

# HEART OF DARKNESS

## GENDER

### – Introduction –

- Gender refers to all the characteristics belonging to masculinity and femininity, and differentiating between them.
- It is a theme present throughout *Heart of Darkness*, even though it's not the most obvious one since it lies in the nature of the characters.
- Just as the novel has been accused of being racist, *Heart of Darkness* has been accused of being misogynistic, and even sexist.
- Indeed, at first glance, there are only a few feminine characters, who seem to be powerless and useless, but their role appears to be significant.

### – Historical context –

#### – Differences –

- First of all, the society at the time of the novella was very misogynistic and even sexist. *Heart of Darkness* has been written at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and as a consequence, Marlow embodies Victorian notions of British imperialism and he follows the ideology of 'separate spheres'.
- This was a Victorian doctrine according to which women had to take care of the private domestic space, to which men could recover from the difficulties of the political and public sphere.
- So, men and women's roles were each clearly distinct.
- Women were expected to show specific qualities such as purity, innocence, while men had to be strong, independent and so on...
- Thus, the male character that is Kurtz speaks freely and people listen, and his erratic behaviour encouraged. Meanwhile, women rarely speak, and are expected to act innocent and submissive.
- Men have more power than women, it is them who hold the big positions in the executive.
- So, as they are thought to be braver and stronger, they journey into the unknown in Congo, but they are affected by this, physically and psychologically.
- No women in the organisation of the Company = no work for them, no responsibilities on the society evolution.
- Men are the only ones incline to violence, evil and so on, in the novella, while women do not do any harm.
- But can stay in the same state of mind, while men have the opportunity to evolve. Marlow,

thanks to this journey, has evolved and sees things differently. But his aunt stayed home and ignorant; not getting the opportunity to explore the world and see it in a different point of view.

- 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.
- Marlow is not an exception to this society, and he tells his point of view on women during his story.

### **– Marlow's thoughts about women –**

- The entire book is told from male perspective, and so all comments about women are those of men during this time period, directed to the men of the crew.
- Marlow has a specific point of view on women because he spent a great time on sea, surrounded by men. After all, he narrates the story retrospectively and his remarks on women are always directed to the crew, at the present tense.
- Marlow has this view because he cannot be a family man, as he could not see his wife, being on his boat for great lengths of time. As a consequence, he is not attached to women, and this is shown by the first description that is made of him in the novella, on page 5: "He was the only man of us who still "followed the sea" ".
- In fact, this life on sea that he leads ensued from his education as a boy. Indeed, when Marlow mentions his childhood and his passions for maps on page 9, he says that it was "a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over" (p9).
  - He takes care of precisising "for a boy".
  - The difference between the two genders occur since childhood, through a differing education.
- Also, Marlow mentions women twice in the novella, and always sees them as somehow divorced from reality, as living in another world. He says on page 14: "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."
  - For him, women's world is an utopia: beautiful but unrealisable, because of this harsh reality men live with since forever, according to him. So, he finds women naive.
  - In fact, he says that men are the ones who have to bear the harshness of the world, while women actually, have to respect the norms of their private society.

- Thus, he sees women as naïve and idealistic. However, he wants them to *stay* that way, as shows it his declaration on page 59: “We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse.”
  - 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.

## – The female characters –

### – *Marlow's aunt* –

- Marlow's aunt represents this Victorian woman. She is the first woman in the novella, and actually the only woman that Marlow dearly knows in the story. She helps him to get in the Company.
- This marks the first difference between the two genders in the book, on page 9: 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, and as a consequence, he seems to not have a very high esteem of women, regarding power.
- However, he praises her aunt as being “excellent”: he does not degrade women, but deprive them for their own good, in a way.
- Marlow's aunt is enthusiastic at this idea and is determined to do so, through her relations in society.
- By doing so, she transcends 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.
- However, she plays a huge role in the story, because without her, there would have been none. Moreover, her influence continues to echo in Congo through the Company's correspondence, on page 30.
- Yet, she only has power because she knows powerful men and has to rely on them. Furthermore, her character has very few development, but this may be because Marlow uses women symbolically as representatives of “home.”

## – Kurtz's Intended –

- Kurtz's Intended is also another Victorian woman, that she mourns after his death, even one year later. She reveals what he left behind him after his journey.
- While Marlow's aunt drawing-room offers Marlow the bliss that is expected from a woman as her, “that most soothingly looked just as you would expect a lady's drawing-room to look”, as described on page 14 ; the Intended's parlour is haunted by Kurtz's ghost and associated with death.
- 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'. 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'.
- She is thus described as “a tragic and familiar Shade”, that evokes the Shades of the Underworld in the Greco-Roman mythology.
- In fact, she is associated with the imagery of light and heaven, being portrayed by Marlow on page 92 like this: “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”.
- Actually, Marlow is attracted to Kurtz's Intended not only because of her feminine beauty, but for her seemingly open expression and innocence.
- She is presented as pathetic, because she has deluded herself about Kurtz to the point that she's barely functional as an independent person.
- In a novel filled with silent women, her mourning emphasises her despair and her sadness now that Kurtz is dead.
- Marlow speculates on page 94 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.”
- 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.
- 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', on page 93.
- 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.
- However, the Intended quickly proves to have power. 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!'. 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'. 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).

- 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'. He mimics her response, 'I knew it—I was sure,' by saying, 'She knew. She was sure'.

### – *Kurtz's Mistress* –

- On the other hand, in Congo, is Kurtz's mistress, who appears on the riverbank when Mr. Kurtz is being taken away. Although she is never named like this, it is clear that she and Kurtz have a sexual relationship.
- She is a complete contrast to Kurtz's Intended. As the Intended is innocent, fair, the native mistress is very demonstrative, wearing bright clothing and jewelry and acting in a loud, wild manner, clearly displaying strong emotions. 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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 time overpowers Kurtz.
- The fact that the woman is described as an "apparition" makes think that Marlow isn't sure this woman belongs in the same category as white women. He is not chivalrous and protective towards her like for the Intended.
- 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**, 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.
- 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.
- Marlow describes this warrior woman's magnificent brass ornaments in terms of their value. This isn't 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, erotic, with words like "desire" and "embrace" and "bared arms".
- The warrior woman seems to speak for all the native Africans, which makes wonder if she's actually their leader.

→ In a society dominated by men, this really marks a contrast opposed to wilderness

- Marlow even draws a parallel between the two women, who both want to believe that Kurtz reciprocated their love absolutely, when they live in such different worlds:

"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." (p95)

## – Gender as Symbol –

### – Fate –

- Each woman represents a major step in the journey of the man:
  - the aunt represents the beginning of the journey, idealistic
  - then comes the mistress, who symbolises Africa and all of his wilderness, with less romance
  - finally, the Intended, who shows what is left behind the man after his journey
- Men are reflected in the women that are dear to them.
- All of this is included in the characters of 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 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.

### – *The Painting* –

- Indeed, women are used as symbols.
- Kurtz paints a picture of a woman who stands against a black background. She holds a torch and is blindfolded. 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.  
→ In the eyes of Kurtz, only 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.
- In fact, 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 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. However, 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.
- 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.
- Furthermore, this woman is so separate that she's a painting, and she's so impossibly idealistic that she isn't real.

### – *Colonisation* –

- Marlow's aunt and the Intended's reactions on colonisation are also one of the causes of Marlow's thoughts on women. Indeed, first, Marlow's aunt expresses a naïvely idealistic view of the Company's mission, by talking about "weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways", praising her nephew as "an emissary of light", "an apostle" – which strongly contrasts with Marlow's affirmation that "the Company was run for profit".
- Thus, Marlow is 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.
- As for the Intended, she has a halo and a "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". 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).



- 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 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.
- 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.
- "We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse." : Her own world actually falls apart once it is confronted with Kurtz's death, because of his journey to Congo.
- Marlow, who has seen some of the worst horrors of the Congo, lies to Kurtz's fiancée 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.
- 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.
- Marlow's aunt established women in Heart of Darkness 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.
- 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.

- 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.
- 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.
- Women represent the potential for goodness in all humans, which is important to both men after having seen the heart of darkness and evil.

### – An abstract genderisation –

- The seaman is linked to his ship, and to the sea. They even have some sort of relationship, since the sea is personified.
- Indeed, on page 5, it is described as “the mistress of his existence” and as inscrutable as Destiny”. Here, “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, and once again, the notion of fate is present, which accentuates the power of the sea.
- Actually, boats are referred to through the feminine gender.
- In fact, throughout the book, the only female name mentioned is the boat's: *Nellie*, keeping with the tradition of giving a boat a feminine name.
- This is because the ship is an object that is taken care of and protected by men, and so it gets a female personification.
- Furthermore, most sailors considered themselves married to the sea: the ship was as a consequence their home. So they named it after a woman, as a female spirit for the ship brought a comforting presence to the crew, that is made only of men.
- It also reminded of a mother, because on sea, the sailor depended on his ship for life, just as a child depends on his mother.
- Moreover, Marlow seeks comfort in his boat from men, and even says on page 34: “No influential friend would have served me better.” 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, a sort of love appears between them.

As a conclusion, women in this novel are not really viewed in such a negative light as has sometimes been supposed. Although women characters may be deprived of rights, 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.

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