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JOSEPH CONRAD AND DARK COMEDY

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by

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ABSTRACT

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The thesis concentrates upon the nature and function of dark comedy in the fiction of Joseph Conrad, focusing primarily upon his novels, especially Heart of Darkness, Lord Jim, The Secret Agent, and Nostromo. The first chapter presents the comic traditions and theories which help to define Conrad's view, and establishes the author's widespread and deliberate concern with comedy. The second chapter concentrates upon low comedy, caricature, and farce insofar as they point toward the subtler, more shadowy aspects of humor which are paradoxically coupled with the horrible, or grotesque, in Conrad's work. The conflict between purpose and purposelessness which initially characterizes Conrad's low comedy introduces a type of comic man who is a purposeless mechanism, an absurd automaton. Those who fail to recognize the comic side of their identity, entertaining idealistic illusions of dominance and purpose, are the fools in Conrad's work; the third chapter investigates the foolishness grounded in false illusions. Recognizing oneself as a comedian in a
comic world prepares one for the darkest episode of self-realization—the confrontation with death. The fourth chapter reveals the corpse comedy in Conrad's fiction, illustrating his tense melding of the horror of death with a sense of humor, and implying that the author's harsh realism remains intact by means of a comic balance.
the ingredient of the comic by no means alleviates the pain of tragic awareness; on the contrary, it makes it more acute. The presence of the comic element, therefore, need not always be interpreted as a symptom of escape or recourse to the healing power of detachment. Rather than that, it may be the result of a most serious urge to face unflinchingly every bitter nuance of what is felt to be the tragedy of existence. As such, the tragicomic vision... is a phenomenon not of escape, but of courage.

-Karl Guthke, *Modern Tragicomedy*

Let the fool gape and shudder--the man knows, and can look on without a wink.

-Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

I. Conrad The Comedian

In his preface to the German edition of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, Thomas Mann asserts that, "broadly and essentially, the striking feature of modern art is that it has ceased to recognize the categories of tragic and comic, or the dramatic classifications, tragedy and comedy. It sees life as tragicomedy... "¹ The tragicomedy which Mann describes has also been called dark comedy and dark humor,² and all of these terms are equally applicable, suggestive of a shadowy middle ground between the funny and the horrible. J. L. Styan notes that by mixing the extremes of comedy and tragedy, "the writer of dark comedy creates an uncomfortable state of mind in his audience, neither providing total comic detachment nor tragic sympathy, but a point of balance, a tension between reality and unreality which pains the audience and gives the work meaning."³
Such comic tension is not altogether a modern development. Gloucester's suicide attempt in *King Lear* is, in one sense, comic: when Gloucester throws himself off a non-existent cliff, he is persuaded that his survival is a miracle. But he is a brutally blinded, homeless old man driven to extreme despair by Edmund's duplicity, and so tragic in that regard. The graveyard scene in *Hamlet* is full of puns and grim jests, and the snake which kills Cleopatra is brought to her by a clown. Conrad, in his youth, was surrounded by his father's translations of Shakespeare, and more importantly, by the Shakespeare criticism and comic theory of Victor Hugo, the "literary hero" of Conrad's father, Apollo Korzeniowski. Hugo's comments about his own and Shakespeare's comic sensibilities advance a working definition of the dark comedy which we find in Conrad's work.

In his 1827 preface to the drama *Cromwell*, Hugo calls Shakespeare the only dramatic artist who succeeded in combining "the sublime with the grotesque, the terrible with the burlesque, and tragedy with comedy." Wolfgang Kayser extends Hugo's comment in *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*:

To the new principle of the grotesque belongs a new artistic genre—that of comedy. . . . "The grotesque . . . is everywhere; on the one hand it creates what is deformed and horrible, on the other what is comic and farcical." . . . The grotesque consists in the contrast that permits no reconciliation, totally destroys the order and deprives us of our foothold.

Hugo and Kayser advance concepts of the grotesque which are not radically different from Styan's definition of dark comic tension, yet their theory of the grotesque seems to involve a more visual,
vivid and shocking mode. Citing the grotesques of Antiquity, such as the Hydra, Harpies and Cyclops, Hugo considers monstrous and horrible traits to be most essential to the grotesque. This appeal to sight is particularly applicable to Conrad, whose concern is "above all, to make you see." Yet, Conrad's sense of the comic most often and most closely conforms to Mathew Winston's definition of "grotesque black humor," as that which "emphasizes the blackness, diminishes the humor, treats the protagonist more harshly, and involves the reader's emotional responses to a greater extent." This is neither a tension of extremes nor a visual shock, but rather a grim, objective looking into human nature. Conrad's most intense and darkest comedy therefore corresponds paradoxically with Schiller's definition of comedy; it is "identical with man's highest aspirations, namely, to be free of passion, to be able to look into and about himself calmly and perspicaciously, to discover everywhere more chance than fate, and to laugh at the incongruity, rather than deplore or curse the infamy, of things."9

Yet the laugh in Schiller's definition must be qualified; Conrad's darkest comedy will always involve something more like a grimace than a laugh. There is no comic relief in Conrad's darkest glimpses, only strain. It is the strain of rejecting the comic detachment which misrepresents the gravity of the human condition, while at the same refusing to give in to the darkness. Thus we are not dealing, in any sense, with a comedy of funniness; and any pleasurable satisfaction derived from black humor, as Styan observes,
"lies in watching the [writer] keep his balance; the significance lies in his finding it important to do so."10

Conrad's deliberate concern with comedy is easily established with a look at any number of images and incidents in his prose.11 H. G. Wells claimed that "One could always baffle Conrad by saying 'humor'. It was one of our damned English tricks he never learnt to tackle."12 But this is countered by the very novel dedicated to Wells, The Secret Agent, one of Conrad's darkest and most comic works. The mock-diabolical Secret Agent, Adolf Verloc, is always portrayed with ludicrous images: "undemonstrative and burly in a fat-pig style," wallowing all day in an unmade bed, "a soft kind of rock," at dinner with his hat and overcoat on; in all these cases an object of scornful laughter. Most illustrative of the ongoing comedy in the novel is Verloc's relationship to the espionage forces which manipulate him; he says, "I have been a straight man to these people too long"(p. 209).

The burlesque show metaphor employed in this novel is not unusual for Conrad; he has a habit of explicitly comparing the situations in his fiction to stage antics. In Nostromo, the activities in Costaguana have the quality of an opera bouffe. This context is verified by Martin Decoud, who views the revolutionary zeal of the country with a kind of cynical truth: "It sounds like a comic fairy-tale--and, behold! it may come off, because it is true to the very spirit of the country"(p. 315). His comment resonates throughout the novel, so that when Don José Avellanos wishes that Costaguana will receive "an honorable place in the comity of
civilized nations" (p. 140), we cannot miss Conrad's obvious pun, reducing the courtesy and mutual respect of nations to a universal bouffe.

Detection of comedy in Conrad's fiction does not require subtlety; Conrad tells us, straight out, that it is there. Like the auditors in Heart of Darkness, we are warned to view Marlow's trip up river as a "sordid farce." In Lord Jim, it is necessary to realize that the scenes of "low comedy" which Jim witnesses on the Patna are part of a purposeful thematic statement to be elaborated in this novel and elsewhere. In Chance, the Ferndale is called "the floating stage of that tragicomedy" (p. 272), and in the drawing rooms of The Arrow of Gold, M. George feels as if he is "staring and listening like a yokel in a play" (pp. 57-58). With all of these examples of Conrad's insistent sense of humor, we are not surprised when he states in the Author's Note to Victory that he originally sighted the prototype for the Lena of the novel in the Place de la Comédie (p. xvii).

Although the most significant humor in Conrad's fiction is quite dark, it can at times be more entertainingly playful. This lighter attitude is sometimes evident in the names of the characters, names like MacWhirr, Mohammed Bonso, and Toodles, or in scenes like the meeting in Typhoon between Solomon Rout's wife and the newly-arrived village priest; Solomon is away at sea, and Mrs. Rout recalls an excerpt from one of his letters:

On the day the new curate called for the first time at the cottage, she found occasion to remark, "As Solomon says: 'the engineers that go down to the sea in ships behold the
wonders of sailor nature"; when a change in the visitor's countenance made her stop and stare.

"Solomon...Oh!...Mrs. Rout," stuttered the young man, very red in the face, "I must say...I don't..."

"He's my husband," she announced in a great shout, throwing herself back in the chair. Perceiving the joke, she laughed immoderately with a handkerchief to her eyes, while he sat wearing a forced smile, and, from his inexperience of jolly women, fully persuaded that she must be deplorably insane. (pp. 15-16)

Conrad's widespread concern with comedy points to a new appreciation of his aesthetic resources, which affects a reading of his famous and often quoted Preface to the Nigger of the Narcissus:

To arrest, for the space of a breath, the hands busy about the work of the earth, and compel men entranced by the sight of distant goals to glance for a moment at the surrounding vision of form and colour, of sunshine and shadows; to make them pause for a look, for a sigh, for a smile--such is the aim, difficult and evanescent, and reserved only for a very few to achieve. But sometimes, by the deserving and the fortunate, even that task is accomplished. And when it is accomplished--behold!--all the truth of life is there: a moment of vision, a sigh, a smile--and the return to an eternal rest. (p. xvi)

The moment of artistic vision is punctuated with a smile, and in the light of the discoveries about Conrad's sense of humor which have been introduced thus far, the comic perception which helps to form that smile cannot be disregarded. As we continue to examine Conrad's humor, particular attention should be paid to how the artist manipulates and contorts the smile into a mask that allows one to grit his teeth in private as he reacts to the ultimate truth of Conrad's view of life.
II. Low Comedy

Fighting fires with an empty bucket in *Heart of Darkness* is laughable in its purposelessness, but the ultimate realization of such purposelessness, the awareness of one's own comic identity, leads to tendencies in Conrad's characters which are suicidal rather than laughable. Since these shifts are complicated, it is useful to begin a discussion of dark comedy in Conrad with that comedy which is, or at least seems, lightest. This is low comedy, which in its conventional sense "makes no intellectual appeal, but depends for its effect on violent and boisterous action, or slapstick" (Conrad's slapstick, however, contains a purposeful appeal to the intellect, as we shall discover). Farce is a common form of low comedy, in which "one-dimensional characters are put into ludicrous situations."¹

Stanton deVoren Hoffman's book, *Comedy and Form in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad*, makes a solid contribution to our understanding of low comedy, concentrating most effectively on *Heart of Darkness*, in which the low comedy is defined by

the playing of the illusion of purpose against an obvious and stronger purposelessness. . . . The culminating vision of all this farce and slapstick is what occurs at the central station, a place where a group of pilgrims sit up nights waiting to take pot shots at a probably indifferent hippo, and where an excitable chap with pail and moustaches will assure Marlow that everybody is behaving "splendidly."²

Such is the comic effect of those in a hurry to get nowhere, and this is the case in so many of Conrad's stories. A character's intense pace contrasts comically with his achievements, and men become stooges to the forces they seek to overcome. Conrad emphasizes
this incongruity between effort and effect through characters who devote inordinate energy to trivial matters:

A big bluebottle fly flew in recklessly into the cool verandah, and darted with loud buzzing between the two men. Lingard struck at it with his hat. The fly swerved, and Almayer dodged his head out of the way. Then Lingard aimed another ineffectual blow; Almayer jumped up and waved his arms about. The fly buzzed desperately, and the vibration of minute wings sounded in the peace of the early morning like a far-off string orchestra accompanying the hollow, determined stamping of the two men, who, with heads thrown back and arms gyrating on high, or again bending low with infuriated lunges, were intent upon killing the intruder. But suddenly the buzz died out in a thin thrill away in the open space of the courtyard, leaving Lingard and Almayer standing face to face in the fresh silence of the young day, looking very puzzled and idle, their arms hanging uselessly by their sides—like men disheartened by some portentous failure. (p. 169)

Moreover, the author himself might expend his own descriptive vitality on a single detail of characterization, until his efforts become ridiculous, so that the reader is amused, but exasperated, as in the following passage from The Secret Agent:

... Mr. Verloc would have rubbed his hands with satisfaction had he not been constitutionally averse from every superfluous exertion. His idleness was not hygienic, but it suited him very well. He was in a manner devoted to it with a sort of inert fanaticism, or perhaps rather with a fanatical inertness. Born of industrious parents for a life of toil, he had embraced indolence from an impulse as profound, as inexplicable, and as imperious as the impulse which directs a man's preference for one particular woman in a given thousand. He was too lazy even for a mere demagogue, for a workman orator, for a leader of labour. It was too much trouble. He required a more perfect form of ease; or it might have been that he was the victim of a philosophical unbelief in the effectiveness of every human effort. Such a form of indolence requires, implies, a certain amount of intelligence. Mr. Verloc was not devoid of intelligence—and at the notion of a menaced social order he would perhaps have winked to himself if there had not been an effort to make in that sign of scepticism. His big, prominent eyes were not well
adapted to winking. They were rather of the sort that closes solemnly in slumber with majestic effect. (p. 24)

By the repeated references to Verloc's "indolence," Conrad seems to convey a comic frustration with his own descriptive efforts. A volume of words neither conquers nor further elucidates Verloc's indolence; neither does it bring Lord Jim out of the shadows for Marlow, or clearly explain the deterioration of Kurtz. There is implicit self mockery in the author's own long-winded technique, mockery grounded in a conflict between purpose and purposelessness.

What low comedy largely becomes for Conrad is a means of showing the ultimate disorder of things; low comedy is the final result of all of his characters' attempts to impose order, to master their fates. Jim's efforts to blot out his past by frantic physical activity are often comic: as a ship's chandler, he is "a regular devil for sailing a boat; ready to go out miles to sea to meet ships in any sort of weather . . . more like a demon than a man"(p. 194). When he quits Egstrom's, heading on for more occupations to abandon, "he [doesn't] seem able to find the door; something comical"(p. 195). The intensity of his escapes becomes legendary; each attempt is "equally tinged by a high-minded absurdity of intention which made their futility profound and touching":

To the common mind he became known as a rolling stone, because this was the funniest part; he did after a time become perfectly known, and even notorious, within the circle of his wanderings (which had a diameter of, say, three thousand miles), in the same way as an eccentric character is known to a whole countryside. (pp. 197-198)

Attempts to resolve the plague of inexplicable forces are never
successful, and the overall image of bewildered wandering in Conrad's fiction has its low comic reality. In *Heart of Darkness*, they are comic who try to open an extrinsic meaning within the meaningless, who try to impose civilized order upon a primeval world, and do so blindly, actually contributing to the aimless disorder. The pilgrims fire desperately into the bush to control the native forces, but their guns go "pop" and hit nothing. Such episodes of a maniacal drive for possession point to the story's central absurdity—Mr. Kurtz himself. The pilgrims' farcical escapades reflect that "absurdity of a king enslaved by his own worthless kingdom."³

Kurtz' ambitions elicit the laughter of the wilderness, "a prodigious peal of laughter which would shake the fixed stars in their places" (p. 116). The jungle itself seems to recognize the futility of a white conquest in the darkness; an almost calculated staginess is at work victimizing the invaders. The frantic movements which define slapstick characters are intensified by the leisurely pace of the omniscient wilderness, moving casually and deliberately. As Marlow's steamboat approaches Kurtz' station, it becomes surrounded by fog:

> At eight or nine, perhaps, it lifted as a shutter. We had a glimpse of the towering multitude of trees, of the immense matted jungle, with the blazing little ball of the sun hanging over—all perfectly still—and then the white shutter came down again, smoothly, as if sliding in greased grooves. (p. 101)

Some inhuman thing seems to be playing games with the pilgrims' perception, teasing them not only by manipulating sight, but sound as well:
The same masks, the same yells, the same mad rushes, the same bedlam of disguised humanity blowing about the streets in the great gusts of mistral that seemed to make them dance like dead leaves on an earth where all joy is watched by death. (p. 263)

The mechanical poses and disguises in this novel enforce the notion that disorder and the grotesque underlie and overcome all attempts to hide them.

Another type of low comedy, also defined by exaggerated formlessness, is caricature, which has as its counterpart burlesque, or action caricatured. These techniques are epitomized by the pilgrim in the pink pyjamas, by whom the author destroys balance and proportion with a comic focus or distortion. A complete catalogue of Conrad's caricatures would be long and impressive. There is the steersman in *Almayer's Folly* who sports "an enormous round hat, like a fantastically exaggerated mushroom"(p. 14). In the same novel one-eyed Babalatchi is covered by a "red turban whose fringed ends falling over the left cheek and shoulder gave to his aged face a ludicrous expression of joyous recklessness"(p. 93). Captain MacWhirr of *Typhoon* emphasizes his dullness with his attire: "brown bowler hat, a complete suit of brownish hue, and clumsy black boots" (p. 3). The captain of the *Patna* in *Lord Jim* has a "purple nose and a red moustache"(p. 14), and looks like a "trained baby elephant walking on hind legs"(p. 37). General Montero in *Nostromo* sports a "bald head covered now by a plumed cocked hat ... [with] the atrocious grotesquesness of some military idol of Aztec conception and European bedecking"(p. 122).

Conrad enjoys caricaturing speech as well as appearance. One
does not listen to Mr. Baker in *The Nigger of the Narcissus* for more than a few words without hearing "Ough . . . Ough . . . Ough" (p. 20-21). *Lord Jim* is rich in this sort of caricature; there are the climactic lines of the *Patna* captain as he makes his getaway: "I vill an Amerigan citizen begome"(p. 42), in addition to the emphatically cold decorum of the French Lieutenant's speech, and Gentleman Brown's death rattle. Conrad's use of such caricature is unrestricted; it extends even to Stein, whose important advice, "To the destructive element submit yourself," is an example of Conrad's gentle mockery of German syntax.

Conrad's widespread use of caricatures creates a comic unreality. His caricatures suggest an affinity between the poseur and the inhuman of subhuman. In such a comic reality pretentious men are more like beasts or things than human beings; the more they cherish a concept of elevated humanity, the more they seem less than men. This comedy of slapstick, farce, and caricature is still low comedy, but its use by Conrad as a means of dehumanizing his characters is at the center of his complex sense of humor.

Hoffman notes that de-humanization informs caricature, and that this technique is part of the low comedy of Conrad's work. "The comedy or farce," he says, "is a reductive process which belittles through dehumanization, and which forces characters into types and rigid gestures, into caricature." As early as Ben Jonson, such behavior had been recognized as an axiom of humor:

As when some one peculiar quality
doth so possess a man, that it doth draw
All his affects, his spirits, and his powers
In their confluxions, all to run one way, 
This may be truly said to be a humour. 5

Henri Bergson's "Laughter" is perhaps the best-known modern theory
about this kind of comedy; he claims that we are struck comically by
some rigidity or other applied to the mobility of life, in
an awkward attempt to follow its lines and counterfeit its
suppleness . . . We laugh every time a person gives us the
impression of being a thing. 6

Our laughter at the one-dimensional man of "humour" diminishes,
however, as we explore this aspect of Conrad's comedy into an
uncomfortable region which mels the comic and the horrible.

V. S. Pritchett has noted Conrad's penchant for making things
more real than people; 7 indeed, Conrad often obscures any clear
difference between the human and the less-than-human. In one sense,
this technique is satire on social and political illusions and
affectations. When the Carlist group in The Arrow of Gold dines,
it is all a "mere show":

They sat rather like a very superior lot of waxworks, with
the fixed but indetermined facial expression and with that
odd air wax figues have of being aware of their existence
being but a sham. (p. 69)

There is a marked lack of real sincerity in the words and gestures of
the group which M. George comes to know in this novel, especially in
the way that they smile. Blunt is perhaps the most frequent poseur
in this regard, smiling with "that flash of white teeth so strangely
without any character of its own that it was merely disturbing"
(p. 23). His "bright mechanical smile" seems always to contrast
sharply with his subtly underhanded behavior, and so seems to be no
more than a social mechanism, another disguise in tune with the
carnival atmosphere of the story.
Although Blunt's affectations reflect his intent to retain and emulate his social and political position, what he suggests is a very ordinary and human tendency from which social and political forces spring, the need to be part of the "crowd." Conrad begins to elaborate this idea in his earlier fiction, initially in his description of Kayerts and Carlier in the short story from *Tales of Unrest*, "An Outpost of Progress":

They were two perfectly insignificant and incapable individuals, whose existence is only rendered possible through the high organization of civilized crowds. Few men realize that their life, the very essence of their character, their capabilities and their audacities, are only the expression of their belief in the safety of their surroundings. The courage, the composure, the confidence; the emotions and principles; every great and every insignificant thought belongs not to the individual but to the crowd: to the crowd that believes blindly in the irresistible force of its institutions and of its morals, in the power of its police and of its opinion. . . . They could only live on condition of being machines. (pp. 89-91)

Kayerts and Carlier point to the theme of man as automaton which is most fully treated in *The Secret Agent*. The ethics of the crowd, its moral expectations, are plagued with ironic inversions which raise questions about the validity and reality of any moral absolute. Moral categories are more like specious labels than reflections of genuine individual convictions; an alarming kinship exists between the terrorist, the burglar, and the policeman. As Inspector Heat faces the Professor, he contemplates this relationship:

They were his fellow citizens gone wrong because of imperfect education, Chief Inspector Heat believed; but allowing for that difference, he could understand the mind of a burglar, because, as a matter of fact, the mind and the instincts of a burglar are of the same kind as the mind and the instincts
of a police officer. . . . Products of the same machine, one
classed as useful and the other as noxious, they take the
machine for granted in different ways, but with a seriousness
essentially the same. (p. 92)

And the Professor states:

Like to like. The terrorist and the policeman come from the
same basket. Revolution, legality—counter moves in the
same game; forms of idleness at bottom identical. (p. 69)

It seems that the distinction between roles in society is
defined more by a kind of indifference, by the quality of one's
chosen attitude toward the rest, than by a recognition of a generally
operative right and wrong. This indifference may take shape in the
grotesque demeanor of someone like Sir Ethelred or Mr. Vladimir, in
the Dickensian surliness of a lower-class cabman, or in the cunning
gamesmanship displayed by both Heat and the Assistant Commissioner
of Police.

The lack of real moral identities drains the characters of
human vitality, so thingness is associated on the one hand with those
ignorant of moral realities, like Winnie, who thinks that the police
serve "so as them that have nothing shouldn't take anything away
from them who have" (p. 173). She believes that "things don't stand
too much looking into," and consequently does not venture outside
the pale of her domestic chores, which she tends to at the same time
day after day. The comedy of her dull naiveté acquires a tragic
component when her inattention to the dark forces surrounding her
results in Stevie's destruction.

More extensively, however, grotesque inertness is associated
with the amoral products of the machine, notably Sir Ethelred and
Verloc. Ethelred is a "Presence," more historically human than effectively alive: "The great Personage might have been the statue of one of his own princely ancestors stripped of a crusader's war harness, and put into an ill-fitting frock coat." This anachronism's personality is contained in a head, a mouth, a hand, a voice; he is never a whole man, but rather a monstrously hollow enormity thinking only in vague, bulky terms. (pp. 136ff.)

The clearest representation of automatism is Verloc. He conveys the impression of being used by some higher power, some great toymaker, as he moves about inexpressively, rarely changing clothes, suppressing all emotional reactions. His resemblance to a mechanical figure goes "so far that he had an automaton's absurd air of being aware of the machinery inside him"(p. 197). He does seem ridiculous, sitting down to lunch in his coat and hat, displaying an insensibility to changes in atmosphere which is difficult to comprehend. His constant silence and immobility certainly obscure any association he might have with vital energy; after Winnie stabs him she notes that the body's "attitude of repose was so homelike and familiar . . . Mr. Verloc was taking his habitual ease. He looked comfortable"(p. 264). The living and dead Secret Agents are difficult to distinguish from each other; it is merely a distinction between negligible vitality and drained vitality, between a regular timepiece and one that is running down defiantly. Verloc's escaping blood establishes this equation between man and machine: "Dark drops fell on the floorcloth one after another, with a sound of ticking growing fast and furious like the pulse of an insane
clock" (p. 264). His discreetly suppressed energy finally pours forth with a fury, perhaps with a vengeance, before all motion is finally stilled.

 Appropriately enough, non-human characters in this novel seem to display more vitality than people do. As Verloc automatically plods toward the Embassy to meet with Vladimir, he passes some of "London's strayed houses:" "Why powers are not asked of Parliament (a short act would do) for compelling those edifices to return where they belong is one of the mysteries of municipal administration" (p. 15). The buildings seem more alive, more powerful than their builders. This same sort of anthropomorphism is apparent as Winnie kills her husband: "He saw partly on the ceiling and partly on the wall the moving shadow of an arm with a clenched hand holding a carving knife. It flickered up and down. Its movements were leisurely. . . . It met no resistance on its way" (p. 262). The knife takes on a power of its own which seems to control Winnie; things exert power over people.

 This horrible reversal lies at the core of Conrad's grotesque comedy. People put their faith in abstractions and mechanisms, and this isolating dependence upon dead matter prevents them from participating in a humane environment. And this dehumanization contains an equally threatening dimension of bestiality, a point made by Hoffman: "Man is poised somewhere between the angelic and the animal, and he has as his great danger . . . not only a disordered self, but something more specific, an animal regression."8 The grunts and elephantine appearance of the captain of the Patna are
comic and even laughable only by virtue of the fact that he is ultimately a harmless creature; his "inhumaness," luckily, does not destroy the passengers on the ship, and we may view him with more or less relaxed amusement. Even when Kayerts and Carlier begin to "snarl" at each other, and one mimics the desperation "of a cornered pig," we realize that their bestiality is a final burlesque of their innocence and ignorance, and is not as appalling as the pre-meditated, deliberate destructiveness of Verloc.

The bestiality in The Secret Agent is much darker than the low comedy of previous examples. After Stevie's death, Verloc dines:

>The sensation of unappeasable hunger, not unknown after the strain of a hazardous enterprise to adventurers of tougher fibre than Mr. Verloc, overcame him again. The piece of roast beef, laid out in the likeness of funereal baked meats for Stevie's obsequies, offered itself largely to his notice. And Mr. Verloc again partook. He partook ravenously, without restraint and decency, cutting thick slices with the sharp carving knife, and swallowing them without bread. (p. 253)

The casual, almost jocular tone which Conrad employs to describe the symbolic cannibalism is no longer "low comedy." Instead, it is darkly grotesque, with Conrad sustaining the tension between the comic and the horrible by exerting a disciplined style incongruous with the violent resonances of Verloc's act. For Conrad, dehumanization finally reduces people to corpses, and the corpse is recognized by Mathew Winston as "the Reductio ad Absurdum of Bergsonian automatism." 9

Not only is automatism characteristic of villains, knaves and idiots, but of several of Conrad's heroic characters. Captain MacWhirr, seaman enough to weather a murderous typhoon, is a human
catalogue of statistics, specifications and regulations, who thinks in pre-programed terms, unemotional, and dull-witted, he has just enough imagination to get him through each day (p. 4). Similarly, Old Jørgensen, the self-sacrificing, courageous companion to Lingard in The Rescue, possesses "unhurried, mechanical movements, his set face and eyes with an empty gaze" suggesting "an invincible indifference to all the possible surprises of the earth" (p. 248). And Singleton, the respected old sailor who steers with care through the devastating storm in The Nigger of the Narcissus, seems unemotional and indifferent to the suffering on board, scorning his fellow sailors' compassion with his mechanical attention to duty. He is described as "a cannibal chief" and an "uprooted tree," implying some inhuman, barbaric force. In all three cases, Conrad presents heroes who are more mechanical than vitally, warmly human.

The mechanical stoicism and certainty of the French Lieutenant in Lord Jim finally evoke Marlow's "disconcerted smile." Although the lieutenant is heroic and admirable in his way, his speech is "a thing of empty sounds," capped by an overdone farewell ritual, an extreme adherence to decorum: "We bowed together: we scraped our feet at each other with much ceremony, while a dirty specimen of a waiter looked on critically, as though he had paid for the performance" (p. 149).

There is a relationship between comedy and heroism; there are men at once courageously effective in carrying out their duties and fatuous in their cold, often dull-witted insensibility. Such characters are akin to the Malay helmsmen steering the Patna in
Lord Jim, who supplement the comedy of desperation acted by the captain and the mates with their own comedy of immobility, in which the frozen Jim also participates:

The two Malays had meantime remained holding to the wheel. Just picture to yourselves the actors in that, thank God! unique episode of the sea, four beside themselves with fierce and secret exertions, and three looking on in complete immobility . . . but there had been no order . . . why should the Malays leave the helm? (p. 97)

Just as Winnie Verloc's regular dedication to domestic duties informs a tension between comedy and tragedy, the steadfastness of these seamen is part of a more elevated tension, which begins to define the comic hero for Conrad.
III. Comic Heroism and the Illusion of Dominance: Conrad's Fools & Men

A singular characteristic of men like MacWhirr, Singleton, Jörgensen, and the French Lieutenant seems to be control, a calm mastery of their behavior in difficult situations. Singleton steers attentively for thirty hours. The French lieutenant decisively mans a ship for that same length of time, a ship that may sink beneath him at any moment. Old Jörgensen commits suicide when he believes the act to be in Lingard's best interests. In each case there is a noble self-sacrifice, and an emphasis upon duty. But it has been suggested above that the stiffness of these characters falls within the realm of the inhuman or subhuman, which is the area of comic caricature.

There are obvious hints which support the view that such men are diminished by their self-control. The name MacWhirr suggests droning small-mindedness, Singleton a lack of intellectual acuity. Indeed, MacWhirr is confused by a naval book on storms, and Singleton plods through Bulwer Lytton's *Pelham*, a book of "polished" and "curiously insincere" sentences which are especially appealing to "the simple minds of the big children"(p. 6). These are limited men, Singleton "still strong, as ever unthinking; a ready man with a vast empty past and with no future"(p. 24), and MacWhirr, "ignorant of life to the last, without ever having been made to see all that it may contain of perfidy, of violence, and of terror"(p. 19).

But the humor directed at these men is not malicious, like that associated with someone like Sir Ethelred. Consider the scene in which MacWhirr prepares to go on deck during a swell:
The stuffy chart room seemed as full of drafts as a shed. Captain MacWhirr collared the other sea boot on its violent passage along the floor. He was not flustered, but he could not find at once the opening for inserting his foot. The shoes he had flung off were scurrying from end to end of the cabin, gamboling playfully over each other like puppies. As soon as he stood up he kicked at them viciously, but without effect.

He threw himself into the attitude of a lunging fencer, to reach after his oilskin coat; and afterwards he staggered all over the confined space while he jerked himself into it. Very grave, straddling his legs far apart, and stretching his neck, he started to tie deliberately the strings of his sou'-wester under his chin, with thick fingers that trembled slightly. He went through all the movements of a woman putting on her bonnet before a glass. . . . (p. 36)

Our amusement at the low comic potential and one-dimensionality of MacWhirr and the others is tempered with admiration for them because they get the job done. The comic aspect helps to define the qualified heroism with which Conrad endows them. Those who are nobly reliable are also somewhat ridiculous, but it is their comfortable ignorance of matter extraneous to their given task, the very narrowness of their vision, which speaks for their success and their survival; as Marlow notes in Lord Jim:

It's extraordinary how we go through life with eyes half shut, with dull ears, with dormant thoughts. Perhaps it's just as well; and it may be that it is this very dullness that makes life to the incalculable majority so supportable and so welcome. . . . It is respectable to have no illusions--and safe--and profitable--and dull. (pp. 143 & 225)

Genuine self-knowledge and achievement involve an assessment of one's limitations, an understanding of one's capabilities in relationship to the environment. By working effectively within a narrow set of limitations, like a machine works, one becomes comic, but a more complex, darker comedy ensues when one steps beyond what
is safe, profitable and dull, and strives to be a kind of super hero. He thus is liable to overstep human capabilities and moral boundaries in the process. Kayser notes that "humor and horror arise from a maximum of health," the desire to master life. This desire is inherent in the traditional ideals and sentiments of civilized society which refuses to view itself as other than the master of all it surveys. By jeering at those who try to dominate the inexplicable forces of the universe and justify their pursuits with false ideals, Conrad portrays ongoing human progress as a sham, an illusion of dominance.

Northrop Frye, in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, provides discussions of ironic and demonic comedy which help to define the kinds of illusions which Conrad vigorously undercuts. Conrad is perhaps most intensely critical of such illusions in *Heart of Darkness*. Presenting the listeners on the *Nellie* as blind fools, he exhibits what Frye calls "a recurring tendency on the part of ironic comedy to ridicule and scold an audience assumed to be hankering after sentiment, solemnity, and the triumph of fidelity and approved moral standards" (p. 48). This implicit ridicule is made explicit by Marlow at the point where he cries out when a moment of high intensity in his tale is met with a bored sigh:

"Absurd!" he cried. "This is the worst of trying to tell . . . Here you all are, moored with two good addresses, like a hulk with two anchors, a butcher round one corner, a policeman round another, excellent appetites, and temperature normal—you hear—normal from year's end to year's end. And you say, Absurd! Absurd be—exploded! Absurd! (p. 114)

There is an overall mockery here of traditional literary
sentiments, of the sort of literature in which man has some kind of control over his world, literature which at least replicates a potentially comfortable existence the like of which Marlow's listeners seem to enjoy.

The higher comic fictional modes in Frye's system—Low Mimetic, High Mimetic, Romantic and Mythic—present visions of society which Conrad/Marlow is scorning, and point to the demonic-grotesque foundation for his comedy. In low mimetic comedy, we find the "incorporation of the hero into the society he naturally fits" (p. 44). The term "naturally" is charged with irony when applied to Marlow, who demonstrates through his relationship with his auditors that one with dark, albeit true, insights into the workings of society is thought by his fellows to be somewhat alien.

High mimetic comedy is characterized by a catharsis of "sympathy and ridicule;" *Heart of Darkness* involves an uncomfortable tension between those two sentiments, rather than a purging of them. Marlow displays sympathy for the Intended's grief when he idealizes Kurtz' memory with lies, and at the same time angrily realizes that the illusions he is sustaining are ridiculous: "'His end,' said I, with dull anger stirring in me, 'was in every way worthy of his life'" (p. 161).

In Frye's conception of Romantic comedy, the frontier often takes on idyllic qualities. But the appearance of the jungle in *Heart of Darkness* undercuts the possibility of any such idealization; Marlow moves along a formless coast bordered by dangerous surf, as if Nature...
herself had tried to ward off intruders; in and out of rivers, streams of death in life, whose banks were rotting into mud, whose waters, thickened into slime, invaded the contorted mangroves, that seemed to writhe at us in the extremity of an impotent despair. (p. 62)

And on the level of mythic comedy, we are usually confronted with what Frye calls a "hero . . . accepted by a society of gods" (p. 43).

Kurtz parodies such a hero. With his thunder and lightning, he is idolized by the natives; their reverence parallels the high regard with which the pilgrims estimate his contributions to the company. But this object of worship is really a "pitiful Jupiter," Satanic, a greedy killer, an ironic distortion of the loving father concept which might define a mythic comedy.

The perversion of all these higher fictional modes finally makes Heart of Darkness what Frye would call a demonic parody. It is a parody of what he labels the apocalyptic world, a world which presents "the categories of reality in the forms of human desire" (p. 141). These forms of desire are ideal conceptions which metaphorically identify the human world with the Heaven of religion, and are represented in the higher fictional modes just discussed. Conrad's story closely adheres to all of the archetypal demonic symbols which Frye presents in terms of a grim parody which connects the demonic with the ironically comic. Recognizing the demonic elements in Heart of Darkness further reveals the distortion and bestiality which has been equated with grotesque dark humor thus far.

The pilgrims in Heart of Darkness must deal with a demonically divine world populated by forces which correspond to the powers in Frye's demonic realm, those "menacing, stupid powers of nature as they
appear to a technologically undeveloped society" (p. 147). But the pilgrims are more impotent than underdeveloped. The tools of these apostles of civilized progress illustrate that impotence: discarded boilers "wallow" in the grass; a railway truck "lies on its back with its wheels in the air" like some dead animal (p. 63). Their efforts are crossed by forces which seem more menacing than stupid: "The high stillness . . . with its ominous patience, waiting for the passing away of a fantastic invasion" (p. 92).

In the sinister human world there is the tyrant, Kurtz, who parodies Frye's "virtuous leader" of the apocalyptic world (p. 148). He represents the "collective ego of his followers," and the obsessive manifestation of that ego informs both his ascent to power and his destruction. His demonic obsessions associate him with other symbolic components of the demonic as well. The suggested erotic relationship between Kurtz and the native queen, who stretches her arms out sadly after that departing tyrant, parodies the apocalyptic notion of marriage, which is "the union of two souls in one flesh" (p. 149). It implies that Kurtz' passion for this woman unites him with something savage and barbarous, and is therefore destructive. In terms of the animal realm of the demonic world, Marlow's first description of Kurtz suggests that he is not unlike a beast of prey, perhaps a serpent: "He looked at least seven feet long . . . I saw him open his mouth wide--it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him" (p. 134). Finally, parodying the temple of the apocalyptic world there is Kurtz' hut, surrounded by shrunken heads
symbolizing entry into the land of death and darkness instead of the apocalyptic city of light.

Altogether, the sinister jungle which comprises the heart of darkness is one of fires illuminating savage "midnight rites," of water which corresponds to the river Styx, all lorded over by a Satanic beast. Thus, Conrad's commentary on the nature of man is filled with bitter mockery of the illusionary beliefs which the listeners on the Nellie and the Intended hold onto. It is through vigorous deflation of this glorious pomposity that Conrad unites false dominance and human comicality. This aspect of his sensibilities begins as early as An Outcast of the Islands and continues well into later work. The furnishings of Almayer's office in Outcast inflate his sense of self-worth: "In his exultation of an empty-headed quill-driver, he thought himself, by the virtue of that furniture, the head of a serious business"(p. 300). But as we have seen in The Secret Agent, mere faith in things and abstractions, in furniture and "civilized commerce" in this case, dehumanizes rather than invigorates, and a dependence upon them is foolish: "He found no successful magic in the blank pages of his ledgers"(p. 300). The "emblems of civilized commerce" are finally of practical value only as ludicrous clotheshangers:

Bits of white stuff; rags yellow, pink, blue: rags limp, brilliant and soiled, trailed on the floor, lay on the desk amongst the sombre covers of books soiled, grimy, but stiff-backed, in virtue, perhaps, of their European origin. The biggest set of bookshelves was partly hidden by a petticoat, the waistband of which was caught upon the back of a slender book pulled a little out of the row so as to make an improvised clothespeg. (p. 301)
This image of strung-together bits of clothing stretched over mementos of ideas which are stiff-backed, but ineffectual points toward an equally ludicrous guise for hollow ideas in Heart of Darkness—the Clerk of the Central Station: "His appearance was certainly that of a hairdresser's dummy; but in the great demoralisation of the land he kept up his appearance. That's backbone... And he was devoted to his books, which were in apple-pie order" (p. 68). The grove of death a few steps away from this amazing caricature of civilized order establishes the comic tension which Kenneth Lincoln has aptly termed "the ironic disparity between intentions and deeds." Lincoln goes on to quote from T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men," a passage most helpful in furthering our understanding of the comic incongruities which Conrad wants to emphasize:

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow.

It is this incompatibility between Ideas and Acts which reduces civilized notions of Heroism and Progress to mere shams. The first adventure which Lord Jim regrets missing saddens him because he has imagined his participation in it as one of noble proportions and superhuman courage: "When all men flinched, then—he felt sure—he alone would know how to deal with the spurious menace of the wind and seas. He knew what to think of it" (p. 9). Indeed, thinking is the extent to which such imaginings are true; between the idea and the act are the practical contingencies of any desperate situation which give it its comic reality. The actual event which Jim misses, as narrated
by the bowman of the rescue cutter, contains elements of both low comedy and the grotesque:

"I just saw his head bobbing, and I dashed my boat-hook in the water. It caught in his breeches and I nearly went overboard, as I thought I would, only old Symons let go the tiller and grabbed my legs--the boat nearly swamped. Old Symons is a fine old chap. I don't mind a bit him being grumpy with us. (He swore at me all the time he held my leg, but that was only his way of telling me to stick to the boathook. Old Symons is awfully excitable--isn't he? No--not the little fair chap--the other, the big one with a beard. When we pulled him in he groaned, 'Oh, my leg! oh, my leg!' and turned up his eyes. Fancy such a big chap fainting like a girl. Would any of you fellows faint for a jab with a boat-hook?--I wouldn't. It went into his leg so far." He showed the boat-hook, which he had carried below for the purpose, and produced a sensation. "No, silly! It was not his flesh that held him--his breeches did. Lots of blood, of course." (pp. 8-9)

Real effectiveness is divorced from imaginary ideals, and cannot escape being comic. Man is located between the superhuman and the less-than-human, and his idealistic pursuits are necessarily tainted. There is a clear implication of this as Jim begins his river entry into Patusan:

Then in a long empty reach he was very grateful to a troop of monkeys who came right down on the bank and made an insulting hullabaloo on his passage. Such is the way in which he was approaching greatness as genuine as any man ever achieved. (p. 244)

On a larger scale, the idealization of a noble human spirit inherent in the grand movements of history is comically undercut briefly in *Lord Jim*, when Marlow reminisces at one point about the achievements of the early Dutch and English explorers: "... the passion for pepper seemed to burn like a flame of love in the breast of Dutch and English adventurers about the time of James I... It made them great! By heavens! it made them heroic..."(p. 226).
Conrad's most extensive treatment of the comic reality of grandiose ideals comes in *Nostromo* from Martin Decoud, who, in light of the attitude which Conrad has implied in these earlier works, seems to speak for the author himself.

A context for Decoud's indictment of Costaguana's political ideals is provided by his blanket reduction of all political organizations: "Of course, government in general, any government anywhere, is a thing of exquisite comicality to a discerning mind" (p. 152). He believes that human dependence upon abstract truths ultimately has its grotesque effect, that "every conviction, as soon as it became effective, turned into that form of dementia the gods send upon those they wish to destroy" (p. 200). But most importantly, he recognizes an incongruity between chivalry and materialism, a perversion of values which informs the *opera bouffe* quality of civilization's schemes:

The national treasures of Costaguana are of importance to the progressive Europe represented by this youth, just as three hundred years ago the wealth of our Spanish fathers was a serious object to the rest of Europe--as represented by the bold buccaneers. There is a curse of futility upon our character: Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, chivalry and materialism, high-sounding sentiments and a supine morality, violent efforts for an idea and a sullen acquiescence in every form of corruption. We convulsed a continent for our independence only to become the passive prey of a democratic parody, the helpless victims of scoundrels and cutthroats, our institutions a mockery, our laws a farce. . . . (pp. 170-171)

The men who do not ever really dominate their environment, or at least recognize the discrepancy between ideas and acts, fail because of a fundamental inability to dominate themselves; as Albert Guerard concludes about *Nostromo*, "The best intentions of men are
subject to brute chance and inhuman process. And their ideals however
generous are undermined by the egoism that fostered them. And so
we have the rise of the tyrant, Montero in Nostromo and Kurtz in Heart
of Darkness, who reinforces the disorder and bestiality opposed by
the ideals he purports to represent. At the head of governments these
men are analogous to so many parrots similar to the "very human" one
owned by Charles Gould, who shrieks "Viva Costaguana" with "intense
self-assertion" and "puffed-up somnolence" (p. 82).

With this comic image of ludicrous animality and egotism,
Conrad brings us back to the question of how to be, and suggests that
a partial answer, at least, begins with the recognition of one's own
comicalness, which will necessarily eradicate the self-centered and
romantic notions which inform a false understanding of human
supremacy.

The relationship between self-awareness and an acute sense of
humor is discussed by Mme. de Stael, in Literature Considered In Its
Relation To Social Institutions (1800). She concentrates at one
point upon "why the customs of the English stand in the way of the
true genius of mirth:"

The English haven't any comic writer like Moliere, and if they
had one, they would not appreciate all his acuteness . . . the
English would simply not notice the humorous subtleties, the
nuances of self-love; they would not recognize themselves there, however true to nature they might be drawn. They do
not learn about themselves in such detail; their deep passions
and important occupations have made them take life more in
a heap.

Mme. de Stael's contention is supported by Decoud's estimation of
Charles Gould in Nostromo: "he's an Englishman [who] cannot act or
exist without idealizing every simple feeling, desire or
achievement" (pp. 214-215). A man like Gould evinces a blindness to the incongruity between his ideas and acts, an incongruity which has been explained in terms of a comic tension. The comicality of such a lack of self-awareness is most easily recognized in the character of Lord Jim, who is often blind to his own foolishness.

Standing apart, Jim seems distinct from the captain and crew of the *Patna*, the "knockabout clowns in a farce," as they struggle with the lifeboat. But Jim is playing out his own farce, pretending to detach himself from the crew, though really unable to do so. He opens and shuts his eyes to the uncomfortable scene before him, responding like a martyr before a firing squad: "Twice . . . he shut his eyes in the certitude that the end was upon him already, and twice he had to open them again" (p. 105). The narrator mocks his efforts: "In this assault upon his fortitude there was the jeering intention of a spiteful and vile vengeance; there was an element of burlesque in his ordeal--a degradation of funny grimaces in the approach of death or dishonour" (p. 105).

Jim is unwilling to admit his own active participation in the comedy, as Marlow notes:

"... from his relation I am forced to believe he had preserved through it all a strange illusion of passiveness, as though he had not acted but had suffered himself to be handled by the infernal powers who had selected him for the victim of their practical joke . . . The infernal joke was being crammed devilishly down his throat, but--look you--he was not going to admit of any sort of swallowing motion in his gullet." (pp. 108-109)

Jim's behavior is an instance of the psychological device called projection, which is defined by Conrad biographer and psychoanalyst
Bernard C. Meyer as "the attribution to influences or agencies beyond the self of those attitudes, feelings, impulses, and thoughts which reside within the subject's own mind." This state of mind results in "the disavowal of personal authorship for the vicissitudes of life." In Jim's case it is the disavowal of his active comic identity in favor of a view of himself as a passive victim, thwarted by cruelly comic forces. Conrad denies the influence of fate-like forces here, asserting that actions are motivated from within, rather than without, and insisting upon a human, rather than a cosmic, comedy.

This human comedy is bitter, because it involves an admitted self-dehumanization or, at least, a partial affinity with the less-than-human. Of all Conrad's characters it is Marlow who most courageously makes this painful admission of being a comedian in a comic world. His comic perception in Lord Jim has already been variously cited, and in "Youth" that sense of humor is also evident.

"Youth" is a testament to the romance of the sea and the romantic illusions of the young seaman: "O youth! The strength of it, the faith of it, the imagination of it! To me she was not an old rattletrap carting about the world a lot of coal for a freight--to me she was the endeavor, the test, the trial of life"(p. 12). Marlow knowingly undercuts his own youthful attitude when the leaking ship has been again made seaworthy, and the discouraged crew has "leaped into life:"

She was recalked, new coppered, and made as tight as a bottle. We went back to the hulk and reshipped our cargo. Then, on a fine moonlight night, all the rats left the ship.

... Rat after rat appeared on our rail, took a last look over his shoulder and leaped with a hollow thud into
the empty hulk. We tried to count them but soon lost the tale. (pp. 16-17)

The tension between illusion and reality, introduced in "Youth," becomes much more intense and painful for Marlow in Heart of Darkness as a sense of humor becomes much more valuable and essential. Hoffman is accurate in assessing the low comedy which Marlow perceives, but he significantly limits the concept of comic salvation, the idea of a comic perspective as a control in the midst of chaos, by insisting that such control entirely disappears following Marlow's encounter with Kurtz. Marlow's narrative control does seem to wane sometime before he meets Kurtz; he becomes someone immersed in the farce rather than a detached observer, a dancer instead of a master of ceremonies, a puppet instead of a puppeteer. But there is a revitalization of his sense of humor, most dramatically in the meeting with the Intended. In this scene he realizes his comic identity, and consciously looks at his own duality, a duality tense with humor and horror.

Marlow's early sense of humor stems from the metaphoric accuracy of his observations, uncovering his clear-sighted recognition of the disparities between ideas and acts; of his aunt's estimation of his "mission" he notes:

\[ \ldots \] I was going to take charge of a two-penny-half-penny river-steamboat with a penny whistle attached. It appeared, however, I was also one of the Workers, with a capital—you know. Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle. (p. 59)

It is Marlow's grasp of the essential realities of his initial experiences, his sense of the absurd unreality of the pilgrim's
antics, which elevates him above all the others. Marlow sees things more clearly than anyone else, at least until he has almost reached Kurtz.

At this point, what begins to happen to him is, at least, surprising. The steamboat is attacked by the natives; everyone has taken cover but Marlow:

Then I had to look at the river mighty quick, because there was a snag in the fairway. Sticks, little sticks, were flying about--thick: they were whizzing before my nose, dropping before my nose, dropping below me, striking behind me against my pilot house. All this time the river, the shore, the woods, were very quiet--perfectly quiet. I could only hear the heavy splashing thump of the stern-wheel and the patter of these things. We cleared the snag clumsily. Arrows, by Jove! We were being shot at! I stepped in quickly to close the shutter on the land side. (pp. 109-110)

Sticks... things... Arrows, by Jove! Those who have taken immediate cover are here more quick-witted than Marlow; he is entering a new context where his sophisticated ability to identify and evaluate is weakening. The implication is that the weapons and the threats of the heart of darkness are not to be mastered by Marlow's heretofore aggressively accurate language. He is beginning to give things foolish names, beginning to seem more and more like a fool himself. He describes the death of the helmsman:

Something big appeared in the air before the shutter, the rifle went overboard, and the man stepped back swiftly, looked at me over his shoulder in an extraordinary, profound, familiar manner, and fell upon my feet. The side of his head hit the wheel twice, and the end of what appeared to be a long cane clattered round... The man had rolled on his back and stared straight up at me; both his hands clutched that cane. It was the shaft of a spear... (p. 111--italics mine)

Hoffman says of the novel's final pages: "If there is any illumination at all, it is not Marlow's. Rather, it is the reader's--and
it is that clear judgements are no longer possible." But as the two instances quoted above illustrate, the source of illumination shifts and the weakening of clear judgments begins much earlier than in the final scene. Even the simply concrete appearance of the destructive forces in this new nightmare world evades him, and Marlow, the master of central station ceremonies, seems more like a stooge who is losing his grip on "things at hand."

He begins to move desperately, frantically, with a fast-paced purposelessness reminiscent of the hole-in-the-bucket pilgrim:

To tell you the truth, I was morbidly anxious to change my shoes and socks. 'He is dead,' murmured the fellow, immensely impressed. 'No doubt about it,' said I, tugging like mad at the shoe-laces. 'And by the way, I suppose Mr. Kurtz is dead as well by this time.' (p. 113)

And as storyteller he is painfully aware that these desperate gestures are absurd:

... Why do you sigh in this beastly way, somebody? Absurd? Well, absurd. Good Lord! musn't a man ever-- Here, give me some tobacco ...

... ..........................................................

And you say, Absurd! Absurd be--exploded! Absurd! My dear boys, what can you expect from a man who out of sheer nervousness had just flung overboard a pair of new shoes? (p. 114)

Hoffman notes that all of the comic characters in *Heart of Darkness" have a thing in common, in that they suggest disorder and lack of control, which is to say they belong with the inhuman or subhuman" (p. 43). Marlow has taken on just such a comic identity at this point. Kurtz is presumed dead; both Marlows, character and storyteller, are forcefully distracted by this possibility, and the
next several pages of the narrative are not unlike "one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense" (p. 115). He is hard-pressed to regain a fix on his yarn, to recapture that calm tone which largely informs the dry wit of earlier observations. After a long period of silence, presumably to regather his thoughts, Marlow says, "I laid the ghost of his gifts at last with a lie... Girl! What? Did I mention a girl?"

Marlow has lost distance on his tale; the detached view which is necessary for an ordered and comic perspective is absent.

It is his proximity to Kurtz, his obsession with the man, which is responsible for this unnerving indirection. In one instance, Kurtz is made a scapegoat for Marlow's breakdown. Marlow insists "Mind, I am not trying to excuse or even explain--I am trying to account to myself for--for--Mr. Kurtz--for the shade of Mr. Kurtz" (p. 117). Hesitant, disoriented, he blames his narrative difficulties on Kurtz' eerie evasiveness. Marlow's attempts to regain superiority over this inscrutable phenomenon are characterized by forced ridicule, an attempt to regain comic control:

You should have heard him say, 'My Ivory.' Oh yes, I heard him... It made me hold my breath in expectation of hearing the wilderness burst into a prodigious peal of laughter that would shake the fixed stars in their places. (p. 116)

But Marlow's kinship with Kurtz is too well-cemented by this time for him to stand back and laugh. The laughter of the wilderness should also mock this observer whose mastery of the apt term has been overcome, whose more and more desperate attempts to give his feeling form emphasize the terrifying formlessness of the darkness. When
recounting Kurtz' report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, Marlow says, "The peroration was magnificent, though difficult to remember, you know." What can be more pathetically absurd, more evocative of the jungle's smirk, than this Marlow who in the face of the enigmatic Kurtz and the ominous, inscrutable wilderness, insists upon reducing what is ultimately the Satanic manifesto of a devil-god to five-part classical form.

Later in the novel, Marlow revitalizes his sense of humor to deal with the most horrible confrontation in his journey;

a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of teeth, was smiling too, smiling continuously at some endless and jocose dream of that eternal slumber. (pp. 130-131)

The grotesque world finds its ultimate symbol in this death head ornamenting Kurtz' hut, ever-smiling at all human illusions of dominance, patient while it embodies final truth. Marlow balances and retreats from all these horrible implications with his following comment: "I am not disclosing any trade secrets." Kenneth Lincoln points out that, by doing so,

Marlow's irony cuts with precision and subtlety into the Company interests . . . the contrast between Marlow's conversational voice and his grotesque vision produces a disturbing tension which calls upon the reader's alertness as well as resilience. Only the comic control of grotesquerie restrains us from recoiling, or a la Marlow's temptation, going ashore for a howl and a dance. Implied in this grotesque comedy is Conrad's own steeled grimace toward the smiling face of death.

The implicit grimace is made possible by a necessary detachment between Marlow and the ghastly decay symbolized by the shrunken head. For an instant it seems to be close enough to be dealt with, perhaps
understood, perhaps overcome; but then "the head that had appeared near enough to be spoken to seemed at once to have leaped away from me into the inaccessible distance" (p. 131). In one sense Marlow is a comic Tantalus here: what seems for an instant to be within his grasp quickly retreats. But that distance is his salvation. He does not go ashore to take "counsel with this great solitude," as Kurtz had, thus demonstrating the crucial difference between the two men: "he [Kurtz] had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot" (p. 151).

Marlow is most desperately foolish and absurdly comic when closest to the edge. He nearly becomes a participant in the midnight rites as he pursues the escaped Kurtz, anxious to "deal with this shadow by [himself] alone:"

As soon as I got on the bank I saw a trail--a broad trail through the grass. I remember the exultation with which I said to myself, 'He can't walk--he is crawling on all fours--I've got him' . . . I actually left the track and ran in a wide semicircle (I verily believe chuckling to myself) so as to get in front of that stir, of that motion I had seen--if indeed I had seen anything. I was circum­venting Kurtz as though it had been a boyish game. (p. 142)

Marlow's crazy stunts arise from a wild hope that what Kurtz represents is defeatable, that the nightmare does have an end, that it is possible for him to destroy the darkness and reestablish order. He remembers that he "confounded the beat of the drum with the beat of my heart, and was pleased at its calm regularity." But regularity is hollow, like the drum on which it sounds here, an unlikely aid in subduing a nightmare because it is artificial. And the nightmare is real and eternal. As Marlow had told the listeners on the Nellie earlier:
When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality--the reality, I tell you, fades. The inner truth is hidden--luckily, luckily. But I felt it all the same; I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey tricks . . . (pp. 93-94)

Those monkey tricks, in the form of fantasies, illusions, games, and laughter, are all part of this recapture of Kurtz, and they are grimly comic because they are used consciously to circumvent the nightmare. They are Marlow's defenses, the sorts of imbecility which are necessary to retain sanity. They are the antidotes to the "moral shock" that Kurtz is "something altogether monstrous, intolerable to thought and odious to the soul." These "tricks" take shape in practical considerations which sustain the illusion of dominance: Marlow's emphasis upon Kurtz as a threat to the ship rather than a threat to the soul is another example. The milder threat is, in contrast to the terrible one, "positively welcome and composing" (p. 141).

Marlow is in this scene the farceur playing out his own farce; his acute sense of humor has become inextricable from a sense of the horrible. The dynamic interplay of these sensibilities culminates in the meeting with the Intended. Marlow supplies her with all the proper responses, responses which resound with hollowness and bitter irony:

'His words will remain,' I said.
'And his example,' she whispered to herself.
'Men looked up to him--his goodness shone in every act. His example--'
'True,' I said, 'his example too. Yes, his example. I forgot that.' (p. 100)

He is necessarily and unwillingly equivocal, painfully aware of the
grotesque tension between the sublime and the ridiculous which is at work here, and "dull anger" stirs within him as he reinforces the Intended's romantic illusion. Marlow's overwhelming consciousness of the horror angrily recognizes the essential nonsense of his words, but his only alternative is to cry out, to raise the whisper of the darkness to a shout, to go in effect, ashore with Kurtz for a howl and a dance. The Intended asks for Kurtz' last words, and Marlow almost cracks: "I was at the point of crying at her, 'Don't you hear them?' The dusk was repeating them in a persistent whisper . . . 'The horror! The horror!'"(p. 161).

But he does not cry out; he pulls himself together and lies. What Marlow recognizes is a necessary foolishness grounded in calmness, regularity, and empty rhetoric, perpetuating the illusion of human dominance over the savage and mysterious. Of his departure from the girl he recalls: "It seemed to me that the house would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head. But nothing happened. The heavens do not fall for such a trifle."

Marlow here most fully regains comic distance on himself by subtly undercutting his own moral confusion. He retreats from his struggle with the horror, that irreconcilable disparity between ideas and acts, into a casual tone which reduces and undercuts the intensity with which he had embued the encounter.

Comic distance, then, keeps one calm, and calmness is of the essence. "Du calme," advises the doctor who measures Marlow's head; "avoid irritation more than exposure to the sun"(p. 58). This is the calmness of busyness, the pragmatic attendance to "mere incidents of
the surface." It is the calmness of a storyteller in clear-sighted control of his words, and the calmness which is a necessary restraint if one is to face the darkness without shuddering. Marlow as a narrator oscillates between control and the lack of it, and his attempts to refocus the tale coincide with reassertions of his humor.
IV. Corpse Comedy

We have seen that the incongruity between ideas and acts is largely characteristic of the comic in Conrad's work. Characters not aware of the gap between ideas and acts take on a dehumanizing foolishness which allies them comically with the inhuman or subhuman, with machines and animals. Realization of this potential and often actual comicality in oneself and others, as with Marlow, is painful because it involves admitting that one's own civilized personality, grounded in concepts of order and progress, manifests a comic purposelessness. And this sense of purposelessness is most acute when its possessor is faced with the ultimate symbol of human futility, the corpse. It is during his encounter with such a symbol that Marlow resurrects his comic defenses to undercut the horror of meeting death. In this scene and many others in Conrad's fiction, the author deals with smiling or comically expressive death figures, and makes deliberate efforts to return the smile.

Hewitt has noted in Conrad's work a "need to dissociate himself from anything morbid,"¹ and Bernard Meyer says that "Naturally in the face of dying or death his childlike withdrawal was extreme." Meyer quotes Jessie Conrad on her husband: "It always cost him an awful effort to bring himself face to face with suffering in any form."² One of Conrad's letters, written in 1911 to John Galsworthy concerning the convalescence of Norman Douglas in the Conrads' home, illustrates Conrad's mustering of comic defenses to deal with the prospect of death:

All we know for certain of D.'s illness is that it is not
typhoid. At first we thought it was a heat-stroke. Now we doubt it. The doctor says,—how can I tell? There are no other symptoms but fever. And suppose it is brain-fever? He can't be moved and indeed where could one move him? One can hear him moaning and muttering all over the house. We keep Jack outside all day,—or as much as we can. Borys begins to look hollow-eyed,—his room is just across the passage,—six feet from the sick man's door, which is kept open for air. I've never seen Jessie look so strained. She knows what it means for all of us. Last week I haven't written a line. My head swims,—and in truth I am as near distraction as is consistent with sanity.

Should he die, I shall have to bury him I suppose... 3

This final remark posits Conrad as the droll observer, who minimizes the seriousness of the situation, and represses his mounting distraction to retain control. He counters the consequences of deep reflection upon the potential corpse by turning his attention to practical considerations, reverting to fatuous understatement. This is the difficult sense of humor which he prescribes as an antidote to the most horrible scenes in his fiction. The way in which death is observed there removes its unendurably harsh implications into the realm of grotesque dark humor.

We may call Conrad's usual mode of dealing with death comic indirection. This technique becomes a type of grotesque dark humor because it employs normally comic ploys—caricature, ludicrous imagery, smirking understatement, a light, jocular tone—in tension with the plain fact of awful destruction. Such is the case in Almayer's Folly when a corpse believed to be Dain Maroola is discovered. It becomes an object of delight, producing a festive mood, as if a holiday has been declared, with "children... warbling joyously in the delight of unexpected excitement." And the focus of such joy is vaguely defined initially as "some unusual event," "some object of interest;"
but a closer look uncovers its gruesomeness:

... the body lying on the mud with covered face in a grotesquely unnatural contortion of mangled and broken limbs, one twisted and lacerated arm, with white bones protruding in many places through the torn flesh, stretched out; the hand with outspread fingers nearly touching his foot. (p. 97)

The surrounding comic atmosphere detracts from this terrible image. Mahmat, the discoverer, proudly and eagerly spreads the tale of his discovery; pompous and boastful, he plays the hero, pleading for the gold anklets which the corpse wears. Babalatchi oversees the proceedings, ridiculously formal in his "official get-up"; on his face there is "a ludicrous expression of joyous recklessness." After a time the crowd disperses unaffected, their "steps quickened by the hungry anticipation of morning rice." There is an overall de-emphasis of the mysterious, ugly death through greater emphasis upon the morbid delight, clownishness and almost imbecilic dispassion on the part of the observers of it.

This comic tension is compounded by Almayer's reaction to the corpse. He resembles Marlow pursuing Kurtz, acting like a lunatic in order to remain calm and deliberate:

A great rush, the noise of which he fancied he could hear yet; and now, with an awful shock, he had reached the bottom, and behold! he was alive and whole and Dairi was dead with all his bones broken. It struck him as funny. A dead Malay; he had seen many dead Malays without any emotion; and now he felt inclined to weep, but it was over the fate of a white he knew, a man that fell over a deep precipice and did not die. He seemed somehow to himself to be standing on one side, a little way off, looking at a certain Almayer who was in great trouble. Poor, poor fellow! Why doesn't he cut his throat? He wished to encourage him; he was very anxious to see him lying dead over that other corpse. Why does he not die and end this suffering? He groaned aloud unconsciously and started with affright at the sound of his own voice. Was he going mad?
Terrified by the thought, he turned away and ran towards his house repeating to himself, "I am not going mad; of course not, no, no, no!" He stumbled as he ran blindly up the steps repeating fast and ever faster those words wherein seemed to lie his salvation. . . . in his extreme anxiety not to forget that he was not going mad . . . He felt very proud of being able to speak so calmly. Decidedly he was not going mad . . . listening to his own voice complacently. (pp. 99-100)

Almayer desperately attempts to dissociate his own death from the supposed death of Dain, who had been his final hope in a dream of riches and prominence, a dream of new life. He comes face to face with himself in the person of the corpse, at once realizing that thinking too deeply on its import will drive him mad. The result is slapstick horror, and a failure both to gain a calm, detached sense of humor, and to regard the corpse as "funny." Almayer's cries of "Not mad" become ironic assertions of the opposite. Here in Almayer Conrad presents a character who prefigures Kurtz, a character steeped so deeply in a dream kingdom that he is condemned to comic behavior, and who cannot withdraw his foot from the edge with deliberate humor, as Marlow does.

Almayer enforces our point that, for Conrad, comic indirection is essential to a controlled view of death. And that control is, quite importantly, artistic control. The artist, as Lincoln says, must employ "comic modes to cope with fundamental human situations which threaten to render the artist inoperative along with mankind as a whole." The situations which Marlow encounters in Heart of Darkness render him inoperative as narrator for a time. Herein lies Conrad's point that the artist's unflinching assessment of the darkest human situations must necessarily force him to adopt devices
which steady his steps in the darkness. And those devices prescribe a necessary point of view for the reader to take—a sense of humor that allows one to cope with the essential realism of the author's vision.

Another way in which Conrad infuses the comic into his darkest scenes is to present death through the eyes of another, removing the close-range impact of recognition. Thus he softens and qualifies the effect upon the reader, and provides himself with an additional narrative frame with which to increase his own comic distance. Donkin's presumption that Jimmy is dead, in The Nigger of the Narcissus, rebounds with grimly humorous effect:

Sure enough, Jimmy was dead! He moved no more than a recumbent figure with clasped hands, carved on the lid of a stone coffin. Donkin glared with avidity. Then Jimmy, without stirring, blinked his eyelids, and Donkin had another shock. Those eyes were rather startling. He shut the door behind his back with gentle care, looking intently the while at James Wait as though he had come in there at a great risk to tell some secret of startling importance. Jimmy did not move but glanced languidly out of the corners of his eyes—"Calm?" he asked—"Yuss," said Donkin, very disappointed, and sat down on the box. (p. 147)

At the moment of Wait's real death, Conrad exercises comic indirection with a ludicrous metaphorical image: "He [Donkin] was just in time to see Wait's eyes blaze up and go out at once, like two lamps overturned together by a sweeping blow. Something resembling a scarlet thread hung down his chin out of the corner of his lips—and he had ceased to breathe" (p. 155—Italics mine). Again, the narration is filtered through Donkin's observation, and the fact of death is conveyed by a subtly comic understatement.

We have already seen Marlow serving as the middleman between
Conrad and the corpse. Stein in *Lord Jim* operates similarly, in consciously employing (as Marlow does) a sense of humor as a way to counter the symbolic prefiguration of his own death. After killing several attackers with a revolver, he describes the attitudes of the corpses:

> One was curled up like a dog, another on his back had an arm over his eyes as if to keep off the sun, and the third man he draws up his leg very slowly and makes it with one kick straight again. (p. 210)

Stein never directly states that the men are dead; instead he notes their ridiculous positions, none of which are necessarily associated with death, and thus diminishes the terrible with the comic.

The extensive concentration upon corpses in both *The Secret Agent* and *Nostromo* is the most gruesome morbidity in Conrad's fiction. In both cases, the author keeps his balance, and allows the reader to do the same, by establishing a marked tension between humor and horror, calmness and anxiety, disgust and entertainment, duty and absurdity.

The remains of Stevie, which Inspector Heat examines in *The Secret Agent*, are shockingly grisly; they consist of

> a heap of rags, scorched and bloodstained, half concealing what might have been an accumulation of raw material for a cannibal feast. It required considerable firmness of mind not to recoil before that sight. (p. 86)

But the powerful effect of this ghastly mound is qualified by the "stolid simplicity" of the local constable who had collected the remnants. Similarly to the way Mahmat proudly describes his discovery in *Almayer's Folly*, the constable here comments upon his own efforts:

> "He's all there. Every bit of him. It was a job."
"... Look at that foot there. I picked up the legs first, one after another. He was that scattered you didn't know where to begin."

The constable paused; the least flicker of an innocent, self-laudatory smile invested his round face with an infantile expression. (pp. 87-89)

Meanwhile, Chief Inspector Heat goes on looking for clues:

The inexplicable mysteries of conscious existence beset Chief Inspector till he evolved a horrible notion that ages of atrocious pain and mental torture could be contained between two successive winks of an eye. And meantime the Chief Inspector went on peering at the table with a calm face and the slightly anxious attention of an indigent customer bending over what may be called the by-products of a butcher's shop with a view to an inexpensive Sunday dinner. (p. 88)

As nausea wells up inside the Inspector, he remains controlled enough to look for evidence, and actually find it. By juxtaposing Heat's realization that Stevie's remains symbolize a terrible summary of human pain and torture with the incongruous image of the butcher shop customer, Conrad conveys the comic inequity between the terrible fact and the professional indifference with which it is examined, the necessary absurdity of countering moral shock with a focus on clues, incidents of the surface.

Conrad's reversion to comic devices here is well-timed, coming at moments when horrible recognition is about to dominate the viewers of the scene. The constable's first inane comment and the allusion to an indigent customer both pull us back from a prolonged attention to the tragic resonances of the corpse. The alternative to comic reversion is a frantic figure crying "Not mad, not mad," inescapably immersed in lunatic disorder. We are advised to grimace in order to
stifle a screech, to take advantage of the snatches of comic light for
our own sake, even going so far as recognizing an absurd similarity
between Stevie's fatal accident and a bit of stock slapstick
business: "It was like slipping on a bit of orange peel in the dark
and breaking your leg"(p. 236).

Verloc's death is the culmination of the comic automatism of
the characters in the novel. Observing Mr. Verloc "taking his
habitual ease" for the last time, we notice another comic function
of the corpse. It seems to become a kind of straight man for the
comic behavior of those still living. As Comrade Ossipon enters
Verloc's home to retrieve Winnie's money, he discovers the dead
agent:

He looked in, and discovered Mr. Verloc reposing
quietly on the sofa.
A yell coming from the innermost depths of his chest
died out unheard and transformed into a sort of greasy,
sickly taste on his lips. At the same time the mental
personality of Comrade Ossipon executed a frantic leap
backwards. But his body, left thus without intellectual
guidance, held on to the door handle... Mr. Verloc lay
very still meanwhile, simulating sleep for reasons of his
own. (pp. 284-285)

Verloc is portrayed as the playful observer of Ossipon's confused
fear, a practical jokester. What is suggested is a smile from beyond
the grave, a camaraderie between dead men and omniscient forces, like
those lurking in the jungle in *Heart of Darkness* jeering at the
pilgrims. The shrunken head which Marlow faces enforces this
application of the death smile; it is "smiling continuously at some
endless and jocose dream of that eternal slumber." Part of that
"jocose dream" may be a final recognition of the antics which living
men are condemned to perform.
The body of Señor Hirsch in Nostromo is a more extensive example of comic omniscience. Hirsch, a Jewish trader, is tortured by the remarkably incompetent General Sotillo; his arms are tied behind him and he is strung up by his wrists. In this position, Hirsch is a grotesquely comic figure: "he screamed with uplifted eyebrows and a wide open mouth--incredibly wide, black, enormous, full of teeth, comical" (p. 447). The victim is here hideously akin to a comic strip character. Hirsch finally drives Sotillo to shoot him, when, "with a sudden flash of a grin and a straining forward of the wrenched shoulders, he spat violently into his face" (p. 449). That momentary grin is coincident with Hirsch's most extreme agony, a breaking point arrived at after hanging in that wrenched position and screaming for hours. It is not a moment of brave defiance for Hirsch, who is the biggest coward in the novel; it is rather evidence that he experiences an instant of realization which triggers a comic view. It is a kind of triumph over Sotillo through an awareness of the absurdity and futility of the situation; it is Hirsch's recognition of himself and Sotillo as caricatures, as participants in a comedy.

In the later argument between Nostromo and Dr. Monygham, which occurs in the room where the murdered Hirsch is still suspended, the action is punctuated with significantly placed comic references to the presence of the corpse. With death literally hanging over them, the two men seem almost to be vying for the favor of the eerie figure, to be expecting an approving nod from Hirsch, who "seemed to be waiting, attentive, in impartial silence" (p. 452). Their reaction to his presence is nonsensically secretive: "To their eyes,
accustomed to obscurity, the late Señor Hirsch, growing more
distinct, seemed to come nearer. And the doctor lowered his voice
in exposing his scheme as though afraid of being overheard"(p. 455).
There is a definite sense that the death smile of Hirsch is
broadening while Monygham and Nostromo act out this little comedy.
At several points, Hirsch seems to be commenting upon their opposing
allegations of Nostromo's absolute value to the chaotic political
revolution: "Ah, yes! True. I am nothing," says Nostromo. "Not
at all. You are everything," replies Monygham. "Behind them, the
late Señor Hirsch preserved the immobility of a disregarded man"
(pp. 457-458). While the two men shout yes for no at each other,
we must remember the similarly obstinate positions of Sotillo and
Hirsch in the earlier scene, which was horribly comical. Hirsch is
here described as waiting, persistent, and immobile, suggesting an
omniscient perspective from which the ignorant exchange of meaningless
absolutes between Nostromo and Monygham looks ridiculous. In addition
to using the corpse as a terrible fact which must be endured with
humor, Conrad leagues it finally with the inscrutable forces which
the dreamers and civilizers attempt to dominate. This illusion of
dominance finds its ultimate mockery in the death smile.

These death scenes are some of the darkest moments in Conrad's
fiction, indeed in all fiction. And a sense of humor which extends
even into such dark extremity becomes a mode of restraint and a
component of courage. Without humor, the horror becomes unendurable,
and forces us frantically ashore for a howl and a dance. With it, man
is able to survive the absurdity and futility underlying the illusions and inequities which shape his modern world and himself; he is, at least, able to act, to carry on. In this regard, awareness of a human comedy allows optimism, an essential belief in the tenacious vitality of man to counter horrible and threatening obstacles. In his author's note to Victory, Conrad writes:

The unchanging Man of history is wonderfully adaptable cloth by his power of endurance and his capacity for detachment. The fact seems to be that the play of his destiny is too great for his fears and too mysterious for his understanding. Were the trump of the Last Judgement to sound suddenly on a working day the musician at his piano would go on with his performance of Beethoven's Sonata and the Cobbler at his stall stick to his last in undisturbed confidence in the virtues of leather. And with perfect propriety. (pp. ix-x)

What a sense of humor encourages and allows is action, and in such action is both comicality and an admirable fidelity to life. Although Jim despises the low comedy of the Patna crew and we know that they are corrupt, Tony Tanner notes that they are at least capable of action in a crisis, while Jim is immobilized. Captain MacWhirr, for all his dull-wittedness, handles the typhoon steadily. He despises the helmsman who gives up in resigned despair during the storm, advising the crew: "Don't you pay any attention to what that man says . . . He isn't on duty" (p. 65).

Attention to duty is a concentration upon what Marlow calls "mere incidents of the surface," and basically comic because an aspect of mechanical and sub-human behavior. Although such action is "the enemy of thought and the friend of flattering illusions" (Nostromo, p. 66), it is also a component of the sanity and control which clear-sighted awareness and achievement demands, and in its most
extreme application, is horribly comic, as in the following quote from Chance:

And indeed to be busy with material affairs is the best preservative against reflection, fears, doubts—all these things which stand in the way of achievement. I suppose a fellow proposing to cut his throat would experience a sort of relief while occupied in stropping his razor carefully. (p. 340)

It is this sort of comic juxtaposition which is central to Conrad's work: "his stories imply the necessity for action even when they demonstrate its impossibility in adverse circumstances or in certain types of character. But, characteristically, he seldom portrays the norm of the successful act but rather deviations from it in extremes of passivity, like that of Almayer, or of automatic response, as in Singleton." The norm of the successful act is Marlow, who recognizes comic juxtaposition both outside and within himself. In him, mechanical attention to duty and achievement involves the most difficult sort of courage, because it springs not from ignorance or refusal to recognize the horror, as with MacWhirr or Winnie Verloc, but from a conscious effort to endure that very recognition.

Conrad's comic hero can both see and act, and it is his sense of humor which largely allows him to do so. Implied by his success is that of the artist, who can remain a realist as well as a deliberate craftsman in the terrible face of a chaotic reality by relying upon comic controls. And those controls have their important effect upon the reader, who is able to digest the harsh truth which Conrad presents because its harshness is softened by a comic sensibility.
Conrad is not a brooding tragedian in his darkest works, but an active realist who shows us through comedy a way to face down darkness and death.
NOTES

All references to Conrad's writings are to the 26 volume
Canterbury Edition of his Complete Works, published by Doubleday,
Page and Company in New York in 1924.

I. Conrad the Comedian

1"Joseph Conrad's 'The Secret Agent,'" in Past Masters, trans.
H. T. Lowe-Porter (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press,
1968), pp. 231-250.

2At some points of overview and generalization I use the terms
comedy and humor interchangeably. In Sigmund Freud's Jokes and
Their Relationship to the Unconscious, ed. and trans. James Strachey
(New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1960), the author tries to make
a precise distinction between the two terms, and suggests that comedy
and the comic imply a technique, usually of exaggeration, and humor
more closely denotes an attitude, a view which lightens the pain of
certain serious or threatening elements. Gallows humor, consisting
of grim jokes in a context of impending death, is an example of the
redirection of strong feeling which humor implies. But it seems that
comedy and humor cannot stand independent of one another; technique
points to attitude and vice-versa; comic scenes speak for the author's
sense of humor. In specific instances, I will largely be using
"humor" to emphasize Conrad's perspective and "comic" to focus upon
the behavior of the characters, while recognizing that the former is
never exclusive of the latter.

3The Dark Comedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

4Jocelyn Baines, Conrad's primary biographer, cites
Korzeniowski's devotion to Hugo in his afterword to Almayer's Folly
that Apollo Korzeniowski devoted "most of his energies as a man of
letters" to Hugo, along with his work on Shakespeare and others.


6Loc. cit.

7From Conrad's Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus, p. xiv.

8"Humour Noir and Black Humor," in Veins of Humor, ed. Harry
Among other aspects of grotesque dark humor, this essay focusses on
several which Winston's article mentions; the following excerpts from his essay sketch some general tendencies which will come under scrutiny:

People become animals or objects, or share their traits or are likened to them. Bodily parts are exaggerated or distorted. The body's inability to keep to its proper confines is comic, as Henri Bergson has shown in *Le Rire*, but it also makes us fear that such horrible distortion could happen to us. . . . Death dominates, but it occurs in a ridiculous manner and is never dignified. Death is the final divorce between body and spirit, the ultimate disjunction in a form that dwells on violent incongruities. Often it is reduced to its physical manifestation, the corpse, which is man become thing; rigor mortis is the *Reductio ad absurdum* of Bergsonian automatism. . . . The madman is a central figure in grotesque black humor. . . . The same perspective prevails in other states that approach madness: delirium, dream, or intoxication. All are conditions in which one's normal certainties and the ability to evaluate rationally break down; in which it is difficult to distinguish between what is funny and what is frightening, and where one may suddenly turn into the other.

9Quoted by Kayser, p. 95.

10The *Dark Comedy*, p. 297.

11In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow steams past coastal settlements with "manes like Gran' Bassam" and "Little Popo." He seems to realize that those names anticipate the grimly comic context into which he is traveling; they seem to "belong to some sordid farce acted in front of a sinister back-cloth." He continues to insist upon a tension between the farcical and the ominous throughout his experiences, in terms like "lugubrious drollery," and "imbecile rapacity," as he points out hollow men with inscrutable smiles and capering pilgrims who fight fires with empty buckets. There is an entertaining insanity about all this, delineating a somewhat theatrical course through the jungle which at once seduces us with some merriment and warns of an evil core.

Faced with so many indications that humor somehow works in complicity with the darkness in what is perhaps Conrad's grimmest story, we become curious that more critical attention has not been paid to how and why it operates, in *Heart of Darkness* as well as in his other major works. I am aware of only two short studies to date on comedy in Conrad. They are Stanton deVoren Hoffman's *Comedy and Form in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1969), and Kenneth R. Lincoln's "Comic Light in *Heart of Darkness,"* Modern Fiction Studies, 18(Summer 1972), pp. 183-197. Additionally, Paul Wiley notes in Conrad's *Measure of Man* (New York: Gordian Press, 1966) that the work of Conrad's final years "often has a
tragicomic flavor that recalls the mood of Typhoon and 'Falk' and suggests the ultimate refinement of a talent natural to him from the beginning" (p. 132). Douglas Hewitt, in Conrad: A Reassessment (Cambridge, England: Bowes & Bowes, 1952), recognizes that the voyage along the African coast in Heart of Darkness "has an air of nightmare--of farcical nightmare" (p. 19), and adds, "there is a flavour of shameless farce about all the weaknesses and crimes of which Conrad writes at this time; his mean characters are all horribly comic" (p. 32).


II. Low Comedy


2. p. 22.

3. Lincoln, "Comic Light," p. 188.

4. *Comedy and Form*, p. 43.


8. *Comedy and Form*, p. 67.


III. Comic Heriosm and the Illusion of Dominance: Conrad's Fools and Men


6In Theories of Comedy, p. 184.

7Psychoanalytical Biography, p. 222.

8Comedy and Form, p. 29.


IV. Corpse Comedy

1A Reassessment, pp. 126-127.

2Psychoanalytical Biography, p. 247.


6Wiley, Conrad's Measure of Man, p. 82.
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