Rochester in *Jane Eyre* (1848), for instance, Almayer was persuaded to marry a woman of different race⁴¹ believing that the union would ensure his financial security and thus a position he believed he deserved and that it would be just a stepping stone to an even greater fortune. When Captain Lingard suggested that Almayer should marry his adopted Malay daughter, Almayer experienced “feelings of mad exultation at the thought of that fortune thrown into his hands”⁴² and could only think of Lingard’s legendary wealth he believed he would share:

[Almayer] was gifted with a strong and active imagination, and in that short space of time he saw, as in a flash of dazzling light, great piles of shining guilders, and realised all the possibilities of an opulent existence. The consideration, the indolent ease of life—for which he felt himself so well fitted—his ships, his warehouses, his merchandise (old Lingard would not live for ever), and, crowning all, in the far future gleamed like a fairy palace the big mansion in Amsterdam, that earthly paradise of his dreams, where, made king amongst men by old Lingard’s money, he would pass the evening of his days in inexpressible splendour.⁴³

Almayer blinded himself into believing that Captain Lingard would find a gold mine in the interior and thus ensure his future wellbeing. He believed Lingard’s money would make it possible for him to go to Europe, where, he was convinced, he would be able to live a life of ease and affluence. Although the price he would have to pay for this would be his union to a Malay woman he did not either love or respect, he downplayed the consequences:

As to the other side of the picture—the companionship for life of a Malay girl, that legacy of a boatful of pirates—there was only within him a confused consciousness of shame that he a white man—Still, a convent education of four years!—and then she may mercifully die. He was always lucky, and money is powerful! Go through it. Why not? He had a vague idea of shutting her up somewhere, anywhere, out of his gorgeous future. Easy enough to dispose of a Malay woman, a slave, after all, to his Eastern mind, convent or no convent, ceremony or no ceremony.⁴⁴

However, whereas the treasure and wealth remained in the sphere of imagination since neither Captain Lingard nor Dain Maroola, the Malay prince who had promised to help Almayer, managed to find it, Almayer’s wife remained an all too real presence in his life, adding to his bitterness and misery. Unlike Mr Rochester, however,

⁴¹ Rochester’s mad wife, Bertha Mason, was a Creole of white descent. However, the way she is described does suggest her racial otherness.

⁴² J. Conrad, *Almayer’s Folly*, p. 12.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Almayer never returned to Europe nor did he manage to get rid of his wife by shutting her up. In fact, *Almayer's Folly* might be read as the reinterpretation of Brontë's novel, offering a challenge to the accepted nineteenth-century narrative. Mrs Almayer is repeatedly described as savage, her action and speech as devoid of reason, and her people barbaric and bloodthirsty. Even convent education had failed to eradicate her ferociousness or mend her uncivilised nature, evident in "a savage contempt expressed by sulky silence, only occasionally varied by a flood of savage invective" with which she treated her husband whom she hated.⁴⁵ To Almayer, she seemed mad, and he feared her violent nature, which made itself manifest when she "she was burning the furniture, and tearing down the pretty curtains in her unreasoning hate of those signs of civilisation."⁴⁶ However, although Mrs Almayer was not very happy in the marriage arranged for her by Lingard, it was her husband who felt that Sambir became a prison for him,⁴⁷ and who finally went mad and died. Unlike Bertha, Mr Rochester's wife, Mrs Almayer took all the money, left her husband and went to live with in Rajah Lakamba's house. As Babalatchi, one of Lakamba's men, believed, "[s]he will not die soon. Such women live a long time."⁴⁸

Almayer's Folly is, in fact, a reverse of a typical narrative of economic success, representing as it does the downfall of the protagonist. Although Almayer's career seemed promising when he started his work for Hudig and then for Captain Lingard, it was evidently arrested at his marriage and, as the novel commenced, it was in rapid decline so that only the poor remnants of his former affluence (which he owed to Lingard) were evident. When Almayer first settled in Sambir soon after his marriage, he was the owner of "the pretty little house, the big godowns built neatly by an army of Chinese carpenters, the new jetty round which were clustered the trading canoes" and he "felt a sudden elation in the thought that the world was his."⁴⁹ A little later, his affluence was replaced by "the general air of squalid neglect [which] pervaded [Almayer's] place. Great red stains on the floor and walls testified to frequent and indiscriminate betel-nut chewing" and even the label over the door: "Office: Lingard and Co." was "[h]alf obliterated."⁵⁰ The heavy competition between Almayer, the Malays and the Arabs made it impossible for him to render his business profitable. When his daughter Nina left with Dain Maroola, Almayer's breakdown and his failure were complete. At this point he could hardly remember where he even put the key to his office, which he wanted to destroy:

After some time he got up and went to the door of a room on the right of the verandah. That was the office. The office of Lingard and Co. He very seldom went in there. There was no business now, and he did not want an office. The door was locked, and he stood biting his lower lip, trying to think of the place where the key could be [...] Where was the key? He looked round and

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

saw it near the door where he stood. It was red with rust. He felt very much annoyed at that, and directly afterwards wondered at his own feeling. What did it matter?⁵¹

Although at this point he had long neglected his work, the offices bore witness to his former employment and his former plans. The rooms, although now covered with dust, contained his account books, in which he “he had intended to keep day by day a record of his rising fortunes” and which now were left “open with torn pages bestrewed the floor; other books lay about grimy and black, looking as if they had never been opened.”⁵² Also the desk and the chair evoke the time at the beginning of his career in Sambir when he was involved in his work, although at present they are just the sad symbols of his downfall:

In the middle of the room the big office desk, with one of its legs broken, careened over like the hull of a stranded ship; most of the drawers had fallen out, disclosing heaps of paper yellow with age and dirt. The revolving office chair stood in its place, but he found the pivot set fast when he tried to turn it. No matter. He desisted, and his eyes wandered slowly from object to object. All those things had cost a lot of money at the time. The desk, the paper, the torn books, and the broken shelves, all under a thick coat of dust. The very dust and bones of a dead and gone business. He looked at all these things, all that was left after so many years of work, of strife, of weariness, of discouragement, conquered so many times. And all for what?⁵³

When Almayer, in his attempt to forget his daughter, took to opium, and Captain Ford decided to take charge of his affairs for him, there was hardly a sign of Almayer’s former occupation:

The shed for the storage of goods was empty, the boats had disappeared, appropriated – generally in night-time—by various citizens of Sambir in need of means of transport. During a great flood the jetty of Lingard and Co. left the bank and floated down the river, probably in search of more cheerful surroundings; even the flock of geese [...] departed somewhere, preferring the unknown dangers of the bush to the desolation of their old home. As time went on the grass grew over the black patch of ground where the old house used to stand, and nothing remained to mark the place of the dwelling that had sheltered Almayer’s young hopes, his foolish dream of splendid future, his awakening, and his despair.⁵⁴

Almayer’s Folly thus might be interpreted as a story of success in reverse: rather than become more and more affluent, accumulate goods and wealth, Almayer lost everything so that finally nothing but grass and dust remained of the place which was once “full of life and merchandise.”⁵⁵ Almayer himself, rather than grow in prominence and estimation which would result from his success, regresses. Never a strong character, he grew more and more feeble, and once he stopped eating and took to opium, he could no longer take care of his affairs and himself. The objects he had

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

accumulated were lost, or stolen or destroyed, and all the people, including his wife and his daughter, left him. When he died, he had nothing and nobody.

Almayer's Folly thus offers an alternative to the imperial narrative of progress. Although the exotic setting of the novel suggests its affinity to the imperial romance, which it both evokes and challenges, the story evidently flirts also with other nineteenth-century narratives of economic success, whose conventions it reverses or parodies. Employing the elements of both a romance and the narratives of success, enabled Conrad to question both, thus undermining the nineteenth-century idea of the colonies as simply the background for adventure or land of unlimited possibilities of enrichment.

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