

# “HEART OF DARKNESS” PRESENTATION

## *GENDER*

- Entire book told from male perspective, all comments about women are those of men during this time period, directed to men (the seamen)
- Male character Kurtz speaks freely and people listen; women rarely speak, an accepted cultural behavior
- Kurtz erratic behavior is encouraged while women are expected to act innocent and submissive
- The Intended's own world actually falls apart once it is confronted with Kurtz's death, because of his journey to Congo
- Boats are female. → Throughout the book, the only female name mentioned is the boat's.
- He has this regard towards women because he is surrounded by men: he cannot be a family man because he could not see his wife, being on his boat for great lengths of time: “followed the sea” → not attached to women
- Maybe Marlow has this view on women because he spent a great time on sea, surrounded by men: after all, he narrates the story through a retrospectively, and his remarks on women are always in the present time
- “The tidal current runs to and fro in its unceasing service, crowded with memories of men and ships it had borne to the rest of home or to the battles of the sea. It had known and served all the men of whom the nation is proud”
- “It had known the ships and the men.” (p5)
  - Importance of men on the sea emphasised.
  - The men are linked to their ship, and to the sea. They even have some sort of relationship, since the sea is personified. The latter guides the men to accomplish their duty, no matter if it is to go home, or to battle: a strong opposition.
  - The men serve the nation.
- “for there is nothing mysterious to a seaman unless it be the sea itself, which is the mistress of his existence and as inscrutable as Destiny” (p5)
  - “mistress” has a certain connotation related to love, and it shows that in the absence of his beloved on sea, a seaman has for only companion the sea.
  - In fact, all of his life revolves around it, even his destiny, to which it is compared to, which accentuates the power of the sea.
- “a wonderful lot of handy men they must have been too – used to build, apparently by the hundred, in a month or two” (p6)
  - The men are praised for the facility with which they can build something for the good of the nation.
- “They were men enough to face the darkness.” (p7)

- Man is depicted as brave and is in fact a synonym of “brave”.
- No matter the danger, they face the darkness to bring light.
- “If you were man enough” (p44)
- “It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind” (p7)
  - Marlow associates men to these crimes, which shows that women do not do any harm.
  - Indeed, men have more power than women, it is them who hold the big positions in the executive. As a consequence, since men are thought to be braver and stronger than women, they are the ones who journey into the unknown. However, they are affected physically and psychologically by this, while the women stay in their own world, as states it Marlow, and so it has in a way a positive side. Thus, men are the only ones incline to violence, evil and so on, in the novella, while women do not do any harm.
- “a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over” (p9)
  - Marlow takes care of precisising “for a boy”.
  - Boys are destined to conquer, to be in a position of renown, and this, “gloriously”.
  - The difference between the two genders occur since childhood.
- The first difference between the genders is on page 9:
 

“The men said 'My dear fellow,' and did nothing. Then—would you believe it?—I tried the women. I, Charlie Marlow, set the women to work—to get a job. Heavens!”

  - The men establish a fellowship between them and Marlow, but in fact do nothing for him and leave himself managing to get what he wants by himself. On the other hand, the women are more committed to help him and Marlow turns to her aunt, as the woman that she is represents her only chance to enter the Company. Yet, Marlow seems ashamed to have asked her for help, as shows it his last sentence, in the common depiction of women as weak and incompetent. As a consequence, Marlow seems to not have a very high esteem of women, regarding power.
- “all along the formless coast bordered by dangerous surf, as if Nature herself had tried to ward off intruders”
  - Nature here is referred as feminine and she protects the sailors from danger.
  - In fact, it is because she adopts the role of a mother.
- “‘I’ve been teaching one of the native women about the station. It was difficult. She had a distaste for the work.’” (p21)
  - Here, the man is in a position of superiority by teaching the woman.
  - She finds herself resourceless as she is taught and does not work.
  - The woman does not contribute to work, while men do.
- “It was a great comfort to turn from that chap to my influential friend, the battered, twisted, ruined, tin-pot steamboat. I clambered on board. She rang under my feet like an empty Huntley & Palmer biscuit-tin kicked along a gutter; she was nothing so solid in make, and rather less pretty in shape, but I had expended enough hard work on her to make me love her. No influential friend would have served me better. She had given me a chance to come out a bit—to find out what I could do.” (p34)
  - Marlow seeks comfort in his boat from men, and considers her as his most helpful

friend: in fact, she is her only companion in this adventure, where she guides him.

→ He owes his adventure to her. She matures him.

→ Despite her faults, he still likes her, and even uses the term “love”.

→ There is a mutual relationship here: he maintains her, and she guides him. Through their experience, love appears between them.

- “He was a widower with six young children (he had left them in charge of a sister of his to come out there)” (p35)  
→ Here, the foreman's sister's place refers to the traditional role of women in society, that is to say, taking care of children while the man goes to Congo in order to enrich his family.  
→ The woman helps her brother by staying in her own world, as states it Marlow, since thus, she can protect his children while he finds himself in a dangerous place.
- “Girl! What? Did I mention a girl? Oh, she is out of it—completely. They—the women, I mean—are out of it—should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse. Oh, she had to be out of it. You should have heard the disinterred body of Mr. Kurtz saying, 'My Intended.' You would have perceived directly then how completely she was out of it.” (p59)  
→ The women are deprived of power, and so what Marlow says is misogynistic, but it is for their own good: he uses thus the word “help”.  
→ There is a clear opposition between men and women, since both are in two completely different worlds: according to Marlow, each gender has a place and, thus, if women begin to work with men, it would supposedly disturb all the order.  
→ Though, Marlow recognises that women's world is beautiful: he wants them to be protected from all the danger men can face.
- “Marlow may have a thing for mysterious, amoral men—but he doesn't seem to think much of women. Twice in the novel, he mentions women and always sees them as somehow divorced from reality, as living in another world: "It's queer how out of touch with truth women are," he says: "They live in a world of their own, and there has never been anything like it, and never can be. It's too beautiful all together" (1.28). (Um, Marlow? If women literally make up half the world, then who's to say that their world isn't the "real" one?)

Anyway, Marlow obviously sees women as naïve and idealistic. But here's the rub: he wants them to *stay* that way. When he lies to Kurtz's Intended, it looks a lot like a chivalrous attempt to protect women from the world's brutal realities—like slavery and imperialism. Well, except for those two knitting women in black, who seem to have a weird power over Marlow—almost like they might be representations of fate, knitting up his destiny. Women: pure and evil all at once.

From our position, that contradiction seems like a pretty good way to sum up Mr. Marlow.”

- For over a century, critics have debated the designation of Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* as either 'Victorian' or 'Modern.' The novella's protagonist Marlow embodies Victorian notions of British imperialism and reveals a vested interest in the ideology of 'separate spheres,' the 19th century doctrine that lauded women for tending the private domestic space that enabled men to succeed in the political and public realm. At the same time, Conrad's experimental style and content prefigure modernist sensibilities, particularly the sense that 'truth' might be revealed through a less linear narrative strain and can even transcend the identity or gender of its narrator. The novella's publication dates—serialised

in 1899 and published as a complete text in 1902—represent yet another way in which the novella resists easy classification.

- Marlow's return to 'civilisation' reflects 'the Victorian ideology of separate spheres, in which the white woman's role is to create a realm of domestic bliss to which the white man can return and recover from the brutality of the world of commerce' (p. 366). Whilst his aunt's drawing-room at the beginning of his journey offers Marlow this kind of "bliss" (the room 'most soothingly looked just as you would expect a lady's drawing-room to look,' Marlow recalls) (p. 27), the Intended's parlour where his journey comes to a close offers no rest for the weary. Instead, signs of the imperial project are everywhere, and the parlour is haunted by the ghost of Kurtz.

### – MARLOW'S AUNT –

- She is the first woman to appear in the novella.
- “a dear enthusiastic soul” (p9)
  - Marlow is attached to her (“dear”).
  - She is ready to do anything (“enthusiastic”).
- And indeed, she writes: “It will be delightful. I am ready to do anything, anything for you. It is a glorious idea.”
  - She feverishly supports Marlow and the fact that she repeats “anything” emphasises the extent of her help.
  - Furthermore, her enthusiasm is shown by the melioratives adjectives that she uses.
  - The attachment that she has towards Marlow is shown by the accent on “for you”, which is explained by the fact that she is part of his family.
- In order to do this, she relies on her relations in society on one of her female friends, but quickly, she happens to call for men:
  - “I know the wife of a very high personage in the Administration, and also a man who has lots of influence with,’ etc, etc.” (p9)
- “She was determined to make no end of fuss to get me appointed skipper of a river steamboat, if such was my fancy.” (p10)
  - There is even a gradation in the adjectives used to describe her: from “ready”, she even becomes “determined to make no end of fuss” for a *simple* “fancy”, which accentuates her enthusiasm.
- “One thing more remained to do—say good-by to my excellent aunt. I found her triumphant. I had a cup of tea—the last decent cup of tea for many days—and in a room that most soothingly looked just as you would expect a lady's drawing-room to look, we had a long quiet chat by the fireside.”
  - Marlow praises her aunt as being “excellent”: he does not degrade women, but deprive them for their own good, in a way.
  - It is a woman who allowed Marlow to set off on his adventure: he is thus grateful to her aunt, even if he considers degrading to ask a woman for this.

→ Women have certain expectations: "a room that most soothingly looked just as you would expect a lady's drawing-room to look". They are trapped in this late-nineteenth century society that imposes them norms to respect, with all the characteristics associated to them related to purity, gentleness and so on...

→ During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Victorian ideal created a dichotomy of "separate spheres" for men and women that was very clearly defined in theory, though not always in reality. In this ideology, men were to occupy the public sphere (the space of wage labor and politics) and women the private sphere (the space of home and children). However, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women's acceptance of traditional roles began to dissipate, especially thanks to industrialisation, that allowed women to work in factories and so to assert new roles in society.

- "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." (p14)
  - Marlow's aunt is idealistic, leading Marlow to think this.
  - In fact, Marlow seems to not understand women, saying it is "queer" how they react, and as a consequence, he develops these thoughts, where he says that women are in a completely different world.
  - For him, women's world is an utopia: beautiful but unrealisable, because of this harsh reality men live with since forever, according to him.
  - He finds it cute that women want to be independent, since it would be impossible, according to him: he finds women naive.
  - In fact, he says that men are the ones who have to bear the harshness of the world, while women in fact, have to respect the norms of their private society.
- "My dear aunt's influential acquaintances were producing an unexpected effect upon that young man." (p30)
  - Her aunt even has effects on his life in Congo.
- She is the connection to the Company in which Marlow receives a position. She appears to be the only female contact Marlow has in his life, and she fully supports the vision of colonialism laid out in Rudyard Kipling's "White Man's Burden."
- The woman, his aunt, also transcended the traditional role of women in those times by telling Marlow that she would be delighted to help him and to ask her for help whenever he needed it.
- she only has power because she knows powerful men, or powerful men's wives
- Marlow's aunt does express a naïvely idealistic view of the Company's mission, and Marlow is thus right to fault her for being "out of touch with truth." However, he phrases his criticism so as to make it applicable to all women, suggesting that women do not even live in the same world as men and that they must be protected from reality. Moreover, the female characters in Marlow's story are extremely flat and stylized. In part this may be because Marlow uses women symbolically as representatives of "home."
- The influence of Marlow's aunt does not stop at getting him the job but continues to echo through the Company's correspondence in Africa.

- Calls him “an emissary of light”, an “apostle”
- “weaning those ignorant millions” =/= “the Company was run for profit”

### – THE TWO KNITTERS –

- “Two women, one fat and the other slim, sat on straw-bottomed chairs, knitting black wool. The slim one got up and walked straight at me—still knitting with downcast eyes—and only just as I began to think of getting out of her way, as you would for a somnambulist, stood still, and looked up. Her dress was as plain as an umbrella-cover, and she turned round without a word and preceded me into a waiting-room.” (p11)
  - “Resembling the Fates of Greek legend, Clotho and Lachesis, who, respectively, spin and measure out the thread of each life before Atropos cuts it.” The slim one would be Lachesis, who chooses a person's destiny, which is what the woman does by guiding Marlow to the waiting-room. On the other hand, the fat one would be Clotho, spinning the thread of human life and making important decisions, such as Marlow's journey to Congo for example, and certainly cannot move much just like the woman does.
  - Their complementarity is shown by the fact that the one is fat while the other is slim.
  - The darkness to which Marlow ventures is represented by the black wool.
  - Now, Atropos is not there, because Marlow is simply not dead yet.
  - They are very modest (“straw-bottomed chairs”, “plain as an umbrella-cover”) and in fact, stand out from the rich Brussels: they are outsiders and seem to not belong to this reality. Thus, the slim woman does not interact with Marlow, still focused on her wool, and quietly guides him.
  - As a consequence, Marlow compares her to a somnambulist, which means that he has the feeling that she is not present in reality, as if she were dreaming.
- “In the outer room the two women knitted black wool feverishly. People were arriving, and the younger one was walking back and forth introducing them.” (p12)
  - As more and more people arrive, and as Marlow signed the document, they knit more feverishly, since these acts are so important that they change their future.
- “She glanced at me above the glasses. The swift and indifferent placidity of that look troubled me. Two youths with foolish and cheery countenances were being piloted over, and she threw at them the same quick glance of unconcerned wisdom. She seemed to know all about them and about me too. An eerie feeling came over me. She seemed uncanny and fateful. Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. *Ave!* Old knitter of black wool. *Morituri te salutant*. Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again—not half, by a long way.” (p12)
  - The other knitter does not interact too, being “indifferent”, “unconcerned” and only looks at the new comers.
  - She is given a real power by Marlow, as the way she describes her seems to say that those who she looks most likely die – further accentuated by the Latin locution “*Morituri te salutant*”, that is to say “those who are about to die salute you”. Moreover, her incarnation of a Fate is underlined by the adjective “fateful”.
  - Even Marlow has the feeling that the black wool that they knit represents their dark future, since it is “as for a warm pall”, as if, as they knitted, they contributed to build this

coffin.

→ The knitter seems to know everything about each person, since, as the incarnation of the Fates, they construct their lives, just as the young one gets straight when Marlow arrives and guides him.

→ The “door of Darkness” evokes the door to the underworld that the Cumaean Sibyl, a priestess in the Greco-Roman mythology, guards in Virgil's *Aeneid* and to which she guides Aeneas, just as the slim knitter does by guiding the new comers.

- The **knitting women** in the beginning of the story symbolize the Fates who determine the future of every human being on the earth. These knitting women symbolize the danger which lies in store for Marlow.
- The two women knitting black wool is a symbol of Brussels Whited Sepulchre. They are knitting the yarn which epitomizes fate and furies and that the fate is having two dimensions one is favorable while the other is unfavorable. The process is either constructive or destructive but the net product will be the black wool that's the evil. Secondly the two women also represent the imperial and industrial systems which are meant to amaze as much wealth as possible. They are manufacturing death and torment for themselves.
- Two of the three Fates spin the life-thread of each human being. The thread represents a human life. The third Fate cuts the thread when the time comes for the man to die. The Fates, being Greek immortals, have foresight and can see every man's fate. Conrad uses the two women knitting black wool to foreshadow Marlow's horrific journey into colonial Africa. The slim one who gets up is described as a somnambulist or sleep-walker that is so occupied in her spinning that she does not pay much attention to Marlow. She may not have paid attention to Marlow because she was spinning Kurtz's fate. Conrad does not include the third fate over the duration of Heart of Darkness intentionally due to the fact that the third fate is supposed to represent the death of a man and we don't know the true fate of Marlow, we only know that he is alive at the end of the novella.

### – KURTZ'S MISTRESS –

- Description of Kurtz's mistress (p75-77).
  - “wild”, “savage”, “wild-eyed”, “a tragic and fierce aspect of wild sorrow”, “like the wilderness itself”
  - “gorgeous”, “proudly”, “her head high”, “savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent”
  - “She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her.”
  - “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.”
- “the barbarous and superb woman” (p84)
- Kurtz is seen with a native consort when Marlow arrives at the camp. While the native woman might be with him because she desires to, it is more likely that she is with him because of his position of power over the natives. She doesn't appear to be afraid or hostile towards Kurtz however.
- Kurtz's mistress has jewelry given by him.

- Higher regard than Kurtz?
- The Congolese woman that rails against [Kurtz's](#) departure is a complete contrast to Kurtz's [Intended](#). As the Intended is innocent and naïve, the native mistress is bold and powerful. Kurtz is a man of many lusts, and she embodies this part of his personality. She frightens the [Harlequin](#) because she finds him to be meddling with Kurtz too much; her threats to him eventually scare him into leaving the Inner Station.
- She seems to exert an undue influence over both Kurtz and the natives around the station, and the Russian trader points her out as someone to fear. Like Kurtz, she is an enigma: she never speaks to Marlow, and he never learns anything more about her.
- The woman is never given the title “mistress,” although it seems clear that she and Kurtz have a sexual relationship.
- To acknowledge through the use of the term that a white man and a black woman could be lovers seems to be more than the manager and the Russian trader are willing to do.
- She is the opposite of Conrad's view of women, in that she instills fear and has a commanding personality that at times overpowers Kurtz.

### – KURTZ'S INTENDED –

- ““My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my—' Everything belonged to him.” (p60)  
→ Women are considered as property, while men own a lot of things.
- ““My Intended, my station, my career, my ideas—these were the subjects for the occasional utterances of elevated sentiments.” (p85)  
→ The woman is at the same rank as the other possessions of Kurtz, which means that he declares his love for her at the same level as the other elements mentioned.  
→ This shows how Kurtz does not really love her, and indeed, since he has a mistress in Congo.
- **DESCRIPTION P90-96.**
- “She struck me as beautiful—I mean she had a beautiful expression.”, “Curiosity? Yes; and also some other feeling perhaps.”
- “She came forward, all in black, with a pale head, floating towards me in the dusk. She was in mourning. It was more than a year since his death, more than a year since the news came; she seemed as though she would remember and mourn for ever.” “The room seemed to have grown darker, as if all the sad light of the cloudy evening had taken refuge on her forehead. This fair hair, this pale visage, this pure brow, seemed surrounded by an ashy halo from which the dark eyes looked out at me.”
- A ghost? Mature and young at the same time, as if she already lived all of her life: being linked to Kurtz, she dies too. “I noticed she was not very young—I mean not girlish. She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering.”



- “But while we were still shaking hands, such a look of awful desolation came upon her face that I perceived she was one of those creatures that are not the playthings of Time. For her he had died only yesterday. And, by Jove! the impression was so powerful that for me too he seemed to have died only yesterday—nay, this very minute. I saw her and him in the same instant of time—his death and her sorrow—I saw her sorrow in the very moment of his death. Do you understand? I saw them together—I heard them together. She had said, with a deep catch of the breath, 'I have survived;' while my strained ears seemed to hear distinctly, mingled with her tone of despairing regret, the summing-up whisper of his eternal condemnation.”
- “But when you think that no one knew him so well as I! I had all his noble confidence. I knew him best.”

“You knew him best,” I repeated. And perhaps she did. But with every word spoken the room was growing darker, and only her forehead, smooth and white, remained illumined by the unextinguishable light of belief and love.

“You were his friend,” she went on. ‘His friend,’ she repeated, a little louder. ‘You must have been, if he had given you this, and sent you to me. I feel I can speak to you—and oh! I must speak. I want you—you who have heard his last words—to know I have been worthy of him. . . . It is not pride. . . . Yes! I am proud to know I understood him better than anyone on earth—he told me so himself. And since his mother died I have had no one—no one—to—to—”

- “She put out her arms as if after a retreating figure, stretching them black and with clasped pale hands across the fading and narrow sheen of the window. Never see him! I saw him clearly enough then. I shall see this eloquent phantom as long as I live, and I shall see her too, a tragic and familiar Shade, resembling in this gesture another one, tragic also, and bedecked with powerless charms, stretching bare brown arms over the glitter of the infernal stream, the stream of darkness. She said suddenly very low, ‘He died as he lived.’”  
→ “Book VI or Virgil's *Aeneid* describes the Shades of the Underworld as stretching out their arms in longing to the boatman Charon as they stand on the shores of the Styx, river of darkness; they yearn for the boatman's help in order to cross the Styx and enter Elysium, the abode of the blessed.”
- “He needed me! Me! I would have treasured every sigh, every word, every sign, every glance.”
- “Repeat them,” she said in a heart-broken tone. ‘I want—I want—something—something—to—to live with.’” “His last word—to live with,” she murmured. ‘Don't you understand I loved him—I loved him—I loved him!’”
- Kurtz's fiancée. Presented as pathetic, because she has deluded herself about Kurtz to the point that she's barely functional as an independent person.
- Marlow speculates that part of the reason Kurtz went to Africa was to make enough money to marry: “I had heard that her engagement with Kurtz had been disapproved by her people. He wasn't rich enough or something. And indeed I don't know whether he had not been a pauper all his life. He had given me some reason to infer that it was his impatience of comparative poverty that drove him out there.”

- She's beautiful and often connected with imagery of light and heaven:

*This fair hair, this pale visage, this pure brow, seemed surrounded by an ashy halo from which the dark eyes looked out at me. Their glance was guileless, profound, confident, and trustful. (3.53).*

Check out that halo and the "pure brow": it matches her naïve and idealistic view of Kurtz, who she sees as a kind of saint, whose "goodness shone in every act" (3.70). She's utterly infatuated with Kurtz and believes herself the single most definitive authority on his character: "I am proud to know I understood him better than any one on earth" (3.59). Um, no.

The Intended is essentially a stand-in for every woman, everywhere. (Well, every white, European woman). Her value is measured by her beauty and idealism, and Marlow says that "We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own lest ours gets worse" (2.29). In other words, men need women to be beautiful and dumb so there's some bit of goodness in the world.

But we think it's more complicated than that. (Of course.) Marlow sees women as naïve, idealistic, and gullible—in other words, able to turn blind eyes to the bloody realities and brutalities of imperialism. (Who do you think is wearing all that ivory?) They end up standing in for *all* Europeans. Like the Intended, white men want to believe in the good and civilizing characteristics of the pilgrims sent into the interior. They want the illusion, and the ivory—not the reality of African slaves worked to death

- [Kurtz's](#) fiancée is marked — like the [Harlequin](#) — by her absolute devotion to Kurtz. When [Marlow](#) visits her after his return from Africa, he finds that she has been dressed in mourning for more than a year and still yearns for information about how her love spent his last days. However, she is actually devoted to an *image* of Kurtz instead of the man himself: She praises Kurtz's "words" and "example," assuming that these are filled with the nobility of purpose with which Kurtz began his career with the Company. Her devotion is so absolute that Marlow cannot bear to tell her Kurtz's real last words ("The horror! The horror!") and must instead tell her a lie that strengthens her already false impression of Kurtz. On a symbolic level, the Intended is like many Europeans, who wish to believe in the greatness of men like Kurtz without considering the more "dark" and hidden parts of their characters. Like European missionaries, for example, who sometimes hurt the very people they were professing to save, the Intended is a misguided soul whose belief in Marlow's lie reveals her need to cling to a fantasy-version of the what the Europeans (i.e., the Company) are doing in Africa.
- An unnamed woman who only appears in the last few pages of the novel, she is the symbol of a life that Kurtz leaves behind when he arrives in the Congo. She is pure and lives in a dream world built around who she believes Kurtz is. Her impressions of him are so disparate from what the reader observes that we marvel at the change that evidently has come about in Kurtz.
- This innocent girl was the fiancée of a murderer "demi-god" who decapitated people. She is the innocent side of the relationship, or the yang. She is pure, but with a spot of darkness being the potential for evil only because she is human. Kurtz is the dark side of the relationship, the yin. He is an "animated figure of death" who once was noble and innocent, like the fiancée. He went to Africa with good intentions, but was corrupted by unadulterated freedom. With no society to tell him how to act, he fell prey to his inner darkness. The Intended is confined by society -- another reason why she cannot possibly comprehend or even want to know about the inner evil of man.
- When Kurtz's health rapidly starts to deteriorate, he speaks out in delirium about this choking evil and how he feels innocents should be protected from the knowledge of it. He

says "we must help [the women] stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse." He feels that the preservation of ignorance is better than the knowledge of this despotic truth. Once the presence of this natural evil is discovered, a person is nearly always committed to its path. Kurtz's feelings for his intended make him realize that not all truths should be known.

- The Intended symbolizes man's denial and unwillingness to learn truths too awful to know. A person should be aware of his own natural malevolence, yet not become evil, finding a balance in between. Conrad shows through the Intended that some truths should never be known.
- "Then I noticed a small sketch in oils, on a panel, representing a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch. The background was somber—almost black. The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the torchlight on the face was sinister." (p30)
  - Astraea, Roman goddess of justice, is often depicted as blindfolded (signifying her impartiality) and Liberty as holding a lighted torch. The images in Kurtz's painting are, however, rendered ambiguous by their links with more menacing colonial torch-bearers in the story.
  - Such an image combines ancient depictions of Justice, who was blind, and Liberty, who held a lighted torch. Kurtz's choice of image reflected the irrational European view that colonization was bringing civilization and peace to those they conquered, and the fact that a woman was shown as the symbol emphasizes Marlow's belief that women live in a world of their own, separate from the actual, tangible facts of the world.
  - In the eyes of Kurtz, a woman can bring light to this darkness he lives in. Alone, without any real friend, only subordinates, he can only turn to a woman for comfort.
- "At the central station, Marlow sees a painting, "a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch. The background was sombre—almost black. The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the torchlight on the face was sinister" (1.57).

What's up with this? Well, Kurtz painted it, for one. And then there's the whole issue of the woman, and we already know that Marlow seems to sequester women into idealized roles outside the realm of gloomy reality. This woman is so separate that she's a painting, and she's so impossibly idealistic that she, um, isn't real.

On to the blindfolded, torch-carrying part—sounds a lot like [justice](#), doesn't it? Maybe. Some people think this image is about blind Europe trying to bring light to Africa, which would fit in with Kurtz's whole grand imperialist theme. One thing we're sure of: carrying a torch while blindfolded sounds like a real fire hazard.

Which, come to think of it, might just be Conrad's point."

- Marlow, who has seen some of the worst horrors of the Congo, lies to Kurtz's fiancé by telling her that his last words were not "The horror!" but rather crying her name. This is because Marlow does not want to carry the darkness of the real world into this woman's idealistic world. Conrad uses Marlow's aunt at the beginning of the novella to establish woman in Heart of Darkness as symbols of society's blindness to its own hollowness. Kurtz's Intended further supports this symbolism since she is completely clueless about Kurtz's true nature. Though Marlow knows Kurtz's triumphs lay in his understanding of men's delusions about themselves, he can't bring himself to make Kurtz's Intended see the "dark" reality. Marlow knows that if even he, who does see civilization's futility, can't bring himself to reveal the darkness then civilization will remain blind to its faults.

- Marlow is attracted to Kurtz's Intended not only because of her feminine beauty, but for her seemingly open expression and innocence.
- The Intended puts great store by Kurtz's words, believing that they lured men to him and earned him his admiration from all mankind. She's naïve about the true motivations of men, which we have seen to be far darker and more self-serving.
- The Intended is so blinded by her love for Kurtz and her idealism that she immerses herself in the lie she created and does not even consider questioning its veracity. Marlow does not dare destroy her beautiful illusion, even when she goes so far as to call his death a tragedy on a global scale. (Er, there *is* a global tragedy here—but it's not Kurtz's death. It's the destruction of a continent.)
- [Marlow to the Intended]: "The last word he pronounced was—your name."

"I heard a light sigh and then my heart stood still, stopped dead short by an exulting and terrible cry, by the cry of inconceivable triumph and of unspeakable pain. 'I knew it—I was sure!' [...] She knew. She was sure. (3.85-86)

To Marlow, all this is just one more piece of evidence that women don't get it.

- By the end of Marlow's visit with the woman, the reader is also aware, even if Marlow is not, that the kinds of illusions and untruths which Marlow accuses women of perpetuating are in fact not dissimilar from those fictions men use to understand their own experiences and justify such things as colonialism. Marlow has much more in common with Kurtz's Intended than he would like to admit.
- Kurtz's Intended, like Marlow's aunt and Kurtz's mistress, is a problematic female figure. Marlow praises her for her "mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering," suggesting that the most valuable traits in a woman are passive. Conrad's portrayal of the Intended has thus been criticized for having misogynist overtones, and there is some justification for this point of view. She is a repository of conservative ideas about what it means to be white and European, upholding fine-sounding but ultimately useless notions of heroism and romance.
- When Marlow fears that he

sees Kurtz there united with her, he immediately stakes his own claim to Kurtz's ghost: in answer to her statement 'You knew him well,' he replies, 'Intimacy grows quickly out there [...] I knew him as well as it is possible for one man to know another' (p. 92). He emphasizes their shared gender, seizing the opportunity to identify with Kurtz in an intimate circle of shared knowledge sacred from feminine access or interpretation.

→ He marks a distinction between women's society and men's journey in Congo.

- Shortly thereafter, Marlow begins to lie. He starts a sentence, 'It was impossible not to—' and the Intended 'finish[es] eagerly' his sentence: 'Love him!' (p. 92). At the moment she makes this assertion, the Intended completely subverts Marlow's authorial expectations. Previous to their meeting, he fantasises about finding in her the perfect audience for 'his' narrative: imagining a 'delicate shade of truthfulness' in her portrait, he assumes that 'She seemed ready to listen without mental reservation, without suspicion, without a thought for herself' (p. 90). In person, she proves less pliable. She seizes control of the narrative, 'silencing

[Marlow] into an appalled dumbness' by interrupting his tale with a version of her own. He makes no move to correct her; indeed, he reiterates her claim by saying 'You knew him best' (p. 92). He acquiesces to the Angel of the House in a perfect performance of gender, politically and literarily powerful

- Marlow's 'lie' to the Intended represents the first time that he claims to have heard Kurtz's last words. By sheer force of will, the Intended forces Marlow to give her a version of Kurtz's death that upholds and affirms everything she 'knows' about him. Marlow insists that Kurtz's final words seem 'to swell menacingly' around him in the parlour, yet he acquiesces not to Kurtz but to the Intended, who wields her feminine 'weakness' in a perfect performance that wins her the affirmation that she needs to preserve her own special knowledge of Kurtz. Goaded on by her tears, Marlow cries, 'The last word he pronounced was—your name' (p. 94). He mimics her response, 'I knew it—I was sure,' by saying, 'She knew. She was sure' (p. 94).

- In a novel filled with silent women, her mourning emphasises her despair and her sadness now that Kurtz is dead.
- Marlow desperately attempts to narrate his story in a way that renders the Intended pure trope.
- The fact that he was lying with the best intent only makes it worse, because this proves that the women of his society *are* living in a fragile surreal world and cannot handle reality - or at least the men think that they cannot and do their best to prove themselves right.)

### – THE PAINTING –

- Kurtz paints a picture of a woman who stands against a black background. She holds a torch and is blindfolded. While the image seems to resemble lady justice, there seems to be very little justice in Africa. Kurtz idealizes women and sees them as the keepers of all good things in the world. They must be kept from the truth of the dark world (thus the blindfold) even as they cast a light that is the only hope for changing the world. Here it is easy to see Kurtz's idealized vision of women.
- The Intended is the embodiment of man's denial of the truth of [inner evil](#). In the painting of the Intended, her blindfold shows her blindness to the truth, symbolized by the torch she holds. The truth of man's evil is within her grasp, but yet she allows herself to be blinded so she cannot accept this to be true. She is in denial -- as far as she knows, if she can't see the evil or that it holds a penetrating presence, it does not exist to her.
- Her unshakable certainty about Kurtz's love for her reinforces Marlow's belief that women live in a dream world, well insulated from reality.
- The other characters which are used symbolically through the novel are the two women both Kurtz's Intended and his African mistress. They function as blank states upon which the values and the wealth of their respective societies can be displayed. Marlow frequently claims that women are the keeper of native illusions. Kurtz's Intended becomes a symbol of the creatures of illusion as the native girl represents or symbolizes reality
- Kurtz's painting is perhaps the most extensive symbol in Heart of darkness. Kurtz's painting is a symbol of the whole prevented enterprise (5). His painting that Marlow notices

succinctly sums up the darkness of blindness in the visual form. In the painting, the woman who is bearing the torch is blindfolded (6). The torch in Kurtz's painting is also used symbolically. The torch is clearly a symbol of European enlightenment, civilization, representing all that good, proper and necessary. As a torch casts light into darkness, the Europeans have come to Africa to bring enlightenment, civilization, savagery and ignorance. This torch is not only a symbol of European enlightenment but also a symbol of justification behind imperial enterprise

- The Kurtz painting, “ ... a small sketch in oils, on a panel, representing a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch. The background was somber – almost black”, interprets the entire European civilization. They are blindfolded and away from the harsh realities. They are ignorant and living in a state of falsehood. And the lighted torch represents their misconception of enlightening Congolese because they themselves need it. Her face has become distorted because the European customs seem rather repulsive. The dark background shows their low mental caliber.
- The painting at the Central Station is perhaps the most extensive symbol in the novel. The painting is of a blindfolded woman carrying a lighted torch, which distorts her face, against a dark background. The picture is a symbol of the whole situation of the European colonization in Africa. Mr. Kurtz was innocent and not aware of the reality of colonization at the beginning of his life in Africa. The blinded woman stands for the European people who are deceived by the false slogans of colonization by trying to spread light within the darkness.

The woman likely symbolizes the European who have come to civilize the natives. The torch she carries represents the European customs and values that they try to force upon the native Africans. The woman is blindfolded because the Europeans cannot see the negative effects that their customs have on the natives. Her face has become distorted because, to the natives, the European customs seem rather repulsive.

- Women are propagating ideas that they do not understand: portrayed in the painting, with a woman who is blindfolded, and who carries a lighted torch in the dark

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### – WOMEN IN GENERAL –

- Women symbolize decency and purity. It is their potential for representing the goodness in humanity that both men see as being worth saving, especially after having seen the horrors of evil. However, it is the ability of society to whitewash these horrors and say that they are done in the name of progress that allows the atrocities to continue.
- Both Kurtz's Intended and his African mistress function as blank slates upon which the values and the wealth of their respective societies can be displayed. Marlow frequently claims that women are the keepers of naïve illusions; although this sounds condemnatory, such a role is in fact crucial, as these naïve illusions are at the root of the social fictions that justify economic enterprise and colonial expansion. In return, the women are the beneficiaries of much of the resulting wealth, and they become objects upon which men can display their own success and status.
- Marlow's aunt established women in *H of D* as symbols of society's blindness to its own hollowness. Kurtz's Intended further supports this symbolism: she is completely clueless

about Kurtz's true nature.

- Marlow believes that women exist in a world of beautiful illusions that have nothing to do with truth or the real world. In this way, women come to symbolize civilization's ability to hide its hypocrisy and darkness behind pretty ideas.
- Men are reflected in women: the Intended describes him very positively, but when he goes to Congo, the woman that he now loves, incarnates wilderness and everything.
- Despite Marlow's disparaging comments about women, a number of women display or exercise a substantial amount of power in *Heart of Darkness*.

All the women within *Heart of Darkness* reflect the values of their society and are viewed as nothing more than trophies for men. Even the women who seem at first to have power are in fact powerless upon closer inspection.

- Marlow associates home with ideas gotten from books and religion rather than from experience. Home is the seat of naïveté, prejudice, confinement, and oppression. It is the place of people who have not gone out into the world and experienced, and who therefore cannot understand. Nonetheless, the women in Marlow's story exert a great deal of power.
- To Marlow, the woman is above all an aesthetic and economic object. She is "superb" and "magnificent," dripping with the trappings of wealth. As we have seen in earlier sections of Marlow's narrative, he believes that women represent the ideals of a civilization: it is on their behalf that men undertake economic enterprises, and it is their beauty that comes to symbolize nations and ways of life. Thus, Kurtz's African mistress plays a role strikingly like that of Kurtz's fiancée: like his fiancée, Kurtz's mistress is lavished with material goods, both to keep her in her place and to display his success and wealth.
- During this time period, women lived their lives vicariously through their husbands. They rarely had their own say in societal matters. Women were thought of as frail to handle matters in politics, and the logical nature of society and its rules. The women in *Heart of Darkness* however portrayed, still at their very core become the embodiment of these societal stereotypes.
- Conrad's *oeuvre* 'has either ignored women, or at best made use of them as figures to fill a space in the background of his painting.' Despite their 'near invisibility,' women are nonetheless 'an always-palpable presence in the background of the text.  
→ Aunt who still has influence, the sudden remembrance of Marlow about the knitter, and the painting of the Intended in Congo
- Women represent the potential for goodness in all humans, which is important to both men after having seen the heart of darkness and evil.
- Marlow frequently claims that women are the keepers of naïve illusions; which is a crucial role, as these naïve illusions are at the root of the social fictions that justify economic enterprise and colonial expansion.
- Women are the beneficiaries of much of the resulting wealth, and they become objects upon which men can display their own success and status.
- In the Congo, where people are brutalized and die, Marlow needs to believe that women live in a world of their own, because it means that the real world hasn't completely ruined everything.

– KURTZ'S MISTRESS AND INTENDED –

- Marlow parallels the Intended with Kurtz's African mistress. While the Intended has "fair hair," a "pale visage," and a "pure brow," and she is dressed simply in black, the stunning African mistress is "draped in striped and fringed cloths" and "bedecked with ... charms." Both women loved Kurtz. Marlow wants to protect the Intended, for women like her, civilized women, in his view "are out of touch with truth."
- The two women in Kurtz's life are also contrasted. His black mistress in Africa is very demonstrative, wearing bright clothing and jewelry and acting in a loud, wild manner, clearly displaying strong emotions.

In contrast, Kurtz's Intended in Belgium is fair, mild-tempered, and draped in black. She is the picture of calmness and patience. Despite their differences in appearance and temperament, the love they feel for Kurtz is very similar. The black mistress is devoted to her man and stretches out her arms to him in a show of great grief as he is taken away from her on the steamer. In a similar manner, the Intended is grief-stricken when Kurtz is taken away from her by death and still wears black and daily mourns his passing after more than a year.

- The majestic-looking **native woman**, who appears on the riverbank when Mr. Kurtz is being taken away, symbolizes a woman's strong devotion and steadfast loyalty to her lord and lover.

Mr. **Kurtz's fiancée** also symbolizes loyalty but her loyalty is that of an innocent, inexperienced woman who is deluded by false appearances and does not know the ways of the world. The fiancée symbolizes the hold of an illusion upon a woman's mind.

- The fact that the woman is described as an "apparition" makes us think that Marlow isn't quite sure this woman even belongs in the same category as white women. You know how he's all chivalrous and protective of the Intended? We're pretty sure he doesn't feel the same way about this lady.
  - Woman or warrior? She walks regally and fearlessly, her hair is "done in the shape of a helmet," and she wears protective brass coverings. She's basically the opposite of the soft, fragile Intended—but does she serve the same purpose for the Africans? She seems to be a rallying symbol for the Africans just like the blonde European women are for Marlow.
  - Notice how Marlow describes this warrior woman's magnificent brass ornaments in terms of their value? We did, too, and we're thinking this isn't much different from judging European women based on the value of their ornaments.
  - Just like the Intended is a symbol of civilization, with its fires and its tea and its couches, the warrior woman is a symbol of the wilderness—elephant tusks and all.
  - The warrior woman is an extension of the wilderness—a sexy one. Notice words like "desire" and "embrace" and "bared arms"? We're starting to understand why Kurtz doesn't want to leave.
  - The warrior woman seems to speak for all the native Africans, which makes us wonder if she's actually their leader. Wouldn't *that* be crazy—a woman leader! Nonsense. Next you'll be telling us that a woman might be president some day.
- In a society dominated by men, this really marks a contrast opposed to wilderness
- "She put out her arms as if after a retreating figure, stretching them back and with clasped pale hands across the fading and narrow sheen of the window. Never see him! I saw him clearly enough then. I shall see this eloquent phantom as long as I live, and I shall see her,



too, a tragic and familiar Shade, resembling in this gesture another one, tragic also, and bedecked with powerless charms, stretching bare brown arms over the glitter of the infernal stream, the stream of darkness." (3.73)

In case you weren't sure, Marlow tells us that we're supposed to be seeing some parallels between the warrior woman and the Intended, who both want to believe that Kurtz reciprocated their love absolutely. It's interesting that they both want the same thing when they live in such different worlds, right? Women.

- As in the African jungle, death permeates every corner of the European home. Marlow meets the Intended 'in a lofty drawing-room' decorated with a 'marble fireplace' and 'grand piano' that give the room the appearance of a graveyard: the fireplace is 'monumental' in its 'whiteness' and the piano 'gleams' in the corner 'like a sombre and polished sarcophagus' (p. 91). As for the Intended, she wears black: 'I—I alone know how to mourn for him as he deserves,' Marlow imagines her to imply by virtue of her dark clothing and 'sorrowful head' (p. 91).

#### – IS THE NOVEL SEXIST? –

However, women in this novel are not really viewed in such a negative light as has sometimes been supposed. Although women characters may be few and far between, and apparently cocooned, by and large, in their own world, they aren't weak or helpless. Kurtz's African mistress is an imposing, most impressive presence when she appears, and his Intended comes to dominate the scene at the end of the novel. We should remember, too, that it is a woman, Marlow's aunt, who precipitates him into his terrifying journey into the heart of darkness when she helps secure a job for him in the Congo. Even more important than this, perhaps, is the fact that the qualities that are generally seen to attach to women in this novel are positive ones: love, loyalty, emotional nurture.

To conclude: Conrad in this novel does appear to belittle women to some extent, downplaying their capabilities and understanding. However, their emotional qualities are also extolled as an antidote to the darker side of human life and nature. Therefore, women have their own significance in the story, and even appear quite powerful.

#### – GENDERISED NATURE –

- Basically, these are all traditionally objects which are *taken care of and protected* by men, and with which the man has a special relationship. A captain takes care of his ship and dies for her if necessary; every man is expected to die for his country – in Nelson's words, [England expects that every man will do his duty](#); in the twentieth century US, a man is not a 'real man' unless he has a car, and takes good care of it. Because men have historically had the role of protecting and, by some extension *owning* women, when we anthropomorphise these personal relationships with objects we own, they get assigned the female role. I take care of my car, and she treats me well by giving me pleasure on the road. I protect my ship and country because it is my duty to do so. Basically, it's tied to the traditional/regressive idea that men protect, and therefore have power over, women, and in the cases of the car, ship or rifle, only *one man* has access to and responsibility for that object. Women are weak and need protection, and men are strong and have the duty to provide it. Throw in the personal relationship between a man and a cherished object like a car, and you get the inevitable female personification.

- the tradition of giving a boat a feminine name runs through centuries of sailing
- In most European languages, objects have gender. Boats and other vehicles typically take female gender and pronouns. This also explains why people refer to a boat as "she," even if the boat's name is masculine or neuter. Throughout time, many sailors have spoken of their ships as female because at sea they depended on the vessel for life as a child depends on his mother
- Historically, sailors saw a ship's figurehead as the embodiment of the spirit of the ship. While many figureheads depicted religious symbols of protection, figureheads of naked women became popular in the 17th century. Although the sailors considered an actual woman aboard the ship to be unlucky, they believed the female figurehead was a comforting presence with the power to calm the sea. If the ship had a female spirit, she needed a feminine name.
- Naming a vessel is an important tradition before the launch of the ship. The majority of vessels are named after important female figures, either historical or personal, with the names majority of the time representing important women in the captain's life.

The most important activity after purchasing a boat...the naming process! This is a big decision for the captain, because his boat will be known by this name for the rest of its existence. After the name is given, the sea mother is supposed to watch over the vessel just as a mother watches over her children. The feminine name offers safety and protection to the vessel which makes this decision crucial. Once the name is chosen, a blessing will be given for the first maiden voyage by the feminine figure being named after or the sea mother.

- Interestingly, although male captains and sailors historically attributed the spirit of a benevolent female figure to their ships, and often the prow sported the full figure of a topless female, actual women on board were considered very bad luck at sea.
- It is possible that ships, boats, autos, etc., are known as "she" because everyone babies them so much, keeps them clean, neat and pretty, and maintains them in good shape. It may not be considered manly for a machine to be hand-wiped and waxed every week.
- At the time of the ancient mariners even as far back as 500 BC, most were 'married to the sea' due to their love for the ocean. The ships were their livelihood, their home and their love. As a compliment to the women they loved, they named their sailing vessels after them, telling them that it would remind them of the ones they left behind for the months and sometimes years they would be gone. This caught on.
- any seafarer would look at the ship as his mother (because the ship rocks him to sleep), and lover/spouse (because the ship will take good care of him as long as he takes good care of the ship).
- In addition, the tradition of female names can allow people to infer the presence of a woman, providing some comfort in a potentially dangerous situation in adding a traditional mothering and calming feminine element.
- Naming a sea vessel is an important tradition before the inaugural launch of the ship. The majority of vessels are named after important female figures, either historical or personal, with the names often including important women in the captain's life. There is an extensive, precise ceremony that most captains follow to ward off any bad luck. The name is chosen, painted on the ship, and the ship then cast off on its maiden voyage following the blessing.
- A feminine name is always selected with the idea of safety and protection, and that the sea

will mother and protect the vessel on its journeys just as a mother watches over her children.

- A second theory points to the existence of [grammatical gender](#) in most Indo-European languages besides English. While Modern English has hardly any grammatical gender, limited for the most part to cases of natural gender, such as the [nouns](#) "woman" and "man" being called she and he respectively, there is evidence that English once had a more extensive system of grammatical gender, similar to that in languages such as German and French. In most Indo-European languages with grammatical gender, the word for "ship" is feminine. In Old English texts, there is more evidence of objects being given a gender.

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1esik9BUG4dwAEAErdqKBbXY\\_SiakAX3YCMmVEQ0CGhM/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1esik9BUG4dwAEAErdqKBbXY_SiakAX3YCMmVEQ0CGhM/edit)