CONRAD’S PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN has widely been regarded as unsuccessful, and his female characters have been the target of criticism for more than half a century. In particular, Thomas Moser, who sees Conrad’s fear or hostility towards women in his female characters, maintains that he loses control while describing them (1957: 162). He also points out the misogyny in the later Conrad and remarks that the characterization of Mrs Fyne seems to evolve from the author’s unacknowledged misogynistic feelings (160). Several commentators have dismantled Moser’s enduring critique of Conrad’s writing about women. Yet one of his most intriguing characters, the topical feminist Zoe Fyne of his novel Chance, has to receive full attention.

In Chance, Conrad presents Mrs Fyne’s interest in women’s issues in distinctively different ways throughout the novel. She invites her female friends over every week to visit, friends whom Marlow calls her “girl-friends,” who come “for Mrs Fyne and treated her with admiring deference” (42). She apparently answers to some of her young disciples’ emotional needs, and she also publishes a tract on women’s education (65), which suggests a strong desire to guide young women. Since the death of Flora’s mother, Mrs Fyne has been anxious about her. However, while initially sympathetic towards Flora, once Mrs Fyne learns about her elopement with Anthony, she violently opposes the marriage and interferes in it. Mrs Fyne, although her own marriage was a runaway love match, uses her husband to play a role in preventing the couple from marrying. Her motive for stopping the marriage is not made fully clear, but Marlow conjectures that Mrs Fyne must have been thinking about how the affair might influence her daughters, because Flora is the daughter of a convict (161).1 Marlow also notes Mrs Fyne’s jealous attitude: “her sense of proprietorship was very strong within her; and though she had not much use for her brother, yet she did not like to

1 In the last scene, Flora confesses to Marlow that in her letter to Mrs Fyne she wrote that she did not love Anthony. But as this is only a fragment of her letter, it lacks context.
see him annexed by another woman” (190). Like many contemporary matches, Flora’s marriage to Anthony in part stemmed from economic exigency: it was a way to protect her father and herself when her father’s bankruptcy left her in an impecunious state. Mrs Fyne’s unsympathetic response to Flora’s elopement and condition contradicts her feminist principles, because she thinks that women, who are the victims of men’s selfishness, do not have to consider other people’s convenience (58).

Marlow also occasionally finds fault with her feminist views. For example, in his exchanges with Mrs Fyne, Marlow says that in his first meeting with Flora she looked like “the most wrong-headed inconsiderate girl” (58) on a cliff, to which Mrs Fyne replies, “Why should a girl be more considerate than anyone else?” Marlow mockingly responds: “Just like that. I confess that I went down flat. And while in that collapsed state I learned the true nature of Mrs Fyne’s feminist doctrine. It was not political, it was not social. It was a knock-me-down doctrine – a practical individualistic doctrine” (58-59). Here, Marlow declares the doctrine of Mrs Fyne’s feminism as neither political nor social, but based on her personal convenience. He further says of the content of her book: “It was a sort of handbook for women with grievances (and all women had them), a sort of compendious theory and practice of feminine free morality. It made you laugh at its transparent simplicity” (65-66). On another occasion, he refers to her book as “a compendious and ruthless handbook on the theory and practice of life, for the use of women with a grievance” (91). On the whole, Marlow views Mrs Fyne as a simple and narrow-minded feminist unable to theorize her feminism.

The Marlow of Chance, a middle-aged bachelor retired from the sea has been regarded as garrulous and misogynistic (Roberts 2000: 161; Schwarz 1983: 52; Baines 1960: 386). Critics claim that the misogyny directed towards Mrs Fyne is aggressive (Armstrong 1993: 159), and Cedric Watts finds that the plot displays a markedly anti-feminist drift (1989: 119). Marlow’s critical discourses about Mrs Fyne have caused many critics to identify them with the author’s own misogyny (Schwartz 1983: 52; Moser 1957: 160). In short, Marlow’s diatribes against Mrs Fyne’s feminist views have often been taken as a reflection of the author’s own anti-feminism (Roberts 2000; Armstrong 1993: 166). Conrad’s satiric presentation of Peter Ivanovitch as a revolutionary feminist in Under Western Eyes has led, unsurprisingly, to seeing Marlow’s