

# AN ASHY HALO: WOMAN AS SYMBOL IN "HEART OF DARKNESS"

by EDWARD A. GEARY

In one of the latest contributions to the long debate over the moral quality of Marlow's "lie," David M. Martin argues that while Marlow's statement is "not literally true" it is "significantly true" to Kurtz's final cry, "for both superimpose an intentional reality upon experiential reality."<sup>1</sup> According to Martin's reading, Marlow has arrived at the truth by the end of the story. Having achieved the proper balance between the "objective reality" of Kurtz and the "subjectivistic reality" of the Intended, "Marlow is ready to function, as no one else in the story can, in the radical center of human consciousness."<sup>2</sup>

I propose another way of looking at "Heart of Darkness" that assumes a more limited awareness in Marlow. Although his journey into the heart of darkness has been, as he says, "the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience" and although it "seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me—and into my thoughts," it nonetheless was "not very clear" (p. 7).<sup>3</sup> Even as he tells the story long afterward, he is still groping for its full meaning. Marlow is a character of mixed impulses, torn between his authentic insights and his allegiance to conventional opinions. The tension appears, for example, in his ambivalent attitude toward imperialism. He sees through the pious pretensions of the European exploiters, but he can still insist that the "conquest of the earth" is redeemed by "an idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to" (ibid.) When he describes the map hanging in the Company offices, he remarks that the areas shown in red (indicating British possessions) are "good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there" (p. 10). In other words, while Belgian imperialism is an unmixed evil, the British are uniquely qualified to carry the White Man's Burden. However, the story itself demonstrates the inadequacy of these conventional apologies for im-

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1. "The Function of the Intended in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness," *Studies in Short Fiction*, 11 (Winter 1974), 31.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

3. Parenthetical references to "Heart of Darkness" are to the Norton Critical Edition, revised, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: Norton, 1971).

perialism. Kurtz had an idea, in contrast to the other adventurers in the Congo, a very noble sounding idea which he did not discover to be a sentimental pretence until it was too late. Moreover, Kurtz was not merely a representative of Belgian imperialism. "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (p. 50), and that includes England. "The original Kurtz had been educated partly in England, and—as he was good enough to say himself—his sympathies were in the right place."

A similar ambivalence appears in Marlow's attitude toward women. He accepts the nineteenth-century doctrine of separate spheres for the sexes, a doctrine which requires of him a certain chivalric regard for woman as an ideal but allows an easy patronization of women as persons. He is embarrassed to admit that he obtained his position in the Congo through the efforts of his aunt. However, despite her influence in the centers of power (something theoretically outside the woman's sphere) she seems in general to cater admirably to a sense of masculine superiority, and Marlow uses her as a springboard for a statement on the nature of the feminine mind: "It's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there has 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" (p. 12). This is purely patronizing. We see an admixture of idealization when he first speaks of Kurtz's Intended: "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 stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse" (p. 49). This is another side of the conventional view. The sign of woman's inferiority—her incapacity for the "real" world of masculine activity—is paradoxically also a sign of superiority, or at least of high social utility. Men may laugh at the beautiful illusory world of women, but they must also respect, even revere it as an ideal, and they must protect it if civilization is to endure.<sup>4</sup>

Beneath these conventional attitudes, Marlow reveals at crucial moments another reaction to women, a deep sense of mistrust and fear. The female receptionists in the Company offices strike him, not as simple and deluded like his aunt, but as possessors of some secret and threatening knowledge. He also senses something menacing in the allegorical painting

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4. This is similar to the view that led some 104 prominent Victorian women to issue "An Appeal Against Female Suffrage" in 1889, arguing that "the emancipating process has now reached the limits fixed by the physical constitution of women, and by the fundamental difference which must always exist between their main occupations and those of men." They also believed that women should be out of it and that for them to enter "the turmoil of active political life" would be "to blunt the special moral qualities of women, and so to lessen the national reserves of moral force." *The Nineteenth Century*, 25 (June 1889), 781-788.

by Kurtz which he sees at the Central Station: "a small sketch in oils, on a panel, representing a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch. The background was sombre—almost black. The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the torchlight on the face was sinister" (p. 25). The blindfolded woman may represent Justice, as Ted E. Boyle assumes,<sup>5</sup> or, as Addison C. Bross maintains, Truth or Faith or, more broadly, the Ideal.<sup>6</sup> The important point is that she symbolizes some very high value of civilization. Perhaps she is Civilization itself, carrying the "sacred fire" into the dark places of the earth. Kurtz painted the picture while he was waiting to go farther upriver to carry out his dual mission of civilizing the natives and earning percentages. Therefore, it must have come out of the same frame of mind that produced the eloquently altruistic report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. For Kurtz, then, there would have been nothing sinister in the painting, just as there would have been nothing "ominous" (p. 51) in the opening paragraph of the report. Kurtz was no ironist. He carried his idealistic illusions all the way into the heart of Africa, and when disillusionment came it led not to the double vision of irony but to a new single vision: "Exterminate all the brutes!" (ibid.). Kurtz's revulsion had all the zeal of his enthusiasm.

Marlow's perception of the painting reverses Kurtz's intended effect. The somberness of the background is not relieved by the torchlight; instead, the light itself has an effect of darkness, giving the woman's face a sinister appearance. Marlow does not elaborate on this sinister quality. He simply records a momentary impression. But he makes us see the painting in an ironic light, and when it is examined in this way some further implications appear. Kurtz's report indicates that he envisioned himself as an agent of civilization, a bearer of light; yet in his painting he used a woman to symbolize this mission. This is the irony in the idealization of women. Woman as symbol is of central importance, the embodiment of the culture's highest values. Yet women as persons are severely restricted in their sphere of activity; they are, as Marlow says, "out of it." The enterprises of civilization are carried on in woman's name but not under her direction (there are no European women in the Congo), and the ideals she symbolizes are not necessarily her own ideals but those that matter most to men as justification of their activities and desires. Kurtz's painting presents woman purely as object, as carrier of ideals: stately, ethereal, inspirational, and sexless. If there is something sinister about her, might it not reside in the ideals she represents? Certainly she is an interesting symbol of European imperialism in "Heart of Darkness": a blindfolded torchbearer blindly

5. "Marlow's 'Lie,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, 1 (Winter 1964), 160.

6. "The Unextinguishable Light of Belief: Conrad's Attitude Toward Women," *Conradiana*, 2 (Spring 1970), 41.

carrying in the guise of light a more abysmal darkness, in the guise of civilization a more vicious savagery.

Kurtz's idealistic intention and Marlow's sinister impression both, I suggest, stem from a habit of regarding women as objects or symbols rather than as persons. In this context, Kurtz's Intended and the African priestess are significant as the representatives of two sides of a cultural fantasy. The Intended is the living repository of the values symbolized in Kurtz's painting. She is pure, spiritual, free from sexuality; a princess kept inviolate behind protecting walls, a symbol of all that belongs to man's "higher" self. The African, in contrast, is "a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman" (p. 61), evoking the male fantasy of unlimited sexuality (a fantasy closely associated, in the nineteenth century, with the tropics and the "darker races"). She is adorned with "bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch-men" (p. 62), and she seems to Marlow the embodiment of some preternatural power: "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" (*ibid.*). Conrad could hardly have done more to suggest symbolic woman in her elemental and passionate phase, and the combination of fascination and menace she evokes.

For Kurtz, before his final horrific enlightenment, the dark woman and the light seem to have been the defining symbols of two irreconcilable worlds. Marlow, however, has intimations that they belong to the same world. He sees the allegorical figure in Kurtz's painting as "stately" and "sinister" and the African woman as "ominous and stately." Moreover, there are moments when he senses the person behind the symbol. One such moment occurs in the jungle when the African woman, who has seemed "like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose," suddenly impresses him as a woman who is afraid: "she stopped as if her heart had failed her" (*ibid.*).

Marlow's various attitudes toward women recur in the concluding scene with Kurtz's Intended: the conventional patronization and idealization, the sense of menace, and moments of more authentic personal insight. The question on which an interpretation of the story largely depends is which attitude predominates and why? David M. Martin rightly sees Marlow's journey to the Intended as "significantly paralleled to his earlier journey to Mr. Kurtz. . . . In the earlier episode, Marlow had felt 'as though . . . [he] were about to set off for the centre of the earth'; now, he

sets off for what amounts to the center of that civilization that man himself has imposed upon the earth."<sup>7</sup> Exactly. But what does Marlow discover at the center of civilization? In a city which is like a whited sepulcher, on "a street as still and decorous as a well-kept alley in a cemetery" (p. 74), in a house whose furnishings are imaged in funereal terms or in terms that recall the dark, tangled undergrowth of the jungle, he finds a woman who has died as a person and who lives only as a symbol of dead or illusory ideals.

I do not suggest that Marlow himself realizes the full implications of this encounter, but Conrad does not leave us to rely exclusively on Marlow's conscious perceptions. There is ample evidence, for example, that Marlow enters the scene as the victim of an illusion, under the spell of a portrait of the Intended given to him by Kurtz: "She struck me as beautiful—I mean she had a beautiful expression. I know that the sunlight can be made to lie, too, yet one felt that no manipulation of light and pose could have conveyed the delicate shade of truthfulness upon those features. She seemed ready to listen without mental reservation, without suspicion, without a thought for herself" (*ibid.*). Marlow regards this portrait without irony, accepting at face value the stereotype of the pure, selfless, "inspirational" woman. In fact, it becomes evident in the scene that follows that the Intended is full of "mental reservation," incapable of receiving the truth, and, in her naive and innocent way, completely ego-centric. Marvin Mudrick has characterized Marlow's interview with the Intended as "a jumble of melodramatic tricks."<sup>8</sup> I suggest that the melodramatic clichés are a reflection of the Intended's vision. Life, for her, is a sentimental novel in which she has found her defining role: the Bereaved, a role which she will enact continuously for the rest of her life.

Evidence of this pervades the scene. She dresses the role and carries herself in the role: "She came forward, all in black, with a pale head, floating towards me in the dusk" (p. 75). "She carried her sorrowful head as though she were proud of that sorrow, as though she would say, I—I alone know how to mourn for him as he deserves" (p. 76). She speaks in the language of sentimental fiction and goes so far as to put the words into Marlow's mouth:

"Intimacy grows quickly out there," I said. "I knew him as well as it is possible for one man to know another."

"And you admired him," she said. "It was impossible to know him and not to admire him. Was it?"

7. Martin, p. 29.

8. "The Originality of Conrad," *The Hudson Review*, 11 (Winter 1958-1959), 552.

"He 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!" (ibid.)

In a sense, she even supplies the "lie" which Marlow tells at the end. When he lets it slip out that he heard Kurtz's last words, he stops "in a fright" (p. 78) because he realizes that in the Intended's world, the world of the sentimental novel, the only appropriate dying words are the name of one's beloved.

Marlow's growing discomfiture finds expression in what Mudrick terms "cheaply ironic double-talk."<sup>9</sup> But if Marlow's conscious irony is less incisive here than it is elsewhere in "Heart of Darkness," the reason can be found in the tension between his half-recognition of the real implications of the Intended's vacuousness and his still strong allegiance to conventional stereotypes. For Marlow this encounter is a crisis of chivalry. The Intended's situation and character are such as to trigger his conventional responses. She is at once a symbol of his civilization's ideals and an object of pity, a helpless woman who must be protected from reality. He has seen the failure of civilization in Africa, and as he approaches her dwelling in the dusk he has the feeling that "It was a moment of triumph for the wilderness, an invading and vengeful rush which, it seemed to me, I would have to keep back alone for the salvation of another soul" (p. 75). Convention offers Marlow a tempting role here. He is Horatio at the bridge, Roland in the passages of Spain, fighting alone against overwhelming odds for the preservation of civilization. To an extent he succumbs to that role as he responds to the Intended's "pure brow" and her "guileless, profound, confident and trustful" glance (p. 76) and bows his head "before the faith that was in her, before that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness, in the triumphant darkness from which I could not have defended her—from which I could not even defend myself" (p. 77).

The conventional stereotype requires that this pale, pure, ethereal woman be identified with the light, with the sacred fire of the ideal. The growing darkness should be—as Marlow sees it in his more conventional moments—an intruder upon the sanctity of the shrine of civilization. However, it becomes increasingly clear upon examination of the episode that the Intended belongs to the darkness. The sepulchral setting seems alien to Marlow; certainly it is alien to the pretensions of European civilization;

9. Mudrick, p. 552.

but it is in the heart of that civilization, and it is not alien to the Intended. She is very much a part of the rich, dead surroundings, and Marlow perceives an "ashy halo" (p. 76) around her face in the failing light, an image which calls to mind the dark and sinister effect of the light in Kurtz's painting.

Moreover, the savage darkness which Marlow feels as an invading force manifests itself only when he arrives at her house, as though it had been there all the time. This is a crucial point and one that has been overlooked in most readings of "Heart of Darkness." Since Africa, Kurtz has been a powerful but receding memory for Marlow, and he comes to the Intended's house expecting that his visit will mark the end of his involvement with Kurtz. It is only when he arrives at the building where she lives that he begins to see the cadaverous Kurtz with hallucinatory intensity, and it is as he waits outside her door that he begins to "hear the whispered cry, 'The horror! The horror!'" (p. 75). When she enters the room to speak to him, Marlow has a vision of the Intended and Kurtz together, "his death and her sorrow," and he hears her say "I have survived" at the same instant that he hears Kurtz's dying cry. "I asked myself what I was doing there, with a sensation of panic in my heart as though I had blundered into a place of cruel and absurd mysteries not fit for a human being to behold" (p. 76).

This cruel and inhuman place is not in an African jungle but a richly appointed drawing room in the heart of civilized Europe, and the horror is that the Intended has survived. But what does her survival mean? If I am right in suggesting that the Intended has no real selfhood, that she is a woman depersonalized in the interests of a cultural ideal, then the issue is not her personal survival or the survival of her illusions, but the survival of what she symbolizes. Kurtz went to Africa for her, both literally and symbolically. He had to make his fortune before her aristocratic kinsmen would accept him as her suitor. Therefore, his depredations were committed in her name. But he also took his benevolent intentions to the Congo in her name, for she is the idealized self-image of his civilization. Kurtz could see nothing inconsistent in his two goals, since they both were to be achieved for his Intended. Kurtz had faith in his ideals; he went out "equipped with moral ideas of some sort" (p. 31) which set him apart from the other exploiters, and yet he reverted to a savagery more profound than any of the others. This must surely have been at least part of the horror he saw at his death: that he went bad not in spite of his ideals but because of them, because they were built on illusory foundations and rendered him incapable of dealing with his own inner darkness.

The moment of vision when Marlow sees Kurtz and the Intended together brings him close to a recognition of what she means as a cultural

symbol, perhaps as close as he ever comes. He comes close again at the end of the interview. When she asks for Kurtz's dying words "to live with," Marlow is "on the point of crying at her, 'Don't you hear them?' The dusk was repeating them in a persistent whisper all around us, in a whisper that seemed to swell menacingly like the first whisper of a rising wind. 'The horror! The horror!' " (p. 79). But Marlow's conventional chivalric instincts prevail, and, filled with self-disgust, he tells her the lie she wants to hear rather than the truth which would have been "too dark altogether." Ironically, though, in lying he tells the truth after all. For in one sense—perhaps the darkest sense that "Heart of Darkness" can have—"The horror!" is indeed her name.