lightning. The god Marlow's group reclaims, though Christi-
nian, is dying and then dead. A native announces: "Mistah
Kurtz—he dead." (This may be a borrowing by Conrad of
e line spoken by a negro in Grant Allen's In All Shades (1886)
"Him dead, sah, dead—stone dead.") [Poet] T.S. Eliot used
Conrad's phrase as an epigraph for "The Hollow Men," and
since the Guy Fawkes' epigraph to that poem also represents
the slain god tradition, presumably Eliot recognized Kurtz
the dead Christian God.

Even though Kurtz is dead, his influence goes unabated
and Marlow discovers it in painting, poetry, music, journalism,
and politics. It is of paramount importance in the con-
tinued devotion of the Intended, Kurtz's fiancée, whom [his-
torian and critic Stanley] Renner identifies as the Christian
Church. Conrad's use of the word "Intended" may be a refer-
on the French equivalent futur since the girl is as much in a
time sequence as she is an association. Her black dress and
funereal surroundings suggest a phrase of Nietzsche's
"What are these churches now, if they are not the tombs and
monuments of God?" To preserve her soul and prevent
madness, Marlow lies to her about Kurtz's last words, but she
realizes that his lie is as deadly as the words themselves.

The actual cry of Kurtz, "The horror! The horror!" elev-
ates him in Marlow's opinion to the highest wisdom. Con-
rad implies that at an extreme point, Christian and Buddhist
doctrine concur that the innermost soul of things is an abyss
a thoughtless and cruel nonentity. The story ends with the
suggestion that the waterway the Nellie is to follow—the
path to knowledge—will yield the same results.

Women in Heart
of Darkness

Jeremy Hawthorn

Jeremy Hawthorn contrasts the Intended and the
African woman as part of an analysis of women in
Heart of Darkness. He argues that idealized Euro-
pian women, represented by the Intended, indirectly
support imperialism because they are ignorant of
and isolated from the work of the men they support.
The African woman, Kurtz's mistress, represents
sensuality and passion, a parallel to the mystery and
power of the wilderness. According to Hawthorn,
Kurtz exploits and ultimately abandons both women.
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Literary Theory.

It is clear at many points in the text of Heart of Darkness that
women are given a particular responsibility and function so
far as the preserving of idealism is concerned, and at this
stage I would like to look more closely at this aspect of the
novella's treatment of the relationship between idealism and
imperialism. . . .

Three female characters each play an indispensable rôle in
Heart of Darkness—Marlow's aunt, the 'wild and gorgeous ap-
pearance of a woman' the reader presumes is Kurtz's African
mistress, and Kurtz's Intended. There is additionally Kurtz's
portrait of the blindfolded female, and there are the two
women knitting black wool met by Marlow in the Company's
office in Europe, women whose resemblance to the Fates of
classical mythology is clearly intended. Their appearance in
the novella suggests that women may have a significant rôle
deploy in determining various fates in Heart of Darkness. The
blindfolded woman suggests that this determining influence may not be a knowing or intended one. . . .

THE SYMBOLIC FUNCTION OF MIDDLE-CLASS EUROPEAN WOMEN

What becomes apparent if we consider the three main female characters in the novella, is that in *Heart of Darkness* issues of gender are inextricably intertwined with matters of race and culture. To start with, we should note that the following comments made by Marlow about ‘women’ are clearly aimed at *European women*: they do not apply to the African woman. Nor do they apply to working-class European women; Marlow’s statement is both culture- and class-limited.

Girl! What? Did I mention a girl? Oh, she is out of it—completely. They—the women I mean—are out of it—should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse. Oh, she had to be out of it.

The women are ‘out of’ the man’s world just as effectively as Kurtz’s ideas and values are out of the horrific world he constructs in Africa. And just as Kurtz’s ideas and values become weakened and impoverished by this isolation, so too do the women who are out of it, imprisoned in their ‘beautiful world of their own’, end up as debilitated and sterile as the Intended. The remarks quoted above are all of a piece with Marlow’s earlier comments about women, comments inspired by his aunt’s adoption of the ‘rot let loose in print and talk’ which leads her to picture him as ‘an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle’.

It’s queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset. Some confounded fact we men have been living contentedly with ever since the day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over.

What Marlow describes as the ‘world of their own’ of women in the above passage has much in common with the world of Kurtz’s ideals, which he does actually try to set up and which does go to pieces before too many sunsets because some ‘confounded fact’ starts up and knocks the whole thing over. And indeed, just as Marlow’s aunt ‘got carried off her feet’, so too Kurtz had kicked himself loose of the earth.

In a work which, I have argued, explores the fate of an idealism betrayed into a corrupting alliance with imperialism, European women perform an important symbolic function. At the same time as they provide us with a relatively straightforward and realistic depiction of European middle-class women of the time, they also serve a larger representational function, portraying that idealism which the domestic imperialist powers use as apology for their exploitation. This idealism is, paradoxically, nurtured apart from that for which it offers an apology: the activities of the European powers in the subject countries dominated by imperialism. If this argument is accepted, then it must also be accepted that the idealism in question is a weak, emaciated, and unhealthy creature. Neither Marlow’s aunt nor Kurtz’s Intended could be said to be possessed of any striking features suggestive of energy or practicality. With his aunt Marlow has a last decent cup of tea for many days ‘in a room that most soothingly looked just as you would expect a lady’s drawing-room to look’. It is one of the functions of women and that idealism which they represent to ‘soothe’ those off to do imperialism’s dirty work. Marlow’s patronizing tone when talking of his aunt is however mild in contrast to the powerful connotations of death and disease to be found in the description of the Intended’s home.

The bent gilt legs and back of the furniture shone in indistinct curves. The tall white marble fireplace had a cold and monumental whiteness. A grand piano stood massively in a corner; with dark gleams on the flat surfaces like a sombre and polished sarcophagus.

The Intended herself is a thing of black and white, of sickness and death. She has no energy, no living presence.

She came forward, all in black, with a pale head, floating towards me in the dusk. . . .

This fair hair, this pale visage, this pure brow, seemed surrounded by an ashy halo from which the dark eyes looked out at me.

Note how words connotative of idealism such as ‘pure’ and ‘halo’ are made to seem unhealthy and corrupted in this description. This seems to me to support the argument that the way in which European women are portrayed in *Heart of Darkness* serves to strengthen the novella’s depiction of idealism as weak, unhealthy and corrupted.
**COMPLEX BLACK-WHITE IMAGERY**

The black-white imagery of *Heart of Darkness*, the effect of which comes to a climax in the meeting between Marlow and the Intended, is complex. An analysis of its function in the passage quoted above would not be easy, and in the novella as a whole it cannot unproblematically be reduced to any schematic system of symbolic meaning. Conrad seems concerned to undercut simple symbolic associations in his use of this imagery, to disabuse the reader of the belief that good and bad can be straightforwardly defined and neatly compartmentalized. Very often in the novella we can observe a process of change from white to black: the centre of Africa is white on the map, but turns out to be a place of darkness; the Intended is pale and fair, but her dark eyes and the darkness falling in her room suggest that her very purity is productive, however unknowingly, of evil. The complexity of this pattern of imagery also seems to me to have something to say about the marriage of trade and idealism in the work: just as we no longer accept the conventional association of white with purity and virtue by the end of the novella, so too we see that idealism can be corrupted by association with evil forces. The challenge to our conventional views at the level of the novella’s imagery duplicates and reinforces the challenge made by the work to other conventional views.

It is apparent from the quoted passage that the Intended’s capacity is for devotion, not for living. 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. And inside the white tomb, black decay and corruption can be found. A disembodied idealism, far from preserving the good, may actually foster the bad. If we accept such an interpretation of aspects of the black-white imagery of the novella, we will have to consider critically Marlow’s view that if women are kept confined to that ‘world of their own’ this may help to make our own (that is, the world of men) better.

**THE SYMBOLIC FUNCTION OF THE AFRICAN WOMAN**

The contrast to the Intended offered by Kurtz’s African mistress could not be sharper.

She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high; her hair was done in the shape of a helmet; she had brass leggings to the knee, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, 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 must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her. She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress.

Where the Intended is static and passive, she is active and forceful; where the Intended has the odour of death about her, she is the personification of life; where the Intended is a thing of black and white, she is ablaze with colour; where the Intended is refined to the point of evisceration, she is ‘savage and superb’; and where the Intended is clad in mourning, she is clad for war. Moreover, while the Intended has an air of oppressive sterility about her, Marlow says of the African woman that ‘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’. This aspect of the contrast is particularly important: the Intended and the idealism she represents are sterile; nothing will come of them but death. But the powerful life of the African woman is, like the wilderness reflected in her, passionate and fecund.

The life of the African woman is all of a piece: there is no division of ideals and aspirations from actuality, no separation between her and her life activity. This being so, the overwhelmingly positive description which the reader is given of her serves as a critique of the life of the Europeans, divided between sterile ideals and brutal ‘horror’. I should add, however, that if we look at the two women together we recognize, I think, a familiar pattern: woman as devoted and chaste spirit, and woman as sensual and sexual flesh. But this reproduction of a well-known stereotypical pattern is not itself restricted to the patriarchal ideology that fosters and benefits from it, for in juxtaposing the two women the narrative of *Heart of Darkness* draws attention to the process whereby women are dehumanized by being divided into spirit and body and are denied the full humanity that requires possession of both.

The gender divisions referred to by Marlow are not, of course, just a literary matter, not just a question of the

1. sickly paleness; having stunted growth or development
work's symbolic patterns of meaning, nor can they be considered separately from the imperialist brutalities which are recounted in *Heart of Darkness*. 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, while at the same time it is also an accurate portrayal of some of the results of the differential treatment of men and women in the European culture. It is European men who are sent to Africa to further the aims of imperialism; but we see European women—ignorant of what their menfolk are really doing for imperialism—offering powerful ideological support to them. What *Heart of Darkness* suggests to the engaged reader is that the division of ideal and action, of theory and practice, is effected in part by means of the division of genders.

**WITH HIS IDEALISM, KURTZ BETRAYS BOTH WOMEN**

The African woman in *Heart of Darkness* is one of a number of 'native' women in Conrad's fiction who are betrayed through their love for, or involvement with, a white man. . . . (Both the African woman and the Intended are abandoned by Kurtz, albeit in different ways.) Kurtz's 'pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct' is not a happy one, and he apparently finds in the African woman qualities which are lacking in the Intended and which he cannot resist. Kurtz is morally responsible for turning the Intended into a living corpse, and then unable to resist the attraction of a woman possessed of precisely that life which European culture has denied the Intended. . . .

Kurtz manages to destroy both women. As I have said, in different ways, he abandons both. So positive and forceful is the impression given off by the African woman that it is not hard to forget that she too has the word 'tragic' applied to her more than once in the work.

*Her face had a tragic and fierce aspect of wild sorrow and of dumb pain mingled with the fear of some struggling, half-shaped resolve. She stood looking at us without a stir, and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose.*

. . . When the steamer leaves, taking Kurtz away from her, we are told that

Only the barbarous and superb woman did not so much as flinch, and stretched tragically her bare arms after us over the sombre and glittering river.

The gesture is recalled by Marlow later on, during his meeting with Kurtz's Intended.

She put out her arms as if after a retreating figure, stretching them black and with clasped pale hands across the fading and narrow sheen of the window. Never see him! I saw him clearly enough then. I shall see this eloquent phantom as long as I live, and I shall see her, too, a tragic and familiar Shade, resembling in this gesture another one, tragic also, and bedecked with powerless charms, stretching bare brown arms over the glitter of the infernal stream, the stream of darkness.

The linking together of the two women at this juncture in the narrative makes an important point. Both women are tragic, both have been betrayed by Kurtz. Putting women on a pedestal, cutting them off from reality, and restricting them to a world of sterile ideals and lifeless illusions is as destructive as treating a woman purely as the recipient of passion. . . .

**IMPERIALISTS USED FEMALE STEREOTYPES TO ADVANCE THEIR CAUSE**

The Intended's isolation from the reality of Kurtz is a part of imperialism's nurturing of spurious ideals, ideals which function more as camouflage than as active principles or guides to action.

'The was a remarkable man,' I said, unsteadily. Then before the appealing fixity of her gaze, that seemed to watch for more words on my lips, I went on, 'It was impossible not to—'

'Love him,' she finished eagerly, silencing me into an appalled dumbness. 'How true! How true! But when you think that no one knew him so well as I! I had all his noble confidence. I knew him best.'

'You knew him best,' I repeated. And perhaps she did. But with every word spoken the room was growing darker, and only her forehead, smooth and white, remained illumined by the unextinguishable light of belief and love.

The Intended's forehead seems here to symbolize her unshakeable idealism; unaware of the horror of the world, believing herself to have known Kurtz better than anyone, she is actually more and more isolated, and more and more reduced by her isolation. The whiteness of her forehead parallels Kurtz's own 'ivory' head: unhealthy, unnatural; and illumined by a light. . . .

Why does Marlow remark that perhaps the Intended did know Kurtz best? Is it that she understood his dreams, his
ideals, and that these were the true centre of Kurtz, that which could explain both sides of the corrupted idealist? Or is this an indication of Marlow’s limitations, of his own desire to maintain a separate world of imagined ideals, a world in which Kurtz’s reality would be measured not by his actions but by his expressed values, his disappointed dreams—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?...

Heart of Darkness ends with Marlow’s decision to maintain the ignorance of the Intended, to keep her in the dark—however much he claims that it ‘would have been too dark—too dark altogether’ to tell her the truth about Kurtz.

Does this difference represent a change in Conrad’s own views about the need to keep women in that ‘world of their own’ the existence of which makes ‘ours’ (i.e. men’s) a little better? A case could be made for such a judgement, but it seems to me to ignore the fact that it is Marlow rather than Conrad who argues that women should be kept in that ‘world of their own’ in Heart of Darkness. What the novella gives us is not what Conrad the man thought about women, but Conrad’s artistic insight into the way in which gender divisions enter into the duplicities of imperialism. I have suggested that the African woman and Kurtz’s Intended can be seen as classic examples of female stereotypes: passive virgin and knowing, active woman. The novella suggests that imperialism was able to inherit these stereotypical female roles and to put them to work for itself, a work that in turn further intensified the domestic oppression of the female sex.
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"... and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness."

—Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness