The “girl-novel”:
*Chance* and Woolf’s *The Voyage Out*

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Conrad’s *Chance* (1914) and Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out* (1915) were completed within a year of each other and were both written with great difficulty (including mental breakdowns) over the course of several years. Although Woolf’s novel was her debut work and Conrad’s was written after decades of successful authorship, they were ostensibly similar in attempting to delineate the life of a young woman who, in both instances, crosses the ocean to find a suitable suitor as well as a sense of self and self-worth. Both have women as protagonists; although, significantly, neither author made the heroines eponymous, arguably signalling that the works were about the accidents of life in *Chance* and the passage through it in *The Voyage Out*. Yet both writers approached the “girl-novel” (if they could be described as such) differently. Indeed, Woolf would have railed at such a term perhaps because of Conrad’s caveat that in *his* “girl-novel” there would be a “steady run of references to women in general all along” (CL 5 208) – a somewhat reductive plan.

With his novel, Conrad attempted to target a female audience, as letters to his agent, J. B. Pinker, and his interview in the *New York Herald* of 14 January 1912 reveal. He also aimed to explore contemporary male attitudes towards women, although he does not investigate the female psyche and gives his heroine little chance to speak her mind. Woolf, on the other hand, reluctant to be called a feminist and conscious of the criticism levelled at female writers writing about women, tried to avoid preaching or strident discussion of the differences between the sexes.

1 The beginnings of *The Voyage Out* (initially entitled “Melymbrosia”) have been dated at some time between 1904 and 1908. Conrad began *Chance* in earnest in 1905, although its antecedents date to 1898 when he voiced the desire to write a short story entitled “Dynamite.”

2 Quoted, or paraphrased, by Martin Ray in his introduction to the Oxford World’s Classics edition (2008: xi). Ray seems to have adapted Conrad to J. B. Pinker, c. 7 April 1913 (CL 5 208).
particularly by the narrator who, she was aware, might be conflated with the author, a fate that has, in fact, consistently befallen Conrad.

As Woolf wrote to her brother-in-law Clive Bell to whom she sent drafts of the manuscript:

Your objection, that my prejudice against men makes me didactic “not to say priggish,” has not quite the same force with me; I dont [sic] remember what I said that suggests the remark; I daresay it came out without my knowledge, but I will bear it in mind. I never meant to preach, and agree that like God, one shouldn’t. (1975: 383)

General comments about the sexes are largely voiced by the characters who speak or think their own minds about gender issues in the natural course of conversation or in their own reflections. In Woolf’s work there is no calculated attempt by the narrator to reference women “in general all along” as is the case with Marlow’s crass observations, which remain chauvanistic, no matter how much he tempers his essentialist judgements with moments of more liberal reflection or excuses that he only believes what he says “on certain days of the year” (94). His comments about women are laced with general scorn, grumbling dislike, and patronizing sarcasm; and his sensible declaration that women are neither “doll or an angel to me” (53) is undermined when he replaces these types with equally reductive categories.

The reasons for writing the two novels were also different. Conrad aimed to capture a female audience, partly for economic reasons, partly to mock the serial form, and partly to expose conservative attitudes towards the woman question. Woolf, on the other hand, wrote partly to pay off doctors’ bills, but mostly to gain recognition as a serious experimental writer who could compete intellectually and artistically with male writers without being accused of having an overt feminist agenda. She was careful, even in her polemical writings, such as *A Room of One’s Own*:

...to keep my own figure fictitious; legendary. If I had said, Look here am I uneducated, because my brothers used all the family funds which is the fact – Well theyd [sic] have said; she has an axe to grind; and no one would have taken me seriously, though I agree I should have had many more of the wrong kind of reader; who will read you [Ethel Smyth] and go away and rejoice in the personalities, not because they are lively and easy reading; but because they prove once

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