

Sexism in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* is essentially an adventure tale. The narrator, Marlow, a seasoned sea captain who has traveled the globe, uncharacteristically accepts a fresh water mission. He signs on with the Belgian Continental Trading Society to journey via steamboat along the mysterious Congo River. His journey initially takes him from Europe down the western coast of Africa and then deep into the Congo. The Trading Society has hired Marlow to locate and retrieve one of its most brilliant but dangerously unruly agents—one Mr. Kurtz. The search for and encounter with Kurtz prove both horrifying and revealing, as they bring Marlow face to face with the “heart of darkness.”

Within the intricate framework of this physical and philosophical quest, Joseph Conrad promotes sexism by portraying women as weak, grieving, ignorant individuals who are entirely dependent on men. Despite providing an illuminating profile of the evils of nineteenth century European imperialism as well as a provocative exploration of the glamour of moral corruption, Conrad in his tale of the Congo appears oblivious to gender discrimination. His main character, Marlow, submits to the prejudices of his era regarding matters essential to the dignity of women. A close review of the female characters in the text reveals Conrad's relegation of women to a one-dimensional state.

Conrad's sexism is first seen in the presentation he offers of Marlow's aunt. Although the men in Marlow's family are aware of the dangers that lurk in Africa and are thus hesitant to aid him in his quest for a job, Marlow's aunt is more than willing to help him. In fact, in response to her nephew's request for assistance, Marlow's aunt replies, “It will be delightful. I am ready to do anything, anything for you. It is a glorious idea” (Conrad 8). With this

statement, the “enthusiastic soul” not only affirms that she is oblivious to the miserable situation in Africa but also indicates that she is extremely anxious to please. Marlow, less impressed by her generosity than by her giddiness, pompously declares, “She was determined to make no end of fuss to get me appointed skipper of a river steamboat, if such was my fancy” (Conrad 8). Furthermore, Conrad enhances his perception of women as dependent persons when he emphasizes the shame that Marlow feels about having to ask his aunt for help. Marlow exclaims, “... I tried the women. I, Charlie Marlow, set the women to work – to get a job! Heavens!” (Conrad 8). To Marlow and Conrad, the idea of a man needing women to gain access to work is so repulsive that it brings with it an inevitable embarrassment.

Demonstrating ignorance similar to that of Marlow’s aunt, the Intended is hopelessly unaware of the “unsound methods” that her fiancé Kurtz enforces in Africa. She exhibits this naiveté during her meeting with Marlow. Though Kurtz has committed unspeakable atrocities at his Inner Station, the Intended, uninformed of these instances, consistently refers to him as a “remarkable man” with a “generous mind,” a “noble heart,” and a “goodness [that] shone in every act” (Conrad 75). This kind of praise stems from the Intended’s false belief that only she truly knew him. She even proudly states, “I had all his noble confidence. I knew him best...I am proud to know I understood him better than anyone on earth...” (Conrad 74). It is this resolute certainty of her late fiancé’s “greatness” that prompts the Intended to grieve her lover’s death with passionate intensity. Marlow realizes this fact, saying, “She seemed as though she would remember and mourn for ever...For her he had only died yesterday” (Conrad 74). In fact, the Intended recognizes this attitude as well, sadly muttering, “And now I am unhappy for – for life” (Conrad 75). Through this proclamation, Conrad asserts that Kurtz was essentially the “life” of his Intended and that she desperately needed him to provide her with a reason for living.

Without him, she has become a sad, endlessly grieving, and useless shell of a woman who seems to have no more purpose in life. For this reason, Marlow lies to the Intended not only to escape the darkness that enveloped Kurtz but also to perpetuate a world in which women are dependant upon men, no matter how falsely virtuous they might perceive the men to be. In this way, Conrad's hero is keeping "women out of touch with truth" and "in a world of their own" (Conrad 12).

Another crucial utilization of the Intended in *Heart of Darkness* is seen in the symbolic function she owns, a function that Kurtz's African mistress shares as well. In an analysis of this key character, essayist Jeremy Hawthorn claims that the Intended serves as a symbol of a corrupted idealism, the same idealism that European powers constructed to justify their encroachment into Africa. To illustrate this example, Hawthorn employs the description of the Intended by Marlow, who states, "This fair hair, this pale visage, this pure brow, seemed surrounded by an ashy halo from which the dark eyes looked out at me" (Hawthorn 487). In Hawthorn's opinion, this association of words connotative of idealism, such as "pure" and "halo," with a vision of weakness is Conrad's way of depicting idealism as being equally weak. Along with being labeled as weak by Conrad, Hawthorn alleges women are made one-dimensional in the novel. Through a juxtaposition of the Intended and the African woman, Hawthorn observes the former as being a "devoted and chaste spirit," exemplified by her extreme attachment to Kurtz, while the latter is "sensual and sexual flesh," demonstrated in her sexual affair with the man. Hawthorn concludes that neither woman is allowed the "full humanity that requires possession of both" (Hawthorn 409). Therefore, Conrad ascribes to women inferior qualities and strips them of the humanity they deserve.

Marianna Torgovnick observes that the women in *Heart of Darkness* are constant symbols of death. For example, Torgovnick suggests that Kurtz's African mistress is made to embody the "dead" African landscape. Upon her entry into the narrative, Marlow states, "The whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul" (qtd. in Torgovnick 403). She is explicitly mirrored in the landscape that Marlow consistently illustrates as the "white man's grave," "lurking death," and a "profound darkness," and thus she personifies death. The Intended shares in this cruel personification. When meeting with her, Marlow pitifully reflects, "I saw her and him [Kurtz] in the same instant of time – his death and her sorrow – I saw her and him in the very moment of his death...I had blundered into a place of cruel and absurd mysteries not fit for a human being to behold." Furthermore, Marlow perceives that "she was one of those creatures that are not the playthings of Time" (Conrad 74). Just as the unfathomable mystery of death surpasses all Time, so too does the Intended become the equivalent of this harsh phenomenon.

To fully understand this view and other sexist innuendos that Conrad provides in the novel, the cultural framework and societal situation in which Conrad existed should be considered. In his analysis of *Heart of Darkness*, critic Andrew Roberts exposes Conrad's environment. Roberts argues that Marlow's – and Conrad's – sexism stems from the entirely patriarchal European world of which both author and character were products. Men were the sole occupiers of positions of power in this culture, and thus Roberts comments, "...a whole matrix of inter-male relationships involving competitiveness, desire, bonding, the sharing and appropriation of power and knowledge...functioned in [this] Western society" (Roberts 458). To maintain this system, women are used as sexual scapegoats by men and revered as a "shared

desire” or common goal. As a result, women are prohibited from attaining “positions of power, knowledge and desire.” Due to this domineering social construct, the women of *Heart of Darkness* are shown as hopelessly weak, helplessly ignorant, and irreversibly subservient to men.

Works Cited

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