

Lynda Herczeg:**The Role of Women in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness***

Artworks based on any kind of symbolist conception always imply the freedom of interpretation. No wonder, thus, that Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has inspired scores of critics, who often explained the same details in utterly different ways. As a result, the novella allows readers to choose their own version from the conflicting ideas. This explains why some believe that Marlow the narrator praises racism, while others claim that through his character's development, the prejudice of a white man actually fades away. Consequently, it is unequivocal that the underlying ideologies and the heavy moral issues Marlow has to face can be introduced by examining one of the major themes. At first sight, it might seem that women do not play an important role in the story. If we take a closer look at the complex symbolism in the novella, however, we find that all the seemingly insignificant female figures have their own importance in the network of the characters and the ideas they represent.

Recent feminist studies have focused on women characters to unveil the methods Conrad uses in the novella. According to Bode, these figures create a sub-text within the text, moreover "perhaps even a story within a story" (21). She begins her analysis with Marlow's frequently cited statement on the other sex:

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 18)

Throughout the novella, Marlow struggles to maintain this limited image of womankind partly because he fears these women, and partly because admitting their equality would ruin the male-

dominated worldview he was born into. According to Bode, “Frequently, critics have sensed danger among the women for the novella’s male protagonists” (20). Later on, we will see how both Kurtz and Marlow depend on women and how complex their emotions towards them are. But we also have to be aware of the fact that none of these female characters can be considered as autonomous individuals. They are hollow, transparent and fragile. Bode suggests that similarly to the “brotherhood” of Kurtz and Marlow (which is rooted in the latter’s conscious identification with the other), there exists a “sisterhood” between the women (20). This bond between the women characters, however, is unconscious. The invisible fatal network they make up together functions as a frame of reference for Marlow’s imagination. And although these women do not represent “the good” against “the evilness” of Kurtz, they still play an important role in protecting Marlow from collapsing. In order to understand this network the protagonist depends on, we have to take a closer look at all the women characters and their roles.

Marlow’s aunt plays an important role by despatching the chain of events. She is the one who arranges his journey to the Congo because she believes that “weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways” (Conrad 18) is the very task of the colonists. Although Marlow proudly remarks that he is an independent man, he can only get the position he wants with the help of a woman. To conceal his “weakness,” he unconsciously tries to preserve his pride by mocking his aunt and her efforts. By illustrating her as a fussy, owlsh woman who is just a mouthpiece of the patriarchal ideology, Marlow, as Smith suggests, “maintains his view that the world of experience is and should be a man’s world” (190). In the quote above we have already discovered the contradiction in Marlow’s ideas on how women and men see the world. In his point of view, experiencing “truth” is the privilege of men, because women live in a world of their own. Smith’s conclusion leads to the realisation that “belief, then, becomes a

fully masculine activity: it inheres naturally in men and comes to the surface through manly experience” (191). In addition, the aunt plays another important role in the first section; it is through her vision that we first associate Marlow with Kurtz. She describes Marlow to the wife of the high dignitary as an “exceptional and gifted creature” (26), an ideal worker. He is paralleled with Kurtz, who “will be a somebody in the Administration before long” (34), as the brickmaker later remarks to Marlow.

Whereas the aunt directly affects Marlow’s life, other women watch over the direction she established for him. The two knitting women Marlow encounters at the Company’s Brussels office play a fully symbolical role, covertly influencing his life. The narration focuses on their activity, knitting, which serves as a link between them and the Fates of Greek and Roman mythology. But instead of three allegorical figures, we have only two: the one who spins and the one who measures the thread of life. The snipper is luckily missing, foreshadowing Marlow’s survival. The atmosphere, however, is ominous, eerie and frightening, giving the feeling to him that they knit a warm pall. The black and white dominance of the scene, together with Marlow’s feeling that they guard the door of Darkness, adds a biblical reference to the whole. They seem to know everything and yet they are ignorant. Bode suggests that in a sense all the three Fates are present if we consider the two knitters as one, the aunt and the African mistress as the other two (24). When we take a closer look at the savage woman, we will see why the author feels so. The importance of the knitters becomes clear in the Inner Station, where Marlow’s heart starts to beat with the drums, which symbolizes his fusion with the heart of darkness. He almost gets consumed by the jungle, when the elderly knitting woman suddenly comes into his mind, thus saving him from falling.

So far we have examined two important influencing agents, but we have not yet considered that Marlow is not just a man but an outstanding seaman as well. This fact adds a

second layer of understanding to the whole, for in sea folklore women are usually considered to be a source of danger. According to Bode, “women, generally, are sources of great superstition among sailors.” She quotes Horace Beck, who tells us in *Folklore and the Sea* that “Cards, dice and women can only lead to trouble at sea” (25). The witch-like knitters seem to have power over the elements. Similarly, the African mistress does not only reflect the jungle but also controls it. On the one hand, she is a fearful savage with fire and hatred in her eyes. But on the other hand, her whole appearance is sublime, which explains why Kurtz was seduced by her. Smith suggests that Marlow creates her symbol “in order to control the threatening wilderness” (184). While he makes a symbol of the savage woman, he personifies the jungle itself. This way he can avoid the existing dangers at least in his mind – as if the potentially threatening forces were brought under his control. The mistress’ sexuality and the grief and sorrow he sees in her eyes incline him to draw the false conclusion that these dangers can only be attributed to women and to the natives.

Furthermore, the detailed description of the accessories she wears draws a parallel between her and the ivory. The whiteness of the tusk is in sharp contrast with the blackness of her skin, but they both represent something very precious that Kurtz owns. It is not only the jungle and the ivory that keep Kurtz in the Inner Station but the mistress as well. By putting together the pieces of information about Kurtz’s life, we understand that the reason behind his journey to the Congo was that he was not rich enough to marry his Intended. It was his love for the Intended that sent him to the jungle and his love for the savage woman that kept him there and indirectly caused his death. In a way, the Intended and the savage woman are like a positive and a negative magnetic pole, both alluring and repelling Kurtz.

The final scene with the Intended is important in many ways. Primarily, it demonstrates the delay of the jungle’s effects on Marlow. The shadow at the door and the ivory keys of the

piano both suggest the presence of Kurtz and the Congo in the civilized but immoral drawing-room. The darkness of the scene, however, does not stem from Marlow's jungle experiences. Bode suggests that it rather stems "from the Intended's placement in the continuum of the novella's female figures stretching from Brussels to the Congo and back" (25). And it seems that we have arrived to what we have already discussed in the introduction. The "sisterhood" or network of the female characters becomes a whole unit underlying the plot. The symbolism of the scene connects the characters and the places at the same time. The pale white woman representing the civilized world is in sharp contrast with the dark-skinned African mistress. Marlow's fear of the savage and the unknown required in the Congo that the savage woman was silenced, which gave her an extra source of mystery. The Intended, however, leads an unpleasant conversation with Marlow. One year has passed since the death of her beloved, but she still mourns him deeply. There seems to be an insurmountable gap between her and Marlow. As the leader of the conversation, the Intended gets him to say whatever she wants to hear. She belongs to that women's "sphere" that Marlow described in the beginning as being far from "the truth." It follows from this conception that he feels he can only protect her from collapsing by lying to her. Marlow substitutes Kurtz's last words ("the horror! the horror!") with her name, which can primarily be interpreted as a natural deed of a man who wants to protect the "innocent" world of women. It is not just a benevolent action, but the proof of Marlow's weakness since he loses the ability to initiate his own thoughts. Bode argues that in this final scene "details of disintegration reinforce a sense of Marlow's submission" (27), which leads to his physical and emotional insecurity. What is more, we can also suggest that he does not lie to her for she represents the immorality of civilization that Kurtz left behind. Finally, we should not forget that Kurtz's oil sketch and portrait of the Intended gives further implications to the symbolism. The chiaroscuro technique, which rests on the balance of

lightness and darkness, can be found in Conrad's technique of sketching his female characters as well.

In conclusion, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* can only be interpreted by taking a closer look at its complex symbolism. Although we have only touched upon the role of the female characters, the importance of the "sisterhood" between them enables us to see the ideology and the underlying emotional changes of the protagonists. Therefore, instead of taking into account the role of the female individuals, it is wise to draw up the parallels and contrasts between the women and their function in the novella.

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