Joseph Conrad’s novella *Heart of Darkness* has been discussed in depth by scholars and students alike on its merit as a great piece of fiction and its seemingly problematic topics. Some—such as Chinua Achebe—argue that the text is racist and should therefore not be seen as a great piece of work, while others defend Conrad’s text by arguing that the novella investigates the racism during the time period instead of endorsing it. Another topic that has been touched on is the presence—or lack thereof—of women in the novella. In the following sections, the intention is to display why the portrayal of women in *Heart of Darkness* differs greatly from the portrayal of men in the novella, and how this portrayal is ultimately sexist.

Though some may say that the view of women during the time period in which *Heart of Darkness* was written would justify the characterization of women in the novella, the presence of challenges to the populace’s perception of women throughout the mid-to-late nineteenth century counter this view. These challenges were presented as part of the women’s suffrage movement and rising feminist ideas in Great Britain—of which
Joseph Conrad became a citizen in the late nineteenth century—and introduced the public to new perspectives regarding the autonomy of women and the gender roles assigned to them. Due to the presence of these perspectives—and the difficulty in ignoring them due to their controversy—Conrad’s text can ultimately be found sexist due to its portrayal of women as non-complex figures for the male gaze despite the author’s likely introduction to the contrary. From Marlow’s perspective throughout the novel, women are treated as fanciful figures stuck in an idealistic universe of their own creation and are therefore not treated as competent compared to their male counterparts. In this essay, the underlying sexism of *Heart of Darkness* will be discussed by three main concepts: Marlow’s view of women’s competency and grasp of reality, the lack of female narrative voice and names, and Marlow’s characterization of the African woman versus Kurtz’s Intended.

Near the beginning of the novella, the main narrative voice of our journey states, “It’s queer how out of touch with truth women are” (Conrad 10). These words from Marlow set the stage for how the mental state of women will be approached throughout the story and begin the stream of sexism that flows throughout the text. Marlow’s view of women as being out of touch with the realities of the world appears to come from growing in a time period where the view of women as sentient, capable human beings was a struggling concept. This view of females as being inherently less grounded may also come from Marlow appearing to have no close female figures in his life. Apart from his Aunt—who he treats with little respect in regards to intelligence—Marlow appears to have no feminine ties whatsoever. This lack of familiarity with the opposite sex may lead him to conform to the stereotypes regarding female intelligence associated with his peers during the time period, and lead him to make assumptions that he carries with him throughout the novella.
This lack of respect towards the female mind may have also ultimately led Marlow to be untruthful to Kurtz’s Intended about Kurtz’s utterances before death. At the end of the novella, Kurtz’s Intended asks Marlow for her beloved’s final words and in seemingly a moment of uneasiness, Marlow responds that his final word was her name. This omission of Kurtz’s actual final words could be seen as Marlow simply not wanting to relive the moment or not wanting to further upset Kurtz’s Intended, but this lie could also be viewed as Marlow’s opportunity to alter Kurtz’s legacy—and his own—to a more ideal one. This sentiment appears in Susan Hagen’s, “Gender, Intelligence, and Good Sex in Heart of Darkness.” In this text, Hagen introduces the idea that although Marlow does not value the female mind, he still appreciates the alternate reality that women live in because “someone must be there to believe [the men’s] lies and give [the men] the mission to live them out” (Hagen 51). Through Marlow’s belief that the female mind is more easily molded to idealism, he and his peers are then able to live morally unjust lives on their travels and face no consequences when they arrive home. The men sent to the Congo can continue the journey to further ignite their insatiable desire for ivory and Kurtz’s violent actions can be buried along with him while his Intended praises his “noble heart” (Conrad 70).

Another way in which the novella is sexist is that the female characters have little to no narrative voice. As Marlow states, “They—the women, I mean—are out of it—should be out of it”, and with how the novella approaches the influence of women in the story, they truly do seem to be pushed aside of the story’s proceedings (Conrad 44). Compared to the male figures in the novella, the desires or purposes of the female characters are never truly written to inspire further inquiry. These women clearly have some influence—such as Marlow’s Aunt assisting Marlow in receiving his job to sail the Congo, or the African woman’s and
Intended’s contributions to Kurtz’s actions or mindset—but the novella never explores these influences in a way to make them more than an implication. Through this denial of influence or intent, female characters in *Heart of Darkness* do not become more than a vague shadow in terms of characterization.

Additionally, the female characters are not named in the novella and are only referred to by station or their relation to a male character—Kurtz’s Intended, Marlow’s Aunt. Though it could be argued that the omission of names for female characters is not entirely stark when compared to the lack of learned male names in the novella, it still remains that the only characters that do have names are singularly male. This omission of names seems to imply that the merit of the women in the story relies entirely on their relation to men and not as singular individuals. As pointed out by Gabrielle McIntire in “The Women Do Not Travel: Gender, Difference, and Incommensurability in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*,” the only traditionally feminine name that appears in the novella is placed on an object: Marlow’s ship, the Nellie. While McIntire includes that the naming of vessels under feminine names was common for the period, she concludes that naming the ship a traditionally female name “nevertheless underscores the fact that he leaves every *woman* of his text unnamed” (McIntire 257). Based on the fact that Marlow only takes the time to mention the feminine name of his ship, it appears that Marlow places more value and respect into an inanimate object than female human beings. The action of naming something—or someone—implies that the person creating the name places value in the object or entity, or that there is a connection felt between the individual and the object or entity. By deciding to create a name for his ship, Marlow displays a connection felt with the object that supports him on his travels. However, by never naming the women he encounters—especially his Aunt, who can be seen as supporting
him by providing him with work—Marlow displays a lack of general connection and appreciation.

Although Marlow takes no time to state the names of the women he encounters, their physical appearance is something that is apparently worth mentioning. Upon first encountering the African woman in the Congo, Marlow wastes no time to comment on her physical appearance. As she first appears, Marlow comments that she is “a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman” (Conrad 55). Upon comparison to the European women that he has encountered, Marlow seems to find the African woman otherworldly due to her attractiveness despite her heritage and apparent lack of refined culture. He goes on to say that, “she was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent,” further displaying an appreciation of her appearance but defining her as “savage” because of her skin color (Conrad 56). To Marlow, she may be pleasing to the eye, but she is still African. Therefore, while she may inspire a type of desire, she is as uncultured and dangerous as the rest of the Africans in his mind. This mixture of fear and desire that Marlow approaches her with appears representative of the mixed emotions associated with the men traveling through the Congo. The desire for ivory and wealth mixed with the fear of traveling through the unknown. As discussed by Pouneh Saeedi in “Women as Epic Sites/Sights and Traces in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness,” the language Conrad uses in describing the African woman displays her as a figure that is one with the earth and “she assumes the monstrous features which Marlow had earlier attributed to the territory he had set foot on” (Saeedi 540). These words further paint her as a representation of the alluring and unsettling Congo. Her skin color mirrors the darkness Marlow associates literally and figuratively with the Congo and her eyes are “wild” because they hold a knowledge and a culture behind them that Marlow can only imagine but never truly understand. However, her
attributes—as foreign as they are—elicit a desire within him similar to his response to the Congo itself. Marlow, a traveler by trade, appears to find the unknown the most exciting, resulting in a confusing and fearful desire for foreign lands and those that inhabit them.

When compared to how Marlow describes the African woman, his characterization of Kurtz’s Intended becomes quite severe in contrast. To Marlow, Kurtz’s Intended is an image of purity and good faith, a woman steadfast in her devotion to a man who no longer lives. But she is never described as “gorgeous” or “wild.” She is a pure, familiar European woman who inspires no confused desire. Perhaps no desire at all. When compared to the savageness of the African woman, the Intended is described as having a “mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering,” and this capacity to stay in her culturally expected mindset may ultimately be the element that makes her more agreeable to Marlow (Conrad 69). She is also granted the power of speech—along with Marlow’s Aunt—which the African woman is never allowed in the company of Marlow. The African woman also appears to represent a literal and figurative darkness, while Kurtz’s Intended represents a lighter figure. She is dressed in all black when Marlow encounters her, but he describes her lightness in instances such as, “this fair hair, this pale visage” (Conrad 69). Her paleness and lightness is then mentioned further throughout their encounter, displaying Marlow’s preoccupation with it. While this lightness appears to dampen Marlow’s fear and desire from his encounter with the African woman, it still does not appear to have the power to change his view on the female mind, as exemplified by his lie to the Intended.

Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is sexist because it fails to represent women as competent human beings and fails to provide them with names. The focus on the appearance of female characters rather than their narrative voice is also a
disservice to women in the novella. Arguing that Conrad himself lacked respect for women would be difficult to prove absolutely. However, the fact remains that through this novella, he created a character that does not respect women. Furthermore, Marlow’s views on the female mind and his focus on feminine appearance rather than feminine influence or intent prove that he is a narrator unable to provide a story welcoming towards women. Through this inability, *Heart of Darkness* solidifies itself as not only a novella heavily controversial for its approach to race, but also as a novella that lacks the respect needed to give its female characters justice.

**Works Cited**

**Questions to Consider:**
**Content**
1. Why is the author reluctant to allow the sexism in *Heart of Darkness* be a symptom of the time in which it was written?
2. How does the sexism being argued by the author overlap with issues of race?

3. In what ways does the argument in this essay relate to those being presented elsewhere in this issue—the ideas about Europeans and Africans in “A Penetrating Truth” or about colonial rule in “Heart of Darkness and Imperialism?”

**Style**

4. How does the develop the textual examples in relation to the outside sources?

5. What does the author do rhetorically to progress from the text to a larger point?

6. How does the author draw distinctions between Conrad and the male characters in the book? What effect does that have on helping support the argument being presented?