

Women and Silence in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness....Or Patriarchal Fantasy, 2.0

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Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness is canonical, and studied in countless classrooms from high school through graduate school. Nevertheless, it is a book that deeply bothers a lot of people, myself included. Throughout the book the only female name ever mentioned is the name of the ship. Women are silent, and frequently disdained by the paternalistic narrator who admits to not really understanding the "world" that women live in.

It is in a visit to his Aunt, his last foray into conventional civilization before he embarks on his transformative journey, Marlowe notes,

It's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset. Some confounded fact we men have been living contentedly with ever since the day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over (Conrad 27).

In fact, Conrad's women are always a bit otherworldly, removed from the grime and violence of Marlowe's perception of the world but yet having a very direct and significant affect on that world. For example, it is Marlowe's Aunt who is able to secure his job with the Company, which he could not do on his own. At his arrival to sign his contract and begin his journey he is greeted by two women, knitting "black wool feverishly (25)" creating an ominous atmosphere that warns the reader of the darkness to come. One of the women leads him to the inner office. The other, who "seemed uncanny and fateful" watches him with a look of "unconcerned wisdom." To me, this woman represents my own approach to Marlowe's journey. As he struggles through the misery of what "men have been living contentedly with" and finds his own inability to be content, this woman and I glance at him over glasses, enjoying the irony of karmic return for his inexcusable misunderstanding of the dark reality that women do see all too clearly. In fact, only they are the real free agents, knitters of destiny able to make choices unlike the men who are victims of their own animal natures

When Marlowe is forced to acknowledge a woman's power, he calls her an "apparition" (77), specifically referring to the Mistress of Kurtz who passes them "savage and superb," unnerving the men because of the influence she has attained over Kurtz. A woman who controls the darkness is too much for them, they want to kill her because they fear her. One of them says that if she had tried to come aboard "I would have tried to shoot her" (78).

At the end of the work, Marlowe visits the Fiancé of Kurtz, who is dressed all in black, still mourning the death of Kurtz a full year after. Throughout the work, Marlowe is continually confronted with the mythology surrounding "Mistah Kurtz"

and in this woman he finds it in full bloom. Has he learned from his earlier pronouncement? Does he seek to bring truth to this woman? No, in fact, he echoes his earlier sentiments through his actions. He protects her from the harsh reality of Kurtz's madness and death, supplanting his final words, "the horror, the horror" by telling her he said her name at the last. In this, Marlowe demonstrates that he has passed through these horrors with more questions than answers. He still does not see clearly the nature of humanity, only that there are horrors he would choose to forget if he could because his own worldview has "gone to pieces before the first sunset". He still is incapable of going to these women, the keepers, the wearers, the knitters of darkness, to understand what has befallen him in new ways or to seek to bridge the gap he perceives between the sexes. Nor is he capable of escaping the mythologies that hold his concepts of civilization and humanity in place. Conrad's women remain otherworldly through the eyes of Marlowe, removed from "the horror" although they both influence it and are influenced by it.

In "A Critical History", Ross Murfin writes,

For Nina Pelikan Straus, the scene of Marlow's famous lie is but the most memorable of many that affect male and female readers differently, reminding the latter that this is a tale "concerned with a kind of mainstream male experience" that has been "deliberately hidden" from the women inside the text. Although not denying that "the sexism of Marlow and Kurtz" may be "part of the horror that Conrad intends to disclose," Straus maintains that "the feminist readers access" to Conrad's most famous work is "especially problematic", a fact she uses to explain "decades of nearly exclusive male commentary surrounding *Heart of Darkness*." (109). Upon reading this commentary, I had a powerful sense of vindication – the relief of solidarity in my creeping discomfort when reading *Heart of Darkness*. I firmly believe, along with the gender studies camp, that gender is a construct. Nevertheless, it is a construct that has programmed my literary computer, and entering the binary codes of Conrad, for me, leads to flashing messages of "File Not Found!" and an overwhelming sense of not being loaded with the proper software.

Murfin continues his examination of the feminist perspective with the opinion of Bette London, who states "that *Heart of Darkness* is an off-putting tale for female, not to mention feminist, readers." Further, she argues that the issue of sex and gender are linked with the issues of racism that Chinua Achebe addressed in his famous 1975 speech at the University of Massachusetts in which he completely attacks the novel for its dualistic, anti-African perspective.

Murfin questions Achebe's claim, stating that "*perhaps* with good reason" his readers have "already dismissed" it as extreme (107). Yet, it is difficult to summarily discount Achebe, whose experiences with and viewpoint of

imperialism so keenly erupts from his background as a Nigerian and a novelist known for his rendering of race relations.

Is Joseph Conrad a “bloody racist” as Achebe so vehemently attests, or a sexist as Straus and London seem to imply? Perhaps he is nothing more than a novelist – but one whose writing betrays the deeply ingrained racism, sexism, and imperialism of the dominant culture that programmed *his* literary computer. As does Marlow, Conrad remains faithful to the belief that the delicacy of women and civilization must be protected from “darkness” and the “savagery” that anything not quite so heartily British might imply. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad creates a file that, in my opinion, can only be completely accepted and parsed when one’s literary computer is equipped with Imperialist Patriarchy 2.0.

Yet, one version of Patriarchy exists in all of us, rather like that ever present preinstalled version of AOL on home computers everywhere. Depending on the nature and extent of the programming our education has done to replace the default system of reverence to difference and retention of status quo, we are more or less able to rely on that old programming to help us access texts that seem rife with the ism’s that come with the subscription to Western Civilization. *Heart of Darkness*, in the opinion of Achebe, Straus, London, myself, and countless other critics, is one such text. It’s female characters, though they do have agency, seem to have it because they are workers of “darkness”, afflicted with the same “blackness” that Conrad abhors in the natives of Africa. Ultimately, choice and agency are, in Conrad’s view, extremely uncivilized, and utterly feminine.

Works Cited

Conrad, Joseph. Heart of Darkness: Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism. Ed. Ross Murfin. New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s Press, 1996.