

Conrad's Idolization of Women in *Under Western Eyes*

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要旨 コンラッドはこれまで女性をうまく描けない作家と見なされ、その女性描写が批判されてきた。このような批判の中で、中でもコンラッドが女性を理想化し、偶像化して描く傾向があることが指摘されてきた。本稿では『西欧人の眼に』(*Under Western Eyes*, 1911) を取り上げ、ミソジニストの作家と言われるコンラッドが女性をどのように表象しているのかについて作品の緻密な読みによって解明し、コンラッドがラズモフのナタリアに対する偶像崇拜的な見方を描きながらも、ピーター・イヴァーノビッチをラズモフの分身としてその女性崇拜をパロディ化して描き、また語り手のラズモフとは異なる見方を提示することによって、女性を偶像化することを問題化していることを明らかにしている。

Conrad has traditionally been regarded as a novelist who wrote exclusively about the male world, and is unable to fully depict women. Critics have derided his representations of women as inadequate, and some have remarked that Conrad describes women as idolized. These tendencies are evident in one of his fiction, *Under Western Eyes* (1911). This essay discusses Conrad's representation of women in his fiction by focusing on Razumov's view of Natalia and examining the author's attitude towards it.

Razumov's Idolization of Natalia

Conrad's portrayals of women have been considered unconvincing and sometimes stereotypical or static depictions of poorly developed

characters.¹ One reason for these criticisms is that his depictions of women rely heavily on idealization or clichés. Critics have noted Conrad's tendency to idolize women, especially European women.² Idolization of women recurs among his male characters such as Marlow in "Heart of Darkness," Decoud in *Nostromo*, Heyst in *Victory*, and Razumov in *Under Western Eyes*. In these fictions his female characters are represented, to some extent, through allegorical imagery.³

This tendency appears most strikingly in *Under Western Eyes*. Razumov's view of Natalia is revealed in the diary he sent her in which he wrote that "To save me, your trustful eyes had to entice my thought to the very edge of the blackest treachery. I could see them constantly looking at me with the confidence of *your pure heart which had not been touched by evil things*."⁴ Excerpts such as the following indicate that his feelings for Natalia strengthened gradually through daily contact:

For days you have talked with me—opening your heart. I remembered the shadow of your eyelashes over your grey trustful eyes. *And your pure forehead!* It is low *like the forehead of statues—calm, unstained*. It was as if your pure brow bore a light which fell on me, searched my heart and saved me from ignominy, from ultimate undoing. (264, emphasis added)

This passage indicates that Razumov views Natalia as a "pure" woman who embodies the virtue of trust. Furthermore, reminiscing about his visit to her apartment, Razumov says that "Suddenly, you stood before me! You alone in all the world to whom I must confess. You fascinated me—you have freed me from the blindness of anger and hate—the truth shining in you drew the truth out of me" (265, emphasis added). Razumov confesses that the truth within Natalia led him from the life of falsehood to the confession of his guilt. This suggests that he adores Natalia to near idolatry, upholding her as an icon of truth. Though there are various kinds of idealizations, idolization of someone or something is an ultimate form

of idealization. Razumov's confession about her shows that he definitely idolizes Natalia.

However, Razumov does not merely idolize Natalia as an icon of truth. The complete extent and nature of his idolization is divulged when Razumov visits Natalia's apartment to confess the Haldin affair. The English language teacher describes him in the following manner:

His eyes, even as under great physical suffering, had lost all their fire. "Ah! Your brother... *But on your lips, in your voice, it sounds... and indeed in you everything is divine...* I wish I could know the innermost depths of your thoughts, of your feelings." (258, emphasis added)

The tone of Razumov's words in this passage conveys his romantic reverence, and his use of the word "divine" suggests that Razumov idolizes Natalia to the point of apotheosis. In this scene, the language teacher describes Razumov as listening to Natalia as if attending to "a strain of music rather than to articulated speech" (255).

The origin of Razumov's idolization of Natalia can be traced back to the night when Haldin visited his apartment following Mr de P—'s assassination. During that night's conversation with Razumov, Haldin describes his sister as follows: "She has the most trustful eyes of any human being that ever walked this earth" (17). Later, referring to Razumov's first encounter with her, the language teacher discloses the progression of Razumov's idolization: "The trustful girl! Every word uttered by Haldin lived in Razumov's memory. They were like haunting shapes; they could not be exorcized" (123). As he later confesses to Natalia, Razumov has not been able to forget Haldin's description of her. Since Haldin's reference, the image of Natalia as a trustful woman has become crystallized within Razumov. His vision of her was shaped by Haldin's words.

Haldin's description of Natalia exercised an extraordinary influence on

Razumov's subsequent behaviour. Before seeing Natalia in Geneva, Razumov justified himself: he regarded Haldin as a sanguinary fanatic who had ruined his life. Razumov even thought of revenging himself on Natalia when they first met in the garden of the Château Borel (263), but he comes to love her in the course of their continued acquaintance. Through Natalia, he hopes to find absolution for his actions, and her trusting personality triggers his confession of the truth. Through her, he finds the meaning of what he has done, and he finally recovers himself by confessing the entire truth about himself.

Documenting the relationship between Razumov and Natalia later in the novel, Conrad delineates his peculiar attitude towards her. When Natalia asks Razumov during their first meeting whether he cannot guess her identity, he avoids her proffered hand and recoils a pace (127). Thereafter, Razumov hesitates to meet Natalia in the garden and appears to shy from her, even while he is evidently attracted to her. Indeed, Razumov's idealized view of Natalia is not all that prompts him to avoid sustained contact with her. His inner conflict caused by his guilt over Haldin also keeps him from approaching her. Nonetheless, Razumov's timidity and awkwardness towards Natalia arises mainly from idolizing her. The idolization of women means to set them on a pedestal and involves establishing distance from them because icons are essentially untouchable. It presumes the remoteness of its object. As he says to himself that all is not for him in his first encounter with Natalia (123), Razumov's idolization of Natalia prevents him from deeper contact with her. In nearly deifying her as an incarnation of truth and trustfulness, Razumov cannot perceive Natalia as an actual woman. Because of his preconceived notions, his idolization towards her generates various misinterpretations. Their relationship is deeply flawed by misunderstandings, and misinterpretations that prevent him from fully understanding her and fulfilling their love.

An act of idolization also occurs on Natalia's part. In his letter to

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Natalia, Haldin devoted only three lines to Razumov (134). However, because “Razumov” was the only name referenced to in the letter (122), his comments about him took possession of her. Thus, when the language teacher asks her impression of Razumov at their first meeting, Natalia quotes Haldin instead of providing her own judgement “Unstained, lofty, and solitary existences” (100). She later repeats Haldin’s phrase from his letter (102, 125). Seeing Razumov reel and lean against the terrace wall in response to Haldin’s name in the garden of the Château Borel, Natalia supposes that his friendship with her brother had been the “very brotherhood of souls” (127). Reminiscing on another occasion about the encounter with Razumov, she says the following about him: “This extraordinary man is meditating some vast plan, some great undertaking; he is possessed by it—he suffers from it—and from being alone in the world” (149). She later confides to Razumov that it is in him that she can find all that remains of her brother’s soul (254). Natalia believes Razumov was Haldin’s intimate friend and a revolutionary with high ideals. She is unable to discern the truth of the Haldin affair until he confesses it. Natalia also does not see Razumov for what he truly is.

In *Under Western Eyes*, Conrad not only delineates Razumov’s idolization towards Natalia but also presents her idolatry towards him. As both Razumov and Natalia are possessed with preconceptions, bilateral idolizations exist between them, which give rise to various misunderstandings. This in turn prevents their final consummation of love. Misunderstandings between lovers are not limited to *Under Western Eyes*. This phenomenon is characteristic to Conrad’s fiction, for example, *The Secret Agent*, *Chance*, and *Victory*.⁵ Through failures of communication, Conrad shows his readers the difficulty of understanding others and our tendency to idealize people.

Peter Ivanovitch as Razumov’s Mirror

As noted, Conrad represents Natalia through Razumov’s traditional

masculine construction of feminine virtue. To idolize a woman is to emphasize one of her facets while ignoring her human complexity. To describe this behaviour in literary terms, it is one-dimensional and lacks humanity. Moreover, the attitudes of Conrad's male characters' towards women often have been equated with the author's view of women and femininity.⁶ How, then, does Conrad as an author treat Razumov's view of Natalia? To gain insight into Conrad's view of idolizing women, we turn to an important character in the novel: Peter Ivanovitch, the Russian feminist revolutionary.

His feminism provides a clue to the author's view of the idolizing of women. Through encounters with Russian women during his escape from prison, Ivanovitch creates a new faith based on "woman's spiritual superiority" (90) which is based on the cult of women. His feminism, however, is differs from customary Western feminism; his comments about Madame de S— reveal the essence of his feminism. Ivanovitch tells Natalia at Château Borel:

"She is a perpetual manifestation of a noble and peerless spirit," he broke in. "Her charm – no, I shall not speak of her charm. But, of course, *everybody who approaches her falls under the spell....* Contradictions vanish, trouble falls away from one.... Unless I am mistaken – but I never make a mistake in spiritual matters – you are troubled in your soul, Natalia Victorovna." (96, emphasis added)

Here, Ivanovitch here explains that Madame de S— is an attractive, influential woman with special powers who embodies a noble and peerless spirit. In describing her in extremely abstract and idealized words, Ivanovitch idolizes Madame de S—. Thus, his doctrine of feminism parallels Razumov's view of Natalia.

It is not only that Razumov's view of Natalia resembles Ivanovitch's view of Madame de S—, but some resemblances also appear in descriptions of the objects of their respective idolizations. Ivanovitch

describes Madame de S— before introducing her to Razumov:

“Perfection itself would not produce that effect,” pursued Peter Ivanovitch, “in a world not meant for it. But you find there a mind – no! – the quintessence of feminine intuition which will understand any perplexity you may be suffering from by the irresistible, enlightening force of sympathy. Nothing can remain obscure before that – that – inspired, yes, inspired penetration, *this true light of femininity*.” (157, emphasis added)

Ivanovitch here explains that Madame de S— has a mind that understands any confusion by force of sympathy. It is significant that this attribute of Madame de S— is attributed to Natalia as well. In her first meeting with Razumov, Natalia is intuitively aware that he suffers from his thoughts (124). Moreover, Ivanovitch's description of Madame de S— “this true light of femininity” corresponds with Razumov's description of Natalia “your pure brow bore a light” (264) and “the truth shining in you” (265). Thus, Razumov's idolization of Natalia and Ivanovitch's cult of Madame de S— are parallels in their respective expressions.

Ivanovitch's description of Madame de S— suggests Conrad's attitude towards the idolizing of women. Although Ivanovitch praises her enthusiastically, Razumov's observation of Madame de S— differs completely. For example, during his interview with her, Razumov feels that Madame de S— is like “a witch in Parisian clothes” (158) and her smile is “a smile which made him think of a grinning skull” (159). She is also described as having “a bony, inanimate hand” (166), and is compared to an “ancient, painted mummy with unfathomable eyes” (159). The language teacher further refers to Razumov's impression that “Her rigidity was frightful, like the rigour of a corpse galvanized into harsh speech and glittering stare by the force of murderous hate” (164). Madame de S— is repeatedly expressed by the caricatured death images. Differences between Ivanovitch's and Razumov's observations create an irony about the idolizing of women.

However, Madame de S— is not represented solely by Razumov's death imagery. The language teacher also conveys Razumov's impression of her as follows:

It was more like the abhorrence that may be caused by a wooden or plaster figure of a repulsive kind. She moved no more than if she were such a figure; even her eyes, whose unwinking stare plunged into his own, though shining, were lifeless, as though they were as artificial as her teeth. (166)

In this passage, stressing Madame de S—'s rigidity and lifelessness, Razumov feels disgusted by such a wooden and grotesque woman. These descriptions of Madame de S— contrast strikingly with those of Natalia, whose figure the language teacher describes as "straight, supple" (134) and her walk as "a strong and healthy movement forward" (134). He later refers to her figure as "youthful" (255).

Further, Madame de S— is depicted as greedy and cruel. For example, Madame de S— discussing the Balkan political situation: "From time to time Madame de S— extended a claw-like hand, glittering with costly rings, towards the paper of cakes, took up one and devoured it, displaying her big false teeth ghoulishly" (160). The language teacher also says: "her immovable peevishness of the face, framed in the limp, rusty lace, had a character of cruelty" (164). These descriptions of physical grotesqueness suggest Madame de S—'s inner nature. The language teacher reveals earlier that she had been bested in a sordid quarrel with her late husband's family over money (119). Their contrast with descriptions of Madame de S— place Razumov's idolization of Natalia and Ivanovitch's cult of Madame de S— in ironic juxtaposition, making Madame de S— a caricatured embodiment of Natalia as idealized by Razumov.

Under Western Eyes features other narrative parallels between Razumov's view of Natalia and Ivanovitch's cult of Madame de S—. Moreover, several similarities can be found between Razumov and

Ivanovitch other than their attitude towards women. According to the language teacher, while escaping from prison, Ivanovitch was saved by a woman who gave him a file, which he ended up losing in the dark: "It appeared to be a sacred trust. To fail would have been a sort of treason against the sacredness of self-sacrifice and womanly love" (90). After this experience, Ivanovitch, who continued to escape with a chain on his leg, encountered a newly wed wife who weeps for him and aids his escape through her husband, the village blacksmith. He thus regained his humanity through her "feminine compassion" (92). Influenced by the two women, Ivanovitch creates his own feminism.

On the other hand, Razumov, who earlier justified his betrayal of Haldin to himself, realizes the meaning of his actions through contact with Natalia. As he writes in his diary, her personality influenced him to confess his crime (265). Significantly, after the interview with Ivanovitch, Razumov feels "bizarre as it may seem, as though another self, an independent sharer of his mind, had been able to view his whole person distinctly indeed" (169). Although Ivanovitch's episode in Russia appears to be a mere digression by the language teacher that is irrelevant to the novel's theme, it is inserted just before the encounter between Razumov and Natalia. Thus, Razumov and Ivanovitch are Doppelgängers in their respective experiences with women and their subsequent cult of women. Conrad often employs Doppelgängers in his fiction.⁷ In this instance, Conrad creates Ivanovitch as Razumov's double to mirror his idolization of Natalia.

Significantly, Ivanovitch is presented as an entirely dubious character. When Natalia first visits the Château Borel, Tekla, a dame companion of the Château Borel, informs Natalia that Ivanovitch is the most inconsiderate man alive, even though he is the century's greatest genius (108). She recounts having to sit still for six hours on a cold day taking his dictation (110). Tekla also speaks of an episode when Ivanovitch was very bitter with her when Madame de S—'s eggs were not properly

prepared (122). Her words reveal that Ivanovitch, a professed feminist, abuses her. In a later conversation with Razumov, Tekla remarks that women are not easily daunted by pain, adding how Ivanovitch declared that it was because of women's blunt nerves (174). Because Ivanovitch's professed beliefs and actual behaviour differ completely, Tekla's disclosures about him produce ironies about his idolization of women, calling his mystic feminism into question. The portrayal of Ivanovitch as a bogus feminist alerts the reader to Razumov's attitude towards Natalia.

Critics have speculated about possible models for Ivanovitch.⁸ Conrad may have created him in reaction to the period during which he wrote *Under Western Eyes*, the Edwardian period.⁹ The feminist movement raged during this period, and many women joined the campaign for suffrage. However, the portrayal of Ivanovitch as a bogus feminist causes the reader to question Razumov's assumptions about Natalia as well. By hinting at analogies between Razumov and Ivanovitch, Conrad raises questions about the idolizing of women. Conrad's critical view of idolizing women is suggested by the ironic presentation of Ivanovitch's feminism.

The Language Teacher's Point of View

Under Western Eyes employs another device that implies Conrad's attitude towards idolizing women. A male character other than Razumov interacts with Natalia, the English language teacher, the novel's narrator. In *Under Western Eyes*, Natalia's character is built through the language teacher's knowledge and observation, and they provide the reader with views different from Razumov's. Natalia evokes different reactions from the narrator, and his viewpoint illuminates Conrad's attitude towards the idolizing of women.

An important aspect of Natalia's personality conveyed by the language teacher is her spiritual independence. He says "She was suspected of holding independent views on matters settled by official teaching" (103).

Since she spoke her mind openly on public events, Natalia earned a reputation for liberalism (103). As she reveals in discussions about Russia with the language teacher, she seeks political liberty in her native country and holds her own, admittedly naïve, ideals for Russia's future. Furthermore, when Natalia confides that she has had no contact with Haldin for a long time, the language teacher remarks that "It is to be noted that if she confided in me it was clearly not with the expectation of receiving advice, for which, indeed, she never asked" (88). Natalia does not seek any advice from him, though she confides many things in him. Thus, the language teacher describes her as an independent woman with her own opinions. As mentioned before, while Conrad was writing *Under Western Eyes*, the suffrage movement became increasingly militant. The social reality surrounding the author may have influenced his portrayal of the heroine.

The language teacher conveys another aspect of Natalia's character that Razumov fails to notice. In a scene before parting with her in her apartment, the language teacher notices her hand, "The grip of her strong, shapely hand had a seductive frankness, a sort of exquisite virility" (88). Later during Razumov's unexpected visit to Natalia's apartment, the language teacher describes her voice, "Her voice, with its unfeminine yet exquisite timbre, was steady, and she spoke quickly, frank, unembarrassed" (255). Although he describes her voice as *unfeminine*, he also mentions her gracefulness (255). The language teacher perceives her as having masculine as well as feminine qualities.

In doing so, he discloses yet another aspect of Natalia's character that undermines Razumov's idealized view of her. Looking at Natalia talking with Razumov in an anteroom of her apartment, the language teacher describes her as follows:

While speaking she raised her hands above her head to unite her veil, and that moment displayed for an instant the seductive grace of her youthful

figure, clad in the simplest mourning. In the transparent shadow the hat rim threw on her face her grey eyes had an enticing lustre. (255)

Moreover, he earlier observes that her grey eyes shaded by black eyelashes were attractive (76). The language teacher clearly notices Natalia's physical charms.¹⁰ He does not see her as the incarnation of truthfulness unlike Razumov, who consecrates Natalia as "pure." His descriptions of Natalia expose the dichotomy between Razumov's idealization and the living woman. The image narrated by the language teacher repudiates Razumov's stereotypical view of her.

Natalia is portrayed through the voice of the language teacher. Throughout his narrative he insists on the incomprehensibility and remoteness of Russians, and emphasizes differences in nationality as obstacles to comprehending them. Despite this difference, however, he and the Russian girl become friends. When Natalia confides that she is out of contact with Haldin, the language teacher remarks that "I am reduced to suppose that she appreciated my attention and silence. The attention she could see was quite sincere, so that the silence could not be suspected of coldness" (88).

In discoursing on Russia and Russians, the language teacher expresses himself as a "silent spectator" (253), but he has always paid attention to Natalia. He believes that Natalia recognizes this and accepts his attention. This is neither prejudice nor misconception on his part, because she does feel a firm friendship with him. On one occasion, Natalia tells him that "There is a way of looking on which is valuable. I have felt less lonely because of it" (100). In fact, the language teacher has not always been a disengaged spectator. He sometimes advises her, and he accompanies her when she visits Ivanovitch's rooms seeking Razumov's address. Because reciprocal affection exists between the language teacher and Natalia, she is not icon of truth for him but a friend with whom he can speak frankly. This enables him to see her as she is.

The language teacher's attachment to and admiration for Natalia appear throughout his narrative. For example, he praises Natalia as "one of these rare human beings that do not want explaining" (140) and an "exceptional girl" (254). When Razumov and Natalia are facing each other in the anteroom of her apartment, the language teacher describes her as "so rare, outside, as it were, above the common notion of beauty" (251). In this scene, Razumov's gaze towards Natalia is merged with the language teacher's. In describing her eyes as "trustful" (276), the language teacher regards her as a woman who does not know to doubt others.

The language teacher in *Under Western Eyes* has aroused mixed critical reactions, and critics regard him as an unreliable narrator.¹¹ He is a Western observer with limited understanding of Russian life, and misconceptions or misunderstandings populate his view of Natalia. However, he maintains a sense of distance from Natalia because of their differences in both nationality and age. Unlike Razumov, he is not utterly infatuated with her, rendering his description of Natalia more reliable. It is important to note that another character shares his view of her. Tekla speaks about Natalia to Razumov, "I could not help speaking of you to that charming dear girl. Oh, the sweet creature! And strong! One can see that at once" (174). Tekla immediately recognizes that Natalia is a kind as well as strong woman. Her view of Natalia accords with the language teacher's.

The language teacher's narration of Razumov's story is based on the diary that Natalia gives him. Conrad's complex narrative method prevents the reader from acquiring full knowledge of the heroine's inner life and her personality. Nevertheless, Conrad creates a complex characterization of her through the language teacher's viewpoint. After Mrs Haldin's death, he remarks about Natalia that "She gave me a new view of herself, and I marvelled at that something grave and measured in her voice, in her movements, in her manner. It was the perfection of collected independence" (273). Razumov's confession of his betrayal shocks Natalia (275).

But after this incident the language teacher notices a growth in her demeanour. He discerns in her calm manner that she has matured through secret suffering. Near the novel's end Natalia returns to Russia to help the persecuted people. An idealized female figure generally lacks identity or individuality, but the language teacher's descriptions show development in Natalia's character. Conrad uses his narrator to portray Natalia as a complicated woman who is able to grow.

Conrad does not portray Natalia with facile symbolism, nor is she a symbolic female presence in the novel. One of Natalia's roles in the novel is that of being a catalyst for the action in that Razumov's love for her compels him to confess his guilt. However, she is not a mere "pivot" or "peg" through whom the story progresses, as Schneider claims,¹² nor is she a "trick" to set characters in motion. As Keith Carabine demonstrates, Conrad deleted many characterizations of Natalia in the process of his textual revisions.¹³ His final version of the novel presents Natalia as a complex character who is capable of growth. Through the device of the narrator, Conrad presents her not as an iconic object but as a spiritually independent, vocal and vibrant figure.¹⁴

The language teacher recognizes multiple facets of Natalia's personality, whereas Razumov sees her in one dimension. In maintaining a distance with Natalia, the elderly language teacher is able to see Natalia objectively, to a certain extent. Thus, the language teacher's point of view supplements Razumov's monolithic view of Natalia and provides an alternative view of the protagonist. The language teacher's diversified view undermines the image that Razumov projects onto his relationship with her. Conrad insists that we interpret Natalia from a viewpoint that differs from the protagonist's.

Under Western Eyes represents Natalia through Razumov's idealization. Judging by his recurring idolized female representations, his protagonist's tendency may have been Conrad's own. If so, his portrayal of Natalia

deconstructs the protagonist's monolithic view. It renders the idolizing of women problematic through caricatured representation of the supporting character and the narrator's point of view. Through this narrative strategy, Conrad expresses skepticism about the idolizing of women.

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Notes

¹ See, for example, Colbron 511-14; Moser 94-96; Meyers 134. For a brief history of critics' responses to Conrad's representations of women, see Jones 5-19.

² For a discussion of this topic, see Schneider 9-32. She discusses female iconographic figures in Conrad's four tales in which the blinded female light bearer appears.

³ For a discussion of this topic, see my essay (2013).

⁴ Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, 264, emphasis added. Hereafter cited by page numbers in brackets within the text.

⁵ For example, in *The Secret Agent* Mr Verloc thinks his wife loves him. Anthony in *Chance* thinks Flora married him for her father. Misunderstandings between Heyst and Lena in *Victory* occur mainly because of their class differences.

⁶ See, for example, Schneider 18; Meyer; Moser 94-96. For a discussion of this topic, also see Iwashimizu 157-70.

⁷ For example, Gentleman Brown is presented as Jim's double and Mr Jones as Heyst's double. For Conrad's usage of Doppelgängers, see Watts 133-34; Hay 134-35 (1991).

⁸ For a discussion of this subject, see Spence 113-22; Hay 283 (1963); Baines 372.

⁹ Conrad creates a second feminist character, Mrs Fyne in *Chance*. Unlike Ivanovitch's characterization, the portrayal of Mrs Fyne reflects the turn-of-the-century cultural climate in which the New Woman emerged.

¹⁰ See Hawthorn 293. His note to *Under Western Eyes* points out Conrad's effort to avoid suggesting the narrator's sexual desire.

¹¹ See, for example, Hay 296 (1963) and Jones 62-63.

¹² *CL* 4: 489-90. In his response to Olivia Garnett, Conrad uses the words "pivot"

and “peg” concerning the role of Natalia. Schneider (40-41) argues that Conrad employs Natalia to provide a pivot for the action.

¹³ For a discussion of this topic, see Carabine 128-73.

¹⁴ Kaplan (272) remarks in her insightful essay that Natalia is represented as a complex, powerful woman.

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