
Labor and Belief in Conrad's Composition

Early on in Marlow's journey to the heart of the Congo, he encounters the chief accountant for the Company; later, he and his crew find an abandoned hut, formerly occupied by a "white man." In these two scenes, Conrad puts forth a series of contrasts that resonate with larger themes in the text: his philosophies of work and faith. The Accountant, whose village teems with many forms of life and death, proves to be a touchstone for each of Marlow's subsequent encounters. It is here that Marlow first hears of the "very remarkable person" that is Kurtz, and here that Marlow begins to form the basis of Conrad's core credo that when everything "is gone you must fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness" (123; 148). Marlow gains an understanding of this "capacity" precisely because he first observes devout adherence to a European ideal in the accountant, and then later sees the remnants of an ostensibly similar man who has been left to his own devices in the deep jungle.

The accountant resides at a station that is far removed from the turmoil and chaos of the inner station, but is nonetheless in a place overrun by great "demoralization" (122). In spite of this, Marlow notes, the accountant maintains his appearance: he looks "amazing" in a "high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket" and "a clean necktie" (122). Marlow makes sure to convey his admiration for the accountant, and Conrad's diction in describing the accountant's clothing suggests that the accountant belongs to the "light" and not to the "darkness." In addition, Marlow notes that the accountant's attention to detail represents his "backbone," that "his starched collars and got-up shirt-fronts were achievements of character" (122). This idea is a weaker brand of Conrad's "capacity for faithfulness," though; while the accountant proves he can preserve his perfunctory values of organization and "apple-pie order," he still lies far from the epicenter of darkness, the inner-station (122). While he has upheld the European class structure in the face of "demoralization," he has yet to confront the true face of evil, as his office is at least "fifty feet" above the "grove of death" (123).

While Marlow praises work for its psychological effects ("I like what is in the work-the chance to find yourself. Your own reality-for yourself, not for others"), he withholds judgment while at the accountant's station (131). Marlow primarily discusses Kurtz, who the accountant speaks of as "a very remarkable person" (123). What *is* remarkable is the extent to which his European air of superiority and the nature of his work in finances have collaborated in forming a man who appears to Marlow "a sort of vision" (122). The accountant's work is in "book-keeping," and he obsesses over the perfect organization of the books (122). He utters, "When one has got to make correct entries, one comes to hate those savages," because when they are sick they "distract [his] attention. And without that it is extremely difficult to guard against clerical errors in this climate" (123). The accountant's work thus suggests to him on a daily basis that human

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lives are dispensable in the quest for perfect logic. His work is in mathematics, a subject ruled by flawless logic; his strength is in "making correct entries of perfectly correct transactions" (123). As a result, the accountant regards Kurtz as remarkable most likely because he "sends in as much ivory as all the others put together," and he enjoys keeping the books on these larger numbers (123). Although Marlow initially describes the accountant using words associated with light, he may do so only because the accountant has not yet fallen from innocence and seen the true costs associated with his blind faith in work.

After Marlow reaches the river, he and his crew arrive at an inlet with "a hut of reeds" that looks "melancholy" and flies a flag with "unrecognizable tatters" (138). The dwelling is "dismantled" with a "rude table" and a "heap of rubbish" (138). The hut is both physically and metaphorically the opposite of the accountant's hut: it is made of reeds, and sits low in the depths of the jungle as opposed to above the canopy; it is empty, and shows the signs of an abandoned life; there is a sign outside that looks as if it were penned by an imbecile, and not with the precision of an obsessive compulsive book-keeper. Most importantly, though, Marlow finds a book entitled "An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship" near the doorway. The book's pages are "luminous with another than a professional light" (138). In this book, Conrad finds a symbol that welds his "capacity for faithfulness" with his idea that work is spiritually redeeming, as the book displays a "singleness of intention, an honest concern for the right way of going to work," and offers Marlow something that the professional light of the accountant could not: "something unmistakably real" (138). This real thing is proof to Marlow that Towson, the author, took "inquiring earnestly" in a subject as seriously as Marlow inquires about journeying to find the truth about his own soul (138). Work for Conrad, therefore, is a vehicle for exploring the self in order to arrive at that layer where a man can see his own innate strength and "capacity for faithfulness."

The book Marlow finds can also be read as a symbol for the soul of man. Even though the book has "lost its covers" and the pages have been "thumbed into a state of extremely dirty softness," the way in which it conveys its "singleness of intent" completely redeems it, positioning it as an "extraordinary find" (138). The book shows discipline and restraint even when it is stripped of its protective outer layer. Like a man stripped of his cultural façade, the book only has its inner self, its soul. Kurtz, therefore, is like a book that has dissolved away, leaving only the binding. He has no inner self, as his focus is solely on expressing those facets of himself that he believes will grant him the most power. The man who once owned the book must have felt the same power that Marlow senses; he feels as though putting the book down is "like tearing myself away from the shelter of an old and solid friendship," and also imagines that the book presents a glimpse of the light that the darkness drowns out (139). If Marlow were to live in the hut, one could imagine him sitting amidst the chaos of the jungle reading the book to himself as a means of survival, basking in the comfort of its luminosity. Perhaps the accountant, in the same situation, would compute numbers to reiterate his faith in perfect logic.

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Both of these scenes speak to Conrad's philosophies of faithfulness and work, but also underscore the motif of the meaning of exteriors in relation to interiors. Toward the beginning of his tale, the narrator states of Marlow, "[he] was not typical...and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of those misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine," thus providing a means of interpreting Marlow's description of physical spaces in the novel (112). Implicit in this view is an understanding that the very essence of something does not belong to its core; the meaning of an object, or a human being, lies in the way in which the "enveloping" forces extirpate shades of meaning. If we apply this idea to the chief accountant's station, it is the "darkness" and the "chaos" that envelope his office, forcing Marlow to seek refuge inside in an effort to escape "eternity" (122). The surrounding chaos acts as another force that compels the accountant to put faith in his work, to be "devoted to his books," to maintain a personal fiction that places order on the outside world as a means of survival (122). Thus the "meaning" that envelopes the accountant's office is that chaos is the only living, breathing truth in a world that brings forth meaning for humans in the form of work and faith.

The hut of reeds that Marlow and his men briefly encounter acts as a bridge between the office of the accountant and Kurtz's inner-station, as a sign of Marlow's descent into hell. The "white man" who once lived in the hut clearly left signs of his "capacity for faithfulness," as evidenced by the book and the chopped wood outside. The book is a reminder of the accountant's bookkeeping, but the absence of a cover suggests that only raw ideas survive in the interior of the jungle. The hut has a table, "a plank on two posts," but it is not a "high desk" like the accountant's and certainly not two posts showing severed heads like those at Kurtz's station (123; 138). Most significantly, though, is what this half-way house symbolizes; because the only things that can be known are that a man used to live in the hut, and that he may presently be dead, Conrad is suggesting that the only two ways for a man to live are at its polar extremes. Either one lives like the accountant, in accordance with the values of civilized man, or one lives completely without restraint, as Kurtz has done. Once one begins to explore the side of man that Kurtz represents, he cannot live without making this choice.

Each of the aforementioned spaces offers a glimpse into Conrad's philosophies of work and faith. At their core, though, these two concepts that are almost mutually exclusive in the civilized world are welded firmly together when placed in the context of the African Jungle. Marlow conveys this idea when he teaches a native to work on the boiler with him: the native believes "that should the water in that transparent thing disappear, the evil spirit inside the boiler would get angry...and take a terrible vengeance" (138). Gaining insight into this matter, Marlow states, "the boiler seemed indeed to have a sulky devil in it, and thus neither that fireman nor I had any time to peer into our creepy thoughts," demonstrating a newly found harmony between work and faith (138). Marlow shares a belief in the "sulky devil" with the native, which helps him to

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avoid his "creepy thoughts." In the "heart of darkness," where man's ideas are his only saving grace, Marlow realizes that the ability "to find yourself" lies in work, but that the ability to maintain ones inner self in the chaos of the jungle comes from the interplay between work and a "capacity for faithfulness."

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