

# Feminist and marxist perspectives in joseph conrad's heart of darkness



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Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* could be said to be written during a period of change, as the world was transitioning from the end of the Victorian age into the beginning of the Modern age. This novella is considered to be one of the greatest fictitious writings in the English language that follows the narrations of the character Marlow through his travels through the Congo River into the Congo Free State in the 'Heart of Africa'. *Heart of Darkness* is a widely-dense novel which can be studied from various critical perspectives, such as feminism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, and many more.

This essay focuses on analysing *Heart of Darkness* from two different critical approaches, mainly a Marxist approach developed through the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels as well as a feminist approach and sets out to discover both strengths and limitations for each approach. Marxist critics view "literary works as reflections of the social institutions from which they originate"<sup>1</sup>. This means that Marxist critics look not only at the "sociology of literature", but also take interest in how novels get published, and whether they mention the working class"<sup>2</sup>. A feminist approach looks at inequality, in this case in a novel from the viewpoint of feminism, or feminist politics. Feminist literature criticism "suggests that women in literature have been previously presented as objects from a male perspective."<sup>3</sup>. Conrad's novella can be analysed from both of these approaches as they help to delve even further into the meaning of his writing.

As previously mentioned, this essay sets out to weigh the strengths and limitations of both a Marxist and feminist approach. This will be carried out

by providing quotations and evidence from within the novel to support these approaches and conclude with my own personal opinion of each argument.

Marxist literary criticism looks at literary works from the social institutions in which they originate. Theorists of Marxism believe that 'even literature stems from a specific ideological function, which is primarily based on the background and ideas of the author', in this case Joseph Conrad. From researching about Conrad's life, we are able to find that his native country, Berdichev, in the Stolen Lands of Ukraine <sup>4</sup> had been conquered by imperial powers, namely Russia and this could be argued from a Marxist approach as to why he sympathised with other conquered natives. For example, in his novella, Conrad empathizes with the Native Africans and describes their troubles to be extremely tragic, whilst also outrightly condemning the 'noble' aims of the European colonists, therefore creating the impression of white superiority. In addition to this, it is believed that due to his own travels through Africa had a keen interest for voyages, travels and the discovery of new land; this is apparent in Marlow's narration of Congo. Lastly, it is also believed that many of Marlow's narrations within the novella were written as an account of incidents that took place within Conrad's own travels through Africa.

<sup>1</sup> Andritolion, Marxist literary criticism, [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marxist\\_literary\\_criticism](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marxist_literary_criticism)

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Vallières, *Marxism: White Niggers of America* by Pierre Vallières, <https://khriselleversoza.blogspot.com/2013/01/marxism-white-niggers-of-america.html>

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<sup>3</sup> Jone Johnson Lewis, Feminist Literary Criticism, <https://www.thoughtco.com/feminist-literary-criticism-3528960>

<sup>4</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, Joseph Conrad, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joseph-Conrad>

Through this knowledge of Conrad's biography, it is seen that the Marxist approach can be seen as a strength in this sense as Marlow's upbringing reflects in his works and so therefore his writing becomes not only more believable to the reader but also more practical.

A major part of the Marxist approach also concerns itself with class division, most notably the rich 'capitalist' class and the poor exploited 'proletariat' class, creating a common ground of the rich to easily exploit the poor. Marxist writers therefore frown upon this treatment of the proletariat exploitation and instead aim to create an equal society.

In *Heart of Darkness* Conrad illustrates how the imperialistic powers of Europe exploit the Africans to increase their own wealth; creating a visibly apparent class division between the Europeans and the Africans. Marxism is clearly demonstrated within the novel as we, the readers are narrated the story of the exploitation of the natives by the European, eliciting the theme of man's inhumanity to man. Marlow's repetition of the greed of the bourgeoisie pilgrims as 'despicable' is attest to this theme. For example, Marlow questions the presence of the fat man who is portrayed to be unfit to survive in Congo: "I couldn't help asking him once what he meant by coming there at all. 'To make money, of course. What do you think?' he said

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scornfully”<sup>5</sup>. This above quotation draws the parallel between exploitation and monetary gain, displaying how capitalism is essentially exploitative. Furthermore, from Conrad’s descriptive writing we learn through Marlow that Kurtz’s hands are ‘plump’ indicating the idea that he does not work as the natives who do work are both starving and dying and therefore it is logical to believe they would not have plump hands.

In addition to this, we find out that there is no even distribution of wealth within the society of *Heart of Darkness*, as even some white-Europeans are described to be poor. We are narrated that Kurtz’s engagement with his lover had been disapproved by her family as Kurtz “wasn’t rich enough”, denoting that Kurtz was not able to afford to marry above his class and therefore left for Congo in order for what we may assume, to obtain this level of wealth.

A strength of the Marxist literary approach in this case would be that it looks at society as a whole and takes into account its misdemeanour within a society and understands the problem of the class struggle. Through the Marxist approach, as readers we are clearly able to tell that there is a dominant class ruling and comprehend the reason behind this.

A limitation with the Marxist approach when looking at the power dynamics in society is that Marxist theory does not take into account the dynamics of human behaviour, such as selfishness and the desire to do better and reach the highest rank. It is installed in human nature that we will always crave to have more, even if that means at the expense of another human being.

Marxism does not take classic human behaviour into account, and instead

refers to an equal society where there is no desire to progress higher into the human ' food chain'.

<sup>5</sup>. Conrad. J, pg. 13, Heart of Darkness

<sup>6</sup>. Tyson. L, pg. 83, Critical Theory: A User-Friendly Guide

<sup>7</sup>. Tyson. L, pg. 85, Critical Theory: A User-Friendly Guide

<sup>8</sup>. Conrad. J, pg. 99, Heart of Darkness

Feminist literary critics concerns itself with the way in which literature “ reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social and psychological oppression of women”. <sup>6</sup>

In addition to this, feminism criticism is also concerned with the exclusion of women from writing “ unless the critical or historical point of view is feminist, there is a tendency to underrepresent the contribution of women writers”. <sup>7</sup>

It is important to understand that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is indeed a manly adventure, recounted and written by a man, and therefore it is a difficult subject to venture for feminist criticism. Thus, due to the structure of the novel, the female characters converse minimally as they are made to be in the background. Two of the three female characters are not even in Africa, making it exceedingly difficult to include them in much of the writing. Whilst this could be said to be a limitation to the feminist theory, as it leaves an underlying thought in the readers mind that perhaps Conrad is not opposing feminism, but he finds there to be no need for those characters to exist in

the rest of the novella, it does raise a few queries. For instance, it could be argued from a feminist viewpoint that Conrad believed there was no need for there to be female characters in Africa, for there is no need for them to be within that continent as it is a male's job. Additionally, the verbal narration of women throughout makes it seem as though Conrad is purposefully neglects their sex.

Accordingly, the power relation created by men towards women could essentially create a feminist approach as it establishes the argument of patriarchal and imperialist ideologies. Therefore, both explanations of feminist literary criticism defined by Tyson within her writing of *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* can be used in reference to the feminist approach taken by Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*. A feminist reading of the novel displays that the marginal status of women is yet again another example of European male domination during this period. Firstly, women are oppressed as they are seen as belongings, as the male characters look down upon them as they are their property. This view of man over woman is apparent in the way that Marlow explains Kurtz, " You should have heard the disinterred body of Mr. Kurtz saying, ' My Intended'" <sup>8</sup>

The use of the personal pronoun within the above quote continues further into the novella as Kurtz's lover is described in various parts as " my Intended", " my ivory", " my station", " my river", as though everything belonged to him, and she herself was not a person, illustrating the oppression through possession of women to men.

Furthermore, Tyson's latter explanation of feminist criticism is also apparent as we see a lack of women characters within the novel, with there only being mention of three women in the text, namely Marlow's aunt, Kurtz's fiancée and Kurtz's Amazon lover. Not only are these characters seen but not heard within the text, Marlow narrates "it's queer how out of touch with truth women are, they live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and never can be."<sup>9</sup> We are able to critically analyse this quote from a feminist approach and conclude that women are disregarded within the text and play an irrelevant role to society. Marlow's description of women portrays their insignificance to the novel, and how they are not really even present in their surrounding world, but instead have an imaginary one of their own.

<sup>9</sup>. Conrad. J, pg. 27, Heart of Darkness

<sup>10</sup>. Conrad. J, pg. 59-60, Heart of Darkness

Despite the mention of these three women in the novel, readers never hear them communicate with each other, or the other male characters, sparking the idea of female 'neglect' as they are practically similar. Not only that, but they also become dehumanized like the native Africans when Marlow says, "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."<sup>10</sup>

Marlow's reference to the female characters as 'girls' instead of 'women' demonstrates a psychological response by males to view women as young, small, and petite. If women do not fall in the aforementioned trio, they are

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then belongings, owned by men to do as they please. Women are in *Heart of Darkness* showcased to either need men in order to survive or neglected and not mentioned as though they are insignificant.

A strength of the feminist critical approach is that it is easily visible through writing as we see a degrading portrayal of women, as not only are they treated as possessions, but they are also barely referred to, therefore depicting the need for more gender equality

However, a limitation of the above feminist approach could therefore be said that whilst Conrad makes little to no mention of the female characters within his novel, he does not go out of his way to uplift the male characters either, therefore not empowering either sex. We as readers also need to take into account that *Heart of Darkness* was published during a period where it was uncommon for women to have much of an explicit say in any of their daily endeavours, and were in most cases disregarded, sexualised, and / or belittled by their male counterparts whether they were present or not. Therefore, two limitations are created in regard to feminist literary criticism.

In conclusion, whilst *Heart of Darkness* is an extremely well-read and well-taught novel throughout several decades, there are certain instances within the novella where we are able to argue that there could be areas of improvement. After studying Conrad's novella from a Marxist and feminist literary approach, not only has it been easier to understand more literal meaning behind the narration but has also opened new aspects of thinking about his work.

Whilst a Marxist approach focuses not only the ideology and background of the author, but also the struggle for a classless society, they are certain strengths and limitations to this approach. As previously discussed, the Marxist approach does not take into account basic human nature, such as the desire to progress, and the selfishness that is innate to us mammals. Therefore, for this reason I would believe the Marxist approach to have more limitation than strengths. Although this approach does take into account the literary works from the "social institutions they originate from", in particular the background and ideology of the author. I personally find that a novel cannot certainly be in relation to an author's surroundings, and so whilst we may make the judgement that Conrad's writing reflected on his travels and own background, this is not guaranteed nor certain. However, the limitation of the Marxist theory that every human desires to progress, as well as innate selfish emotions within them I feel is common within most readers and therefore more reliable and relatable.

A feminist literary approach is the reiteration of degrading women through an economic, social or political manner, or perhaps even casting them aside. As previously mentioned, not only are female characters barely mentioned within *Heart of Darkness*, they are portrayed to be objects for men, or degrading through verbal lash. We are clearly able to see the subjection of women within this novella, creating an evident feminist approach to study. However, whilst women are barely mentioned throughout the text, men are not praised nor empowered, suggesting that perhaps Conrad was not essentially anti-feminist within his writings. This therefore creates a limitation for the feminist approach as we do not entirely know

whether Conrad was indeed trying to be anti-feminist or merely did not have much need for female characters to narrate the tale of the voyage through the Congo river. However, this is hardly the case as we find the women characters not even able to communicate and voice their thoughts, as well there is backlash present throughout the novel helping us to understand that perhaps the disregard of women is intentional. Therefore, a strength of feminist literary criticism is that it allows readers to rethink the inequality of each gender and reconsider the story from that perspective.