

Sometimes, stretched at ease in the shade of a roadside tree, we watch the motions of a labourer in a distant field, and after a time, begin to wonder languidly as to what the fellow may be at. We watch the movements of his body, the waving of his arms, we see him bend down, stand up, hesitate, begin again. It may add to the charm of an idle hour to be told the purpose of his exertions. If we know he is trying to lift a stone, to dig a ditch, to uproot a stump, we look with a more real interest at his efforts; we are disposed to condone the jar of his agitation upon the restfulness of the landscape; and even, if in a brotherly frame of mind, we may bring ourselves to forgive his failure. We understood his object, and, after all, the fellow has tried, and perhaps he had not the strength – and perhaps he had not the knowledge. We forgive, go on our way – and forget.

And so it is with the workman of art. Art\* is long and life is short, and success is very far off. And thus, doubtful of strength to travel so far, we talk a little about the aim – the aim of art, which, like life itself, is inspiring, difficult – obscured by mists. It is not in the clear logic of a triumphant conclusion; it is not in the unveiling of one of those heartless secrets which are called the Laws of Nature. It is not less great, but only more difficult.

To arrest, for the space of a breath, the hands busy about the work of the earth, and compel men entranced by the sight of distant goals to glance for a moment at the surrounding vision of form and colour, of sunshine and shadows; to make them pause for a look, for a sigh, for a smile – such is the aim, difficult and evanescent, and reserved only for a very few to achieve. But sometimes, by the deserving and the fortunate, even that task is accomplished. And when it is accomplished – behold! – all the truth of life is there: a moment of vision, a sigh, a smile -- and the return to an eternal rest.

From Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* by Joseph Conrad

\*Art is meant to include all creative art forms: literature, painting, cinema, music, photography, theatre etc.

languidly: without energy, effort or enthusiasm

may be at: may be doing

a ditch: a long, narrow opening dug into the ground

to uproot a stump: to dig out that part of a tree (usually the trunk) left in the ground

to condone the jar: to approve of the disturbance, the unpleasant influence

to arrest: to catch one's attention, to attract notice; also: to stop

evanescent: lasting for a short time

In answering the following questions, please use your own words as far as possible. When quoting from the passage, please put all quotations within quotation marks.

1. How is a labourer similar to a 'workman of art', but also different?
2. How effective is the metaphor of the labourer for the artist, or someone who creates?
3. Explain the phrase: "the unveiling of those heartless secrets which are called the Laws of Nature."
4. What should the aim of art be, according to the author?
5. Choose one of the following and write a composition in no fewer than 200 words
  - a) "Art is long and life is short, and success is very far off." Explain this phrase within the context that it is used, and/or the context of our present day society.
  - b) Write about a personal experience where you have found "all the truth of life" in an art form, and it has provoked in you the kind of reaction that Conrad is talking about: "a moment of vision, a sigh, a smile."