

Heart of darkness – analysis of marlow's lie essay

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



The text Heart of Darkness looks into what embodies a lie by giving the accounts of Charles Marlow an Englishman working as a ferryboat captain in Africa soon after the death of Kurtz. Marlow’s experiences both in Africa and Europe may have shaped him and led him to lie to Kurtz’s intended.

Marlow’s experiences are pegged on evils of the human condition in these two regions especially Kurtz’s expedition to what he called the “ heart of darkness” along the banks of the snake-like river Congo (Conrad, 19). All this reactions are divided into two; common inconsequential misdemeanors and trifling lies and the larger evils which in most cases are attributed to madmen (Conrad, 150; Milne, 88).

The big question here is why did Marlow lie to Kurtz’s intended, was it the right thing to do to lie or not and why? Marlow on recounting to Kurtz’s intended about her lover’s death lies to her about Kurtz’s last words. As a replacement for Kurtz’s last words “ The Horror, The Horror” he lies about Kurtz’s last words. He claims that he called out to her and mentioned her name (Conrad, 50). So why does he lie or what is Conrad trying to portray here?

The circumstances and world Marlow lives in, is one that paints a picture of Europeans males as men able to chase after their every impulse (acquiring fame, women and wealth-embodied in Kurtz) (Conrad, 46). To understand the reason for the lie, first we must understand there were two images of Kurtz being portrayed. One was what Marlow, Kurtz’s intended and other people idolized; and the other was what Marlow found out (Ellis, 96).

All through his journeys, Marlow saw Kurtz as a ‘hero’ and admired him but on meeting him and getting to see for himself the real Kurtz and such things as dried heads on stakes facing his station, his view of Kurtz changed. This can be said to be one of the influences over Marlow that led to his lie.

The meeting between the two made Marlow realize that Kurtz was not an ideal person and did not have good principles too. Another more profound influence over Marlow was his perception of women (Conrad, 50). Does he lie to protect Kurtz’s intended’s feelings or is his lie fostered by other reasons?

Marlow sees women as holding less importance in the society. Both Marlow and Kurtz see the intended as the epitome of the naiveté of women. She holds a huge significance in Conrad’s portrayal of importance on women in the text. Her depiction paints women as naïve, idealistic and deeply devoted to the males in their lives, as seen by the intended towards Kurtz. A further indication of this is her being referred to as the intended and depicted as a possession belonging to Kurtz that remains unnamed (Conrad, 22).

This shows very little value is accorded to her by Conrad through Kurtz and Marlow. Marlow only recognizes and praises her beauty when he meets her but that is as far as he goes in acknowledging her. He tells her of how any man would be proud to have her as his wife, that her “beauty is a trophy and to a man’s eye her only redeeming quality” (Ellis, 6).

Nevertheless, Marlow’s perception of the intended is not how he sees her alone but all the women he encounters in his journeys. To Marlow, all the women he encounters are “unintelligent, uninformed and unimportant”

(Conrad, 83). Marlow goes ahead to even ridicule their innocence and says that “ its queer how out of touch with the truth women are” (Conrad, 34).

This may form the background of Marlow’s lie and try to explain why he lied to Kurtz’s intended. Conrad paints a picture whereby women’ unawareness with the goings on around them and which remains constant subject matter to base the female characters all through text “ especially the Intended whose naiveté makes her a caricature of women of the time” (Boyle, 64).

Marlow describes Kurtz’s painting of the Intended in which she is blindfolded holding a torch.

The painting reinforces how blind to the truth about Kurtz and about Imperialism she is, and how she is confined by her white European view of society. Through the eyes of the male narratives, the Intended is an embodiment of oppressed female stereotypes and reflects the misogyny of their societies. The Intended is valued only as a collected object and not as an autonomous being (Boyle, 64).

Marlow is not alone in his perception of women, Kurtz in one instance tells Marlow that to protect their world from getting worse; they should help women stay “ in that beautiful world of their own” (Conrad, 16). This is an indication that the male protagonists and Conrad himself have strong beliefs that women are very delicate characters and such characters are too simple to grasp the conciseness of the horrors occurring in the world around them (Ellis, 196; Milne, 88).

This can be seen from the way the intended’s mind is clouded by her extreme devotion to Kurtz. She is oblivious to his actual character and her perception and devotion of him is only fed by the praise Kurtz gets in Europe. Boyle argues that “ her naiveté mimics the thoughts of other white Europeans of the time and their views on Imperialism” (Conrad, 150).

According to Boyle, Europeans, like the Intended, staunchly believe in the greatness of the men who travel to Africa to bestow civilization on a savage country. This therefore warrants the lie about Kurtz to the intended. Marlow does not want to damage the reputation or image Kurtz has created in the eyes of hi intended (Milne, 1988).

As a result he protects it by lying allowing the intended to continue thinking this way about Kurtz. Ted Boyle argues extensively on the intended’s naiveté “ for believing her name was really his last word -a part of Kurtz, the noblest part, the part he Intended has in fact survived the powers of darkness” (Boyle, 106). The text clearly illustrates that Marlow would rather lie to the intended about Kurtz’s false legacy than to admit to women that men also have faults.

To cover up for male weakness, Marlow and Kurtz indirectly criticize and pity the intended for her weakness, a “ weakness that has not been acquired, but rather assumedly to be in possession internally as a side effect of their gender” (Conrad, 50).

There is a lack of correspondence between Kurtz and his intended therefore she is protected by Kurtz from the harsh realities and truths of the world

especially the horrors of the Congo. Marlow is also in on this when he allows her to believe that Kurtz was a good man even to his death (Dahl, 68).

The intended is completely unaware of her betrothed’s true self but follows blindly what has been created by Kurtz in the pretense that he loves her. This brings forth the vulnerability of women, their original weakness and their absolute dependence on men. She and other women of the time are victims of both sexual discrimination and the entire society especially their own gender which continues to oppress them (Ellis, 19).

Kurtz succumbs to savagery but on the other side of the world, his intended is still holding to the illusion of his portrayed European self. Kurtz breaks away from social obligations and gives into an inner primitive nature abandoning his pasts to give into the darkness, but yet his intended still loves him and still remains dutifully and instinctively faithful to him (Conrad, 1950).

She claims to know Kurtz best when she meets with Marlow. She tells Marlow that if she had been at his bedside she would have treasured every sigh, word and glance, while Marlow listens with bated breath wishing he could scream to her the irony of her words (Conrad, 112).

Marlow wants to tell her of the darkness that overtook Kurtz, but because he has been conditioned to consider women inferior and incapable, he holds his tongue and allows her to believe what she wishes.

This creates the setting for the lie. Kenneth Bruffee looks into Marlow’s lie to Kurtz’s intended and expresses it as “ the belief that some knowledge of

yourself is the only reward life offers” (Bruffee, 14). Bruffee’s understanding implies that the text itself involves a self gained knowledge by Kurtz on man’s deficiency which comes out as both rewarding and disappointing (Bruffee, 64).

Carola M. Kaplan’s article *Colonizers, Cannibals, and the Horror of Good Intentions in Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness – Critical Essay* also tries to look at what embodies a lie. Kaplan argues that man has the ability to embody truth but is not aware of this. According to Kaplan, Marlow all through the text insists on being truthful and on truthful dealings. He tries to be adamant on the distinction between “ truth and lies; men and women; civilization and savagery and, most of all, between self and other” (Kaplan, 97).

Kaplan states that the distinction between one’s self and others is the most important and vital aspect of society. This forms the contextual basis of the opposition that carries on the colonial endeavors in Africa. So the question comes up again, why the lie by Marlow to the intended? Marlow does not only lie to the intended but to the Europeans as a whole (Conrad, 1950). The fear and lure that hold sway over the Europeans of the other (Africans) is enough to instigate the hunt and ‘ discovery’ of colonialism (Kaplan, 97).

To rationalize this aspect of colonialism, the other (Africans) is portrayed as inferior to Europeans. Nevertheless, Marlow’s persistence on the distinction he thinks as right is to no avail; as the colonists emerge victors (Kaplan, 97). Kaplan states that “ the gang of virtue is indistinguishable from the gang of

greed, the illusions of women merely echo the illusions of men, and there is no clear distinction between lies and truth” (97).

Patrick Brantlinger argues that the text *Heart of Darkness* presents a very authoritative and commanding analysis of imperialism and racism.

Brantlinger asserts that “ Chinua Achebe claimed Conrad to be a ‘ bloody racist’ in a lecture he delivered titled *The Images of Africa*” (Brantlinger, 196).

But according to Brantlinger, the text’s very quintessence lies in the fact that it does not overlook imperialism. He states that Achebe was of the mind that Conrad through the characters of Kurtz and Marlow reduced Africa to a lowly role of being props for the disintegration of one inconsequential European mind (Kurtz’s) greatly idolized by Marlow; and that is an arrogance that is both preposterous and wicked in humans (Brantlinger, 16; (Brantlinger, 88).

Marlow hero worships Kurtz to the highest degree in the text *Heart of Darkness*. He attributes Kurtz’s greatness as seen in the eyes of his intended and Europeans was from a creation of all Europe.

According to Marlow, Kurtz is the “ best of the best” (Conrad, 56). Marlow tries to seek the truth from his journeys and appears to find it when he comes across Kurtz. Conrad paints and illustrates Kurtz as a great man and not as the other pilgrims (Brantlinger, 1988). Kurtz was meant to be a savior, a redeemer from the imperialistic motives that drove the Europeans to Congo by trying to civilize the native inhabitants.

As the story unravels we get to see Kurtz as the “ great man he is, a lover of arts, an intellectual, an artist, a lover, a philanthropist with a mission and a writer” (Brantlinger, 19). He is the embodiment of the European man according to Conrad. But along the way Kurtz embraces the heart of darkness -a phrase used by Conrad to refer to Congo- and lapses into his savage state suppressed within him (Brantlinger, 19).

Marlow’s journey into the heart of darkness opens up the meaning of this phrase. It now not only refers to the harsh realities of the Congo but to the inner beings of man. His encounters with Kurtz bring about the other side of Kurtz, one that was only known by the natives; his savage nature, not even known to his intended.

Marlow observes that Kurtz is eventually prevailed over “ by the land of darkness, and returns to the very savage beginnings that Marlow observes in the natives “(Brantlinger, 96). Marlow sees Kurtz to have sunk so low and taken an elevated position among the ills of the land. He calls him hollow and says this of him:

“ the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude — and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core” (Conrad, 60).

This clearly illustrates the depths Kurtz had sunk to. At the end of the text, Marlow’s lie to Kurtz’s intended does not seem to be only for her but for him as well. Despite Kurtz’s savageness that Marlow has witnessed, he still is in a kind of denial and still idolizes him (Milne, 8).

Marlow comes out as a character who despises people who lie and dislikes lies altogether but yet he demonstrates that if the circumstances are extraordinary then a lie is unavoidable (Dahl, 53). From the text Marlow can be argued to not actually telling a lie but letting those he is purported to have told the lie to continue thinking what they were thinking.

Since this is the case with Kurtz’s intended, she herself claims to Marlow that if she were with Kurtz during his last moments, the words that would have come out of her betrothed’s mouth would have been her name (Milne, 65).

Marlow does not offer any indication to change her thinking and tell her what the actual words were but lets her engross herself in her own make believe world. This helps him justify the need for the lie. In the text Heart of Darkness, Marlow cuts himself short and says “ you know I hate, detest, and can’t bear a lie, there is taint of death, and a flavor of mortality in lies” (Conrad, 87).

To understand why Marlow was forced to lie, we should understand first of all that he had no reason to hurt the intended. Marlow’s thinking was that it was better for the intended to remember her betrothed (Kurtz) as she knew him while he was still alive.

He did not see any reason to change her view as this would hurt her. Marlow is finally portrayed as a praiseworthy man for doing a kind thing to spare the intended’s feelings. As illustrated in the text Heart of Darkness, Marlow lies two times all through the text. He despises lies and says as much towards his attitude about lies but yet again he is of the idea that when faced with extraordinary circumstances, a lie is unavoidable.

Another dimension can be added to this discussion; that Marlow lied to the intended to also help himself stick to the Kurtz he knew; the great man and lover of arts, and not the savage beast he encountered. He is not ready to accept the change in Kurtz and says that all Europe contributed in turning Kurtz to the savage that he is.

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