

NEA: Theory and independence

example conventional response

This resource gives an exemplar student response to a non-exam assessment task, in this case, a conventional response rather than a re-creative piece. The moderator commentary illustrates why the response has been placed within a particular band of the assessment criteria. This resource should be read in conjunction with the accompanying document 'Teaching guide: Non-exam assessment'.

Example student response B – Band 5

"The presentation of people, places and events in *Heart of Darkness* amounts, ultimately, to an outright condemnation of colonialism".

To what extent do you agree with this view of the text?

Post-colonial literary criticism, like Marxist and Feminist criticism, is concerned with power. It considers how the literature of countries that were colonised in the past, mostly by western European countries, especially Britain, attempt to present themselves and their history and how they interpret their relationship with the colonising power. It also studies literature that is produced by the colonising powers, considering how it represents the fact of colonisation and those who are subjected to it. Post-colonial criticism is particularly interested in how much of western literature either overtly or covertly perpetuates the ideology of colonialism, namely that the colonising power represents civilisation and the colony the savage. Many post-colonial critics claim that whatever the message appears to be most of western literature is fundamentally and inherently racist in its presentation of countries and cultures that it considers as 'other'.

At first glance *Heart of Darkness*, in apparent contrast to most of western literature, seems to be an anti-colonial text. It is very difficult to read Marlow's account of the mistreatment of the 'natives' in *Heart of Darkness* as anything but a condemnation of the brutality of colonial rule. Colonialism involves monetising another country for economic self-interest, imposing one culture upon another and suppressing the native, 'colonised' people. At its heart lies a belief in the inherent superiority of the colonisers and the inferiority of the colonised. *Heart of Darkness* explores these issues and appears to condemn them. However for some readers it is not primarily about, or necessarily a critique of, colonialism as it is more concerned to explore the darkness at the heart of all humanity, regardless of geographical location.

Within the novel Conrad presents the colonial force as being arrogant and absurd. The futility of their project is demonstrated when Marlow describes a 'Man-of-War anchored off the coast... shelling the bush', which is followed by the comment that then 'nothing happened. Nothing could happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding'. The 'objectless

blasting' represents the futility of the colonial expansion but Marlow's questioning of the sanity of the colonists is arguably more than just a criticism of colonialism, it is potentially a comment on the futility of human endeavours in general. Even the place names contribute to the sense of futility, 'names like Gran' Basson, Little Popo; names that seemed to belong to some sordid farce acted in front of a sinister backcloth'.

The presentation of the futility and consequent insanity of the colonists suggests that Conrad is criticising them but is also exploring the self-destructive and destructive madness of humans. This self-destructiveness is highlighted through Marlow's encounters with the 'Swedish captain' of his steamer, who tells of 'a man who hanged himself on the road' as a result of 'the sun ... or the country perhaps'. There is also Fresleven, who is presented as a 'gentle creature' initially, who 'went ashore' and started to 'hammer the chief of the village with a stick over a quarrel'. The quarrel 'arose from a misunderstanding about some hens'. This idea is most resonantly explored through Kurtz, who is driven to insanity through this exposure to 'the horror'. Rather than vilifying these colonisers, it could be argued that Conrad presents them as victims; they are flung out into an inhospitable environment and are sacrificed to the destructive impulse within human nature.

Although it is possible to read *Heart of Darkness* as a critique of human folly and corruption in general it, undoubtedly, can also be read as a criticism of colonial rule. Conrad certainly presents the fate of the natives in a way that suggests condemnation of their treatment at the hands of the Europeans. Marlow, the white European, comments that 'they were not enemies, they were not criminals', as if surprised to discover his long held beliefs are unfounded. He describes the 'black shadows of disease and starvation' and is critical of the 'pitiless' treatment of the local people by the colonisers, notably the relentless beating of the 'nigger' who is blamed for causing a fire. Marlow is presented as a figure who has no particular colonial zeal but who 'looked at the map [of Africa] in a shop window' and was 'fascinated', as if Africa is some strange, exciting playground to him. Conrad himself had experience of visiting the Congo and was shocked by what he saw. He was vocal about his opposition to the actions of colonising powers in a letter he wrote to William Blackwood (publisher of Blackwood magazine). He claimed he had a desire to expose the 'pure selfishness' involved in 'the civilising work in Africa'¹. In *Heart of Darkness* he exposes the cruelty and inhumanity of the methods of colonisation and to that extent the text is critical of colonial rule.

However, despite his apparent criticism of some aspects of colonial practice, Conrad is unable to view Africa through anything other than the European lens of his time and many readers find his presentation of the continent and its people inherently racist. The renowned Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe called it 'an offensive and deplorable book' that de-humanised Africans. Africa, in *Heart of Darkness*, is presented as 'the other', a dark and savage place, an uncivilised world which houses 'cannibals' and 'pure, uncomplicated savagery' and which drives men to insanity. Even if Conrad is critical of colonialism he still presents Africa as the place which houses 'the horror' and which harbours 'the heart of darkness', he seems incapable of conceiving it as a place which nurtures creative, intelligent people with a rich and vibrant heritage. The idea that Africa could have something positive to offer beyond profit is a world view that he is simply incapable of adopting and so he falls prey to the 'general inability to empathise across boundaries of cultural and ethnic difference'².

1. *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad* – Cambridge University Press, 1986

2. *AQA Critical Anthology* - P Barry

There are other aspects of the text which do not sit easily with modern readers. Kurtz and Marlow work for an ivory trading company, an organisation which profits from the killing of native animals for the decorative ivory they provide.

The validity of this trade is never questioned by the text but to a modern reader, aware of how endangered the wild animals have become and living in a world which is suffering the consequences of the plundering of precious natural resources, it is not likely to be viewed with neutrality. The very use of the word 'nigger', a term which has acquired such negative connotations, is in itself an indication of the mindset of Marlow, and possibly Conrad himself. Despite apparently being concerned at the mistreatment of the Africans they are still presented as different, the other and, inevitably, the lesser.

V.G.Kiernan states that Africa in this period (the late 19th century) 'became very truly a dark continent, but its darkness was one the invaders brought with them, the sombre shadow of the white man'³. This is not a view that deeply permeates Conrad's view of Africa in *Heart of Darkness*. While he is critical of the methods the Europeans bring he does present Africa as anything other than uneducated, primitive and uncivilised. He does lure his readers into viewing and criticising what colonial powers do, but he does not fundamentally challenge any stereotypical views about the nature of the place that is being colonised.

If, as some readers claim, Conrad actually wants to explore the darkness at the heart of humanity in his text, why choose Africa as the setting for his tale? Why not the mean back streets of London or the financial district of any major European city? Why does Marlow have to travel so far into the depths of Africa?

Why is it there, as opposed to anywhere else, that Kurtz experiences 'the horror'? Despite his claims to liberal views Conrad is clearly not able to detach himself from the Euro-centric point of view that dominated his world.

Despite on the surface appearing to be an anti-colonial text Conrad's work is fundamentally shaped by a set of attitudes and values that view black Africans and their country as different, alien and inferior. The text advocates that white men should not treat them harshly but ultimately does not challenge the reader to view them differently. Given this, *Heart of Darkness* does not provide an outright condemnation of colonialism; it pays lip service to some anti-colonial sentiments whilst at the same time reinforcing the ideology which is the premise on which colonialism is built.

3. *The Lords of Humankind: Black Man, Yellow Man and White Man in an Age of Empire* – V G Kiernan, 1969

Bibliography and references

¹ *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad* – Cambridge University Press, 1986

² *AQA Critical Anthology* - P Barry

³ *The Lords of Humankind: Black Man, Yellow Man and White Man in an Age of Empire* – V G

Moderator commentary

This student shows a good understanding of some of the ideas associated with post-colonial criticism and they try to show that reading through that lens can still lead to different interpretations, although the counter arguments within this piece could arguably have been more developed. They have gone beyond seeing a post-colonial reading as only being interested in the presentation of

downtrodden 'native characters' and have tried to engage with the attitudes and values lying behind the text. The student considers the context within which Conrad was writing and how the world view of that time period may have shaped his writing. They touch on how a modern reading context is likely to be different but perhaps more could have been done with that?

The student engages with the topic in a vibrant and lively way and there is much to commend in their piece, however AO2 could be a little more developed, particularly in terms of the structure of the novel. The writing is good but it is worth considering if the piece would be stronger without the introductory paragraph; beginning at paragraph two would maybe have given a sharper, more focused beginning to the argument?

Overall this piece probably does enough to get into low band 5.