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EUROPEAN IMPERIALIST VIOLENCE AND FEMININE INFLUENCE IN JOSEPH  
CONRAD'S HEART OF DARKNESS

by

KATLYN DAVENPORT

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of English

Carolyn Tilghman, Ph.D., Committee Chair  
College of Arts and Sciences

The University of Texas at Tyler  
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The University of Texas at Tyler  
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Abstract

EUROPEAN IMPERIALIST VIOLENCE AND FEMININE INFLUENCE IN JOSEPH  
CONRAD'S HEART OF DARKNESS

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May 2020

This thesis explores themes of influence and resistance to imperialism in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. To contextualize the feminine control and resistance of imperialism and colonialism, the thesis first examines Marlow's and Kurtz's roles as agents and representatives of the Company, and thereby reveals their complicity in the brutalities carried out against the native people of the Congo. Additionally, it compares the vivid descriptions of violence inherent in imperialist domination with the vaguer characterization of violence among the tribespeople. Finally, by examining relationships between male and female characters as well as the ideals of the Anglo/American New Woman, this thesis demonstrates that female European characters, like Marlow's aunt and Kurtz's Intended, control and manipulate their male counterparts, while female African characters, like Kurtz's mistress and the accountant's laundress, represent a silent resistance to imperialist domination and violence.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

As one of the most influential novels in English literature, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has been analyzed, criticized, and apotheosized for decades in the literary community. Its popularity originally stemmed from its widespread appeal as an adventure novel, but its complex characters have made it an abiding subject for study. Additionally, the time of its publication in the early twentieth century as compared with its contemporary setting positioned the novel as a critique of timely political and societal issues, such as imperialism, gender roles, and racial oppression. As such, the novel has supplied decades of literary critics with ample material regarding race, gender, and imperialism to explore and debate. Critics like Hunt Hawkins and Chinua Achebe have both praised and condemned Conrad's examination of race, gender, and cultural stereotypes within the novel, questioning whether his narrator, Marlow, reflects the author's own experience as an adventurer and travel writer, or if Conrad's characterization of Marlow adeptly criticizes white male supremacy during the European conquest of Africa.<sup>1</sup> In *Heart of Darkness*, the white men whose experiences drive the narrative are literal instruments of European imperialism as well as figurative representations thereof. In other words, Marlow and Kurtz not only serve as a narrative focus for the unnamed narrator to describe the exploits of European imperialism in

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<sup>1</sup> see Mark Doherty, Jeremy Hawthorn, Bette London, John G. Peters, Pouneh Saeedi

Africa, but also as symbolic representations of the Company as a cruel imperialist entity. As such, the interactions between Marlow and Kurtz and the female characters in the novel who are conspicuously unnamed depict not only an ongoing struggle between cultures but between male and female humanity. On the surface, the women in *Heart of Darkness* appear deliberately silenced and utterly subservient. With further examination of the women's influence on Marlow and Kurtz, however, it becomes clear that they exert more control than is obvious at first glance. What appears to be unbridled masculine imperialism in the novel is carefully controlled by European female characters, and subsequently curbed by native women in the African continent so deliberately invaded by the Company. Thus, femininity in various forms becomes the instrument by which imperialism, represented by individual white male characters, is both prompted and thwarted. Additionally, considering the historical context of *Heart of Darkness*, which was published in serial form in 1899 and as a book in 1902, one may conclude that Conrad's treatment of women in the novel also serves as a response to the New Woman movement in late Victorian England, a movement in which many women sought and gained independence from traditional gender roles. His novel responds to the appearance of the New Woman in literature by supporting the concept of the New Woman in the character of Kurtz's African mistress and opposing it in the character of Kurtz's Intended. In short, this essay aims to investigate the effects of European imperialism on the Congo and its people and subsequently to illustrate the relationships between male and female characters in the novel by considering feminine manipulation of masculine and imperialist goals.

## Chapter 2

### Imperialist Company Men

In order to understand the subversive nature of the oft-ignored female characters in *Heart of Darkness*, one must first recognize the relationship between the primary white male characters and their imperialist goals. Marlow and Kurtz are both agents for the Company, whose goal is to locate and export ivory from the African continent. These men and other agents like them subjugate and exploit the native population in order to, in turn, exploit the land itself. The Company for which Marlow goes to work exhibits attitudes and methods typical of European political entities and commercial agencies during the scramble for Africa. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, several European nations set out to take control of the African continent. While many proponents of this plan claimed to act in the best interest of native tribes, most primarily concerned themselves with the three C's of colonialism: civilization, Christianity, and commerce ("Scramble for Africa"). As European nations divided and conquered the African continent, they brought with them Eurocentric ideas of how a "civilized" society should operate, and which religious practices should be observed. Most of all, however, Europeans sought profit through the exploitation of Africa's people and resources. In *Heart of Darkness*, the Company's pursuit for ivory using the native population as slave labor represents a singular focus upon European prosperity through commerce. With the promise of individual prosperity, white men in the novel eagerly cast themselves as representatives

of the Company, Conrad's collective noun for imperialism in the novel. The Company employs white European men as a dominating physical and political force used to subdue and subjugate the native African population in order to exploit the resources and workers found in the "Dark Continent." Marlow's frequent reference to the Company as a proper noun without the accompanying name of a specific leader or head positions the Company as an entity representative of itself. The looming specter of the controlling entity that is the Company overshadows the actions of the male characters in the novel. Despite Marlow's occasional admissions of guilt or pity for the native Africans exploited by the Company, he is neither enlightened nor empathetic enough to oppose the prevailing racist attitudes of the Company. Because the goals of the Company represent typical imperialist goals, especially those regarding the expansion of commerce via the exploitation of other countries' resources, agents of the Company, like Marlow and Kurtz, become agents of imperialism. Thus, when Conrad critiques Marlow and Kurtz, along with other male characters like the station manager and the "man of patches," he critiques the Company, and by extension, European imperialist conventions, techniques, and attitudes. In the article "White Skin, White Masks: Joseph Conrad and the Face(s) of Imperial Manhood," Jesse Oak Taylor examines the significance of the white man's face as a "mask" representing the imperial agenda as seen in Conrad's novel: "*The* "white man" (singular) is presented as a unified entity, an aggregate, a corporate body that is not merely irreducible to, but of an entirely different order from, any individual body" (192). Therefore, while the narrative focuses upon individuals, one may also attribute the goals and values of demographic groups, whether they be male, female, European, or African, to individual characters.

The unnamed narrator describes Marlow as "a seaman, but a wanderer too, while most seamen lead, if one may so express it, a sedentary life" (5). This seemingly contradictory description contrasts Marlow's desire to explore the "blank spaces on the earth" with other seamen's penchant for technically traveling but remaining on a ship. But this innocuous contradiction is misleading. Marlow does not merely wander into Africa, he penetrates its inner territories deliberately and aggressively with the self-assured air of an agent of European imperialism. Marlow's desire to explore thus becomes a tool of imperialism, and according to Taylor, "Marlow's opening gambit implicitly shifts the emphasis of conquest from discreet acts by individual actors to the smooth functioning of a system" (197). In other words, Marlow's narrative develops a sense of a collective imperialist, rather than an individual, entering and conquering the African continent. As speaker within the frame narrative, Marlow serves as both storyteller and protagonist, so his endeavors most influentially convey those of the Company. He enters the continent with no consideration for the people already inhabiting it. He is unconcerned with the "black shapes" about whom he says, "they were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation lying confusedly in the greenish gloom" (Conrad 17). While the admission that they were not "enemies" or "criminals" conveys pity on the part of the Company man, these illustrations of Marlow's actions and attitudes also consistently reflect his connection with imperialism. Even his later reluctant admission to a "remote kinship" with the "wild and passionate" natives belies a sense of superiority consistent with the Company's beliefs (36). As such, Marlow espouses values that align him with typical imperialist ventures. In "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," Chinua Achebe critiques

*Heart of Darkness* as a racist work, which examines the continent and inhabitants of Africa in terms of their inferiority to European civilization. Some critics attribute the racist elements of the novel to the narrator Marlow, arguing that Conrad was actually critiquing racism through the lens of Marlow's failings. Achebe instead argues that Conrad was a racist, claiming that his writing mirrors Western psychology's tendency to "set Africa up as a foil to Europe." His article provides examples of traditional analysis of Kurtz's mistress, as well as an explanation of her juxtaposition with the European female characters in the novel. However, while Achebe argues that Conrad denies Kurtz's mistress the same power held by European women, I will show that she influences Kurtz in much the same way that European women control Marlow's destiny. In short, his article provides context for austere racial aspects of the novel which inform the comparison between different female characters. In his article, Achebe states, "*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (15). Here, Achebe highlights the dichotomy between Marlow's homeland and the world the Company seeks to conquer, demonstrating the unapologetic racial discrimination inherent in an imperialist system. Achebe argues that even early in the novel, when describing the River Thames, soon to be compared with the Congo, Marlow shows concern about the prospective connection with "dark places" and people of the earth (qtd. in Achebe 15). In other words, Marlow does recognize a connection between himself and the wilderness but fears the implications thereof. Similarly, Achebe claims that Conrad, through Marlow, uses multiple synonyms for "incomprehensible" to insist that the native population is utterly

different from himself and other Europeans, and he is believed by the unnamed narrator because he is reinforcing imperialist beliefs. In order to prevent himself from too closely examining the connection between himself and the native population, he continuously claims that they and their environment are somehow inexplicable. Additionally, Achebe states that Marlow is shocked by the atrocious conditions the enslaved natives live under, but fails to recognize the actual injustice because he does not see them as equals. In fact, he only recognizes the “claim of distant kinship” with his dying helmsman, but he does not affirm it (qtd. in Achebe 21). Marlow identification with the natives he encounters is therefore only superficial, preventing him from truly empathizing with them. In response to Achebe’s article, Hunt Hawkins’s article, “*Heart of Darkness* and Racism,” outlines racial arguments surrounding *Heart of Darkness*. Hawkins acknowledges Conrad’s tendency to attribute primitive characteristics to the natives in Marlow’s narrative, but he argues that Conrad is critiquing Eurocentric attitudes of the time. Similarly, Hawkins points out that Conrad, as a Polish-born citizen of England, endured certain forms of racism throughout his life. Hawkins argues that, because of his background, if Conrad is to be classified as a racist, it is important to acknowledge varying degrees and types of racism. Much of Hawkins’ article responds to Achebe’s claims that Conrad was a racist, but it makes the counterclaim that Achebe oversimplifies the issue. One thoughtful point Hawkins makes is regarding Achebe’s own novel, *Things Fall Apart*, which he claims is Achebe’s answer to *Heart of Darkness*. According to Hawkins, Achebe’s novel “gives a comprehensive, carefully balanced picture of African culture.” However, he also states:

It would be a mistake, nonetheless, to read Achebe, any more than Conrad, as representing all of the cultures and situations on the continent. Achebe’s Ibo live at approximately the same time but more than a thousand miles from the upper

Congo depicted by Conrad. Therefore, it would be wrong to simply see *Things Fall Apart* as the truth concealed behind *Heart of Darkness*. (334)

In other words, Achebe's counter-narrative in *Things Fall Apart* is not necessarily more accurate or representative of the truth than Conrad's depictions of native Africans in *Heart of Darkness*. Therefore, even if Marlow's experiences in the novel accurately reflect Conrad's experiences, they can be read as a critique of imperialism through Marlow's bias and racist perception, not, as Achebe argues, evidence of racist beliefs on Conrad's part. In fact, Hawkins presents evidence from Conrad's letters to show that although Conrad may have condemned some native traditions that he witness in his travels, he "did not view such rites, even conceived at their worst, as justification for African subjugation," and he was "a staunch, if complicated opponent of European expansion" (335). However, Hawkins asserts that Conrad compares Africans with "ants, hyenas, horses, and bees" comparisons, which "can hardly be called flattering" (333). He also claims that Conrad's apparent identification with the other white faces in the novel reflects their connection with imperialism, while the dehumanized descriptions of the native Africans, reveals one of many symptoms of imperialist oppression. For example, when Marlow encounters groups of natives along the bank as he penetrates the interior, he describes them in terms of a collected set of visual and auditory components, not as individual human beings:

But suddenly as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. (35)

By including their isolated body parts in the same list as he describes buildings in the village, Marlow dehumanizes the natives, reflecting the imperialist attitudes of the

Company. Rather than recognizing their humanity, he sees them as a part of the village and the surrounding jungle, and therefore part of what he has been employed to help control. In short, Marlow's racist attitudes reflect and enable his connection to the Company.

On the other hand, some scholars, like Hyunok Kim, in "The Anxiety of Moral Degeneration of Imperialism in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," argue that Marlow's seemingly racist attitude has been misunderstood, or at least that he demonstrates growth toward being less racist during his adventure in the Congo. Specifically, Kim states that "the journey down the river changes Marlow's perception of the natives regarded as the uncivilized people," but he later "loses the vision of the new imperialism he has gained and returns to Europe as a blind man" (71). Other critics have approached Marlow's assessment of the native African population differently, attributing the descriptions of native behavior to Conrad's observations in his own real-life travels. In "A Picture of Europe: Possession Trance in *Heart of Darkness*," Nidesh Lawtoo argues against Chinua Achebe's condemnation of Conrad as a racist, stating that the "frenzy" of dancing natives Marlow describes is a representation confirmed by cultural observation and not merely a literary device Conrad employs. Additionally, Lawtoo claims that "Conrad's representations of frenzy. . . emerge out of a carefully crafted artistic 'picture,' a dark, opaque, yet nonetheless mimetic picture that looks back to the past in order to make us 'see,' in a self-reflexive turn we are now familiar with, the horrors that ensue when massive forms of ritual frenzy break out, not so much at the heart of Africa but at the heart of Europe instead" (130). In other words, rather than Africa appearing as a primitive counterpart to Europe, the examination of the empire's operations within the African

continent exposes the European continent's darkness as seen through its corruption and violence. Still other critics attempt to lessen Marlow's implication in the wrongs of imperialism by arguing that he makes progress toward being less racist throughout his adventures in the African continent. Richard Russell Rankin's "Dante's Belacqua in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: Marlow's Journey toward Rejecting Racism" examines the intertextual connection between Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and *Purgatorio*, the second part of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. According to Russell, Marlow gradually realizes that rather than being superior to the natives due to his European heritage, he shares a deep kinship with the African tribes he meets during his travels. He suggests that "Marlow is neither coward nor spectator because he so fully perceives and sympathizes with the suffering of these natives" (138). Additionally, Mark Doherty, in "The Power of Tides, the Impulses of Mankind: A Marxist and Cultural Materialist View of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," states, "As the story moves forward, worlds like wild vitality, appealing, suggestive, great and invincible, mystery, greatness, amazing reality, and free are employed to characterize the underdeveloped world of The Congo. Conrad demonstrates through his protagonist [Marlow] that he values the wilderness and the wild humanity subsisting there" (74). Yet, despite Marlow's apparent admiration for the natural world, he still facilitates the Company's attempted takeover of the Congo, its resources, and its people. Similarly, both Achebe and Doherty quote the following passage as evidence of Marlow's attitude toward the native population: "but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at" (Conrad 14). Whereas Achebe condemns Conrad for this passage because he believes

that it indicates his admiration for natives when they are in their place, Doherty calls it “an example of Conrad as a novelist being able to dramatize events, ideas, and values rather than simply verbalizing them – an overt plea to value all humanity” (76). Between these two extreme views of Marlow’s perception lies my more likely understanding of his perception of the native population. He seeks neither to actively oppress them nor to liberate those disenfranchised by the Company. He observes them, occasionally pities them, and marvels at their ways; but he takes no specific action to change their plight. Until Marlow reaches Kurtz, he functions as the Company would have him do. His disobedience of the Company mandates only occurs as he carries out Kurtz’s wishes and protects his reputation. As such, his journey includes several instances in which he encounters native Africans and behaves toward according to Company policy. Russell claims that Marlow's journey through the Congo mirrors that of Dante through Purgatory and that descriptions of some of the enslaved natives allude to the character Belacqua in the *Purgatorio*, for whom Dante feels compassion and pity. According to Russell, this parallel implies that Marlow feels similar compassion toward the African slaves, and thus makes progress toward being less racist throughout his time spent with the natives. Nevertheless, as Russell admits, Marlow continues to refer to the natives using racist terminology and barely accepts their humanity: “It was unearthly, and the men were— No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman would come slowly to one” (Conrad 36). Therefore, Russell’s claim that Marlow rejects his previous racist attitudes is undermined by Russell’s misunderstanding of Marlow’s evolution, which he describes as a “journey from believing he is civilized to a deep identification with the Congolese natives” (133).

Rather than absolving Marlow of his racist attitudes, Russell's claim relies on Eurocentric assumptions classifying the Congolese natives as uncivilized simply because they lack previous European societal influence. Additionally, Russell fails to adequately explain how identifying the enslaved black natives as representatives of Dante's *Belaqua*, a man punished in purgatory for slothfulness, contributes to Marlow's absolution. On the contrary, Marlow briefly describes a scene full of body parts, like "legs drawn up," "chin propped on his knees," and "his woolly head...on his breastbone" (Conrad 17-18). The disjointedness of these descriptions dehumanizes the natives Marlow encounters, especially in light of the neatly organized characterization of the chief accountant's garb that follows just after: "I saw a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clean silk necktie, and varnished boots. No hat. Hair parted, brushed, oiled under a green-lined parasol held in a big white hand" (18). Russell's argument fails to account for Marlow's obvious preference for the customs, dress, and appearance of his fellow white European men, and by extension, the Company. Thus, Marlow's attitudes and actions during his posting in the Congo reflect those of the Company and maintain the connection between the individual and collective imperialist goals rather than demonstrating his evolution towards anti-racism.

While Marlow is a relatively new addition to the Company's roster of agents, and therefore still crystallizing his role within the Company, the legendary Kurtz is recognized by all who know him as a highly effectively, though frighteningly eccentric, Company agent. He has served the Company long enough in the Interior to become the top producer of ivory. As such, his actions in the interior, though not officially sanctioned by the Company, reflect the expedient, business-like methods employed in imperialist

ventures. By the time Marlow sets out to the interior to find Kurtz, he finds Kurtz has become a legend within the company for his remarkable success in finding and procuring ivory. The Russian agent claims that Kurtz has “enlarged [his] mind,” and Marlow listens “in astonishment” as he explains Kurtz’s methods for being so successful:

‘What was he doing? exploring or what?’ I asked. Oh! Yes. Of course he had discovered lots of villages, a lake too – he did not know exactly in what direction; it was dangerous to inquire too much – but mostly his expeditions had been for ivory. ‘But he had no goods to trade with by that time,’ I objected. ‘There’s a good lot of cartridges left even yet,’ he answered, looking away. ‘To speak plainly, he raided the country,’ I said. He nodded. ‘Not alone, surely!’ He muttered something about the villagers round that lake. ‘Kurtz got the tribe to follow him, did he?’ I suggested. He fidgeted a little. ‘They adored him,’ he said. The tone of these words was so extraordinary that I looked at him searchingly. It was curious to see his mingled eagerness and reluctance to speak of Kurtz. The man filled his life, occupied his thoughts, swayed his emotions. ‘What can you expect!’ he burst out; ‘he came to them with thunder and lightning you know – and they had never seen anything like it – and very terrible. He could be very terrible. You can’t judge Mr. Kurtz as you would an ordinary man.’ (55-56)

In this conversation, Marlow gains understanding of Kurtz’s effect on others, both in terms of the natives and his fellow Company men. By showing his might with advanced weapons, he easily brings the native population under his control, as evidenced by their reluctance to let Marlow and the others take Kurtz away, as well as Marlow’s discovery that the natives had performed some sacrificial rituals in Kurtz’s honor. In turn, the ease with which he facilitates the loyalty of the natives inspires devotion and awe on the part of his colleague, the Russian agent. Though the Russian seems ashamed of his admiration for Kurtz, he also excuses Kurtz’s behavior and tells Marlow not to judge him, because he is not like other men. In other words, the Russian agent believes that Kurtz operates under a moral code separate from that which governs other men. This begs the question, as Doherty asks, “what sort of morality would allow the indiscretion Kurtz exhibited?” (72). Doherty’s article analyzes Marxist themes in *Heart of Darkness*, reading Conrad’s

work as a criticism of capitalist views of the late Victorian era that encompass issues of race, class, nature, and gender. Doherty claims that Conrad's novel examines patriarchal and matriarchal views of the time and calls for equitability between the two.

Additionally, Doherty's article analyzes imperialist themes in the novel and argues that Conrad's depictions of Marlow and Kurtz reflect his criticism of imperial and capitalist exploitation of the African continent. When considered as a representative of the Company, Kurtz's morality, according to Doherty, is likely an extension of his personal and imperialist goals. He believes that his goal for the Company is to tame the wilderness and obtain its resources, so the methods he uses to reach that goal are justifiable if they are effective. Similarly, his personal goal is to amass enough wealth to be a deemed suitable husband for his Intended, so whatever reprehensible actions he deems necessary for success fit into to his personal moral framework. Therefore, the Russian agent's entreaty to Marlow on Kurtz's behalf pleads for an understanding of this imperialist morality.

After this conversation, Marlow comes face to face with Kurtz's disturbing eccentricity when he approaches Kurtz and discovers that what he thought were decorative balls atop poles outside Kurtz's house were actually heads that were "black, dried, sunken – with closed eyelids" (Conrad 57). After describing this scene, he addresses his listeners, stating, "I am not disclosing any trade secrets. In fact the Manager said afterward that Mr Kurtz's methods had ruined the district" (57). Kurtz's intimidation tactics, symbolized by the heads on poles, while outwardly condemned by other representatives of the Company, nevertheless represent the brutality inherent in the imperialist agenda for commerce. It is left unclear exactly what other methods Kurtz used

to bring the native population so completely under his control, but whatever his methods were, they resulted in more than just fear. Doherty states, “We see that the natives are cannibals, yet we see elements of intellect, reserve, and restraint...We know they are worshipers, but they seem to worship charisma over materialistic elements like ivory or even currency” (71). This would partially explain the natives’ devotion to Kurtz, since we see evidence of his charismatic personality in the Russian agent’s description. In fact, according to the Russian agent’s account, “They adored him” (56). As such, his exertion of control over the native population, while eventually rejected by representatives of the Company, reveals the subversive nature of imperial control in the African continent.

Tables and figures embedded within the text should be placed on either the same page as the first mention in the text, or on the page following the first mention of the text. Large tables and figures should be placed on a separate page. Table 1 is larger than half a page and therefore is placed on its own page. The page before the table/figure should be a full page of text, unless it happens to occur at the end of the chapter. This applies even if a paragraph must be broken across pages.

## Chapter 3

### Imperialist Violence: The Catalyst for Resistance

In *Heart of Darkness*, African natives are enslaved and abused, crying out voicelessly against the oppression of imperialism. The persistent acts of violence by European conquerors against the native African population provides a macabre backdrop for Marlow's adventure into the Congo. Each instance of Marlow's interaction with male African natives reflects death, destruction, and violence. Being an experienced sailor, he claims to have seen the "devil of violence," but he recognizes the actions of the Company as evidence of "a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly" (16). In other words, Marlow does not immediately recognize the violence inherent in imperialist conquest. He sees it instead as wastefulness and foolish management of resources. Therefore, he does not carry out the acts of violence himself and is appalled to see them, but he is a complicit witness. Additionally, unclear references to the violent traditions of the tribes near the inner station and the cannibals aboard Marlow's steamer highlight the differences between violence among the tribes and the brutality of the Company. By explicitly describing the Company's acts of violence toward African men and only hinting at the "unspeakable rites" carried out within the tribes, Conrad demonstrates the hypocrisy of the imperialist desire to bring civilization to a supposedly primitive land (50). Additionally, he juxtaposes the abhorrence of the Company's violent

actions with the mystery of the natives' traditions in order to emphasize the impact of the Company's actions, necessitating a resistance and solidifying Conrad's criticism of the imperialism and colonialism, which Marlow represents. In short, the graphic death and mutilation of African males in the novel creates a sense of urgency for the need of resistance that is found in African female characters like the accountant's laundress and Kurtz's mistress.

Throughout the narrative, Marlow describes several instances of imperial brutality against the native population of the Congo. On his way to the Central station, Marlow encounters "black shadows of disease and starvation lying confusedly in the greenish gloom...brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest" (17). Marlow's mock delicacy at referring to their deaths as "rest" belies his complicity in the Company's actions against these men. Additionally, the men's obvious suffering at the hands of imperialist invaders demonstrates a need for resistance to violation of the Congo and its people. According to Russel Samolsky in "Apocalyptic Futures: *Heart of Darkness*, Embodiment, and African Genocide," Conrad's use of imagery describing the angular, bent "black shapes" in this scene illustrates a population "abandoned to the law of the colonial sovereign" (Conrad 17, Samolsky 103). Similarly, the image of contrasting colors illustrates the conflict inherent in the subjugation of people. Along with the "black shadows" and "greenish gloom" in this scene, Conrad continues the color imagery by depicting "black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree," and eyes with "a kind of blind white flicker in the depths of the orbs which died out slowly" (17). In "Imagery in

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Tawfik Yousef claims that the imagery of the contrasting colors of white and black continues throughout the novel, and eventually "indicate[s] the final reconciliation between the two colors, between the black Africans and the white Europeans, and to underline the unity of the human spirit and the solidarity of mankind" (25). In this scene, however, the sentiment conveyed by image of contrasting white and black is anything but reconciliatory. The contrast between the colors in the scene reflects the ongoing conflict in the novel between white Europeans and the black Africans. As the "flicker" in the reclining man's white eyes is extinguished, he is dying because of the harsh conditions foisted on him by white Europeans. In other words, his death at the hands of white men is represented by the flicker of white in his eyes contrasted with his "black bones" (Conrad 17). In the same paragraph, Conrad continues the color imagery in his description of a man to whom he offered food: "He had tied a bit of white worsted round his neck...It looked startling round his black neck, this bit of white thread from beyond the seas" (17). The white yarn around the man's neck recalls chains and ropes used by white Europeans to restrain and control their captive black workforce. As such, the visualization of the line of white yarn across the man's "black neck" emphasizes the objectionable domination by the Company of the native population. In short, by depicting images of the death of native African men using vivid color imagery to specifically implicate the responsible parties – European colonizers – Conrad condemns white on black violence and underscores the reason for Africa's resistance to colonization.

Shortly after his encounter with the dying men in the grove of trees, Marlow's cavalier, uncaring reaction to another dead African worker on the road further demonstrates his involvement in the violence carried out against the native population.

Whereas Marlow claims to be “horrorstruck” at the plight of the men dying among the trees, he seems amused by the grim sight he stumbles upon closer to the station:

Once a white man in an unbuttoned uniform camping on the path with an armed escort of lank Zanzibaris, very hospitable and festive – not to say drunk. Was looking after the upkeep of the road, he declared. Can’t say I saw any road or any upkeep, unless the body of a middle-aged negro with a bullet-hole in the forehead, upon which I absolutely stumbled three miles farther on, may be considered as a permanent improvement. (20)

In stark contrast to the relaxed and “festive” white man in uniform, Marlow encounters a dead body, which he jokingly refers to as an “improvement” on the road. As Marlow specifically notes the cause of death in this instance, it appears that this man, rather than dying slowly at the hands of violently oppressive European masters like the men in the grove of trees, was blatantly murdered, presumably by the uniformed white man who Marlow met on the road a few miles before. Samolsky claims that this instance of violence is also connected to later images of death, like the skulls on Kurtz’s fence, because it “forces open a signifying trail of skulls that winds its way through the textual jungle of *Heart of Darkness*,” (87). These skulls, whether the one shot in the road or the many on Kurtz’s fence, signify the continuous acts of white on black violence inflicted upon the native population of the Congo. In the same way that Conrad does not specifically describe abuses done to the men dying slowly among the trees (only the outcomes of those abuses) he only describes the effects of the violence – the dead man on the road with a gunshot wound in his head. Conrad’s focus on the consequences of violence rather than the perpetrators thereof strengthens his criticism of imperialism by emphasizing the harm caused by violence rather than the actions of the culprit.

Another distinctly violent image of an African man’s death is that of Marlow’s helmsman. When first introduced, Marlow describes this man as “the most unstable kind

of fool I had ever seen” (44). Despite this first impression of the helmsman, his death is unique for Marlow, because he comes to appreciate and value the helmsman, and later admits he “had missed [his] late helmsman awfully” after his death (50). In fact, Kim claims that Marlow mourns this loss because he “casts off the preconceived ideas of his race to reach the level of empathy, which allows him to bond with his native helmsman” (71). While his death does not literally occur at the hands of a European, he does die in service to the Company, so the imperialist agenda at work in the Congo is still culpable for his death. As such, Conrad provides a vivid description with colorful imagery, much like other depictions of the death of Africans at the hands of Europeans: “It was the shaft of a spear that. . .had caught him in the side just below the ribs. The blade had gone in out of sight after making a frightful gash. . .a pool of blood lay very still, gleaming dark red under the wheel; his eyes shone with an amazing lustre” (46). The helmsman’s death affects Marlow much differently than the other deaths of native African men that he witnesses. He barely recognizes the men dying in the grove of trees as human, and he jokes about the man on the road who had been shot in the head, but he mourns the loss of his helmsman, despite the disdain Marlow feels for him when he is first introduced. By allowing Marlow to experience the consequences of violence through the loss of a valued crew member, Conrad expands his critique of European imperialism to include its detrimental effects on both black and white characters in the novel.

In contrast with the explicit violence carried out by white Europeans against black Africans, often described by Marlow in gory detail, violence carried out among the tribes is generally glossed over. Samolsky states that “Kurtz presided over secret rites and . . . critical speculation names these rites as human sacrifice and cannibalism” (66). Conrad

offers no specific illustrations or details of these occurrences, and Marlow once again accepts the violent nature of his post. In reading Kurtz's report to International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, Marlow is moved by his "burning noble words" until he finds the footnote added later: "'Exterminate all the brutes!'" (50). This sentiment apparently disturbs Marlow because, while he commits himself to caring for Kurtz's memory, he also claims that he is "not prepared to affirm the fellow was exactly worth the life we lost in getting to him" (50). However, the secrecy and speculation surrounding these instances of violence suggest that Conrad depicts violence among African tribesmen more vaguely in order to underscore his criticism of European violence against the native population. By avoiding specific descriptions of rituals like human sacrifice, Conrad's criticism of imperialist violence retains the forcefulness of condemnation. Similarly, Conrad disregards cannibalism as a violent act in need of explicit portrayal because he uses depictions of brutality to condemn imperialist violence, not violence among tribespeople. To this end, Marlow exhibits an understanding, if not full acceptance, of the cannibals' lifestyle. Compared with his attitude toward the enslaved Africans that he encounters on his way to the station, Marlow views the cannibals recruited to man his riverboat differently. He describes them as "fine fellows – cannibals – in their place. They were men one could work with, and I am grateful to them. And after all, they did not eat each other before my face" (35). He brushes off their diet because he does not witness it, though he acknowledges later that he marvels that "something restraining" kept them from taking over the boat and eating the other passengers. When their leader expresses interest in catching another native in order to eat him, Marlow reflects, "I would no doubt have been properly horrified had it not occurred

to me that he and his chaps must be very hungry, that they must have been growing increasingly hungry for at least this month past” (40). Though the act of cannibalism is arguably just as violent as the atrocities committed by European imperialist, Marlow’s attempt to empathize with the cannibals’ hunger contrasts starkly with the condemning characterizations of violence committed by white characters. In short, Conrad overlooks violent acts between native Africans in order to highlight the fundamental violence of imperialism and colonialism.

## Chapter 4

### European Women: The Power Behind the Imperialist Throne

While women in the novel are, in many ways, marginalized and ignored, the female European characters become much more consequential when examined as catalysts for Marlow's and Kurtz's actions on behalf of the Company. From Marlow's aunt, to the two women Marlow sees in the Company's office, to Kurtz's Intended, European women appear throughout the *Heart of Darkness* as controlling forces for white men in the novel, especially Marlow and Kurtz. Marlow's involvement with the Company still functions as a criticism of imperialism and the bourgeois class, however. As Doherty states, "Conrad via Marlow shows little or no respect for either the women (knitting black wool) or the men (the agents, company directors, the "clean shaven man, with an official manner" that make up the controlling entities of the Company (75). Marlow's critique of the bourgeois class includes both men and women but focuses more specifically on the women as he ridicules his aunt and pities Kurtz's Intended. Pouneh Saeedi's "Women as Epic Sites/Sights and Traces in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" focuses on this understated importance of female characters as images and figures within the novel. Saeedi claims that no matter how much women are "condemned to either erasure or monsterization" in the wake of imperial progress, they "keep resurfacing within the traces they leave behind" (538). Traces of Marlow's aunt appear

when Marlow realizes “[his] dear aunt’s influential acquaintances were producing an unexpected effect upon” one of his fellow agents (26). Although Marlow is miles and months removed from the last interaction with his aunt, her influence nevertheless affects his interactions with other Company men. On the other hand, while Marlow’s aunt’s appearance echoes in Marlow’s adventure, Kurtz’s Intended appears as a foreshadowing concept as he lists his possessions – “My Intended, my ivory, my station, my career, my ideas” – before she is introduced as a character (68). In both cases, these women are notably absent in most of Marlow’s adventure, but appear at the beginning and end, with remembrances and hints in between.

As mentioned, the first woman with whom Marlow describes contact is his aunt, a socialite who facilitates Marlow's employment with the Company. After describing his meeting with her, he reflects upon "how out of touch with truth women are" (Conrad 13). His condescension toward women first manifests in this scene, which simultaneously introduces the subversive nature of female appearances in the narrative. Marlow's aunt orchestrates his connection with the Company, making Marlow an agent of imperialism and sending him to the African continent to act on behalf of European interests. Marlow states that "she was determined to make no end of fuss to get me appointed skipper of a river steamboat, if such was my fancy" (8). Her insistence upon Marlow's employment is the catalyst for his adventure, and while the narration shows that Marlow's derides his aunt's perception of a world "too beautiful altogether...[that] if they were to set it up it would go to pieces," her influence is necessary for the beginning of his career with the Company (13). As Saeedi argues, Marlow's aunt is one of two white women who serve as endpoints in the novel, "framing...the narrative itself" (538). Indeed, his aunt’s influence

instigates his adventure into the dark continent, so she is a vital instrument to the narrative. While Marlow describes his aunt quite patronizingly, his reliance on her is evident when he realizes he "had been represented to the wife of the high dignitary...as an exceptional and gifted creature--a piece of good fortune for the Company--a man you don't get hold of every day" (12). Without his aunt's help and influence, Marlow would not have received the appointment to his position with the Company. Like Saeedi, John Peters, in his article "Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the World of Western Women," similarly critiques Marlow's antifeminist views, but he also argues that while Marlow criticizes his aunt, he views the world inhabited by his aunt and other European women as

a space in which [his] existence can matter, a locus from which [he] can organize [his] existence and experience, a space embodying the order, meaning, and trust of the Western view of the world, thereby providing a sanctuary from the disorder, chaos, and emptiness of the world outside that space. (95)

In other words, Marlow accepts his need for his aunt as a function of his need for comfort and refuge from the chaos of the world he usually inhabits, but her influence extends into that other world as well, compounding his reliance upon her. Though Marlow "perceives...two irreconcilable worlds of the feminine and the masculine," his position in the masculine world is directly dependent upon his aunt's position in the feminine world. The fact that his inclusion as an agent of imperialism depends upon his aunt's communication with another woman undermines the symbolic power of the white male imperialist before he even leaves the country.

After Marlow's aunt secures his position, two women at the Company office provide a symbolic look at Marlow's future posting. Just before their introduction, Marlow describes the fate of his predecessor, an untimely demise resulting from a quarrel

over "two black hens" (Conrad 9). After Marlow retells this event, he describes his visit to the Company office, which is presided over by "two women, one fat and the other slim, [who] sat on straw-bottomed chairs, knitting black wool" (10). This ominous parallel between the two hens over which his predecessor lost his life and these two women becomes clear when Marlow says about the older woman that "not many of those she looked at ever saw her again—not half, by a long way" (11), implying that most of the men hired by the Company and observed by her never return. In other words, just as Marlow's predecessor died in a fight over two black hens, many others hired by the Company are sent to their deaths by these "[knitters] of black wool" (11). Saeedi argues that despite the lack of recognition of women as individuals in the novel, evidenced by their lack of names and, in some cases, speech, women in the novel retain significance through becoming landmarks in the narrative. In the case of the two women knitting black wool, Saeedi claims that "they replicate the Fates as they engage in knitting while most men who pass through their door are bound to either meet their deaths or undergo the most traumatic experience of their lives" (551). Thus, the two women judge the Company's men—Marlow included—for their fitness to carry out the will of the Company, before sending them on a likely harrowing adventure.

At the opposite end of the narrative is the other European woman upon whom the imperialist white male relies, Kurtz's Intended. Just as Marlow's aunt prompted his involvement with the Company and, by extension, imperialist goals, Kurtz's Intended is his reason for joining the Company. When Marlow meets her, he recalls his understanding of Kurtz's original motivations for engaging the ivory trade:

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 reason to infer that it was his impatience of comparative poverty that drove him out there. (75)

Kurtz was not well-off or well-connected enough for her family to approve of their marriage, so he sought the riches and status offered to the bourgeois class through the pursuits and advancement of imperialism. Even when he becomes obsessed with the search for ivory, his Intended takes precedence in his mind. When his illness causes him to fade in and out of consciousness, Marlow lists the "subjects for [his] occasional utterances": "My Intended, my ivory, my station, my career, my ideas" (68). While this list primarily describes aspirations related to Kurtz's work for the Company, the Intended's position as first in the list demonstrates his preoccupation with her. Though Kurtz has been away from his Intended for months, she still supplants his interest in Company goals. Alternatively, the list could be read as an explanation of the causality of Kurtz's endeavors with the Company. Because of the Intended, he pursues ivory, leading to his position at the station and increased determination for his career. With either reading, the Intended is a catalyst for Kurtz's work within the Company, and his furtherance of imperialism. The link between the goals of the bourgeois class and European imperialism is explored further in Doherty's article, in which he states, "Marlow, Kurtz, the inner station manager, and most of the other key 'white' characters in the novel come from the same bourgeois socioeconomic status" (71). Institutions like the Company participated in the commercial goals of imperialism by sending agents into the African continent to subjugate the native population and procure resources. These positions offered an opportunity for middle-class individuals without noble rank or title to find their fortunes, leading to both financial and social advancement. For Kurtz, this advancement was an opportunity to prove himself worthy of his Intended in the eyes of

her family. In other words, Kurtz sought social advancement through imperialist goals in order to satisfy his Intended. Thus, the white European woman—the Intended—once again prompts the white man—Kurtz—to further imperialist interests.

At the end of the novel, however, the white male controlled by the Intended is not Kurtz, but Marlow. After enduring several visits from agents of the Company, and one from a man claiming to be Kurtz's cousin, Marlow's final pursuit is to visit Kurtz's Intended. When looking at her portrait, he observes a "truthfulness upon [her] features," which mirrors Marlow's claim to "have remained loyal to Kurtz" (70-72). In other words, Marlow seeks her out because his loyalty to Kurtz is reflected in her honesty, and he hopes to find some relief for his mental and emotional turmoil. Upon meeting the Intended, he describes her as having "a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering," but he also seems increasingly unnerved by her grave, persistent mourning for Kurtz (73). Nevertheless, Marlow listens patiently and responds to her promptings, demonstrating his need to help her "ease her pain in the certitude of [his] sympathy" (75). Therefore, despite the Company's insistence that Marlow shares with them any information that he might have about Kurtz and his endeavors in Africa, Marlow only feels beholden to the Intended. After all, just as a white European woman—Marlow's aunt—began his story, a white woman, and not the Company, ends it.

Additionally, despite his devotion to and admiration for Kurtz, Marlow is unable to relate Kurtz's final words to the Intended truthfully. Marlow "could not tell her" the truth about Kurtz's last moments (Conrad 77). Though his nerve was unwavering in all manner of situations during his employment by the Company in Africa, the story ends with his inability to follow through on Kurtz's "justice which was his due" (77). Marlow

finds himself "bowing his head before the faith that was in her, before that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness" (75). While Kurtz's idealist view of his Intended motivated his imperialistic endeavors in the heart of darkness, Marlow sees her "faith" as so pure that he cannot mar it with the realistic "horror" of Kurtz's experience and final moments in Africa. The "glow" that Marlow imagines around the Intended mirrors the light that he, Kurtz, and other Company men imagined they brought into Africa to illuminate the heart of darkness. Despite Marlow's belief in this "unearthly glow," he feels powerless before the Intended's grief and honesty, so he is unable to say anything that could disappoint her. John Peters similarly describes her world as a "sanctuary from the outside world" (95). Peters claims that for the Intended, "an idealistic Kurtz can exist, whereas in the outside world he cannot" (96). Therefore, the Intended holds sway over Marlow because her version of Kurtz is more admirable than the one Marlow had met in the real world. In other words, when presented with the proper moment to carry out the wishes of his idol and fellow Company man, Marlow instead defers to unspoken direction from a woman he has never met before. According to Bette London, in "Reading Race and Gender in Conrad's Dark Continent," this interaction between Marlow and the Intended further undermines Marlow's authority, and therefore that of the Company and European imperialism. London states that "women's absence constitutes a condition of narrative coherence—the foundation of masculine authority," so when Marlow comes face to face with the Intended, he is unable to maintain the truth and fidelity of his narrative (238). Instead, he proclaims that Kurtz's last words were to speak the name of his Intended, offering her "inconceivable triumph" (76).

While the novel's white female characters exercise control over the imperialist male, their lack of control over their environments and their use of manipulation to further their goals reflect Conrad's critique of the New Woman in Victorian literature. The concept of the New Woman represents, for western women, a shift toward self-discovery and independence. One of the clearest definitions of the New Woman can be found in a biography of Alice Freeman Palmer, an American New Woman, by Ruth Bordin: "The term new woman always referred to women who exercised control over their own lives be it personal, social, or economic...They were professionally trained, career and role conscious, and usually self-supporting for a major part or all of their lives" (2). Where the typical Victorian woman possessed the singular domestic focus of serving her husband and household and raising children, the New Woman focused on self-interest, embracing her career and education. For some literary critics, female characters in the novel lack any resemblance to the New Woman. London, for example, claims that female characters are dismissed or ignored in the narrative because none have been given names, and most are devoid of speech. London also argues that Marlow's stories marginalize women both as specific characters and as a collective body.

Similarly, most of the female characters are referred to, either in the novel or contemporary criticism of it, as they relate to a named male character: Kurtz's Intended, his African mistress, Marlow's aunt, and the manager's laundress, to recognize a few. Criticism espousing this view of female characters supports the idea that Conrad's novel is at odds with the ideals of the New Woman, considering that women are viewed as mostly silent extensions of the male characters rather than as individuals. On the other hand, in "The Women of *Heart of Darkness*," Jeremy Hawthorn claims that while the

women of *Heart of Darkness* are described, in Marlow's words, as being "out of it," their presence is significant. According to Hawthorn, "Marlow's own worship of that more perfect world inhabited by women [is] a worship which leads him to lie to the Intended and thus to perpetuate the cycle of lies that fuels imperialism" (353). In other words, because Marlow worships the world of women, women heavily influence him and, in turn, the imperialist ventures of the Company that he represents. Hawthorn also states that "the women who are out of it, imprisoned in their 'beautiful world of their own,' end up as debilitated and sterile as the Intended" (354). Thus, by being separated from the real world, the Intended becomes pale and lifeless. Her halo-like glow and mausoleum reminiscent home are pristine but ominous in their barrenness. Additionally, he claims that "the Intended's sterile isolation depicts realistically the separation of those in the domestic culture from full knowledge of what is being done in their name in Africa" (357). To maintain the idealism of the separate world which Marlow imagines women inhabit, knowledge of the atrocities inherent in colonialism and imperialism must be kept even from those who benefit from its profits. Thus, Marlow's perception of the Intended's purity remains intact because, while she is the motivation for Kurtz's involvement in cruel imperialist ventures, she is isolated from it by being part of this "domestic culture." Furthermore, Hawthorn explains that issues of race, gender, and culture are all intertwined within the novel. Therefore, while the women of *Heart of Darkness* are described in Marlow's words as being "out of it," their presence is significant and influential to most areas of criticism regarding the novel. Hawthorn also analyzes the imagery of color as a comparison between Kurtz's Intended and his African mistress, thereby creating a dichotomy of life and death between the two women and

their respective cultures. Marlow harbors some distinctly antifeminist views, which some argue mirror Conrad's own. Nevertheless, the narrative itself relies upon the influence and direction of women in the novel as previously discussed.

Kurtz's Intended exists as a motivating catalyst within the novel for both Marlow and Kurtz, but she also contradicts the ideals of the New Woman. When Marlow meets her, Kurtz has been dead for a year, but despite being a young, single, affluent woman, living in Great Britain in a time when independence for women was becoming more attainable, she exhibits no likelihood to strike out on her own, become a career woman, or engage in any self-exploration leading to independence. As such, the Intended not only lacks the characteristics indicative of a New Woman; she is the antithesis of these characteristics. The Intended exists only as an extension of Kurtz and an endpoint for Marlow's story. When Marlow describes his meeting with the Intended, he states that "she struck [him] as beautiful," and he once mentions her "dark eyes," but the rest of his description refers to the emotional tenor of her countenance (72-73). Even this brief assessment of her person describes her in subjective terms, as though Marlow was acknowledging Kurtz's reasons for desiring her as a wife, not in any way declaring her personhood. All other descriptions of her are distinctly dependent upon her relationship to Kurtz, as she still mourns his death over a year after he passed away:

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 the news came; she seemed as though she would remember and mourn forever...She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering. The room seemed to grow darker, as if all the sad light of the cloudy evening had taken refuge on her forehead. (73)

For all the detailed descriptions offered by Conrad, none recognizes the Intended as an individual. All the traits described represent her connection to Kurtz, or the loss thereof.

Her "fidelity, ...belief, ... [and] suffering" also position the Intended squarely within the description of an "Angel in the House" (73). Pei Wen Clio Kao's article, "From Incapable 'Angel in the House' to Invincible 'New Woman' in Marlovian Narratives," describes the Intended as representative of the Christian ideal of the "Angel in the House," a woman who exemplifies Christian virtue as a quiet housewife. While I disagree with Kao's argument that Kurtz's Intended is a victim, the article's comparison of the Intended with Kurtz's mistress provides context for the argument that women in the novel steer Marlow using different methods, but nevertheless impact the reach of his imperialist goals. An "Angel in the House," as described by Kao, would be quiet, demure, and subservient to her husband. She would fulfill all roles as assigned to her by the man of the house, as a biblical model of marriage would prescribe, adoring and obeying her husband as commanded by God. While the Intended never had the chance to fulfill her role as the wife of Kurtz, she still mourns and honors him like a widow who intends to follow the role assigned to her by her society.

In "An Ashy Halo: Woman as Symbol in *Heart of Darkness*," Edward Geary recognizes the symbolic value of the novella's final scene. In this article, Geary examines the women in *Heart of Darkness* as symbols of masculine ideals of imperialism. He argues, like Hawthorn in "The Women of *Heart of Darkness*," that in Marlow's view, the women are "out of it," meaning that as individuals, they are not involved in the imperialist pursuits to which Marlow and Kurtz have devoted their careers. However, Geary claims that collectively, the women in their respective environments represent masculine European ideals and fantasies. More specifically, he claims that because Kurtz travelled to the Congo in order to be able to marry his Intended, she symbolizes the

motivations for Kurtz's horrific actions in the heart of darkness. Therefore, Marlow's statement at the end can be understood as truthful because "the horror" becomes synonymous with her name. As Geary examines women in *Heart of Darkness* as symbols of masculine ideals of imperialism, he highlights this scene with the Intended as "a princess kept inviolate behind protecting walls, a symbol of all that belongs to man's higher self (502). Once again, the Intended exists, though symbolically in this case, as possession of Kurtz. This aspect of her character places her thoroughly at odds with the ideals of the New Woman, in that she exhibits no drive for self-determination. Furthermore, the Intended's nature, which so clearly contradicts that of the New Woman, also demonstrates a lack of vitality and life, so much so that her environment and countenance mirrors Kurtz's death. As she speaks to him, Marlow associates the Intended's voice with "the whisper of a voice speaking from beyond the threshold of an eternal darkness" (75). In the descriptions of the Intended and her darkened home, she appears to be dead or dying, alongside Kurtz. In other words, she cannot continue to exist because her reason for existence—Kurtz—is gone from the world. Hawthorn claims that "words connotative of idealism such as 'pure' and 'halo' are made to seem unhealthy and corrupted in this description," and therefore convey within the Intended a sense of ghostly apparition and death (355). Marlow "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" (74). He aligns the Intended with Kurtz, even in death, as though her identification with Kurtz prohibits her continued existence without him. The Intended's inability to divide herself from Kurtz personifies the critique of the European bourgeois rejection of the New

Woman by demonstrating the unsustainability of a woman living only as an extension of the man in her life.

## Chapter 5

### African Women: A Silent Resistance

While Marlow's aunt, the two knitting women, and Kurtz's Intended send European men into the African continent on the errands of European imperialism on behalf of the Company, the women of Africa resist the incursion and thwart their efforts. None of these women speak in the novel, lending, according to London, the collective African woman "remains positioned in the narrative as the ideological counterpart—and opposite—of white, European woman" (237). The opposition established between African and European women becomes evident in both superficial and ideological examples in the novel. Two specific characters demonstrate this most clearly: the accountant's laundress and the warrior known as Kurtz's mistress. In "*Heart of Darkness and Racism*," Hawkins argues that Conrad uses Marlow's experience to demonstrate clearly that imperialism is a force to be resisted. He claims that

Conrad very clearly expresses his condemnation of European cruelty in such memorable scenes as the French ship firing blindly into the continent, the beating of the African assumed to have started the fire at the Central Station, the carriers found dead in harness on the caravan trail, the man with a bullet-hole in his forehead as part of road "upkeep," the "pilgrims" shooting from their steamer, the crew not being given food, the chain-gang building the railway, and the contract-laborers languishing in the "grove of death." (336)

Notably absent from Hawkins list of atrocities against the native population are Kurtz's African mistress and the accountant's laundress. In other words, while the need for resistance is found within Marlow's observations of the subjugated male African

population, resistance is observed in the actions of these two women.

The accountant's African laundress appears only briefly, but both her rebellion and her acquiescence undermine the Company's authority. She does not speak within Marlow's narrative; instead, the accountant relates her experience from his own perspective. Consequentially, when Marlow tells the story of the African laundress, it is from the perspective of his conversation with the accountant. Nevertheless, the force of her resistance leaves enough of an impact on the accountant for him to remember it and relate the event to Marlow. When Marlow asks how the manager was able to keep up appearances in apparel while stationed so far from civilization, the manager says, "I've been teaching one of the native women about the station. It was difficult. She had a distaste for the work" (18). For the accountant to share with Marlow, a man he just met, some difficulty he had with one of the natives demonstrates the substantial impression her resistance made upon him. Although she is silenced by the narration, the collective white man still remembers her rebellion. According to Saeedi, the laundress's blatant hostility toward the accountant represents a "veiled method of resistance to the colonizer's narrative" (539). In other words, though silent, the laundress solidifies her stance of resistance by being discussed first by the accountant, then by Marlow to the unnamed narrator. More importantly, her function as the accountant's laundress underscores the necessity of women in the narrative. Just before Marlow mentions the accountant's admission that she is the reason he has "managed to sport such linen," Marlow remarks that he "respected his collars [and] his vast cuffs" (18). As the first person with whom Marlow speaks upon reaching the station, he is the best representation of the Company's desired appearance. The specificity of aesthetic detail offered here by Marlow within the

frame narrative belies a reverence and admiration for European fashion which stands out distinctly from the untamed African backdrop. Marlow respects the man and his office immediately because of his crisp, distinctive finery, provided and maintained by the African laundress. If she does not perform this task, the accountant would either be forced to maintain own pristine wardrobe or more likely abandon the finery. In other words, much like the Company relies on the labor force of subjugated Africans for their commercial interests, the accountant relies on the laundress for his show of finery. Therefore, in this instance, imperialism itself relies upon a native African woman in order to maintain its appearance. Without her, the accountant, and by extension the Company, would lose much of the cultivated image separating themselves from the environment they are trying to tame.

Another intriguing and powerful black woman in the novel is Kurtz's mistress, a fierce African woman who appears near the end of *Heart of Darkness*. Her significance in the novel has been hotly debated by critics. According to Saeddi, she "resists integration into the Symbolic order of language and masculinity and yet speaks volumes in constituting a crescendo in the narrative" (540). Marlow and the crew fear her. Upon first seeing her, Marlow remarks, "She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress" (Conrad 60). His descriptions of this woman come closer to exhibiting respect toward a black character than any other description in the novel, evidencing his fear of this fierce African warrior. Similarly, the "man of patches" states, "If she had offered to come aboard, I really think I would have tried to shoot her" (61). Both the Russian agent's fearful reaction and Marlow's sense of reverence and awe demonstrate her unique and

powerful impression upon men of the Company. According to Doherty, “Conrad wished for society of his time and of ours to appreciate the jungle and its raw power on a transcendental level. Marlow displays a clear sense of awe and wonder at the vast and virgin wilderness” (77). Considering her close comparison to the wilderness that serves as her backdrop, Marlow’s sense of awe extends to Kurtz’s African mistress as well. Marlow usually describes the native population as a group or as a collection of vaguely human body parts. When he describes Kurtz’s mistress, he conveys a much more vividly specific image of this “wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman” (60). In this passage, Marlow describes her with a series of contrasting adjectives like “savage and superb...wild-eyed and magnificent...ominous and stately” (60). These descriptors reflect Marlow’s reverence for the woman as well as the Russian agent’s sense of intimidation by her. Marlow recognizes her power as “an image of [the wilderness’s] own tenebrous and passionate soul,” while the “man of patches” only remembers his unsuccessful efforts to “keep her out of [Kurtz’s] house,” an effort to limit her influence on Kurtz, and therefore the Company (60-61). In other words, her influence on Kurtz reflects the wilderness’s influence on the Company, demonstrating that neither Kurtz nor the Company have been fully successful in taming or subjugating the wilderness or its inhabitants. As a result, the Company's image as the conquering masculine European entity is once again tarnished by feminine influence, this time through fear and awe.

André Viola's "A Black Athena in the *Heart of Darkness*, or Conrad's Baffling Oxymorons" attempts to disentangle Kurtz's mistress from previous criticism that paints her in an unflattering light and to understand Conrad's use of oxymoronic phrases to describe her. In her introduction, Viola mentions several critics, including Johanna M.

Smith, Rebecca Stott, and Abdul JanMohamed, who have described the African woman with “derogatory qualifiers for which Conrad is seemingly to blame” (164). Smith refers to “the savage women,” Stott calls her an “emblem of death,” and JanMohamed “bluntly calls her a ‘dark, satanic woman’” (qtd. in Viola 164). Conversely, Viola describes Conrad’s characterization of the African woman an “evocation of a war goddess, both on account of some of the character’s equipment (‘brass leggings,’ ‘brass wire gauntlet,’ and ‘helmet’) and of her whole attitude (‘proudly,’ ‘she carried her head high’)” (164). With this image in mind, Marlow’s intimidation is entirely understandable. She is a warrior and mirrors the dark wilderness that the Company has yet to conquer. In short, she represents the collective resistance to imperialism. Additionally, she is powerful woman who, apart from her physically imposing presence, apparently has some control over Kurtz. The Russian describes an episode in which “she got in one day and kicked up a row...[and] talked like a fury to Kurtz for an hour” (61). Because Kurtz is Marlow’s idol, his deference to this black woman, at least subconsciously, undermines Kurtz’s significance and influence as an imperialist white male. As Marlow and other agents witness Kurtz yield to this woman, they lose respect and confidence in him, which undermines his authority as an imperial Company agent. Thus, the Kurtz’s African mistress represents the resistance of the African people and landscape, standing against the Company’s violent assault. Much like the other women in the novel, her influence is unanticipated, but not imperceptible. Though voiceless, she stands as a significant force in both Kurtz’s and Marlow’s journey into the heart of darkness. Her appearance represents a turning point both in the novel and in Marlow’s quest to find Kurtz and to see for himself if Kurtz lives up to his reputation as the best agent the Company has to offer.

As discussed before, Conrad's critique of the New Woman movement is found within his representation of female characters. Kurtz's Intended exhibits traits diametrically opposed to the independent characteristics seen in the New Woman. Hawthorn states that "existence in a world of their own, then, does not seem to produce any sort of enviable life for European women, but more a sort of living death" (355). The New Woman does not exist in Conrad's imagined world of western women; in *Heart of Darkness*, the ideals she represents are reserved for the vibrant, alive African women. Specifically, the traits of the New Woman emerging in British literature and culture exist within the character of Kurtz's mistress. While Kurtz's Intended opposes the ideals of the New Woman, Kurtz's mistress upholds them in her occupation and interactions with imperialist white men. Her physical characterization offers a stark contrast with the pale, colorless Intended. She displays vibrant, colorful garb, which reflects the intimidating wilderness around her. Marlow's first glimpse of her contrasts sharply with his later experience with the Intended:

[She had] a crimson spot on her tawny cheek, innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck; bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch-men, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step...She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, 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. (60)

This description when compared with Marlow's later encounter with the Intended highlights several significant differences. First, unlike the Intended's funereal appearance, the African mistress is dark but colorful and full of life, like the jungle, which serves as her backdrop. Where the Intended is "pale" and "ashy," the African mistress is "tawny" with "crimson" cheeks. The colorful imagery demonstrates not only the vibrancy of the

African woman, but it also mirrors that of the environment in which Marlow finds many opposing images to his European homeland. This vibrancy is one trait that aligns Kurtz's mistress with the European New Woman movement. Achebe argues that Conrad affords Kurtz's mistress such detail because he respects that she is "in her place," but he also intends for her to serve as a foil for the Intended (18). While Achebe believes that Conrad's purpose in this comparison is to demonstrate the preferability of the Intended as compared to this "savage" African woman, the comparison instead demonstrates the mistress's superiority in terms of the ideals of the New Woman. She is independent, vibrant, alive, and intimidating, as compared with the weak, pallid, gloomy Intended. In "The Women of *Heart of Darkness*," Hawthorn analyzes color as a comparison between Kurtz's Intended and his African mistress, creating a dichotomy of life and death between the two women and their respective cultures (356). In other words, the "pale" Intended, steadfastly mourning the loss of her fiancé, Kurtz, reflects and is tied to his death, while his African mistress vibrantly abides independent of his existence. Additionally, the vivid description of the African mistress conveys a certain vivacity that mirrors ideals of the New Woman relating to self-expression and independence. Conversely, referring to her as "Kurtz's African mistress" seems to undermine the sense of independence that aligns her with the New Woman. In "A Black Athena in the *Heart of Darkness*, or Conrad's Baffling Oxymorons," Viola argues that Conrad never refers to her as such. Instead, Viola focuses on Conrad's descriptive terms that align the character with the Greek goddess of war, Athena. Similarly, her characterization, with her "hair...done in the shape of a helmet, ...brass leggings...[and] brass wire gauntlets" demonstrates her role as a warrior and leader. Therefore, not only does she exude ferocity and independence,

making her intimidating to European men with little to no experience with overtly powerful women, she is also literally dressed for battle. The garb described here indicates that her tribe accepts women in military roles, a concept virtually unheard of in Victorian European society. Consequently, the idea of the New Woman, so clearly opposed in the character of Kurtz's Intended, is embodied by this fierce, vibrant African warrior.

After the introduction to the Kurtz's mistress, the Russian agent describes a confrontation between the warrior and Kurtz, when the warrior communicated vociferously with Kurtz in her own language. Kurtz seemingly understands, but the agent does not. However, he comprehends her aggressive tone which makes him distrustful of her sway over Kurtz. This apparent influence further exemplifies the African mistress's independence and self-confidence. The warrior's boldness, along with her occupation as a warrior, mirror characteristics attributed to the Anglo/American New Woman. Because the New Woman was considered distinctly Western, arising in the United States and Great Britain, the fact that the Intended fails to exhibit any traits associated with the New Woman, while Kurtz's African mistress embodies those traits, further criticizes European bourgeois society. Essentially, at the same moment when women in European bourgeois society tried, sometimes unsuccessfully, to embrace the ideals of the new woman, women in Africa, like Kurtz's mistress, personify the ideals of the New Woman. In other words, what seems like the height of progressiveness in European society is simply the way of things for the tribe of Kurtz's mistress, despite the European belief that African society is primitive and backward. The African mistress is unquestionably independent, without any need for acceptance or recognition by men in or outside her society, making her a New Woman with no need for the label.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

Throughout *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow, Kurtz, and other men appear as examples of dominant masculine imperialist agents. They enter the heart of Africa with goals of domination and manipulation of the land and its resources, including human labor. They represent and in some cases facilitate the violence directed at African men in the novel, which reveals Conrad's criticism of imperialism and colonialism. However, the women in the novel consistently appear as calculating influencers, undermining the superiority of men in almost every major scene in the narrative. Without women, the story does not progress. Marlow does not receive his appointment with the Company without his aunt's influence. Though he derides her focus on societal norms and her understanding of the goals of imperialism, Marlow relies on her clout and her kindness. Similarly, the Company and Kurtz do not function apart from the black African women they dominate. As an agent of the company, the accountant relies on his laundress to maintain appearances, a visible connection to European power and influence within the dark of the jungle. As evidenced by her boldness, the African warrior heavily influences Kurtz and intimidates the Company men who come to retrieve him. Finally, Marlow fails to complete his mission as directed by Kurtz because of tacit direction from Kurtz's Intended. Her unintentional prompting leads Marlow to tell her what she wishes to hear

about Kurtz's death, not its true "horror" or the horror of Europe's venture into the heart of Africa. Therefore, despite a tendency for readers to view *Heart of Darkness* as a distinctly masculine adventure novel, the significance of the role of female characters in illustrating the resistance to the violence of imperialism becomes clear through an examination of their delicate manipulation and subversive intimidation.

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