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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.

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 immobility. This stillness on a ship, waiting for nature to propel things, is a guiltless one, because it is not brought on by inadequacy or laziness. Only the mind can escape from this tedium, so it studies events, decisions, reasons, and consequences of the past. Time casts a long shadow. Judgment is confounded with hindsight, not empowered by it. A man alone with his recollection of events embarks to reason with himself about the soundness of past decisions. His past deeds which were based on certain assumptions now show their true form, and the soundness of those assumptions is questioned. Here a man who thinks of himself as an honorable pilot tries to reconcile 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, 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 those 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 called it.

The Administration profits from the actions of the agents, but remains divorced from 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 reflected on the effects of these large scale operations on each individual. His description of the vast and overpowering African jungle is a good depiction of the Administration they all labored for. The relentless influence of the African jungle on Marlow’s life is the tangible placeholder for the persistent influence of the Administration on Marlow’s character. It is easy to notice the different climate that sickened their bodies, but noticing the elusive power of the Administration that sickened their morals is the key if we read between the lines.

Conditions resembling that of the end of the eighteenth century when Conrad lived and wrote exist presently too. Many honest and industrious people lack the luxury of considering the overarching purpose of the organization they labor within. Millions of people would be very thankful for a chance at a job, just as Marlow was appreciative of his aunt who helped him obtain a contract with the Administration. 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, those spans of stillness occur when silence envelops all, and we are forced to reflect on our journey thus far. We have spent our industriousness, applied our intelligence, and in some cases even succeeded in becoming 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. Print.