Victory Short Guide

Victory by Joseph Conrad

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Contents

Characters

Whatever happens in Victory, readers must admit that it contains a memorable cast. The central figure is Axel Heyst, a Swedish Count, and the son of a disenchanted philosopher whose pessimistic books discourage involvement in life. The elder Heyst, whose influence hangs over his son's actions, much as his portrait hangs in Heyst's bungalow, appears to have espoused a philosophy modeled on Arthur Schopenhauer's intellectual pessimism. Perhaps more relevant to a discussion of the younger Heyst is the presence of several parallels between Heyst and Hamlet. Both Hamlet and Heyst are Scandinavian in heritage, both are aristocrats, both are greatly influenced by a father's spirit, and both are brooding and philosophical personalities whose characteristic stance is a detachment from action and involvement in human life.

The parallels extend further. Heyst's sympathetic actions toward Morrison and Lena lead him away from his isolation from humanity and involve him with others, much as Hamlet's acts of kindness and his feeling for Ophelia take him away from his brooding on revenge. Heyst's immediate failure to act decisively when Lena and he are threatened is also Hamlet-like, and his suicide after Lena's death reaffirms parallels with Hamlet, whose methods of avenging his father turn out to be self-destructive.

In Heyst, Conrad seems to have written a study about the attractions of withdrawal from humanity and the tragedies attendant on such isolation. Heyst's interest in others—even his affection for his late father and his anger over Schom berg's calumny—shows that his nature is a warm one and that he does feel concern for humanity. In fact, Heyst's sympathetic interest in others—in Morrison, in Lena, even in Captain Davidson—contradicts the philosophic point of view he learned from his father. It is clear that had Heyst been more involved with life, and more concerned about marrying Lena and beginning a family life on Samburan, he would probably have enjoyed a more satisfying and fulfilling existence. At the same time, his story would have been less tragic and probably less interesting.

In portraying his other tragic protagonist, Lena, Conrad seems to have attempted to place a self-sacrificing and romantically inclined woman at the center of his tragic novel, just as he had done, to some extent, in his portrait of Winnie Verloc in The Secret Agent (1907; see separate entry). Although a contemporary novelist might have made Lena less sexually innocent, Conrad gives her wisdom and shrewdness about the ways of the world, and even ardent feminist critics should admire her determination to escape both from the tyranny of Mrs. Zangiacomo and from the threatened domination of the lecherous Schomberg.

Although it might arouse contempt in feminist readers, Lena's longing for Heyst's love is based in part on her belief that social validation for her as a woman requires her to win the love of a morally admirable man—and Heyst is a Swedish count, besides. Moreover, Lena's view of life has been conditioned by nineteenthcentury romantic and sentimental attitudes. However, she feels a genuine gratitude and affection for Heyst, without fully understanding his reluctance to make a commitment to her. Aside from self-sacrifice,

readers should find her conduct admirable, both in her resistance to Ricardo's attempted rape and in her use of her feminine allure to persuade him to lend her the knife. Had she prudently fled to the forest, as a conventional nineteenth century melodrama heroine might have done, she would have survived—but her role in the story would not be the material of tragedy.

Conrad's secondary characters are a memorable crew of rogues and victims, with the exception of Davidson and perhaps of Wang. The lecherous hotel manager, Schomberg, is a thoroughly believable petty scoundrel, who has brutally abused his wife and who nurtures a malicious hatred of Heyst for rescuing Lena from the fate Schomberg had planned for her. Schomberg's malice toward Heyst is thoroughly irrational but absolutely credible. Heyst is not merely a man who aided Lena, but is in his own way a heroic person who lives by high and disinterested principles. Indeed Heyst embodies values that Schomberg rejects, so Schomberg's desire to see Heyst destroyed is rooted in jealousy and resentment. Ironically, Schomberg's designs are often frustrated by the cunning of his illtreated wife.

Conrad's trio of predators and bandits, Mr. Jones, Martin Ricardo, and Pedro are a well conceived and threatening crew.

Unfortunately, their importance as symbolism for Conrad seems to have been as great as their interest as characters. At one point in the narrative, Conrad, through Heyst, explicitly explains to the reader that Jones represents intellectual malice, Ricardo is a figure of self-serving and sensual gratifications, and Pedro symbolizes brute strength without intelligence. Although Conrad shows so little interest in Pedro as to leave him in the background and have him killed by Wang, the other two characters hold our attention.

To some degree, Mr. Jones is an enigmatic figure. His antipathy for women prevents him from having any close emotional or sensual attachments, although he seems to relish the companionship and assistance of Ricardo. When he discovers Ricardo has betrayed him by concealing the presence of Lena, Jones's reaction becomes almost psychopathic.

This violent reaction, as well as Jones's curious sympathy for and interest in Heyst, suggests that Jones is a homosexual, and this idea is supported by an occasional oblique reference in the novel.

The besetting flaw of Mr. Jones is arrogance, however, arising from his origin as an English gentleman, which has given Jones a contempt for anyone below his class; and it also stems from his rejection of the unwritten code of the English gentleman, which Jones has decided is foolish. It is probably Jones who truly practices the philosophy espoused by Heyst's father, the view of life which considers human involvements to be foolish. In fact, Jones tends to divide the world into the "tame" who live by some sort of civilized restraints, and the "wild" people who, like himself and Ricardo, take whatever they can get.

Yet even Jones cannot fully escape his emotional attachment to Ricardo. A curious feature in Conrad's portrayal of Jones is Jones's cadaverous appearance and his propensity for pretending to be ill and infirm; these traits appear to be symbols of what Conrad considers Jones's inner sickness. At any rate, it is clear that Jones is a sadist who enjoys playing with his victims, for his announced plan is to force Heyst into a card game and win Heyst's money slowly, forcing Heyst to struggle against his position as a victim.

Although Jones is a fascinating character, his performance in the final section of the novel is somewhat disappointing.

Davidson hints that his death by drowning may have been a suicide, but the matter remains ambiguous. Indeed, Davidson may be protecting Heyst's reputation, if Heyst had thrown Jones into the ocean. On the other hand, a suicide by Jones would serve Conrad's symbolic purposes well, since, in Conrad's view, characters without attachments to others—-like Decoud in Nostromo (1904; see separate entry)—are likely to destroy themselves.

Ricardo is a different kind of scoundrel from Jones, being primarily concerned with the gratification of his sensual nature. Although Ricardo follows Jones with servility because of his respect for the upper class, his relationship with Jones is filled with love-hate ambivalence, and these emerge in Jones's emotional courtship of Lena. In fact, transported by his dreams of lechery and his infatuation with Lena, Ricardo proposes to kill not only Heyst but Jones, both of whom are of the hated gentleman class.

Part of Ricardo's infatuation with Lena seems to result from their both belonging to the English lower classes; but his admiration and longing are stirred by her pluckiness and her cleverness, which Ricardo mistakenly believes is a mirror of his own. Ricardo's surrender to lust for Lena seems to result from his repression of his desires for a woman while traveling with Jones. Conrad increases the credibility of Ricardo's action by allowing Ricardo to grovel in front of Lena and to stroke her foot and ankle, suggesting the surrender to a fetish. Although not a villain like Jones with a grand and cosmic vision of evil, Ricardo is certainly a thoroughly believable portrait of human depravity.

The minor characters are less interesting. Although Heyst believes that Wang may be a scoundrel, his behavior is explained by Conrad on the grounds of self-interest. Wang's mysterious comings and going seem at times to reinforce stereotypes about the inscrutable "Oriental" behavior, and the character should have been more fully developed. Wang's use of Heyst's revolver to kill Pedro seems an afterthought on Conrad's part.

Finally, Captain Davidson is another of Conrad's reliable and disinterested narrators, and his presence in the novel is mainly employed to describe the fate of Heyst and Jones at the end. However, Davidson does like Heyst and feels some concern about his fate. Although less developed than Conrad's most famous narrator figure, Marlow, Davidson plays a significantly ironic role in arriving at the island just too late to save Lena.

Social Concerns

Althoug h at one time Victory was less highly regarded than some of Joseph Conrad's more famous novels, its stature as a work of art has increased over the years, as many readers have come to identify in some ways with the detachment and alienation of the central character, Axel Heyst. Despite complaints from some critics about Conrad's use of melodrama and some lapses from realism, the novel continues to exercise a certain fascination for many readers.

A major social concern of the novel is the nature of Heyst's attempt to live a life of detachment and philosophical isolation, somewhat like the tragic count in Conrad's short story "Il Conde" (1907; see separate entry). Is it possible to live such a life of solitude, apart from the sufferings of humanity? And if it is possible to do so, is such a choice morally defensible? What makes Heyst attractive to readers is in fact his sympathy and kindness toward Morrison and Lena, the two decent people whom he befriends.

Another significant social concern of the novel is the apparent ease by which destructive and parasitical people such as Mr. Jones and Ricardo move around the world. Although they are confidence men, swindlers, thieves, and have committed murders, they use their mobility, their arts, and the bribery of authorities to live an itinerant but fairly prosperous existence in the less developed areas of the world. As menaces to decent social life, this pair are even more potent symbols than the arrogant young Neapolitan robber of "Il Conde."

Yet another social concern of the novel is the status of a lower class woman without friends or connections in the early part of the twentieth century. Lena's existence in the traveling orchestra is perilous and unpleasant because Mrs. Zangiacomo resents her as a potential rival. She is in danger of falling under the dominance of Schomberg, a brutal and tyrannical husband to Mrs. Schomberg, simply because she needs a protector.

Although she finds a kind, though not very worldly, protector in Heyst, she is menaced by the attentions of Ricardo.

The status of an attractive young woman as potential victim is certainly a major social theme of the novel.

Finally, a lesser theme is suggested by the role played by Wang, Heyst's Chinese servant. A shrewd employee, Wang has no deep loyalty to Heyst and takes a selfprotective approach to Heyst's problems.

But Wang's attitudes have been created by the behavior of European imperialists who have a history of exploiting Asians as workers and servants. Once again, Conrad offers some oblique criticism of imperialism.

Techniques

Critics have debated over whether Victory is too schematized or allegorical in its conception. Although the story is credible as realism, if one accepts the reality of the villains, it has also been attacked as lacking sufficient realism.

Without reviewing the different arguments here, it may be noted that Conrad employs a narrative of surface realism which contains obviously symbolic overtones.

In its moderate realism, the novel is reminiscent of Conrad's earlier Malayan stories, but the use of names and situations that contain a literary resonance is obvious. Axel, for instance (according to Robert Hampson's "Introduction" to the Penguin edition), Heyst's first name, appears to have been taken from the hero of the fin de siecle symbolist drama Axel by Villiers de Isle Adam, a work of late French romantic aestheticism that Conrad was acquainted with. Other characters in the narrative have been given symbolic significance as well, with Heyst being compared to the brooding Hamlet or the reclusive Prospero in Shakespeare, Lena being seen as analogous to Shakespeare's Miranda; and the villains being compared to Satanic figures.

Perhaps the concern for allegory and symbolism has been pushed too far.

More interesting from a technical point of view is Conrad's use of differing points of view, as his narrative focus gives the reader a privileged glimpse of the minds of many characters—now Heyst's thoughts, then Lena's, and later the scoundrel Ricardo's. In fact, Conrad describes the mind of nearly every major character at one point or another.

Nevertheless, the features which tend to make the novel attractive to the reader may remain the most controversial, particularly Conrad's use of a melodramatic sequence of events to bring the story of Heyst and Lena to a dramatic conclusion.

Like Lord Jim (1900; see separate entry), the novel depends in part on the presence of melodrama to create interest; unlike popular melodramas, however, there is a rather ambiguous triumph of good over evil, and certainly no conventional happy ending, with Lena's death from a bullet fired by Jones followed by the grief-filled suicide of Heyst.

Conrad's technical management of the melodrama in Part IV has struck such critics as Albert Guerard in Conrad the Novelist (1958) as awkward and unconvincing. In fact, several of the events of the ending are likely to raise questions of credibility. (1) To begin with, although Heyst is a thinker rather than man of action, he is a man of the world with considerable experience of travel in dangerous country. Many readers are likely to wonder why such a man would have only one firearm for protection at his retreat on Samburan, and why this revolver could be stolen so easily by Wang, the Chinese servant. (2) Heyst's relationship with Wang seems oddly developed. Although Wang may be concerned with self-preservation and protecting his wife, could Heyst not persuade Wang to stay around, by the offer of more money?

After all, Heyst believes correctly that Wang has stolen his revolver, so Heyst can assume that Wang is armed and a possible source of help. (3) Recognizing his peril, why does Heyst not try to flee with Lena to the jungle? (4) After telling Lena to leave and hide in the jungle, and going to meet Mr. Jones, why does Heyst fail to take the opportunity to overpower Jones and take his revolver, especially after Jones becomes disconcerted over the news that Ricardo has concealed the fact that Heyst has a woman present?

Aside from Heyst's odd actions, which may perhaps be defended on the grounds that Heyst is a complex man who commits himself to action only when his course is clear, Mr. Jones's actions are also puzzling. (1) Jones seems to believe in the tales of Heyst's hidden treasure, but he fails to do any homework, accepting Ricardo's stories which are based on the Schomberg's gossip. Yet Schomberg is a man for whom Jones feels the utmost contempt. (2) Again, with Heyst unarmed and at his mercy, why does Jones take the time to discuss philosophical issues, before killing him? (3) And when Jones learns of Ricardo's perfidy in concealing the presence of Lena, why does Jones immediately set out to shoot Ricardo as a disloyal subordinate? Some of these questions again may be answered on the grounds that Jones is both a homosexual with a pathological hatred of women and a sadist who wants to keep Heyst in his power for as long as possible. (Moreover, Jones, as a gentleman, feels a kinship with Heyst, although Jones professes to despise the class that has expelled him.) But Jones's decision to kill Ricardo seems to be compounded not only of anger over being betrayed, but based on a belief that Ricardo has set up the robbery of Heyst because of his desire to take Heyst's woman as well as Heyst's rumored money.

Although the final section of Victory may be defended, and although the novel's resolution is sufficiently tragic to please all but the most exacting disciples of Conrad's tragic vision, it must be conceded that some of the concluding events lack credibility. Possibly, Conrad's struggle to complete the novel over a long period of three years may have compelled him to settle for a hastily contrived ending.

Themes

A central theme of the novel is the tragic nature of Axel Heyst's philosophical detachment from human life, and Conrad's own vision of the need for some kind of involvement in the human community. Although Conrad was in many ways a skeptic about human ideals, like Axel Heyst's father, the philosopher who published a number of books expressing a philosophy similar to Schopenhauer's intellectual pessimism, Conrad the artist and thinker recognized the importance of involvement and commitment to the human community. Hence the novel may be viewed from one perspective as the tragic consequence of Heyst's inadequate involvement with humanity.

Ironically, however, it is not until Heyst becomes involved first with Morrison and then with Lena that the fatal momentum of the final events in his life begins.

Thus another theme of the novel is the grim recognition that involvement with humanity, even relatively innocent people like Morrison and Lena, produces its own kind of tragedy.

Despite its tragic ending, the novel seems to affirm Conrad's essential belief in the need for love in its handling of the relationship between Lena and Heyst.

The novel also affirms Conrad's belief in the importance of moral integrity, which is demonstrated in Heyst's behavior, however Hamlet-like and exasperatingly he behaves.

At the same time, Victory shows the tragic cost that people pay for their illusions. Nearly all Conrad's major characters, including his villains, are victims of their illusions, as the section on characters will show in more detail.

Adaptations

Rather surprisingly, Victory was almost immediately viewed as worthy material for a stage adaptation. Although Conrad gave some thought to collaborating with the proposed adaptor, MacDonald Hastings, he eventually decided against it, being occupied with other projects. Although Conrad did not consider Hastings's early efforts especially faithful to his work, he consented to the adaptation mainly for commercial reasons. Conrad later showed renewed interest in Hastings's stage adaptation and made suggestions for revision. He also took an interest in the casting, but it was not until 1919 that the play was performed with Sir Henry Irving in the cast. Surprisingly, the play was a moderate commercial success, but apparently Conrad's failing health prevented him from seeing a performance. There was also a silent film version in 1919 with Wallace Beery and Lon Chaney, Sr.; this film is known today only to film historians and archivists, but since it was two hours in length, it apparently dealt with much of Conrad's original plot.

In 1920, Conrad adapted one of Victory's companion stories, "Because of the Dollars," into a forty-five-minute play, The Laughing Anne, but could not place it with a theater. However, the story, under the title of Laughing Anne, was eventually turned into a forgettable English motion picture with Margaret Lockwood in 1953.

This technicolor film was predictably marketed as a Far Eastern adventure epic, but Lockwood, memorable as a delectable ingenue in Alfred Hitchcock's 1938 classic The Lady Vanishes, was well past the prime of her youthful beauty and near the point of moving on to matronly roles in British television comedy.

Key Questions

Much of the interest in the novel concerns the philosophical attitudes of Axel Heyst and his desire to withdraw from human involvement. Readers might analyze Heyst's feelings about human life, and the extent to which his attitudes are dependent on the philosophical attitudes of his father.

Another area for opening discussion could be the status of Lena, who is about to be made a victim of Schomberg or some other man of means early in the novel, before she is rescued by Heyst.

Later Lena again becomes a possession to be battled over because of Ricardo's lust for her. Another question regarding Lena is her complex relationship with Heyst. Is Heyst in love with her at first? What are the terms on which he expects her to live with him on Samburan? Whey does Heyst not act more decisively in response to Lena's affection?

Yet another area of discussion might concern Lena's self-image and her desire to sacrifice herself for Heyst. In the light of contemporary feminist attitudes, what might readers think of Lena's self-sacrificial intentions?

1. What leads Heyst to the island of Samburan as a retreat from the world?

What influence does Heyst's father play in Heyst's life and philosophic outlook?

2. How did Heyst feel about his father?

Do Heyst's feelings for his father's memory contradict the philosophy that Heyst learned form his father? Why or why not?

3. What leads Heyst to befriend Morrison? To what degree, if any, is Heyst responsible for Morrison's tragic death?

Was there any practical basis for Morrison's scheme of mining coal on an island in the Dutch East Indies?

4. Why does Schomberg hate Axel Heyst, even before Heyst befriends Lena and takes her out of Schomberg's power?

What is the defining trait of Schomberg's character?

5. To what extent is a malicious gossip like Schomberg a source of evil? To what degree is Schomberg responsible for the subsequent tragedy of Heyst and Lena?

6. Why does Heyst fail to respond to Lena's initial overtures offering affection and love? How is Heyst deficient in his knowledge of women?

7. What must contemporary readers decide about Lena's desire to sacrifice herself in an attempt to save Heyst from the predatory trio led by Mr. Jones? Is winning Heyst's love a sufficient victory for Lena for her sacrifice?

8. What might a contemporary feminist comment about Lena's attitudes? To what degree is Lena's view of life conditioned by the cliches of nineteenth century romanticism?

9. If Heyst is a man of the world and accustomed to living a solitary life, why is his existence on Samburan so unwary and unprotected? Why does Heyst make it easy for anyone, including Wang, to steal his revolver? Why does Heyst lack other weapons?

10. If Heyst is an experienced wanderer, why is he so surprised by the arrival of Mr. Jones, Ricardo, and Pedro?

Even though he does not have a hidden treasure, could he not have been more concerned about possible robbers?

11. Why does Heyst vacillate so much when faced with the threat of Mr. Jones and Martin Ricardo?

12. What motivates Mr. Jones in his general behavior? Why does he rob Heyst for sport?

13. Why does Jones dislike women so greatly? Does Conrad provide evidence implying that Jones is a homosexual? Was Conrad prevented by the literary taboos of his time from being more explicit?

14. What parallels and contrasts are there between Jones and Ricardo? Between Jones and Heyst?

15. What occurrences in the final sequence of events involving Heyst, Jones, Ricardo, and Lena seem difficult to give credence to? Why does Heyst fail to attack Jones when he has the chance?

Why does Jones try to shoot Ricardo?

16. Is Ricardo's fascination with Lena credible? Is Ricardo serious when he talks of killing both Jones and Heyst and mak ing Lena his partner in a career of adventure?

17. Is Captain Davidson's sudden arrival during the crisis credible? Would Davidson leave Heyst alone on the island with Jones after Lena's death?

18. Why does Conrad leave the final events of the tragedy narrated by Davidson somewhat unclear? Did Jones commit suicide, or did Heyst throw him into the ocean?

19. What is our judgment of Heyst's suicide? Who, if anyone, gained a "victory" in this novel?

20. What is Conrad's final judgment if any about the nature of isolation as opposed to involvement with human society? How does this point of view emerge from the story of Heyst?

Literary Precedents

As has been noted, many literary precedents besides sea fiction and French realism have been suggested for Victory.

Among works which may have contributed to the novel's symbolism are Shakespeare's Hamlet (1601) and The Tempest (1612), the biblical story of Adam and Eve in Eden, and John Milton's Paradise Last (1667; the epigraph on Conrad's original tide was a quotation from Comus, Milton's youthful masque about a young woman's temptation). Lena's name for herself, "Alma," is Latin for "the soul," and Edmund Spenser in The Faerie Queene (1590-1596) devotes a lengthy allegorical passage to describing the "House of Alma." However, it seems unlikely that Conrad was directly influenced by Spenser. In fact, the symbolic meaning of "alma" would not have been difficult for Conrad to discover.

These sources, suggested by various scholars, are cited by Robert Hampson in his "Introduction" and "Notes" to the Penguin edition (1989) of Victory. Even less plausible than the influence of Spenser is the suggestion of the influence of Greek legends about Troy. As Hampson notes, Lena has been compared to Helen of Troy (whose full name was Helena, and who was "kidnaped" by an attractive prince from an unattractive husband).

However, the New Testament is the source of allusions and quotations for Conrad in the story. More than once Conrad himself presses parallels between Lena and Mary Magdalen in the Christian gospels: Magdalen was a fallen woman who redeems herself by her devotion to Jesus; Lena, although more innocent than Magdalen, seeks to redeem her tarnished life by her devotion to the virtuous Heyst.

Some descriptions used by Conrad have been discovered to have parallels in Guy de Maupassant's story, "The Sisters Rondolis." Another de Maupassant story suggested as a source is "As Strong as Death," which describes a complex love affair. As biographical studies have shown, Conrad was a devoted reader of de Maupassant, and a disciple of de Maupassant's own literary model, Gustave Flaubert. Anatole France, another favorite author of Conrad's, has been cited as one source of Lena, particularly his story "The Red Lily." The portrayal of Heyst's father has been traced to a source in Anatole France's A Literary Life.

Some less literary sources for Victory have also been suggested. Material about the islands and their peoples was available to Conrad in such historical works as Rodney Mundy's Narrative of Events in Borneo and Celebes (1848) and A. R. Wallace's The Malay Archipelago (1869).

Related Titles

Although the novel comes late in Conrad's career, Victory shows many affinities with the earlier Malaysian novels, including Almayer's Folly (\ 895), An Outcast of the Islands (1896), and the brilliant and complex Lord Jim. Heyst's dream of a life of solitude on Samburan is reminiscent of Almayer's quixotic dream in Conrad's first published novel. At times, too, the romanticism of some of the description seems to recall early Malaysian stories like "The Lagoon" (1898).

The character of Schomberg appears in other Conrad stories, notably in a minor role in Lord Jim. Schomberg is also the proprietor of a small hotel in Bangkok in the story "Falk" (1903), but the malicious innkeeper has been given a much larger role in Victory. Also related to the novel are two short stories Conrad wrote during the time of the composition of Victory, "The Planter of Malata" written late in 1913, and "Because of the Dollars" (composed in 1913-1914). Both stories, which interrupted work on the novel, deal with situations similar to Victory, but demonstrate less art and subtlety. In "Because of the Dollars," the woman character is a more experienced and worldly version of Lena called "Laughing Anne." Neither short story has been regarded as having a comparable literary stature as the novel Victory. "Because of the Dollars," however, gained some popularity, and has enjoyed a kind of twilight secondary existence as a play and later as a film, as the section below explains.

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