

Ágota Varga:

The Role of Women in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: The World of Beauty and Darkness

The story of the novella *Heart of Darkness* is based on Joseph Conrad's own journey to the Congo in 1890, which ruined his health and left him completely demoralized. Conrad – just like his main character Marlow – struggles to come to terms with the horror of his experience by sharing his story with an audience. Marlow (or Conrad) is still puzzled and undecided when relating the details of his journey and the events he has witnessed. That is why Marlow's tale is not explicit or obvious, but is full of elements of uncertainty. Critics have viewed his lack of precision as a positive characteristic for its power to evoke a dreamlike atmosphere in which the reader shares Marlow's momentary inability to grasp what is happening. Marlow's portrayal of places and people is also extremely vague: instead of giving us detailed delineations, he rather describes the feelings these evoke in him. Because of this vaporous quality many of the characters in the novel are vision-like – their existence outside Marlow's mind can often be doubted. Among all the characters present in Marlow's narration, women are probably the most mystified.

Heart of Darkness is a story about a man, about manly adventure in which female figures seem to be playing quite an unessential role. The women in the novella, indeed, appear to be creations of Marlow's or Kurtz's imagination, and as such, their status as autonomous individuals is dubious. However, if we examine these figures more closely we will recognise their strength as symbols and their power in influencing Marlow's fate. Even though there is no direct connection between the women, there is a powerful female network present in the novella, which frequently takes charge and assumes control of its events (Bode 20).

The female characters in Conrad's work can be divided into two main groups: those who talk and those who remain speechless. The women whose voice can be heard (Marlow's aunt, the Intended) are connected with the civilized world, while those who stay silent are some kind of symbols of the "enigma of the jungle" (M. Smith 193) (Kurtz's mistress, the ladies at the Company's Brussels office).

Marlow's view of women can be heard right at the beginning of his narration. Commenting on one of his aunt's remarks, Marlow exclaims: "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..." (Conrad 40) According to feminist critic Joanna M. Smith, this opinion is very typical of the nineteenth century, when the ideology of separate male and female spheres was still ruling. Marlow's comments on his aunt and his mockery of her intervention with the Company on his behalf reflect "the patriarchal ideology excluding women from the man's sphere" (M. Smith 189). Marlow's idea of the separate female space, which is limited in its possibilities, was contradicted by his aunt's success. He tries to deal with the sense of shame and discomfort caused by this contradiction by mocking his aunt's efforts. Although Marlow's aunt undoubtedly belongs to the civilized world, she still seems to carry with her something of that dark, savage force which characterizes all the women in the novella, since it is her who gives the final push to set Marlow going on his journey into the unknown, into the very heart of darkness.

In the Company's Brussels headquarters Marlow encounters two ladies, who are the door-keepers of the Company's main office. Their physical appearance is described in great detail. They are both dressed in black, knitting black wool; one of them is slightly younger and thinner, while the other one is older, sitting in a chair, wearing "a starched white affair on her head." The older lady reminds us of a witch, since she has a wart on her cheek, wears

“silver-rimmed spectacles” (Conrad 38) and a cat is sitting in her lap. Nevertheless, this minute description does not really serve to prove the factual reality of their existence. Moreover, it only strengthens the surreal, dreamlike atmosphere of the story in which most of the characters can only be seen by Marlow alone. He attaches images from classical and Christian mythology to the knitters. The ladies appear to have some kind of a dark connection with afterlife; they seem to be some kind of guardians in the gate of hell, in the “door of Darkness” (Conrad 38). Marlow speaks about two young men, who are being “piloted over” (Conrad 38) from civilization into the wilderness by one of the ladies, she being the only thread connecting the two different worlds. These women are standing somewhere between the civilized world and the jungle, and they seem to possess a profound knowledge of both of these places. Their appearance – the dominance of the colour black, perhaps – and their ambience evoke the presentiment of something evil and threatening in Marlow. Even though there are only two of them, their knitting serves to link them with the three Fates of Roman and Greek mythology, who control human destiny by spinning and cutting the thread of life. The reason for the absence of a third lady might be that Marlow survives his journey to the Congo, so there is no need for the third Fate, whose duty would be to snip the thread. Other experts believe that there is a third Fate present in the novella and identify her with Kurtz’s black mistress (Bode 24). In my opinion however, it is Marlow’s aunt who can be regarded as the third Fate, since she is the only other female character in the story who is ‘spinning some kind of a yarn’ in order to influence Marlow’s future. After he gets back from his trip, suffering from a serious illness, it is his aunt who tries to “nurse up” (Conrad 99) his strength, thus the thread of his life is again being placed into her hands.

When Marlow arrives to the Company’s Outer Station in the Congo, he encounters an accountant who is wearing a surprisingly clean and well-ironed outfit. As this man explains

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the origin of his wonderful linen, it becomes clear that he has forced a native woman to become his laundress. According to Johanna M. Smith, the accountant makes use of imperialist and patriarchal oppression, which Marlow himself approves of (M. Smith 183). Although he makes fun of the man for looking like “a hairdresser’s dummy” (Conrad 45), he also expresses his admiration for the accountant’s accomplishment. Shortly after his arrival to the station, Marlow realises that he does not want to be part of the ‘great cause’ any longer and expresses his contempt for the subjugation of the natives, but the patriarchal oppression remains unseen by him because it seems natural. The laundress – being a symbol of the victimization of the natives – remains silent and invisible; unable to speak for herself.

Representing the savages and the jungle, there is another speechless character in the story, Kurtz’s native mistress, who appears after Kurtz has been taken on board of Marlow’s ship. Marlow’s fundamental fear of female power present throughout the whole novella seems to be justified by the African woman. She is “savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent” (Conrad 89). As Bode states in her article, she reflects the mysterious and impenetrable jungle with all its secret forces and also exercises control over it. She has the ability to change the face of the landscape itself: “Suddenly she opened her bared arms and (...) at the same time the swift shadows darted out on the earth, swept around on the river, gathering the steamer in a shadowy embrace” (Conrad 89). Kurtz’s longing to remain part of jungle life is very strongly linked to his longing for her. Her soul reflects the jungle, she herself is the wilderness and as such she has gained absolute control over Kurtz. She approaches the steamer as if the jungle itself closed in menacingly around the intruders. She is not allowed to board though: some other female force seems to stand in her way. The ship – loved, cherished, caressed by the sailors – is referred to in the English language as a ‘she’, a woman, protective of her passengers as a mother is of her children. Marlow’s steamer is also a female character with a

symbolic voice: her horn scares the savages away, since to them it represents the unknown, the 'fearful' civilization. The African mistress does not dare enter this world, she remains on the shore, and thus this clash between the two worlds seems to be won by civilization.

The darkness of his jungle experience has accompanied Marlow home never to leave him anymore. The final scene with the Intended suggests most strongly that the effects of the jungle are still present. There are many details recalling the jungle in this scene: Marlow's vision of Kurtz as he stands in the door of the Intended, his last words echoing in the room around them or the piano made of dark wood with its ivory keys. Moreover, the Intended herself has a shadow-like presence and her movements can easily be associated with those of the native girl: "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" (Conrad 104). The African woman and the Intended form some kind of a mysterious "sisterhood" (Bode 20); they complement each other, just like the black and white, the ebony and the ivory of the piano. Like the African mistress, the Intended also seems to have the power to bring on the darkness. Her effect on Marlow is very powerful; she assumes complete charge over him. She is leading the conversation – he only says the words she wants to hear.

His visit to the Intended leaves Marlow totally disconcerted: he is unable to interpret this meeting correctly. He believes that the reason for his lying to the woman was his intention to protect her from disappointment. He does not realise that the darkness and the death-like atmosphere present in the Intended's room was not brought in by him, but it was originally there and was only strengthened by the appearance of the girl. The fact that she was still dressed in black, still in mourning after more than a year had passed since Kurtz's death, suggests that suffering has become her natural state and that she will not part with it easily. By telling her the truth, Marlow could have demolished her idol and saved her from her

misery. But the Intended does not want to be saved: Marlow is unable to fight against the pressure put on him by this woman who has a superb “capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering” (Conrad 102). He is forced to lie. In the Intended’s presence Marlow is overcome by the same feelings that have overwhelmed him in the jungle: “ I asked myself what I was doing there, with a sensation of panic in my heart as though I had blundered into a place of cruel and absurd mysteries not fit for a human being to behold” (Conrad 102-103). Marlow is incapable of grasping the essence of the Intended’s world and does not realise that this woman is not a fragile little creature in need of protection but someone possessing great, threatening force. The source of his fear can only partly be attributed to his past experience: the horror he feels was mainly evoked by the Intended’s dark power. Her affliction is her strength: by telling her the truth, Marlow could deprive her of it. He could enlighten the darkness of her heart.

For Marlow though, the world of women is “too beautiful altogether” (Conrad 40). He is unwilling and unable to change his view about them. Marlow is the one who cannot see the truth, he is the one blindfolded, the one who is “out of touch” (Conrad 40) with reality. He cannot comprehend that the world “too beautiful altogether” can also be a world “too dark altogether” (Conrad 105).

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