

# The revelation of societal values through marginalisation in Conrad's Heart of Darkness...

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



It is fair to say, that late 19th Century Europe is not remembered for its progressive and humanistic values. Indeed, European society at this time could probably be described as racist and sexist, with colonialism and 'empire building' national passions throughout the continent, a passion perhaps best expressed by Belgian King Leopold who described the imperialist enterprise as a " crusade worthy of a century of progress". Generally, black people were thought of as a savage type of sub-human, whilst women were generally believed to be second-class citizens, with both groups possessing few rights. Naturally, the literary texts of the time generally reflect this, with ' classics' of Western Literature such as Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, for example, essentially racist and pro-colonialist. Joseph Conrad's 1898-99 work *Heart of Darkness*, however, does purport to dispute some of the dominant values of its society to an extent, through its somewhat dubious anti-colonialist discourse. Despite this, however, *Heart of Darkness* constructs black Africans and women as being on society's fringes. Whilst it can be argued that this marginalization is unconscious, Conrad nevertheless exhibits racism and sexism to a degree and in doing so reveals some of the dominant societal values in his time. In recent years especially, there has been increasing criticism as to how Conrad represents black people in his novella. A large amount of this criticism has stemmed from the post-colonialist African novelist Chinua Achebe, who, in his famous lecture " An image of Africa" argues, that the way in which Conrad represents Africans as on the margins means he should be labelled a " thoroughgoing racist". A key aspect of Achebe's criticism is the way in which Africa and its people are marginalized as an " other world", or an antithesis to ' civilized' Europe. This

can be seen firstly through the fact that, according to the novella, everyone who comes into contact with Africa becomes crazy. The Company Doctor, when he examines Marlow, tells us that when men go to Africa “ changes take place” (inside their heads) whilst the Company Secretary’s response to Marlow’s query as to whether or not he would go to Africa is “ I am not such a fool as I look, quoth Plato to his disciples”. These two statements seem to suggest to the reader that Africa, and by association its native people, makes ordinary people crazy because of its savagery. As such, it marginalizes Africans as barbarous and, in doing so, reveals some of the racism prevalent in Conrad’s society. The dichotomy between ‘ civilized’ Europe and barbarous Africa, within the novella, can also be seen through the character of Kurtz. The ‘ poster boy’ of European society, Kurtz, at the beginning of his sojourn in Africa is described glowingly by all, with the Brickmaker, for example, calling Kurtz “ an emissary of pity, of science and progress” whilst Kurtz’s paper for the “ International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs”, expresses, in Marlow’s words, “ every altruistic sentiment”. Onto this is juxtaposed the Kurtz that we meet who has altered his report on ‘ the suppression of savage customs’ with a postscript reading “ exterminate the brutes”. Additionally, Kurtz is self-centered (“ My intended, My ivory, My station, My river...”) and barbarous as evidenced by the gruesome set of skulls outside his hut. From this transformation, the reader can ascertain that something has changed Kurtz. In the words of Achebe, this something is Africa and its inhabitants, who are constructed as, “ the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant

bestiality". As such, Conrad's text again, perhaps unconsciously, marginalizes Africa and its people as a savage kryptonite for European civilization, and therefore again allows dominant societal values to be seen. Another way in which Africans are represented as on society's margins is through the silencing of all Africans within the novella. During the course of the book, Africans are essentially voiceless, speaking only twice, with their native language described as "uncouth babble" (although this can be explained, to an extent by the lack of knowledge of African languages during Conrad's time). On the few occasions when Africans do speak, they speak essentially Pidgin English, and effectively 'marginalise themselves', as such. This can be seen through the two occasions when Africans speak as, on one occasion, the 'cannibalistic savagery' of African's is shown as a black African asks Marlow to catch an individual so that he can "eat 'im", and, on the other, it is proclaimed that "Mistah Kurtz - he dead", reminding the reader that it is Africa which has 'caused' Kurtz's death through its lack of civilisation. As such, it can be seen that Africans are pushed to the fringes, through their lack of voice, and are therefore marginalized as savage and incapable of intelligent speech. Additionally, Africans are also marginalized through the comparisons of Africans and Europeans throughout the novella. Marlow tells us that, "what thrills you was the thought of their (Africans) humanity - like yours" and that Africans can lay a claim of "remote kinship". This again marginalizes black people by suggesting that Africans have a 'lesser humanity', as such, again a reflection of the discourses of Conrad's time. This is again highlighted as Marlow tells us that he believes Africans to be "fine fellows...in their place", thereby suggesting that Africans are fine,

as long as they stick to their place, which, Marlow implies through showering praise on a group of Africans paddling canoes, is in the jungle, as 'savages'. As such, the novel gives us an insight into the societal beliefs of late 19th Century Western Europe by (consciously or unconsciously) constructing Africans as second-class humans. Despite this, however, it has been argued (notably by Ngugi Wa Thiongo) that the anti-colonialist discourse of Heart of Darkness balances out its 'racist' representation to some extent. It could also be argued, however, that this discourse is not really anti-colonialist at all, but instead argues for 'better' colonialism, as such. Although Marlow calls Colonialists "violent robbers", and describes ivory hunters ironically as "pilgrims", presumably to a shrine of greed, he also notes that Kurtz' report on the suppression of "savage customs" expresses "every altruistic sentiment". Additionally, Marlow also describes patches of red on the map, representing English territory, as being where 'good' work is being done, despite this being colonisation just like everywhere else. What this implies is that there is a type of 'good' colonialism, whereby Africans are 'civilised' without force, which is valued by Conrad. As such, whilst there appears to be anti-colonialist elements, generally, these serve more to expose the brutality that is occurring in the name of colonialism to the middle-upper class readers of Blackwood Magazine (where the novella was published) than to criticize the imperialist enterprise as such. It can be seen therefore, that the novella promotes a patronizing way of 'civilizing' black Africans and as such, again marginalizes them as lesser humans. In doing so, it also again reflects the values of Western European society, whereby colonialism was seen as a 'positive' force for the uncivilised Africans. Another group of people pushed to

the fringes within Heart of Darkness are women. Within the narrative, women occupy very minor roles, and achieve merely a passing mention. There are only five women mentioned throughout the book, Marlow's aunt, Kurtz's intended, Kurtz's mistress and the two women symbolically knitting like the classical Greek fates. It is significant that none of these women are named. Additionally, of these women only one, Marlow's aunt, wields any real power (as she manages to get Marlow a position in Africa). Even Marlow's aunt, however, must wield power through influencing men, whom, it is implied, wield the 'real' power, as such. The other four female characters are fairly dysfunctional, either delusional like Kurtz's intended, denied speech like Kurtz's native mistress or fairly irrelevant like the two women knitting. Women within the novel are dismissed i. e. they are not central to the novel's proceedings and occupy what are essentially symbolic roles. Thus, it can be seen that women within the novella are pushed aside, denied power and a significant role, revealing much about Conrad's patriarchal society, in which women had little economic or legal power and few rights. In a similar vein, women within the text are also characterised in a way that marginalises them. Marlow's aunt, for example, is characterised as naive and in Marlow's words "out of touch with the truth". As he journeys into what he describes as the "centre of the earth", he is told by his Aunt to "wear flannel" and "write often", statements which make the reader perceive her as foolish and somewhat simple. Similarly, Marlow tells us that women, "live in a world of their own...too beautiful altogether and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset", providing a context for our understanding of the Intended, whom we perceive as living in

a delusional world and deceiving herself. In contrast, the Mistress lives out her urges, and is 'real', in a sense, but essentially, is constructed as bestial and savage. As such, women, it is suggested, either live in a fantasy world created as they lack the pragmatism and intelligence of men or live in the real world but are essentially savage, fulfilling a symbolic role. This again reveals dominant values of late 19th Century Europe, which commonly perceived women, as, according to one leading historian, "delicate, sensitive, frail, and emotional creatures". Finally, the lie to Kurtz's Intended also showcases how women within the text are pushed to the fringes, revealing dominant societal values. Marlow, although he tells us that he 'abhors lies', lies to Kurtz's Intended, in order to 'protect' her from the horrors of her fiancé's death by telling her that instead of his last words being the deeply disturbing "the horror, the horror", Kurtz's last words were the Intended's name. As such, Marlow appears to be attempting once again to protect the woman from the 'real' world, adopting a patriarchal and paternalistic protective attitude towards the Intended. As such, the woman is again pushed to the fringes, as the reading shows her to be unpractical and living in a 'fantasy' world, and therefore again, this dominant view in Conrad's society is exposed. Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness is an unquestionably important work of literature. Nevertheless, as the novella is read, it appears to propagate and collude with many of the cultural myths and stereotypes with respect to women and indigenous Africans that were prevalent at the time of writing, seemingly marginalising both of these groups and pushing them to the fringes of society. In this way, some of the dominant ideologies and values of Conrad's time, that is, racism, sexism and

colonialism are revealed through the novella. By the end of the novella, by constructing black Africans and women as marginal in society, Conrad has both consciously and unconsciously revealed that the late 19th Century European society in which he lived regarded both black people and women paternally and in a patronising fashion, and allowed us to better understand this society.