REVIS(IT)ING JOSEPH CONRAD’S *HEART OF DARKNESS*:
WOMEN, SYMBOLISM, AND RESISTANCE

by

Kathryn Marie Smith

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

The Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Florida Atlantic University

Boca Raton, Florida

April 2009
REVIS(IT)ING JOSEPH CONRAD’S HEART OF DARKNESS:

WOMEN, SYMBOLISM, AND RESISTANCE

by

Kathryn Marie Smith

This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate’s thesis advisor, Dr. Sika Dagbovie, Department of English, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

Sika Dagbovie, Ph.D.
Thesis Advisor

Josephine Beoku-Betts, Ph.D.

Jane Caputi, Ph.D.

Josephine Beoku-Betts, Ph.D.
Interim Director, Women’s Studies Center

Manjunath Pendakur, Ph.D.
Dean, Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters

Barry T. Robinson, Ph.D.
Dean, Graduate College

April 2, 2009
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to express her sincere gratitude to her thesis advisor, Dr. Sika Dagbovie, who not only guided her ideas and arguments, but also spent countless hours helping her revise and improve her work. She also would like to thank her thesis committee members, Dr. Josephine Beoku-Betts and Dr. Jane Caputi, who together provided invaluable feedback, as well as Donna Bryan, who supported her throughout the entire thesis process. The author would not have been able to complete this thesis without the continuing assistance and mentorship of the entire Women’s Studies Center. Her experience in the Women’s Studies graduate program has been nothing but positive, and she will dearly miss both her mentors and colleagues. Lastly, the author has to extend her heartfelt thanks to all of her friends and family who have offered endless encouragement throughout her academic endeavors.
Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is, admittedly, a text with many racist, imperialist and sexist subtexts. A feminist literary analysis, however, can extract women’s empowerment and agency. This thesis takes a closer look at the Mistress (also known as the African woman) and the Intended, two women with vastly different racial and class backgrounds who, in their own ways, demonstrate resistance. This thesis analyzes Mr. Kurtz’s often-ignored sketch in oils, arguing that the sketch itself demonstrates the colonial mentality of difference and the disruption of that difference. It then explores both the Mistress and the Intended in detail, positing that while the Mistress uses the colonizers’ fear of the wilderness and its silence to her advantage, the Intended takes control over her own domestic circumstance. Overall, this author asserts that the Mistress and the Intended, while often dismissed, are noteworthy, important, and influential characters in *Heart of Darkness.*
DEDICATION

This manuscript is dedicated to the Women’s Studies Center at Florida Atlantic University. The Women’s Studies graduate program has offered me invaluable opportunities for learning and teaching, and has equipped me to pursue my dream of becoming a college professor. I will always remember the people I have befriended in this program, and I hope to pass on their legacy of encouragement and empowerment.
REVIS(IT)ING JOSEPH CONRAD’S *HEART OF DARKNESS*:
WOMEN, SYMBOLISM, AND RESISTANCE

Chapter I: “‘Recognizing, Resisting, and Overturning’ Colonialism:

Analyzing the Women of *Heart of Darkness*” .................................................... 1

Chapter II: “Sketching the Uncontrollable Darkness: Colonialism, Power, and

Subversion in *Heart of Darkness*” ........................................................................ 17

Chapter III: “‘The Unswerving Steadiness of Her Glance’:

Restraint and Resistance” ..................................................................................... 37

Chapter IV: “‘Too Dark Altogether’: The Intended, Marlow’s Intentions,

and Disruptive Darkness” ..................................................................................... 57

Works Cited.............................................................................................................. 76
I. “RECOGNIZING, RESISTING, AND OVERTURNING” COLONIALISM: ANALYZING THE WOMEN OF HEART OF DARKNESS

Introduction: Text as Symbolic Power (Play)

On the surface, Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (1899), a story of Belgian colonialism in Africa, seems to be a male-driven text which leaves little room for a feminist literary analysis. Conrad’s narrator, protagonist, major and minor characters are all European men, and the women who exist within the novella are not even given names. These women are the fiancée and the lover of Mr. Kurtz, a manager of the Belgian Congo trade, and they are only known in reference to him – his fiancée as his Intended and the African woman only as his beautiful “savage” Mistress. The narrator, Marlow, often depicts these two female characters as two-dimensional caricatures instead of genuine people, striving to keep them in their geographic and proverbial place throughout the novel. Despite the patriarchal and imperialist elements written and narrated throughout the text, however, a feminist critique can reveal important ways in which the Mistress and the Intended defy Marlow’s categorization. Though the women in Heart of Darkness are often relegated to the margins of the text, they are simultaneously unimportant and vitally important. Héliéna M.

1 In the essay, “A Black Athena in the Heart of Darkness, or Conrad’s Baffling Oxymorons,” André Voila et al. argue that Conrad never specifically names the African woman Kurtz’s mistress. Though their point is intriguing, for the purposes of my paper, as well as clarity, I will be following the literary critical tradition of identifying Kurtz’s fiancée as the Intended and the African woman as the Mistress.
Krenn, a postcolonial literary scholar, highlights this contradiction in her essay, “The ‘Beautiful’ Women: Women as Reflections of Colonial Issues in Conrad’s Malay Novels,” stating that the “Conradian female character appears to be altogether insignificant even though she plays both a structurally and thematically important role” (106). The Intended and the Mistress are not valued characters in terms of textual attention and spoken voice, but they are imperative to Marlow, for they represent foundational symbols of colonialism. Their “structurally and thematically important role,” then, is the representation (and consequent disruption) of purity and sexuality, civilization and savagery, order and chaos, respectively. In Marlow’s perspective, Kurtz’s fiancée embodies the “civilized” woman who is white in many senses of the word – pure, fair-skinned, European, upper-middle-class – while Kurtz’s African mistress is the epitome of savagery and darkness. As symbols, these two women are vital to colonialism, in that they justify the racism, ideals and false heroism of imperialist agendas.

Padmini Mongia elaborates upon the women’s contradictory and complicated position, writing, “[n]ot active participants in adventure narratives, women are nevertheless the site upon which the anxieties of late Victorian and early Edwardian England are played out. The feminine, always associated with what is weak but also often threatening or seductive, is a negative trope in . . . Heart of Darkness” (135). Mongia poignantly highlights the strange ambiguity the Mistress and Intended occupy in Heart of Darkness; though they are not major characters in the traditional sense, they remain the “site” of much of the thought and action. Kurtz’s Intended is the appropriately weak and cloistered feminine figure while his Mistress represents the
dark, powerful side of femininity which needs to be contained. The two women, the Mistress and the Intended, are necessary opposites in the colonial discourse of power and masculinity, for as stereotypes they reinforce patriarchal ideas of white and black femaleness and the presentation of Africans as Other.

_Heart of Darkness_, like any imperialist text, needs symbols and binaries to sustain itself and create a false image of masculinity and power.\(^2\) Interestingly, the Mistress and the Intended _are_ these symbols, defined against each other as opposites which reinforce the colonial project. The Mistress, as an African woman, is not-white and not-civilized, serving as foil to the Intended, who is not-black and not-savage.

Ellen Rooney refers to these depictions of women as the “masculine ‘narrative of femininity’” which uses “stereotypes of woman and women” in order to affirm “patriarchy’s many stories” about femininity, masculinity, and power relations (73). The Intended represents all that masculinity is fighting to protect (white women), just as the Mistress is an embodiment of what colonizers strive to tame (black women). In addition, not only do the women become symbols, but their humanity is further de-emphasized by their association with a sort of landscape, a “site” upon which, according to Mongia, the male colonizers’ anxieties are written. This conflation of women with land has particular significance for the Mistress, for the colonizers inevitably see her as a dark wilderness which/whom they need to conquer, a reality which I discuss further in Chapter Three.

\(^2\) Literary critic Jeremy Hawthorn affirms this assessment in his discussion of the women in _Heart of Darkness_: “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” (147).
This thesis seeks not only to illuminate and deconstruct the false binaries of colonialism, but also to revive the Intended and the Mistress as important characters in Conrad’s novella. Drawing on and departing from those critics who have acknowledged the women’s (un)importance, I take a feminist critical perspective by highlighting the female characters’ agency within *Heart of Darkness*. I follow the lead of postcolonial literary critic Rose Marangoly George, who offers a remedy to the rampant imperialism of Western texts in her article, “Feminists Theorize Colonial/Postcolonial.” She suggests that readers use “a critical framework in which literary and other texts can be read against the grain of the hegemonic discourse in a colonial or neocolonial context” (Marangoly George 212). According to Marangoly George, this framework is different than typical literary analysis, for it “insists on recognizing, resisting, and overturning the strictures and structures of colonial relations of power” (212, emphasis mine). She therefore offers three interconnecting responses to colonialist literature which I employ in this thesis: (a) recognizing and identifying imperialist, racist, and sexist elements, (b) resisting these elements through critique and through revealing women’s agency, and (c) overturning the “strictures and structures” of imperialism by writing new meanings into the text. In analyzing *Heart of Darkness*, I argue that Marlow actively constructs the Intended and the Mistress as static symbols, but that these female characters break free from

---

3 Marangoly George references Spivak in her insistence on recognizing women’s agency despite oppression: “Spivak points to what will become a major preoccupation of postcolonial feminist writing: namely, if and how disenfranchised women can represent, speak, and act for themselves, despite oppressive conditions. Postcolonial feminism unflinchingly acknowledges that there are many obstacles in the path of securing such ‘voice-consciousness.’” Yet, despite the odds, postcolonial feminist discourse strives to create the space for this ‘countersentence’ to be spoken by the ‘gendered subaltern’” (Marangoly George 216).
these oppositional categories and threaten to destroy the carefully crafted empire of colonialism.

Discussing the women’s agency in *Heart of Darkness* is inherently complicated because, as fictional characters, they are largely controlled by the author Conrad, and even the narrator Marlow. What this thesis reveals, however, are the ways in which the characters escape Conrad’s control at crucial times within the narrative. The Mistress, for example, is so threatening to Conrad that he edits her role several times between 1899 and 1902 to diminish her presence. In Chapters Three and Four, I analyze these elisions to expose the Mistress’s hidden power. Furthermore, I read the Mistress Intended as a character that in fact speaks to “real” historical and autonomous women. Throughout this thesis, I avoid the “tendency to either ignore or romanticize female agency, portraying women as victims or heroines” (Hodgson and McCurdy 16). Instead, I acknowledge that the female characters are oppressed in certain ways but also argue, like Dorothy Hodges and Sheryl McCurdy that they “produce, reproduce, and transform gender representations and relations” and that “the cumulative effect of their actions, large and small, is to shift relations of power, and thereby reconfigure gender relations and representations” (16). The irony of *Heart of Darkness* is that although Conrad and Marlow reduce the Mistress and the Intended to symbols in order to contain them, the female characters end up symbolizing not only the impossibility and disruption of colonial binaries, but also powerful archetypes of female power.
Foundations and Faults: Critical Scholarship on *Heart of Darkness*

*Heart of Darkness*, though a short novella, has inspired over a century of scholarly criticism, and the patterns of that criticism have varied greatly over the years. Upon publication in 1899, *Heart of Darkness* was generally praised by reviewers and critics, but largely fell into obscurity for the next several decades. In the 1930s and 1940s, however, Conrad enjoyed a sort of revival when M.C. Bradbrook and F.R. Leavis proclaimed *Heart of Darkness* to be one of the great works of the Western literary canon, and Conrad’s novella has maintained this lofty position. In fact, in the 1960s, Lionel Trilling regarded *Heart of Darkness* as the “quintessentially modern text” (Tredell 9).

While *Heart of Darkness* continued to gain critical momentum later in the twentieth century, a new type of critical perspective on the novella arose, one which denounced the racism and imperialism that Conrad’s work seemed to espouse. Postcolonial, feminist, and Marxist critics alike joined in disparaging the text’s treatment of Africans and women (and, of course, African women). My thesis follows most closely the tenets of this postcolonial and feminist literary criticism, for it is no secret that Conrad’s novella, an accepted addition to the Western literary canon, harbors many racist, sexist, and imperialist overtones.

One of the leading literary critics to denounce the colonizing aspects of *Heart of Darkness* was author Chinua Achebe, who attacked Joseph Conrad for writing an

---

4 Contemporaries of Trilling include Eloise Knapp Hay and J. Hillis Miller, who discuss the novel’s “critique” of imperialism and its treatment of nihilism, respectively. In addition, leading scholars predating Trilling et al. are Raymond Williams and Albert J. Guerard, who analyze the novel’s form and metaphor but who largely ignore social and historical context.
overtly racist text which underwrites an imperialist agenda. Achebe describes the
convention of making Africa(ns) dark and forbidding in his essay, “An Image of
Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness,*” arguing that Conrad’s novella
“projects the image of Africa as ‘the other world,’ the antithesis of Europe and
therefore of civilization” (Achebe 252). Achebe astutely posits that Conrad chose
Africa as a location for fantastical and horrifying events because his (racist) audience
would readily accept chaos and darkness if it came from the continent of Africa.
According to Achebe, Conrad “chose the role of purveyor of comforting myths,” and
these myths pertain not only to Africa but to the African woman as well (Achebe 253).
He claims that Conrad spends time describing the Mistress for two reasons: “[f]irst,
she is in her place and so can win Conrad’s special brand of approval and second, she
fulfills a structural requirement of the story: a savage counterpart to the refined,
European woman who will step forth at the end of the story” (Achebe 255). I will
discuss both of Achebe’s contentions further in my thesis, but I challenge his claim of
“the author’s bestowal of human expression to the one [The Intended] and the
withholding of it from the other [the Mistress]” (Achebe 255). Achebe may be correct
in that Conrad (and Marlow) do not bestow the Mistress with “human expression,” yet
a close reading of her interactions with the colonizers reveals a great deal of agency
and autonomy.5

Chinua Achebe is not the only critic to underestimate the volition that
Conrad’s women display. In her groundbreaking article, “The Women Do Not Travel:
Gender, Difference, and Incommensurability in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness,*”

---

5 See Patrick Brantlinger and André Voila et al. for a similar perspective.
Gabrielle MacIntire describes the women as “powerless,” “sedentary, stationary, and confined to their own territories”: language which is, in itself, very confining (258-9). Nina Strauss uses the same negative language in her work, claiming that the African woman’s “image, though visually full, is physically void and nearly inhuman; for it is explicitly allied with that abominable darkness described by Marlow” (208). While Strauss is correct to point out the connection between the Mistress and darkness (a colonialist link which I will further discuss in Chapter Three), she forgets the crucial fact that this is how the Mistress is “described by Marlow.” The point of my thesis is to reveal the women’s importance despite sexist and racist narration. This thesis directly argues against Strauss’s statement that “Conrad’s text offers no women’s voice . . . to the reader” (208).

In contrast to Strauss and MacIntire, Rita Bode gives quite a different interpretation of Heart of Darkness, one which exposes an abundance of women’s voices. She contends that though criticism has often focused on the “theme of brotherhood,” specifically between Marlow and Kurtz, a careful reader can find the bonds of sisterhood within the novella (Bode 20). In her essay, “‘They…Should Be Out Of It:’ The Women of Heart of Darkness,” Bode writes about how “the women also form significant reflections of each other,” and how in this way, they “form a kind of sisterhood in which each female seems to support and complement the intents of the others” (Bode 20). The Mistress and the Intended may form connections, and indeed sometimes serve as “reflections of each other,” yet these ties are found solely in literary devices and not in the women’s actions. Bode’s article implies a conscious sisterhood between the two female characters when, in fact, they are separated by not
geography, but also race and class. Bode’s optimism about the women’s roles is encouraging, but this thesis looks to find more nuanced, textually-based examples of agency and power within the Mistress and the Intended.

While I am not alone in looking closer at the female characters within *Heart of Darkness*, my thesis differs from previous scholarship in that I grant both the Mistress and the Intended agency. I argue that this agency is evident through the women’s actions, and through Marlow’s inability to keep lightness and darkness separate (such as when the supposedly pure, white Intended is surrounded by darkness). Many critics, from Chinua Achebe to Johanna M. Smith, freely acknowledge the power of the African woman in Conrad’s short story, but rarely do they mention the Intended’s role in the story. In fact, as is the case with Ian Watt’s “*Heart of Darkness and Nineteenth-Century Thought,*” scholars tend to explain away the Intended’s passivity by asserting that she is confined to her domestic sphere, and therefore, cannot be expected to play an active role.

One example of this critical pattern—solely discussing the Mistress—is evident in the essay, “*Heart of Darkness: Anti-Imperialism, Racism, or Impressionism?*” by Patrick Brantlinger. He argues that “Kurtz’s ‘superb and savage’ mistress, although described in glowing detail, is given no voice, but in spite of this […] she, at least, entertained no illusions about Kurtz or about imperialism” (401). In stating that “she, at least, entertained no illusions,” Brantlinger implies the seeming naivete of Kurtz’s fiancé and the way in which Marlow shelters her, without in fact mentioning the Intended at all. Additionally, André Voila et al. devote an entire article only to the African woman, in which they claim that she is “a Black Athena in the
“Heart of Darkness.” The authors offer close readings of the passages concerning the
Mistress, arguing that “the paragraphs devoted to the character do not present a static
portrait but a kind of compressed drama” (Voila et al. 164). The above authors have
undoubtedly improved the literary analysis of *Heart of Darkness* by recognizing the
Mistress’s agency and pioneering a study into the women of Conrad’s novella. Where
they fall short, however, is in discussing the multifaceted ways in which both the
Mistress and the Intended resist Marlow’s misogynistic narration. The point of this
thesis is not simply to critique *Heart of Darkness* for its patriarchal and racist
depictions of the female characters, but rather, to focus on “how disenfranchised
women can represent, speak, and act for themselves, despite oppressive conditions”
(Marangoly George 216).

**Feminist Frameworks**

While many scholars have explored the themes, characters, symbols, and
significance of *Heart of Darkness*, still others have struggled with the difficulties of
even approaching colonial, masculine-centered literature. Feminist literary theory, as a
school of criticism, began in the 1960s as a study of how patriarchal texts, through
masculine language, methods, and subject matter, tend to alienate female readers and
scholars. Preceding the feminist literary movement, Virginia Woolf, in “A Room of
One’s Own,” reflected on the inherent contradiction of woman reader/writer
approaching patriarchal texts. Authors such as Kate Millett seized upon this feminist
foundation and questioned how a woman reader could begin to relate to masculinist
works like *Heart of Darkness*, when the main characters, plot line, and even
metaphors focus solely on men. In response to such obstacles, scholars like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar created their own feminist-centered criticism on traditional texts, revealing patriarchal and imperialist undercurrents that previous critics seem to have missed. The goal of these authors was not only to deconstruct canonical works but also to reveal hidden female empowerment within those same literary texts. Their aims were and are threefold: “to counter conscious and unconscious patriarchal presuppositions,” “to explore women’s literature,” and to examine the continuing effects that literature imposes on general society (Leitch 315).

Ultimately, feminist and postcolonial scholars view Conrad’s work as a text fraught with sexist, racist, and imperialist themes, but which, for these reasons, needs to be analyzed through a progressive lens. In the essay “‘Too Beautiful Altogether’: Patriarchal Ideology in Heart of Darkness,” Johanna M. Smith discusses the difficulties and benefits of dissecting Heart of Darkness. Smith writes:

> A story about manly adventure narrated and written by a man, Heart of Darkness might seem an unpropitious subject for feminist criticism . . . however, a feminist approach to Conrad’s story of colonizing can interrogate its complex interrelation of patriarchal and imperialist ideologies. By examining the women in Marlow’s narrative, we can identify the patriarchal-imperialist blend that requires the kinds of women he creates. (Smith 180)

In this one paragraph, Smith deftly identifies the limitations imposed on both the critics and Conrad’s female characters. Because the novella is both written and narrated by men, the Mistress and the Intended seem to be trapped in a limiting and
patriarchal world. Despite the fact that Marlow constructs the women as polar opposites to reinforce the colonial empire, I argue that the Mistress and the Intended threaten to dismantle these stereotypes. I endeavor, like Smith, to “identify the patriarchal-imperialist blend” in Heart of Darkness that tries to keep the female characters firmly in their place, while also uncovering the women’s agency.

In expanding upon the women’s roles in Heart of Darkness, I mirror Rooney, who argues that “[f]eminism thus always involves a ‘rewriting’ of femininity or femininities” outside of the static ways in which patriarchy has depicted women (17, emphasis mine). Even more importantly, Rooney claims that feminist literary theories “are the collective conversations” of feminist readers concerning “the intersections of subject formations such as race, class, sexuality, and gender, in the work of literature” (17). I implement Rooney’s perspective on feminist literary criticism in order to look at intersectional oppressions in Heart of Darkness – specifically racism, sexism, and imperialism – and also to rewrite what it means to be a female character in Conrad’s novel.

A strong focus on intersectionality is important, because even a feminist discussion of literary “women” can easily subsume women of all ethnicities under the banner of (white, middle-class) Woman. As Spivak asserts in “Feminism and Critical Theory,” “[w]hat seems missing […] is the dimension of race” (59). As a postcolonial feminist as well as a woman of color, Spivak calls for a complex reading of literature such as Heart of Darkness, including an in-depth look into how it, as a text, reinforces the rhetoric of colonialism. In her ground-breaking essay, “Three Women’s Texts and

---

6 Leading feminist scholars who explore intersectionality and the tendency for white feminists to ignore race are Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks.
a Critique of Imperialism,” Spivak uncovers the ways in which British imperialism was inextricably connected to the literature which authors such as Conrad produced. In other words, Conrad, as a male British author, is actively constructing British ideals of colonialism, masculinity, and normality in *Heart of Darkness*, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Exploring Marlow’s stereotypes of the Mistress and the Intended lends insight into colonial views of race, gender, and class, particularly how intersections of these social signifiers literally mold and shape literary characters. Although the two women are both middle- to upper-class in their respective communities, the implications of their class statuses are vastly different. The Intended, as a white, European woman, largely conforms to the expectations of domesticity, staying indoors and pining for her unfaithful fiancé, whom she believes is valiantly earning money for their marriage. Later in the story, when Kurtz dies, she is then required to dress in mourning for a lengthened period of time, still confined inside her dim home. While the European male colonizers treat the Intended as a porcelain doll because of her class, the African Mistress’s upper class does not provide her the same luxury, comfort and protection. Her jewelry, clothing, and adornment suggest that she is an upper-class woman, if not a queen, amongst her people, but to the colonizers she is simply another black woman to use and control. It is clear, therefore, that when colonial power is involved, race prejudice undercuts class privilege, and all Africans are subsumed into the category of undesirable darkness.

---

7 Johanna M. Smith argues that readers should view the Mistress as a woman warrior with a position of power among her native community.
Like Spivak, this thesis encourages modern readers to realize that “[t]he role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored” although this fact “continue[s] to be disregarded in the reading of nineteenth-century British literature” (Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts” 896). Spivak goes as far as to assert that the absence of a postcolonial, feminist lens in literature analysis is the continuation of the “imperialist project, displaced and dispersed into more modern forms” (896). It is, admittedly, a paradox to embark on a feminist analysis of a text that is as obviously patriarchal and imperialist as Heart of Darkness, but I am not the first to do so. Gertrude Mianda, in her study of gender and education in the Belgian Congo, argues that “it is precisely because women were kept on the margins of social and public discourse in the Belgian Congo that we must begin to write their history by making use of men’s writings. Only in this way can we extricate Congolese women from the rubbish of colonization” (Mianda 145). Similarly, in my thesis, I extricate the stories of the Mistress and the Intended even though they are situated in a predominantly male atmosphere. My analysis of the men’s reactions to, and fear of, the women is just as telling as the women’s own actions and agency.

This thesis is an attempt to restate the importance of these female characters in a more encompassing way. In my second chapter, “Sketching the Uncontrollable Darkness: Colonialism, Power, and Subversion in Heart of Darkness,” I analyze a powerful yet often overlooked symbol in Heart of Darkness: Kurtz’s sketch of the blindfolded woman carrying a torch. I draw upon scholarship which suggests a strong connection between the appropriation involved in sketching portraits and landscapes, and the further appropriation of the land and people themselves. In drawing the
archetypal blinded woman, I argue that Kurtz is attempting to create a flawless figure of justice (most likely an exaggeration of the Intended’s naivete and purity) to act as a foil to the darkness and savagery he assumes he will encounter in the Congo. Ironically, his drawing becomes a conflation of the Mistress and the Intended; though Kurtz strives to fix a static depiction of (white) womanhood, he in fact depicts a powerful combination of the Mistress’s and the Intended’s characteristics. Additionally and importantly, this one sketch undermines Marlow’s careful attempts to keep the two women separate, as symbols for the colonial empire.

The third chapter of this thesis, “‘The Unswerving Steadiness of Her Glance’: Restraint and Resistance,” centers on the African woman, or Kurtz’s Mistress. Literary, feminist, and postcolonial critics have all acknowledged her autonomy within the story, but their accounts often end after Marlow’s description of her body, dress, and movements. My analysis looks further into the way in which her steady movements, unswerving glance, and strategic silence are methods by which she resists the colonizers’ gaze. I concur with Johanna Smith that the African woman represents a silent warrior figure, and will expand upon the “formidable silence” and assertive body language that the Mistress employs as resistance against her colonizers. Additionally, I lessen the importance of Marlow’s famed description of the Mistress’s body, and instead focus on her actions. One important and telling instance is when the African woman approaches Marlow’s ship and threatens the colonizers with her proximity. She challenges the power dynamics that the colonizers insist upon, and asserts her presence as a human being with autonomy.
While critics may admit to the Mistress’s power, the Intended largely remains a mystery. She is often invisible in literary scholarship, which is surprising given the volume of work that has been written about *Heart of Darkness*. Even when, as I showed earlier, scholars discuss the Mistress’s role, the Intended is relegated to the margins of their work, if she is mentioned at all. Chapter Four, “‘Too Dark Altogether’: Marlow’s Intentions, the Intended, and ‘Disrupting Darkness,’” aims to include her in the story of women’s autonomy within *Heart of Darkness*, even if her power is less obvious than that of the African woman. I will largely focus my attention on the concluding scene of the novella, in which the Intended’s house and visage continues to darken even as Marlow struggles to depict the Intended as a symbol of whiteness and light. By examining what I consider to be subversive imagery of lightness and darkness, and a strong Africanist presence, I assert that the Intended breaks from Marlow’s restrictive stereotype. Additionally, I argue that when she unknowingly mimics the powerful gestures of the African woman, this action confirms the power that the two female characters exhibit throughout *Heart of Darkness*. 
II. SKETCHING THE UNCONTROLLABLE DARKNESS:
COLONIALISM, POWER, AND SUBVERSION

The One that Got Away: Kurtz’s Sketch as (Unintentionally) Subversive

There is a seemingly insignificant moment in the beginning of *Heart of Darkness* which actually reveals a great deal about the construction (and possible disruption) of the female characters. Marlow, on his way into the Belgian Congo to meet Mr. Kurtz, stops at a trading post and finds an oil sketch by Kurtz. Marlow tells us: “Then I noticed a small sketch in oils, on a panel, representing a woman draped and blindfolded carrying a lighted torch. The background was somber—almost black. The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the torchlight on her face was sinister” (Conrad 28). Given Conrad’s famed attention to detail and symbol in *Heart of Darkness* and other texts, it is surprising that literary critics often either ignore Kurtz’s sketch or overlook it as simply another example of Kurtz’s intellect.⁸

In this chapter, I analyze the sketch in oils as an allegory about the women in Kurtz’s life, and further, as a manifestation of the colonizers’ attempt to assert their “civilization” over the “savagery” of African jungle. I argue that, in an effort to assert himself as superior to the ever-approaching “darkness,” Kurtz meant the sketch to symbolize the femininity and purity of his Intended (in other words, the “pure

---

⁸ The only critic who explicitly discusses the sketch in oils is Mark Sexton, whom I will address in detail later in this chapter.
woman” for whom he is conquering Africa) but that his depiction is thwarted by the presence of the Mistress and a powerful, encroaching darkness.

Kurtz attempts to depict his fiancée, in fact, as the proverbial figure of Justice, yet her visage becomes an amalgamation of the Intended and the Mistress in such a way that it disrupts the empire of colonialism, which builds itself upon (false) oppositional categories. The careful effort that Marlow and the other men in the novel make to keep the two “types” of women separate is therefore undermined in this one sketch, which highlights the fact that the caricatures of the saintly European virgin and the sensual African whore are purely inventions of the masculinist and imperialist mind. Further, the sketch represents the conflation of two worlds that must be separate in order for colonialism to survive: the chaotic, dark sphere of colonialism and the pure, domestic refuge. Ultimately, I assert that the sketch’s integration and unity of the Mistress and the Intended, darkness and lightness, challenges the colonizers’ binaries, and symbolically threatens the men’s masculine and imperialist control.

Con/Artistry

A historic look at the significance of colonialism and sketching sheds a great deal of light upon Kurtz’s shadowy sketch of the female figure. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word “sketch” originated in the 17th century from the German word skizze, meaning “done or made off hand.” The word soon came to

---

9 In other words, I maintain throughout this thesis that the ideology of colonialism is dependent upon opposites and hierarchies: lightness over darkness, whiteness over blackness, (supposed) civilization over (supposed) savagery. In this way, imperialists have historically justified their domination over peoples and lands which they consider inferior, according to Western binaries.
mean an abbreviated drawing of a larger work of art. Artists often made sketches in order to solicit financial assistance from wealthy citizens who would then pay for the piece to be completed, although a sketch in oils such as Kurtz’s would sometimes stand alone. In particular, a sketch in oils was an apt medium for travelers and colonists, for the immediate and abbreviated nature of the sketch lent itself to quick portrayals of “exotic” plants, landscapes and peoples alike.

Seen in the relatively innocuous context of art, the sketch in *Heart of Darkness* may seem to fit into Mark Sexton’s reading of the passage, which depicts the Kurtz as a Renaissance man, “a man of significant inner complexity” (387). In Sexton’s view, the fact that Kurtz created a sketch in oils is evidence of his intellectual and artistic capacities, a perspective which seems to mirror the unwarranted admiration that the other colonizers in *Heart of Darkness* bestow upon Kurtz. This thesis takes a more cynical view of Kurtz’s artistry, for when seen through the lens of colonialism, the sketch in oils has an entirely different and more ominous meaning. Given the larger themes of sexism, colonialism and control in *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz’s sketch is an attempt to depict (the Intended as) the perfect woman: one who is blindfolded and, as Sexton notes, “offering light against darkness, but herself unable to see the light she offers” (387). Unfortunately for Kurtz (and for Marlow), he does not succeed in creating this ideal image and instead ends up drawing a combination of his current fiancée and his future mistress. The archetypes Kurtz is attempting to control, to narrate into a proscribed space, ultimately disrupt his perceived authority over the women, the Africans, and the Congo itself.

---

10 Admittedly, Kurtz has not yet met the African woman when he draws his sketch in oils, but I argue that her embodiment of the powerful African darkness seeps into his sketch nonetheless.
Origins and Meanings

Given the intimate connection between expression through art and through words, the linguistic background of the “sketch in oils,” including its denotations and connotations, is important. The first definition the Oxford English Dictionary gives is “a rough drawing or delineation of something, giving the prominent features without the detail” (“Sketch,” def. 1a). It is important to note that, although “delineation” often signifies the act of describing or portraying, it also implies the creation of boundaries. Another synonym of “delineate” is to “demarcate,” which denotes marking boundaries and creating impassable lines between colonizer and colonized. One might argue, in the context of colonialism, that sketching is as much about claiming territory and restricting peoples as it is about artistic expression.

Additionally, a sketch in oils necessarily involves showing the major features of the object of study without including important details; in essence, colonizers like Kurtz could sketch what they wished to represent, whether or not this outline reflected reality.

Throughout the age of imperialism, sketches were often a method of documenting new lands and territories, as well as drawing native peoples in such a way that it justified the colonizers’ “civilizing” presence. In his intriguing essay, “The Power of the English Nineteenth-Century Visual and Verbal Sketch: Appropriation, Discipline, Mastery,” Richard Sha describes the rules and norms surrounding sketching:
when human subjects were to be sketched, late eighteenth- and
nineteenth-century drawing manuals assisted in naturalizing a
differential of power between the sketcher and the subject sketched:
the former necessarily and naturally occupies the position of narrative,
representative, and appropriative agency, while the latter remains the
object of scrutiny. (Sha 82)

Kurtz indeed assumes authority and agency in creating his sketch, for the subject he is
drawing is not even present. As Marlow later tells us, Kurtz uses a small portrait of
his Intended to begin his sketch, which as it turns out, represents not just the fiancée
herself, but an idealized image: a blindfolded figure holding a light into the darkness.

In his study, Sha sees the colonial sketch as not just another piece of art, but as
a potent symbol of forced power differentials. He argues that sketching necessarily
involves appropriation: of power as well as of the people and objects being drawn.
According to Sha, it “is no accident that a number of the authors of these manuals also
published foreign sketches promoting colonialism” (Sha 85). Even though Sha does
not relate his findings to Joseph Conrad’s novella, his theories directly describe
Kurtz’s authorship of both his report, or manual, and his sketch in oils.

Richard Sha is not the only author to discuss sketching and its relation to
power; Mary Louise Pratt’s book, *Travel Writing and Transculturation*, explains the
process through which journals, sketches, and other forms of travel writing became, in
Sha’s words, “colonial narratives of legitimacy” (Sha 85). Pratt even goes as far as to
say that travel writing became a way of defining not only the Other, but the European
Self as well: “Borders and all, the entity called Europe was constructed from the
outside in as much as from the inside out” (Pratt 6). Larry Landrum capitalizes upon this idea in order to illustrate the European fear of finding too much similarity between themselves and the natives they sought to exploit. In order to abate this fear, travel writing and depictions (in Landrum’s study, mainly missionary journals) were recorded in order to demarcate clear lines between the colonizer and the colonized. In other words, European colonizers, including Kurtz and Marlow, were obsessed with “construct[ing] images of difference,” both between Africans and Europeans, and men and women (Landrum 234).

Though journals and travel writings are obviously dealing with written narration, sketches such as Kurtz’s were often included within journals and handbooks, and held sway of their own. Sha writes that “sketching facilitated the taking of views, which . . . legitimated the domination of women, the enclosure of common land, and colonial imperialism” (Sha 73). Kurtz’s sketch exhibits two of these dominations, both of the Belgian Congo and of women (his appropriation of the Intended as a symbol of colonial purity). In fact, Kurtz tries to use the domination of the women in his life to justify his colonial dominion.

**Intentions and (Mis)Takes**

In the Oxford English Dictionary, one definition of a sketch reads that it is “especially . . . intended to serve as the basis of a more finished picture” (“Sketch,” def. 1a). Although I do not propose a direct correlation between the Oxford English Dictionary and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, the use of “intended” in both texts is certainly interesting. Undoubtedly, Conrad is playing upon variations of the
word “intended” throughout *Heart of Darkness*, the most literal describing Kurtz’s fiancée (one who is affianced) and the most abstract connotation being a person’s ultimate aim or goal (what is intended, or in another form, one’s intention). If a sketch is something “intended” as a rough draft of a finished picture, could not Kurtz’s sketch in oils be intended to represent the Intended? In other words, is his sketch in oils a blueprint of sorts for a picture of purity and of civilization, the proverbial figure of justice?

I ground my suspicions about the sketch in oils by examining Kurtz’s (and, to an extent, Marlow’s) idealization/idolization of his Intended, as shown in the portrait that Kurtz bestows upon Marlow. Upon Kurtz’s death, Marlow examines the letters and small photograph that Kurtz had given him, and is intrigued to find the visage of Kurtz’s mystical Intended. Throughout his experiences in the Belgian Congo, Marlow has heard Kurtz talking about his fiancée as if she were a particularly beautiful and special possession of his—“My Intended, my station, my career, my ideas” (Conrad 67)—and in his study of her portrait, Marlow falls into a similar thought process. While gazing upon her portrait, he thinks to himself that “[s]he seemed ready to listen without mental reservation, without suspicion, without a thought for herself” (Conrad 71). This way of viewing the Intended negates any agency or independent thought that she may have, and categorizes her as a silent martyr. Marlow’s gazing also implies that he, like Kurtz, has ownership over the Intended. By interpreting her portrait as a symbol of her passivity, Marlow assumes the role of the viewer while the Intended is simply a lovely piece of art. In effect, this is Kurtz’s treatment of her when he attempts to sketch her as the figure of Justice; the
Intended is silent and so Kurtz (and Marlow) narrate meanings and project meaningfulness onto her image.

Further, through a close reading of the passage, one can glean implications that the Intended’s “pure” looks and passive demeanor are the original basis for the sketch in oils. Marlow details her portrait, saying: “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” (Conrad 71). Not only does Marlow equate (white) beauty and proper passivity with honesty, but his emphasis on the Intended’s “truthfulness” is very similar to the “woman draped and blindfolded, carrying a torch” in Kurtz’s sketch. This woman, draped and carrying a torch, is a direct replication of proverbial images of justice, who are typically blindfolded women wearing togas and carrying torches, or in some instances, a set of scales. It is also important to note that, in some manuscripts of *Heart of Darkness*, there is the phrase, “that face on paper seemed to be a reflection of truth itself” (Conrad 71, emphasis mine). This statement that the Intended is the embodiment of truth to Kurtz and Marlow further identifies her as the woman in Kurtz’s sketch.

Although my argument departs decidedly from Sexton’s interpretation of the sketch in oils, his position on Kurtz’s fiancée abets my claims. Sexton writes, “[w]e see here the transformation of the Intended into a figure closely resembling the one in Kurtz’s sketch” (390). He goes on to say that, “as such, she represents to Marlow a vision similar to that first recorded in the sketch by Kurtz—a face, ‘blind’ to many things, most obviously to the true nature and experience of Kurtz” (Sexton 390). This
juxtaposition between the Intended’s “truthfulness” and her blindness/naïveté is reflected in Kurtz’s sketch. He wishes to show his Intended as one who provides truth and light, but only to the men in the novella, for both Marlow and Kurtz need a woman who acts “without a thought for herself” (Conrad 71). In his sketch, then, Kurtz can immortalize the Intended, making her into an idol of justice and truth, without having to consider her as a real person with needs, thoughts and desires. In a sense, Kurtz and his fellow colonizers need the symbol of the Intended (but not the Intended herself) as a beacon of whiteness and lightness. I argue that this attempt to represent the Intended as a mythical figure or idol is Kurtz’s (failed) attempt to shield himself against the encroaching darkness.

Interestingly, Kurtz cannot escape this darkness, for the sketch in oils becomes a combination of lightness and darkness, the Intended and the Mistress, which destabilizes the power differential in his sketch. Just like when Marlow visits the Intended’s house and “the room is growing darker,” so is the sketch darker than Kurtz intended (Conrad 73). The background of the sketch is “somber—almost black,” making “the effect of the torchlight on her face sinister” (Conrad 28). The torch the woman is holding, then, is no longer a comforting light in the darkness, but a glimmer which makes the darkness seem even blacker. The significance of the darkness is not to be underestimated, for Kurtz and Marlow try to escape the perceived darkness of Africa(ns) throughout the novella.

Even more important than the combination of darkness and light is the presence of the African Mistress within the sketch. When Marlow says that the “movement of the woman was stately,” his description unintentionally highlights the
fact that the female figure not only represents the Intended, but the Mistress as well (Conrad 28). In one of the few but powerful descriptions of the African woman, Marlow claims that “there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress” (Conrad 60, emphasis mine). Not only is the word “stately” repeatedly applied to the Mistress (sometimes in synonyms, such as “measured steps”), but to the colonizers, she comes to embody the threatening darkness of the jungle. In unmistakable language, Marlow describes his encounter with the Mistress, and how “the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, [as] the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at its own tenebrous and passionate soul” (Conrad 60).

This conflation of the Mistress with the surrounding wilderness also explains why, in the sketch, “the effect of the torchlight” on the woman’s face “was sinister” (Conrad 28). Dating back to the fifteenth century, the word sinister has been used to mean “corrupt, evil, bad” and “base” (“Sinister”). The Latin root of the word is sinistre, meaning “left” or “left-handed,” which to the Romans translated into “erring; erroneous; astray from the right path” (“Sinister,” def. 4c). One can observe in these oppositional categories—left and right, bad and good—the same mindset that the colonizers have in exploring/conquering the “dark” continent. To them, their right to the African land and people is indisputable, due to the “sinister” aspects of the Congo. Given another definition for “sinister”—“Of actions, practices . . . underhand; dark”—it is even more obvious that to call an element “sinister” in Kurtz’s sketch is to recognize it as part of the vast African darkness, and certainly not as a typical
characteristic of the Intended (“Sinister,” def. 3). In addition, all of the above meanings of sinister are also similar to the word “ominous,” which Marlow explicitly uses to describe the Mistress (“ominous and stately”). When Marlow notices the sinister effect of the torchlight on the female figure’s face, then, it highlights the portrait’s subversive embodiment of both the Mistress and the Intended. Rita Bode describes this ambiguous lightness and darkness as a form of *chiaroscuro*, of lightness and darkness emphasizing and playing off one another. She argues that the “presentation of these women suggests a strong association with a light that turns into darkness; they represent a realm in which light and darkness become interchangeable, in which light and darkness are shifting, ambiguous entities” (Bode 31-2). This shifting lightness and darkness, so opposed to the typical white/black binary, is one explanation as to why Kurtz abandons his sketch in oils. He leaves the sketch behind as he journeys further into the Congo, signifying that it had become a source of disturbance rather than comfort.

**Keeping Up (Imperial) Appearances: Sketching, Starching, and Other Rituals**

As important as it is to analyze *Heart of Darkness* itself, it is equally as important to read between the lines, so to speak, in order to gain a better understanding of the colonizing mindset. The failure of Kurtz’s sketch in oils to represent his ideal(ized) woman would not be significant if not for the fact that the sketch is, itself, symbolic of a greater need for “high” art. As Kurtz journeys deeper into the African Congo, it seems imperative for him to assert his high-mindedness through making art, whether it is in the traditional sense (the sketch in oils) or in his
later, macabre artistic manifestations.\textsuperscript{11} Similarly, Kurtz’s contemporary, the company accountant, asserts his own civilization and separateness by dressing in white clothing and making a native laundress carry out his white superiority, exhibited through fashion.

Mark Sexton notes Kurtz’s artistic tendencies, but neglects to see the emerging psychosis behind them. He argues that the sketch reveals Kurtz to be a “Renaissance man” with in-depth thought processes and expressions; in other words, someone who has a “profound sense of life’s complexity” (Sexton 388). Sexton perceives the multifaceted nature of the female figure but explains away this ambiguity as simply another example of Kurtz’s brilliance. He lauds Kurtz, writing, “the paradoxical subject of the sketch suggests a mind that seeks to grasp and interpret experience” (Sexton 387). Conversely, in my analysis, Kurtz’s attempt at art, through the sketch in oils, evidences his compulsive need to “act civilized” in unfamiliar territory. Consequently, when this sketch becomes an amalgamation of the binaries Kurtz is trying to keep separate, he abandons the sketch in oils.

Kurtz’s behavior is markedly similar to the chief accountant, whom Conrad devotes a lengthy amount of text to describing and satirizing. I compare and contrast Kurtz and the accountant in order to show how both men perform ritualized behaviors when confronted with a “savage” culture which they consider beneath them. To justify their colonial presence among the Africans, both Kurtz and the accountant must assert their superiority, and to do this, they must create boundaries (“delineate” and “demarcate”) between themselves and the natives. In Kurtz’s case, he begins with

\textsuperscript{11} Here I am referring to the shrunken heads lining the pathway to Kurtz’s hut, which I later discuss as another form of colonial “ornamentation.”
his sketch in oils; the accountant’s “art,” on the other hand, manifests itself in his choice of clothing.

The chief accountant is a minor character in *Heart of Darkness*, yet his portrayal offers a glimpse into the futility and forced necessity of keeping up appearances. Marlow encounters this man early in his journey, and is both shocked and amazed at his painstaking attire. Marlow narrates:

> When near the buildings I met a white man in such an unexpected elegance of get-up that in the first moment I took him for a sort of vision. I saw a high, starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clean necktie, and varnished boots. No hat. Hair parted, brushed, oiled, under a green-lined parasol held in a big white hand. He was amazing and had a pen-holder behind his ear. (Conrad 21)

The repetition of whiteness and white imagery shows the colonizers’ literal insistence on white supremacy. The accountant parades his European clothing in various shades of white, from his “white cuffs” to his “snowy trousers.” Even his “big white hand” becomes part of the ostentatious display of supposed superiority. The fact that the accountant’s elaborate clothing is extremely impractical in the tropical climate adds even more aesthetic emphasis: he asserts his wealth and stature through displaying his frivolous fashion while the natives starve.

One might expect the cynical Marlow, upon seeing this absurd “vision,” to denounce the accountant’s pettiness, given the overwhelming poverty of the natives and, more practically, the oppressive African heat. Nevertheless, Marlow says, “I
respected the fellow. Yes. I respected his collars, his vast cuffs, his brushed hair.”

Even further, Marlow makes the grand claim that, “in the great demoralisation of the land he kept up his appearance. That’s backbone” (Conrad 21). One must wonder as to why Marlow would praise impractical and arrogant attire when, at other times in the novel, he lampoons similarly laughable characters. Admittedly, Frances Singh maintains that Marlow employs three types of responses to colonialism: direct attack, ironic commentary, and metaphor (Singh 269). A critic such as Singh might point out that Marlow is being ironic in his praise of the accountant. Indeed, he is sarcastic toward many other characters in *Heart of Darkness*, including the general manager whom he describes as a “papier-mâché Mephistopheles” (Conrad 29). In my reading, however, Marlow’s repeated insistence on the accountant’s “achievements of character” is too much for even irony to excuse.

Marlow’s attitude in the accountant’s case is, in fact, much like the way in which, early in the novella, he lambasts Belgian colonialism yet still argues for another, purer, type of imperialism. He begins by saying that “[t]he conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much” (Conrad 10). The reader may, at this point, be expecting Marlow to indict colonialism as a whole, since he seems so close to realizing the false justifications for invading others’ land and culture. Unfortunately, Marlow continues, claiming, “What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it . . . an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down, and offer a sacrifice to” (Conrad 10). In this way, Marlow criticizes the Belgian ivory company but does not,
in turn, dispense with the idea of colonialism in general. He maintains that there could be a utopian version of imperialism, if one would only commit enough to it. In the same way, I argue that Marlow admires the accountant, perhaps not for the clothing itself, but for the lengths to which the accountant will go to display his art, and his colonial power.

Just as the accountant views his clothing as a sort of statement, even art, Kurtz asserts his civilization through making his sketch in oils. Interestingly, the two men are connected slightly through the fact that the accountant is the first person to mention Mr. Kurtz to Marlow, describing him as “a very remarkable person” (Conrad 22). Additionally, both the accountant and Kurtz show signs of insanity when they suddenly revert from supposed “logical” thinking to aggressive rebukes of the natives. In the accountant’s case, he candidly says to Marlow, “When one has got to make correct entries one comes to hate those savages—hate them to death” (Conrad 22). In this offhand but shocking statement, his occupation of working with numbers and making entries is drastically juxtaposed against his intense hatred and violence toward the African people. Similarly, after writing a long report about the importance of living among and civilizing the natives, Kurtz adds the violent postscript: “Exterminate all the brutes!” (Conrad 51). As is apparently throughout Heart of Darkness, when the colonizers encounter a completely different and “savage” culture, they perform highly ritualized behaviors which can soon turn to violence and lunacy.

These behaviors not only serve to differentiate between colonizer and colonized, but they also act as a (re)assertion of masculinity. Each time the colonizers create art to distinguish themselves as “civilized” in a “savage” land, they either use
women as symbols, as in Kurtz’s sketch, or force women to help them in their tasks. The accountant employs a native laundress, whom he mentions briefly but whom is largely excluded from the text. The reader only learns of this woman through the men’s conversation; when Marlow asks the accountant how he keeps up his “miraculous” appearance, “[h]e had just the faintest blush and answered modestly, ‘I’ve been teaching one of the native women about the station. It was difficult. She had a distaste for the work’” (Conrad 21). As is clear here, and as Landrum claims, “[r]espect for local customs was nonexistent” and European intruders like the accountant sought to “foster a dependence among the Africans that made them susceptible to management” (Landrum 238-9). In this situation of the laundress, the accountant keeps her in check by demanding that she learn a foreign and unnecessary skill, in order to buttress his superiority and whiteness.

**Colonial Authority: Art as Power**

An even more dramatic example of colonial “art” and ritual gone wrong is evident in the shrunken heads lining Kurtz’s pathway. These heads are, in a sense, a morbid parody of the shrubbery and flower bushes that might line the walkway of a middle- to upper-class person’s house. To equate this adornment to a form of upper-class landscaping may seem far-fetched until one looks closely at the passage itself, in which there are numerous hints toward artistry. This “art,” furthermore, is representative of the general artifice which the colonizers employ to separate themselves from the natives. Interestingly, Kurtz’s morbid form of art(ifice) is particularly destructive and deadly, no doubt because he has a greater claim to make.
In cohabitating with the African woman in his hut and taking her as his lover, Kurtz is transgressing the boundary of race and class and is in “danger” of becoming completely assimilated into the African culture. Additionally, he came to the Congo specifically in order to climb in status and earn the approval of his Intended’s family. I argue, therefore, that he constructs this walkway of violent art in order to maintain his position of power: both as an upper-class white man and as a ruthless tyrant.

Upon seeing the heads—or wooden “knobs” as Marlow first believes them to be—Marlow declares that he “had been struck at the distance by certain attempts at ornamentation, rather remarkable in the ruinous aspect of the place” (Conrad 57). That Marlow calls them “attempts at ornamentation” is crucial to the idea that Kurtz, even in his sickened and degraded state, is still establishing his power through “art.” (In labeling the shrunken heads as colonial “art,” however, I am not excusing Kurtz’s behavior; rather, I am exposing the depth of the colonial power struggle evident in the Belgian Congo throughout Heart of Darkness.) Marlow goes on to describe the “round knobs” as “symbolic,” “expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing” (Conrad 57), language which explicitly categorizes these macabre decorations as artistic. Moreover, the shrunken heads are symbolic, not only as “ornamentation,” but as markers of Kurtz’s white supremacy over the natives. In this case, the combination of his ambition for authority with his need to create “high” art is unmistakable, and his attempts at expression directly cause and result from violent aggression toward the native peoples.

Just as when he is confronted with the chief accountant, Marlow’s reaction to the colonizers’ ritualized art and practices is surprisingly ambivalent. He relates to his
fellow shipmates that the Manager of the Belgian expedition “said afterwards that Mr.
Kurtz’s methods”—his reign of terror over the natives, which included the display of
shrunken heads—“had ruined the district” (Conrad). Marlow himself, however, has
“no opinion on that point” (Conrad 57). For Marlow to have “no opinion” in a matter
so obviously grotesque as Kurtz’s “methods” is telling of the way in which he excuses
Kurtz’s behavior. Instead, Marlow emphasizes that Kurtz simply “lacked restraint”:

> I want you clearly to understand that there was nothing exactly
> profitable in these heads being there. They only showed that Mr. Kurtz
> lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was
> something wanting in him—some small mater which when the
> pressing need arose could not be found under his magnificent
> eloquence. (Conrad 57)

I argue that this deficiency in Kurtz, this “pressing need,” is his dogged attempt to
position himself above the Africans through whatever means necessary, and usually
through the use of women as symbols. Whether with a sketch, a fashion statement, or
even through the ostentatious display of African victims, Kurtz and his fellow
colonizers desperately cling to their whiteness and their superiority. This perspective,
in fact, echoes Marlow’s previous statements about the “unselfish belief in the idea”
of colonialism: that it should be “something you can set up, and bow down, and offer
a sacrifice to” (Conrad 10).
Illusions and Elusions

A look into Kurtz’s background makes it even more apparent that his artistry is symbolic for a greater colonial artifice. Marlow confides in his listeners that Kurtz, who was Belgian, also had English and French ancestry, and all of these countries were aggressively imperialistic European powers. Marlow makes the statement that “[a]ll Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz,” and that, because of this, “most appropriately the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs had entrusted him with the making of a report for future guidance” (Conrad 50). With his varied European connections, Kurtz is in a sense the quintessential colonist, and his behavior is just another aspect of his duties to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. One might argue that his sketch in oils, and his atrocities toward the natives, are all a part of his colonial plan and duty.

The fact that Kurtz was commissioned to record his experiences in the area is indicative of imperialist practices of his day. It was the custom of colonizers to document crucial features of the newly conquered land and people in order to formulate further plans to rule. Sketching was also a form of documentation, and was perhaps even more important because of its immediate visual impact. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a sketch can be “a brief account, description, or narrative giving the main or important facts.” The sketch of oils was unique in that it recorded not Kurtz’s current surroundings, but a symbol of European purity/superiority. Still, it was as much an assertion of power as the sketches Richard Sha discusses. By drawing a sketch that embodies a white, pure, and passive woman, Kurtz attempts to ward off the perceived darkness of the African jungle. The sketch,
however, does not remain as such a symbol, and instead the darkness and the
Mistress’s presence threaten to disrupt Kurtz’s control. Perhaps this is because “[t]he
sketch’s obsession with power and insistent need to demarcate lines between the
empowered and disempowered . . . indicates the very instability of power and
possession” (Sha 92). In this way, the marginalized can elude appropriation.
III. “THE UNSWERVING STEADINESS OF HER GLANCE”:
RERAINT AND RESISTANCE

The Outsider Within: Women’s Subversive Presence

Whether they are sketched or gazed at, alluded to or directly described, the women of Heart of Darkness have a pervasive yet largely invisible presence. Conrad affords the female characters little space within the text, yet their symbolic importance remains. In Kurtz’s sketch in oils, elements of both the Intended and the Mistress converge to thwart Kurtz’s original imperialist vision, and their covert influence is furthered evidenced in Marlow’s depictions of the Mistress and the Intended. Interestingly, he repeatedly insists that the women have no place within his story, and yet their visages and actions continue to play an important role. Towards the beginning of the novella, before Marlow embarks on his quest into the Congo region, he makes a pointed aside: “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 sunset” (Conrad 16). Here, Marlow criticizes his aunt, who encourages him to go on the African expedition. He assumes that she is naïve about the true dangers awaiting him, and therefore claims that she and all other women live in an isolated, sheltered world of their own. Not only do women, according to Marlow, live in an alternate
universe than men, but this separate world is “too beautiful altogether” to be a sustainable reality.

Marlow’s dismissal of the women is important because it reveals both the ways the women’s agency is restricted and the ways in which they still exert influence over Marlow. Admittedly, to overstate the power of the Mistress and the Intended would be as much of a mistake as to underestimate them. For as much ideological importance as the female characters embody, they have very little real authority. Edward Geary elaborates upon their dual restriction and influence, writing:

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.” (Geary 501)

Geary’s analysis is true both of the fictional Heart of Darkness and of the larger historical context upon which it is based. As an appropriately feminine and cloistered woman, Kurtz’s Intended is largely trapped in perpetual domesticity and then mourning, and as a subject of colonial rule, the African woman is by no means fully autonomous. Even so, the two female characters have great ideological and symbolic importance, and this power cannot be underestimated in a novella which focuses a great deal on psychology and internal turmoil. The African woman, in particular, seems to understand her ability to intimidate the colonizers and bears herself with pride and authority. Her interactions with Kurtz, Marlow and the other men are interesting, as well as integral to any analysis of Heart of Darkness.
The Mistress acts similarly to the African women in northern Ghana who, when confronted with colonial rules of marriage, used these new rules to further their independence. According to Sean Hawkins, “[t]he indigenous notion of wife (pog) had acknowledged women’s autonomy and husbands’ lack of control over wives, whereas the colonial idea of a wife increasingly allowed husbands to assert ownership through the courts” (134). Yet these women did not simply submit to these new laws of marriage; they used the laws to leave abusive partners and run away with new, more supportive “husbands.” If one were to straightforwardly look at these women’s situation, it may seem like the colonial marriage laws took away their autonomy, but a closer look reveals that the women manipulated the new rules to give themselves more independence; it is “the story of effective evasion and protracted resistance on the part of women through their choice of residence” (Hawkins 134). I see a similarly inspiring subversion in the Mistress from Heart of Darkness, for in her own way she uses the colonizers’ imperialist assumptions as a form of resistance against them, from their conflation of African women and wilderness, to their fear of the jungle, to their apprehension toward silence.

Not long after Marlow states that women are “out of it,” he makes another generalization, but this one has more disruptive implications for his theory. When he mistakenly mentions Kurtz’s Intended during his storytelling, Marlow loses his typical composure. He stammers, “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 stay in that beautiful world of their own lest ours gets worse” (Conrad 49). An in-depth reading of this faltering passage demonstrates Marlow’s relationship with
the women in his story, one characterized by wariness, suspicion, and attempted control. Geary concurs, writing that, beneath his conventional condescension toward the women in the story, “Marlow reveals at crucial moments another reaction to women, a deep sense of mistrust and fear” (Geary 501).

In short, Marlow needs the Mistress and the Intended to stay in their proverbial places and when they unexpectedly enter his story, he becomes uncomfortable. For example, in the above passage Marlow switches from talking about the “girl” (by whom he means the infantilized and supposedly naïve Intended) to women in general, claiming first that they “are out of it” and then that they “should be” and that men must “help them” (read: make them) stay in their sheltered world. (One must remember that throughout Marlow’s narration, he is speaking as a man to a group of men cloistered together on a ship; therefore any inclusive “we” that he uses—such as “we must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own”—is exclusively male.) Not only are Marlow’s points erratic, but his language is jumbled and much less eloquent than his usual storytelling. He repeats the phrase “out of it” several times and stumbles over his words, suggesting to Rita Bode “a basic uneasiness that the women might possibly have an existence beyond his interpretation of them” (Bode 21).12

Gabrielle MacIntire takes this point even further in her essay “The Women Do Not Travel: Gender, Difference, and Incommensurability in Conrad’s Heart of

---

12 Bode also goes as far as to argue that, “[f]rom his too facile dismissal of all women to another realm of perception through to his final encounter with the Intended, Marlow’s troubled reactions frequently suggest the sailor’s fundamental fear of female powers. The African mistress seems to justify such fears” (Bode 24). This chapter will further analyze the ways in which the Mistress embodies the threat of female power to Marlow and the other colonizers.
"Darkness." She highlights the fact that, in emphasizing how supposedly uninvolved the women are, Marlow gives them greater focus: he “stops the articulate flow of his yarn to revise his own terms . . . His tangent is so filled with hesitations and dramatic caesuras that his very language betrays how unsettling women are to Marlow's order of things” (MacIntire 264-5). Indeed, the colonial “order of things” is dependent upon patriarchy and dualistic ideology, including strict roles for women. Marlow’s insistence that women are “out of it,” however, “ought to alert us to the fact that they might be more important to his story than he allows” (MacIntire 265). Toni Morrison argues that, whenever “[p]atterns of explosive, disjointed, repetitive language” occur in Western stories, they indicate “a loss of control in the text that is attributed to the objects of its attention rather than to the text’s own dynamic” (69). In other words, Marlow’s obsession with keeping the women under his narrative control begins to show glaringly in his disjointed aside about them, and the attention then shifts from Marlow’s smooth narrative to the women he is attempting to exclude. The actions and characterization of the Mistress and the Intended subvert the usual order. More specifically, this chapter looks at the Mistress’s uniquely intersectional position as an African woman, and how this positionality both hinders and abets her resistance.

**The African Woman As/Is the Jungle**

Of course, one cannot analyze the women in Heart of Darkness without acknowledging and expanding upon their vast social, class, and racial differences, for “issues of gender are inextricably linked with matters of race and culture” (Hawthorn 148). When Marlow talks of the women being “out of it,” he mostly means that white
women should remain in that “beautiful world of their own.” There is no such separate, beautiful world for black women such as Kurtz’s Mistress, who are inevitably embroiled in colonial conflict. It is the African woman’s land and people that are being controlled and she can only resist colonial rule to a certain degree. For every oppression the Mistress faces however, she in turn subverts the oppression and converts it into a mode of resistance.

Padmini Mongia outlines the realities of both women in her discussion of native women in colonized areas as compared to the white wives and fiancées back in Europe. She states, “[n]ative women become allegories of geographical regions, themselves represented as feminine, which are penetrated by male sojourners” while “[w]hite women reflect domestic spheres which are fragile, beautiful, and removed from the active world of men” (Mongia 136). To be conflated with the land and denied personhood is dehumanizing for anyone, but for the Mistress her position seems particularly degrading because of Marlow’s negative depiction of Africa. Bram Dijkstra accurately pinpoints this depiction as the story of a “properly evolved, properly gender-organized, modern, male-dominant civilization against a preevolutionary, female-dominant world of animal passions and brute nature” (Dijkstra 148). Indeed, Marlow describes the Congo area as a “prehistoric [and therefore primitive] earth . . . that wore an aspect of an unknown planet,” as well as “an accursed inheritance” full of “profound anguish and excessive toil” (Conrad 37). When Marlow sees the native people, he includes them in the same condescending

---

13 Here I acknowledge that overt resistance from the African woman could have physical consequences, even death. This is evidenced by the fact that she could have been shot and killed simply for approaching Marlow’s steamboat.
description, calling them “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 . . . a black and incomprehensible frenzy” (Conrad 37). Marlow denies these people their humanity by narrating them as a mass of body parts which closely resemble the jungle. A “whirl of black limbs” and “bodies swaying” are descriptions easily applied to trees, and in fact, directly after he talks of the natives, Marlow seamlessly transitions to “the droop of heavy and motionless foliage.” This connection between the Africans and the jungle is even more prevalent in Marlow’s later encounter with the African woman.

Many literary critics often misconstrue this harsh colonial trope as a situation of complete powerlessness for the African woman. Strauss writes about how the Mistress’s “image, though visually full, is physically void and nearly inhuman; for it is explicitly allied with that abominable darkness described by Marlow” (Strauss 208). Strauss assumes that, because the Mistress is so deeply connected with the darkness and the jungle, her representation is overwhelmingly negative, yet to call her portrayal “nearly inhuman” is an exaggeration and an underestimation. It may be true that Heart of Darkness “declares in no uncertain terms that the soul of Africa is the soul of a woman”; this connection, however, whether real, imagined, or a combination of both, is part of the Mistress’s power (Dijkstra 148).

In the case of Heart of Darkness, the typical colonial mindset of seeing Africans, particularly African women, as part of the land becomes one of the Mistress’s strengths. Arguably, the colonizers (including Conrad and Marlow) are disparaging toward the jungle because they fear the darkness and perceive the
different surroundings as chaos. Through her alliance with this darkness, therefore, the Mistress has a mysterious hold on the men. This darkness, furthermore, need not be read as “abominable” even if Marlow describes it as such; instead, a feminist postcolonial critique can read the darkness as multifaceted and complex. Morrison asserts that blackness and darkness are a powerful answer to the static whiteness in many Western texts: “images of blackness can be evil and protective, rebellious and forgiving, fearful and desirable . . . Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable” (59). Not only does this reading of darkness remove the negative connotations Marlow puts onto the Mistress and her people, but it also points to the reason why Marlow fears the African woman. By associating her with the darkness, he and the colonizers see her as a symbol of multiplicity and chaos: the exact opposite of their preferred orderliness, stability, and “whiteness.”

**Dominant Darkness**

As his boat makes its way through the Congo River, Marlow narrates on the disquieting atmosphere of the jungle:

Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kinds. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest . . . You lost your way in that forest as you would in a desert and butted all day against shoals trying to find the channel till you thought yourself
bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once—
somewhere—far away—in another existence perhaps. (Conrad 35)

Once again, there is the language of primitiveness, of a lack of civilization, but even
more important is Marlow’s emphasis on the “impenetrable forest.” Just two pages
after the above passage, Marlow states, “[w]e penetrated deeper and deeper into the
heart of darkness” (Conrad 37). He switches back and forth between impenetrability
and penetrability, seemingly unable to decipher and therefore fully conquer the new,
feminized territory. In addition, he likens his surroundings to “another existence,” a
place where one can easily become eternally lost, and where the “great silence” is
omnipresent and, perhaps, even omnipotent.

One might argue that the African woman uses the jungle’s mystery and silence
to undermine Marlow and the colonizers. Through capitalizing on her association with
the wilderness surrounding her, the Mistress gains powers of intimidation and
confusion.14 Interestingly, this power is given to the African woman by the colonizers,
for by conflating her with a wilderness that terrifies them, they have in essence created
their own fear. Whereas the imperial narrative is often a simple one of male force and
domination, the men in Heart of Darkness find themselves bewildered, or to use
Marlow’s exact word, “bewitched” by the Mistress and her surroundings. The word
“bewitch” has obvious connotations of (feminine) danger, for according to the Oxford
English Dictionary it means to “affect (generally injuriously) by witchcraft or magic”
(OED). Often, in a patriarchal culture, the power of bewitching is seen as negative and
particularly feminine; independent women, whether involved with magic or not,

14 I posit that the Mistress realizes the colonizers’ fear of silence and the exotic, therefore in her
measured walk and her ornamentation, she emphasizes their fears in order to intimidate them.
automatically become witches while men, such as Marlow, are the perceived victims of feminine wiles.

Furthermore, powerful women are often associated with evil, shown in the following definition of *bewitch* or *fascinate*: “[t]o cast a spell over . . . by a look; said especially of serpents . . . To deprive of the power of escape or resistance, as serpents are said to do through the terror produced by their look or merely by their perceived presence” (“Fascinate,” def. 2a). The underlying connection between women, serpents, and evil cannot be denied, for the Biblical precedent of Eve and the snake is a constant theme throughout Western literature. This connection between women and the “evil” or dark side of nature is even more significant in a novella primarily taking place in a jungle resembling “the earliest beginnings of the world” (Conrad 35). The dark jungle seems to be a dystopian version of the Garden of Eden, and the African woman embodies not Eve, but the legendary succubus Lilith. Even the water is “evil,” with the Congo River described as “deadly—like a snake” (Conrad 36). Marlow perceives the African woman to be collaborating with the jungle and the deadly wildlife within, creating a formidable combination. Part of the Mistress’s reaction is to bewitch and bewilder the colonizers; in essence, her resistance is “[t]o deprive of the power of escape or resistance” (“Fascinate,” def. 2b).

Making the Mistress into a demonic woman is not a new literary trope, as Dijkstra explains; it has been happening for centuries, and the African woman is a typical example. Twentieth-century writers had many negative stereotypes for women,

[b]ut the most prevalent of all was the ultimate temptress, the bestially beautiful, primitive African queen, who made men lust after her against
their better judgment. She held within herself the preevolutionary powers of all the mythical monsters and ‘lower races’ combined, and hence rendered men virtually defenseless against her intemperate depredations. (Dijkstra 146)

At the time that Marlow sees her, the African woman has already “ensnared” Mr. Kurtz and her intoxicating beauty temporarily captivates Marlow, explaining the long passage he devotes to her image. Yet quickly after this moment, Marlow switches the reader’s attention from the Mistress’s beauty to her connection with the “evil” jungle in the background, implying that she has dark, preternatural powers. In this way, “early-twentieth-century culture attempted to neutralize the dangerous erotic appeal of intelligent women who were self-reliant and sexually assertive” (Dijkstra 129). Conrad and Marlow are following in this patriarchal pattern.

“Evil” and “wicked” are both labels used to condemn threatening women, and Dorothy Hodgson and Sheryl McCurdy posit that “‘wickedness’ is a discourse of primarily masculine power that seeks to control or oppress women by stigmatizing certain actions, whether normative or unconventional” (5). At the same time as this label condemns, it also serves to highlight the feminine power to “effectively challenge political, social, or cultural constraints on their behavior” (Hodgson and McCurdy 6). In *Webster's First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*, authors Mary Daly and Jane Caputi offer an alternative view to “evil” women such as the Mistress, a way of viewing her that disseminates Marlow’s judgments but retains the Mistress’s power. The *Wickedary* is a feminist dictionary through which Daly and Caputi reveal the patriarchal meanings behind words such as
“witch,” “crone,” “hag” and “spinster,” and provide alternative, empowered definitions. For example, while a “witch” in a traditionally dictionary would be an evil woman associated with dark magic (or, more often, a woman who simply did not conform to society’s expectations of marriage and childbearing), in the Wickedary a witch is defined as a powerful, wise woman connected with nature. In the same manner, the word “spinster” is often used to condemn older, unmarried woman, whereas the Wickedary defines “spinster” as a woman connected to larger, cosmic forces; she is a spinster only in the literal meaning of “one who spins,” for she weaves and spins the threads of life. The African woman embodies the powers of a “witch” or “spinster” without the negative, evil associations. Andre Voila et al even read the African woman as a personification of the warrior goddess, Athena; they expose connections between descriptions of the Mistress and characteristics of the archetypal Athena (Voila 164). Ultimately, the African woman does command a certain awe in her descriptions, and both she and the wilderness rebel against the colonizers.

African Queens and Irrational Fears

It is interesting that the word bewitch has both negative and positive characteristics; as well as meaning to negatively influence one by magic, it also means to “attract and ‘hold spellbound’ by delightful qualities; to charm, enchant” and “to attract and retain the attention of (a person) by an irresistible influence” (“Bewitch,” def. 1). Both of these facets of “bewitching” can be seen in Marlow’s passage about the Mistress. First, he is “held spellbound” by her looks, and proceeds to depict her in detail:
And from right to left along the lighted shore moved a wild and
gorgeous apparition of a woman. She walked with measured steps,
draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly with a
slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. [...] bizarre things,
charms, gifts of witch-men, that hung about her, glittered and trembled
at every step. (Conrad 60)

There are several positive aspects to this description of the Mistress, such as the
measured and proud way in which she walks, and her vivid and vivacious
ornamentation. Marlow is dually, even simultaneously, fascinated and horrified by this
“wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman.” In fact, the word gorgeous symbolizes
Marlow’s split attentions; while gorgeous unequivocally means beautiful or attractive,
the root of the word is gorge, which means to satiate a greedy appetite, a word often
applied to predators. While the African woman is gorgeous, Marlow also fears that she
will gorge herself on the men, pointing to the stereotype of the “bestially beautiful,
primitive African queen” (Dijkstra 146).

Achebe states that Marlow’s attention to the Mistress is “quite unexpected” but
posits that it serves the dual purpose of showing an African woman who “is in her
place and so can win Conrad’s special brand of approval” and offering “a savage
counterpart” to Kurtz’s Intended (Achebe 255). Smith makes a similar point,
expanding upon the way in which Marlow seems to objectify the Mistress’s body
through his prolonged gaze: “[t]he woman’s body is here commodified, becoming the
thing on which value is displayed; in addition, the tusks connect her with the
victimized jungle being invaded in the Company’s quest for ivory” (Smith 185). Both
critics acknowledge the Mistress’s potential for power in their essays, but then take away any volition she might display. Smith’s essay touches on the idea (similar to Voila et al) that the African woman could be a warrior or queen of her people, but emphasizes instead Marlow’s objectification, just as Achebe focuses on the Mistress’s “place” even though he admits that she presides over the story “like a formidable mystery” (Achebe 255). It is easy to assume, from the condescending undercurrents in Marlow’s description, that the Mistress is simply a commodity, but a closer look at the rest of the passage offers a different and more empowering reading.

This thesis reads the African woman as a female leader, even a queen; her ornamentation, charms, and “gifts from witchmen” signify her importance within the community and suggest precolonial African rule which included “autonomous queens and influential queen mothers” (Hanson 219). Her authority, highly threatening to those who can “only see and comprehend the political power of men,” is one explanation as to why Marlow’s men fear and loathe her so much (Hanson 220). In a later scene in which the Mistress attempts to board the steamboat, one of Marlow’s men says, “If she had offered to come aboard I really think I would have tried to shoot her . . . I had been risking my life every day for the last fortnight to keep her out of [Kurtz’s] house . . . No—it’s too much for me” (Conrad 61). Upon reading this statement, one must wonder why one of Marlow’s men would be so intent upon shooting an unarmed woman simply for approaching the boat. In addition, why would he risk his life to keep her out of her lover’s house, what boundaries is he trying to defend, and what exactly is “too much” for him? Holly Hanson, author of “Queen Mothers and Good Government in Buganda: The Loss of Women’s Political Power in
Nineteenth-Century East Africa,” explores the complicated interactions between female rulers in Africa and male, European colonizers. She explains that “queen mothers were banished and activities of spirit mediums that involved whole communities were criminalized” because European colonizers feared African women’s authority (Hanson 220).

The same distrust and disgust of women’s power occurs in Heart of Darkness, with severe consequences for any woman who attempts to directly transgress her boundaries. The African woman, therefore, does not overtly defy her colonizers, but subverts them through her gazes and silent actions.

**Strategic Silences and Other Forms of Resistance**

Historically, silence has been a mode through which colonizers and other patriarchal figures oppress women, particularly women of color. As Patricia Hill Collins elucidates in Black Feminist Thought, the combination of many factors, including “the suppression of Black women’s voice by dominant groups,” has often led to silence (125). In fact, initially the African woman is silenced by Marlow and his men. They intrude upon her territory and take away her lover, Kurtz, and she walks the shore seemingly stunned by these developments. Smith relates her silence to the power of patriarchal ideology “to distance and hence conquer the woman’s body” by what she calls “image-making” (Smith 186). Image-making is very similar to my argument in Chapter Two that Kurtz and Marlow, upon being confronted with Africa’s power and intimidating difference, make idols of European values to ward off any

---

15 One interesting argument is that the Mistress could have begun a relationship with Kurtz in order to maintain her power once the colonizers took over. It is possible that she used her relationship as leverage for continued influence and for protection for her community.
potential assimilation or, as they would see it, “contamination.” The European men make both positive and negative images which, respectively, idolize white culture and demonize black culture; these images often take the form of people, such as the Mistress and the Intended. In the same way, the “imperialist ideology” prevalent throughout *Heart of Darkness* tries “to distance and conquer the mysterious life of the jungle. And both the savage woman and the jungle are momentarily silenced by Marlow’s images of them” (Smith 186).

Throughout *Heart of Darkness*, however, the African woman employs this same unsettling and powerful silence, intimidating Marlow and his men. When Strauss claims that “Conrad’s text offers no women’s voice or variant female version of wilderness to the reader,” she ignores the fact that the wilderness itself could be a strength, and that there is no woman’s voice in *Heart of Darkness* only if one takes the concept of voice literally (Strauss 208). While Collins discusses Black women’s silence as evidence of oppression, she also acknowledges that expression and resistance are complicated. Black women, including the Mistress, even use silence as a technique for subversion. According to Collins, “[s]ilence is not to be interpreted as submission”; Black women also have the option of “‘inside’ ideas that allow [them] to cope with and, in many cases, transcend the confines of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality” (Collins 99). The African woman’s “voice” is her “inside idea,” her chosen silence, and in combination with her commanding gestures and alliance with nature, her resistance is iconic.

Many times throughout *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow comments on the overwhelming silence of the surrounding jungle. For example, he repeated observes
that there is a “great silence” to the Congo and that it “was very quiet there” (Conrad 37). These mentions of silence may seem like isolated instances until one compares and combines them, revealing silence as a largely invisible yet powerful weapon. The African woman imitates and employs this same formidable silence in her interactions with the colonizers. Marlow goes on to say that she “was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress.” He explains that, “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” (Conrad 60). Here, admiration has turned to suspicion and each seemingly complimentary word is coupled with something insulting: “superb” is preceded by “savage” and “magnificent” by “wild-eyed.” Now, her steps are not measured and proud, but “ominous.” It is at this point that Marlow realizes the African woman is not simply an object, but rather a force to be reckoned with. The hush that falls upon the scene echoes the great and eerie silence earlier the story.

This same silencing is used by the Mistress against the colonizers only a page later. Marlow describes her unsettling presence:

She stood looking at us without a stir and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose . . . She looked at us as if her life had depended upon the unswerving steadiness of her glance. Suddenly she opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid above her head as though in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky,
and at the same time the swift shadows darted out on the earth, swept around the river, gathering the steamer in a shadowy embrace. A formidable silence hung over the scene. (Conrad 60-1)

This passage indicates the many and varied axes of the Mistress’s power. Firstly, Marlow is frightened of her because, once again, she is “like the wilderness itself,” and both this wilderness and the African woman are “inscrutable.” Marlow cannot penetrate either the land or her mystery and often feels as though “Nature herself had tried to ward off intruders” (Conrad 41). Not only does this sentence signify the African woman’s passion and resilience, but it also signals the reason why many critics, and Marlow, underestimate the African woman: her agency and her methods are, by nature, “inscrutable.” I concur with Johanna Smith when she claims that “she is a woman warrior whose gestures and speech remained unreadable, giving her the power that ‘a formidable silence’ indicates” (Smith 186).

The Mistress’s gestures and mannerisms are extremely important for they are her means of communication and intimidation. In both the magazine and manuscript versions of Heart of Darkness, the text is even more explicit about the power of silent action. Conrad’s manuscript reads: “Her sudden gesture was as startling as a cry but not a sound was heard. The formidable silence of the scene completed the memorable impression.” It is clear from this statement that the African woman’s actions are a form of speech, for her gesture is like “a cry” even though it is soundless.

Additionally, Conrad had originally written that “the unbroken silence that hung over the scene was more formidable than any sound could be” (Conrad 61). One must wonder why Conrad decided to significantly alter his depictions of the Mistress.
between the 1899 and 1902 editions of *Heart of Darkness*. Robert Kimbrough notes that “Conrad did tone down noticeably two descriptions of the native woman who appears at the end of the story” (Kimbrough xi). The first example of this change concerns the Mistress’s silent gesture, but the second example was entirely taken out of the text, and can only be revived through a look at Conrad’s manuscripts.

According to Larry Landrum, Conrad had originally bestowed upon the Mistress a role of caretaker to Mr. Kurtz but then reduced her to only his lover (244-5). While the position of caretaker is still a typically feminine role, it would have given the Mistress more influence within the text and the fact that Conrad changed her character shows the way in which her character had begun to become too powerful for him to handle.

The importance of symbolic gesture becomes even more conspicuous when compared with ritual acts of resistance carried out by the women of colonial South Africa. Though these women were located in a completely different area of Africa than the Mistress would be, and though they had differing customs and culture, their response to colonial presumption and restrictions were markedly similar to the African woman’s subversions. Excluded from colonial schools for men and forced instead to sweep these spaces, the women of South Africa turned the domestic act of sweeping into a ritual of cleansing themselves from colonial infiltration. These group acts “provide[d] a means for women to report, comment on, and critique practices and policies with which they disagree, as well as propose their own alternatives” (Hodgson and McCurdy 15). While the South African women did not have the license to outwardly protest their colonization, they used ritual sweeping and gestures to voice their discontent. This same ritual resistance through body language is evident in the
Mistress’s “unswerving” stare and steady walk, which she uses to intimidate and confuse the colonizers. Just like the sweeping was a symbol of the women ridding themselves of colonial influence, the Mistress’s slow and deliberate tread could be in direct opposition to Marlow’s haste. While he is attempting to rush Kurtz away from the Congo, the Mistress is simply pacing the shore and fixing him with her stare. Hodgson and McCurdy argue that women’s performances and expressions typically use “metaphor as an indirect yet potent means to voice grievances” (Hodgson and McCurdy 15). The Mistress expresses herself through her actions, if not with her voice, and the few passages Marlow devotes to her are enough to demonstrate her subversive influence.
IV. “TOO DARK ALTOGETHER”: THE INTENDED, MARLOW’S INTENTIONS, AND DISRUPTIVE DARKNESS

Psychic Dependence: Marlow’s Complicated Relationship with the Intended

Though the Mistress and the Intended live continents apart, and though race and class power structures separate them, they have one unlikely thing in common: Mr. Kurtz. Both of the women, despite various examples of agency, are embroiled and entrapped in a relationship with Mr. Kurtz, and are subsequently betrayed by him. Even Voila et al. admit the character of the Mistress, whom they argue is an incarnation of the goddess Athena, is “not a purely admirable figure of resistance” because she, like the Intended, is a tragic figure (Voila et al. 169). A discussion of the women of Heart of Darkness, then, must consider their relationship to Mr. Kurtz, who is arguably a figurehead of the Belgian colonial enterprise. This chapter demonstrates how, despite their tragic connection to Mr. Kurtz and to colonialism, the Mistress and the Intended elude easy interpretation, by Marlow and others. Specifically, I argue that the Intended’s typical domestic role is complicated by her darkened surroundings, her unconscious mimicking of the Mistress’s haunting gesture, and her assumption of control over her mourning for Kurtz.
Jeremy Hawthorne makes an interesting point about the Intended’s position as a white woman of colonialism. Though the Mistress is more obviously oppressed, the Intended is cut off from reality, kept “out of it.” He states that 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 a recipient of passion. (Hawthorn 153)

Here, Hawthorn asserts that while the African woman was more directly abused by Kurtz and the colonizers—having her people enslaved and her land taken away—the Intended was left in isolation to hope and dream about her fiancé, Kurtz. Both of these different and yet connected oppressions limit the women’s agency and seem to prevent resistance by either women. I do not agree, however, that “Kurtz manages to destroy both women” (Hawthorn 152). To assume that Kurtz and Marlow “destroy” the women is to assume that the women have no existence beyond the men, and that Marlow and Kurtz wield full authority. There are many examples in *Heart of Darkness*, however, that show how the Mistress and the Intended defy the men’s presumed authority and refuse to conform to stereotypical expectations. Heliéna Krenn states that “Conrad’s novels present an intensely ironic complex not only of racial and national but also of sexual revenge and that – in most cases – the latter has something
to do with women’s function to make the truth assert itself” (Krenn 119). In Chapter Three, I argued that the Mistress consciously enacted revenge upon the colonizers by exploiting their fear of darkness and of the jungle, and by refusing to allay their fears by speaking. In this final chapter, I assert that the Intended represents a crucial flaw in Marlow’s narrative on women; her dark house and clothing disrupt Marlow’s assumptions about light and purity, and her unconscious gesture signals to Marlow a connection between her and the Mistress which he cannot deny.

Discussing the Intended’s influence is difficult, however, when Marlow constantly describes her as timid and naive. In Chapter Two, for example, I noted the way in which Marlow expects the Intended to act a certain passive way based upon her idealized portrait. He focuses on her fair skin and white forehead, needing her to be the beacon of light that she represented for both Kurtz and himself. This need for women to be symbols—symbols which save the colonizers from assimilation into the African jungle—allows the women to exert some form of power over the men; for, more often than not, the women do not conform to their expected categories, and this nonconformity is both unsettling and intimidating. Hawthorn asserts that “[t]heir appearance in the novella suggests that women have a significant role to play in determining various fates in Heart of Darkness” (148). What “fates” these women control may seem illusive if one concentrates solely on tangible results, but both women are certainly unnerving to Marlow and the other colonizers: the Mistress for

16 Padmini Mongia draws similar connections, writing that the “discursive distinctions in the construction of Africa and the Orient in . . . novels by Conrad” demonstrate how “women - native, mixed, and white—represent a continuum of threats.” These threats to proper masculinity, in turn, affect the colonizers’ plans and mentalities, and serve as evidence of “how the colonial relationship varies in different circumstances and settings” (Mongia 136).
her independent attitude, and the Intended for her dark house, which clashes with
Marlow’s suppositions about her purity and lightness. It seems as though each
character is menacing to Marlow, but for completely different reasons. The African
woman seems to be the queen of darkness and mystery, whereas Kurtz’s fiancé is
“another inscrutable ‘intention’ that Marlow defends himself against” (Strauss 206).

Although the Intended is supposed to be a simple foil to the perceived “evil” of
the African Mistress and although she seems to be isolated at the margins of Heart of
Darkness, she also embodies power and importance as a signifier. Nina Strauss claims
that the women, as signifiers, are exploited, but I argue that this position at the
foundation of colonial idealism lends Kurtz’s fiancée some influence. To Marlow and
to Kurtz, she represents a crucial symbol—an idol/ideal of both European civilization
and of women’s supposed submissiveness—and therefore any departure of hers from
this role is subversive. Strauss in fact underlines my point in stating that the men have
a “psychic dependence on the contrasting images of women” (i.e. the Mistress as dark
and foreboding and the Intended as white and pure). Moreover, this dependence is
never acknowledged; it simply runs as a continuous undercurrent throughout the male-
controlled narrative of Heart of Darkness:

What this figure [the Intended] achieves, as perhaps few other female
characters in fiction do, is what could nicely be called negative
capability but which is psychologically symbolic of the male’s need for
an infinite receptivity and passivity. Male heroism and plenitude
depend on female cowardice and emptiness. (Strauss 214)
Once again, what Strauss interprets as the Intended’s weakness, I construe as her main strength. Strauss sees the Intended as a symbol of Marlow’s “need for an infinite receptivity and passivity,” which is indeed true. If, however, the Intended disrupts this infinite passivity and emptiness and instead reveals to Marlow a complexity he is not expecting, she then destroys the narrative of male heroism which Marlow is attempting to complete. Furthermore, she upsets the delicate balance of lightness and darkness which Marlow has been setting up and depending on throughout his story.

**Keeping the Intended “Out Of It”: Critical Scholarship**

Though literary scholars are by no means as invested as Marlow in maintaining the Intended’s isolation, they too abet Marlow’s goals in keeping the Intended out of the dialogue. Strangely enough, critics cannot seem to find women’s agency within *Heart of Darkness* without making the two female characters compete with one another for importance. Jeremy Hawthorn’s article is a key example of this pattern, for it celebrates the agency and power of the Mistress, but only at the expense of the Intended: “[w]here the Intended is static and passive,” the African Mistress “is active and forceful; where the Intended has the odor of death about her, she is the personification of life; where the Intended is a thing of black and white, she is ablaze with color; where the Intended is refined to the point of etiolation, she is ‘savage and superb’” (151). The Mistress is indeed a powerful force, especially when her strong appearance and direct action are compared with the Intended’s seeming passivity, but Kurtz’s fiancée is not as helpless as Hawthorn paints her. Hawthorn claims that the Intended is a “thing . . . of sickness and death,” and that she “has no energy, no living
presence” (149). At this point in Hawthorn’s analysis, the Intended is no longer a
person, but a “thing” which has no life. Patrick Brantlinger goes as far as to state that
the Intended is not only a passive void, but is also “perhaps the greatest fetishist of all,
idolizing her image of her fiancé” (393). If one were to follow this logic, the Intended
would seem a submissive “thing” unworthy of any particular attention. This, however,
is a folly of literary scholarship, given the emphasis and symbolic importance that
Marlow bestows upon Kurtz’s fiancée.

Rita Bode refuses to accept this dismissal of the Intended and, while her work
does not explicitly detail the Intended’s agency, she at least discusses both female
characters without resorting to harsh comparisons. Bode argues that, since readers and
critics readily see the theme of brotherhood in Heart of Darkness, most notably the
borderline homoerotic bond between Marlow and Mr. Kurtz, then they should just as
readily accept that “the women also form significant reflections of each other” (20). In
Bode’s analysis, the “separate female space, which, according to Marlow, the women
inhabit, becomes by the novella’s end the dominant one, drawing within its parameters
the male characters as well” (20). The Intended, then, is not the only one who ends up
trapped in her dark house, for Marlow too is drawn into this feminine space.

The darkness within the Intended’s domain, further, connects her to the woman
Marlow fears: Kurtz’s African Mistress. Dijkstra points out that, “[j]ust as Marlow’s
entry into the primal womb of darkness was facilitated and ‘guarded’ by women, so
Conrad’s final reckoning of his journey takes the form of a crucial confrontation with
Kurtz’s ‘Intended,’ upon his return to Brussels” (154-5). While the Mistress and the
Intended have significant connections to one another, and while both disrupt Marlow’s
assumptions about women, to state as Bode does that the “links between these women point to a sisterhood in which each works to further and complete the actions begun by the other” is an exaggeration. After all, the Intended and the Mistress never communicate with one another and, while both women resist in their own ways, their racial and class differences keep them from forming the idyllic “sisterhood” that Bode proposes.

The Intended’s identity, as a white European woman, is complicated by her dual position as oppressed and oppressor. In the essay, “Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in Twentieth-Century Colonial Cultures” Ann Laura Stoler explains how European women were “both subordinated in colonial hierarchies and . . . active agents of imperial culture in their own right” (344). Though Stoler’s study is of white women living in the colonial site itself (certainly not “out of it” as Marlow would like), her arguments are still relevant to Kurtz’s Intended, who is both a symbol of colonial idealism as well as a catalyst for Kurtz’s involvement in the enterprise. She supports the Belgian expedition into the Congo because it is the means through which Kurtz can earn money and status to marry her. As Marlow finds out, “her engagement with Kurtz had been disapproved by her people. He wasn’t rich enough or something” (Conrad 74). The Intended also represents the perfect domestic angel whom Kurtz, Marlow, and the other men are supposedly defending. According to Stoler,

Male colonizers positioned European women as the bearers of a redefined colonial morality . . . The presence and protection of European women were repeatedly invoked to clarify racial lines. Their
presence coincided with perceived threats to European prestige...covert challenges to colonial order, outright expressions of nationalist resistance, and internal dissension among whites themselves. (352)

The Intended is not present in the Congo area but her portrait alone is enough, for Kurtz and Marlow, to justify the Belgian invasion. Her pure, white visage also provides the foil for Kurtz’s dark and mysterious African woman, who is “evil” to Marlow precisely because she is not the Intended.

Just as his engagement to the impeccable Intended motivates Kurtz to enter into colonialism, so does Marlow’s interaction with his aunt lead him to journey to the Congo. Marlow’s “spinster” aunt is a complicated character for while she evinces independence she also unquestioningly supports Belgian imperialism. It is for this reason, Johanna Smith argues, that both Marlow’s aunt and Kurtz’s Intended “are not silenced.” Marlow needs them “for their speech: by mocking the lack of worldly experience which their words convey, he can recuperate that experience as a manly encounter with truth. By having them feebly echo the case Kurtz has made for imperialism, he can reverse the powerlessness evinced in his response to Kurtz’s eloquence” (Smith 189). The problem for Marlow, and the reason he is so uncomfortable in the Intended’s house, is that unlike Marlow’s aunt, the Intended does not echo the argument for imperialism; she instead focuses on Kurtz and forces Marlow to divulge details about their experience. She insists that Marlow, in a sense, re-live his interaction with Kurtz and colonialism, and makes his lie even more difficult.
Attending to the Intended: Marlow’s Lie

When Marlow makes his infamous claim that the women are “out of it,” he is specifically referring to his encounter with Kurtz’s fiancée at the end of Heart of Darkness. In this one scene, Marlow realizes just how much he has to lose and what he will need to do to maintain the precarious balance of men as active and powerful and women as passive and powerless. He abruptly picks up his story to the men after a long pause with the cryptic sentence, “I laid the ghost of his gifts at last with a lie” (49). Interestingly, this lie that Marlow tells is actually the way that he strives to keep (white) women out of it; in a sense, the lie is twofold because while it is the means by which Marlow keeps the Intended ignorant, the fact that women are always “out of it” is itself a lie.

Marlow’s lie to the Intended is both difficult to define and less important than the fact that Marlow feels compelled to alter reality in order to maintain his neatly categorized world. Technically, the lie to which Marlow is referring is his conversation with the Intended about Mr. Kurtz, specifically when she requests that Marlow tell her Kurtz’s last words and instead of the reality (“The horror! The horror!”) Marlow responds with “The last word he pronounced was—your name” (Conrad 75). This is the falsehood itself but Marlow’s whole visit is also a lie. He claims that he feels obligated to pass on Kurtz’s letters and the Intended’s portrait, but later he admits that he is not even sure this is what Kurtz wanted him to do. Marlow candidly discloses, in the middle of his narration about the Intended, “I rather suspect he wanted me to take care of another batch of his papers which after his death I saw the Manager examining under the lamp” (Conrad 74)—these other letters are no doubt
Kurtz’s extreme capitalist methods of extracting ivory from the Congo at the expense of his health and the natives’ lives and land. The fact that the Manager pores over these letters suggests that Kurtz, with all his alleged brilliance, had come up with a new, even more ruthless and efficient way of obtaining ivory, and the fact that it is these papers which he probably wished Marlow to take is further indicative of Kurtz’s (and colonialism’s) complete corruption.

The manuscript and magazine versions of Heart of Darkness are even more explicit on this point, stating, “But in the box I brought to his bedside there were several packages . . . tied with shoe-strings and probably he [Kurtz] had made a mistake” (Conrad 74). This alternate package, probably valued more by Kurtz than his Intended, is what Marlow means when he says, “[a]ll that had been Kurtz’s had passed out of my hands: his soul, his body, his station, his plans, his ivory, his career” (Conrad 71, emphasis mine). After listing these possessions, Marlow then moves on to Kurtz’s living possession: the Intended. It is significant not only that Marlow, like Kurtz, considers the Intended to be a passive object, but that he visits her, both to solidify his submissive image of her and also to justify his own involvement in colonialism. Marlow is conflicted as he attempts to relate his reasons for visiting Kurtz’s Intended: “There remained only his memory and his Intended—and I wanted to give that up too to the past, in a way—I don’t defend myself. I had no clear perception of what it was I really wanted. Perhaps it was an impulse of unconscious loyalty . . . I don’t know. I can’t tell. But I went” (Conrad 71-2). One might assume that Marlow’s motives for visiting the Intended would be to return her letters and portrait—that is, if Marlow is telling the truth. Just like when he lies to the Intended, it
is unclear here whether Marlow is also lying to his listeners. For example, if his motives were simply to abide by Kurtz’s deathbed wish, he would have no reason to defend himself. Marlow starts to say that his reason is “unconscious loyalty” but quickly backtracks, claiming that he does not know and “had no clear perception of what it was [he] really wanted.” Clearly, there is something in the above passage that Marlow is not telling, but whether he “can’t tell” or won’t tell is debatable.

Perhaps Marlow’s real motive for seeing Kurtz’s Intended is to “help them [women] stay in that beautiful world of their own lest ours get worse” (Conrad 49). In other words, it is probable that Marlow, not the Intended, is the one who most needs closure, to keep his colonialist past at bay and to return to a familiar “world shaped by the male bonds of work and restraint” (Mongia 144). After all, Marlow insists, “Oh, she [the Intended] had to be out of it. You should have heard the disinterred body of Mr. Kurtz saying, ‘My Intended.’ You would have perceived then how completely she was out of it” (Conrad 49). This passage by Marlow, while seemingly straightforward, is actually loaded with hidden meaning. First, it is important that Marlow keeps contending that the women, specifically the Intended, have to be out of it. Second, Kurtz’s repeated mention of “My Intended” reinforces the complete possessiveness that both he and Marlow feel toward the Intended, for differing reasons.

Even more significant, however, is his use of the word “disinterred” to describe Kurtz on his deathbed. The word “disinter” is often applied to corpses and tombs; it means “to take (something) out of the earth in which it is buried” and, further, to “bring out of concealment, ‘unearth’” (“Disinter,” def. 1). To say “disinterred” is therefore a strange word choice for Marlow to make because, at the
point he is describing, Mr. Kurtz is talking about his Intended and is, obviously, not yet dead. With a less exact narrator, one might explain away this misnomer as a mistake, but in the case of Marlow, who is a veritable wordsmith throughout *Heart of Darkness*, his mistake has meaning. The word “disinterred” upon closer investigation takes on the characteristic of bringing something out of concealment and exposing a truth previously hidden, in this case women’s real importance and the threat this makes to Marlow’s patriarchal and colonial way of life. I argue, then, that Marlow’s mistake in using the word “disinterred” reveals his hidden guilt about the lie he makes to the Intended.

Once again, Conrad’s earlier manuscript of *Heart of Darkness* is illuminating and instructive, for as editor Robert Kimbrough writes, “many passages that were later suppressed help one understand the full meaning of the final text of *Heart of Darkness*” (xi). The manuscript, in this instance, gives the reader more detail for why Marlow lies to the Intended about her fiancé and about African colonialism. Marlow explains the sacrifices needed to preserve white women’s ignorance: “That’s a monster truth with many maws to whom we’ve got to throw every year—or every day—no matter—no sacrifice is too great—a ransom of pretty, shining lies—not very new perhaps—but spotless” (Conrad 49). Ironically, the “monster truth” Marlow is referring to—that (white) women are out of it, and that they never know the realities of colonialism—must be upheld with a multitude of lies. Not just any lies, in fact, but

---

17 Rita Bode draws connection between Marlow and other sailors and men of literature, such as Ulysses: “From his too facile dismissal of all women to another realm of perception through to his final encounter with the Intended, Marlow’s troubled reactions frequently suggest the sailor’s fundamental fear of female powers” (Bode 24).
“pretty, shining lies” that shed light upon an otherwise dark subject. This imagery of beauty, light, and even spotlessness, is no accident when paired with the Intended, the proverbial beacon of light throughout Marlow’s story. Behind all of this gossamer imagery, however, is an overwhelming fear that the “monster truth” will gorge itself upon Marlow with its “many maws,” which symbolize the mythical, feared, and horrifyingly feminine vagina dentata. To protect himself from the terrifying reality, or even idea, that women will infiltrate his world of men and rationality, Marlow relies solely upon the Intended.18

Revealing Disruptive Darkness: A New Way of Reading Heart of Darkness

Marlow’s encounter with the Intended comes toward the end of the novella, and effectually transplants both Marlow and the readers into the uncomfortable meshing of Marlow’s two worlds: the atrocious Belgian colonialism in the Congo and the suffocating realities of European domestic life. In the beginning of his visit to the Intended, Marlow waits in the drawing room and feels increasingly unsettled as he watches dusk falling outside. He notices a relic of whiteness, a “tall marble fireplace,” but this time the whiteness is “cold and monumental” and not comforting, as it was to him in the jungle. More imposing than this cold fireplace is a grand piano that “stood massively in the corner; with dark gleams on the flat surfaces like a somber and polished sarcophagus” (Conrad 73). This juxtaposition of whiteness and blackness,

18 According to Dijkstra, “[t]his is what civilization means, Marlow recognizes: [Kurtz’s white fiancée is] the angel of altruism, the mother of the human soul . . . She is the counterforce man has created against the African devil-woman. The Intended is the virgin-mother of man’s disembodied future, and she must therefore be protected at all cost . . . To protect the future of civilized society, Marlow lies to her” (155).
right before Marlow is to meet with the Intended, is symbolic of his struggle to separate lightness and darkness and of the triumphant darkness which has followed him from the jungle. The dark grand piano that looms in the corner mimics the darkness from which Marlow is trying to escape, and its coffin-like appearance emphasizes the many haunting African casualties Marlow helped to cause in the name of “civilization” and whiteness. This drawing room, moreover, sets the scene for Marlow’s interpretations and assumptions about the Intended. Marlow describes the Intended’s entry into the room: “She came forward all in black with a pale head, floating in the dusk” (Conrad 73). As the room grows darker and darker, Marlow claims it was “as if all the sad light of the cloudy evening had taken refuge in her forehead” (Conrad 73). It is not the light, however, but Marlow, who is taking refuge in the Intended’s high, pale forehead. For him, her pale white skin represents all he is trying to reclaim, and though her piercing dark eyes stare at Marlow, all he sees is “this fair hair, this pale visage, this pure brow,” ignoring the “ashy halo” that disrupts the fairness and pureness of her image (Conrad 73).

Hawthorn reads the Intended’s white forehead as a symbol of “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” (153). It is important to note, however, that the Intended’s isolation is not something of her choosing, but a societal expectation of mourning of which she takes control. The Intended knowingly asserts her authority in her interaction with Marlow, taking pride in her remembrance of Kurtz and subtly insisting that she knew him better than Marlow: “She carried her sorrowful head as
though she were proud of that sorrow, as though she would say, I—I alone known how to mourn for him as he deserves” (Conrad 73). Though the Intended’s pride is in mourning her unfaithful fiancé, she is actually claiming authority over something that would, inevitably, control her life. At the time *Heart of Darkness* was written, it was common for women to mourn their husbands and fiancés for the rest of their lives—to never take another lover and to dress in black. (Hence, Marlow’s comment that it “seemed as though she would remember and mourn forever” is not a comment about the Intended’s passivity, but rather a social pattern she was adhering to, with her own additions.) The Intended simply takes this accepted fact and molds it to become part of her existence.

Further, she is adamant about the fact that she knew Kurtz better than anyone, first pretending to acknowledge Marlow’s experience with him—“you knew him well”—but quickly asserting, “no one knew him so well as I! I had all his noble confidence. I knew him best” (Conrad 73). While Marlow had originally approached his visit with the condescending assumption that he knew Kurtz better and that the Intended was simply a naive and timid object, she instead makes him reiterate her own point: “‘You knew him best,’ I repeated. And perhaps she did.” As soon as Marlow makes this concession, the room grows even dimmer and he begins to second-guess his otherwise unchallenged dominance. He writes, “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” (Conrad 73). As the darkness (and, I argue, the Intended’s agency) encroaches on Marlow, he once again resorts to idolizing her whiteness as his saving grace.
Toni Morrison, in her critical work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, discusses “images of impenetrable whiteness”; she posits that these icons of whiteness (such as the Intended’s “unextinguishable” forehead) can only exist in contrast to representations of African people and darkness (33). I use Morrison’s theory to argue that writers such as Conrad split lightness and darkness into a dichotomy, privileging “blinding whiteness” as “both antidote for and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness” (33).19 The shadow that accompanies the Intended’s whiteness in *Heart of Darkness* is, of course, the Intended’s supposed opposite, Kurtz’s African Mistress. For Marlow, she and the African darkness she represents linger in every unlighted corner, “a dark and abiding presence” from which Marlow attempts to escape through the Intended’s whiteness (Morrison 33). When the idols of whiteness are not enough to assuage Marlow’s growing fears, he feels as “with a sensation of panic in my heart as though I had blundered into a place of cruel and absurd mysteries not fit for a human being to behold” (Conrad 73). This language into which Marlow slips is none other than the words he used to described Africa: mysterious, cruel, absurd, savage, and unholy.

It is clear at this point that the Intended’s house is not the typical domestic refuge, but a complex space in which the Intended’s assertiveness and the African woman’s influence collide. The undeniable Africanist presence swells as the Intended

---

19 Admittedly, Morrison is discussing American literature specifically throughout *Playing in the Dark*, but she extends her commentary to colonial situations as well: “What rose up out of collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation was an American Africanism—a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American. (There also exists, of course, a European Africanism with a counterpart in colonial literature)” (Morrison 38).
continues to talk over Marlow, disturbing and disrupting him. Marlow relates to his listeners how

the sound of her low voice seemed to have the accompaniment of all the other sounds full of mystery, desolation, and sorrow I had ever heard—the rippling of the river, the soughing of the trees swayed by the wind, the murmur of the crowds, the faint ring of incomprehensible words cried from afar, the whisper of a voice speaking from beyond the threshold of an eternal darkness. (Conrad 74)

Once again, Marlow bemoans the way in which the mystery and power of the African jungle has followed him to his supposed safe space; the rippling river and the trees swaying in the wind are undeniable references to the Congo and Marlow’s experiences there. Further, while some may read “a voice speaking from beyond the threshold of an eternal darkness” to mean Kurtz’s haunting last words, I argue that this voice is in fact the Mistress. Though she did not physically speak to Marlow, her actions and her resistance continue to articulate themselves across oceans and time. The Intended’s haunting gesture solidifies this Africanist presence:

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 . . . I shall see this eloquent phantom as long as I live . . . a tragic and familiar Shade resembling in this gesture another one, tragic also and bedecked in powerless charms, stretching bare brown arms over the flitter of the infernal stream, the stream of darkness.

(Conrad 75)
The Intended unconsciously mimics the Mistress’s evocative movement, and interestingly, her arms are both “black” and “pale,” symbolizing a sort of melding of the black/white binary. She both resembles and is the “Shade” of the African Mistress, affirming to Marlow that the women are not out of it, and that he will not receive the comfort of whiteness that he seeks.

The Intended even cries out to Marlow, “You know!” technically meaning Kurtz’s last words but also implying a possible knowledge of Kurtz’s unfaithfulness. With this one phrase, the Intended demands that Marlow recall his real experience in the Congo and once again Marlow finds himself repeating her words: “‘Yes, I know,’ I said with something like despair in my heart” (Conrad 74). It is at this point, when Marlow feels himself encased in “the triumphant darkness from which I could not have defended her—from which I could not even defend myself,” that Marlow lies to the Intended in a pitiful attempt to keep his world intact. He pleads with the listener to understand his motives: “I couldn’t. I could not tell her. It would have been too dark—too dark altogether” (Conrad 76). What Marlow does not divulge, but which is clear here, is that it would have been too dark for him.

Morrison poignantly writes that, whether “[e]xplicit or implicit, the Africanist presence informs in compelling and inescapable ways . . . both a visible and an invisible mediating force. Even, and especially, when . . . texts are not ‘about’ Africanist presences or characters or narrative or idiom, the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation” (Morrison 46-7). Her point is all too relevant to Marlow in Heart of Darkness, who cannot escape Africa and who, like
Kurtz, constructs idols of whiteness and European civilization in an attempt to stave off both the women’s power and the darkness.

Marlow’s confusion and fear in encountering both the Mistress and the Intended is key to a novella which is largely controlled by him. As the “masculine narrator of the story,” Marlow holds a significant amount of power and tries to conceal many of the women’s stories in *Heart of Darkness* (Smith 183). Therefore, when the African Woman and the Intended exhibit agency and break free from their oppositional categories, they subvert Marlow’s authority, an authority largely based on colonial hierarchies of race and class. It is surprising, then, that while there has been much criticism and scholarly attention given to *Heart of Darkness*, so few scholars acknowledge the women’s influence.

Too often, readers are manipulated by Marlow into focusing on the Mistress and the Intended only as objects of the gaze, assuming, like Marlow, that the female characters have no agency. I admit that the women, written by Conrad and narrated by Marlow, are not fully autonomous characters or individuals, yet the “many connections among them are enough to make the novella’s women grow beyond, indeed, become too large for the imaginative constructs that try to contain them” (Bode 21). Through their actions and stares, speeches and silences, the women of *Heart of Darkness* prove their influence and importance.


