5-2010

"The Cast-Off Mistress;" The changing face of seafaring in Conrad's Middle-fiction

Margaret Hutchison

College of William and Mary

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses

Recommended Citation

https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/721

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
“THE CAST-OFF MISTRESS;”

The changing face of Seafaring in Conrad’s middle-fiction

Margaret Hutchison

Advisor Professor Simon Joyce

Committee: Professor Walter Wenska

Professor Mary Ann Melfi

Professor Laurie Wolf

Spring 2010
“The Cast-Off Mistress;”

The Changing face of Seafaring in Conrad’s Middle Fiction

To understand Conrad the writer, one must understand that, in the words of critic Thomas Moser, this literary giant, “disciple of James, mentor of Ford Madox Ford, friend of Galsworthy, Wells, and Gide- had been first of all a seaman, really a seaman, and for twenty years” (Lord Jim xi). Indeed, the personal history of Joseph Conrad prevents the separation of his literary and maritime careers. Born in Poland in 1857 as Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski and orphaned in 1869, Conrad went to sea at the age of sixteen. From his experiences there Conrad acquired his third language, English, and a nautical vocabulary, the union of which produced the rhetoric of his later masterpieces. These early episodes of life at sea authenticate his narratives and provide the historical and geographical details which color his nautical accounts. Conrad’s time at sea birthed his authorial identity.

Yet in many ways, the mariner Conrad and the novelist Conrad exist as two separate entities. By the time Conrad published his first novel Almayer’s Folly in 1895, he had retired from his career at sea, never to return professionally to shipboard life. Indeed, as literary peer and advisor Ford Madox Ford writes of Conrad in Portraits from Life, “He detested the sea as a man detests a cast-off mistress” and “his passion became to live out of sight of the sea and all its memories” (57). It seems difficult to believe that Ford intends this description for the same author who produced the canonical texts of modern maritime literature, or, indeed, for the same man who, upon his death, left an unfinished manuscript upon his desk which mourned the end of the great age of sail.
(Conrad Last Essay)\(^1\) As Conrad’s biography, letters, and personal memoirs reveal, his affinities to seafaring and the sea are exceedingly more complex than at first glance.

Joseph Conrad both loved and hated the sea. His experiences there provided the fodder for some of his greatest literary masterpieces, namely *Nigger of Narcissus*, *Lord Jim*, “Heart of Darkness,” and *Nostromo*, while simultaneously limiting his authorial productivity by branding him with the negative stigma surrounding authors of popular, nautical fiction. Inexplicably, despite any expressed frustration with the content of his works, Conrad continued to write about ships, the seaboard, and the art of sailing while attempting to conform these nautical patterns into a display of authorial mastery. For Conrad, the intricacies of affinity surrounding his past nautical experiences, and his struggle to reconcile these two separate, and at times, exceedingly disparate identities as sailor and artist, heavily mark his early fiction.

The historical context of this period in the British Merchant Service further complicates Conrad’s frustrations of identity. His time at sea heralded the transition from sail to steam in the British Merchant Service. In 1836, the voyage of the steamship *Savannah* first introduced steam propulsion as a method of oceanic travel. Although this new invention developed slowly, the benefits of the application of steam at sea soon became apparent. In 1869, five years before Conrad’s maiden voyage, the opening of the Suez Canal confirmed the future dominance of the steamship. Although constructed to shorten the journey around the horn for sailing vessels, the Canal’s adverse calms prevented the efficient transversal of anything other than the steamship. With alarming

---

\(^1\) I refer to the essay “Legends” which was found incomplete on Conrad’s desk after his death of a heart attack. This essay addresses, in a very sentimental fashion, the loss of the heroic and patriotic deep-sea sailors of the square-rigged wooden ships.
speed, steam emerged as the most economically conducive method of travel. As a result, the years 1875-1900 represented a period of intense change in the practices of British mercantile shipping, further spurred on by the introduction of iron and composite construction. The years in which Conrad began his apprenticeship as an author coincide precisely with this period in which steamships crowd out the deep-water sailing vessels.

In his lifetime, Conrad identified with a deep-water sailor under mast. As Zdzislaw Najder writes of Conrad in his biography Joseph Conrad; A Life, “Of his nearly eleven years at sea, nine months were on steamers” (162). Conrad discusses the anomaly of his career in A Personal Record, saying “I never went into steam- not really. If only I live long enough I shall become a bizarre relic of a dead barbarism, a sort of monstrous antiquity, the only seaman of the dark ages who had never gone into steam- not really” (289). For Conrad, the changes in technology which revolutionized the face of the industry threatened to destroy a way of life which had thrived for over three hundred years.

Furthermore, these innovations further exacerbated Conrad’s uncertainty of professional identity. Although Conrad retired from the sea in 1893, he did not achieve economic or public success until post-1913, with the publication of his novel Chance. Accordingly, his early years as an author were characterized by constant financial strain and uncertain popularity. The new author found himself between two careers; one which was quickly becoming obsolete and the other which boded only tenuous success. The combination of stresses inherent in this dramatic transition caused considerable tension on Conrad’s perceptions of himself and, it would be safe to say that between the period of 1897-1900 Conrad suffered a crisis of personal identity.
Conrad’s biographies and personal correspondence reveal that he associated career with identity. As Ford Madox Ford writes, “Conrad held very strongly to the idea of the Career. A career was, for him, something a little sacred: any career. It was part of his belief in the shipshape. […] A career was a thing to be carried through tidily, without mistakes, as a ship is taken through a voyage and stowed safely in a port” (*A Personal Remembrance* 131). This association was probably engrained in Conrad from an early age through the guidance of his Uncle and guardian, Tadeusz Bobrowiski, who admonished Conrad at the tender age of twelve to “to be useful, hardworking, capable, and therefore a worthy human being-”(Najder 40).\(^2\) With proper treatment, a profession could become the vehicle of respectability, identity and personal value. Accordingly, Conrad cared greatly about the public perception of his careers. As a result, he spends much of his memoirs, essays, and arguably, the majority of his maritime fiction, attempting to authenticate his choice of vocations, both his former occupation in the Merchant Marines as well as his authorial career post-1893. He seemed to deeply associate his personal value with professional success, and in the course of his authorial life, Conrad often expressed frustration at his lack of production, berating himself for failing to gain mastery over his newly chosen profession.

This study will examine the ways in which anxiety regarding professional identity influenced the writing of Conrad’s middle fiction, particularly in the works of “Youth,” “Heart of Darkness” and *Lord Jim*. Published during the period in which Conrad grapples with issues of self-perception, particularly in association with the relevance of career as a

\(^2\) Bobrowiski wrote this letter c. 1869 preceding the death of Conrad’s Father. Najder comments upon the severity of the letter, which reads more as a sermon than a letter of condolence to a grieving child. However, this document reveals the nature of Conrad’s upbringing regarding career, productivity, and, in the words of Bobrowiski, one’s “future destiny.”
signifier of personal value or identity, these works exemplify themes of professional frustration, unemployment, and displacement. In “Youth” Conrad discusses the relationship between personal value and productivity, reclaiming the participation in work as a chief virtue. The theme carries over into Conrad’s novella “Heart of Darkness,” published in the same volume, which functions as a narrative of unemployment in which a disenfranchised narrator Marlow speaks out against a modern age which substitutes the common laborer in place of the skilled worker. In *Lord Jim*, Conrad creates a complex argument for the abstraction of value and production which exposes the dangers of associating personal identity with professional action. In a reversal of the traditional literary structures, Conrad presents the central figures tragic flaw as simply the realization of the inevitability of each man’s failure. Throughout these works, the underlying transformations in the British Service further demand a reevaluation of professionalism in conjunction with the modern industrial age.

The notion of presenting career as the signifier of identity resonates with a modern perspective and demonstrates the far-reaching relevance of Conrad’s fiction. Such thinking could only be facilitated by the changing social climate of the mid-1800’s, a period in which mass social reevaluation of the respectability of career occurred. Also, I believe that such an examination will be deeply sympathetic for a contemporary, and more specifically, Western audience of the 21st century. Conrad represents a society that constructs productivity as a factor of one’s personal value and identity; a society in which the signifier of the individual self substitutes the words ‘this is who I am’ for the phrase, ‘this is what I do.’ As Conrad’s own frustrations and latent anxiety reveal, this connection between personal value and action fragments traditional self-perception and results in a
myriad of complications of identity which produce personal anxiety, self-deprecation, and even paralysis.

***

“On this ship you will have to Work;” the ethics of action in “Youth”

The short story “Youth” explores the art of seafaring in relation to the concept of quidditas, and presents the sailing ship as the symbol of value divorced from the act of production. More specifically, the narrative reclaims the innate qualities of seafaring apart from the industrialization of a modern British Merchant Marines through an examination of the sailing ship in the context of her competition with the steamship. The story revolves around the small sailing barque, the Judea, during her ill-fated voyage carrying coal to Bankok. By the time the Judea sails, steamships have already come to the forefront as serviceable cargo and passenger vessels, and within the story, the ship encounters only steam operated vessels while crossing the Indian Sea. Although the narrative never specifies exact dates, the reader can assume that the body of the text occurs sometime after 1852, subsequent to the establishment of the first regular steam-line running between Australia and the East Indies (Bowen 207). Conrad’s description of the steamship Somerville, a mail-boat which traveled from West Australia to Singapore, supports this conclusion. Another indication of the period comes from Conrad’s own personal history. He constructs the plot of the story around his experiences as a second officer aboard the 600-ton barque, Palestine, a voyage which began in September 1881 (Najder 90). In his Author’s Note, Conrad describes the story as a “feat of memory”

---

3 The steam-ship Somerville is most likely commissioned by the P. and O. line ran a branch from Singapore to Sydney beginning in 1852.
constructed in “a mood of wistful regret, of reminiscent tenderness” (“Youth” x). Although “Youth” exaggerates many of the incidents for fictional effect, the significant structural elements, including the Judea’s eventual destruction, correspond to actual events. In the story, Conrad first introduces his most famous narrator, Charlie Marlow. Framing the narrative around Marlow’s youthful experiences as a second mate on board the Judea, an older and wiser Marlow recounts the events from the comfort of a seaside tavern.

In material aspect, this small barque upon which the action of Marlow’s narrative takes place is perhaps the best representation of the old ways of sailing in any of Conrad’s nautical fiction. Marlow, the narrator of the tale, describes the Judea thus: “The ship was old” and “She was all rust, dust, grime-soot aloft, dirt on deck” (5). The state of the ships speaks to the level of her usefulness. Furthermore, Marlow goes on to comment that the ship was only 400 tons, with “a primitive windlass, wooden latches to the doors, not a bit of brass about her, and a big square stern” (5). For a ship presumably sailing in the mid-1800’s, the Judea is hopelessly outdated: her owners have made no move to apply available innovations such as steam-operated deck machinery. The reference to her ‘square stern’ implies that she is unwieldy and not designed for speed. Judea is ordinary in every sense of the word, and her construction and small size prevent her from having a romantic or noteworthy career.

Rather than perceiving these inefficiencies as an obstacle, a young Marlow embraces the ship as a symbol of the principles of past maritime tradition. He comments, “There was a touch of romance in it, something that made me love the old thing—something that appealed to my youth!” (6). The young Marlow commits himself the old
ship on the strength of her romantic and aesthetic image. He also comments upon the inscription on the bow which reads “Do or Die.” Emblazoned fittingly beneath a peeling coat of arms, the inscription glorifies action as a supreme virtue and speaks to nostalgic images of chivalric and heroic codes of behavior. An older Marlow chooses this phrase as the rallying cry for his younger self, and the words become, throughout the narrative, an emblem for the spirit of an earlier age.

Yet the kind of action which this motto seems to imbue with a sense of virtue actually represents labor without production, or energy expended without the promise of return. As the reader soon learns, the Judea suffers such bad luck that she fails to reach Bankok through her own strength. The ship experiences a gale, springs a leak, and must return to port to be gutted and refitted; subsequently, the cargo of coal in the newly fitted hold catches fire and eventually explodes, forcing the men to abandon ship. Despite this failure, Marlow, his tavern audience, and even the reader, are not meant to perceive the venture as a tragedy. Rather, Marlow, his Captain, and the crew are all redeemed by their adherence to the principle that work in itself can be virtuous.

When ‘young Marlow’ first boards the ship, he is told emphatically by his superior officer that “You know in this ship you will have to work” and that this ship “is different, and you gentlemen out them big ships… but there! I dare say you will do” (4-5). This central principle of labor is soon illustrated by the desperate efforts which the crew must expend in order keep the sieve-like Judea afloat. During the first portion of the story, a leak forces the men to the pumps, and they forget all sense of time: “We pumped watch and watch, for dear life,” Marlow recalls, “and it seemed to last for months, for years, for all eternity, as though we had been dead and gone to a hell for sailors” (12).
Although the men pump for their life, their expended energy results in no measurable product. Their efforts are fluid, displacing water from one source to another in a circular motion. They exert their highest level of labor only in order to live, demonstrating the full meaning of the phrase “Do or Die.”

Later, when the ship catches fire, the men reverse their previous action in order to quench the blaze. Marlow comments, “It was our fate to pump in that ship, to pump out of her, to pump into her; and after keeping water out of her to save ourselves from being drowned, we frantically poured water into her to save ourselves from being burnt” (22). Out of context, the efforts of the men and their regressive industry seem absurd, but the urgency of their situation and the consequences of their potential failure redeem this circular labor. Their actions fragment the connection between value and production, prompting Marlow to declare of the ship that “To me she was not an old rattle-trap carting about the world a lot of coal for a freight- to me she was the endeavor, the test, the trial of life” (13). What seems to bother him more is the opposite of energy expended without production; product without action. He describes the ship in dry dock as being “Horrid,” and how “Morally it was worse than pumping for life.” Despite the wages that he receives during this recess, Marlow finds shore-life lacking in stimulation and waits impatiently to return to sea while the “owner, the underwriters, and the charterers squabbled amongst themselves” (17).

The appreciation of labor for the sake of action captivates the young Marlow, and by association Conrad, because it represents the innate value of a venture divorced from productivity. Marlow begins the story with the acknowledgement of the voyage’s quantitative failure. He says, “You fight, work, sweat, nearly kill yourself, sometimes do
kill yourself, trying to accomplish something- and you can’t. Not from any fault of yours. You simply can do nothing, neither great nor little-not a thing in the world- not even marry an old maid, or get a wretched 600-ton cargo of coal to its port of destination” (4). This lack of production takes several forms, including the failure to fulfill certain tasks or goals, an inability to generate a desirable response (such as recognition), or more concretely, a failure to produce material recompense. Ultimately, the Judea never delivers her cargo.

Especially in the case of combustible coal, cargo exercises a detrimental or pernicious effect upon the ship, and concludes by destroying the vessel from the inside. At one point, the smoking cargo actually transforms the sailing ship into metaphorical steam-ship- the emblem of commercialism in Conrad’s fiction- leaving in her wake a billowing path of smoke notwithstanding the efforts of the crew to stifle the blaze. Marlow says, “We battened down everything, and still she smoked. The smoke kept coming out through imperceptible crevices; it forced itself through bulkheads and covers; it oozed here and there and everywhere in slender threads […] it poisoned the sheltered places on deck, it could be sniffed as high as the mainyard” (21). By the time the coal combusts, the crew and captain barely mourn the loss of their cargo, so disheartened are they by its harmful effects. When the condition of the ship finally forces the crew to abandon, the Captain faithfully instructs the crew to gather up any salvageable material for the underwriters. Yet the crew refers to these pieces as “a lot of old rubbish,” and their concern for material goods does not exceed their reason. Quietly, they let slip impossibly cumbersome items over the side, including a kedge-anchor, a heavy chest,
bags of coffee, and tins of paint (33). Rather than appearing sensible, the Captain’s obsession with preserving as much of the ships materials as possible reads as madness.

This unconcern for material gain illustrates the particular quality of value without production that Conrad associates with the age of the sailing ships. Although the journey produces nothing in terms of enterprise, something still has been gained by attempting the voyage. The journey revolves around an obsession with destination. As Marlow writes after ship begins leaking, “I loved the ship more than ever, and wanted awfully to get to Bankok. To Bankok! Magic name, blessed named” (16). The Judea exists at an extreme of the spectrum between work and rest, and fulfills her purpose simply by connecting the fragmented spaces of the earth and expanding the mind of one man with visions of foreign and exotic places. In “Youth,” a ship transverses the sea, and that is enough. The journey retains a profound impact on Marlow’s psychology, and prompts him to retell the events despite their circular progression and static ending.

Conrad’s idealized vision of the old sailing ship also extends to the space in which these vessels sailed. In the beginning of Outcast of the Islands, Conrad personifies the aesthetic image of the sea as a “a beautiful and unscrupulous woman the sea of the past was glorious in its smiles, irresistible in its anger, capricious, enticing, illogical, irresponsible; a thing to love, a thing to fear.” He continues, “It cast a spell, it gave joy, it lulled gently into boundless faith; then with quick and causeless anger it killed. But its cruelty was redeemed by the charm of its inscrutable mystery, by the immensity of its promise, by the supreme witchery of its possible favor” (12). This image focuses upon an unchanged, untamed essence of the sea in all of its duplicity. Although Conrad employs symbolism and takes poetic license with his language, he does not deny the capricious
and dangerous nature of the sea. His description encompasses both an artistic rendering of the aestheticism of the sea, while simultaneously addressing the realities and hardships of a life lived upon it in an honest, if poetic manner. Accordingly, the duplicitous nature of the sea, with its “causeless anger,” “cruelty,” and “supreme witchery of its possible favor,” proves her most enticing aspect. Conrad celebrates the untamed sea as a space for exploring freedom of action and the formation of an identity independent of certain social values such as productivity. For Conrad, the allure of his personified “old sea” rests in her independence from the bonds of commercial enterprise as well as her defiance of industry, which attempts unsuccessfully to transform both her faults and merits into manageable, marketable quantities. As Conrad writes in Mirror of the Sea, “receiving no impress from valor and toil and self-sacrifice, recognizing no finality of dominion, the sea has never adopted the cause of its masters” and “unlike the earth, it cannot be subjugated at any cost of patience and toil.” The freedom from containment, dominion, and subjugation which the “old sea” possesses differentiates this space from the land, where “victorious nations of mankind have taken root, rocking their cradles and setting up their gravestones” (133).

The content of this passage, with its emphasis on the sea’s treacherous nature, implies Conrad’s belief in an honest portrayal of reality. As Mark Stockdale writes in “Conrad’s Sea: Invisibility and the Death of Symbol,” “If Conrad presents the sea symbolically in his work, then, as, for instance, when he calls the sea ‘the restless mirror of the Infinite’ in An Outcast of the Islands, this presentation should not be seen as a literary posture,” for Conrad “would never have condescended to ‘reinvent’ the element on which half his life had been spent as a mere trope” (4). This vision of the sea unites
Conrad’s disparate identities as artist and sailor. In order to survive a life at sea, a sailor must visualize his profession as an aesthete. He must see with an artist’s double vision of reality and appearance in order to appreciate the beauty of the sea without underestimating its hidden power. Internalizing this holistic, double-knowledge forces the sailor to admit and delight in the true essence of things, rather than attempting to bend reality to fit his individual purposes. Thus, Conrad’s vision of the sea functions synonymously with the ability to accept the capriciousness, the fluctuating extremes, of present existence.

This emphasis on the aesthetic value of quiddity, or delighting in the inner essence of things, combats Conrad’s own personal anxieties surrounding his career as an author. Delighting in the essence, the ‘whatness’ of sailing ship implies the value of ‘being’ despite production. Conrad’s focus on quidditas speaks to the lapses in production which plague him throughout his authorial career, and comments upon his personal anxieties during periods characterized by inadequate financial return. Conrad often spoke of his anxiety in no uncertain terms. As he writes in one letter to critic Edward Garnett, dated December 1987, “In all these days I haven’t written a line, but there hadn’t been a day when I did not wish myself dead. It is too ghastly, I positively don’t know what to do” (Najder 240). In the summer of 1898, preceding his publication of “Youth,” Conrad was suffering from a similar episode of authorial stasis while working on his already commissioned full-length work The Rescue. His frustration with the progress of this work led him to consider returning to his career in the merchant service. Lamenting his decision to become a writer, Conrad spent July of that year looking for a position at sea. As he wrote to Cunningham Graham “I am in a deplorable
state, mentally. I feel utterly wretched. I haven’t the courage to tackle my work.” Najder observes that “it is impossible to tell to what extent [Conrad’s] depression was the cause or the result of living in ‘his own hell,’ which consisted of an inability to write, a lack of one, and family worries” but regardless, “Conrad was obviously in a state of prostration” (269). From this mood, and in the grips of attempting to complete The Rescue, Conrad penned “Youth.” In light of the personal anxiety which characterizes Conrad’s vision of himself during the period, “Youth” can be considered a retaliation against the lack of production, or conversely, as a re-imagining of the structures of value outside of the constraints of ends versus means.

Conrad’s previous experience as a sailor prevents him from presenting the sea in a purely romantic light. As a result, Conrad’s portrayal of the sea and sea-life teeters between two perspectives; the authorial perception of the sea as a symbolic, transformative, and romantic space of the traditional maritime voyage narrative and his professional awareness as a retired, veteran seaman that the sea of his present century no longer represents the possibilities for which it was once immortalized. Accordingly, Conrad deals with this complication in “Youth” by polarizing his conflicting perspectives on seafaring within the historical context of changing technology: he presents the sailing ship as the idyllic image of a past life, while conversely demonizing the steamship because of its association with a modern world in which men revert to passivity, commercialism rules the day, and selfishness becomes the key component for survival.

Despite a desire to authenticate the continued viability of the sailing-ship, Conrad must either historicize or heavily fictionalize his musings on the topic. Such is the case in “Youth,” which recounts the adventures of a younger Marlow in the narrative voice of his
older self. This frame temporalizes the tale through the juxtaposition of past and present, naiveté and maturity, youth and age. This story has become the property of an older generation, of personal memory and forgotten history. Marlow recounts the story to a group of seasoned, fellow mariners. They have earned their place at the table because of their experiences at sea, specifically as a result of their time before the mast, “in the good old days when mail-boats were square-rigged at least on two masts, and used to come down the China Sea before a fair monsoon with stun’sails set alow and aloft.” Their common history as sailors of the older method, mast and canvass, creates this “strong bond of the sea” which unites them in what Conrad refers to as “the fellowship of the craft” (“Youth” 3). These men represent an old guard, the ambassadors of a way of life that has already begun to dissolve, circulating among the newer generation as legends rather than fact. As Conrad writes in Notes on Life and Letters, for a deep-sea sailor in the age of steam, his very existence promises in time to become a “bizarre relic of a dead barbarism, a sort of monstrous antiquity” of the present time (289). Ultimately, “Youth” concludes that the old image of the sea is an illusion of perception which can only be summoned up through the tears and tales of older men immersed in their memory and good glasses of claret. As Marlow remarks of the sea in a later novel, “In no other kind of life is the illusion more wide of reality- in no other is the beginning all illusion- the disenchantment more swift- the subjugation more complete” (LJ 79).

The displacement of time within the narrative speaks to Conrad’s deepening nostalgic associations with sailing ships, yet it also demonstrates Conrad’s desire to transform or reconcile modernity with the aesthetic qualities of the old sea. The tale-telling has nothing to do with productivity and everything to do with re-contextualizing
reality outside of the limitations of commercialism. Participating in communal
remembrance through the vehicle of Marlow’s story produces within the characters the
sensation of returning to a time of past perception, forcing them to reenter former
mindsets in order to take up the narration. The act of storytelling becomes the means by
which Marlow and his seafaring peers regain their autonomy from previous acts of
commercialism and productivity. The connection demonstrates Conrad’s faith in the
innate value of art, a belief encapsulated in the omitted lines of his authorial preface to
_Nigger of Narcissus:_ “For in art alone of all enterprises of men there is a meaning in
endeavor disassociated from success” (Najder 246). The Marlow’s allegiance to the
square-rigged windjammer of their younger days acts as a talisman against the evils of
industry.

Unfortunately, this singular vision of the sailing ship—as a vessel which
transverses oceans, achieves a destination, unites the places of the earth—fails to take into
account the underlying purposes for her activity. Although the young Marlow perceives
the _Judea_ as a romantic symbol and the personification of action as the ideal virtue, he
forgets that the barque is also “a rattle-trap” employed in “carting about the world a lot of
coal for freight” (13). What the “old Marlow” realizes and mourns, and the “young
Marlow” ignores, is the understanding that ships sail only as a mechanism of the greater
capitalist infrastructure of nations. They are meant to carry cargo, and must unwittingly
participate in the mechanisms of trade. Despite the freedom which a ship symbolizes, she
is really only a prisoner of the mercenary interests of her owners and underwriters. She
sails upon the sea but her true allegiance must lie with those on land.
Accordingly, despite the heroic virtues which the *Judea* represents, her vision of the sea remains both outdated and insupportable. As Frederic Jameson remarks of Conrad in the *The Political Unconscious*, “the sea is the empty space between the concrete places of work and life; but it is also, just as surely, itself a place of work and the very element by which an imperial capitalism draws its scattered beachheads and outposts together, through which it slowly realized its sometimes violent, sometimes silent and corrosive, penetration of the outlying precapitalist zones of the globe.” Although the *Judea* embodies the romance and nostalgia of seafaring, she simultaneously functions as a symbol of the new era of commercialism, or as Jameson writes, the age in which “Imperial capitalism draws its scattered beachheads and outposts together” (213). The *Judea* participates in the system which will lead to her demise, and slowly but surely, her journey lays the foundation for her eventual retirement. As a ship, she represents one of what 19th century Merchant Captain Frank T. Bullen describes as a class of “unfortunate vessels,” which are “those small sailing craft which still drag out a precarious existence in competition with steam.” These dilapidated members of the service “laying disconsolately upon mud-banks at ebb-tide, or, looking woefully out of place, at some wharf belonging to a seaside place […] Oh, so dirty, so miserable they look” (298).

Ultimately, the *Judea* exists in order to service the commercial interests of her owners. As Burgess writes in *The Fellowship of the Craft*, “If the *Judea* has been well served by the men aboard her, she has been poorly served by the men on land—the owners, the underwriters, who have kept her too long at sea” (63). The *Judea* incident actually represents a common practice of the period called “one-more-voyaging,” in which the owners of an obviously un-seaworthy vessel continue to operate her in order to turn a
profit, often without insurance. Archaeologist Richard Gould describes the practice as an “extension of capitalist mercantilism from context of a land-based society to seaborne trade” (253). The economic competition between steamers and sailing-ship had just begun to shift in favor of the steamer as a result of the building of the Suez Canal in 1869, which shortened the distance between fueling stops enough to facilitate the widespread use of Steamers as cargo-carriers to the East. This uneven competition made risk-taking activities such as “one-more-voyaging” common compensations for the owners of merchant sailing-ships.

The Judea could also be described as a past ideal resurrected in order to service a modern mentality. Older sailing-ships like her could no longer compete with the larger cargo holds and the speed of either the cargo-steamer or the modern sailing-ship. Yet the Judea manages to remain in operation only as component of the infrastructure necessary to support her competitor, the steamship. Although great advances in steam-propulsion technology had already been made, cargo steamers still relied upon coaling stations in order to service most of their trading routes as late as 1914. To meet the needs of these coaling stations, sailing ships traveled from Britain to the far-East, often carrying coal as ballast. Conrad never says what the Judea’s cargo will be used for but one can safely assume that the coal will eventually fuel steamships traveling along the Western Coast of Malaysia or Southeast to Australia. Participating in this exchange allows sailing-ships like the Judea to remain operational while simultaneously participating in the destruction of the past lifestyle which their existence represents. Fortunately, failing to deliver her

---

4 “The extension of capitalist mercantilism from context of a land-based society to seaborne trade is best described in terms of ‘one-more-voyaging’ (Murphy, 1983); ship-owners of the time were tempted to operate their vessels one more voyage beyond their designed or normal use-lives” (253).
cargo severs this link, and the *Judea* sinks to the bottom with the strength of her identity intact.

The interactions between the *Judea* and the steam-ships in “Youth” speak to this victory of modernity over tradition, and reveals that the sailing-ship stands little chance against her formidable competition. Even before the *Judea* leaves harbor, she is struck and disabled by a passing steamship. This altercation physicalizes the economic competition under which the *Judea*, and other archaic ships in commission past their prime, must operate. Twice more before the story concludes, the *Judea* must give herself over to the aid of steamships. After the explosion, the crew flags down the aid of another passing steamer, the mail-boat *Somerville*, which attempts to tow the disabled barque to Batavia. The damage, however, proves too severe, and the *Judea* sinks. As a result, Marlow’s first vision of the East comes on the deck of a longboat. But before entering the bay, the crew encounters yet another steamer, the *Celestial*. “And then,” Marlow writes, “before I could open my lips, the East spoke to me, but it was in a Western voice. A torrent of words was poured into the enigmatical, the fateful silence; outlandish angry words, mixed with words and even whole sentences of good English” (43). Having completed his journey to Bankok, Marlow is greeted by a burst of profanity from the English mate on the steamship *Celestial* who, having mistaken the longshore boats for shore-boats, narrowly misses steering his vessel into the side of the jetty. The incompetence of this officer and his crew, their enigmatic and ridiculous methods of seamanship, contrast sharply with Marlow’s skilled and hardened companions before the mast. Yet, as the passage reveals, the presence of the steamship and her crew, their language, their shoddy seamanship, their intrusive but uncouth Englishness, has now
penetrated the East. This may be the young Marlow’s last, unaltered, vision of Bankok, but the steamer and her crew promises to become a permanent fixture in Eastern waters.

Despite a rejection of—or frustration with—the mercenary impulses which drive modern merchant shipping, Marlow and his fellow seafarers continue to pledge allegiance to their seafaring activities. So too does Conrad, although at times the connection gives him uneasiness. The way in which Conrad redeems participation in the industry is through his glorification of professionalism, which extends beyond the production of labor or the action of industrialism motivated by profit. The marketable aspects of labor, driven in the modern age by the impersonalization and the reification of work, have little to do with Conrad’s ideas of professionalism, and everything to do with the refining of skill and craftsmanship. As he writes in Mirror of the Sea, “Now the moral side of industry, productive or unproductive, the redeeming and ideal aspect of this bread-winning, is the attainment and preservation of the highest possible skill on the part of the craftsmen. Such skill, the skill of technique, is more than honesty; it is something wider embracing honesty and grace and rule in an elevated and clear sentiment, not altogether utilitarian, which may be called the honour of labor” (55). By divorcing skill from production and presenting mastery as a supreme virtue, Conrad justifies his participation in the greater mechanism of industry, or in this case the British Merchant Service, and reclaims the position of the individual within a capitalist society. In the case of “Youth,” the exercise of skill remains a crucial element for preserving the ship’s qualities despite its depreciating economic value. As Marlow concludes his tale, “But you here- you all had something out of life: money, love- whatever one gets on shore- and, tell me, wasn’t that the best time, that time when we were young at sea; young and had
nothing, on a sea that gives nothing, except hard knocks- and sometimes a chance to feel your strength” (46). The Judea demonstrates that even a sailing ship which has failed offers the opportunity to demonstrate skill.

***

Marlow’s Journey into the Congo: Professionalism in the Heart of the Sailor

Although mastery of the craft redeems the Judea’s participation in the sordid world of industry, the necessity for this same exercise of skill has been diminished with the introduction of the steamship and other shipping technology which reduced the need for individual strength and skill. In “Heart of Darkness,” Conrad, through his narrator Marlow, explores craftsmanship in relation to a modern world and its new technologies. In Marlow, Conrad introduces a figure who adheres firmly to his belief in skill, and who builds his career and his life around the importance of craftsmanship. If “Youth” explores the impact of changing technology in relation to the ship, “Heart of Darkness” examines the same transformation in relation to the individual. The novella introduces a spectrum of characters, from Marlow, the veteran craftsman to the common laborer, and poses the question of how acts of labor can be measured, or whether they should be compared. While also a psychological voyage of discovery, Marlow’s journey into the Congo represents a renegotiation of professionalism in the modern age. The society which Marlow enters in ‘Heart of Darkness’ negates the importance of skill, and as a representative of the individual craftsman, Marlow must reevaluate his position in a world which seeks to substitute the skilled individual for the common laborer.

From the opening passage “Heart of Darkness” echoes “Youth.” When Conrad first mentioned this novella to his publishers he commented that “It is a narrative after the
manner of youth told by the same man dealing with his experience on a river in Central Africa” (Najder 286). ‘Heart of Darkness’ also begins as a doubly framed tale with an unnamed narrator who then concedes the story to Marlow. Both tales share an audience of the same composition, although presumably not the same characters, which include the Accountant, the Lawyer, the Director of Companies, the nameless narrator, and Marlow. Yet, the similarities prove superficial.

In “Youth,” Marlow summons up an image of the golden age of sail, and although this portrait of the sailing ship is only a lingering reality, his narration manages to effectively convince his audience of the potency of the delusion. The central action of “Youth” actually takes place in the modern age but Conrad actively preserves the illusion of the glorious bygone days of shipping, and the deck of the Judea functions as a place which suspends time and allows full expression of artistry for the sailor. The tragedy of “Youth” occurs when the narrative returns to the reality of the frame, which reminds the audience of the temporality of youthful fantasies through the juxtaposition with the present age. Despite a similar structure, “Heart of Darkness” inverts the carefully preserved illusion of “Youth.” Conrad begins the narrative in a similar manner, through the voice of an unnamed narrator. But the story moves from the nostalgia of the frame on the deck of a sailing vessel to the ugly reality of the seafaring industry presented in the central action. Although Marlow desperately attempts to retain the same fragmentation of causality between professionalism and production in “Heart of Darkness,” he cannot do so. The means and the ends remain connected.

Furthermore, although Marlow’s audience in “Heart of Darkness” resembles his previous drinking companions, the bond which unites them is not the same. Unlike in
“Youth,” Conrad does not characterize this group of individuals by their adherence to the ‘fellowship of the craft.’ Their seafaring knowledge has no bearing upon their roles as receivers of the story. Instead, their presence at the beginning of the narrative represents a society of professionals, in which Marlow shares due place. The inclusion confirms the professional potential of the seafarer and suggests that Marlow the Mariner has an equal rank among other widely acknowledged and respectable professionals such as the Lawyer.

In “Heart of Darkness,” Conrad presents his narrator Marlow as the skilled craftsman. Marlow, not unlike Conrad, considers himself to be primarily a salt-water sailor of the traditional line, under canvass. Marlow derives his identity from a professional collective of seamen, “the fellowship of the craft,” and his participation in the industry assures him a place in this select society, a community only entered through a rite of induction, a period of apprenticeship, and the constant baptism of the sea. These men also share a highly specialized working knowledge which encompasses both practical and academic elements. As Robert Gardiner writes of the sailing ship in his work *Sail’s Last Century*, “Her operation in the conditions of the early nineteenth century required skills of such a high order that they could only be acquired by prolonged total application from early youth. […] Such skills, acquired at a high human cost, naturally resulted in a certain degree of conservatism towards innovation until it was proved beyond doubt to have overwhelming economic advantage” (75). All of these elements allow Conrad to convincingly champion the marine officer as a skilled worker rather than a common laborer.
In his essay “Story-Teller in the Body of a Seaman” critic Byron Caminero-Santangel observes that “there were two characteristics which defined a profession in the later half of the nineteenth century. One was the notion of service; […] The other was the idea of restricted entry based not only on mastery of ‘a core of esoteric knowledge’—although this was important— but also on character” (194). Marlow, a certified officer of the British Mercantile Service, displays all of these qualities. Caminero-Santangel also observes that the emerging middle-class of the late Victorian period uses profession and professionalizing activity to achieve social validation.

Certainly, for Marlow, and for Conrad, the authenticity of their craftsmanship solidifies their personal identities. An indication of this can be found in Conrad’s listing of characters. With the exception of Marlow, who becomes the Everyman of the tale and the example of the professional as individual, Conrad foregoes the use of personal names. He introduces his characters only by the title of their career, and as a result “Heart of Darkness” is peopled entirely by professions who step forth in personas such as the Accountant, the Manager, and the Bricklayer. Marlow responds to the characters he meets by attempting to categorize them according to career, and he even manipulates unlikely personages into this pattern as well, including several natives whom he refers to as the Helmsman and the Stoker. The only characters, besides Marlow who defy categorization are the infamous Kurtz and his assistant, the Harlequin, and their non-conformity unsettles the narrator. The naming reflects the perceptions of Marlow, particularly the way in which he relates to those around him. He associates career and identity so strongly that the title of profession replaces personal names.
Career also assumes humanizing and civilizing properties, and seems to allow individuals to transcend their original birth status. The case of the Helmsman particularly illustrates the progressive potential which Marlow associates with professional activity. This individual, because of his ‘otherness,’ his ignorance, and his association with savagery, should never have received a second glance from the thoroughly anglicized Marlow. Nonetheless, Marlow insists upon, what he terms, a “distant kinship” with this unfamiliar individual, with the risk of offending his xenophobic audience. Marlow writes that “Perhaps you think it passing strange this regret for a savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in the black Sahara. Well don’t you see, he had done something, he had steered; for months I had him at my back- a help- an instrument. It was a kind of partnership” (51). In this passage, Marlow comments upon the unifying principle of communal labor. Men change their social status through their work, and acts of communal labor provide the theatre for reimagining social, racial, and cultural boundaries.

Work also has a moral effect upon the laborer, and because of his responsibilities as Skipper, Marlow manages to avoid the temptations which presumably overwhelm Kurtz. He does not join in the savage ceremonies of the natives, and when questioned, he explains; “You wonder I didn’t go ashore for a howl and a dance? Well, no- I didn’t. Fine sentiments you say? Fine sentiments be hanged! I had no time” (38). The navigation, the management of the crew, the work of maintaining the steamer all conspire to keep Marlow firmly in his social position as a civilized individual. He has too much in his head to consider anything besides the journey. In many ways, Marlow’s work allows him
to retain his Englishness while also molding the natives such as the Helmsman and the Stoker into lesser examples of the civilized individual.

Yet, professionalism only operates as a signifier of identity through participation in industry, and the dramatic action of “Heart of Darkness” begins as a narrative of professional displacement. Having just returned to London from several long voyages in the East which cumulatively represent a six year stint of deep-sea sailing, Marlow scrounges about for a job. But, employment in his chosen line of profession proves scarce. As he comments, “I began to look for a ship-I should think the hardest work on earth. But the ships wouldn’t even look at me. And I got tired of that game too” (11).

Marlow finds himself in the shameful position of being unwanted and unneeded in his own country. His failed attempt to gain employment forces Marlow to resort to desperate measures, soliciting his female relatives for their help in finding a position. Looking back upon the incident, Marlow shudders with embarrassment that he “Charlie Marlow, set the women to work-to get a job! Heavens!”(12). By appealing to the help of both females and landgoers, Marlow breaks the sailor’s unspoken code of conduct. He begins to fall out of his “fellowship.” Perhaps the question to ask then is why Marlow, an experienced and licensed mariner, cannot find employment in his professional line. Actually, Marlow’s period of unemployment may have little to do with professional incompetency. In fact, craftsmanship and experience may not even be a determinant.

Beneath the written narrative of “Heart of Darkness” remains the unspoken historical context of this period in merchant shipping. During the period in the British Mercantile Service which Conrad illustrates in his early fiction, opportunities for sailors of the old method had already begun to diminish. As early as 1895, the year in which
Conrad published his first novel *Almayer’s Folly*, the production of sailing-ships within Great Britain had dropped by as great as 80%, replaced instead by the quickly adapting steamer. This statistic from anthropologist Richard A. Gould reveals the extent of the shift:

**New Sail- vs. Steam-Ship Construction in England, 1875-1895**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>STEAM</th>
<th>SAIL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No. of Ship</td>
<td>Gross Tons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1875</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>158,531</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>1,090,132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>314</td>
<td>688,999</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although a steady fleet of sailing ships remained in operation, the drop in production meant that positions on deep-sea sailing vessels were increasingly harder to find, particularly for licensed officers such as Marlow looking for positions on the quarterdeck. Marlow is not just facing unemployment, but professional extinction. The words, “the ships wouldn’t even look at me,” speak to an underlying fear on the part of Marlow that his professional identity is becoming increasingly invisible within the context of modern industry.

Marlow’s unemployment gains complexity when one also considers whom and by what causes professional displacement. The competition with the steamship often forced owners of sailing ship to reduce crew size and cost of labor in order to cut costs. New

---

technologies, such as the adoption of steam operated deck equipment for heavy lifting, facilitated these reductions. As a result, towards the end of the century, ships in the British Merchant Marines, particularly the larger commercial vessels, were notorious for being dangerously undermanned (Life in a Dying World of Sail 115). Not only must Marlow compete with his fellow peers for positions in a narrowing career field, he has also been displaced by machinery, inanimate steam-operated rigging systems intended to replace the need for human components. The influence of adopted technologies continues to resonate with Marlow even during his journey into the Congo. His new career takes place within the backdrop of steam technologies which take vengeance upon their operators through a variety of malfunctions.

In order to find work, Marlow must compromise his assumed identity by putting aside his professional experience as a deep-sea sailor of the mast. He finds a berth on a freshwater steamer traversing a river in the Belgium Congo. The extent of the professional difference between sail and steam during this period implies that this transition proves dramatic enough to be considered a change in career. As 19th century Captain Frank Bullen writes in Men of the Merchant Service, “So great is the difference in duties to be performed by masters of sailing-ships from those of masters of steamers that they are like members of another profession” (25). Although Marlow’s position is temporary, throughout his journey a fear of complete displacement poisons his own perceptions of himself. The same ironic morbidity of action which characterizes the Judea’s cargo of coal marks Marlow’s interaction with the steamboat. He navigates just the sort of ship which has driven him from his original, chosen berth. In taking his position, he acts in a self-destructive manner.
Notably, the shift also requires the alteration of Marlow’s cultural identity as well. Found in the uncomfortable position of having no place, no berth, in his own country, Marlow must effectively expatriate himself by accepting a position in the Company. The abstraction of allegiance means that his labor no longer constitutes an act of communal service. He pledges his actions to the civilizing cause of the Company, but his true allegiance remains with himself, as he attempts to preserve his Professional identity, individuality, and even citizenship in the exercise of his new profession. Marlow knows from the beginning that although ‘the Company’ parades under the banner of humanitarianism, production remains the ultimate goal. Marlow refuses to fall prey to the delusions which suggest otherwise, and he tells his Aunt so when he “ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit” (16). Unlike the voyage of the Judea, there is no delusion that the perfection of skills supersedes the end product. In fact, the Company seems willing to ignore the method as long as the process yields adequate return.

Marlow’s position on the Steamer proves the lesser of two evils. In his mind, better by far to take an inferior berth than to idle about on shore, “loafing about, hindering you fellows in your work and invading your homes” (11). This passage reflects a common motif throughout Conrad’s nautical fiction which suggests that time ashore corrupts the sailor. As another famous Conradian sailor, Tom Lingard, espouses, “there’s only one place for an honest man. The sea, my boy, the sea!” (OI 42). On shore, the sailor faces a myriad of temptations- licentiousness, drink, gambling, among them- denied him during the austerity of his time at sea. Conrad also seems to be commenting on the mischief of hands left idle, or the deadly sin of slothfulness. Marlow’s description of himself sounds slovenly and parasitic, and the statement reflects the inherent morality of
a useful occupation. An individual who fails to contribute becomes a hinderer and a
detriment to the rest of society. As in *Nigger of Narcissus*, any man who attempts to
undermine the efforts of honest laborers exhibits demonic and otherworldly qualities, and
will ultimately receive condemnation.

By contrast, in Conrad’s fiction labor functions as a system of morality, and good
work ethic constitutes the highest virtue. The story of “Youth” illustrates this through the
glorification of labor without production and “Heart of Darkness” labor seems to be the
one redeemable virtue. By participating in an act of labor, one establishes a moral
framework. As Marlow explains: “I don’t like work-no man does- but I like what is in the
work- the chance to find yourself. Your own reality- for yourself- not for others- what no
other man can ever know” (31). Marlow is describing a process of identity formation
which only labor facilitates. The process of “knowing oneself” which Marlow describes
occurs through an expenditure of his sweat, his energy, and his exertions. Marlow values
work because it tests his limitations of acquired skill and ability. In “Youth,” labor,
particularly labor undertaken in the pursuit of a career, also matures boys into men and
represents the threshold between adolescence and adulthood. Conrad voices a similar
sentiment in a letter dated 1891, “When the individual well understands that by himself
he is nothing and man is worth neither more nor less than the work he accomplishes with
honesty of purpose and means, and within the strict limits of his social duties, only then is
he the master of his conscience and has the right to call himself a man” (Karl 318-319) 6
From one’s work, a person discovers his own limitations and well as clarifying his social
position. On the surface, a participation in work redeems Marlow. Conversely,
unemployment prevents displays of virtuous action. The central protagonist Jim in *Lord

---

6 Letter from Conrad to Marguerite Poradowska.
Jim feels this most acutely after the central incident when his believes that the suspension of his mariner’s license prevents him from a display of heroic and redeeming activity.

Marlow’s steamboat command does not initially promise the hope of labor, but rather threatens to become an example of empty professionalism. He arrives at the station only to find his command wrecked and unserviceable. Marlow’s disenfranchisement at the beginning of the novella begs the question of how closely profession influences identity and also, the ways in which this association can be fractured. During Marlow’s time ashore, before he manages to repair his vessel, he encounters several other “Professionals” who haunt the central station. One of these is the Bricklayer, a man whom Marlow labels a Papier-Mâché Mephistopheles. The assumption of the name is that the Bricklayer has an empty identity. He is simply a façade of a person, whose hypocrisy can easily be discovered upon closer examination. As Marlow says, “The business entrusted to this fellow was the making of bricks- so I had been informed; but there wasn’t a fragment of a brick anywhere in the station, and he had been there more than a year- waiting.” Marlow goes on to say that “It seems he could not make bricks without something, I don’t know what- straw maybe. Anyway it could not be found there, and as it was not likely to be sent from Europe it did not appear clear to me what he was waiting for. An act of special creation perhaps” (27).

The Bricklayer represents professionalism without labor, the tradesman who essentially refuses to dirty his hands with actual work. This man identifies himself only as the Bricklayer of the Central station, and he has no other formal duties. Yet, he has not produced anything which authenticates this assumption since his arrival in the Congo, and instead, remains stuck in limbo for a year because he lacks one simple element of
production. Is a Bricklayer who does not lay bricks really a Bricklayer? He validates his claim to his position in the Company through a profession which he does not exercise, and he names himself using a career which he does not participate in. Marlow sees right through the illusion, and as he says, “it seemed to me that if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him and would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt” (29). But upon examination, Marlow and the Bricklayer share a commonality. Their circumstances prevent them from participating in their alleged career. Marlow, in some part, is the Bricklayer. Without his steamship, he cannot fulfill his duties as Captain because of the absence of one necessary, but abstract part, the rivets which Marlow needs to repair the steamboat. Rivets and straw prevent the men from revitalizing their identity. Yet, in the shadowy world of the central station, the Bricklayer continues to identify himself with his nonexistent profession.

A struggle to maintain an individual identity despite the absence of professional qualifiers is an underlying preoccupation in “Heart of Darkness.” The characters which Marlow first encounters on his journey are all engaged in a scramble to develop their professional identities through ladder climbing. Career in the Congo provides the chance for social mobility for men like the Bricklayer, and he debases himself in order to achieve a greater title. Despite the general eagerness, the path to promotion is largely unclear, and seems based not on performance but on constitution. As the Manager comments, “People who come here should have no innards” (25). Nonetheless, rank within the Company means everything, although it is unclear what benefits such a position will provide besides the intangible rewards of title and fame. The Manager of the Central station sweats and strains along with the rest, and disease and death are the only reward for
Kurtz, the celebrated manager of the interior trading post. Ivory, the coveted currency of the Congo, never surfaces in a physical manner within the text. Instead, the whispered presence of this resource provides the excuse for the professional infrastructure of the Company. The competition for positions within the interior creates an atmosphere of intrigue, slander and backbiting which contradicts Marlow’s vision of harmonious, communal labor. As a result, all of the “Professionals” whom Marlow encounters have a shallow quality. Even the Accountant, who keeps his records meticulously, receives the superficial name of the Dressmakers Dummy.

Professionalism, unlike wage labor, requires that an individual surrender a portion of his identity. Although a professional may leave his labor, he carries his title with him outside of the work place. Conrad, like Marlow, experiences the confusion of identity caused by professional displacement. At the apex of his seafaring career in which Conrad had finally achieved his greatest degree of professional success as a licensed Captain, health concerns forced him ashore. With the completed but unpublished manuscript of *Almayer’s Folly* in hand, unable to return to his previous employment, no doubt Conrad must have wondered where his place as a productive individual truly was.

As a result, Conrad understands well this feeling of ‘being past one’s prime,’ or, as in the case of Marlow, “having no ships look at you.” The deterioration of his health occurred during his own voyage into the Congo in 1890 on the steamer *Roi des Belges*, and as both Jean-Aubrey and Edward Garnett agree, “Conrad’s Congo experiences were the turning-point in his mental life and that its effects on him determined his transformation from a sailor to a writer” (HoD 195). In taking up the theme of the Congo in “Heart of Darkness” Conrad revisits the liminal spaces of his initial professional
transformation from sailor to author. Specifically for Conrad, the deck of a steamer has transformative properties. His last voyage, although he did not realize it at the time, took place on the deck of the steamship *Vidar*. So, placing the narrative within the space of the Congo, re-writing himself back on the deck of a steamboat, Conrad returns mentally to his own personal crossroads.

Through the person of the bricklayer, Conrad again examines the relationship between personal worth and production. If the Bricklayer continues to identify himself as a Bricklayer despite his lack of straw, than a deep-water Captain commanding a freshwater steamboat may still be able to call himself a sailor. In similar fashion, perhaps a seaman turned writer, who has difficulty producing marketable works, can still cling to the professional authenticity of his former career at sea despite his new position on land. Conrad does so by using his literature as a forum to resurrect this successful past image of himself. But, the delusion comes at a price. For Conrad, the fixation on authenticating seamanship, along with the autobiographical and vicarious nature of his nautical fiction threatens to class Conrad’s novels with the popular, even juvenile, nautical adventure tales of the period. Without a careful consideration of style and form, Conrad could easily have fallen into the company of the writing sailors such as Dana, McFee, and Brassey who use their status as experienced mariners to publish. Like Conrad, these professional sailors wrote about their time before the mast, but although these men produced publically successful work in the form of memoirs, essays, and autobiographies, they were not “authors” in the way that Conrad strove to become an author. As a sailor writing about the sea, or conversely an author with twenty years of maritime experience, Conrad also flirts with the company of those whose actions do not reflect their profession.
For Marlow the cost of retaining his former identity comes at the price of association with a detestable individual; a man who’s spoken and active identity fail to correlate. The image of the Bricklayer fills him with disgust, and in turn, their associated situational unemployment could easily result in self-loathing. Marlow does not succumb, but stays closely by his only source of comfort, his ship, the symbol of his productivity.

During Marlow’s conversation with the Bricklayer, he leans upon the wreck of his steamer. Although incapacitated, the presence of the damaged vessel reminds Marlow of his legitimacy. Unlike the Bricklayer, Marlow has work. He says; “Yes- I let him run on […] and think what he pleased about the powers that were behind me. I did! And there was nothing behind me! There was nothing but that wretched old mangled steamboat I was leaning against while he talked fluently about the ‘necessity for every man to get on’” (30). The Bricklayer mistakes this sustaining element which Marlow possesses for social or political influence. Actually, as Marlow himself realizes, his only advantage to the process of “getting on” is his opportunity to work. An end to unemployment, even through the vehicle of a mangled steamship, allows Marlow to avoid the company of empty men such as the Bricklayer. In an interesting reversal of allegiances, Marlow, the deep-water sailor pledges his fidelity to the “wretched, old, mangled steamboat,” and even, in a sense, grows to love it. Burgess describes the unlikely match between man and machine as “nothing less than Marlow’s salvation. It is Marlow’s recognition of this immense indebtedness which brings him, all during the passage up the river, to make the steamboat, once a target of his scorn, the object of his meticulous care and concern, a care of concern born of gratitude, of admiration, of affection, even of love” (72).
Yet, an exercise of labor must be supplemented by an exercise of craftsmanship, and although the steamship provides Marlow with labor, it robs him of his status as a craftsman. What Burgess later points out is that even though Marlow learns to live, and even love, his steamboat, it was never his first passion. As he writes, “in Conrad’s mind, some ships were created more worthy than others” (72). Actually, the steamboat from “Heart of Darkness” is a remarkable exception considering Conrad’s treatment of steam propulsion throughout the rest of his fiction. In “End of the Tether” Conrad writes that “a sailing-ship somehow seems always ready to spring into life with the breath of the incorruptible heaven; but a steamer […] with her fires out, without the warm whiffs from below meeting you on her decks, without the hiss of steam, the clangs of iron in her breast- lies there as cold and still as a pulseless corpse” (235). He continues in A Mirror of the Sea that, “the modern steamship advances upon a still and overshadowed sea with a pulsating tremor of her frame, an occasional clang in her depths, as if she had an iron heart in her iron body” (65). Conrad believes that the steamship has altered the face of the ocean, the industry, and the sailor for the worse, destroying the redeeming aesthetics of seamanship in order to optimize commercial interests. He writes of the sea that “a great pall of smoke sent out by countless steamboats was spread over the restless mirror of the Infinite. The hand of the engineer tore down the veil of the terrible beauty in order that greedy and faithless landlubbers might pocket dividends. The mystery was destroyed” (OI 12). Conrad finds this loss of aestheticism particularly troubling. The steamboat does not have the same romantic qualities, or potential for creative mastery which endears the sailing ship. As Conrad writes, “The taking of a modern steamship about the world (though one would not minimize its responsibilities) has not the same
quality of intimacy with nature, which, after all, is a dispensable condition to the building up of an art. It is less personal and a more exact calling; less arduous, but also less gratifying in the lack of close communion between the artist and the medium of his art” (Mirror of the Sea). Marlow too misses this aesthetic communion with his calling. His soon realizes that his relationship with the steamer is less a feat of skill, and more an exercise of labor. The steamer has none of the redeeming qualities of his chosen profession, adventure, romance, and the opportunity for mastery, and instead fosters a mentality which strongly contradicts Marlow’s professional vision.

Although Marlow retains a command during his journey into the Congo, he loses the opportunity to practice his chosen skillset. Economically, Marlow’s position as a steamer skipper would have been considered superior to his past positions. All told, crews of steamers enjoyed higher wages than their brothers on the windjammers, as well as other benefits such as better provisions and lighter working conditions. Yet, for Marlow, the difference in wages does not compensate for the down-step in craftsmanship which the steamer necessarily requires for operation. As another deep-sea sailor of the late nineteenth century humorously comments, “It may be taken for granted by the uninitiated that there is almost as much difference to the beginner between taking charge of a steamer and a sailing-ship as there is between wheeling a perambulator and driving a four-in hand” (Bullen 129). For a seasoned veteran, this new command has an embarrassingly rudimentary, indeed even childlike, quality.

Unable to find a place among the empty “Professionals” of the central station, Marlow is uncomfortably aware of his new connections to the unskilled laborers whom he encounters. Although perhaps more socially beneficial to align himself with the
Manager and his company, Marlow refuses to play the political game necessary for social ladder climbing. Rather, Marlow concentrates his efforts upon the task at hand and sees a job well done as the only necessary gratification. Nor does Marlow find a place among the devout, but unproductive “pilgrims” which haunt the Congo’s interior. These men use religion rather than the pursuit of professionalism to justify their activities. Just as he comments to his Aunt in the beginning, Marlow refuses to call the Company’s mission anything less than its true intention, commercial interest. By rejecting the society of these two groups of individuals, the professionals and the idealists, Marlow finds himself in the company of the third group, the laborers. He finds himself relating less to his own class and discovers instead his bond to the native workers. At one point, he comments that he prefers the company of the cannibals, present on the ship in order to cut wood, than the presence of the pilgrims, because of the native’s superior work ethic (38-39). At another point, Marlow professes a bond with the native Helmsman, because of their mutual labor on board the steamboat (51).

From the beginning, Marlow realizes the ideology of the Company has been built upon the efforts of the common, untrained laborer rather than the craftsman with a highly individualized skill-set. The work occurring in the Congo depends upon the efforts of an unskilled, unwilling native labor force, enslaved by the Belgium government. Their work pushes forward without direction or finesse, and Marlow scoffs at their inefficiency of method. This work takes place in the shadow of technology, particularly steam technology, and the operation of this equipment is imperative for the operation of the Company.
The ideology from which the common work force originates also threatens his own profession and his tenuous position within the Company when he is informed upon his arrival about the condition of his vessel. Marlow describes the incident:

I did not see the real significance of that wreck at once. I fancy I see it now- but I am not sure- not at all. Certainly the affair was too stupid- when I think of it- to be altogether natural. Still…. But at the moment it presented itself simply as a confounded nuisance. The steamer was sunk. They had started two days before in a sudden hurry up the river with the Manager on board, in charge of some volunteer skipper, and before they had been three hours they tore the bottom out of her on stones and she sank near the south back. I asked myself what I was to do there- now that my boat was lost

(24).

The loss of the steamer strikes a double blow for Marlow, depriving him of his position as Captain while simultaneously supplanting his authority as a sailor. By taking command, even if an inept command, of the vessel, the Manager implies Marlow’s replacability and leads Marlow to wonder whether his journey has even been necessary. He asks, “what I was to do there- now that my boat was lost” (24). If Marlow cannot act in his capacity as a skipper, the construction of his identity comes into question.

The incident reflects a mentality of transferable labor. The Manager, and his posse, incorrectly assume that all skippers are the same, that the knowledge needed for the correct operation of the steamship is easily attainable, universal, and even unnecessary. Their audacity frustrates Marlow almost as much as the thought of the labor he will now have to undertake in order to service the damaged vessel. On the other hand,
the incident also affirms Marlow’s belief in the necessity of craftsmanship, even in relation to the inferior post of his tramp steamer. Although the Manager would like to assume that his men are interchangeable, he unsuccessfully substitutes an inferior volunteer skipper for the professional, experienced Marlow, to the great detriment of all involved. Inhabiting a tenuous position on land, as a disenfranchised skipper without a command, Marlow can say little in reply to the Manager’s absurd assumptions. Later, however, with the deck of the steamship firmly beneath his feet, Marlow asserts his position and refuses to concede to impractical demands. When the Manager orders the vessel forward into a blinding fog with the demand to “take all risks,” Marlow refuses the action. Although surprised, the Manager concedes to his superior authority and says, “Well, I must defer to your judgment. You are Captain” (44). Ultimately, Marlow reestablishes himself, but he can only do so with the aid of his operational ship.

The affair also demonstrates a common ideology surrounding the role of technology which seems particularly indicative of the interaction with the steamship. The complexities of a deep-sea craft are readily apparent, written in the lines of rigging, mast and canvass. Conversely, all the mysteries of the steamship are hidden beneath deck, under steel, and below the water-line. Marlow observes that the ‘affair was too stupid…to be altogether natural.’ Actually, he is correct in thinking that this ideology has come about as a result of fabricated faith in the simplicity of technology. To the untrained mind of the Manager, the operation of the steamship appears deceptively simple, a process designed to be automated which no longer requires precise knowledge of operation. Rather, for the Manager and untrained crew, the operation of the vertical boilers is a
process so hidden, abstracted and un-relatable that the steamer could almost be believed to be creeping forward under the aid of magical forces.

Marlow illustrates this naïveté with the story of his Stoker, a native Congolese, who believes that a genii lives inside the machinery creating the steam which propels the ship forward. Marlow says that, “he was hard at work, a thrall to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge. He was useful because he had been instructed; and what he knew was this- that should the water in that transparent thing disappear the evil spirit inside the boiler would get angry through the greatness of his thirst and take a terrible vengeance” (39). Both the Manager and the Stoker ignore the complexities and intricate processes which actually drive the machine. The inherent abstraction between functional operation and underlying understanding is a reality of the steam travel which Marlow must grapple with. The steamboat requires less of the specialized knowledge necessary for operation which the sailing ship boasts, and the design facilitates less of a human component to labor.

These elements of the steamboat encourage a mentality which devalues the exercise of skill, and as a result of this realignment of importance, the common laborer replaces the trained professional. Marlow’s description of the Stoker illustrates this principle. The center of the steamboat’s operation revolves around this individual whom Marlow describes vividly:

“And between whiles I had to look after the savage who was fireman. He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat walking on his hind legs. A few months of training had
done for that really fine chap. He squinted at the steam-gauge and the water-gauge with the evident effort of intrepidity- and he had filed teeth too, the poor devil, and the wool of his pate shaved into queer patterns, and three ornamental scars on each of his cheeks” (38-39).

This description of the fireman or Stoker himself exhibits a particularly derogatory and racially charged condescension yet this description is more than a commentary on the Congolese. It can also be read as a derogatory description of modern crews of steamships, as written through the eyes of a deep-sea sailor. The advent of steam in merchant shipping also changed the composition of the crews, and required the introduction of several new types of crewmen whose primary occupation was tending the boilers and other steam-operated equipment. The Stoker, or the fireman, held a hellish position on the early steamships. His sole duty throughout the day was to remain beneath the deck, nursing the fires of the boilers. This labor literally propelled the ship forward, and his position within the bowels of the ship granted him a spatial centrality within his surroundings. As a crewman, he personified the maritime activities of the modern era.

Despite these herculean feats of propulsion, Stokers were scorned by their fellow sailors and considered socially inferior members of the crew well into the early 1900’s. As Peter Kemp writes, “It took many years to reach the stage where his social position in the naval hierarchy equaled even that of the ordinary seaman” (198). These men, although trained to service the boilers, usually had little to no maritime knowledge. They were officially considered seamen without the apprenticeship required of their maritime peers. In the minds of the sailor, the
Stoker represented “a distinctly lower order of life” because of his lack of craftsmanship (198). He paraded as a mariner without the technical expertise required to authenticate his place in, what Conrad calls, the “fellowship of the craft.” He did possess a certain set of knowledge, but this knowledge is abstracted by his interaction with technology. Despite the Stoker’s lack of maritime knowledge, his duties threaten to replace those of the Ordinary or Able Seaman. When mast, rigging, and sail finally disappear, the activities of the Stoker will fuel this new method of propulsion.

The description of the Congolese Stoker caricatures all of these prejudices, including the bestial features attributed to him. Often called “donkeymen” after the donkey boilers which they operated, 19th-century stokers received all sorts of condescending names from the crew. The suggestion here is that the operation of the steamboat, although representative of a modern age, requires only primitive mind for operation. In fact, technology threatens to replace exercises of human ingenuity. An unskilled and savage specimen of mankind stands at the center of the activities of modern industrialization, and is as necessary a figure in the process as Marlow. The argument can be made that the interaction with the steamship “civilizes,” the Stoker, but Marlow carefully points out that despite his occupation, the Stoker’s underlying identity does not change. “Upon my word,” Marlow comments, “to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat walking on his hind legs” (38). The dog remains a dog despite his wardrobe. In fact, perhaps the opposite argument could be made. Through the image of the Stoker, Conrad suggests that the introduction of technology has a regressive effect upon individuals. When Marlow begins his journey
into the Congo, he states that he feels as if he were journeying back to the beginnings of
the earth, to his primordial origins. Yet, it is not insignificant that he should make this
regressive journey upon a steamboat, a process which requires him to forsake the
sophistication of his primary skillset as a deep-water sailor.

Despite this period of displacement, Marlow clings tenaciously to his reputation
as a sailor. During his time aboard the Steamer, he maintains his identity in two ways, by
investing his efforts in the steamship with the qualities of the idyllic days of sailing and
by individuating his labor from the inefficiency of the Company.

In order to accept his new position while still retaining his previous identity,
Marlow must reconstruct the steamboat in the image of the sailing ship. He emphasizes
adventure. Along with the opportunity to possess a command, the promise of adventure
first lures Marlow to the Congo, and this quality of exploration seems particularly
reminiscent of the sailing ship. The lingering influence of Marlow’s boyish longing for
exploration first prompts him to apply (11). Although the unromantic “two-penny-half-
penny river-steamship with a penny whistle attached,” may not promise the same
introduction to exotic places as the Judea, it does provide the opportunity that the
disenfranchised Marlow desires to expand his experiences. Marlow’s initial interaction
with the ship also mirrors his former deep-sea voyages. Although free to wander about
onshore, Marlow displays a curious loyalty to his damaged vessel, and spends every
moment aboard her, including his evenings. As he says, “I stuck to my salvage night and
day” almost as if he were tied to her (31). In the tumultuous world of the central station,
Marlow considers the vessel his only home and safe haven, and his physical constancy on
deck resembles that of a long sea voyage. The holistic devotion which Marlow displays
towards his steamer is a necessary attribute of the deep-sea sailor, whose duties
necessitate a constant and lengthy communion with the ship. As well as establishing a
bond with the ship, Marlow also creates a “Fellowship” on board the Steamer. During the
voyage, he gathers about individuals such as the Helmsman and the Stoker, and initiates
them into the ways of the craft. He grants them the secret knowledge of rudder and boiler,
and watches over them both as apprentices or children.

In order to separate himself from the identity of the larger Company, Marlow
compartmentalizes his duties into the incidentals of his work. He concentrates on the
leaking steam-pipes, the next load of fuel, and the delicacies of navigating an unknown
river. He also concentrates on his goal of arriving at the Inner Station and discovering
Kurtz. “Hugging the bank against the stream, crept the little begrimed steamboat like a
sluggish beetle crawling on the floor of a lofty portico […] Where the pilgrims imagined
it crawled to I don’t know. To some place where they expected to get something, I bet!”
Marlow says, “For me it crawled towards Kurtz- exclusively” (37). Marlow has separated
the voyage of the Steamer from the Company’s commercial interests and the greed of the
pilgrims by narrowing his vision to the task at hand. The horror of his encounter with
Kurtz occurs in the realization that all of these abstract incidentals, rivets and straw, come
together to reinforce the twisted vision of the Company. They are pieces of the larger,
defective mechanism of imperial interest; an assembly line of small atrocities which
ultimately result in Kurtz. This realization of mutual responsibility is partly a product of
commoditizing labor and the loss of control over one’s own efforts. The work ends, and
must be evaluated for the goal of what end. Although Marlow would like to believe that
his work remains his exclusively, to do with as he wills, his interaction with the company reveals the impossibility of the abstraction of his labor from commercial interests.

The vessel’s connection with land makes it impossible for Marlow to compartmentalize, justify, or recall his labor. This is the difficulty of the voyage, any voyage, by boat or by ship. The voyage must end, and this inevitable connection with the shore recalls the laborer to his final product. For the sailing ship, the length of the voyage prolongs this period of untarnished labor, free from commercialism. In a steamboat, bound to the shore because of the need to re-fuel, the crew is constantly recalled to the reality of their capitalist driven labor. For Marlow, Kurtz stands at the end of the voyage, a horrific reminder of what unbridled human greed and ambition, the grease on the cogs of capitalism, can produce in the body of a man.

***

Reconciling Romance and Reality in *Lord Jim*

The repercussions of associating profession and identity form an underlying concern of *Lord Jim* as well; a novel which also addresses the issue of unemployment, professional displacement, and the connection between production and personal value. Despite the difficulty of extricating individual action from the larger industrial mechanisms, for Marlow and his professional peers, professional activity remains a chief signifier of identity. Simplified, the key to achievement for Conrad and his characters lies in the equation that what one does determines who one is. Accordingly, the relationship between the passive and active-self determines, in some part, personal worth. Ideally, these variables should be determined by energy expended, along with mastery of activity,
further strengthened by the career’s potential for demanding action rather than passivity. Although the text revolves around these principles of action, Jim in *Lord Jim* discovers a displacement of causality between intention, personal action, professional activity, and identity. This lack of correlation between passive intention and successful execution exposes the danger of associating doing with being.

Conrad devotes the first book of the novel to an explication of the *Patna* incident. A European steamer, chartered to bring pilgrims from Singapore to the holy land, founders off the gulf of Siam. In a panic, the crew abandons the doomed vessel along with her almost nine-hundred passengers, expecting the steamer to sink silently into a watery grave. They are accompanied reluctantly by the central protagonist, Jim, a young second-mate. In an ironic twist of fate, the abandoned steamer survives, to be towed into the port of Aden unscathed. From there, an official inquiry into the incident begins. Overcome by remorse, Jim spends the rest of the novel attempting to redeem his cowardly behavior. Conrad originally began this tale as a short story entitled *Tuan Jim; A Sketch*. He based the *Patna* episode on a similar factual incident in 1880 in which a pilgrim-ship, *Jeddah*, foundered off the Cape Guardafui.

Although Jim’s crime and the inciting action of the novel is foremost a moral dilemma, it also represents a moment of professional failure which forces Jim into what could almost be termed early retirement. As a result, in the text, professionalism functions synonymously with moral behavior, and represents the highest standard for personal conduct. In *The Fellowship of the Craft*, critic C.F. Burgess suggests that Jim functions under two codes, a strict personal code and the code of the sea. This first code, despite its fantastical idealism, seems to align with widely held ethical considerations and
prompts an active response to opportunities which require heroic action. By failing to act upon his desire to save the sinking vessel, Jim violates basic ethical principles. In particular, by climbing into a lifeboat and abandoning a ship full of helpless innocents Jim metaphorically denies the pilgrims their basic humanity and right to life.

Although his failure to uphold these strict personal standards destroys Jim’s vision of himself, it is Jim’s violation of the second code which most disturbs Marlow. The events on the Patna disrupt Marlow’s perceptions of seafaring foremost, even before affecting his vision of mankind. He says, “Don’t you see what I mean by the solidarity of the craft? I was aggrieved against him, as though he had cheated me- me!- of a splendid opportunity to keep up the illusion of my beginnings, as though he had robbed our common life of the last spark of glamour” (81). Marlow reacts by ignoring the larger implications of failed heroism, but rather characterizes Jim’s action as a violation of the principles of seamanship. Through the eyes of Marlow, we perceive that Jim’s failure is double sided, not only an ethical transgression but also a demonstration of professional in-competency. Indeed, professional rather than ethical concerns also seem to preoccupy Marlow throughout “Heart of Darkness,” as his commentary on inefficiency demonstrates.

Conrad contextualizes the entirety of the action in the first half of Lord Jim in the professional world. Throughout the course of the novel, Conrad parades several acceptable examples before his readers- Marlow, Captain Brierly, the brave French Captain, and Stein- as well as some unsavory characters, particularly the crew of the Patna but also the adventurers Chester and old Robinson with their preposterous scams.
Conrad seems to offer these forms up for comparison to his central protagonist Jim, as if tempting the reader to find the correct mold which produces proper behavior.

The court, as gathering of professionals, has expectations for Jim. They expect him to remain, and to work. The fate of the Patna, whether it survives or not, has nothing to do with Jim’s final condemnation. If he had prepared the few available lifeboats, stood upon the deck in the final hours, manned the pumps, taken part in the glorification of work without certain production, his efforts would have been redeemed by his craftsmanship and the morality of well-executed work. This expectation seems simplistic, yet for Jim, to do so would have required ignoring the inevitable in order to act without hope of favorable results. For the seafarers and for Marlow, this sacrificial act of work without certain production defines the noble seaman. Furthermore, such endeavors are not considered to be necessarily heroic, but rather simply remaining faithful to one’s duty. Perhaps the most demonstratively heroic character in the novel is the unnamed French Captain whom Marlow meets in chapter eight. As part of the original boarding crew for the rescue ship which tows the Patna into Aden, this officer remains onboard the mortally disabled ship for thirty hours while his fellow shipmates stand by with axes, ready to cut the tow line at the first signs of a sinking ship. Marlow clearly seems impressed by this stoicism, but the retired Frenchman comments while “lifting his eyes dispassionately” that his actions were “judged proper” and a successful voyage results when “one has done one’s possible” (86). The ethics of the novel reveal that action, rather than the result, determines the failure or success of any one endeavor.

The tension between the professional and romantic identities embodied in Jim further complicates the progression of the novel. The text takes shape as a Bildungsroman
in which the central protagonist, Jim, embodies youthfulness through his association with the romantic. Although Jim loses his initial idealized conception of seafaring through the ensuing disillusionment brought about by his personal downfall and consequent maturity, he manages to retain his status as a visionary throughout, ending the novel with his premature death. This coming-of-age story contributes to a common mythology in maritime narrative; not surprisingly for a profession the survival of which was deeply rooted, by necessity, in a system of apprenticeship. Jim’s story seems to intentionally share in this commonality. Marlow describes Jim as ‘One of Us’ but his description refers less to Jim’s status as a peer and more to the young man’s potential as a future mariner, who will bring new life blood into the veins of a fading merchant service.

Jim’s initial attempts to establish himself as a sailor do not begin as a thoughtful consideration of seafaring as a viable career, but rather, were first prompted by juvenile day-dreaming encouraged by what Conrad terms “light holiday literature,” presumably with nautical content. As Conrad writes, “after a course of light holiday literature his vocation for the sea had declared itself, and he sent at once to a ‘training-ship for officers of the mercantile marine’” (LJ 8). Jim begins his apprenticeship to the sea, not unlike the young Marlow introduced in “Youth,” both decidedly, and dangerously naïve. The noticeable juxtaposition between light literature as compared to the serious, almost religious, quality of the word ‘vocation’ demonstrates the conflict of Jim’s initial perceptions. He does not understand the seriousness of his undertaking, or the nature of the space in which his efforts occur. He believes himself to be entering into a profession which harbors opportunities for heroic action, in which his fictionalized accounts of
romance may be acted out as reality. Ironically, instead of encouraging Jim in his endeavors, his romanticizing prevents him from acting appropriately.

Conrad associates these daydreams with inaction, an association which further undermines their professional viability. Even in this initial description, Jim’s contemplations about seafaring assume a passive rather than active quality. Conrad continues, “On the lower deck in a babble of two hundred voices he [Jim] would forget himself, and beforehand live in his mind the sea-life of light literature. […] He confronted savages on tropical shores, quelled mutinies on the high seas, and in a small boat upon the ocean kept up the hearts of despairing men- always an example of devotion to duty, and as unflinching as a hero in a book” (9). His obsession with the glorious past leaves him passive in the face of the present.

Jim’s initial romanticizing of sea-life is not unusual. Conrad even goes so far as to suggest that these daydreamings are the origins of every sailors’ voluntary enslavement to the sea. Marlow himself insists in Lord Jim that his own career began in disillusionment, and ‘Youth’ pays testimony to the nostalgia of this early naivety. As Marlow observes in the latter pages of Lord Jim “In no other kind of life is the illusion more wide of reality-in no other the beginning all illusion” (79). Despite the initial enchantment, Conrad and Marlow both acknowledge the dangers of remaining naive. As a result of his daydreaming, Jim does not react fast enough to take part in his own realized fantasies. Soon after his time in the masts, he misses an opportunity to aid in the rescue efforts of two shipwrecked sailors, and Conrad seems to indicate that this fixation on popular literature distracted Jim from the task at hand. Conrad describes the incident:
“Boys rushed past him. A coaster running in for shelter had crashed through a schooner at anchor, and one of the ship’s instructors had seen the accident. A mob of boys clambered on the rails, clustered round the davits. ‘Collision. Just ahead of us. Mr. Symons saw it.’”

Although Jim tries to respond quickly, he does not move fast enough. A hand on his shoulder deters him from leaping into the prepared cutter, “‘Too late, youngster.’ The captain of the ship laid a restraining hand on that boy, who seemed on the point of leaping overboard, and Jim looked up with the pain of conscious defeat in his eyes. The captain smiled sympathetically. “Better luck next time. This will teach you to be smart” (9-10).

In writing this initial episode in *Lord Jim*, no doubt Conrad must have remembered his youthful imaginings, when his holiday reading of Hugo and McClintock first prompted him to go to sea. Considering Conrad’s personal mythology, the scene in *Lord Jim* parallels a similar episode in *Mirror of the Sea* which details a young Conrad’s first exposure to the duplicity of the sea. The episode also portrays a mad rush to rescue the crew of a shipwrecked crew. Unlike Jim, no hand upon the shoulder checks a young Conrad’s efforts, and he quickly springs to action, climbing into the longboat. This episode does not occur in the expected backdrop of a ship in storm but in the eerie silence of a still day. The men whose life Conrad and his seafaring peers preserve have been shipwrecked and adrift for three days, without any visible hope for aid. As Conrad writes, “On that exquisite day of gently breathing peace and veiled sunshine perished my romantic love of what men’s imagination had proclaimed the most august aspect of the nature…I saw the duplicity of the sea’s most tender mood.” He then writes decisively of
the moment of his professional maturity saying “before we shoved off, I had looked
coolly at the life of my choice. Its illusion were gone, but its fascination remained. I had
become a seaman at last” (137). In this moment, Conrad comes-of-age and into his new
identity as a sailor. The suggestion of this incident, held in relief by the backdrop of
popular nautical literature, is that the enchantment of the sea must evolve into something
else entirely, Professionalism.

Eventually the successful mariner must put aside his previous delusions and learn
to lean on his inherent cynicism for professional survival. Despite an aesthetic, even
artistic appreciation of the sea which makes the harsh requirements bearable, the sailor
must keep his knowledge of the sea’s treachery in his foresight as a check to any
emotions. The most successful sailors in Conrad’s fiction are those that manage to keep
their seafaring experiences firmly in the category of a career. Even Marlow, who rejoices
at the sight of the sea with these words, “there was a sign, a call in them-something to
which I responded with every fibre of my being,” continually checks his ardor with a
reminder of the sea’s duplicity. Marlow understands that a sailor should not get carried
away with passion, but rather should maintain a professional relationship with his calling.
This professionalism proves his salvation in “Heart of Darkness”, where work preserves
him from the savagery of the wilderness, prevents him from partaking in “a howl and a
dance,” and acts as his moral restraint.

The difference between Jim and his other young counterpart Marlow from
“Youth” is that Jim sustains his romantic vision throughout the novel until his death. Jim,
at heart, remains a romantic, and this part of his identity cannot exist synonymously with
his initial desire to become a sailor. Either he must forsake his own romanticism,
denounce himself as it were and become a cynic, or leave the sea. What Jim does not realize, that Marlow the narrator and Conrad the author both know, is that the sea is no longer a tenable place for the romantic.

The pivotal moment in *Lord Jim* begins as a severe misjudgment which demonstrates Jim’s singular vision. Preceding the wreck which will cost Jim his career, and later his life, Conrad describes the scene through Jim’s eyes. The section begins, “A marvelous stillness pervaded the world, and the stars, together with the serenity of their rays, seemed to shed upon the earth the assurance of everlasting security.” Conrad continues, saying, “Jim on the bridge was penetrated by the great certitude of unbounded safety and peace that could be read on the silent aspect of nature like the certitude of fostering love upon the placid tenderness of a mother’s face” (15). Conrad would never write of the sea as containing ‘unbounded safety and peace,’ or ‘fostering love upon the placid tenderness of a mother’s face,’ nor would Marlow. This description comes from Jim’s unique perspective. These words are also an unsubtle warning of the dangers to come, the eye which passes before the storm. Precious moments later, a ghost wreck, floating silently beneath the surface, rips the bulkhead of the *Patna* from stem to stern. Jim later describes the collision as “easy as a snake crawling over a stick” (21). Deprived of a barrier against the rushing water, the officers predict that the ship will sink in less than fifteen minutes.

What is to be said about this blissful unawareness on the part of Jim? Must the reader take in this initial naivety when constructing their judgment? Conrad certainly seems to think so. Perhaps if a wiser man had stood upon the bridge, a man who would perceive the calmness with caution, then the *Patna* could have been spared that fatal
collision. Perhaps not. The collision occurs ambiguously enough to suggest that perhaps nothing could have been done. Yet, Jim’s passive initial response to the situation clarifies the nature of his later crimes. Jim is on trial because he fails to assume a professional vision of seafaring. He does nothing under a law which requires action, and his failure to respond actively to the situation results in his moral condemnation. The question then becomes whether Jim’s failure occurs only on the surface, as a mistake of action, or whether the problem runs still deeper, as a symptom of underlying, unchangeable identity.

The human dilemma present at the heart of Joseph Conrad’s coming of age novel *Lord Jim* could be summarized succinctly in the words of one character, “How to be! Ach! How to be” (LJ 128). This phrase, as spoken by the Lepidopterist Stein, addresses issues of identity both as a factor of how one considers oneself but also of how one presents that displayed self to the larger world. Understanding one’s own identity demands a careful balancing act between how one would like to be and how one actually thinks or behaves. This contradiction between desired identity and imperfect execution characterizes Jim’s struggle and helps explain his central and defining moment of paralysis around which the plot of *Lord Jim* develops. As Stein points out, “Man is amazing, but he is not a masterpiece,”- or in other words, man is imperfect and therefore fated to error (128). A consideration of career as a signifier of identity reveals one way in which Conrad contextualizes the struggle to establish oneself or, in Stein’s words, discover how to be.

Within *Lord Jim* profession functions synonymously with action, and therefore becomes the sounding board for humanitie’s achievement, or lack thereof. When action
becomes the means of defining oneself, then identity is relegated to confines of the
temporal frame. Identity becomes a symptom of mortality, temporality and the limitations
placed upon man by time and personal power. For Jim, heroic action exists on a spectrum
which encompasses both the energy that one expends in order to simply exist as well as
the effort required for the highest possible feats that man can aspire to. Consequently, a
change in career, professional failure, or even simply a transfer of ambitions, all produce
serious repercussions on the personal psychology of the characters.

When considering career in correlation with identity, the matter of
professionalism becomes an issue of life and death, being and not being. The connection
allows the metaphor of Captain Brierly’s death to achieve full potency. When Brierly
acknowledges his own potential for failure, he turns his back on the path of action, career,
and also life, and in so doing, takes his own life. Despite a successful career, executed
with precision and perfection, Captain Briarly inexplicably commits suicide at the height
of his success. Although seemingly unrelated to the thread of the story, Marlow mentions
his death during the first description of the trial. It soon becomes clear during further
description that Brierly’s death correlates with the facts of Jim’s trial. Unlike Jim, the
Captain has no romantic notions about human nature. The evidence of human
imperfection present in the investigation causes Brierly to question his ability to control
his own actions, minimize professional failure, and sustain the identity he has established
for himself. In the Brierly episode, death makes up the opposite spectrum of a good
career. The implication of Brierly’s suicide reveals the extreme of Conrad’s, and his
characters, anxiety about career. To preserve professional perfection in the face of
inevitable, eventual but unpredictable failure, Brierly suspends life altogether. During his
fatal leap. Brierly demonstrates a longing to escape the constraining pressures of his mortality by avoiding the dilemma of time altogether. He takes care to leave his chronometer behind in the hands of the living, a monument to his freedom from temporality. Brierly’s death suggests that equating human action with identity creates an underlying, corrosive fear of failure that will ruin the best of men.

Conrad describes this paradox of human passivity in the face of the inevitable and the ability to act within the framework of fate in his quote from Outcast of the Islands; “Fatalism is born of the fear of failure, for we all believe that we carry success in our own hands, and we suspect that our hands are weak” (138). The failure, the weakness, which prevents success, reaches out in Lord Jim to take a deadly vengeance on Jim’s identity. Fatalism also remains a product of the unsounded weakness of the hands, which Marlow aptly calls “an infernal alloy in [Jim’s] metal.” He asks of Jim “‘How much?’ The least thing- the least drop of something rare and accursed; the least drop!” but there nonetheless to corrupt the innocent, youthful, but exceedingly arrogant young sailor (32). Marlow suggests that the mistake which Jim harbors is actually a part of his make-up, the composition of his inner metal. As a result, Jim’s actions are forever held hostage by the limitations of his abilities, the latent mistakes of his unseen parts.

The Patna incident brings out Jim’s deepest weakness, his human imperfection and mortality. Upon realizing that the collision has proved fatal to the ship’s construction, the captain and crew move to abandon the vessel, leaving approximately nine hundred pilgrims on board. Panicked and unable to think clearly, Jim also jumps into the lifeboat. In this leap, Jim concedes to his feelings of paralysis. Despite his original heroic intentions, he confronts in this moment the inevitability of human passiveness in the face
of supernatural obstacles. He insists that his response to the situation does not evolve from his fear of death. Nonetheless, Jim’s mortality causes the dilemma on the most basic levels by denying him time, or as he says, “eight hundred people-and no time!” (55).

Denied by his own mortality, by the mortality of others, by the looming inevitability of death as well as the constraints of what one man can achieve, Jim forfeits the situation entirely. He thinks rather than acts. As Jim explains, “I thought of every mortal thing; but can you shore up a bulkhead in five minutes- or in fifty minutes for that matter? […] Where was the kindness in making crazy with fright all those people I could not save single-handed- that nothing could save?” (58-59). Jim speaks directly in this passage of the limitations which, when viewed in the microcosm of the ship, are the greatest opponents to human action and achievement, one’s time, one’s ability as a single man, and one’s inevitable death.

During this moment of looking forward into the future, Jim remarks on the tendency of time to defy measurement. Faced with the impossible task of repairing a bulkhead at sea, Jim understands that because of his lack of expertise and needed materials, time no longer plays a factor. Furthermore, Jim’s reaction implies that if such provisions were available, the process of repairing the vessel would take exponentially longer than the sinking ship would allow. As a result, for Jim fifty minutes has equal value to him as fifteen. Conrad’s early descriptions of the pilgrims further reflect this fatalism. Jim describes the resting pilgrims spread in postures of death as “all equal before sleep, death’s brother” (16). The tableau appears to foreshadow that fatal rip in the bulkhead which happens only moments after but the predicted death of the multitude never occurs within the boundaries of the text. The prediction demonstrates Conrad’s
intention as an author to confound the reader’s understanding of reality by metaphorically raising the dead. In the space of a moment, the pilgrims have both died and experienced resurrection. But, just as truly as the passengers live again, they have also, in a sense, perished, and in with the illustration of this single moment Conrad demonstrates the inherent contradictions in space and time. Although saved by fate in this instance, the mortal pilgrims will eventually meet death at some other time. In comparison with eternity, has the suspension of their life from fifteen years to fifty really altered the fabric of reality, or would it have been better to die on the pilgrimage, thus guaranteed greater spiritual salvation? In the eyes of Jim and in his inner conscious, the Patna has sunk off the gulf of Siam just as surely as the pilgrims have reached the shores of Aden. Similarly, because of the fragmented causality of a modern conscience, a man can be condemned for the lives of the saved just as surely as for the lives of the metaphorically slain. In a similar vein, Jim’s fateful leap into the boat proves as isolating as his previous uncompleted leap to the rescue of the shipwreck of his earlier days.

Frederic Jameson describes this structural dilemma of human temporality in his essay “Romance and Reification,” from The Political Unconscious in which he refers to Jim as Conrad’s existentialist hero. As Jameson points out, Jim’s response to the sinking Patna might not be a moral inclination at all, but rather an act of repetition, “one to which, in its empty form, he has already been sensitized” (262). Jameson goes on to write that, “The longing for the second chance, for the return of a situation in which you can prove yourself, this time triumphantly, is, when it declares itself in Jim’s agony after the Patna episode and his trial, merely the repetition of a repetition: the real second chance, in the event the only one, is the Patna crisis itself, in which Jim is now given the
unexpected opportunity to complete his long-suspended act, and to land in the cutter over which he was poised so many years before” (263). Jim’s despair at being unable to return to this initial moment of indecision characterizes the larger existential dilemma presented by existence. When Marlow picks up the narrative at the first of the novel, he describes a Jim still obsessed with overturning the hour glass. Jim’s retreat eastward towards the rising sun, passing through Bombay, Calcutta, Rangoon, Penang, and Batavia, physically retraces the stages of the aborted journey to the holy place, as if to erase his previous action and begin again.

For Jim, until his fateful leap, the debilitating possibility of personal failure has not entered into his construction of self. Even after the trial surrounding the Patna, Jim describes his failure reluctantly, curiously detached from any responsibility from his seemingly involuntary action. He seems to feel disappointment rather than shame, a condition which frustrates Marlow. Although Jim remains a victim in the face of fatalism and Marlow remains clearly sympathetic, the wiser seafarer also perceives that a crime has been committed. Marlow desires that Jim “squirm for the honour of the craft” (32). Instead, the shame that Jim personally fails to experience becomes a communal emotion which causes the rest of the industry to writhe from embarrassment.

Along with discovering the unsounded depths of the individual, Jim’s leap also exposes the secret weaknesses within the maritime industry; transforming a personal failure into a communal burden of shame for the nautical characters in the novel. As critic Michael Greaney writes in his essay “Lord Jim and Embarrassment,” “like a blush spreading guiltily across the body, his shame radiates out to encompass an entire community of European sailor and expatriates- Marlow, the French Lieutenant, Captain
Brierly, and many others— all of whom participate in the crisis of collective embarrassment of which *Lord Jim* is a case study” (1). Greaney speaks of embarrassment in his essay as a lesser form of shame, originating from a display of human weakness (3). He describes infectious embarrassment with the suggestion that exposure of other’s weakness causes the discomfort of bystanders despite their physical distance from the actual event. In his discussion of the *Patna* incident, embarrassment operates in the same manner as sympathy.

When Marlow describes Jim as “one of us” his feelings transcend embarrassment. He behaves guiltily, as if he too shares the burden of the event. Captain Brierly, described as a top-notch Mariner with a flawless reputation; has experienced nothing in his career which would allow him to empathize with Jim. Regardless, in a similar manner to that of Marlow, Brierly feels in some part responsible for Jim. He not only suggests that Jim should “creep twenty feet underground and stay there!” but he also provides the means for such a disappearance to take place. This movement to hide the unmanageable, the embarrassing even, reflects the conscience of a guilty man. As Brierly says, “We’ve got all kinds amongst us—some anointed scoundrels in the lot; but hang it, we must preserve professional decency or we become no better than so many tickers going about loose. We are trusted. Do you understand? – trusted!” (44). The impulse on the part of Marlow and Brierly to banish an affair which challenges their collective reputation demonstrates their concern for their professional identity as mariners.

The potential insecurity of career which the *Patna* incident creates helps to explain the mystery of Marlow’s involvement at all. Marlow explains earlier in the text his hesitation to entangle himself in other’s affairs. In ‘Heart of Darkness’ he insists on
the impossibility of human connection insisting, “I feel as if I am telling a dream to you,” and “we live as we dream, alone” (30). In *Lord Jim*, he expresses his frustrations with situations which invite the sharing of hidden confidences when he describes “the kind of things that by devious, unexpected, truly diabolical ways causes me to run up against men with soft spots, with hard spots, with hidden plague spots, by Jove! and loosens their tongues at the sight of me for their infernal confidences” (25). For a man who believes strongly in the realities of isolationism, Marlow’s interest and intimate involvement in Jim’s affairs seem incongruous. So too does Brierly’s intent manipulation of Jim’s escape. Brierly professes earlier in the novel that “they caught me for that inquiry, you see,” soon after complaining about the inconvenience of coming to court (43). If this is the case, why do Marlow and Brierly move so quickly to hide, to repair, and to take responsibility for what appears to be a highly individualized violation of ethical principles? Marlow, Brierly, and their nautical peers respectively understand that Jim’s violation did not occur in isolation, but within the context of a changing merchant service, and as authorities in their field, they are partly responsible for failing to blow the whistle on illicit maritime activity. Their efforts to cover up Jim’s actions are more than just a preventive measure, quarantining the individual responsible in order to prevent further infection. Rather, Brierly and Marlow wish to hide Jim because they realize that his actions are symptomatic of the larger social ills present in the Merchant Service.

In his critical work *Maritime Fiction*, John Peck points out that although Conrad idealizes the sailing ship in his memoirs, he rarely presents a favorable view of the merchant service in his fiction. Peck writes, “This is, however, consistent with the impression in all of Conrad’s sea stories. He always presents a world of grubby trade, of
tramp steamers picking up whatever work they can wherever they can, without too many questions being asked. Britain might have a proud maritime history, but in Conrad a great tradition seems to be on its last legs” (171). Conrad’s idolization of the sailing ship in his memoirs is ultimately revealed to be the golden calf of industry in his fiction; a false god which prevents men from indulging in heroic or productive action. Even so, the central action of *Lord Jim* occurs aboard a steamship, forcing the reader to question whether this tragedy could have happened on any other deck besides that of a Steamer.

For a man whose time at sea permanently disabled his health, Joseph Conrad has every reason to critique the Merchant Service. Jim begins his career at sea with an injury, disabled by a falling spar. Accordingly, Jim spends his first tour “stretched on his back, dazed, battered, hopeless, and tormented as if at a bottom of an abyss of unrest” (12). During his first storm at sea, Jim witnesses nothing but the disorder of his tossed cabin, secretly joyful that his disability prevents him from going on deck. Later, this disability thrusts him in the society of unsavory professionals who will change the trajectory of his career. He is forced to make a choice between the harsh, home service and the sunnier climes of the Eastern shores, and accordingly, Jim abandons his former identity as a sailor under mast for a position on a steamer. Conrad describes this moment of decision in a passage in chapter two. He writes:

> “Directly [Jim] could walk without a stick, he descended into the town to look for some opportunity to get home. Nothing offered just then, and, while waiting, he associated naturally with the men of his calling in the port. These were of two kinds. Some, very few and seen there but seldom, led mysterious lives, had preserved an undefaced energy with the temper of buccaneers and the eyes of
dreamers. They appeared to live in a crazy maze of plans, hopes, dangers, enterprises, ahead of civilization, in the dark places of the sea, and their death was the only event of their fantastic existence that seemed to have a reasonable certitude of achievement. The majority were men who, like himself, thrown there by some accident, had remained as officers of country ships. They had now a horror of the home service, with its harder conditions, severer view of duty, and the hazard of stormy oceans. They were attuned to the eternal peace of Eastern sky and sea. They loved short passages, good deck-chairs, large native crews, and the distinction of being white” (12-13).

When faced with the choice of evils, deck-lounger or buccaneer, Jim fits neither category. As Jameson suggests, “That Jim must initially test himself against these two categories, that neither is adequate to house him, suggests that the character system, if one is at work here, if far from complete and lacks certain key features or seams” (244). In deciding between the adventurers and the deck loungers, Jim not only faces a choice of ethical importance but also a matter of divergent career choices. The episode could be perceived as recasting of Jim as a disenfranchised deep-sea sailor without a suitable ship; a circumstance similar Marlow’s dilemma at the beginning of ‘Heart of Darkness.’ Jim’s old way of life has become unsuitable, untenable, impractical, and the haven of reckless adventurers, although still a better embodiment of patriotic spirit than the laziness of the latter alternative. The deck-loungers “attuned to the eternal peace of the Eastern sky” prefer the easy pace of Foreign Service. Although home service, or the coastal trade, would have allowed them access to the shores of Europe, these men prefer to forsake
their homeland for a warmer climate, longer periods between loading and unloading cargo, and the higher wages proffered to steamship officers.

Conversely, the adventurers described in this passage are sailors under mast, willing to brave the dangerous atmosphere of the modern windjammers in order to represent a corner of the seafaring industry in which adventure continues to thrive despite commercial interest. These men, with the “temper of buccaneers,” continue to push the limits of ships and seamen. They live in the face of danger, ruling security. Who are they? And what kind of ships are they sailing? One thing is clear. These men continue to cling to a way of life that is dying, and the unpredictability of their ventures guarantees that death be their only certain accomplishment. Their willingness to take certain risks in order to remain in their chosen form of livelihood speaks to the changes in the sailing ship during this period.

Changing technology was quickly relegating the sailing ship to the realm of those dreamers, buccaneers and “dark places of the sea.” When the inaugural year of maritime steam propulsion came about, ocean-going steamships were little more than glorified sailing vessels with auxiliary engines and retractable propellers. By 1900, the year in which *Lord Jim* first appeared in print, technological developments in steam propulsion advanced to the point in which ocean-steamships became a competitive, efficient, and economically conducive method of travel. As a result, the sailing ship had to transform in order to narrow the looming commercial gap. In order to compete, sailing ships had to carry more cargo at faster speeds with less crew than any other ship under canvass since the beginning of the era. The increased tonnage in new ships meant that sailing ships constructed in the 1870’s and 1880’s were typically overmasted. This, along with the
common practice of ‘lugging sail,’ or carrying more canvass than the weather would safely allow, made an already dangerous profession even riskier (“Life in the Dying World of Sail” 119). Marked undermanning also characterized the sailing ships in competition with steam (115). In his essay “From Sail to Steam,” Richard A. Gould writes that the ratio between cargo and crew post-1860 increases fourfold, which meant that sailors of the period seldom had the man-power to manage unwieldy cargo (202).

The adventurers that Conrad discusses in comparison to the deck-chair loungers are counterparts of two later characters, Chester and his partner Robinson, who are known for their risk-taking behavior and daring schemes, in particular their venture into the guano trade. Conrad writes of Chester that “He had been pearler, wrecker, trader, whaler, too, I believe; in his own words- anything and everything a man may be at sea, but a pirate,” and in his wanders he has acquired a cheap steamer with which to harvest guano from a remote and dangerous island. As Jameson comments, “these adventurers men comprise the intangible and even ‘comic-satiric’ visionaries of impossible projects such as the ill-fated Guano Empire” (244).

The absurdity of Chester’s “guano suggestion” is not as abstract as the first impression might suggest, but does have some basis in historical fact. Uneven competition between sail and steam often forced captains of sailing ships to undertake ridiculous, even comical, adventures inward to remain afloat. In Archaeology and the Social History of Ships Gould writes that “In addition to their routine duties at sea, like chipping rust, painting iron plating, and calls to go aloft and handle sails, crewmen serving on iron ‘windjammers’ were often compelled to work as laborers on shore—especially in the guano trade.” He goes on to clarify that “Barren islands off the West
African and South American coasts contained vast deposits of bird guano which commanded high prices of fertilizer in Europe and America. This trade did much to encourage the use of large iron and steel sailing ships” (252). This image—the hardened and brave crews of the large sailing ships subjected to the menial, land-labor of a guano trade in order to compete with technologically advanced steam propulsion—truly is a heart-wrenching defeat for the adventurers who formerly commanded the waters. The transformation in shipping causes the polarization which Conrad describes in the opening chapters of Jim’s life-story when he must choose between divergent careers. Those who desire adventure must take greater, more absurd, and more death-defying risks, while those inclined to make an easy living manage to thrive upon the profits of the new system at the cost of their integrity. By choosing the deck-loungers, Jim chooses the greater of two evils.

Conrad describes the ship in which Jim finds employment as a 1400-ton steamer “as old as the hills, lean like a greyhound, and eaten up with rust worse than a condemned water-tank” (13). The Patna sails under a reduced crew, and her undermanning further reflects the nature of this particular venture. Conrad describes the Patna’s officers and engineers, five in total, but aside from these men, the rest of the crew of the Patna seems non-existent. In “The Missing Crew of the Patna,” Gene M. Moore writes that “The crewman of the Patna are so hard to spot that readers and critics have often discussed the novel as if the five Europeans and the ‘eight hundred pilgrims (more or less)’ were the only people on board” (84). Moore goes on to comment that these officers are hardly adequate for the task at hand, although Conrad insists on the invisibility of the rest of the crew. It is as if Conrad intentionally emphasizes the diminishing size in order to make a
point about the state of this dilapidated shipping endeavor. Furthermore, the *Patna* is inadequately equipped, holding eight-hundred pilgrims with only seven life-boats. Even by filling each boat to the brim, Jim notes that there are three times as many people to boats (55). The ratio of men to lifeboats prophesies the nautical disasters which characterize the merchant service at the turn of the century, in a terrible violation of logical safety precautions.

Marlow also suggests that although Jim’s punishment seems well-deserved, the way in which the inquiry singles him out seems unwarranted. A further investigation of the duties of first mate reveals that his responsibilities, when viewed in the context of the *Patna* disaster, are impossible to fulfill adequately. Although the first mate is primarily responsible for the safety of the cargo and passengers, he must concede his authority to his chief supervisor, the captain. As Frank Bullen, explains in his factual work, *Men of the Merchant Service*, published in 1900, “The chief mate is responsible to the captain for the safety and security of the ship. Responsibilities include the crew's welfare and training in areas such as safety, firefighting, search and rescue. The Chief Mate is second in command on merchant ships that do not carry a Staff Captain” (83). However, “Whether a man makes a success or a failure as mate and consequently as master […] is more largely due to the treatment he receives at the hands of his first master than is generally admitted” (81). Ultimately, the captain of the ship maintains the highest level of authority. Despite this clear hierarchy of command, Jim quickly learns that a Captain willingly takes responsibility for all successful endeavors but refuses to acknowledge failures, or as Bullen comments “in the case of disaster to his ship no amount of theory as to the master bearing the whole responsibility will avail to save the unhappy mate from
the most severe punishment that can fall upon a merchant officer, suspension or cancelling of his certificate if any leather headed court of enquiry choose to bring him in to blame” (83). Marlow and Brierly both realize that Jim’s fate has been influenced by this double standard, inherent in the structure of the maritime industry.

The skeleton crew of the *Patna* also suggests that Jim may have been responsible for more than his normal duties as chief mate. Conrad makes no mention of a second mate on this steamer, thus the menial tasks from this position fall on Jim. Bullen writes that when one discusses “the tramp proper, we begin to wonder how it is that second mates persevere at all.” In order to illustrate this statement, Bullen describes the particulars of the mate’s watch:

“The few sails that a tramp steamer carries are set whenever the wind is favorable or it is imagined that they will help in the slightest degree. And who is to set them? […] According to the law the second mate should refuse to quit his post on the bridge, and, since it is absurd to suppose that one man could accomplish such a task as setting a sail, he would leave it unset. Such independent behavior would, however, certainly result in his services being dispensed with at the earliest possible moment. So the practice is for the second mate to come off the bridge, and the man to be called off the lookout; and the trio, having left the ship plunging blindly along over the gloomy sea, at dire peril to herself and any other vessel that may be near, do their best to accomplish their task in as short a time as is possible” (117-118).
The impossibility of the first and second mates’ list of duties speaks directly to issues of temporality, the desire or the necessity of performing multiple tasks at the same time. These unrealistic expectations for a man that cannot exist in two places at once explains, in part, Marlow and Brierly’s sympathies towards Jim.

This final image, of the ship “plying blindly along over the gloomy sea” also reflects a term which Conrad critiques in his memoirs, ‘New Seamanship.’ Along with the changing technology, methods of crew management, ship-maintenance, and navigation all changed as well, and these components characterized the “New Seamanship” of the modern era. Conrad based the events in *Lord Jim* on the Pilgrim-ship episode of 1880, an incident that could have proved the largest nautical disaster of the 19th century. Conrad’s prophetic reflection on this episode of the recent past, characterized by new methods of navigation, an inadequate crew, and a shocking lack of lifeboats, anticipates the greater nautical disasters of the early-twentieth century, particularly the sinking of the Titanic in 1912. In his scathing letter to the British Review entitled “Some Reflections on the Loss of the Titanic in 1912” Conrad writes of the famous liner, “you launch that mass with two thousand people on board at twenty-one knots across the sea--a perfect exhibition of the modern blind trust in mere material and appliances. And then this happens. General uproar. The blind trust in material and appliances has received a terrible shock” (*Notes on Life and Letters*). The biting and profound sarcasm of this essay labels blind faith in technology rather than human ingenuity as the flaw of the unsinkable ship. Conrad then compares the *Titanic* disaster with the whaling ships of old, sailing vessels able to navigate the harsh arctic waters with little incident guided only by the skills and strength of her crew. For Conrad, the methods
of navigation which accompanied the development of steam would prove a fatal blow to
the merchant service.

But Conrad also acknowledges the complexities of ‘New Seamanship’ and the
ways in which commercialism influences craftsmanship. As critic Robert Foulke writes
of officers in his *The Sea Voyage Narrative*, “Captains of sailing ships had obligations
and desires that were not easily reconciled: The safety of the ship, the welfare of the
crew, the profit of the owner and charter, and the progress of a career did not always
mesh neatly. Conflict between these interests was normal in sailing-ship voyages during
the nineteenth century” (22). These complexities of intention and execution appear in
Conrad’s other fiction addressing sail and steam, including the misjudgments of Captain
MacWhir in *Typhoon*, the blind Captain Whalley in “End of the Tether,” the Manager’s
assumptions from “Heart of Darkness” and the embarrassing incident of the clumsy
short-sighted helmsman at the end of “Youth.” Even the iconic Captain Allistoun in
*Nigger of Narcissus* experiences the pressures of commercialism, and his desire to
compete with the speed of the steamship prompts him to crowd his ship with sail; so
much so that he tips his command to the side. Superior craftsmanship alone allows the
crew to recover.

Jim’s infidelity to the craft reflects the flaws in the larger Merchant Service and
undermines the collective cultural identity of the nautical characters. Along with the
challenge to professional competency, Jim’s act challenges the Marine’s reputation as a
symbol of British identity. When Marlow refers to Jim as “One of Us,” he remarks upon
Jim’s European heritage. The actual Pilgrim-ship incident which occurred onboard the
*Jeddah* in 1880 generated a large amount of outrage because of similar associations
which equated the deplorable behavior of the British officers with the national consciousness. When the original telegraph came in announcing that the ship had sunk, the survival of only the officers piqued the interest of the coastal services because such a ratio between preserved officers and passengers was a rare event in the case of European shipwrecks.

During the 19th century, national concern arose regarding a fear that the technological transformations of the service threatened to devalue several hundred years of important nautical heritage. One essay published in 1864 entitled “Ships and Railways” by James Mather addresses the uproar surrounding the advent of steam propulsion, both rail and ocean-going. Mather writes that “The ships and sailors once driven out of the trade cannot be recovered- the Railways are there always” and that a Britain which fails to maintain these human maritime assets should “accustom herself, not only to the gay pomp and circumstance of war, but to its hard realities” (26, 46). This essay, and similar sentiments expressed during the period, suggest that the health of the British Merchant fleet was a dire matter of national security. Mather also writes that “The Navy of England, with the commercial marine at its heart, nerves, and sinews, is the soul by which insular Britain lives, moves, and has her state” (26). Not only does seamanship embody an act of patriotism, it also preserves the cultural identity of those on shore. The article reflects sentiments regarding changing technology, particularly the fear that technological advances will diminish the need for specialization, and that significant, and possibly integral, trades will become extinct.

Despite these associations between sailing and patriotism, by the time that Conrad began to sail, the Merchant Service had already begun to transform into an international
industry. Conrad implies that the Patna has disreputable backers, “owned by a Chinaman, chartered by an Arab, and commanded by a sort of renegade New South Wales German” (13). The international quality of this venture reflects the ending of “Youth,” in which the trade-posts of the East have been transformed into the commercial hubs which dissolve boundaries of country and culture. By taking part in this international opportunity, Jim begins to reject his uniquely English perspective, adopting instead new methods of commercialism which reflect poorly on the British Merchant Marines. As Najder notes in his biography *Joseph Conrad: A Life* in Conrad’s time at sea “15 percent of all merchant service crews were foreign, but on the ships he sailed the proportion was usually higher, between 30 and 60 percent. Work on long-distance sailing ships was by far the hardest, and the English were least willing to enlist on them” (82). These statistics prove particularly interesting in light of Conrad’s preferences regarding the sailing ship. In his stories about tall ships, Conrad often diminishes the percentage of foreign seamen in order to maintain the association between the sailing ship and British national sentiments. In *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* Marcus Rediker describes modern shipping as a “cooperative and collective undertakings. And these confrontations, like so much of maritime life, were deeply informed by the international character of both maritime work and the workers themselves” (5). Although Conrad’s fiction may claim otherwise, his personal experiences would indicate the truth of Rediker’s statements. For a Pole sailing among largely foreign crews, the international quality of Conrad’s maritime career cannot be overlooked.

Although Conrad tailored his fiction to appeal to his British readership, he continues to take into account the significance of foreignness or “otherness” as an
integral part of the sailor’s life and identity. Very rarely do the nautical figures in Conrad’s fiction get to experience life in their native element. Often, main characters are displaced, such as Kurtz the German in the Belgium Congo or Nostromo, the Italian sailor who travels in inland South America. In part, Conrad’s maritime identity was a device which allowed him to compensate for his own ‘otherness’ and insured his acceptance as an English author. Accordingly, the missing crew of the Patna may also be an intentional omission on the part of Conrad to appease European readership. If the remaining crew had been placed in relief, composed of faithful Easterners, the comparison would accentuate the infidelity of the English officers and distance Conrad’s readership. As a result, although Lord Jim addresses the nature of failure as a central theme, Conrad only hesitantly exposes the key flaws in maritime identity, refusing to directly address the problems inherent in the system. Instead, like Marlow and Brierly, Conrad allows Jim to behave as the scapegoat, preserving the maritime reputation at the cost of the reputations of individual sailors.

Jim ultimately refuses to sacrifice his romantic aestheticism for a cynical view of sailing. Although his old-world vision of sailing remains insupportable, he manages to preserve his romanticized view of the sea by traveling inward, ending the novel as a cast-off sailor. The image of Jim in the interior of Patusan alludes to the tale of Odysseus’ final journey. Having offended Poseidon, god of the sea, Odysseus’s punishment specifies that he must walk inward, bearing an oar, until someone stops him to inquire about the object on his back. Jim also completes his voyage as a sailor in exile and the second half of the novel evolves into a captivity narrative. In framing the second half of Lord Jim around this journey inward into Patusan, Conrad resurrects a motif, present in
his other nautical works, in which a central mariner character abandons the sea and aligns himself with the land in an effort to achieve fame and economic prosperity. In these works, the journey inward provides a way in which to regain honor, establish identity, and achieve redemption. Yet Conrad also associates this transition with self-imprisonment, while the journey inward retains a sense of mystery, unexplored horror, and the possibility of disastrous consequences. As Jim quickly realizes, and indeed, in writing the novel Conrad experiences personally, attaching oneself to the land can be a sordid affair. The staking of stationary claims results in all of the unsavory systems of the day: at the worst, tyranny, oppression, imperialism, and primogeniture; at best, the sort of laziness which tempts Jim towards the beginning of the novel.

Although in Conrad’s fiction, the sea represents freedom and uncontained spaces, the land has unique purgatorial or heterotypic properties. For Marlow and Jim, the Congo and Patusan respectively become the transformative spaces in which the men can develop in isolation, and re-emerge able to rejoin society. In the essay “Conrad’s Heterotopic Fiction,” Robert Hampson discusses Foucault’s theory of heterotopic spaces as “counter-sites” to which individuals in crisis can withdraw. Hampson goes on to write, “Foucault suggests that, in the modern world, crisis heterotopias are being replaced by ‘heterotopias of deviation,’ places for ‘individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm’” spaces which would include “rest homes, psychiatric hospitals, and prisons” (128). For Jim, Patusan represents a place of containment, designed to hide away socially unacceptable persons in order to revitalize them. Perhaps a more useful way of thinking about a place like Patusan is as a purgatorial space, in which an individual cannot remain indefinitely but must pass through a period of purification in order to
achieve inner redemption.

However, Conrad suggests that the risk of withdrawing inward is that these purgatorial spaces can become permanent or institutional, because either society or the individual fails to desire rehabilitation. For Jim, the latter option appeals to his egotistical visions of self. As Hampson suggests, “[Patusan] provides the conditions in which Jim can live a heroic life and live up to his image of himself. In doing so, it also subtly implies a criticism of the rest of the world that does not provide such opportunities” (128). Jim condemns the viability of the Merchant Service simply through his refusal to return to his old profession, while Marlow and Brierly affirm this criticism by failing to invite Jim’s return. But Jim’s withdrawal inward comes at the cost of his own freedom.

Marlow says of him that “all these things that made him master had made him captive too. He looked with an owner’s eye at the peace of the evening, at the river, at the houses, at the everlasting life of the forests, at the life of the old mankind, at the secrets of the land, at the pride of his own heart; but it was they that possessed him and made him their own to the innermost thought, to the slightest stir of blood, to his breath” (LJ 149). By remaining ashore, land becomes Jim’s captor and guardian. In his first episode in Patusan, Jim find himself imprisoned, and in order to escape, he claws his way through the mud and grime to freedom. Conrad describes this escape from the grasp of the earth as a second birth, writing, “he reached and grabbed desperately with his hands, and only succeeded in gathering a horrible cold shiny heap of slime against his breast- up to his very chin. It seemed to him he was burying himself alive…” (153). It seems fitting then that Jim should begin and end his time in Patusan as a captive of the very earth, first metaphorically during his escape and secondly in his literal burial at the end of the novel.
Conclusion:

For a sailor, the necessity for landings is obvious. As Conrad writes in *Mirror of the Sea* the land marks the intervals in a sailor’s life by connoting the beginning and the end of a voyage, defining the boundaries of seafaring, and providing the purpose for traversing from one point to another. Coming ashore occurs because it is unavoidable, and thus the nature of landfall functions synonymously with knowledge of the human condition. Gaining an understanding of landfall reinforces, through comparison, the transcendental qualities of seafaring, allowing life at sea to function as a metaphor for temporality: by abolishing illusions of any ultimate escape, life at sea presents the suggestion that all seasons must end. Conrad acknowledges the temptation of authors to use the sea as a metaphor for freedom, and although he allows himself this image, he also tempers the picture with irony in order to expose the nature of the sea as it really is; an illusion.

The sailors with which Conrad peoples his works have similar difficulties. A truly loyal sailor should want to remain at sea, but as Burgess observes, Conrad’s sailor characters rarely do. In fact, only three of Conrad’s nautical characters truly avoid lengthy or unnecessary landfall, Carter in *The Rescue* and Singleton and Mr. Baker in *Nigger of Narcissus*. Furthermore, Conrad’s best known narrator, Marlow, exhibits a particularly intriguing ability to exist on land and shore. Marlow even retires, concluding his appearances in *Chance* having never returned to the sea in Conrad’s fiction.

As an author, Conrad’s persistence in dividing his text between shore and land seems less clear. While describing the scenes ashore, there is obvious authorial
uncertainty as Conrad explores new spaces and unfamiliar scenes of domestic life. He is uncomfortable with the themes that shore life demands, such as colonialism, the female presence, property ownership, and wealth. Even so, Conrad continues to draw his sailors inwards, even to the detriment of his own career. Even the stories which exist almost exclusively shipboard, such as “Youth,” are in constant danger of being driven to land by unexpected and disastrous episodes in the plot such as stranding or shipwrecks.

Ideally, like his most faithful sailors, Conrad might have preferred to remain solely an author of the sea but the structure as well as the content of Conrad’s greatest works demonstrates a frustration of this professional idealism. Conrad himself saw the need for clarifying his identity, and understood that his position in both worlds, sea and land, would eventually prove untenable for a respected author. His definition of authorial mastery rested upon this longing, as he says, to “get freed from that infernal tale of ships and that obsession with my sea life which has an much bearing on my literary existence, on my quality as a writer, as the enumeration of drawing-rooms which Thackery frequented could have had on his gift as a great novelist” (Peck 165). As a result, as a storyteller and author, Conrad understood well the necessity of bringing his novels ashore.

Even so, in the final voice of Marlow, the reader perceives Conrad’s conflict of interest as demonstrated by his longing for his youthful imaginings of the sea. Conrad writes:

“This sky and this sea were open to me. The girl was right- there was a sign, a call in them- something to which I responded with every fibre of my being. I let my eyes roam through space, like a man released from bonds who stretches
cramped limbs, runs, leaps, responds to the inspiring elation of freedom. ‘This
is glorious!’ I cried, and then I looked at the sinner by my side. He sat with his
head sunk on his breast and said ‘Yes,’ without raising his eyes, as if afraid to see
writ large on the clear sky of the offing the reproach of his romantic conscience”
(197).

Recurring themes of unemployment, displacement and exile reflect the
professional turmoil occurring in Conrad’s personal life during this period. In “Youth,”
Conrad concedes to the illusions that characterized his former life at sea while “Heart of
Darkness” functions as a written realization that the doors of the mariner’s profession
have closed to him forever. He has no other recourse but to “write or burst.” Within the
text of Lord Jim, Conrad renounces the popular nautical tale, and forces his narrative
ashore. Throughout these texts, the changing face of seafaring, particularly the alterations
to the profession brought on by shifting technology within the British Merchant Marines,
act as a metaphor for Conrad’s own authorial insecurities, in a profession in which he had
only begun to establish himself.

Although Conrad had already received critical acclaim and limited popular
success, a six-month period of complete un-productivity characterizes Conrad’s mental
state prior to 1898, during which he battled, unsuccessfully, with the unruly text of his
full-length work the Rescue. The quick succession of Conrad’s publication of two notable
works, “Youth” and “Heart of Darkness” as well as the beginning of several other
manuscripts including Lord Jim and his later novel Chance the text which changed his
fortunes, contrasts sharply with the unproductive period surrounding The Rescue. As Karl
suggests in his biography Joseph Conrad; The Three Lives, “The Rescuer was so difficult

7 Letter to Cunninghame Graham (dated August 26, 1898)
a manuscript because it occurred at almost exactly at the time Conrad’s literary direction was changing; he was writing a novel in a manner that for the next twenty years he was to forgo.” Karl goes on to clarify that in writing *The Rescue* Conrad “was returning to a period of *Almayer* and *Outcast*, which in imaginative terms he had already begun to reject for more intense experimentation” (371). His rejection of the *Rescue* in favor of the experimentation of “*Heart of Darkness*” and *Lord Jim* demonstrates that Conrad’s trajectory had already begun changing as he attempted to solidify his identity as an author apart from his ability to convey popular nautical tales.

In the process of reshaping his persona as an author, Conrad created in his new narrator his most famous teller of tales. Not unlike Conrad, Charlie Marlow completes “Youth,” “*Heart of Darkness,*” and *Lord Jim* with a change of purpose, and becomes at the end of the tale the manipulator of the narrative rather than a participant. He is no longer simply a mariner, but the storyteller, and his reputation comes from his ability to convey narrative. The characters know Marlow for his stories. Yet Marlow himself insists on the frustrations of conveyance. As he says in “*Heart of Darkness,*” “it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch one’s existence […] It is impossible. We live as we dream-alone” (30). He voices the fears of an author when he appeals to his audience for clearer understanding. Fear of failing to gain mastery pervades the story in the form of Marlow’s intrusions into the narrative. In the midst of his descriptions, he continues to doubt his effectiveness as a storyteller, asking “Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream-making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream sensation.” Beneath the surface of Marlow’s professional austerity, he too struggles with
professional mastery, and his personal dilemma revolves around the questions of what
determines a successful occupation. Furthermore, in Marlow, Conrad equates seafaring
with artistry, and connects his endeavors at sea to his struggles on land. Conrad’s
examination of professionalism through his nautical subject matter reflects his
insecurities as an author traversing the uncertain space between his two careers.

The ability to adapt proves Marlow’s most successful quality and the key to his
professional survival. Pictured throughout the phases of his career, as a second mate, first
mate, Captain, and finally the retired mariner who appears in the 1913 sea-novel *Chance*,
Marlow manages to maintain his identity as a deep-water-sailor throughout the four
works. The strength of his character reveals that identity does persist despite
professionalizing activity. Whether Conrad wrote himself as Marlow or simply created in
this British seaman his ideal archetype is impossible to determine. Yet, in many ways,
Marlow fulfills the idealizations of Conrad’s own persona, not the least of which is the
ability to create a coinciding existence both on sea and land. Despite his obvious
affinities to the sea, Marlow successfully makes the transition to shore. In the same way,
despite his insecurities regarding domestic life and the uncongenial subject, Conrad
persists in writing about the land. This willingness to transition between spaces, genres,
and styles in his fiction occasionally frustrates Conrad’s form, as does his chameleon-like
qualities as a writer of popular as well as academically sanctioned literature. Ultimately,
though, his flexibility serves him well. His persistence in developing a successful
reputation as a public author alongside his creation of a distinct artistic form allowed
Conrad’s literary legacy remain both profitable in his lifetime and lasting in his death.

***
Abbreviation:

Heart of Darkness: HoD
Lord Jim: LJ
Outcast of the Island: OI
Mirror of the Sea: MotS

Bibliography


