

DON'T KNOCK THE BOAT:

Feminine Characters in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"

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Kelly Larkin Conway's "Don't Knock the Boat: Feminine Characters in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'" floats the argument that critics have ignored a key feminine character in the story: The Boat. Indeed, "The Nellie" is the only female character to be christened with a name in Conrad's work. Larkin Conway suggests that the Nellie may be unmoored from traditional criticism of femininity in "Heart of Darkness" since it "resists both the expectation of spatial confinement, by transgressing national and cultural boundaries, and stereotypes of fragility" of women in travel writing. Larkin Conway's work is buoyed by the critical work of Karen Lawrence, who notes in *Penelope Voyages: Women and Travel in the British Literary Tradition* that "enduring narratives of the gendering of travel, a narrative that conflates travel and absence in the experience of Penelope, who is left behind" persist in the Western imagination (ix). Larkin Conway shows, however, that we may read the Nellie as the only female character who transgresses traditional gendered roles and "creates the opportunity for a dynamic feminine character" in Conrad's story. Larkin Conway does not turn a blind eye to the problematic representations of other women in the novel, but she does suggest Conrad may not always toe the line when it comes to Victorian feminine stereotypes.

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“It is a story of the Congo. There is no love interest in it and no woman - only incidentally,” Joseph Conrad wrote to his publisher, Fisher Unwin, two years before finishing “Heart of Darkness” (McIntire 257). Despite his intentions, however, there *are* examples of women in his novella, just not strong ones. Readers meet and interact with three principal women who fit within rigid stereotypes: they are inferior, fragile, static creatures that need protection. Only one feminine character resists some of these stereotypes, and that is the river steamboat. Referred to as “she” throughout the novella, the steamboat resists both the expectation of spatial confinement, by transgressing national and cultural boundaries, and the stereotype of female fragility, by providing Marlow’s crew with protection against the natives. Because of this resistance, she is the strongest feminine character in “Heart of Darkness,” if only problematically.

Although some critics argue that the female characters propel much of the plot of “Heart of Darkness,” Marlow interacts with these women as though they were inferior. In her article “‘They . . . Should Be Out of It’: The Women of *Heart of Darkness*,” Rita Bode claims that Conrad’s female characters are quite powerful, and frequently

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“female forces lie behind the white male presence in the Congo” – even though none of the female characters are ever named (22). One example of this female influence is Marlow’s aunt’s ability to find him a job of some prestige. However, readers never actually experience this influence; they only infer it. Furthermore, Marlow’s belief in the absurdity of asking women for help sabotages the aunt’s influence (Conrad 498). Peter Hyland, in his essay “The Little Woman in the *Heart of Darkness*,” suggests that Marlow feels diminished upon having to ask a woman for help, revealing his contempt for their assumed inferiority (Hyland 6). Marlow reveals this prejudice again when he casually belittles his aunt’s opinions on colonialism, stating, “It’s queer how out of touch with truth women are” (Conrad 504). Marlow’s brush-off is ungrateful and unfounded: ungrateful because she got him the job, and unfounded because her opinions, in the context of the story, are neither queer nor out of touch. In fact, her colonial optimism resembles opinions found in Kurtz’s report on the “Suppression of Savage Customs” (Hyland 6).

In a story about travel and adventure, the women of “Heart of Darkness” are uniquely static creatures. McIntire, in her article “The Women Do Not Travel:

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Gender, Difference and Incommensurability in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," argues that "the principal women of the text are always positioned in transitional spaces in either the colony or the metropole . . . [and are] decidedly static and unable to wander between cultural, ideological, and national boundaries" (258). Unlike men, who have the privilege of wandering or traveling, Conrad's women are powerless to cross the limits of nation, culture, and ideology. While Conrad's male characters acquire experience of multiple continents, his three female characters - the Intended, the African woman, and Marlow's aunt - are permitted experience of either Europe or Africa, but not both.

This stereotype of female spatial limitation fits Hyland's claim that "the truly feminine is primarily a construct of patriarchal ideology, for its purpose was to locate women away from the active but corrupting world of work and commerce to protect the superior morality they were supposed to embody" (5). The desire to hide women away hinges on the view that women need protecting, an assumption that occasionally appears sympathetic, but is merely a cover for the stereotype that women are either inferior and unable to work, or fragile and easily corrupted.

But Conrad does more than just confine women to one

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territory: he conflates gender with the territory itself, implying that one is an extension of the other. This conflation is particularly disturbing in a colonial setting, where it implies that men can conquer and own women much like they conquer and own land. We see an example of this implication in the description of the African woman, in which Conrad both feminizes the Congo and defines the African woman by the mysterious land in which she lives - ultimately subjugating both (McIntire 261).

Women in “Heart of Darkness” are also constructed as frail creatures that need protection from men, notably the African woman and the Intended. The African woman, portrayed at first as mysterious and magnificent, becomes tragic, stretching her arms out as Kurtz and Marlow pull away in the steamboat (Conrad 588). Because Marlow’s last image of the African woman is of her “trying to halt the departure of her lover, [when he realizes he is going to tell his lie] he is able to absorb completely his memory of the savage woman into the image of the fragile woman who must not be hurt, the Intended” (Hyland 8). In this passage, Hyland implies that Marlow views women as fragile and helpless so, when he encounters someone who does not fit - for example, the African woman - he uses his imagination to maintain his sexist views. During the

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final scene with the Intended, Marlow means to relay Kurtz's last words but fails, claiming that "it would have been altogether dark - too dark altogether" (Conrad 603). One typical interpretation of Marlow's lie, according to Hyland, is that the Intended needs protection from the truth. He goes on to argue that Marlow's response to women is dictated by a Victorian patriarchal structure that "impos[es] a sentimental and reductive definition upon the object that removes the necessity of actually looking at it. Marlow's apparently protective attitude toward women is based upon a containing stereotype that may conceal actual fear and contempt" (Hyland 4). In Hyland's argument, the Intended becomes the object that is defined sentimentally, which allows Marlow to avoid viewing her as a person deserving of the truth.

Conrad does create one feminine character, however, that defies some Victorian stereotypes: the steamboat. The steamboat is the only feminine character able to traverse spatial divides, command respect, and provide men with protection. This argument focuses on the particular steamboat that takes Marlow into the heart of the Congo, but the novella refers to several boats, all of which are constructed as feminine and defy some of the rigid gender roles outlined above. Monika Elbert, in her article "Freya

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of the Seven Isles' and the Heart of Male Darkness," claims that Conrad himself believed "the real heart of man is his brig, his ship, which is feminine, and that hostile masculine forces are always at work against her/him" (37). Unlike the other female characters in the novella, the steamboat travels between cultural and national boundaries, experiencing both Europe and Africa. Additionally, given that Marlow has spent his whole life as a successful seaman, readers can assume he enjoys sailing and respects steamboats, if only because they have always been his livelihood. In fact, the only feminine character in the whole novel that gets a name is "Nellie," the boat on which Marlow tells his story (Conrad 490). Finally, unlike the feminine characters that need protection from men, the river steamboat provides Marlow and his crew with protection: when the natives attack the crew from the riverbanks, the only thing that will stop them is the screeching of the steamboat's penny whistle (Conrad 564). For all these reasons, the two-penny-half-penny river steamboat is Conrad's strongest feminine character in "Heart of Darkness."

Although feminists may be comforted by the discovery of a strong feminine character, Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" remains a problematic text because the

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steamboat is still a man-made, inanimate object with no agency. In the case of “Heart of Darkness,” the convention of referring to boats in female terms creates the opportunity for a dynamic feminine character but, typically, such habits reflect uncritical and sexist views. It is also important to remember that Marlow, as the director of the river steamboat, arguably co-opts any agency the boat may have. Furthermore, the fact that the most interesting and dynamic feminine character in “Heart of Darkness” is non-human and was perhaps created unintentionally leaves its subversive potential wanting at best.

Joseph Conrad’s narrator recounts a tale in which the feminine characters conform to limiting, Victorian gender roles. However, despite the weak female characters and his desire to exclude women from the “Heart of Darkness,” Conrad’s characters end up relying on the one feminine character that resists some of these Victorian stereotypes. By both protecting the men, and providing them with the ability to travel, the steamboat becomes the strongest feminine character of the novella.

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