Heart of Darkness is told by a man to a male audience. None of the main characters are women; Marlow keeps the women in the background and speaks slightingly of them; to him they are an object of mild scorn and laughter. His lack of respect for the intelligence of the whole sex is indicated in his treatment of Kurtz' fiancee at the end of the story. Having already spoken of himself as a man who hates a lie, he tells her, "The last word he pronounced was - your name". Why Marlow would tell such a lie is indicated earlier: Women simply cannot face the truth:

It's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in 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.

If Marlow's tale is neither about women nor for their hearing, how, then, do they fit into Heart of Darkness? In this paper I hope to show that woman, in her symbolic way, plays at least as important a role as man. Conrad very deliberately and ironically has Marlow tell his story aboard a ship named the Nellie; and that feminine name is the first word of the story (p.45).*

Women, indeed, are behind all of the events in the story. We learn at the very end that Kurtz himself went to Africa for a woman: "I had heard that her engagement with Kurtz had been disapproved by her people. He wasn't rich enough or something. And indeed I don't know whether he had not been a pauper all his life. He had given me
some reason to infer that it was his impatience of comparative poverty that drove him out there" (p. 159). And it is only through women that Marlow himself secures his boat. Having failed in every way to get a job, he asks his Aunt's help. She replies, "I know the wife of a very high personage in the Administration".

Then when Marlow receives his appointment and arrives at the company office, whom should he meet but two women knitting black wool. Here Conrad makes his point perfectly clear; we can no longer doubt the importance of woman in the world of Heart of Darkness, for these two are none other than the fates themselves: "Old knitter of black wool. Morituri te salutant" (p. 57). The product of their black wool will be Marlow's fate in darkest Africa.

We are reminded that woman also caused Kurtz to go to Africa and is responsible for his death. When Marlow comes upon the dying Kurtz, trying to crawl into the witch-like meeting of natives in the forest, he has some "imbecile thoughts": "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" (p. 142). Conrad universalizes the role of woman by reminding us of the sailors who went to their deaths for Queen Elizabeth (p. 47).

Woman is behind the African events because of her missionarying instinct, because she has the strange notion that she can impose her civilization upon Africa. Marlow's aunt, for instance, sends him to Africa at "an emissary of light" who will wean "these ignorant millions from their horrid ways" (p. 59).

So far, I have been concerned with woman's actual role in Heart of Darkness; the rest of the paper will be concerned with her symbolic role. Missionarying woman herself is absent from Marlow's Africa; we see only her effects, or things which are associated with her. In brief, woman is civilization; she is neatness, order, and superficiality; she is, above all, the embodiment of ornamentation and the false sense of values which pervades the story. On one level of the story woman is
civilized Europe, but as Marlow's story is also a journey into the soul, she is on another level the mere conscious and routine aspects of the mind. She is incapable of plumbing the depths of savagery which exist in all of us, depths which only Marlow and Kurtz are aware of and which even they cannot endure for long.

Woman, as civilizing agent, is represented by boats, cloths (especially starched cloths), beads, writing (e.g. Kurtz' letters to his fiancée), and especially by ivory, which is the main reason behind the African ventures. Writing can be disposed of quickly, for it is neither a frequent nor an important symbol, and is not used as a comment on the misplaced values of civilization. And boats, thought of great significance otherwise, are not especially relevant to my purposes, being too general a symbol. Boats and ships are a microcosm of the civilized world; the ship is a mere speck upon the ocean (p. 92); its puny guns fire into a whole continent (p. 61). Marlow's boat becomes shabbier and weaker as its crew journeys into savagery. Its crew is a microcosm of the human mind, being composed of both whites and savages. It runs into snags and fog as it approaches the end of its journey. Its navigational problems are appropriate to the breakdown of civilization among its crew.

Starched cloths and beads, are of little or no value, yet they are what Europe brings to Africa for its ivory. It is not exactly clear how this is supposed to improve the natives and we gather that the white man's value are no better than the savages'. Marlow, for instance, values his dead cannibal helmsman above the whites on his boat and even above Kurtz himself (p. 119). Civilization in Heart of Darkness has no relation to inner reality; it is an entirely external thing. Marlow and the Russian, for instance, read with delight a book on ocean navigation which they would burn in Europe.

This external nature of civilization is symbolized by starched cloths and beads. The knitting old woman, for instance, "wore a starched white affair on her head" (p. 56). But it is only later that we connect starch with feminine civilization. At the first outpost where Marlow
stops on his way up the river, he meets a starched accountant: "I respected the fellow. Yes; I respected his collars, his vast cuffs, his brushed hair ... In the great demoralization of the land he kept up his appearance. That's backbone. His starched collars and got-up shirt-front were achievements of character. He had been out nearly three years" (p. 68).

When Marlow questions him about his linen we learn that he has trained native woman to take care of it.

As Marlow progresses up the river starched cloths disappear, but we find that the natives' nakedness has been covered: "several times a week a coast caravan came in with trade goods - ghasty glazed calico that made you shudder to look at it, glass beads, value about a penny a quart, confounded, spotted handkerchiefs" (p. 84).

Marlow's own attitude toward cloths changes as he goes further up the river: He threw away a pair of shoes (p. 113-114). The unthinking Russian, on the other hand, borrows a pair of shoes from Marlow (p. 140); it is appropriate that the Russian who sees only the superficial aspects of Kurtz' condition should be so concerned with cloths:

He looked like a harlequin. His clothes had been made of some stuff that was brown holland probably, but it was covered with patches all over, with bright patches, blue, red, and yellow, ... and the sunshine made him look extremely gay and wonderfully neat withal, because you could see how beautifully all this patching had been done (p. 128).

There is even some suggestion that he is too womanish, because of his slavish devotion to Kurtz and because there is an argument between him and Kurtz'mistress, whom, partly because of his gay cloths, she considers "not decent" (p. 136-137).

As Kurtz went to Africa because of a woman, so is he ruled by a woman in Africa - in his sickness at least - and this woman, too, bears marks of civilization: "She
carried her head high, her hair was done in the shape of a helmet; she had brass leggings to the knee, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, a crimson spot on her tawny cheek, innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck" (p. 135). When all the other savages run from the steamboat whistle, she is not afraid of it.

Like his mistress, Kurtz is a mixture of civilization and savagery. He dies, I think, because he cannot become a complete savage. He has achieved a vision of savagery in himself (as Marlow does to a lesser extent) but his civilized self will not allow him to forget the horror of it all. Marlow says that his soul looked upon itself and went mad (p. 145). Kurtz himself is the best example of the fragility or thinness of the feminine missionary type of civilization. Having come to Africa with such idealistic zeal as we find in his pamphlet for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, he later prefers to "exterminate all the brutes" (pp. 117-118).

Kurtz' false sense of values is epitomized in his obsession with ivory. The white man's lust for ivory is gutting Africa. The scenes of dying and shocked natives which Marlow describes upon his arrival are the result of the blind greed of Kurtz and his kind. Marlow, indeed, describes Kurtz as death itself: "I could see the cage of his ribs all astir, the bones of his arms 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 ... I saw him open his mouth wide - I gave him a wildly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow the air, all the earth, all the men before him" (p. 134). Later Kurtz' head (p. 115) and face (p. 149) are said to be ivory.

The mere act of obtaining ivory itself epitomizes the results of the ivory, trade upon Africa: One has to kill the elephant to get his tusks. Ivory is, of course, a comparatively useless material; one of its chief uses is piano keys (thus the piano in the house of Kurtz' Fiancée - p. 156). But the ivory traders are not even interested in the ivory itself; at an even further remove form
reality, they are obsessed with "percentages" (p. 78). It is this obsession with percentages which keeps them going, as Marlow's concern for the workings of his boat keeps him going: "When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality fades away" (p. 93). In brief, Conrad's ivory society has no real values whatsoever. The ivory teeth of the cannibals, by contrast, are for a very definite purpose (p. 97).

Ivory, white and luxurious, is a mock of civilization - of an empty civilization which woman has imposed upon man's more basic savagery. The knitting old woman who sends men all over the world has a white handpiece (p. 56) and Kurtz' fiancée, who sent him, has "fair hair" and a "pale visage" (p. 157). White is woman's color and Heart of Darkness says that woman cannot civilize darkest Africa - at least not until she arrives at a fuller, more basic kind of civilization. The chief example of feminine civilization is Kurtz, but he is found to be "hollow at the core" (p. 131). He is only a shell of fine words. So is the civilization we have erected only a fine suit of clothes which has not changed the inner man. That the women in the story are unaware of the realities of the human soul can be seen in Marlow's aunt's final advice to him: She tells him to wear flannel in Africa (p. 59).

* This and all following page references are to the Doubleday, Page and Company edition of Youth and Two Other Stories, New York, 1980.