Loneliness amid the Abuse of
Words in *Chance*

Toshimasa Oshimoto

*Chance* is regarded as the first novel of Conrad’s later period which some critics consider to be his declining phase. Their critical opinions have two common points. One is concerned with the narrative technique in the novel: the narrative method is too complicated for the content; the nominal interlocutor “I” is superfluous. Captain Anthony is uninteresting; Marlow is dull, loquacious, and speaks unnaturally long at one time. The other is concerned with heterosexual love: the implied happy ending of Flora and Powell is not convincing, the relationship between Captain Anthony and Flora is very unnatural, and Franklin’s misogamy and misogyny are almost absurd.

But *Chance* is appreciated highly by some other critics. Even Albert J. Guerard, who judges that “the novels after *Under Western Eyes* are inferior”, admits “*Chance* is (always excepting *The Snadow Line*) the only later novel worth much attention on its merits.”

The aim of this present essay is not so much to delve into these critics’ arguments as to show a major reason why the novel can be considered as an important work. It is well-known that Conrad at last gained popularity by *Chance*. Its plot is along popular lines—the bankruptcy of the great financier, a young girl in a piteous plight, elopement of the young couple, complication of characters’ relationships,
and the happy ending in the denouement. In spite of the complicated narrative and Marlow’s lengthy comments, to read *Chance* is probably easier and more enjoyable for some readers than to read *Heart of Darkness* or *Nostromo*. *Chance* has, however, another charm besides this popular element. This is the underlying sense of the precariousness of human existence which it has in common with Conrad’s major works.

I

Flora seems a conventional heroine at first glance. She feels keen loneliness after her father de Barral’s bankruptcy. She has unusual, bitter experiences and finds no one with whom she can intimately communicate. Her loneliness is, however, not the exceptional, personal case of a daughter of a fraudulent business failure but a typical case of the age in which she lives. She is imprisoned in her loneliness; but she is not alone in this. Many characters around her are captives in one way or another. Each main character seems to live in his or her own capsule for most of the novel. As F. R. Leavis says, moral isolation is the theme of *Chance.*

*Chance* reveals the society in which lack of communication is the dominant feature. This does not mean that the people in the novel speak little or infrequently. The truth is quite contrary. It may be no exaggeration to say that *Chance* is, in a sense, a novel of the abuse of words.

*Chance* reveals critical attitudes toward contemporary Britain. De Barral, for example, is presented as the product of early mass society. Marlow tells de Barral’s history:
He was a mere sign, a portent. There was nothing in him. Just about that time the word Thrift was to the fore. You know the power of words. We pass through periods dominated by this or that word—it may be development, or it may be competition, or education, or purity or efficiency or even sanctity. It is the word of the time. Well just then it was word Thrift which was out in the streets walking arm in arm with righteousness, the inseparable companion and backer up of all such national catch-words, looking everybody in the eye as it were. [Italics mine]

De Barral had “a pretty fancy in names” that sounded good but had no substance; and he had “nothing else besides—absolutely nothing—no other merit” (p. 69). He is a hollow man in a different way from and on a much smaller scale than Kurtz in Heart of Darkness. He also resembles Donkin in The Nigger of the “Narcissus”. Both are shams who have a liking for words that have no relation to reality.

But in Conrad’s Britain such an inefficient, irresponsible man as de Barral can leap into fame and remain a great personage for a short while. His strange “success” depends on advertisement, a form of one sided communication with the masses. Probably because they live in age of unbelief and mistrust, people of the novel are swayed by advertisements and journalism. On some occasions they are surprisingly credulous.

When the first-person narrator, in surprise at de Barral’s history, says to Marlow, “you exaggerate surely—if only by your way of putting things. It’s too startling,” Marlow retorts:

I exaggerate! . . . My way of putting things! My dear fellow, I have merely stripped the rags of buniness verbiage and financial
jargon off my statements. And you have startled! I am giving you the naked truth. It's true too that nothing lays itself open to the charge of exaggeration more than the language of naked truth. (p. 80)

Journalism is responsible for de Barral's publicity and his ruin. When he was at the peak of his fame, "he was, according to the majority of the daily press, a financial force working for the improvement of the character of the people" (p. 75). Even his lack of management was "praised in silly public prints as illustrating in their [four of de Barral's financial institutions] management the principle of Thrift for which they were founded" (p. 79).

De Barral was an essentially mediocre man whose role as a public personage was short-lived. "There was never any glory or splendour about that figure" (p. 75). He did not know even how to spend the money to gratify his tastes or to enjoy luxury:

There was something perfect in his consistent mediocrity. His very vanity seemed to miss the gratification of even the mere show of power. In the days when he was most fully in the public eye the invincible obscurity of his origins clung to him like a shadowy garment. He had handled millions without ever enjoying anything of what is counted as precious in the community of men, because he had neither the brutality of temperament nor the fineness of mind to make him desire them with the will power of a masterful adventurer... (p. 84)

When de Barral's inevitable bankruptcy comes, his public image changes completely. People now call him an idiot or a man with a criminal type of face. Daily papers continue to profit from his notoriety,
preying upon his fate with blazing, fierce headlines during the whole week of sittings. De Barral is certainly a criminal fraud. He is a victim of his own self-deception as well as of the deceptive public image of him fabricated by journalism. Behind the pose of social justice of the newspapers and the teeth-gnashing of their readers lies the general public's vexation at its own folly and credulity.

When Marlow heard of de Barral's "very first and last gesture" during the trial, "a hard-clenched fist" raised feebly above his head, he began to be really interested in the man, for he could sense for the first time the existence of private feelings behind the public personage. But the pressman's reaction was quite different:

The pressman disapproved of that manifestation. It was not his business to understand it. Is it ever the business of any pressman to understand anything? I guess not. It would lead him too far away from the actualities which are the daily bread of the public mind. [Italics mine] (p. 87)

This contains an incisive criticism of such journalism. Marlow distinguishes information from knowledge:

Information is something one goes out to seek and puts away when found as you might do a piece of lead: ponderous, useful, unvibrating, dull. Whereas knowledge comes to one, this sort of knowledge, a chance acquisition preserving in its repose a fine resonant quality. (p. 88)

Quantity of information or loquacity of words do not lead to this sort of knowledge—that is to say, to a true understanding of a situation or of other people. Thus Marlow's interest in de Barral's case is different
Loneliness amid the Abuse of Words in Chance

from that of the ordinary readers of the daily press. But how does “this sort of knowledge” come to Marlow? He explains the difference between the busy pressman and himself:

He [the pressman] probably thought the display worth very little from a picturesque point of view; the weak voice, the colourless personality as incapable of an attitude as a bed-post, the very fatuity of the clenched hand so ineffectual at that time and place—no, it wasn’t worth much. And then, for him, an accomplished craftsman in his trade, thinking was distinctly ‘bad business.’ His business was to write a readable account. But I, who had nothing to write, permitted myself to use my mind as we sat before our still untouched glasses. And the disclosure which so often rewards a moment of detachment from mere visual impressions gave me a thrill very much approaching a shudder. I seemed to understand that, with the shock of the agonies and perplexities of his trial, the imagination of that man, whose moods, notions, and motives wore frequently an air of grotesque mystery—that his imagination had been at last roused into activity. And this is awful. Just try to enter into the feelings of a man whose imagination wakes up at the very moment he is about to enter the tomb. . . . [Italics mine] (p. 87)

“A moment of detachment from mere visual impression” prevents us from lapsing into hasty, emotional judgements or prejudice. “The sort of knowledge” comes through the disinterestedness of a composed mind. It is often considered that an onlooker is irresponsible and can have only imperfect understanding of a situation. But Marlow’s role in Chance is quite contrary to this view of an onlooker. Although his remarks are sometimes lengthy and irritating, his role reveals how an onlooker understands better what is happening to others.
There is an interesting conversation between Marlow and the anonymous narrator:

"Luckily, people, whether mature or not mature (and who really is ever mature?), are for the most part quite incapable of understanding what is happening to them: a merciful provision of nature to preserve an average amount of sanity for working purposes in this world. . . ."

"But we, my dear Marlow, have the inestimable advantage of understanding what is happening to others" I struck in. "Or at least some of us seem to. Is that too a provision of nature? And what is it for? Is it that we may amuse ourselves gossiping about each other's affairs? You, for instance, seem—"

"I don't know what I seem," Marlow silenced me, "and surely life must be amused somehow. It would be still a very respectable provision if it were only for that end. But from that same provision of understanding, there springs in us compassion, charity, indignation, the sense of solidarity; and in minds of any largeness an inclination to that indulgence which is next to affection." (pp. 117–118)

Language can be the medium of true communication only when it produces this kind of understanding. What Marlow does in the novel is to interpret the complicated situation to the narrator and readers: His efforts for the right use of words help the two lovers, Anthony and Flora, and finally Powell and Flora.

Language is Conrad's primary concern in Chance. Language, which should be the medium of communication, is often described as the root of deception or trauma in this novel. The discrepancy between appearance and reality is almost always the concern of literature, but the
Governess's case is a very flagrant one.

Till the day of de Barral's failure, her Governess had been for Flora "the wisdom, the authority, the protection of life, security embodied and visible and undisputed" (p. 117). On that day, however, that Governess called her a fool, no better than a beggar, and added that nobody would love her. This shattering experience "was never forgotten. It was always felt; it remained like a mark on her soul, a sort of mystic wound, to be contemplated, to be meditated over" (pp. 118–119). About six years later in conversation with Flora on the pavement in front of a pub in East London, Marlow feels the effect of the trauma. "See the might of suggestion? We live at the mercy of a malevolent word. A sound, a mere disturbance of the air, sinks into our very soul sometimes" (p. 264).

Marlow has the view that civilization is a very thin veneer. There is a dark, passionate inner world in the hearts of governesses as well as in those of the rest of us:

Do you look upon governesses as creatures above suspicion or of necessarily of moral perfection? I suppose their hearts would not stand looking into much better than other people's. Why shouldn't a governess have passions, all the passions, even that of libertinage, and even ungovernable passions; yet suppressed by the very same means which keep the rest of us in order: early training—necessity—circumstances—fear of consequence; till there comes an age, a time when the restraint of years becomes intolerable—and infatuation irresistible... (p. 103)

According to Marlow, the Governess, a poor and fairly shrewd woman, has felt anger and hate against the rich and the repressive
society:

She was abominable, but she was not common. She had suffered in her life not from its constant inferiority but from constant self-repression. ... In her composed, schooled manner she despised and disliked both father and daughter exceedingly. I have a notion that she had always disliked intensely all her charges including the two ducale (if they were ducale) little girls with whom she had dazzled de Barral. What an odious, ungratified existence it must have been for a woman as avid of all the sensuous emotions which life can give as most of her betters. (p. 104)

As an individual the Governess is abominable, yet her characterization implies a criticism of English class society as a whole. In this connection the Fynes are an interesting caricature. They are the products of "early training—necessity—circumstances—fear of consequences," too. The resemblance between the Governess and Mrs. Fine is repeatedly stressed. Her distinctive feature during the tea-party scene on a "brightly dull" holiday is described thus: "the appearance of very trustworthy, very capable and excellent governess; as if Fyne were a widower and the children not her own" (pp. 41–42). Gradually Marlow feels the Fynes becoming uncongenial to him, and begins to satirize "Mrs. Fyne's individualist woman-doctrine, naively unscrupulous" (p. 62). He calls her "good innocent creature, worthy wife, excellent mother (of the strict governess type)" (p. 63).

It is possible to point out Marlow's (and Conrad's) bias against the Women's Movement. But it is unfair to accuse the novelist, who wrote Chance many decades ago, of anti-feminism by today's standard. What is the defect of Mrs. Fyne's feminism in Marlow's view? This ques-
tion again leads to the discrepancy between appearance and reality and the problem of communication in this novel.

Mrs. Fyne is an author of "inflammatory" feminist books. She is, in principle, an advocate of equality between man and woman. Yet she has a peculiar class consciousness, or, at least she always wants to feel superiority towards the people around her. Her feminism stems from her hatred for her father, Careon Anthony. He too was an author. He published poems in which he praised the domestic and social amenities of his age and exalted womanhood. But in his home he was quite arbitrary and exacting, and he showed "traces of the primitive cavedweller's temperament." His two wives died crushed with grief and desperation.

In her girlhood Mrs. Fyne felt "fear of consequences" in remaining at her home. She escaped from the "circumstance" by elopement with the pedestrian Fyne. The choice was "necessity" for her. What dominated her at the time was the will to survive; just as the similar motive dominated the Governess's life in a society which seemed cruel and unjust to her.

The "excellent husband" of this feminist is Mr. Fyne. He is not a man of many words. He has, however, published a book on pedestrian tours of public footpaths, and he is known in the small world of that recreation. He is a typical petit bourgeois in a developed country. Having a petty post at the Civil Service, he has a cottage in the country and spends leisurely holidays there. As far as his usual life and his hobby are concerned, he is a "flower of civilization." Yet this solemn man is a product of shallow civilization. Once his uneventful life and respectability are threatened, he reveals himself a new, an
unknown Fyne to Marlow on the pavement in East London. Appalled at the prospect of his brother-in-law's impending marriage with Flora, he utters a cry of "a sound so quaintly ugly and almost horrible" and his face becomes "extremely apelike."

Marlow declares that, in spite of their writing, the Fynes are not intelligent people. They represent the fault of the ordinary, good citizen: "They were commonplace, earnest, without smiles and without guile" (p. 61). By and by Marlow realizes that neither of them really worries about Flora's disappearance. They are without compassionate concern for her. What they want is to abolish all contact between themselves and their daughters, and Anthony and Flora, the notorious convict's daughter. On the first night of Flora's disappearance Marlow surprisingly finds implicit relief in Mrs. Fyne's rigid sitting posture: "She looked exactly like a governess who had put the children to bed; and her manner to me was just the neutral manner of a governess" (p. 50). Her trouble is not about Flora's life itself but about the damage her brother's marriage with the girl may bring to the respectability of her family. Although Mrs. Fyne is an advocate of the new movement, she is very conscious of class distinction and very eager to keep respectability.

Mrs. Fyne is critical of the world, or of what many other people do. She regards herself as the champion of righteous opinion and has: "a readiness to assume any responsibility in Heaven" (p. 137). These qualities contribute to bring the six-year-old, desperate Flora to her and to her good husband. To criticize various events in this world is one thing; it is quite another to sustain a directly responsible relation with them. Mr. Fyne, at least, shows himself aware of this, when he art-
lessly confesses to Marlow that he has been concerned “at the possible consequence” of adopting Flora.

Flora was often burdensome to the Fynes. De Barral’s cousin was “an unexpected sort of man” to them. If Flora had stayed at the father’s cousin’s, it would have been a relief to the Fynes. Yet Flora came back to them again and again. The card-board box businessman was “what is most respectable in lower middle class” (p. 128). Conrad shows this man’s vulgarity and the subtlety of English class consciousness. The man, who possessed all the civic virtues in their meanest form, regarded himself as superior to the Fynes. “The man in black sat down then with a faint superior smile.” [Italics mine]:

All the time Fyne felt subtly in that man’s manner a derisive disapproval of everything that was not lower middle class, a profound respect for money, a mean sort of contempt for speculators that fail, and a conceited satisfaction with his own respectable vulgarity. (p. 129)

Fyne shows “extreme distaste” for that man when he tells Marlow of him. Indeed, each of the two middle aged men feels himself very different from the other. Yet, in reality, both are vulgar only in slightly different forms and degree.

Furthermore de Barral’s cousin and the Fynes have one thing in common. They use words for self-assertive and self-justifying purposes only. They don’t regard words as a medium through which to understand others. The businessman, of course, has not published. Yet he is wordy, even delivers a sort of homily, when he talks of his industry and of his worldly view of life as exemplary. He is very insensitive to the meaning of words. According to him, the cruelest scene Flora has
experienced in his home was no more than "a tiff." His wife and daughters are also as or more insensitive than he. They are "people without any fineness either of feeling or mind, unable to understand her misery" (p. 163).

II

Flora has been lonely, surrounded by these people of words with whom she cannot communicate. She cannot help being a passive victim. Her name Flora means a flower. But she has to endure the long, wintry years and wait for her bloom in the barren soil of a civilization in which the Fynes are typical plants.

Her elopement with Captain Anthony is a necessary step for her flowering. If Mrs. Fyne were a genuine feminist, she would have at least approved of this. But she feels that Flora has returned evil for good. She believes that Flora has enticed and used her brother, Anthony. According to Marlow, however, it is Mrs. Fyne herself who is responsible for her brother's elopement. Soon after Anthony comes to spend his holidays with them at the cottage for the first time, both Mr. and Mrs. Fyne discover that they have nothing even remotely in common with him and they neglect him. Marlow guesses that Captain Anthony "must have had his loneliness brought home to his bosom for the first time of his life, at an age, thirty-five or thereabouts, when one is mature enough to feel the pang of such a discovery" (p. 159). Marlow openly criticizes Mrs. Fyne: "don't you think now, frankly, that there is a little of your own fault in what has happened? You bring them together, you leave your brother to himself!" (p. 158).

Marlow expresses a critical view of Mrs. Fyne and her feminism to
her husband:

'What your wife cannot tolerate in this affair is Miss de Barral being what she is.' ... 'That is—her being a woman. I have some idea of Mrs. Fyne's mental attitude towards society with its injustices, with its atrocious or ridiculous conventions. As against them there is no audacity of action your wife's mind refuses to sanction. The doctrine which I imagine she stuffs into the pretty heads of your girl-guests is almost vengeful. A sort of moral fire-and-sword doctrine....' 'But it is a mere intellectual exercise. What I see is that in dealing with reality Mrs. Fyne ceases to be tolerant. In other words, that she can't forgive Miss de Barral for being a woman and behaving like a woman.'

[Italics mine] (pp. 187-188)

Mrs. Fyne's feminism stems from aversion to her despotic father. But she is herself despotic in her turn.

Two things can be said of Conrad's characterization of Mrs. Fyne. One is Conrad's mistrust of mere words. Conrad spent more than two decades as a seaman. His experience of the small, closely-knit community of the British merchant ship formed his character. It made him a keen observer of actions, and gave him a preference for people of few words. The responsibility of the seaman of a sailing ship is very definite. A sailor's neglect of his duty may endanger him as well as others. On the other hand, on land people are in a highly complicated, but loosely connected, vast society and are able to express quite irresponsible opinions in large, abstract words. Once they face real problems in their own life, they are in contradiction to what they say. This is the basis of Conrad's dislike of journalists and of people of mere words in general. Though it was written years before Chance,
his letter of 14 January 1898 to R. B. Cunninghame Graham expresses severe scepticism of use of words:

Life knows us not and we do not know life—we don’t know even our own thoughts. Half the words we use have no meaning whatever and of the other half each man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly and conceit. Faith is a myth and beliefs shift like mists on the shore; thoughts vanish; words, once pronounced, die; and the memory of yesterday is as shadowy as the hope of to-morrow. . . .

The idea that all of us are the products of our past is the other concept which determines Conrad’s characterization of Mrs. Fyne. She wishes to reject her past, yet she retains much of it. “Having seen tow successive wives of the delicate poet chivied and worried into their graves, she had adopted that cool, detached manner to meet her gifted father’s outbreaks of selfish temper. It had now become a second nature” (p. 51). Marlow becomes even a little bit sympathetic to Mrs. Fyne’s personal history. “Her father kept her strictly cloistered. Marriage with Fyne was certainly a change, but only to another kind of clausturation” (p. 66). What is more interesting is that not only Mrs. Fyne but also many other characters—Flora, Anthony, de Barral, for example—are, each in their different ways, conditioned or psychologically imprisoned. Describing de Barral’s corpse to Marlow, Powell says, “You know he always carried himself as stiff as a poker” [Italics mine] (p. 435). That stiffness is symbolic of his life. Other characters live in similarly stiff way. Dominated by some fixed idea, each of them becomes inflexible. “Each of us arranges the world according to his notion of the fitness of things” (p. 289). Daniel R. Schwarz explains
the merit of *Chance* thus: “its success rests on Conrad's deft analysis of physical, emotional and moral imprisonment as a trope for these more subtle kinds of imprisonment.”

Flora's loneliness is the loneliness of the circumstances in which many people live in their own isolated cells. Similar loneliness must be felt by others of the society in which she lives:

*Chance* discovers a heart of darkness beneath the civilized exteriors of Edwardian London. . . . In *Chance*, the London of *The Secret Agent* still exists in all shabby, ugly decadence; mankind is separated by individual dreams and illusions.

Flora herself is imprisoned by her past—her father's financial smash, the abhorrent remarks of her nasty Governess, the humiliation at her father's cousin's in East London and at the German family's home. But she is very different from others in one point. She has been forced to live and suffer under the false name of Miss Smith for several years. This contrasts with some other characters' attitude, Mrs. Fyne's for example, toward their own disguise, the discrepancy between what they say and what they do or between their public image and their private life. They are unconscious of it and derive advantage from it:

. . . I thought that there is nothing like a confession to make one look mad; and that of all confessions a written one is the most detrimental all round. Never confess! Never, never! . . . How many sympathetic souls can you reckon on in this world? One in ten, one in a hundred—in a thousand—in ten thousand? Ah! What a sell these confessions are! What a horrible sell! You seek sympathy, and all you get is the most evanescent sense of relief—if you get that much. (p. 212)
When Flora tries to live with her own identity, great difficulties lie ahead of her. She herself is partly and unintentionally the cause of complication. Asked the content of the letter by Marlow some years later, Flora admits that she wrote it “foolishly” and “recklessly.” Her character is the combination of fresh girlishness and almost withered youth. Till the fateful day of the Governess’s spite, she was a girl ignorant or unconscious of the world’s ways. After it, she began to register an aging effect. Her natural growth was distorted for a long time. She was so innocent as to be unable to see through the masked approaches of the man at the German family’s home, because she couldn’t believe that she would be attractive to anyone. Even when she fell in love with Anthony, she was unable to have faith in his love for her.

Her jailed father, de Barral, had been the only outlet for Flora’s affection during her years of misery. For Flora, de Barral was always a good father who used to take her for walks along the Esplanade in Brighton. Her father had become a fixed idea to her. This made her confuse her love for Anthony with filial feeling. Because of the trauma, some distorted immaturity remained with her.

Her fixed idea collides with the fixed ideas of her lover and her father. She is shocked by her lover’s fixity. Captain Anthony deserted his despotic father’s home in his teens. Yet his rejection was only partial: he remained the son of the “delicate” poet. Marlw says of him:

... who could have suspected Anthony of being a heroic creature. There are several kinds of heroism and one of them at least is idiotic. It is the one which wears the aspect of sublime delicacy.
It is apparently the one of which the son of the delicate poet was capable.

He certainly resembled his father, who, by the way, wore out two women without any satisfaction to himself, because they did not come up to his supra-refined standard of the delicacy which is so perceptible in his verses. That’s your poet. He demands too much from others. (p. 328)

Anthony inherits this excessive demand on others from his father. This is also related with his attitudes toward words. Though he is a rather taciturn man, he has his own difficulties with language. He does not see the world as it is. He fancies that the world and others should exist according to his preconceptions, predicted by words in his imagination unrelated to facts. He is a naively “sincere” man. He never casts doubt on what others say. Having his peculiar fixed idea of femininity, and of man’s chivalrous role in romantic love, he feels his pride wounded when Flora tells him that Flora does not love him but is only making use of him. Literal-mindedly he takes Fyne at his word:

But Anthony, unaccostomed to the chatter of the firm earth, never stayed to ask himself what value these words could have in Fyne’s mouth. And indeed the mere dark sound of them was utterly abhorrent to his native rectitude, sea-salted, hardened in the winds of wide horizons, open as the day. (p. 333)

This is the origin of his morbid “magnanimity” toward Flora which afflicts her as well as himself.

Flora is also shocked by her father’s stiffness. The man who had a special talent for the language of advertisement of his business, was not
receptive toward others’ words. “He was impervious to words, to facts, to inferences. It would have been impossible to make him see his guilt or folly—either by evidence or argument—if anybody had tried to argue” (p. 378). He felt he didn’t have enough say during the trial. The whole legal process seemed to him a trap set by the mob’s envy.

During the time of her father’s imprisonment Flora has had various experiences, and has grown to be a young woman. On his side de Barral has spent the same period feeling the time was like yesterday, and just intensifying his fixed idea. It can be said that some aspects of de Barral’s characterization reveal Conrad’s own claustraphobia. Conrad believed that man can live soundly only when he has free, true contact with others.

Flora cannot communicate with her father. All her humiliated compromised arrangements are in vain. “She felt how she had always been unrelated to this world” (p. 337). The situation on the Ferndale seemed to her “a captivity.” She felt that both her father and Anthony were respectively “almost a stranger” to her. “Where could she escape from this? From this new perfidy of life taking upon itself the form of magnanimity... But where to go?” (p. 336). Her loneliness reminds readers of the loneliness of Razumov of whom Councillor Mikulin asked “Where to?” Both Flora and Razumov lack moral support. The life on the Ferndale is “like being in jail” to de Barral, and he calls Captain Anthony “head jailor.” In a sense, all the main characters live lives “like being in jail” and each is a “jailor” to others in Chance.

There is great sympathy in Conrad’s characterization of Flora. This may be a reflection of Conrad’s own lonely, bitter experiences in his
childhood. F. R. Karl points out the parallel of child-parent relationship in Conrad’s life and in his novels:

When we seek analogies in Conrad’s fiction, we think of Flora de Barral and her father in Chance, a daughter, not a son, with a father so intent on his own destiny he has no interest in her or her existence. Appollo was far kinder, more considerate, but the silences must have been deafening, as they were between Flora and de Barral. In fact, if we recall child-parent relationships in Conrad’s work, we recognize how conversation, lacking continuity or relevance for the child, seems to come out of a vacuum or a desert.\(^{14}\)

III

The unnatural, almost incestuous relation between Flora and her father must somehow come to an end. After successive, surprising events, Flora’s love for Captain Anthony becomes very clear and de Barral commits suicide with his own poison. The normal survives the abnormal. “Truth will out, Mr. Marlow” (p. 444).

Some critics complain that chance plays too great a part in the novel. It cannot be denied that there is some clumsiness in Chance, especially in the handling of the final scenes. Douglass Hewitt’s complaint of “the division of mankind into the camp of the good and the bad”\(^{15}\) in Chance may have some validity. It is true that the essence of de Barral’s evil and that of Anthony’s egoism are not sufficiently investigated. Flora may be too flawless. Yet, Hewitt’s judgement is mainly based on his penchant for novels which scrutinize the complexity of an individual’s psychology. The greatest merit of Chance lies, however, in
the deft description of various forms of imprisoned lives, and of the isolation of the characters in modern society at large.

Love between man and woman is shown as a possible alternative to the wasteland of Edwardian Britain. The happy days of Anthony and Flora cannot last long. The value of love is shown in the relationship between Flora and Powell. Powell is a young man who has the least preconception among the major characters in the novel. His role resembles Marlow's to some extent. He is an onlooker at first, and tries to understand the situation on the Ferndale with disinterestedness. His concern with imaginative sympathy for Anthony and Flora saves Anthony's life, and helps Anthony and Flora find their love again. Finally Powell himself finds his love for Flora and can expect happy days in the near future. This means that Anthony's over-simplified distinction between life on shore and on ship is not valid enough. The life on a ship is often swayed by fear, cowardice, jealousy, and egoism. It is so described in The Nigger of the "Narcissus" and Lord Jim. It is seldom if ever perfect.

What common factor brings Flora and Powell together? It is their youth. Flora looked like "a child" or "a forsaken elf" to Powell in the poisoned brandy scene. "The behaviour of young Powell" combined "boyish impulses" with "instinctive prudence," and resembled that of some nice children. "And he was amongst them like a child, sensitive, impressionable, plastic—but unable to find for himself any sort of comment" (p. 426). Their youth is not described as mere immaturity. It has more value—vitality, plasticity, flexibility—none of the stiffness or preconception. "Conrad suggests that Flora has escaped permanent damage because she was too young to understand the disruption
and discontinuity of her life with her father."^{16}

Even a small child lives, plays and suffers in terms of its conception of its own existence. Imagine, if you can, a fact coming in suddenly with a force capable of shattering that very conception itself. It was only because of the girl being still so much of a child that she escaped mental destruction; that, in other words, she got over it. Could one conceive of her more mature, while still as ignorant as she was, one must conclude that she would have become an idiot on the spot—long before the end of that experience" (p. 117).

Powell is not a wordy man. He does not volubly comment on the situation around him; he is modest enough to try to understand it. He is great contrast to the mate Franklin who has a very sentimental conception of Captain Anthony and the life of a merchant ship—another self-made psychological prison in *Chance*. Powell's behaviour resembles "the quiet, matter-of-fact attention of [the] ship's stewardess" who took care of Flora on her way from Germany back to England. Powell responds to life not with words but with simple, necessary actions based on imaginative sympathy. These responses are better suited than any others to Flora, who has been lonely amid the abuse of words and "bereft of moral support which is wanted in life more than all the charities of material help" (p. 336).

Love is not a panacea in *Chance*. Although Flora is at last a flower in bloom with "her true self... like a fine tranquil afternoon," her question: "Do you think it possible that he should care for me?" to Marlow in the last scene still reflects a little anxiety about the possibility of love. Yet to live with some anxiety is an indication of wisdom.
As far as *Chance* is concerned, at least, Conrad has not changed radically into an optimist.

Some readers tend to say Conrad declined because of the change of the subject-matter in his fiction. Conrad's essential view of man and universe seems, however, continuous from his early days. To write of heterosexual love is no sudden change in his later period. Women play an important role in many of his works. Consider, for example, Mrs. Gould in *Nostromo*, Winnie Verloc in *The Secret Agent*, or Natalie Haldin in *Under Western Eyes*. Love and loneliness of major female characters are a continuous concern for the novelist. The conflict between young lovers and the parent-child relationship appears repeatedly in his works. Nostromo's love for Giorgio Viola's daughters with the tragic end is the most typical case. The result of Stevie's mother's self-sacrificing decision to enter the almshouse in *The Secret Agent* shows Conrad's similar concern in a slightly different situation. To write of heterosexual love as the subject-matter does not mean the novelist is an optimist. For Conrad the universe is indifferent and pitiless; and mankind spends lonely, meaningless days in it. He wrote his sea-fiction primarily because he sometimes found in the best tradition of the British merchant marine a sustaining alternative to the dark side of life. It was a small community in which members knew each other and order existed for their common interest. But even on a ship that ideal order is often threatened by falsehood. And when he leaves the sea for his subject, his political novels show that falsehood is the norm. The bitter experience of his childhood may have encouraged him to regard most of what is called "political order" as a disguise for the instinct of domination. Not that he rejected the search for true order.
Paradoxically, the dark London and the frightening lack of communication in *The Secret Agent* show commitment to the quest for an order of community and communication. *Chance*, too, reflects his despair at the vast, amorphous selfishness of modern urban society and, at the same, his hope in love as alternative value for some individuals of that society. It is a temporary value. It may be threatened by various events and factors in this world. But just as a sailing ship manned by seamen of the British merchant marine rides out a storm successfully, love may enable individual people to survive in the desolate modern world.

Notes

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4 Thomas Moser, pp. 102 ff.

6 Albert J. Guerard, p. 254.

7 Albert J. Guerard, p. 261. Guerard says: “*Chance* is, however, an intelligent novel, and especially so where it maintains a firm critical awareness of Captain Anthony's sentimentality” (p. 263). And: “Whatever Conrad's failure to use all the dramatic advantages of his 'system,’ and however seriously irony has been weakened by a new tenderness, *Chance* remains a serious and important novel. It is not major Conrad, but it is a work of a mind still capable of significant invention” (p. 272).

8 F. R. Leavis, p. 222.


13 Ibid. p. 53.


15 Douglass Hewitt, p. 89.

16 Frederick R. Karl, p. 23.