

**"IT IS IMPOSSIBLE THAT ALL THIS SHOULD BE LOST":
VICTORIAN NARRATIVE IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS***

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Abstract

Critics debate the designation of Joseph Conrad's 1902 novella *Heart of Darkness* as either "Victorian" or "Modern." The novella's protagonist embodies Victorian notions of British imperialism, whilst Conrad's experimental style and content pre-figure modernist sensibilities. I suggest that the final scene of the novella illuminates Conrad's simultaneous embodiment and interrogation of Victorian narrative convention. Kurtz's fiancée shows an astonishing degree of agency in constructing a master narrative apart from the tale that Marlow tells his masculine audience. Such a close-up view of the construction of this narrative exposes the frailty of narratives in general and the dependence of "truth" upon prescribed gender roles. This article discusses how Conrad's tale of gender and period crossings centres around the attempts of Marlow and Modernism to leave behind feminine and Victorian "delusions." These attempts inevitably fail because such delusions are themselves essential to masculine and Modern self-invention.

For over a century, critics have debated the designation of Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* as either 'Victorian' or 'Modern.' The novella's protagonist Marlow embodies Victorian notions of British imperialism and reveals a vested interest in the ideology of 'separate spheres,' the 19th century doctrine that lauded women for tending the private domestic space that enabled men to succeed in the political and public realm. At the same time, Conrad's experimental style and content prefigure modernist sensibilities, particularly the sense that 'truth' might be revealed through a less linear narrative strain and can even transcend the identity or gender of its narrator. The novella's publication dates—serialised in 1899 and published as a complete text in 1902—represent yet another way in which the novella resists easy classification. The final scene in particular illuminates Conrad's simultaneous embodiment and interrogation of Victorian narrative convention. In the scene, Marlow tells a bereaved woman that her fiancée's dying words were her name when, in fact, the man cried out 'The horror! The horror!' The irony is lost on neither Marlow's hearers nor his readers.¹ In a text that seems to layer narrative upon

¹ A selection of critical readings that interpret 'the horror' as the Intended's name, or as slang for 'whore,' include David Bruffee, 'The Lesser Nightmare: Marlow's Lie in Heart of Darkness,' *Modern Language Quarterly*, 25 (1964), 322-29; James Ellis, 'Kurtz's Voice: The Intended as "The Horror"', *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920*, 19.2 (1976), 105-10; Carola M. Kaplan, 'Colonizers, Cannibals, and the Horror of Good Intentions in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness,' *Studies in*

narrative, however, this final scene offers the only example of a cohesive, coherent narrative. Because the narrative created is a 'lie,' Conrad appears to critique Victorian notions of truth and imperialism. However, in a novella that constantly calls into question its own authority and undercuts any notion of an omniscient narrator, such an intimate view of the construction of this narrative exposes the frailty of narratives in general and the dependence of 'truth' upon prescribed gender roles. I will illustrate how Marlow's and Modernism's attempts to leave behind feminine and Victorian 'delusions' inevitably fail because such delusions are themselves essential to both masculine and Modern self-invention. The brilliance of Conrad's narrative is that it both records and deconstructs these attempts.

Conrad frames *Heart of Darkness* as a story-within-a-story. A nameless, first-person narrator recalls the tale of Marlow, indicating himself to have been one of the listeners, and then Marlow relates his own story (also in first-person) about his sojourn into the 'heart of darkness'—the Belgian Congo. Marlow confides in a small community of men (including the narrator) aboard a ship. The story he tells is this: when Kurtz, a European company man, 'goes native,' apparently adopting customs that horrify Marlow (such as cannibalism, taking an African mistress, and engaging in unnamed sexual and religious rites), the company employs Marlow to bring Kurtz back to his native Europe and the fiancée he left behind. On the trip home, Kurtz dies. Marlow, haunted by what he has seen in the Congo, sits beside Kurtz's deathbed and fantasizes about the final thoughts running through the dying man's mind:

Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath: "the horror! The horror!" (p. 86)

In the year following Kurtz's death, Marlow grows increasingly obsessed with this 'complete knowledge' that Kurtz possesses. Driven to death's door by the trauma, he becomes convinced upon his recovery that he alone understands the truth about the life and death of the man who has occupied his every thought and action for so long. He imagines that the connection he feels is a spiritual one, and frames his 'jealous' refusal to share Kurtz 'with any one' in prophetic terms: 'it was ordered I should never betray him—it was written I should be loyal to the nightmare of my choice' (p. 81). The word 'choice' betrays the extent to which Marlow imagines he can play God with Kurtz's legacy. Back in Europe, Marlow gradually gives away most of Kurtz's belongings to carefully selected individuals. Eventually, only 'a slim packet of letters'

Short Fiction 34.3 (1997), 323-33; Gerald B. Kauver, 'Marlow as Liar,' *Studies in Short Fiction* 5.3 (1968), 290-292; Bruce R. Stark, 'Kurtz's Intended: The Heart of Heart of Darkness,' *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 16 (1974), 535-555; and Fred L. Milne, 'Marlow's Lie and the Intended: Civilization as the Lie in Heart of Darkness,' *Arizona Quarterly* 44 (1985), 106-112.

and a portrait of Kurtz's fiancée (known only as 'the Intended') remain in his possession. She remains the one aspect of Kurtz's life that eludes Marlow's grasp. He follows his own mysterious impulses to visit her and bequeath the remaining fragments of Kurtz's life to her care: 'Perhaps it was an impulse of unconscious loyalty, or the fulfillment of one of those ironic necessities that lurk in the facts of human existence. I don't know. I can't tell. But I went' (p. 90). Yet in the course of the exchange, it becomes clear that Marlow wants something from her as well. By ridding himself of all Kurtz's earthly possessions, he fears the loss of his own particular connection with Kurtz. In order to possess Kurtz entirely, Marlow must 'shield' his only competitor—the Intended—from the Truth about Kurtz and keep his legacy safe and unsullied by feminine hands.

When Marlow arrives on the Intended's doorstep, he fantasizes that he feels keenly the presence of Kurtz there with him as 'a shadow insatiable of splendid appearances, of frightful realities; a shadow darker than the shadow of the night, and draped nobly in the folds of a gorgeous eloquence. The vision seemed to enter the house with me' (p. 90). He insists that he must stave off this dreadful presence 'for the salvation of another soul' (p. 90)—the imperilled female soul of the Intended. The domestic setting of his encounter with the Intended only serves to intensify Marlow's sense that he must preserve and protect the realm of feminine fancy and delusion from the 'separate sphere' of masculine knowledge, of sacred truth, forged in the heart of darkness and in the bowels of a ship.

Marlow's saviour complex epitomises the 'white man's burden' of nineteenth-century imperialist ideology: protecting the innocent female from the truth about the big bad world of commerce and imperialism. The Intended clearly participates in and perpetuates these masculine enterprises—her parlour features a piano with ivory keys, one of the two major commodities (alongside rubber) motivating Western rape of the Congo—but Marlow conveniently maintains she is too fragile to learn the truth behind the inanimate objects that adorn her drawing-room. It is in the name of her 'salvation' that Marlow lies to her about Kurtz's final words. In doing so, Marlow occupies familiar ground. By the time Conrad published *Heart of Darkness* at the turn of the century, King Léopold of Belgium's harsh tactics for 'colonising' the Congo had come under attack. On July 17, 1906, in response to an editorial criticizing his tactics, Léopold sent a letter to *The London Times* containing thirty seven articles that characterise his brutal policies of slavery, mutilation, misery, and death as humanitarian and Christian in nature. He stresses the need for 'order' and 'security' in the Congo in the face of the native population's natural 'laziness' and 'propensity for lying.'² Whether or not Conrad himself intended to critique Western imperialism lies outside the realm of this argument, but Marlow certainly epitomises the good Victorian imperialist and patriarch in his treatment of the Intended, just as Kurtz had embodied the enlightened Victorian missionary gone bad in his relations

² Leopold, 'Letter', in *The Times* archives <http://archive.timesonline.co.uk/tol/searchOnDay.arc>

with the Africans within the narrative Marlow tells.³

As in the African jungle, death permeates every corner of the European home. Marlow meets the Intended 'in a lofty drawing-room' decorated with a 'marble fireplace' and 'grand piano' that give the room the appearance of a graveyard: the fireplace is 'monumental' in its 'whiteness' and the piano 'gleams' in the corner 'like a sombre and polished sarcophagus' (p. 91). As for the Intended, she wears black: 'I—I alone know how to mourn for him as he deserves,' Marlow imagines her to imply by virtue of her dark clothing and 'sorrowful head' (p. 91). When Marlow fears that he sees Kurtz there united with her, he immediately stakes his own claim to Kurtz's ghost: in answer to her statement 'You knew him well,' he replies, 'Intimacy grows quickly out there [...] I knew him as well as it is possible for one man to know another' (p. 92). He emphasizes their shared gender, seizing the opportunity to identify with Kurtz in an intimate circle of shared knowledge sacred from feminine access or interpretation. Shortly thereafter, Marlow begins to lie. He starts a sentence, 'It was impossible not to—' and the Intended 'finish[es] eagerly' his sentence: 'Love him!' (p. 92). At the moment she makes this assertion, the Intended completely subverts Marlow's authorial expectations. Previous to their meeting, he fantasises about finding in her the perfect audience for 'his' narrative: imagining a 'delicate shade of truthfulness' in her portrait, he assumes that 'She seemed ready to listen without mental reservation, without suspicion, without a thought for herself' (p. 90). In person, she proves less pliable. She seizes control of the narrative, 'silencing [Marlow] into an appalled dumbness' by interrupting his tale with a version of her own. He makes no move to correct her; indeed, he reiterates her claim by saying 'You knew him best' (p. 92). He acquiesces to the Angel of the House in a perfect performance of gender that critics like Nancy Armstrong have astutely identified as politically and literarily powerful.⁴

Bette London, in her seminal 1989 article 'Reading Race and Gender in Conrad's Dark Continent,' argues that Marlow ultimately displaces the Intended by occupying a 'feminine' position as 'Kurtz's most enduring conquest' (p. 245)⁵ Andrew Roberts likewise suggests that Conrad invites readers to empathise with female characters as well as male characters who temporarily occupy a 'feminised' position (p. 121).⁶ I would argue that Marlow's anxiety certainly arises from his desire to 'displace the Intended,' but that he clings to his masculinity as the bond that ultimately unites him with Kurtz and places both of them beyond her reach. As the

³ For an authoritative account of this period in Belgian history, see Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998).

⁴ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987).

⁵ Bette London, 'Reading Race and Gender in Conrad's Dark Continent,' *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts*, 31.3 (1989), 235-252.

⁶ Andrew Roberts, *Conrad and Masculinity* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002).

Intended expounds upon her grief, Marlow vacillates between anger and pity. When she begs to hear Kurtz's final words, Marlow assures her that he was with Kurtz 'to the very end.' However, the text leaves this point ambiguous. When Marlow visits Kurtz on the night that he dies, he is 'startled to hear him say a little tremulously, "I am lying here in the dark waiting for death."' Marlow stands over him 'as if transfixed,' and watches a 'change' that comes over 'his features,' 'as though a veil had been rent.' It is 'of an intense and hopeless despair.' Shortly thereafter, in response to 'some image or some vision,' Kurtz utters what Marlow claims are his final words: 'the horror! The horror!' Marlow blows out the candle he has carried with him and leaves the cabin. One might certainly infer that Kurtz has died in Marlow's presence; however, Marlow never explicitly confirms this, 'successfully ignor[ing]' the questioning glance of his dinner companion. It is the manager's young native boy who interrupts their meal shortly thereafter to exclaim, 'Mistuh Kurtz-he dead!' (p. 94).

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

Johanna M. Smith argues that Marlow's return to 'civilisation' reflects 'the Victorian ideology of separate spheres, in which the white woman's role is to create a realm of domestic bliss to which the white man can return and recover from the brutality of the world of commerce' (p. 366). Whilst his aunt's drawing-room at the beginning of his journey offers Marlow the kind of "bliss" that Smith describes (the room 'most soothingly looked just as you would expect a lady's drawing-room to look,' Marlow recalls) (p. 27), the Intended's parlour where his journey comes to a close offers no rest for the weary. Instead, signs of the imperial project are everywhere, and the parlour is haunted not only by the ghost of Kurtz but by an active female author, all too alive, with an agenda of her own.

The threat that Marlow senses in the Intended's presence is heightened by the fact that very few women appear on the pages of *Heart of Darkness*. The anonymous author of a 1903 review in the *Glasgow Evening News* observes that Conrad's *oeuvre* 'has either ignored women, or at best made use of them as figures to fill a space in the background of his painting.' Whilst feminist and gender criticism of the novella remain comparatively sparse, more and more contemporary critics join Gabrielle McIntire in insisting that despite their 'near invisibility,' women are nonetheless 'an

always-palpable presence in the background of the text.⁷ It is this virtual yet palpable absence of women elsewhere that makes the final scene of the novella even more compelling: all of a sudden, the action of the tale shifts from the homosocial space of the ship where Kurtz dies, and where Marlow tells his tale, into an overtly 'feminine' domestic space: the parlour of Kurtz's nameless fiancée. Equally startling is the sudden presence of a female voice; with a few minor exceptions, such as Marlow's 'out of touch' aunt (p. 27) and the African Mistress (Marlow, unable to speak her language, conveniently compares her indecipherable cries to a 'satanic litany' [p. 84]), the women of the text remain silent.⁸

When the Intended insists, 'it is impossible that all this should be lost' (p. 93), she clings not only to the cherished memory of a single man, but also to all that he signifies ideologically, namely a singular truth embodied in a singular white man who lives up to his God-ordained role as imperialist, patron of women and minorities, and master narrator of their experiences. It is a defiant cry, but also quite prophetic. She refuses to 'lose' Kurtz to the man who stands before her, just as she defies death to separate her from her beloved. She encloses herself in the graveyard of her parlour-room, clothes herself in black, and colludes with Marlow to construct a Victorian narrative about Kurtz that serves her agenda just as conveniently as his own. In a novella packed with silent women, her voice breaks the spell that Marlow's tale spins for his homosocial audience, and reminds the reader that multiple competing agendas of gender and period crossings are at play.

From Marlow's perspective, the lie reifies his role as saviour and (ironically) as keeper of the truth. The Truth about Kurtz remains safely and finally in his keeping. Yet his hard-won homosocial bond is fraught with tension. Throughout the novella, Marlow questions the truthfulness of certain labels the Company assigns to the natives: 'enemies,' 'criminals,' and 'rebels.' When a fellow white man defends Kurtz's murderous practices by telling Marlow his victims were rebels, Marlow

shocked him excessively by laughing. Rebels! What would be the next definition I was to hear? There had been enemies, criminals, workers—and these were rebels. Those rebellious heads looked very subdued to me on their sticks (p. 75).

His refusal to accept these terms as legitimate labels for the natives he encounters

⁷ Gabrielle McIntire, 'The Women Do Not Travel: Gender, Difference, and Incommensurability in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*,' *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, 48.2 (2002), 257-284. Important exceptions to my claim that a paucity of feminist and gender criticism exists in the critical canon of the novella include Nina Pelikan Straus, Bette London, Johanna M. Smith, and Elaine Showalter.

⁸ For a foundational reading of the role female silence plays in allowing Marlow to uphold the notion of 'separate spheres' in his narrative, see Johanna M. Smith's "'Too Beautiful Altogether': Ideologies of Gender and Empire in *Heart of Darkness*," in *Heart of Darkness*, ed. by Ross Murfin (Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 1996), 169-184.

seems to support his insistence that he 'hate[s], detest[s], and can't bear a lie' because it reeks of death (p. 42). Understood in the context of his preceding claim, the Intended's ability to undermine his conviction is remarkable. At her insistence, he embraces a living death and tastes the 'flavour of mortality in lies' that allows her privileged access to the narrative of her choosing (p. 42).

Yet even as he caves to the Intended's demands, Marlow continues to subscribe to a narrative that assures white men they hold the very power of the universe in their hands. After uttering his lie, 'It seemed to [him] that the house would collapse before [he] could escape, that the heavens would fall upon [his] head. But nothing happened. The heavens do not fall for such a trifle.' 'Trifle' though it might be, he immediately goes on to wonder 'Would they have fallen [...] if [he] had rendered Kurtz that justice which was his due?' (p. 94), that is, if he had applied the same critique to Kurtz's words that he applies to 'enemies,' 'criminals,' and 'rebels'? Even after succumbing to a lie, he believes that his word alone is powerful enough to dismantle the "house" where it is told and the occupant who forced the lie from him in the first place.

The white man's burden that he takes upon himself ostensibly distresses him; it certainly conflicts with his earlier disavowal of titles like 'emissary of light' and 'a lower sort of apostle' that might glorify his trip to the Congo (he writes off such discourse as 'such rot' [p. 26]). Yet in the presence of the Intended, his self-imposed plight seems to result in a measure of pleasure insofar as it binds Marlow more closely with Kurtz. He fails to join Kurtz in death, but perhaps the lies he tells will allow him to share in his damnation. The heavens may fall, but they will do so at his discretion. As Cedric Watts argues, *Heart of Darkness* suggests

the appalling paradox that whereas the majority of men who led secular lives are heading for a death which is extinction, Kurtz has at least the significance granted by the intensity of his evil. If he has sold his soul, at least he had a soul to sell (p. 51).

Marlow's pretence of saving the Intended's soul functions as yet another opportunity for reifying his own special connection to Kurtz, even as the images of the graveyard and of death that pervade the parlour of the Intended (as well as her own spectre-like appearance that renders her 'a pale head, floating towards [Marlow] in the dusk) (p. 91) suggest that she, rather than he, occupies this liminal space with her beloved.

By placing two versions of Marlow's story alongside each other—the version he tells his shipmates that comprises the majority of the novella and the version he tells the Intended that concludes it—Conrad illuminates the gender crossing and period crossing that intersect in the text. Without the 'lie' to the Intended, I might agree with critics like Debrah Raschke who comfortably classify *Heart of Darkness* as Modern.⁹ Yet the final scene problematizes such comfortable conclusions. By

⁹ Debrah Raschke, *Modernism, Metaphysics, and Sexuality* (New Jersey: Associated University

lying to the Intended, Marlow casts his own reliability as a narrator into doubt. Raschke points out the irony of Marlow's attempts to silence women, particularly his insistence at the conclusion of the novella that 'the women are out of it' even as their presence underlies the text from beginning to end (p. 87). Likewise, Nina Pelikan Strauss highlights the many ways in which Marlow's own version of the 'truth' absolutely depends upon 'the guarding of secret knowledge' from a woman capable of 'deconstruct[ing] and demystify[ing]' it, should she gain access to the masculine sphere (p. 214). Thus, the complex style of Marlow's narrative is exposed as a desperate attempt to escape the influence and sphere of the feminine because *her* presence and voice will expose its debt to Victorian notions of imperialism, patriarchy, and gender identity, and of the dubious grounds upon which Modernism builds its critique.

Marlow's obsession with preserving separate spheres of knowledge reflects a deep indebtedness to an ideology that, like the ideology of imperialism, "was under pressure in the late nineteenth century" (Smith, p. 176). Yet the historical anachronism is less important here than the discursive investment Marlow displays in keeping the ideology alive. Marlow desperately attempts to narrate his story in a way that renders the Intended pure trope. In the tale Marlow intends to tell, the Intended functions as a symbol of 'feminine knowledge' that upholds the very myth of masculinity and imperialism that underlies Kurtz's every action in the Congo and Marlow's subsequent, desperate attempts to control the legacy Kurtz leaves behind. As Pelikan Strauss argues, 'Heroic maleness is defined precisely in adverse relation to delusional femininity' (p. 207). To remedy this definition, she advocates a 'radical feminist criticism of high art' that 'would remove the mask' of masculine objectivity 'to disclose the particular delusions intrinsic to a particular literary work' like *Heart of Darkness* (p. 209). I mean to suggest that the Intended is in no need of such rescue—that, in fact, her authorship of an alternative narrative or 'lie' performs the work of a feminist critique on Marlow's narrative that precedes it, and exposes the many 'delusions' at play. Unlike her female predecessors in the novella, the Intended intervenes as co-author, disrupting Marlow's narrative and forcing him to tell a different version altogether. Marlow's audiences are left with two authors, two versions of a story for which the word 'truth' has lost its relevance, and with their own allegiance divided between Victorian and Modern notions of identity equally grounded in common 'lies.' Contrary to Marlow's best-laid plans, the Intended asserts her own authorship both of the story that will govern her life, and of the Modern age that imagines it can leave her behind.

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