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Encounters with Symbolic Ambiguity: The Knitters of Black Wool in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

Abstract

In this article I discuss Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*, focusing on two female characters who appear early in the text – the knitters of black wool. I examine the scene at the office of the Trading Company in Brussels to emphasise its importance in Conrad's text. First, I focus my attention on the younger knitter, arguing that despite the seeming obscurity of this character, her presence in the text is significant: I explore how she functions as a symbol and the ways in which she is related to certain later moments in the novella. In the second part of the article, I include the older knitter in my analysis and I discuss the office scene in its entirety.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, knitters, symbols, ambiguity

Over the past century the female characters in *Heart of Darkness* have received a significant amount of critical attention. While characters such as Marlow's aunt, Kurtz's Intended and the African woman have been widely discussed, more sparing attention has been given to two other women who appear in the narrative briefly but whose presence in the text is strongly felt – the knitters of black wool. As the plot unfolds, those seemingly minor characters prove to be significant as Conrad regularly gives subtle, almost indiscernible clues leading back to them, providing the reader with insights into his ideas and authorial intentions.

An important point needs to be made, related to the difference between Conrad and the narrator-protagonist Marlow in their attitudes towards women. As we shall see later, it is essential that the reader be careful not to assume that these attitudes coincide. When some critics say, for instance, that *Heart of Darkness* is a sexist novel whose message is perpetuated by the "masculinist tradition" of Conradian critics (Straus 1996: 52), it is not to be concluded that it is Conrad whose view on women is expressed in the text. If the author loads the narrator's way of telling a story with sexism, he does not necessarily do it to express his own view on women but to provoke a reaction in his readers and to make them question certain values and attitudes. The alternative perspective – the perspective of the Other – was not unfamiliar to Conrad, whom Kostova calls "the precursor of present-day transnational writers" (Kostova 2022: 11). As White points out, "Marlow is not so much Conrad's

spokesman as a strategic innovation that served his purposes in disrupting... essentially dangerous monolithic illusions” (White 1993: 177).

Marlow encounters the two knitters at the Headquarters of the ivory company in Brussels:

Two women, one fat and the other slim, sat on straw-bottomed chairs, knitting black wool. The slim one got up and walked straight at me – still knitting with down-cast eyes – and only just as I began to think of getting out of her way, as you would for a somnambulist, stood still, and looked up. Her dress was as plain as an umbrella-cover, and she turned round without a word and preceded me into a waiting-room. (Conrad 1992: 8–9)

From this first encounter with the two knitters, it becomes clear that there is something ‘not quite right’ about their presence, something *uncanny*, in the sense it appears in Freudian thought. The strange and mechanical way the young woman moves and reacts suggests that Marlow has suddenly been transported from the streets of Brussels to a completely different place, which Sherry describes as a “rigid, mechanical, blind, and automatized world” (Conrad 1992: 46). Sherry also notes that she does not speak or see or even move in relation to others. The reader may not recognise at once what exactly causes the strong uncanny feeling here but revealing its direct psychological agent is not Conrad’s concern. What is more important for him is to find a way of manipulating and using this feeling in such a way as to communicate to the reader the idea of strangeness, otherness, darkness, and even helplessness. For the sake of a more complete analysis, however, we will have to look at the mechanism of creating *the uncanny* in this episode. In his 1919 paper “The Uncanny” Freud gives a relatively detailed account of the different and sometimes controversial explanations of this psychological phenomenon. He mentions the conception that the uncanny feeling is generally caused by intellectual doubts whether an apparently animate being is in fact alive or whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an automaton. At the same time, the reader’s attention must not be focused directly upon this uncertainty, lest it should be resolved too quickly (Freud 1955: 226).

The passage in *Heart of Darkness* I have cited above seems to fit this definition almost perfectly. The thin knitter leaves the impression of being an odd wound-up toy in a human form as she approaches Marlow almost blindly, like a somnambulist. At the same time, she does not interrupt her work, as if a hidden spring in her mechanism does not allow her to stop her compulsive knitting. Only when Marlow considers “getting out of her way” (Conrad 1992: 8) does she seem to become human as she “st[ands] still, and look[s] up” (1992: 9). However, this transformation is partial and brief: a careful reader will not fail to notice that although the girl leads Marlow into the waiting room, none of her actions are directed towards him (or any-

one else). “[The woman] stood still and looked up... and she turned round without a word and preceded me into a waiting-room” (1992: 9). The most significant phrase here is that the young knitter “looks up” but does not look up *at him*. We are left with the impression that she is staring into the void: a humanoid but frightening automaton performing a pre-programmed function, triggered by someone’s entering the room. This idea is strengthened several lines later, when Marlow describes the girl’s function in the office: “People were arriving, and the younger one was walking back and forth introducing them” (1992: 9). This “walking back and forth”, suggesting a ceaseless, hopeless repetition, supports the impression that she is a mechanised creature. The uncanny effect achieved here by the author is distinctly felt.

The young woman’s presence in the narrative does not end there. After his brief interview Marlow confronts the two knitters again:

In the outer room the two women knitted black wool feverishly. People were arriving, and the younger one was walking back and forth introducing them. The old one sat on her chair. Her flat cloth slippers were propped up on a foot-warmer, and a cat reposed on her lap. She wore a starched white affair on her head, had a wart on one cheek, and silver-rimmed spectacles hung on the tip of her nose. She glanced at me above the glasses. The swift and indifferent placidity of that look troubled me. Two youths with foolish and cheery countenances were being piloted over, and she threw at them the same quick glance of unconcerned wisdom. She seemed to know all about them and about me, too. An eerie feeling came over me. She 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. (Conrad 1992: 9–10)

Throughout the narrative, Marlow shows a tendency to transform the people he meets into symbols and seems unable to think about them in any other terms. At the same time his symbol-making process is loaded with, as Johanna M. Smith puts it, “patriarchal-imperialist blend” (Smith 1989:180). It would, therefore, be logical to assume that the young knitter is also a symbol. The difficulty here does not arise from a necessity to find support for this claim but from the fact that the thin woman symbolises more than one thing and it is not a simple task to discern all of them.

One of the things the young woman symbolises is death. As Sherry briefly mentions, she is “a dehumanised death in life to herself and to others, and thus a prefiguring symbol of what the Trading Company does to its creatures” (Sherry 1976: 46). This finds confirmation in the analogy pointed out by Smith (1989: 189),

to whom Conrad's use of the phrase "piloted over" connects her with Charon, the pilot who ferries the dead across the Styx into Hades: "Two youths with foolish and cheery countenances were being piloted over..." (Conrad 1992: 10).

This mythological image creates an even darker and more ominous atmosphere. The naïve young men are being led into the waiting room to be interviewed but what is symbolised is their forthcoming journey into the 'heart of darkness', where few white people survive. The passive construction in this sentence strengthens this impression and for the first time introduces the idea of doom – an idea encountered frequently in the narrative from this point on. The woman's attire also suggests an image of personified death. Her dress is "as plain as an umbrella-cover" (Conrad 1992: 9). The colour of the dress is not specified but the image of the umbrella cover speaks in favour of the black, which makes her appear as if she is mourning the symbolic death of the very people she is "piloting over" from civilisation into Hades. Symbolically, she is sending the men to their demise, marking the beginning of their conspiracy with the death-inflicting Company. At the same time, she is performing a ritual function at this same company, which means that she too, in a sense, has been introduced to *her* symbolic death. This seems to support Sherry's opinion that the thin knitter is a symbol "of what the Trading Company does to its creatures" and leads us to a curious analogy. The image of personified death appears once again in the novel, when, having arrived at the Inner Station, Marlow sees Kurtz for the first time through his binoculars: "I could see the cage of his ribs all astir, the bones of his arm waving. It was as though an animated image of death carved out of old ivory had been shaking its hand with menaces at a motionless crowd of men made of dark and glittering bronze" (Conrad 1992: 66).

This time the analogy is direct and positively repulsive. Conrad draws the image of personified death boldly and in almost shocking detail. The carved ivory is interwoven in the picture in such a way as to make the main figure in it even more cadaverous with its yellowish-white colour. Like the thin knitter, Kurtz is one of the victims of the Company and in a way a symbol of it. He may have been yet another optimistic youth, ready to work for the firm, but it becomes clear that as a representative of the Company he has become the death of many people, as well as his own. The knitter also symbolically sends many enthusiastic men to their death and in doing so, causes her own. The similarity between these two episodes goes further. In the second one Conrad is attempting, consciously or not, to trigger the same kind of uncanny feeling in the reader, as in the episode with the knitter, using the same mechanism. Again, for a brief moment there is a suggestion that a hideous ebony figure of death is coming to life, gesticulating to a crowd made of bronze.

The similarity between these two patterns of describing personified death is no coincidence. It seems justified to suppose that through such an analogy the author represents the two kinds of death the Company inflicts. While Kurtz, at the moment of his introduction to the reader, stands for physical death, caused by the horrible

climate and disease, the young woman in the office illustrates spiritual death – both hers and the death of the young people entering into a conspiracy with the greedy and murderous company. Kurtz too has undergone this kind of death, which in his case is even more terrifying, given the multitude of people he has killed to take their ivory. The reader does not witness Kurtz's spiritual death but the result of it – physical demise. Marlow suggests that the youths the knitter introduces into the waiting room are likely to perish in the same way: "Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again – not half, by a long way" (Conrad 1992: 10).

The young woman herself, however, will never be overtaken by such a fate. She is destined to remain in the realm of spiritual death without having to face such a horrible physical demise because, in a curious way, physical death is closely associated with something which Marlow methodically denies to women – the access to truth. The concept of truth preoccupies the narrator throughout the novel and becomes an unconscious but powerful agent of his constant uneasiness. Talking about his conversation with his aunt, Marlow comments: "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" (Conrad 1992: 12).

From the moment Marlow starts his journey up the river, the idea of absolute truth begins to appear frequently. It becomes clear that even a *man* is out of touch with truth until he undertakes a dangerous journey into a "heart of darkness", where mortal danger lurks everywhere and where he is granted the opportunity to look deep into his own soul and explore it: "The mind of man is capable of anything – because everything is in it... What was there after all? Joy, fear, sorrow, devotion, valour, rage – who can tell? – but truth – truth stripped of its cloak of time. Let the fool gape and shudder – the man knows... But he must at least be as much of a man as these on the shore. He must meet that truth with his own true stuff" (Conrad 1992: 39).

Ultimate knowledge thus becomes associated with danger and death, which, however, characterise a world reserved exclusively for the men. As a woman, the knitter will always be denied the experience of going into the heart of darkness and getting an opportunity to discover truth because she belongs to a feminine world, a world "too beautiful altogether" (Conrad 1992: 12), where reality gives way to illusion and where women must be kept: "We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse" (1992: 52–53). As a result, the young woman does not have to face physical death in Africa but at the same time she is denied the opportunity to discover 'truth', or, at any rate, what Marlow perceives as truth.

Another thing that puts the knitters – and ultimately all women – in a disadvantageous position is that in a paradoxical way, an agonising physical death seems to trigger the reversal of the earlier process of a spiritual one. Kurtz's last words "The horror! The horror!" betray the change he has been undergoing. A realisation of his horrible deeds seems to come to him; he is no longer the greedy and murder-

ous ivory hunter but a man coming back, though too late, to his human nature. Just before he dies, he symbolically breaks his collusion with the Company. Several phrases in Marlow's account support this impression: "I went no more near the remarkable man who had pronounced a judgment upon the adventures of his soul on this earth" (Conrad 1992: 78). "The most you can hope from [life] is some knowledge of yourself – that comes too late – a crop of inextinguishable regrets" (1992: 78). And several lines later: "[His cry] was an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory!" (1992: 79).

As was mentioned above, the women working for the Company, are not going to be allowed to step across the threshold separating the feminine world of beautiful illusion from the masculine world of harsh 'truth' and enter the heart of darkness. In this way they are not only symbolically denied the access to truth, but also lose the chance to leave their conspiracy with the firm and rediscover themselves by reversing the process of spiritual death the way Kurtz does. These possible interpretations of the young woman's role as a symbol of death – both hers and the death of the men she is introducing – stem from Marlow's subjective perceptions and from his own symbol-making process. In a way, he himself silently implies those interpretations, which could have been different had Conrad entrusted another person with the task of narration.

Another way of interpreting of the young knitter's character is to view her as a symbol of the Company. We find several confirmations of this interpretation in the text. The knitter is periodically sending men into the waiting room – and to their spiritual death – without any display of sympathy. The Company does the same thing in a different way – it sends the same men to Africa – the 'real' heart of darkness – to their physical death. It is not coincidental that in the waiting room Marlow suddenly encounters the image of the continent he is being sent to, in the shape of a map:

Deal table in the middle, plain chairs all round the walls, on one end a large shining map, marked with all the colours of a rainbow. There was a vast amount of red... a deuce of a lot of blue, a little green, smears of orange, and, on the East Coast, a purple patch... I was going into the yellow. Dead in the centre. And the river was there – fascinating – deadly – like a snake. (Conrad 1992: 9)

The use of bright colours in this passage makes it clear that the map on the wall stands for the real Africa. For a moment the reader is left with the impression that Marlow has suddenly found himself not in the office but in the very heart of the continent he intends to visit. This subtle manipulation on the part of Conrad strengthens the suspicion that the young woman symbolises the Company, as well as death.

Another detail that deserves attention is the ceaseless, hopeless repetition I mentioned earlier, characterising the thin knitter's function at the office ("...introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown" (Conrad 1992: 10)). This repetition has a strong counterpart in the process initiated by the Company, which sends groups of men to Africa with monotonous regularity. Marlow's sea trip on board of the French steamer is also marked by an overpowering and depressing sense of repetitiveness. The ship stops at every port and Marlow observes that the only reason for this seems to be landing soldiers and custom-house officers. The way he describes the process emphasises the repetition: "We pounded along, stopped, landed soldiers; went on, landed custom-house clerks to levy toll in what looked like a God-forsaken wilderness...; landed more soldiers to take care of the custom-house clerks, presumably. Some, I heard, got drowned in the surf; but whether they did or not, nobody seemed particularly to care..." (1992: 11).

The insanity and hopelessness of this process – landing soldiers and officers in this dreary, incomprehensible, God-forsaken wilderness – resembles the atmosphere in the office, where the young woman keeps introducing the men "continuously to the unknown" (1992: 10). In fact, she is performing the same function, though not literally but on a deeper, symbolic level. What happens in the Brussels office is just a slightly distorted mirror image of the events that will inevitably follow. Its ritualistic nature can hardly prevent the reader from noticing the correspondence. The horrifying indifference about the soldiers' fate reflects the indifference of the woman, who does not even seem to notice the visitors. Indeed, it is unclear whether it is the Trading Company that sends the soldiers ashore (as the ship is French), but even if it is not, the people on the steamer are devoted to the same cause and have entered into the same conspiracy.

The sense of repetitiveness is confirmed when a page later Marlow reports their encounter with a French man-of-war. "In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent... It appears the French had one of their wars going on thereabouts... There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight" (Conrad 1992: 3).

The solitary ship, firing away at the deserted shore, is yet another scene characterised by ominous repetitiveness and a sense of madness, going back to the scene in the office. The narrator may be unaware of the analogies he unconsciously makes but the author certainly is not. In the young knitter Marlow superstitiously sees the harbinger of his own disturbed future. For this reason, Conrad uses the character of the thin knitter to create a complex symbol of both the Trading Company and the agonising death its conspiracy leads to.

Understanding the third – and last – thing the young knitter symbolises will require widening our analytical scope and examining the scene in its entirety, including the other main character in it – the old knitter. In his description of the two silent women Marlow mentions four times that they are knitting and each time he

specifies that what they are knitting is black wool: "Two women... sat on straw-bottomed chairs, knitting black wool" (1992: 8). "In the outer room the two women knitted black wool feverishly... Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall... *Ave!* Old knitter of black wool..." (1992: 9–10) This almost compulsive insistence on the part of the narrator has a strong significance. Obviously, there is a message here that the reader is supposed to receive. Smith comments that the knitters are loaded with images from classical and Christian mythology. She observes that although there are only two of them, Marlow's insistence on their knitting black wool links them with the three Fates of Greek and Roman myth, controlling the destiny of all people by spinning, measuring and cutting the thread of life (Smith 1989: 187). Smith's reference to the ancient myth here suggests that this is exactly the connection Conrad wants us to make. The three Fates are Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos. Clotho is the Fate of life, who spins the thread. Lachesis controls the duration of human life. She measures the thread. Atropos is the Fate of death. She decides when a life will end, by cutting the thread. It is easy to see how in Marlow's superstitious mind the knitters, "guarding the door of Darkness" (Conrad 1992: 9), come to be associated with the Greek Fates. The older one leaves in Marlow the uncanny impression of knowing everything (another reference to Freud, to whom one of the causes of the uncanny is a suspected "omnipotence of thought" (Freud 1955: 239), just like the mythological figures: "The swift and indifferent placidity of that look troubled me... She seemed to know all about them and about me, too. An eerie feeling came over me. She seemed uncanny and fateful" (Conrad 1992: 9–10).

The wool apparently signifies the thread of life. The narrator feels that these women are somehow in control of his destiny. Smith mentions the fact that one Fate is missing, without attempting to explain it. In my opinion this omission on the part of the author contains a clue to Marlow's own function in the novel. To understand why one of the Fates is left out it is necessary to determine which one it is. The fact that neither knitter is cutting the thread points to Atropos – the Fate of death, who decides the closure of everyone's life. Why is she excluded? Although at this point of the narrative the reader is left guessing, towards the end of the novel it becomes clear that the narrator himself is entrusted with some of her functions. It is Marlow who, in a way, decides Kurtz's fate. If he does not determine when Kurtz will die, he certainly influences *the way* he dies, by isolating him from the wilderness, which "had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own..." (Conrad 1992: 53), he provides him with the opportunity to be alone with himself, re-evaluate his life and make an attempt to reverse his spiritual death. It is Marlow, again, who determines the fate of Kurtz's Intended by telling her his famous 'white lie' that Kurtz's last word has been her name. Conrad makes quite clear her intention to live out her life in mourning, with the memory of her beloved. She wants to hear Kurt's last words because she needs

to have “something to live with” (1992: 86). Thus, Marlow’s lie in fact determines her fate. Although this type of reasoning may seem farfetched, it shows that there *is* some grounds for interpreting the figure of the narrator in this episode as a symbol of the third Fate and for arguing that Atropos is not excluded after all.

There is a curious projection of the uncanny image of the two knitters/Fates a page earlier. Their appearance is foreshadowed by the two black hens which Marlow mentions in relation to his predecessor, killed in a row with the natives: “It was only months and months afterwards, when I made the attempt to recover what was left of the body, that I heard the original quarrel arose from a misunderstanding about some hens. Yes, two black hens” (Conrad 1992: 7).

The two black hens may seem like a detail Conrad includes to emphasise the absurdity of the situation but when the reader is introduced to the knitters it becomes clear that the birds perform much the same function as the three Fates – they determine Fresleven’s fate and bring about his death. The fact that the colour of the hens is black and that they are only two links them to the two women in the office, knitting black wool and symbolising the Greek Fates.

I have not, of course, exhausted the subject of the two knitters’ functions in *Heart of Darkness*. A more detailed study of the topic would reveal other possible interpretations. Nevertheless, the analysis in this article shows that there is more to the characters of the knitters than the reader might notice at first glance. The very fact that the two women appear just before the beginning of Marlow’s trip is in itself a serious reason for subjecting them to a detailed analysis. It appears that in spite of their unbroken silence and very brief appearance in the text, the author has entrusted them with the task of providing important clues for receiving and deciphering his ideas and textual intentions. Marlow’s superstitious and prejudiced unconscious mind is quick to ascribe to the knitters supernatural and mythical qualities, which not only gives information about the narrator, but also provides the reader with insights into Conrad’s own view of society and its symbol-creating mechanisms.

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