Combining Postcolonial, Feminist, and Gender Criticism with Queer Theory

Although you have been introduced to feminist and gender criticism as well as the postcolonial approach earlier, you have not been introduced to queer theory. Because the essay by Gabrielle McIntire that follows eventually takes a “queered” turn after combining the postcolonial approach, feminist and gender criticism (plus the postmodernist concept of the differend, which McIntire herself thoroughly explains), a brief introduction to queer theory commences the following lead-in to “The Women Do Not Travel: Gender, Difference, and Incommensurability in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness.”

WHAT IS QUEER THEORY?

Generally speaking, queer theory begins by assuming that homosexuality and heterosexuality are not mutually exclusive binary oppositions—fixed and exclusive modalities of personal identity—but, rather, points along a continuum of possible sexual practices. Most queer theorists would agree with feminist gender critics that gender differences by and large are not innate but, rather, constructed, which is to say that they are the result of long-standing assumptions about what constitutes feminine versus masculine behavior. But they take the constructionist viewpoint a step farther, arguing that the opposition homosexual/
heterosexual is also an either/or social construct that codifies and thereby misrepresents a range of behaviors and practices.

Rather than being a term used prejudicially, queer is used by queer theorists to refer to critical and philosophical positions taken outside the circle of conventional assumptions about sexuality and gender. As a result, some queer theorists are interested in the way in which prevailing discourses regarding sex, gender, and sexuality lump individuals and individual practices not only into boxes marked male/female, masculine/feminine, and straight/queer (heterosexual/ homosexual) but also divvy the “queer” world up into boxes marked bisexual, transvestite, transgendered, sadomasochist, and so forth.

The philosophical roots of queer theory are deeply grounded in Michel Foucault’s *Histoire de la sexualité* (*The History of Sexuality* [1976]), which maintained that the whole concept of homosexuality as the abnormal opposite of heterosexuality was an artifact of nineteenth-century Western thought. Those roots also may be found in philosopher Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s landmark books *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) and *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), both of which paved the way to understanding how queer theory can undergird a critical approach to literary works. *Between Men* is particularly relevant to McIntyre’s reading of *Heart of Darkness*, insofar as it utilizes the terms of feminist and gender criticism to analyze relationships between men that involve levels of male bonding that, though not necessarily or even usually sexual per se, utterly leave women out.

Any definition of queer theory will inevitably elicit reasonable objections from various subsets of queer theorists. For instance, some might want to carve out exceptions, arguing that African American lesbian authors have more in common with other African American women authors than, say, with black male homosexual writers. And, certainly, there are queer theorists who write not from the constructionist but, rather, from an essentialist perspective, arguing that homosexual persons are naturally different from birth much in the way that there are essentialist feminists who insist that women and men are not just anatomically different but *essentially* different in a number of ways (e.g., the way in which they write).

In the opening pages of the essay excerpted below, Gabriella McIntyre examines the representations of women found in *Heart of Darkness*, finding them to be “always positioned... in either the [African] colony or the [European] metropole,” always “here or there,” “decidedly static and unable to wander between cultural, ideological, and national boundaries” (p. 332). Thus “placed... Conrad’s women” — from Marlow’s aunt in her parlor serving tea to the gorgeous African woman looking “like the wilderness itself” — “reinforce a sense of extreme separation between the colony and the metropole, and as such they are crucial for guarding and preserving difference between Africa and Europe” (p. 332).

But because they are all women (in a world of traveling white men), they also underscore gender difference in *Heart of Darkness*, a topic previously addressed by Johanna M. Smith, whose 1989 essay “Too Beautiful Altogether” (pp. 189–204) represents feminist and gender criticism in this volume, and Bette London, whose essay (published the same year) “Reading Race and Gender in Conrad’s Dark Continent” blends the feminist/gender approach with that of postcolonial criticism. Developing the ideas of Smith and London while extending her argument regarding the gap between Europe and Africa, McIntyre writes: “While Conrad’s text explicitly marks out incommensurable differences between Europe and Africa and between Europeans and those he calls ‘savages,’” these are, in turn, “sustained and enforced by the incommensurabilities in knowing and speaking that he establishes along gender lines” (p. 335). For the “male protagonists possess both empirical and abstract knowledge of the colonial enterprise in both Africa and Europe” (p. 335); thus, when Marlow judges his aunt’s enthusiasm for the European civilizing project to be evidence that she is “out of touch with truth,” he criticizes her not for exhibiting European moral blindness but, rather, “he reads her indoctrination as a specifically feminine ignorance” (p. 336). Later, in “one of the few places in the text where Marlow interrupts his narrative with an aside to his [male] auditor,” he “pushes this exclusion [of the feminine from knowledge] further to insist, with an intratextual echo of his own words, that women should be ‘out of’ his whole story.”

“I laid the ghost of his gifts at last with a lie,” he began suddenly. “Girl! What? Did I mention a girl? Oh, she is out of it completely. They — the women I mean — are out of it — should be out of it.” (p. 337)

McIntyre finds in the above-quoted passage what postmodernist theorist Jean François Lyotard refers to as a *differend*, which refers on one hand to “an unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be” and, on
the other, that which would be “put into phrases” — that is, “rhetorical or speech genre” (McIntire’s phrase) which cannot be “translate[ed]” by those wielding the predominant discourse. In the first sense of differend, Marlow’s language is unstable because he is trying to “put” the feminine “into phrases”; he “typically,” as McIntire points out, “stutters and falters in his narration most explicitly at the moments when he is unable to make women part of his story” (p. 338). In the second sense of Lyotard’s term, what women would “put into phrases” in speaking to power is also present as a trace in the passage — that is, as silence. Turning to Smith’s account of the way in which the women in Heart of Darkness are either silenced by the patriarchal discourses from which they are excluded or reduced to parroting them weakly, McIntire then returns to Lyotard’s The Differend, which argues that discursive interactions between two parties from heterogenous “phrase regimens” end with one party “reduced to silence.” McIntire continues: “The voices Lyotard writes of are as unintelligible to the more powerful discourses that frame and contain them... as the women in Heart of Darkness are to Marlow’s narration” (p. 339).

“Without framing his argument in feminist, queer, or racial terms,” McIntire subsequently argues, “Lyotard goes far in describing how institutional and societal modes disallow certain forms of speech or genres of expression by not making space for the possibility of their idiom” (p. 339). Before ever invoking The Differend, McIntire framed her argument in linked, feminist and racial terms. “[N]either women nor Africans (regardless of gender),” she had earlier remarked, “are capable of navigating between types of knowledge, any more than they are capable of leaving the territory that defines them” (p. 336). Having introduced Lyotard’s concept of the differend, she powerfully reframes her argument in homosocial, homoerotic, “queer” terms.

She does so most pointedly in her consideration of the story’s ending, which “highlight[s]” Marlow’s “desire for non-contact between his epistemological framework” and “women’s in general.” When Marlow visits Kurtz’s Intended, he “return[s] things” (a portrait and her letters) but “cannot meet her with language.” Instead of engaging the young woman in conversation, he “mime[s] her phrasing.”

In answer to her statement, “You knew him well,” he echoes her in profoundly homoerotic language: “I knew him as well as it is possible for one man to know another.” His echolalia effectively parodies her desire for knowledge about nothing less than knowledge itself by claiming a supreme (and possibly sexual) form of knowledge for himself. (p. 341)

As “their exchange continues,” as Marlow “struggl[es] to piece words together in the hesitating language of discomfort, claiming ‘He was a remarkable man... it was impossible not to... ,’ the Intended interposes ‘Love him’” (p. 342). In Lyotard’s phrase, this is an attempt to “put into phrases” her love for the same man, to — in McIntire’s words — “meet Marlow on his own discursive level by literally completing his sentence... by echoing his language of love and desire.” But this is “precisely the sort of thing Marlow does not want to hear from a woman; it is far too near to the ‘truth’ about his attraction to Kurtz. Marlow experiences this interpolation as a terrifying shutting down of his voice, feeling that she was ‘silencing me into an appalled dumbness’” (p. 342).

Marlow soon recovers his voice. When the Intended subsequently asks him to “repeat” Kurtz’s last words, to in effect share in Kurtz’s and Marlow’s language, he — in McIntire’s words — “reinforces their difference by refusing to meet her in the same discursive territory of ‘truth.’” Rather than tell her that Kurtz died muttering “The horror! The horror!” in what Marlow has called a “supreme moment of complete knowledge” that “had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth,” he instead tells her that Kurtz died speaking her name. “As such,” McIntire concludes, “Marlow ends his story on a differend by directing her away from knowledge to leave her believing in a false romantic vision of Kurtz’s final words” (pp. 342–43).

WORKS CITED


