Heart of Darkness Feminist Criticism

Links

[• Dr. Kristi Siegel’s Introduction to Modern Literary Theory (scroll down)](http://www.kristisiegel.com/theory.htm)

• [University of Toronto Literary TheoryGlossary: Feminist Criticism](http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/glossary/Feminist_criticism.html)

•[Michael Delahoyde Feminist Criticism](http://public.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/feminist.crit.html)

•[Wikipedia Feminist Criticism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminist_literary_criticism)

Feminist theory advocates examining how women are treated in a political, economic, social, psychological, personal, and aesthetic sense within the literary work. Scholars attempt to understand the intersecting points of femininity and questions underlying patriarchal tensions within novels and interrogate the ways in which our literary expectations are contingent upon female subordination.

views of women and their role. Almost too obviously, feminist criticism will focus on the female characters in a work and how they function. It may also reveal women as representative of the “Other,” the deviation from the dominant masculine characters. When we use the gender lens, we examine patterns of thought, behavior, value, and power in interactions between the sexes.

Example from Full Essay

What men have said so far, for the most part, stems from. . .the power relation between a fantasized obligatory virility meant to invade, to colonize, and the consequential phantasm of woman as a “dark continent” to penetrate and to pacify. (Helene Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”)

A story about manly adventure narrated and written by a man, Heart of Darkness might seem an unpropitious subject for feminist criticism. As my epigraph suggests, however, a feminist approach to Conrad’s story of colonizing can interrogate its complex interrelation of patriarchal and imperialist ideologies. By examining the women in Marlow’s narrative, we can identify the patriarchal-imperialist blend that requires the kinds of women he creates. To do so is to engage in a feminist critique of ideology, for, as Myra Jehlen puts it, “Feminist thinking is really rethinking, an examination of the way certain assumptions about women and the female character enter into the fundamental assumptions that organize all our thinking.”

Such rethinking about Heart of Darkness reveals the collusion of imperialism and patriarchy: Marlow’s narrative aims too “colonize” and “pacify” both savage darkness and women. Silencing the native laundress and symbolizing the equally silent savage woman and the Company women, Marlow protects himself from his experience of the darkness they stand for. The two speaking women he creates, his aunt and the Intended, perform a similar function. As we will see later, Marlow, by restricting unsatisfactory versions of imperialist ideology to them, is able to create his own version, a belief to keep the darkness at bay.

--From “Too Beautiful Altogether: Patriarchal Ideology in Heart of Darkness” by Johanna M. Smith

Questions to answer in your Congo Diary:

1. How is Marlow’s aunt portrayed? How is she described?

2. What does Marlow mean early in Part 1 when he suggests that women are “out of touch with truth” and live in a beautiful world of their own?

3. At the appointment with the Company in Brussels, how are the two women portrayed and what might be their symbolic meaning?

4. What role does Kurtz’s African mistress play? What kind of language is used to describe her? Is it consistent? How is she representative or not representative of her culture and race?

5. Discuss the portrayal of Kurtz’s Intended. How is she representative or not representative of her culture and race?

6. What is the significance of Marlow’s lie to the Intended? What’s Marlow’s attitude toward lying? Is his lie justified or not?

7. What do you think are the strengths of this approach? The weaknesses?