**The Diction of Melancholia**

In *The Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad's fictional study of civilized man's futile efforts to maintain his dignity and altruism as he probes the inscrutable darkness of the jungles of the Congo for precious ivory, Marlow is torn between his lifelong devotion to truth and his compulsion to perpetuate the myth of Kurtz's dedication to the jungle savages whom he exploits. Marlow has commanded ships on all the seven seas; he has observed man in conflict with stormy seas and tempestuous fellows everywhere; and he has acquired an operative contentment of mind that enables him to appraise his associates and acquaintances with a dispassionate discernment that occasionally betrays his humanism.

Aboard the Nellie, a cruising yawl moored in the Thames, Marlow narrates his harrowing experiences in the "heart of darkness," his metaphor for the impenetrable jungle which, in turn, symbolizes the unplumbed evil that lies dormant in the hearts of men, waiting only for cues to unleash their hearts' perfidies. As a boy he had wondered about the mysterious serpent that rolled through the heart of darkness. Now, a sea captain, he could vindicate his youthful aspirations. Lacking a command for the first time in his career, he has used his aunt's influence to obtain the captainship of a ridiculously outfitted fresh water steamer that coughed and wheezed its way up the snag-ridden Congo.

Before leaving the continent, he had been warned by the company doctor to maintain *du calme* in Africa. A strange doctor, indeed, who took cephalic indices of all the fortune hunters leaving for the land of ivory and rubber, but who would never write a paper for a medical journal because he never saw those who returned. His parting advice to Marlow, "avoid irritation more than exposure to the sun," was heeded by the sensible sailor. Before the story ends, many men die because they lack *du calme*. Captain Freseleven, Marlow's predecessor, argues violently with a tribal chieftain about a couple of hens; when he lays hands upon the chieftain, the chieftain's son spears the irate captain. A Swede hangs himself, unable to bear the African rigors. Marlow's helmsman, a cannibal, imprudently puts his head out of the wheelhouse during an attack by savages and he, like Freseleven, is speared. The station manager's uncle, ill-trained for jungle exploration, leads his exploratory party into the depths of the jungle. Only the donkeys' remains are found; of the "less valuable animals," as Marlow puts it, no trace is found. And finally, there is Kurtz himself, who "lost his cool." A brilliant writer, a fine musician, and a dedicated reformer, Kurtz symbolizes the new business man who will civilize the savages as he enriches his company's coffers. But Kurtz's missionary zeal, like his name, is short; a compelling materialistic messianism seizes him. The savoir becomes the exploiter, indulging himself in every savage rite, including head shrinking of slain tribesmen and unspeakable abominations which the Victorian Conrad will not spell out clinically. Capping his reversion to a brutal, primitive type, Kurtz appends to his anthropological report on the "Suppression of Savage Customs," a shocking postscript, "Exterminate the Brutes."

Marlow will not forget Kurtz's last words, "The horror, the horror." How can one regard his oral epitaph? Was Kurtz aware of his utter degradation and was he speaking ruefully of his bitter, wasted life? Was he repeating Calderon's sad line, "The unhappiest thing for a person is to be born," only more forcefully and more pathetically? Or was he merely expressing his fear of death and his amazement that it had really confronted him?
The story troubles many of my freshman English students. They see *The Heart of Darkness* as a continuous heartache that even Marlow’s magnanimity cannot ease. He deletes the cynical line, “Exterminate the Brutes” from Kurtz’s monograph and he spares Kurtz’s beloved the knowledge of his last words, nobly leading her to believe that Kurtz had died murmuring her name.

Save for Marlow, the bearded mechanic who helped him refloat the damaged steamer, and a young Russian sailor whom Marlow encounters at one of the steamer’s stops, all the Europeans are schemers, exploiters, hypocrites and killers. Money alone moves them. The savages are sub-human robots; when they can’t work anymore, they are not rehabilitated because it is cheaper to let them die. Life is cheap in the jungle. For sport, the “pilgrims” aboard the steamer shoot into the brush at will at the sight of tribesmen. Contrarily, the steamer’s crew, predominantly cannibals, refrain from attacking the white men, even when hunger gnaws imperiously at their breadbaskets. They have made a compact. To Marlow, they are the only honest men aboard.

Conrad is not a propagandist. He actually saw most of what he has set forth in *The Heart of Darkness*. Many of my students see the story as a blot upon the white man’s social history. Some are incredulous; they cannot readily accept a fictional tale as evidence of man’s utter disregard for men of another race. A few refuse to believe with Marlow that “the conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.” Even when students check histories of the Congo to vindicate Marlow’s fictional version of Belgian and French misconduct there, some students still can’t empathize with the unfortunates, white or black, whom Marlow describes.

Perhaps the real world has too much horror in it for students to concern themselves with fictional sadness as well. Girls sometimes protest that our literature is too depressing, that we stress the tragic inordinately. Perhaps too frequent a dose of catharsis boomerangs. Perhaps the young seek a romanticism that will obscure the darkness that clouds their horizons.

The preponderance of unpleasant words in *The Heart of Darkness* may be a clue to the unremitting uneasiness that the novel induces. A profitable study might be made of the mental responses of readers to pessimistic books. How do mentally disturbed people react to books that expose man’s frailties on every page? How do frightened people, hypochondriacs, and perplexed people behave after reading a naturalistic war novel? If literature is a reflection of life, will not readers react psychologically to books as they might to actual experiences?

There is little relief throughout *The Heart of Darkness* from the vocabulary of woe and ominous tidings. For example, Conrad uses at least one hundred sixty nouns to denote depressing people, physical illness, death, varying intensities of mental distress, mystery and the occult, violence and horror, and the gamut of sensory perceptions. But his repetition of key words — dead (15); death (15); devil (15); darkness (20); gloom (9); silence (13); danger (9); hate (9); fog (7); pain (6); and stillness (6) — brings the incidence of his use of melancholy nouns to more than four hundred, a formidable battery of linguistic missiles to assail the reader’s peace of mind.

Conrad’s melancholy adjectives, approximately one hundred fifty of them, are as depressing as his nouns. The darkness of the inscrutable jungle and the blackness of men’s hearts are complementary nightmares. Although the in-