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Abstract: This essay analyzes the treatment by the character of Charlie Marlow of the Western women in the short story "Heart of Darkness," by Joseph Conrad. It describes the attitude of Marlow toward women and those of the sepulchral city who believe the universe to be rational and safe. It also shows the important role of women in the psychological and ontological survival of Marlow, in affording him a sanctuary for his mind as well as refuge from the chaos and indifference of the universe.

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Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness and the World of Western Women

Numerous critics have commented on Marlow's remarks about women in Heart of Darkness, many accusing him of everything from mild anti-feminism to blatant misogyny. Gabrielle McIntyre and Nina Pelikan Straus, for example, offer astute readings of the novella. McIntire refers to the "women's near invisibility" in the novella (257),¹ while Straus remarks, "No doubt that the artistic conventions of Heart of Darkness are brutally sexist" (125),² and many other commentators concur.³ Given the overwhelming corroborating evidence in Heart of Darkness itself, it is difficult to dispute these allegations. Such assessments, however, do not fully address a particularly significant aspect of Marlow's comments about women, that is not whether Marlow's views are anti-feminist or misogynist (since McIntire, Straus, and others clearly demonstrate that they are) but rather why Marlow holds the views he does and why he expresses them when he does in his narrative. In this essay, I will argue that Marlow views the world of Western women in the way he does less because he simply reiterates dominant nineteenth-century cultural ideas about women than because he sees women as fulfilling a crucial role in his ontology by providing a shelter from the bleak truths he discovers on his journey up the Congo River. During the course of that journey, Marlow finds that the layers of civilization peel away to reveal an irrational and

empty immensity in place of the ordered and meaningful universe of Western cosmology. It is from such a discovery that Marlow seeks the sanctuary that the world of women provides for him and for the rest of the male world.⁴

In order to consider adequately Marlow's comments on women, however, it is first necessary to identify the specific nature of the world that Marlow discovers in the Congo as well as his response to it, because Marlow's view of the world of women is directly linked to his view of the world in general. From the earliest commentaries on *Heart of Darkness*, critics have recognized that the novella is a journey of self-discovery--a journey to discover the nature of one's self and the nature of one's place in the world.⁵ As such, *Heart of Darkness* is also a journey to discover the nature of the universe. While Marlow travels up the Congo River and moves farther and farther from civilization, he looks for meaning in his existence and meaning in the universe. Rather than meaning, though, he discovers that all of his previously-held cultural views are merely constructs with no transcendent foundation.⁶ Removed from the trappings of the Western world and, more important, removed from its external restraints (laws, public opinion, etc.),⁷ he finds himself in a world in which "[a]nything--anything can be done" (91; see also 74, 128, and 139). Marlow also discovers that no inherent truths lie at the back of Western civilization and its attempts to civilize Africa, since at each instance in the novella in which Western civilization appears, rather than improving Africa and the Africans (as it should if it were founded upon inherent truths), civilization is instead either out of place (e.g., the chief accountant's Western attire, 67-68), absurd (e.g., the French gunboat firing into a continent, 61-62), or actually detrimental (e.g., the grove of death, 66-67). Ultimately, Marlow learns that no absolutes exist, that he inhabits an indifferent universe, and that life is a "mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose" (150). Marlow further finds that he cannot keep such bleak ideas constantly in the forefront of his consciousness; to do so would make life impossible.

Even the knowledge of one's mortality is more than Marlow wishes to consider for any length of time, and he makes this clear when he says that death and mortality are "exactly what I hate and detest in the world--what I want to forget" (82). More than merely trying to forget his own mortality, however, Marlow wishes to find shelter from the much more troubling idea that the universe is not one of rationality and benevolence but rather one of irrationality and indifference. Overt knowledge of such a universe usually remains submerged from his consciousness while he remains within the comfortable confines of Europe, but in Africa this knowledge emerges with some frequency, and when it does Marlow quickly represses it. Hence, in *Heart of Darkness*, examples abound of Marlow's seeking shelter from such unsettling ideas. For this reason, he welcomes, for instance, routine tasks, not because he enjoys looking for wood to cut for steaming or watching for snags and sunken stones in the river but because through attention to such mundane details the "inner truth is hidden--luckily, luckily" (93; see also 97-98).

While Marlow welcomes the "inner truth" being hidden, there are also characters in the novella who not only never seek shelter from such truths but in fact never even recognize the need to do so because they are oblivious to the nature of the universe. After returning from Africa, for example, Marlow says of the inhabitants of the "sepulchral city":

They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew. Their bearing, which was simply the bearing of commonplace individuals going about their business in the assurance of perfect safety, was offensive to me like the outrageous flauntings of folly in the face of a danger it is unable to comprehend. (152)

Marlow scorns these people because they believe the universe to be rational and safe. For him, such individuals, and anyone like them, delude themselves. Marlow displays a similar attitude toward women:

It's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there has never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset. Some confounded fact we men have been living contentedly with ever since the day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over (59)

Marlow's comments in the latter passage are less virulent than in the former passage, but his attitude is essentially the same; as Ruth L. Nadelhaft argues, "His own aunt, Marlow asserts, represents legions of women who must be protected from the reality of the 'confounded fact' which might destroy their beautiful world of unreality" (45). The scorn Marlow expresses for the world of women and for those of the "sepulchral city," though, results not from the fact that they are sheltered from the knowledge of an irrational and indifferent universe but rather from the fact that they are ignorant of its very existence.

Marlow's attitude toward women and those of the "sepulchral city" is further complicated, however, by the fact that while at times Marlow seems to consider those who are ignorant of the nature of the universe to be deluded, at other times he actually seems to envy such individuals' ability to go through life oblivious to the troubling truths he has discovered. The Russian, for instance, is a character who is ignorant of the nature of the universe. In fact, his case is even more extreme than that of women and those of the "sepulchral city," since, unlike those others, the Russian is in direct contact with the African wilderness and yet still remains ignorant of what lurks there. One would expect Marlow's scorn toward the Russian to be unrelenting; instead, while recognizing the Russian's delusions, Marlow remarks:

I was seduced into something like admiration--like envy. Glamour urged him on, glamour kept him unscathed. He surely wanted nothing from the wilderness but space to breathe in and to push on through. His need was to exist, and to move onwards at the greatest possible risk, and with a maximum of privation. If the absolutely pure, uncalculating, unpractical spirit of adventure had ever ruled a human being, it ruled this be-patched youth. I almost envied him the possession of this modest and clear flame. (126)

Oblivious to the physical and psychological danger everywhere around him, the Russian focuses only on the immediate and remains seemingly forever unaware of larger metaphysical questions. Marlow "almost envie[s]" his condition because the Russian never has to confront the bleak knowledge that Marlow has acquired. As a result of Marlow's conflicting attitudes about a knowledge of the nature of the universe, a tension exists in his narrative between his viewing those who are ignorant of the nature of the universe to be either naive or fortunate. Ultimately, he seems to see them as both. According to Marlow, one should be fully aware of the nature of the universe, but one should also shelter oneself from such

knowledge. The difficulty arises in finding adequate shelter. As noted earlier, attention to routine tasks can provide shelter, as Marlow explains:

I had to mess about with white-lead and strips of woollen blanket helping to put bandages on those leaky steam-pipes--I tell you. I had to watch the steering, and circumvent those snags, and get the tin-pot along by hook or by crook. There was surface-truth enough in these things to save a wiser man. (97)

Similarly, he remarks elsewhere, "But the snags were thick, the water was treacherous and shallow, the boiler seemed indeed to have a sulky devil in it, and thus neither that fireman nor I had any time to peer into our creepy thoughts" (98). Through attention to life's details, Marlow can keep at bay the bleak knowledge he has acquired in the Congo, but this kind of shelter is merely a temporary respite from his "creepy thoughts."

In addition to mundane tasks, Marlow finds other ways of sheltering himself from what he discovers in Africa. For instance, about fifty miles below the company's Inner Station, Marlow stops the steamer to collect some firewood that had been stacked next to a hut. While there, he discovers a copy of a book, *An Inquiry into Some Points of Seamanship*, and begins reading it, remarking that "at first glance you could see there a singleness of intention, and honest concern for the right way of going to work. ... I assure you to leave off reading was like tearing myself away from the shelter of an old and solid friendship" (99-100). Marlow's response to this book seems somewhat surprising, since the information is some sixty years old and even for a sailor like Marlow it was "[n]ot a very enthralling book" (99). This volume, though, provides Marlow with the illusion of a sense of the order of things, with a clear purpose behind that order, which order and purpose stand in stark contrast to everything else he encounters in the Congo. Like the sheltering effect of mundane tasks, however, that of the book is only temporary, as is clear from the fact that despite Marlow's finding refuge in such activities, the knowledge of an irrational and indifferent universe continues to reappear throughout the remainder of his journey up the Congo River. As a result of the transitory nature of these kinds of shelter, Marlow seeks instead a more permanent refuge, and to find it, he unconsciously turns to the idea of sanctuary. Marlow's sanctuary, though, is not a physical construct but rather an ontological construct, as he erects a place of refuge out of the place of women in nineteenth-century society. Marlow's creating a sanctuary out of this world of women may seem odd given his negative comments about them, but in fact Marlow exhibits the same sort of ambivalence toward the world of women as he does toward the need for a clear knowledge of the nature of the universe while maintaining an equal need for finding shelter from such knowledge: while Marlow considers the world of women to be delusional, he also considers it to be a place of refuge from an otherwise desolate existence.

Commentators have variously interpreted the distinct division between the world of men and the world of women in *Heart of Darkness*. For example, Straus argues, "Marlow presents a world distinctly split into male and female realms--the first harboring the possibility of 'truth' and the second dedicated to the maintenance of delusion" (124). Similarly, Mahmoud K. Kharbutli remarks that Marlow "delineates two mutually exclusive worlds envisioned in absolute terms, one of shadows and unreal beauty, magically built and inhabited by women, and another of brutal and hard facts, populated by men and unknown to women" (244). Somewhat to the contrary, Johanna M. Smith suggests that Marlow "constructs a

feminine world of 'idea'-belief to stand along side the masculine world of Kurtz's 'horror'-belief; located in separate spheres, these contradictory ideologies can coexist" (196). In contrast to these views, I would argue that not only do these two worlds co-exist but that they are in fact inextricably intertwined, each dependent upon the other, each in effect protecting and providing for the existence of the other.

As is well known, nineteenth-century Western society typically viewed the primary role of the leisure-class woman to be that of a nurturer and a comforter, designed to care for the physical and psychological needs of her children and husband.⁸ In conjunction with this role, women were also removed from the public world of business and politics, and Marlow generally maintains these nineteenth-century views on women. Ian Watt remarks, "Marlow unquestioningly assumes the Victorian relegation of leisure-class women to a pedestal high above the economic and sexual facts of life" (244). The world that the nineteenth-century woman inhabited was also one of purity, and the ideal woman would make her home a refuge for her family from the dangers and difficulties of the outside world.⁹ Kharbutli argues,

The female world is to be kept inviolate against the encroachment of reality to serve as a haven for men, who are invariably harassed by the brutalities of life and whose miseries will, consequently, be alleviated by the thought that at home a woman angel will salve their bruises and cater for their comfort. (244-45)

Kharbutli suggests here that by separating the world of women from the outside world and by making it a safe harbor, men can retreat to that world and receive comfort and healing from the trials of the material world. I would argue, however, that what is much more important to Marlow is not so much establishing a place of physical comfort or even of psychological comfort (although these exist in the world of women), but instead establishing a place of ontological comfort. In this way, rather than simply being a place of nurturing and healing, as Kharbutli suggests and as is typically viewed to be the role of the world of women of that time, for Marlow, this world provides men with a space in which their existence can matter, a locus from which men can organize their existence and experience, a space embodying the order, meaning, and truth of the Western view of the world, thereby providing a sanctuary from the disorder, chaos, and emptiness of the world outside that space.

The world of Kurtz's Intended most clearly illustrates this role of sanctuary. Even Marlow's description of her reveals the physical characteristics of a purified sanctuary. Marlow comments on her appearance: "This fair hair, this pale visage, this pure brow ... [Her] glance was guileless, profound, confident, and trustful" (157). He also notes that "her forehead, smooth and white, remained illumined by the unextinguishable light of belief and love" (158) and later remarks that "her fair hair seemed to catch all the remaining light in a glimmer of gold" (160). In short, Marlow presents her as a creature of goodness and purity--an appropriate keeper of sanctuary. More than her mere appearance, though, the Intended's world itself provides a sanctuary from the outside world. She believes in Kurtz's ideals, but she also believes in Kurtz himself: "I believed in him more than any one on earth--more than his own mother, more than--himself. He needed me!" (161); her belief is a support for Kurtz, and in this way she offers Kurtz a comfort from the doubts of the world--and even from his own self-doubts. In this role, the Intended functions as the traditional nurturing woman of the nineteenth century, but her role is not limited

simply to that role. The Intended's world is also one of ideals. Even an idealized Kurtz inhabits it. The Intended says of Kurtz that it "was impossible to know him and not to admire him" and love him (158). She goes on to remark of "all his promise, and of all his greatness, of his generous mind, of his noble heart" (160) and to say, "Men looked up to him--his goodness shone in every act. His example--" (160) and also that Kurtz "drew men towards him by what was best in them. ... It is the gift of the great" (159); she concludes this elegy by commenting on Kurtz's death: "What a loss to me--to us!-- ... [t]o the world" (159). The Kurtz who exists in the Intended's world is not the one who presided "at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites, which ... were offered up to him ... to Mr. Kurtz himself (118) but rather the one who was "an emissary of pity, and science, and progress" (79), not the Kurtz who wanted to "[exterminate all the brutes" (118) but the one who wanted to "exert a power for good practically unbounded" (118). In the Intended's world, an idealistic Kurtz can exist, whereas in the outside world he cannot, as his ideals crumble in the face of an empty universe.

Along with providing a space in which an idealistic Kurtz can exist, the world of the Intended represents a sanctuary from the outside world because of the philosophical ideals that populate its space. The Intended has the utmost faith in Kurtz's idealistic civilizing mission, which he expresses in the statement: "Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing" (91). Marlow's aunt articulates even more clearly the idealized conception of the mission of Europe's colonizers: after receiving his commission to go to the Congo, Marlow says that his aunt then considered him to be "one of the Workers, with a capital--you know. Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle.... She talked about 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways' " (59).¹⁰ These ideals have their source in the Western view of the world of the time that saw itself based upon inherent and universal truths that needed to be brought to the non-Western world. Consequently, with such Western ideals safely ensconced in the world of women, men, then equipped with such ideals, could set out for the non-Western world and view their activities as part of the greater civilizing mission, seeing themselves as "bearers of a spark from the sacred fire" (47) rather than as exploiters of other peoples and cultures.

In light of the sanctuary the world of women provides, Marlow's later comments on women take on a more complete meaning. At one point in his tale, Marlow, thinking of the Intended, says, "We must help them [women] to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse. Oh, she had to be out of it" (115). Although similar to his earlier comment that women are "out of touch with truth" (59), Marlow's statement here also differs significantly from his earlier comment. In the first instance, Marlow exhibits little more than a patronizing attitude toward women, while in this case, he genuinely approves of the "out of touch" world of women, not because here he reveals more clearly his anti-feminist biases but rather because he finds it necessary to keep women in a separate sphere in order to maintain a place of refuge for men from the outside world--lest the male world "gets worse" (115). The idealized world of light and truth--the world of women--stands in sharp distinction to the dark reality Marlow discovers in the African wilderness--thus providing him with a psychological and, more important, ontological sanctuary from the bleak world he uncovers there.

At the same time, though, Marlow clearly recognizes the illusory and ambiguous nature of the Intended's

world and the world of women in general, which it represents. Consistently, Marlow and the Intended discuss Kurtz at cross purposes, Marlow meaning one thing and the Intended understanding another. Furthermore, the images of light and purity in Marlow's interview with her are equally offset by images of darkness and corruption. Perhaps most telling is that the very ideals of this world facilitate the exploitation that occurs in the Congo. As Marlow's aunt suggests, the world of women views the colonizers as "Workers" (59). Thus, rather than being opportunities for easy and profitable trade, European colonial activities become idealized into missions of benevolence--meant to serve the non-Western world by disseminating Western civilization and more important Western ideals of an inherent truth and order in the world. In this way, the Intended and the world of women are ultimately complicit with the men in their exploitation of the non-Western world. In *Heart of Darkness*, these ideals provide the justification for imperialist activities and are at the very heart of the world of women, where they are nurtured and from where they are sent out into the Western world in general. Without such ideals, the exploitation that occurs in the process of disseminating Western civilization could not be justified, and the Europeans would become no better than the Roman conquerors whose "administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more.... They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale" (50). As long as the civilizing ideals are nurtured by the world of women and propagated by the world of men, as long as there is "the idea--something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to" (51), imperialist activities can flourish, and men can find a sanctuary from a meaningless universe.

Nevertheless, despite Marlow's awareness of the contradictions at the heart of the world of women, he is still attracted to that world. In fact, Marlow's knowledge of these contradictions emphasizes just how important the world of women is to Marlow's ontological survival. In effect, Marlow wants to maintain the world of women for the same reason he welcomes mundane tasks, envies the Russian, and becomes engrossed in reading *An Inquiry into Some Points of Seamanship*: each posits a world of order and meaning, and thus Marlow, and men in general, are afforded a space of sanctuary (illusory though it is) from the actual nature of the world. In this way, the world of women provides a refuge from the chaos and indifference of the universe, and, as a result, Marlow can hold a knowledge of the nature of the universe while at the same time finding a constant shelter from such knowledge.

The significant role the world of women plays in providing sanctuary in Marlow's mind is further underscored by when and how that world appears during the course of Marlow's narrative. Although she does not mention *Heart of Darkness* specifically, Susan Jones does note of Conrad's works in general that, contrary to usual impressions, women populate his writings quite regularly (14). This situation is certainly true of *Heart of Darkness*, in which women appear with surprising frequency for a tale set largely in the Congo and told among men aboard a sailing vessel. In fact, women appear (either physically or in Marlow's mind) at various crucial junctures in the tale, and whenever the narrative arrives at a point of crisis, women almost invariably appear in one way or another to protect or provide shelter for Marlow.

Women first appear when Marlow is unable to find employment. After unsuccessfully searching for a job on his own, he then solicits help from his male friends, who "did nothing" (53), after which, as he tells his

listeners, "Then--would you believe it?--I tried the women. I, Charlie Marlow, set the women to work--to get a job. Heavens!" (53). Along with Marlow's condescending attitude and obvious desperation in turning to women for help, the importance of this incident lies in Marlow's uncertainty about his future employment and uneasiness about his current circumstances. His state of being at that time contrasts with his usual state of being; his world has become unpredictable and has spun out of his control. In turning to women, he wants to return his life to a state of order, certainly, and predictability. In this instance, the world of women not only provides a psychological and ontological comfort but an actual practical comfort as well since Marlow's aunt thinks that his desire to work in the Congo is "a glorious idea" (53) and represents him to her connections (wives of influential individuals) "as an exceptional and gifted creature--a piece of good fortune for the Company--a man you don't get hold of every day" (59), thus helping to secure him a position. With a position in place, Marlow's life once again appears to be one of familiarity and order (at least until he arrives in Africa). In this way, the world of women has provided comfort, protection, and ultimately order for Marlow's existence during this time of crisis for him.

The next crucial point in Marlow's tale occurs when he goes to the company offices to interview for the job he has been tentatively offered. There, he encounters the women knitting black wool. In some ways, this oddly placed pair does not particularly belong in a discussion of women in *Heart of Darkness* because as working women they are not part of the leisure-class world of women upon which Marlow comments. Even more important, though, their role differs significantly from that of the other Western women Marlow encounters since their function in the tale is almost exclusively symbolic and since Marlow presents them not as being "out of touch with truth" (59),ⁿ as are Western women in general, but rather as being the exact opposite: in fact, they appear to be almost omniscient, the one seeming to know of Marlow's approach without even looking up at him (55) and the other seeming to know all about the various job applicants before even meeting them (57). Marlow says of the two women:

An eerie feeling came over me. She [the latter woman] seemed uncanny and fateful. Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. Ave! Old knitter of black wool. Morituri te salutant. Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again--not half, by a long way. (57)

McIntyre also notes the difference between the knitting women and the other Western women who appear in *Heart of Darkness*, and she argues that their role is ambiguous, that they

are at once comforting and sinister. On one level, their knitting seems more appropriate to a domestic space of semi-leisure than to a space of business, and the women provide a last glimpse of "home" for the men who cross their threshold, complete with a cat who sits on the older women's lap. But, at the same time, they are reminiscent of the three fates of Greek myth who weave and unweave destinies regardless of individual wishes. (271)¹²

I would argue instead, though, that their ambiguous position between the world of men and the world of women is less representative of a position between comforting domesticity and sinister fatefulness than

it is a demarcation between the ordered world of women and the chaotic world of men (embodied in the Belgian trading company). The knitting women guard "the door of Darkness," one guarding its entrance and the other its exit, and one of their primary purposes lies in delineating this boundary between the known Western world and the unknown non-Western world. One of the knitting women appears again much later and further emphasizes their role as guardians of darkness. At the very moment Marlow discovers to his horror that Kurtz has left his hut and has gone crawling back to the jungle, presumably to participate in more "unspeakable rites," one of the knitting women reappears in Marlow's mind, and he comments, "The knitting old woman with the cat obtruded herself upon my memory as a most improper person to be sitting at the other end of such an affair" (142). This knitting woman, the one who guards the exit to "the door of Darkness," is, in fact, a most appropriate figure to appear at that moment, as she bars Marlow's exit from this world of darkness in which he has found himself, preventing him from seeking sanctuary from that world and in a sense forcing him "to dream the nightmare out to the end" (150).

After Marlow receives his commission and leaves the ominous atmosphere of the company offices, he is then to set forth into the unknown, into that blank space in the center of the African map (52). At this crucial psychological juncture, Marlow's immediate response to his encounter with the company and the knitting women is to visit his aunt "in a room that most soothingly looked just as you would expect a lady's drawing-room to look" (59). Although Marlow thinks his aunt's views of the colonizing mission are naive (59), they also reveal a world of ideals and order, separate from the dark world of the company offices and the male world of the unknown into which Marlow is about to enter. For a brief interval before he departs, then, Marlow exists in the soothing comfort of an ordered and idealized world, his last view of such a place that will contrast so starkly with the chaos and corruption he will later encounter seemingly ever-present in the African wilderness.

Marlow's aunt also appears briefly at an important moment during Marlow's stay at the company's Central Station on the Congo River. In the course of his talk with the brickmaker, Marlow suddenly realizes that he is being pumped for information. The brickmaker finally enlightens him, saying, "You are of the new gang--the gang of virtue. The same people who sent him [Kurtz] specially also recommended you" (79). Suddenly discovering that he is one of "the gang of virtue," Marlow tells his listeners, "Light dawned upon me. My dear aunt's influential acquaintances were producing an unexpected effect upon that young man" (79-80). Marlow's aunt's "influential acquaintances" inhabit the same world of women that she does, a world of ideals, and their activities result in removing Marlow from the sordid and cynical world he encounters at the Central Station and placing him instead unwittingly among "the gang of virtue" (79). Marlow says earlier that "in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly" (65), and he later notes that at the Central Station "the flabby devil was running that show" (72). In this way, unbeknownst to Marlow, his aunt and her acquaintances--the world of women--indirectly shelter him from the "flabby devil" and the corrupt world it represents by keeping him outside that world in the minds of those he encounters in Africa. Just as with the Intended's world, though, the ideals of "the gang of virtue" are illusory and their effect ironic, since such ideals seem nowhere evident in the Congo and appear to be merely the justification for the exploitation that actually occurs there.

At this point in the narrative, it might have been possible to imagine that Marlow could have seen in "the gang of virtue" a possible alternative or even a shelter from the world of the "flabby devil." Perhaps a bastion of Western ideals exists in "the gang of virtue" to counter the absurdity Marlow sees everywhere else around him, but Marlow sees no evidence that such ideals exist in practice. This lack of such ideals is further underscored by yet another woman at the Central Station. Marlow remarks,

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 torch-light on the face was sinister. (79)

Like the Intended, this woman carries the torch of Western ideals, and also like the Intended she is complicit in the corruption Marlow chronicles. In this painting, Kurtz unwittingly reveals the connection between the world of women and the "flabby devil"; the blindfolded woman is clearly "an emissary of light" (59), a bearer "of a spark from the sacred fire" (47), but because she cannot see she what she is doing she is also ignorant of the meaning and possible sinister results of those ideals. Similarly, the Intended is in a sense blindfolded; she admits to Marlow regarding Kurtz's "vast plans": "I knew of them, too--I could not perhaps understand--" (160), and in this admission she too reveals a certain ignorance surrounding the effects of the ideals she espouses. In both cases, the woman's ignorance emphasizes the ignorance of those who claim to be disseminating Western civilization into the darkness of Africa. Furthermore, both women are blind to the effect of their activities and therefore cannot question the validity of either the ideals or their dissemination, and thereby their world becomes a haven for those ideals.¹³ Having already witnessed the scene depicting the woman in Kurtz's painting, when Marlow learns of the existence of "the gang of virtue," he can only view such a group as hopelessly ineffectual and their ideals (if such exist at all) as wholly illusory.

The world of women again appears significantly at almost the mid-point of the tale. Marlow is about to tell his listeners what he learned of Kurtz and begins by saying that "the memory of that time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense" (115). At this moment, with a chaotic world encroaching upon his memory, Marlow falters and is "silent for a long time" (115). When he finally composes himself in part and begins to relate his experience with Kurtz--an experience that culminates in Marlow's recognition that there is no inherent meaning in the universe or in human existence--he first retreats into the sanctuary of the Intended's world (even though only his mind): "I laid the ghost of his [Kurtz's] gifts at last with a lie.... 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 to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse. Oh, she had to be out of it" (115).

As noted earlier, in this instance, Marlow approves of women being "out of it." In the midst of the Congo, thousands of miles from the soothing comfort of his aunt's drawing-room (59), Marlow's attitude toward the world of women alters significantly. Remarkably, Marlow's listeners have yet to even learn of the Intended's existence, but, when confronted once again with all that Kurtz represents to him, Marlow makes this bewildering chronological leap into the world of the Intended in order to find a brief respite

from the bleak truths surrounding Kurtz that he is about to reveal to his listeners. In the process of telling his tale, Marlow begins to relive in his mind his experience in the Congo and finds that he must first shelter himself in the idealistic world of the Intended before he can proceed to inform his listeners that "the gifted Kurtz" (114), the "universal genius" (83), the man "equipped with moral ideas" (88) "had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land" and that the "thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own" (116). Kurtz begins as a "prodigy" of "the gang of virtue," a man of "higher intelligence" and "wide sympathies" (79), and his descent from that lofty and idealistic position lies at the heart of Marlow's terrifying epiphany regarding the nature of the universe. Marlow says of Kurtz's precipitous decline, "That was the reflection that made you creepy all over. It was impossible--it was not good for one either--trying to imagine" (116). In the face of such knowledge, Marlow momentarily retreats into the sanctuary afforded by the Intended's world before he can bring himself to relive his experience with Kurtz. This is why Marlow argues that men must protect the idealistic world that women inhabit (115)--so that it can protect and shelter the world of men and provide them with a space in which order and truth exist and where there is meaning in human existence.

Marlow's aunt appears once more just after Marlow has returned from the Congo. Having stared into a metaphysical and ontological abyss, Marlow arrives back in Europe both physically and psychologically ill. At this important point in the narrative, his aunt arrives to nurse him (152). In this instance, Marlow's aunt functions almost exclusively as nurturer and comforter for the male world, and although Marlow suggests that her efforts "seemed altogether beside the mark" because "[i]t was not my strength that wanted nursing, it was my imagination that wanted soothing" (152), her role remains that of a comforter since at this point in his recovery she still tries to provide Marlow with a place of refuge--only in this case she apparently can offer little more than physical comfort and protection for him.

Finally, Marlow encounters the world of women for the last time when he actually meets the Intended near the end of his tale. At this critical point in his experience, he has come to visit her, intent on divesting himself of the remnants of Kurtz (155). Kurtz has been a key to Marlow's discovery of the nature of the universe, and he wants to rid himself of the last physical reminders of Kurtz and the truths he has disclosed. Rather than divesting himself of Kurtz, however, Marlow ends by embracing him even more closely when he finds that he cannot relinquish Kurtz to the truth and render him "that justice which was his due" (162)--in the process destroying the Intended's world. Instead, Marlow must maintain her world in its unsullied form, thereby also keeping that sanctuary intact. In the end, Marlow protects the Intended's world by lying to her.¹⁴ Earlier, Marlow had already set the stage for the significance of this incident when he said,

You know I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appalls me. There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies--which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world--what I want to forget. It makes me miserable and sick, like biting something rotten would do. (82).

That Marlow feels so strongly about lying and yet nevertheless lies to the Intended demonstrates how much his experience in the Congo has affected him and how much he feels the need to protect the sanctuary that the Intended's world provides for him and for the rest of the male world. It would have

been impossible to do other than lie to her and still retain some semblance of illusory order in the universe. After telling the Intended that Kurtz's last words were her name rather than "The horror! The horror!" (149), Marlow remarks,

It seemed to me that the house would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head. But nothing happened. The heavens do not fall for such a trifle. Would they have fallen, I wonder, if I had rendered Kurtz that justice which was his due? Hadn't he said he wanted only justice? But I couldn't. I could not tell her. It would have been too dark--too dark altogether...." (162; ellipses are Conrad's)

Marlow's narrative ends there, and significantly so, because when he says that it "would have been too dark--too dark altogether," the darkness would have resulted from the crumbling of the sanctuary that is the Intended's world--the falling of the heavens, as it were (162). Ironically, telling the truth would have almost been an act of sacrilege; the truth would have shattered the Intended's illusions and destroyed her world of goodness and light, leaving her and all she represents exposed to the knowledge Marlow had acquired in the Congo and leaving the male world with no refuge from the "appalling face of a glimpsed truth" (151).

Footnotes

1 McIntire continues her argument by asserting that Marlow keeps the women in the novella (unlike the men) rooted to their cultural and geographical places, prevented from traveling across or between boundaries.

2 Straus argues further that both the text and the commentary on it have sought to exclude women from its action and interpretation.

3 Perhaps the earliest extended commentary on women in Heart of Darkness is Grace Isabel Colbron's "Joseph Conrad's Women," in which she suggests of Conrad's women in general that although they are often present in his works, including Heart of Darkness, it is not their development or psychology that matters to Conrad but rather that of his male characters (476). Some other important commentaries on women in Heart of Darkness include those by Johanna M. Smith, who argues that Marlow tries to colonize and pacify women in Heart of Darkness (170); Addison C. Bross, who argues that Marlow seemingly unconsciously represents women as linked with evil (41); and Valerie F. Sedlak, who argues that in fact Marlow's views of women do not follow from the evidence in the text and thus his comments about women are undermined by the text itself (465). Other commentaries on women in Heart of Darkness include those by Edward A. Geary, Gordon W. Thompson, Thomas R Cleary and Terry G. Sherwood, Judith Spector, Herbert G. Klein, Bette London, Jeremy Hawthorn (183-99), Lynn Thiesmeyer, Rita Bode, Susan Hagen, Birgitta Holm, Leslie Heywood, Carola M. Kaplan, Richard J. Ruppel, and Debrah Raschke (71-87).

4 Because Marlow comments only on the world of Western women in the novella, in discussing the world of women in Heart of Darkness, I will not be considering the two African women (important though they are to the novella for other reasons), the chief accountant's laundry woman at the company's Outer

Station and the "wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman" (135) at the Inner Station, since for Marlow they inhabit a very different world from that of the leisure-class Western women upon which he comments. For more on the treatment of the African women in *Heart of Darkness*, see, for example, Torgovnick (145-58), Thiesmeyer, Mongia, Smith, Stone and Afzal-Khan, Ogede, Sen, Ray and Viola.

5 See, for instance, Guerard, especially chapter 1, "The Journey Within," 1-59.

6 Conrad appears to have experienced something similar himself; G. Jean-Aubry quotes him as having told his friend Edward Garnett, "Before the Congo I was just a mere animal" (*Life and Letters* 1: 141). By this statement, Conrad seems to imply that after his time in Africa he recognized a much bleaker universe.

7 Conrad, *Youth and Two Other Stories* 114; see also 116. Hereafter, all quotations from *Heart of Darkness* will be taken from this edition and will be followed by their page numbers in parentheses.

8 For a more complete description of nineteenth-century society's role for women, see, for instance, Carol Dyhouse, "The Role of Women: From Self-sacrifice to Self-awareness."

9 See, for instance, John Ruskin's famous essay "Of Queens' Gardens." See also Coventry Kersey Dighton Patmore's *The Angel in the House*.

10 Marlow's comments, of course, also illustrate his scorn for such views when he follows his aunt's comment by saying, "There had been a lot of such rot let loose in print and talk just about that time, and the excellent woman, living right in the rush of all that humbug, got carried off her feet" (59).

11 Rita A. Bergenholtz discusses more extensively the symbolic nature of the knitting women. Nadelhaft notes the "abrupt contradiction" between the knitting women and those who populate the world of Marlow's aunt (46). Similarly, Sedlak comments, "Marlow's statements, for example, about women being out of touch with truth and living in a world that is too beautiful do not apply to the two women in the Company's outer office room" (451-52).

12 Along with McIntyre, other commentators (including Colbron [479] and Lillian Feder in "Marlow's Descent into Hell" [283]) have noted similarities between Marlow's description of the knitting women and the three women of fate in Greek mythology: Klotho who spins the thread of life, Lachesis who measures it, and Atropos who cuts it.

13 Other views of the blindfolded woman in Kurtz's painting include those of Wilfred S. Dowden, Randy M. Brooks, Mark S. Sexton, Frederick R. Karl (132), Marianne DeKoven (113), Brian W. Shaffer (2), and Lissa Schneider (9-13).

14 Much commentary exists concerning the Intended and Marlow's lie to her. These commentaries tend to divide themselves into four general camps: those who see Marlow as acting chivalrously by protecting the Intended's sensibility, those who see the Intended as unworthy of hearing the truth or unable to comprehend it, those who see Marlow maintaining the ideals of the Intended's world by lying to her, and

those who see the Intended as in fact embodying the "Horror" itself: for example, Leonard F. Dean, who argues that Marlow acts in a chivalrous manner in lying to the Intended (104). In the second camp are such commentators as Thomas Moser, who suggests that the Intended is not worthy of the truth because she is not in touch with it (81), and Gerald B. Kauvar, who argues that Marlow does not lie because the Intended represents a lack of understanding like Kurtz's lack of understanding (292). The third camp comprises such critics as Kenneth A. Bruffee, who sees Marlow as maintaining the ideals that the Intended embodies by lying to her (326); Ted E. Boyle, who sees Marlow's lie as a form of an idealistic higher truth (161); and Peter Hayes, who suggests that the lie preserves what is good (108). The final camp consists of such commentators as George E. Montag, who argues that Marlow does not lie at all but rather that the Intended represents the horror that Kurtz saw (94). Similarly, James Ellis, Bruce R. Stark, Doreen Fowler, and Fred L. Milne all tend to agree with Montag. Yet other commentaries on the Intended and Marlow's lie to her include Kenneth Bernard, David M. Martin, Garrett Stewart, Edwin Thumboo, Jan Verleun, Ian Glenn, Diana Knight, Peter Hyland, Edward H. Hoeppepner, Andrew Michael Roberts, Gail Houston, and David L. Rozema.

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