

Lecture on *Heart of Darkness* by Mark Dintenfass, Professor of English

Let me begin by saying that I am at a slight disadvantage here—for at least two different reasons.

The first reason is that the usual purpose of a Freshman Studies lecture is to establish a context for your reading and discussions—that is, to introduce you to the work at hand. But in this case most of you have already been talking about *Heart of Darkness* for two class periods, and have probably covered much of the material I might have used by way of introduction to establish a context for your reading of the book.

I can assume, for example, that you already know that the British novelist we call Joseph Conrad was actually a Polish aristocrat with an unpronounceable name; that at an early age, seeking adventure, he "went to sea," as they used to say in those days; and that most of his works are based upon his experiences as a sailor on various ships in various parts of the world.

I can assume that you know that Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness* in 1898, during the time when European colonialism was in its heyday and the cultural movement we call Modernism was being born.

I can assume that you know that, like Marlow, Conrad spent some time piloting a small steamboat up the Congo River, into the heart of a land that was then being ruthlessly exploited as the private property of King Leopold of Belgium, and that, like Marlow, the experience left him morally shaken and physically ill—although, unlike Marlow, there was no Mr. Kurtz waiting for Conrad at the Inner Station. (In other words, *Heart of Darkness* is in part autobiographical and in part imaginary. Such a statement, incidentally, can be made about all good works of fiction.)

And thus, assuming that you already possess these bits of information, I don't have to mention them.

But the fact that you have already been introduced to Conrad and *Heart of Darkness* is only one of the two disadvantages I've mentioned.

The other was suggested to you by Mr. Ryckman's introduction, which, as usual, managed to be elegantly brief.

I am both a novelist and a teacher of literature. It is my professional fortune, or misfortune, depending on how you look at it, that I wear two hats. And, as you can imagine, it's a little difficult, sometimes, to wear both of these hats at once because—and here we get to the heart of something—what a novelist does and what a teacher does are, I believe, quite different enterprises in at least one important sense.

This difference, I should add, not only distinguishes a novelist's purposes from a teacher's, but also distinguishes a novelist's purposes from those of philosophers, scientists, or social theorists, all of whom generally find it much more natural to be teachers.

I am going to attempt to define this difference as a way of helping you enter more fully into the *Heart of Darkness*.

I am going to argue that works of philosophy (like *The Republic*), or works of political theory (like *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*), or works of natural science (like *The Origin of Species*), are fundamentally different in intent from works like *Heart of Darkness*—or *Pride and Prejudice*, for that matter—and that they demand from us a rather different kind of response.

The difference I have in mind can best be understood as a result of the difference between *actual concrete experiences*, or, in other words, life as we actually *live* it—which tends, as you know, to be blurred and messy and confusing—and the kinds of *abstract ideas* that actual experiences can sometimes produce in us, or in that part of us, anyway, which tries to *understand* the world in some *rational* way.

To make the point clear—consider what you are experiencing right now as you listen, or pretend to listen, to my lecture.

The sum total of your actual experience of even these last few minutes is, you will quickly realize, fairly complicated.

Some part of you, of course, is attending to me and trying to make sense out of what I'm saying. Call that the student part of you. But what about all the other parts of you? —Because, after all, there is more to you than just being a student.

Maybe a part of you is responding in some more or less semi-conscious way to an attractive member of the opposite sex who is sitting nearby. Perhaps another part of you may be brooding over some weird dream or nightmare you had last night, or some problem in your personal life—that fight you had with your roommate, or the refusal of your parents to understand that you really do need more money. Still another part of you is, I suppose, aware of the approach of the noon hour and, because your stomach has begun to growl a little, is thinking about lunch.

Now, that part of you which is a student, the part of you that is authentically curious about what I have to say, is trying not to pay much attention to the other parts of you. It believes that sexual desire, memories of nightmares, personal problems, your growling stomach are all irrelevant to the important part of what is happening here right now, and it is trying to comprehend and formulate, as clearly and as reasonably as possible, the main ideas of my lecture. The student within you, if he hasn't already been overwhelmed by the dreamer or lover or lunch-eater within you, has decided that much of the totality of your experience is unimportant and has focused its attention on abstracting from the confusion of all these multitudinous sensations whatever important idea or thesis my lecture may contain.

In a somewhat larger way, this sifting of important and clear ideas from the mess and confusion of experience is what writers like Plato, Darwin, or Engels are doing. They experience the world in all its messy confusion, and then they attempt to abstract from the mess, by careful selection, a system of ordering principles which other people can comprehend and make use of. The point of their work is to define those ordering principles, whether it be a theory of forms, a theory of natural selection, or a theory of dialectical materialism, and to show how the ordering principles—which we call ideas—serve to clarify the mess and dispel the confusion: in other words, they are trying to shed the light of intelligence upon the darkness of experience.

In short, Plato, Darwin, and Engels assume, first, that there is a kind of explicable order to things and, second, that their job is to discover and delineate a systematic explanation of that order. They offer us an argument, and we are expected, as readers and as students, to grasp the argument and ultimately to accept or deny that the ordering principles being offered actually fit the world as we come to know it, the world, that is, of our own experience.

Such writers fit very well into the academic world in general and Freshman Studies in particular because what they are doing is pretty much what teachers are doing as they attempt to dispel your confusion and give you an orderly understanding of the materials you are studying. It is also pretty much what you are expected to learn how to do, which is why your teachers keep asking you to clarify and define your studies through a series of papers and exams. Teachers assume that as freshmen you begin in the dark cave of ignorance, and that by the time you graduate, with their help and your own hard efforts, you will have struggled up into the world of light and more light.

Now I have to tell you that novelists, especially modern novelists, tend to approach the world—and the works they produce after experiencing the world—somewhat differently.

For many novelists, especially modern novelists, the messiness and confusion and darkness of experience is in itself an interesting thing. That your glands may be aroused by the sexy person in the row in front of you or that your stomach may be grumbling even while you are thinking abstractly about my talk is fascinating to novelists. Rather than trying to simplify and abstract a particular idea or meaning from experience, novelists tend to wallow in the multiplicity of ideas and meanings and sensations that experience can provide.

Novelists, in other words, are not generally in the business of abstracting orderly ideas about experience. They are rather in the business of re-creating and communicating the rich complexities of experience itself. Their purpose is to get the reader to re-live an experience in some important and concrete way, with all its complexity and messiness, all its darkness and ambiguity, intact.

In short, a novel is not a kind of orderly argument. It is addressed to the reader, not the student, and its ordering principles are of an altogether different, and more difficult, kind. For the novelist, it is the fullness of experience—not the abstract meaning of the experience—that counts.

Now this point might seem fairly obvious, and if I have been long-winded in making it, that's because the point, obvious though it may seem, is often ignored by people who have to teach novels, and not just those who only teach novels in Freshman Studies. Even literary professionals—people, that is, who make their living thinking and talking and writing about the literature that other people have produced—often fall into the error of neglecting or misunderstanding the novelist's purpose.

Consider, for example, the criticism leveled against *Heart of Darkness* by Paul O'Prey in his introduction to the Penguin edition. He writes:

"It is an irony that the 'failures' of Marlow and Kurtz are paralleled by a corresponding failure of Conrad's technique—brilliant though it is—as the vast abstract darkness he imagines exceeds his capacity to analyze and dramatize it, and the very inability to portray the story's central subject, the 'unimaginable', the 'impenetrable' (evil, emptiness, mystery or whatever) becomes a central theme."

Mr. O'Prey's sentence is somewhat impenetrable itself, but never mind. His complaint, as I understand it, is that Conrad wants to evoke an abstract notion of darkness, but he doesn't manage to adequately define it or analyze it.

He then goes on to quote, approvingly, another critic, James Guetti, who complains that Marlow "never gets below the surface," and is "denied the final self-knowledge that Kurtz had."

In other words, according to Mr. O'Prey and Mr. Guetti, Conrad has somehow failed in his attempt to delineate the horror that is Kurtz's final vision, failed to penetrate the darkness that Marlow evokes, failed to give a precise name and shape to the dark and tragic human condition. Mr. O'Prey and Mr. Guetti want, as all good academics want, clarity, definition, intellectual coherence, order, a well-stated and well-argued thesis; they want light and more light, and are upset that Conrad has failed to provide it.

Like a carping Freshman Studies instructor they scrawl on the bottom of Conrad's paper: "Too vague, C-plus."

Now I, when I wear my professorial cap, am also in favor of clarity and light. When I read your papers, or your final exams, I do not want to find you telling me that you really do know something but can't quite explain what it is. And you, in return, expect me, as a teacher, and a lecturer, to make clear sense out of things, to give you something defined and specific, a set of abstractions, that you can put in your notebook, if not in your soul, and reproduce in some reasonable facsimile on your final exam.

But for Conrad, as for myself when I wear my novelist's cap, the highest virtue is not clarity in abstraction, but the truth of real experience in all its dark messiness and complexity; and in the world as Conrad sees it, these two—the truth of experience and the clarity of ideas—are generally in conflict.

Listen, for example, to what Conrad says in a preface he wrote for another novel in 1897, just a short time before he set to work on *Heart of Darkness*.

"The thinker," he writes, "plunges into ideas, the scientist into facts—whence, presently, emerging they make their appeal to those qualities of our being that fit us best for the hazardous enterprise of living. They speak authoritatively to our common-sense, our intelligence . . . It is otherwise with the artist. Confronted with the same enigmatical spectacle, the artist descends within himself, and in that lonely region of stress and strife . . . he finds the terms of his appeal. His appeal is made to our less obvious capacities [less obvious, that is, than intelligence and common sense] . . . The changing wisdom of successive generations discards ideas, questions facts, demolishes theories. But the artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom . . . He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to that sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation—and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts . . . which binds together all humanity—the dead to the living and the living to the unborn."

In short, for Conrad, "truth" in fiction is not philosophical; it is, rather, like the truth in painting and music, an appeal to beauty and mystery and pain, an appeal to our capacity for delight and wonder and loneliness and fellowship—an appeal, in other words, to the fullness of all our multitudinous experience.

And again, here is Conrad, writing—in 1922, many years later—to his friend Richard Curle, who had published a critical article making some of the same sorts of points that Mr. O'Prey makes:

"Didn't it ever occur to you, my dear Curle, that I knew what I was doing in leaving the facts of my life and even of my tales in the background. Explicitness, my dear fellow, is fatal to the glamour of all artistic work, robbing it of all suggestiveness, destroying all illusion. You seem to believe in literalness and explicitness, in facts and in expression. Yet nothing is more clear than the utter insignificance of explicit statement and also its power to call attention away from things that matter in the region of art."

For Conrad then, as for most modern artists, the world as we experience it is not the sort of place that can be reduced to a set of clear, explicit scientific or philosophical abstractions. Its truths—the truths of the psyche, of the human mind and soul, of experience itself—are messy, vague, irrational, suggestive, and dark—and it is these kinds of truths, says Conrad, that art, and art alone, can convey to us.

And, finally, here is Marlow, on page 57 of your edition of *Heart of Darkness*, expressing a story-teller's exasperation at his own limited powers of communication:

"Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible, which is the very essence of dream . . . No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone . . ."

Impossible! But, of course, Marlow, the faithful storyteller, keeps trying.

Let me reiterate: (Incidentally: you might note that there's a paradox here: wearing my professorial cap, I'm trying to make a clear, abstract statement about what I take to be, when I'm wearing my novelist's cap, the inadequacy of clear abstract statements.) The intent of the philosopher, the scientist, and the social theorist is to **abstract some important and clear idea from the messy world**; the intent of the novelist—of all artists, in fact—is to **re-create for us an image of the messy world itself**.

I would even go so far as to say that one of Conrad's apparent intentions in *Heart of Darkness* is to undermine our reliance on abstract ideas, and abstract notions of truth, as they are generally applied to the real world.

If he seeks to lead his readers to an experience of the "heart of darkness," it is not to shed the light of reason on it—to analyze and define it in some abstract way—but rather to re-create, in all its fullness, his experience of darkness in our feelings, our sensibilities, our own dark and mysterious hearts.

Once you understand that, you will see that *Heart of Darkness* is not a coded message, a kind of complicated puzzle you are supposed to solve in order to get the meaning or message that is hidden in it. It is, rather, a re-creation in a pattern of words and images of a set of experiences that can, if you read it well, become a part of your own experience.

To put it another way, *Heart of Darkness*—or any good novel, for that matter—is a kind of little world unto itself.

As a reader, your job is to enter into the experience it contains—to sit on the deck of the *Nellie* as night comes on and listen to the story Marlow has to tell; to be curious with Marlow about Mr. Kurtz; to smell dead hippo and hear the drumbeat of the natives and sense the implacable vastness of the wilderness, with all its multitude of claims upon us.

Notice: I said this is your job as a reader.

Now I have to draw a distinction between being a reader and being a student.

Readers, after all, don't have to show up at in classroom ready to say something or write papers about their reading or prepare themselves for final exams—but students do. When you study a novel, as opposed to simply reading it, you also have to put on a second hat.

Let me remind you that nothing I've said so far is meant to imply that we cannot make some sense of *Heart of Darkness*, or that all we need to do be confused by it.

In fact, there are many different ways to make sense of *Heart of Darkness*, and to talk usefully and clearly about our experience of it, just as there are many different ways to talk usefully and clearly—if not comprehensively—about our experiences of the larger world in which we live.

When I say that *Heart of Darkness* is a kind of little world which we can experience, rather than a system of ideas we must understand, I simply mean that there is no single right way of understanding it. I also mean that just as we try to understand our world through a number of different systems of thought, so, too, we can try to understand *Heart of Darkness* in various ways depending upon what sorts of questions we ask of it.

For example, if you have an interest in history, you can see *Heart of Darkness* as a depiction of, and an attack upon, colonialism in general, and, more specifically, the particularly brutal form colonialism took in the Belgian Congo. Consider the book from this point of view, and you will be led to those details which depict the mistreatment of the Africans, the greed of the so-called "pilgrims," the broken idealism of Kurtz, and so on. You will find it important to notice, for example, that French man-of-war lobbing shells into the jungle, or the grove of death which Marlow stumbles upon, or the little note that Kurtz appends to his noble-minded essay

on *The Suppression of Savage Customs*, or the importance of ivory to the economics of the system. As a historian, however, you might also find yourself a little frustrated by the odd fact that the book is so evasive about naming places and people and dates. We can surmise, for example, that Brussels is the city of the whited sepulcher, but we might wonder why Marlow can't come right out and name it.

One reason for the lack of names, I suppose, is that Conrad was not only interested in the particulars of the history of colonialism as it was applied to the Belgian Congo; he was also apparently interested in a more general sociological investigation of those who conquer and those who are conquered, and the complicated interplay between them. In this light, different—more sociological—questions can be raised and different answers found. The details that might be noticed in this context are, for example, Marlow's invocation of the Roman conquest of Britain, or the cultural ambiguity of those Africans who have taken on some of the ways of their Europeans—Marlow's helmsman, for example, or the Manager's rude servant—or the ways in which the wilderness tends to strip away the civility of the Europeans and brutalize them. But certainly, unlike a sociologist, Conrad is not impartial and scientifically detached from these things, and he even has a bit of fun with such impartiality in his depiction the doctor who tells Marlow that people who go out to Africa become "scientifically interesting."

But perhaps you find sociology boring—as I do. Never mind. You can step across the hall, so to speak, and consider *Heart of Darkness* from a psychological point of view. There are, after all, an awful lot of heads and skulls in the book, and Conrad goes out of his way to suggest that in some sense Marlow's journey is like a dream or a return to our primitive past—an exploration of the dark recesses of the human mind.

Looking at the book from a psychological viewpoint, in fact, many readers have been inclined to comment on its apparent similarities to the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud in its suggestion that dreams are a clue to hidden areas of the mind, and that at the heart of things—which Freud called the Id—we are all primitive brutes and savages, capable of the most appalling wishes and the most horrifying impulses. Through Freud, or other systems of thought that resemble Freud's, we can make sense of the urge Marlow feels to leave his boat and join the natives for a savage whoop and holler. We might even, in this light, notice that Marlow keeps insisting that Kurtz is a voice—a voice who seems to speak to him out of the heart of the immense darkness—and so perhaps he can be thought of, in a sense, as the voice of Marlow's own deepest, psychological self. All of which is interesting enough, and might produce some good classroom discussion—though one has to remember that it is doubtful Conrad had ever heard Sigmund Freud when he set out to write the book.

Besides, even if it is clear that these historical and sociological and psychological viewpoints are useful, they hardly speak to the whole of our experience of the book.

The book is also concerned, for example, with religion, and so we might want to examine the way Conrad plays with the concept of pilgrims and pilgrimages, or the role of Christian missionary concepts in the justifications of the colonialists, or the dark way in which Kurtz fulfills his own messianic ambitions by setting himself up as one of the local gods.

And I am sure, for example, Mr. Ryckman, being a philosopher, will find himself interested in exploring at least two philosophical aspects of the heart of darkness.

First, is the aspect we might call moral philosophy.

Certainly *Heart of Darkness* is preoccupied with general questions about the nature of good and evil, or civilization and savagery. And certainly *Heart of Darkness* raises and elaborates upon some quite specific moral questions: What saves Marlow from becoming evil? Is Kurtz more or less evil than the Manager and the pilgrims? Why does Marlow think that lies smack of mortality—that is, why does he associate lying with death—and what is happening to him—is he acting morally or immorally—when he lies to Kurtz's Intended?

And what price must he pay for his lie? A serious contemplation of questions such as these can certainly shed some light.

Second, Conrad also seems to be interested in what you have learned in Freshman Studies to call questions of epistemology—questions that have to do with what kinds of things are knowable and what procedures we can use to know them.

Certainly the way in which Conrad chooses to tell his story makes epistemological questions relevant. Here we have someone, an outside narrator, telling us a story he has heard from someone else, Marlow. The story Marlow tells seems to be about a man named Kurtz, but most of what Marlow knows about Kurtz he learns from other people, many of whom have all sorts of reasons for not telling Marlow whatever simple truths they might know. Marlow has to piece together much of Kurtz's story, and make guesses to fill in the things he cannot know for sure. So do we really get to know anything about Kurtz? Is there, in fact, really a Kurtz about whom anything specific can be known? It is worth recalling here that one of the traditional connotations of the word darkness is ignorance and that one of the traditional connotations of the word light is knowledge. Is there the light of knowledge in the *Heart of Darkness*? What kind of knowledge? What kind of knowing? . . .

So where are we? A little lost, I suspect.

I set out to demonstrate that *Heart of Darkness* is more like a world than a treatise, and have shown that many different academic disciplines—that is, many, many different organized systems of thought—can find interesting things to say about it, just as they find interesting things to say about our world, without ever capturing or comprehending all of it.

But does that mean that *Heart of Darkness*—like the real world—may turn out to be, in the final analysis, an incomprehensible and chaotic mess?

The answer to that question, I believe, is no.

The real world may indeed be a chaos, and all our attempts to reduce it to reasonable order may turn out to be ultimately futile, but works of art, I believe, always have an order of their own.

One of the great paradoxes of art is that if it is to successfully evoke a true sense of the multitudinous experiences of life, it must hold those experiences within a highly organized and patterned order.

In the English department—as in the Art department and in the Conservatory—we call the ordering principles: Form.

I would go so far as to suggest that Form is exactly what makes a work of art artistic—in fact, it is part of the definition of what we mean when we say art. And to appreciate the form of a work of art—which is important if you wish to see the work for what it is in and of itself—you have to stop asking abstract questions about what the work means and start noticing how formal patterns are used to give order and structure to the thing.

Given the limits of time (as a novelist, I'm infinitely aware that as we approach the noon hour, your growling stomach is becoming an ever larger part of your experience), I will limit myself to making only three brief suggestions about how to talk about the form of *Heart of Darkness*.

First, notice that the book is divided into three chapters. It might be profitable to ask what happens in each of those chapters, and why Conrad chooses to make the breaks where he does. It is also worth noting that Marlow breaks off his story exactly three times—three times the outside narrator comes back to say something—once in chapter one, twice in chapter two, and not at all until the end in chapter three. I would like to suggest that it will be worth your while to see what Marlow is talking about in the page or so before

each break, and how it relates to what the outside narrator says is happening on the Nelly, and to what Marlow says when he starts speaking again.

Are there other things that come in threes in *Heart of Darkness*? How about the three stations of Marlow's journey? Or the three women who frame his journey—his aunt, Kurtz's African girlfriend, and the Intended? And what about the three possible central characters: Kurtz, Marlow, and the outside narrator? I'm sure if you inspect the book closely you can find other patterns that come in threes.

The second aspect of form is what I'll call the "Russian doll effect." Do you know those traditional dolls made in Russia which open up and there's another doll inside, and then you open that to find still another doll. You keep opening dolls until you're down to a little nubbin of a thing. Well, that's the form of the narrative of *Heart of Darkness*. At the center is the story of Kurtz, around that the story of Marlow, around that the story of the narrator, and, by implication, around that there is still another story going on, the story of your reading of the book. As a formal device the Russian doll effect lends a particular structure to the book. What it signifies about the nature of the experience—and how it relates to the epistemological questions I raised a few moments ago—I will leave for you to think about and discuss.

The third aspect of form I want to mention has to do with the book's images—those things that you are expected to see and hear and smell and taste and feel as you read. (Strictly speaking, images should be things that we see in the mind's eye, but by general consent of the literary professionals, one is allowed to call the smell of dead hippo an image: I suppose you smell it with the mind's nose.)

You are aware, I am sure, that the images of *Heart of Darkness* are not randomly placed, but are, to a great extent, arranged in patterns of opposition.

There are, for example, things that are dark and things that are light. There are also things that are black and things that are white. Moreover, many of the things that are light or white (the candle held by the Intended in Kurtz's painting of her or fading light on her forehead as Marlow talks to her) are surrounded by darkness, and many of the things that seem at first glance to belong to the dark or black side of things manage to partake of light and whiteness (Kurtz's jungle bride is described as glittering and flashing, and Marlow often notices the white eyes or teeth of the black natives—or a bit of white cloth around a black man's neck). Similarly, although Europe at the time was generally thought of as the place of light, or enlightenment, and Africa was generally thought of as the place of darkness, Marlow insists that England, too, was once one of the dark places on the earth, and that the African landscape, like Kurtz's African bride, is often described in images of glittering light. And, along the same lines, don't forget that the book begins at sunset in the bright Thames and moves into a night so dark that the men on the Nelly can't see each other.

Along with opposed images such as these, is a more complicated opposition between things that are inside or within and things that are outside—things that are at the heart or center, and things that are at the periphery. We travel from the Outer Station to the Inner Station toward the heart of darkness and then outward again, presumably back toward civilization, just as we travel inward from the outside narrator to Marlow to Kurtz and then outward again until we are left with the image of that outside narrator seeing the whole world as belonging somehow to the realm of darkness. And let us not forget that the unnamed narrator tells us right away that the significance of Marlow's tales is not, as is typically the case with sailors, inside, like a kernel in a nut, but outside, like a haze around the moon.

Should we then search for Marlow's meaning in the center of the book, in the heart of Africa, or on the periphery of the book, in what happens to Marlow in Brussels? And is Marlow's meaning the same as Conrad's meaning? Is the real meaning of the book to be found further on the edge of things, by which I mean what is happening on the Nelly as Marlow tells his story, or even further outside, in what happens to the reader as he reads the book?

To put that another way, the three aspects of the book's form I have mentioned—the three-fold structure, the Russian doll effect, and the series of opposing images—are also related to each other to make up an even larger kind of formal arrangement. Form within form. This is one of the hallmarks of art in general and especially of modern art in particular, and I believe you might find similarly intricate patterns in the works of Stravinski and Picasso when you begin to consider them.

I have just one more point to make and then I will allow your growling stomachs to make their pilgrimage to Downer, for whatever good it will do them.

I suspect my talk has left some of you a little confused. I have spoken to you somewhat ambiguously from beneath my two hats, as teacher and writer. I have taken a rather skeptical and ironic view of some of the large abstract ideas this course has been about. I have told you that your real experience may not be altogether explicable in general abstract terms, and thus have led you to distrust systematic reasoning as a mode of arriving at truth. I have invited you to probe into your own psyches, and suggested that what you may find there will be darkness and confusion.

In all of these ways—ambiguity, irony, a distrust of abstraction and rational systems, an interest in the psychological, a sense of the multiplicity of experience and of the rather privileged position art holds as a response to that experience—I have been speaking like a modernist. That is, I have been speaking as someone who has absorbed some of the thinking of that cultural period we call Modernism, a period which commenced in the 1890s with books like *Heart of Darkness*, flourished for next half century with a rich outburst of artistic activity—including painters like Picasso and composers like Stravinski—and came to end at some indefinite time in the recent past, or so those who use the term post-modern to describe the world we live in may be thought to imply.

If you must have a simple truth to put in your notebooks, it is that *Heart of Darkness*—in that it also exhibits these tendencies—is a modernist novel, by which I mean that it is characterized by these traits:

- a distrust of abstractions as a way of delineating truth
- an interest in an exploration of the psychological
- a belief in art as a separate and somewhat privileged kind of human experience
- a desire for transcendence mingled with a feeling that transcendence cannot be achieved
- an awareness of primitiveness and savagery as the condition upon which civilization is built, and therefore an interest in the experience and expressions of non-European peoples
- a skepticism that emerges from the notion that human ideas about the world seldom fit the complexity of the world itself, and thus a sense that multiplicity, ambiguity, and irony—in life and in art—are the necessary responses of the intelligent mind to the human condition.

Multiplicity, ambiguity, and irony: these are not the easiest forms of expression to cope with when you are a student and asked to express yourself clearly and directly.

But as a final thought, I might add that it is precisely because the world appears to us to be multiple, ambiguous, and paradoxical, that we must strive to speak and write clearly.

Otherwise there is only darkness, only confusion.