

Marlow's Blindfold

The characters in *Heart of Darkness* are almost entirely men, with only a few women sprinkled in. Even then, we do not get to fully hear from these few women; we are seeing them through the eyes of Marlow, covered by his notions of their thoughts, smothered by his interpretation of their appearance. Marlow wants to believe that the Europeans and Congo natives exist in two separate realms; one has the light of civilization, and the other the darkness of savagery. But based on what he sees in the Congo, there may be an overlap with the two, the gap between them not being as wide as he thought. This is what he fears, so he uses European women to counter this. He wants to completely separate European women, at least in his mind, from the darkness. He wants to see them as this bastion of civilization that cannot and should not be touched by the savagery of the natives, this worldly ideal that upholds those truths that he has known his entire life—the same truths that real men at the time believed in.

One way he does this is by directly contrasting the darkness, representing femininity with light. This is prominent in the way he describes the Intended. He sees her “fair hair”, “pale visage”, and “pure brow”, all manifestations of how he sees her carrying the light of civilization— contrasted by the darker imagery of what surrounds her: an “ashy halo” (74). To him, European women bear a light surrounded by the darkness of the rest of humanity. This is again shown when Marlow seems to witness the room around them grow darker and darker, with only her forehead, “smooth and white”. She seemed to shine with “an unearthly glow in the darkness” (75). The Intended is, at least through Marlow's eyes, a pure, innocent figure far removed from what he witnessed in the Congo. She is a beacon of light to him that he wants to use to justify that yes, civilization is a real concept and people can truly be civilized, with no trace of savagery. This is to fight off his fear that Europeans and Africans are not so different.

Light is used in a more nuanced way earlier in the novel. When Marlow is in the Congo, before he meets the Intended, he knows of her through Kurtz's portrait. This portrait serves two purposes: to reinforce the role of women as one-dimensional figures, and to shed light on the situation as a whole. In the painting, the Intended is blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch against a dark background. This is representative of how Europeans are trying to bring light to the Congo, through spreading methods of civilization. It is her, a woman, depicted because, again, European women are supposedly the model of civilization; as Schneider explains, the portrait presents the Intended as an icon rather than a "speaking subject"(479). She, in the painting, cannot shift from the form Kurtz painted her as, making her the perfect personification of civilization. She, in real life, may voice real thoughts that may or may not stray from traditional femininity. Seeing only the portrait deepens Marlow's idolatry of womanhood. Even as an icon, however, the painting reveals truth through its composition. There is a blindfold on this European woman: Europeans want to bring light to the Congo, but they are in the dark themselves. Marlow describes the effect of the torchlight on her face as "sinister" (25). If there were no torchlight, had the Europeans not tried to spread light they did not have, the whole picture would be in the dark. Her sinister face nor her blindfold would not be seen. By the act of trying to colonize the Congo, Europeans have revealed their own blindness and ugliness. The light they tried to bring to others only illuminated their own darkness. Marlow, at this time, is beginning the process of realizing this truth, and he is scared of it.

The ugliness of the Congo's colonization was not lost on all of society at its time. Of the several critics, George Washington Williams in particular protested the cruelty of King Leopold's treatment of the natives. He was initially in support of Leopold's "humane sentiments and work of Christian civilization for Africa" (121), perceiving Belgium's settlement as the

spreading of its torchlight to Africa. Upon discovering the grim reality of the situation, Williams sent a letter holding the king accountable. As the portrait of the Intended implies, the European nation's attempt at carving itself as a grand bringer of light was what led to its exposure as a false god.

In the novel, the atrocities that Williams describes in his letter are depicted harshly and vividly. Marlow witnesses how the darkness in European men oozes out— their greed, depravity, corruption, and wickedness— all brought out and put on display in the Congo, while under the perception of civilization from Europe's view. This is portrayed in extremes in Kurtz, who embodies this darkness. Once he tastes the power he has over the natives, he loses all sense of restraint: he advocates to “Exterminate all the brutes!”(50) and displays the natives' decapitated heads on sticks, making no attempt to hide his brutality. In his rapacious quest for ivory, he raids villages, orders mass killings of rebels, acquiring the most of any station through the use of pure, unbridled force. This is the depth of the European man bared to Marlow, with the shell of civilization cracked open. It is this darkness that he fears: the idea that this primitive, unrestrained, savage side lies in the soul of every man, African or European— which is why he then looks to women.

Marlow wants women to stay in their own world and keep their light, which is why he protects them from his own world. In his world, he trudges into the heart of darkness and witnesses the depravity of Europeans. In his narrative in the Congo, he strongly keeps the idea of European women out, to “help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse”. Now that he knows European men and African men share more of each other's world than he would like, he wants European women, at least, to exist in a different realm, so that there might be light at all in the world. He does not even want to tell the Intended about Kurtz's true

last words, fearing it may taint her pure light with his dark: “I could not tell her. It would have been too dark— too dark altogether...”. He had been detailing her “desolation”, her “sorrow”, her “despairing regret” from the thought of Kurtz’s death (75). This is from Marlow’s lens, meaning this is what he thinks he sees in her. If he thinks she is in so much pain over Kurtz’s death, then it furthers his conviction that the real truth would be too much for this woman to handle.

He had always perceived women as in their own, pristine world, even before his experience in the Congo. This is simply due to European societal norms at the time. Before his embarkation, he had softened his words with his aunt, always referring to her as “dear”— “my dear aunt”, “a dear enthusiastic soul” (12)— a term of endearment that indicates he believes her to be equal to a child, and, like a child, must be taken care of and shielded. In fact, in the beginning of the novel, Marlow scoffs at the idea of the intersection of women and work, exclaiming “Heavens!” to himself at the thought (8). Work is a harder, heavy idea, and he finds the thought of women doing it ridiculous. At the time of the Congo’s colonization, the idea of women’s suffrage was slowly gaining traction— and opposition. Writings were published with intense criticism of the idea of women being able to vote. Horace Bushnell, a prominent American minister, decried womens’ suffrage as a “reform against nature” (5), making the argument that women and men are so dissimilar that true equality is impossible, and that therefore no rights given to men should be automatically given to women. He claims they are different in nature, in that men radiate “Force, Authority, Decision, Self-Asserting Counsel, Victory”, while women’s nature says, “I will trust, and be cherished, and give sympathy and take ownership in victory” (Bushnell, 51). The world of women encompasses comfort and passiveness, not actions like working and voting. Marlow’s beliefs echo this idea captured by so

many of the time period. This world that women live in, according to Marlow, is “beautiful” (12), but naive and unrealistic, to the point where if women were to set up the world, it would collapse “before the first sunset” due to some element that men, in their world, have always lived contentedly with (13). Women’s worlds cannot handle the same severity that men’s worlds contain, but their greatness lies in that. Because harsh realities do not exist in their world, it is all the more luminary. When Marlow loses hope in men after his trip to the Congo, it is this beautiful, luminary world he desperately latches onto.

Ironically, Marlow’s attempts to isolate women into a world of serenity may have given even more power to the darkness. Marlow worships the world that women inhabit, but by perpetuating that world, he is fueling imperialism even further, as Hawthorne suggests: when women are locked into that world, they end up “sterile”, sick (410). These European women become the representation of the domestic idealism that countries use to imperialize. King Leopold operated under this false light, with promises of bringing civilization to the Congo. It is what allowed for the complacency of others while Belgium committed atrocities. In forcing an idealized view of imperialism upon themselves, those people suffocated themselves into the sickness of ignorance.

In this novel, femininity is an amplification of European civilization. It concerns mannerliness, control, pleasantness, order, and all the aspects that structure what civilization is. If human civilization were a spectrum, Marlow would put European women at the very end, even further than European men, with Africans on the opposite end. However, in the Congo, he witnessed how Africans could practice restraint while Europeans, especially seen in Kurtz, could let themselves dissolve into depravity. This skews the spectrum because it implies that Europeans and Africans overlap. Marlow does not want them to overlap; he does not even want

there to be a spectrum. He wants European and Africans to be two entirely separate entities altogether— a clear division between them. Since Marlow has trouble justifying any clear division between them now, he looks to women to do it for him. He thinks of women as a mark, far removed from the world of those savages in the Congo, to justify there is truly a distinction between light and dark. Like the Intended in her portrait, Marlow has his own blindfold on— one made of light that blinds the wearer from the darkness.

By the end of the novel, however, Marlow does recognize that it is all an illusion. When he meets the Intended in real life, the light she contains seems to grow more hopeless as the conversation goes on. While she does have light, the darkness around her is growing stronger, which is the visual manifestation of Marlow giving in to the truth. As he listens to her, the room darkens “with every word spoken”. He then bows his head at “the faith that was in her... that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow... in the triumphant darkness...” (76). He is still clinging, bowing his head, to this idea of light within her, but knows at this point that it is a false illusion within the true darkness. The “glitter” in her eyes, her “fair” hair that seemed “to catch all the remaining light”, her “pale” hands in the “fading and narrow sheen of the window” (75-76), all exist to emphasize the rapidly diminishing hope of Marlow’s ideals. He cannot use women as his blindfold anymore. As he loses the Intended to the darkness, Marlow is forced to face the idea that people cannot be truly civilized— that the only actual division between Europeans and Africans is in outward form only; aspects like language, food, manners, clothes, and skin color are guises Europeans have carved to project this idea of civilization onto themselves; underneath, in their hearts, all people have their own darkness.

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