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English 111, Section 024-A

16 November 2012

Outline

Topic: Joseph Conrad – Heart of Darkness

Thesis: In writing Heart of Darkness Josef Conrad reflected on his past and struggled with morality of things he had seen or even partaken in.

1. Joseph Conrad’s line of work predisposed him to reflection.
2. In his reflection he was observed moral inconsistencies.
3. He chose to speak around the moral issues and not directly.
4. Millions of us can’t afford to be as direct as we would have liked Conrad to be.
5. Heart of Darkness is a reference to a moment in one’s life when the difference of what we believed we did and what we actually did becomes evident.

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Travelling inefficiently on a ship as people did in Joseph Conrad’s time provided long spans for thinking and reflection. At the mercy of the wind and the tide one would find periods of stillness. Stillness on a ship waiting for nature to propel it is a guiltless one, because it is not brought on by inadequacy or laziness. The body and mind caged by the sea are forced to be still as the surface of calm waters. In a reasonably nourished and rested body the mind surges to go, to make, and to do, but that energy is repelled by the physical limits of the ship, so it is reflected into the past. Within this stillness the mind is unbridled. The reflected energy of the mind is focused to go again, to make again, and to do again, but not anew. There is nothing new here. Events, decisions, reasons, and consequences can only be studied here; they cannot be redone. Time casts a long shadow here. Judgment is confounded with hindsight not empowered by it. One alone with one’s recollection of events embarks to reason with oneself about the soundness of past decisions. This is when one’s past deeds based on past assumptions show their true color in light of actualities. Here a man that thinks of himself as an honorable pilot tries to reconcile himself with the absurd context he had operated in. Charlie Marlow is but an alias for Joseph Conrad when he writes: “Watching a coast as it slips by the ship is like thinking about an enigma” (Conrad 10). In writing Heart of Darkness Josef Conrad reflected on his past. Using fiction as a form he struggled to make sense of what he had seen, and perhaps what he had done.

The enigma that Conrad struggles with is one of morality. He reflects on his own deeds and that of people he associated with. He lived Marlow’s life and maybe aspired to be as productive as Kurtz. He saw the absurdity in the conduct of the white men in a faraway place and reflected on it. He identified with the strange looking natives; “what thrilled [him] was just the thought of their humanity” (Conrad 32), and was terrified by the realization. He laughed as the natives were labeled conveniently to suit the purpose of the white men; “There had been enemies, criminals, workers—and these were rebels” (Conrad 54). What he avoided, maybe tactfully, to consider directly was the morality of his employer, or the Administration as he calls it.

The Administration profits from the actions of the agents, but remains divorced of the details. The Administration offers employment to a manager, a clerk, an accountant, a pilot, a mechanic and even a brick maker without brick making capability. Each individual concerned with his own conduct, and preoccupied with the success of his own career is blind to the general purpose of the Administration. The industrialization and progress that made London such a civilized place in Marlow’s eyes compared to what the Romans had encountered nineteen hundred years prior required scale. Conrad’s description of the vast and overpowering African jungle is a good depiction of the Administration they all labored for.

Presently too, the conditions resemble that of the end of the eighteenth century when Conrad lived and wrote. Majority of industrious people lacked the luxury of considering the overarching purpose of the organization they labored within. Marlow was very appreciative of his aunt who helped him obtain a contract with the Administration. In our present lives too millions of people would be very thankful for a chance at a job where they can apply their talent. These individuals cannot afford to question the general purpose of the organization that employs them.

By and large we moral individuals compartmentalize our lives, and detach ourselves from the big picture. We are clerks, accountants, managers, pilots, and agents of one Administration or another. We even divide and label our lives into public and private. In our public lives we do what we have to in order to provide for our children. In our private lives we try to teach our children the morality that our elders taught us. But we cannot afford to mix the two lives. Conrad could not afford to do this either.

Commonly, this context-justified-morality accommodates a lot of people. But then, at least for some people, there are those spans of stillness when silence envelops all, when we are forced to reflect on our journey thus far. When we have spent our industriousness, applied our intelligence, and in some cases even become the first-class agent. At that time if we determine that our existence was in the service of an Administration similar to that which employed Marlow and Kurtz we too, faced with the heart of darkness, may rightfully cry: ‘‘The horror! The horror!”

Works Cited

Conrad, Joseph. Heart of Darkness. New York: Dover Publications, 1990