

My Unificationist Memoirs Chapter 38

J. Scharfen
July 31, 2021



Marlon Brando - The Hollow Men - How Cultures Die - T S Eliot

Each day, every class period, I worked to raise the spiritual awareness of my students. I knew in the marrow of my bones, if I provided provocative material and engaged them in the search for meaning, I could awaken their original natures and set them on course to find God. One of the reasons I focused on the theme of literature as an intergenerational conversation, was to alert my students to the universal and transcendent dimension of their seeking. We all long to find a resting place for our hearts. In a very real sense, nothing had changed from my days as an MFT leader laboring to inspire and energize my members, except the circumstances in which I found myself.

My final assignment for the year integrated three different mediums: literature, film, and poetry. I began with Joseph Conrad's "The Heart of Darkness." Set in the Belgian Congo, this novella depicts the cruelty of European imperialism in Central Africa. As the protagonist travels upriver to retrieve Mr. Kurtz, the wayward manager of a station in the deep forest, the veneer of civilization is stripped away from his companions (whom he calls "Pilgrims") leaving only the most base and selfish instincts. The external journey mirrors an internal one, which reveals the "heart of darkness" within each human. When they finally arrive at the station, they discover an ill Kurtz, who has established himself as a deity, worshipped by the natives. Clearly, Kurtz is a symbol of European imperialism, spiritually sick and physically wasted. Once loaded on the boat, Kurtz slips into delirium and dies, with his final words being, "The horror, the horror...."

After wrapping up the novella, we turned to Francis Ford Coppola's masterpiece, "Apocalypse Now." Based on Conrad's work but set in Vietnam, it gave my students a distinctly modern setting to reflect on the state of American culture. As Captain Willard proceeds upriver to assassinate Colonel Kurtz, the Green Beret gone "native," he travels on a Navy PBR deep into the tropical darkness, crossing the border into Cambodia. As Willard and the PBR probe ever more deeply upriver, the movie's imagery becomes increasingly primitive, as scenes depicting ancient religious practices and events flash on the screen. The crew becomes less disciplined and a lack of seriousness interferes with the performance of their duties. They seem more interested in water skiing, smoking weed, listening to rock from American Radio Saigon, and getting passes to watch Playboy Bunnies dancing for troops on RandR. Unlike the spoiled

and distracted Americans, Willard reflects that the only way "Charlie" made it home was through victory or a body bag. The corruption of American culture with its obsessive pleasure-seeking, makes it impossible for them to successfully operate as warriors. One of the most horrifying scenes in the movie occurs when these jumpy, stoned sailors stop a Vietnamese sampan to search it and end up opening fire on innocent peasants, murdering them. When Willard finally does meet Colonel Kurtz, he discovers an American officer who has made himself a god, worshipped by his "Montagnard" soldiers. Colonel Kurtz knows he cannot return to "civilization" and longs for death at the hand of Willard. While a simultaneous native ritual unfolds in flame lit darkness, and a water buffalo is sacrificed, Willard dispatches Kurtz using a Montagnard machete. His last words, of course, are "the horror, the horror..." drawn directly from the text of Conrad's "Heart of Darkness."

Marlon Brando plays Colonel Kurtz in the Coppola production. Prior to his death, in a period during which Willard lives with Kurtz in his compound, Brando gives an extraordinary reading of T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" (youtu.be/IPeHO1r8paU). The poem directly references Conrad's work, and alludes to the same theme of civilizational decay found in "The Heart of Darkness." Moreover, the poem's title is drawn from Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar," from a passage which references the corruption of love:

"Thou hast described
A hot friend cooling. Ever note, Lucilius,
When love begins to sicken and decay,
It useth an enforced ceremony.
There are no tricks in plain and simple faith.
But hollow men, like horses hot at hand
Make gallant show and promise of their mettle."
(Act IV, Scene II, lines 19-25).

Eliot's writing made a perfect argument for my curriculum's theme - literature is an intergenerational conversation seeking meaning.

As with "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock," Eliot echoes Dante's "Commedia," making repeated allusions both metaphorically and thematically. The poem operates on a very personal sexual level, as well as a broadly social one, as Eliot captures a cultural crisis within a deeply individual one, "Trembling with tenderness/ Lips that would kiss/ Form prayers to broken stone." In this effort, and effect, Eliot becomes the modern interpreter of Dante, and continues his project of exposing the idolatry of worshipping the power, money, success, and sex that so exemplify the "world."

These were the perfect themes to discuss (and write about) as May unfolded, flowers bloomed, Prom approached, and Summer's freedom beckoned my students. Anyone living and breathing has experienced supercharged teenage hormones mixed with the elation of Spring, truly a potent cocktail, maybe the most inebriating. Conrad, Eliot, and Coppola gave me the springboard for many honest class discussions about mind and body unity, in the context of desire and ultimate purpose. I could wind up the year referencing every text we encountered and address deeply moral concerns on the safe common ground of our reading - in a manner which invited discussion, unlike our Theology classes. Sometimes, there's nothing more off-putting than a priest.

The kids felt this and responded with good humor. Once, as we were watching "Apocalypse Now," I found myself totally engrossed in the movie with my back to the students. It was a hot May afternoon, and the air conditioning seemed useless. I checked over my shoulder to survey my boys, only to discover that my entire class had surreptitiously stripped down to their boxers. I thought, "Hmmm. This has never happened before...what should I do?" Absolutely nothing. I turned back to the movie and pretended as though everything remained perfectly normal. If MFT prepared me for anything, it was the unexpected. I'm just happy no administrator, or any of the Ursuline girls, walked in on our unusual state of undress.