Writing on a novel

A detailed analysis of passages from a novel will show the significance of language, images, dialogue, setting and characterisation within passages and an awareness of how these contribute towards meaning in the novel as a whole.

Go to **www.insightpublications.com.au** for analyses of passages from *Persuasion*, *Emma* and *Sense and Sensibility*.

Sample response on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

This response is based on three passages from *Heart of Darkness*:

- pp.11–12, from 'I flew around like mad to get ready' to '*Bon Voyage*'
- pp.42–4, from 'I had the manager on board and three or four pilgrims with their staves' to 'leaving hardly a sign – and no memories'
- pp.92–3, from 'I rang the bell before a mahogany door on the first floor' to '"You knew him well," she murmured, after a moment of mourning silence.'

(Page numbers are from the 2007 Penguin Classics edition.)

Heart of Darkness is suspended between two worlds: Europe and Africa; civilisation and barbarism. Yet Conrad presents these apparent opposites as being far more complex than a simple binary of 'good' versus 'evil'. In Passage 1, Conrad places Marlow in the centre of the overseas colony to which he is headed, in an unnamed city that brings to mind a 'whited sepulchre' or, later, simply becomes the 'sepulchral city'. It is a place of decay and death disguised in deluded dreams of making 'no end of coin by trade' – everyone is 'full of it'. The imagery emphasises the barren soullessness: the empty street is in 'deep shadow' and not just silence, but a 'dead silence'.

Conrad also highlights the city's decline in the description of the company offices. The 'ungarnished' staircase is 'as arid as a desert'; even the doorway is not simply an open door, but a 'crack' through which Marlow must slip, giving the impression that he is secreting himself into a forbidden part of the Earth. In this desolate environment, the people are dehumanised and detached. The 'somnambulist'-like woman moves through a set of established behaviours (stand up, escort guest, return, sit down), never stopping her knitting; she brings to mind other fateful knitters such as Dickens' *tricoteuse*, Madame Defarge, or the Fates of Greek mythology who wove men's destinies. The compassionate but ghostly 'skinny forefinger' that beckons Marlow into the office's dim 'sanctuary' furthers the impression that he is entering some other-worldly place to meet 'The great man himself' – who, ironically, is described as 'pale plumpness' and 'five feet six'.

Passage 1 shows a general detachment among those who are involved in, yet also removed from, the activities in the actual colony. Unlike the captain whom Marlow is replacing, these are not the people committing the atrocities. But they are benefitting from them and as a result they seem less than human. Nevertheless, Passage 1, like *Heart of Darkness* generally, is not wholly against colonialism. One of its brightest images is the 'large and shining map, marked with all the colours of the rainbow' showing the division of Africa into various colonies. Marlow's reaction reflects the view of colonialism presented in the

Establishes a broad connection between the passages based on a central idea in the text, then moves immediately into a close analysis of the language and imagery in Passage 1.

Clearly and confidently integrates well-selected quotations into the discussion.

Shows a clear connection between the city and the offices within it, leading to a broader discussion of Conrad's use of imagery (a key feature of the text).

Recognises the intertextual associations of some of the key images, showing a sophisticated understanding of how the writer is conveying views and values.

Explains how the imagery positions readers; the way in which the description is ironic might have been discussed.

Shows understanding of the nuances in language and hence of the text's presentation of views and values.

Provides an insightful explanation of the effects of the text's syntax and construction.

Shows a strong understanding of how the effects and nuances of language help to create atmosphere and tension.

Connects the central concerns of the passages and relates these to the wider text, demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between the passages and the text.

text: the red (British colonies) are where 'some real work is done' and the purple patches (German colonies) are where 'the jolly pioneers of progress drink the jolly lager-beer'. It is not colonialism itself that is necessarily the problem, Conrad suggests, but how it is undertaken.

The image of the river as a 'fascinating – deadly' snake and Marlow's destination 'Dead in the centre' of the map foreshadow later descriptions of the sinister nature of the African wilderness in Passage 2. Conrad's descriptions of the jungle are long and dense, seemingly echoing the nature of the jungle itself: the reader almost has to push through a thickness of words. Like the sepulchral city, the jungle is marked by silent 'still bends' and 'empty reaches' contrasted with 'the ponderous beat' of the steamboat wheel. Marlow's language reflects their intrusive, mechanistic push into an unwelcoming wilderness, and also makes the steamboat, 'like a sluggish beetle crawling on the floor of a lofty portico', seem fragile and insignificant.

The humans seen from the river in Passage 2 are either frightened foreigners being swallowed by the jungle or local people hiding within it. This contrast helps to establish an atmosphere of curious foreboding, in which unknowable cultures and intentions exist: 'sometimes the roll of drums behind the curtain of trees would run up the river … Whether it meant war, peace, or prayer we could not tell'. It is uncertain whether the people are 'cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us – who could tell?' and this – along with the undefined but glorified 'something' sought by the pilgrims – builds an air of tension where 'the snapping of a twig would make you start'.

The jungle is presented as a living organism whose enigmatic 'heart of darkness' they are approaching. The local Congolese and the personified jungle are closely entwined; indeed, they are almost one entity (an image that recurs later with Kurtz's station). Marlow describes passing a village and seeing 'a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage'. Conrad presents the image of 'a black and incomprehensible frenzy' with no clarification as to whether this refers to the jungle or the people: the two are so foreign to Marlow that he is 'cut off from the comprehension of the surroundings'.

In Passage 1, the people mirror the emptiness of their surroundings, but are still somewhat familiar to Marlow. In Passage 2, though, he cannot recognise them. He is 'on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet'. This is a thread that runs throughout the novel: the idea that the colonial clash of civilisations can open the soul to something that seems completely alien to the 'civilised' and that can – if, like Kurtz, one lacks control over one's own desires – destroy a person.

The core images in these two passages come together in Passage 3, where the Intended is the sleepwalker and her house, similar to the city of Passage 1, is a tomb. The grand piano is a 'sombre, polished

sarcophagus', and the 'mahogany door' echoes Kurtz's last words: 'The horror!' The symbolism of dusk falling and the room growing darker increases the sense that the Intended has also been destroyed by the 'heart of darkness'. As a result of her love for Kurtz (and, Marlow suggests, the fact that she idolised him rather than knowing what he was capable of) she has been drawn into his madness.

Passage 1 shows a lifeless city waiting to be filled with riches. Passage 2 reflects the physical, moral and psychological barriers colonists grapple with to make those riches. Passage 3 shows the meeting of the two: the rich house and the empty woman who has paid the real price. In drawing these parallels, Conrad displays the great potential of humans to destroy themselves, and others, in their pursuit of wealth and power.

Draws connections between the passages consistent with the interpretation of the text. The analysis of Passage 3 could have been further developed through discussion of how the description of the Intended combines black and white imagery.

The short conclusion highlights the key connections between the passages, showing how they reveal developments in the text and how they contribute to the views and values of the text as a whole.

Assessor comments

This response provides an interesting and coherent interpretation of *Heart of Darkness*. It works closely with the language of the passages, analysing the meanings and effects of various images. The complexity of the text's views on colonialism is acknowledged throughout, and the features of the text that present these views (language, imagery, characterisation) are carefully considered.

The second half of the response effectively contrasts Passages 1 and 2, with Marlow's sense of the deathly aspects of Europe compared to his complete incomprehension of the African jungle and its inhabitants. The discussion of Passage 3, although brief, shows how it draws together imagery and ideas from the earlier passages, showing a sophisticated understanding of the significance of the passages and the connections between them. A longer, more detailed analysis of Passage 3, and of the figure of the Intended, could have further developed this interpretation.

The response is expressively and fluently written, with varied and well-constructed sentences and a wide vocabulary effectively and appropriately used (e.g. 'foreshadowed', 'symbolism', 'parallels'). Quotations are well-selected and integrated throughout; however, at times (e.g. paragraphs 5 and 6) there might have been fewer quotations and some more detailed 'unpacking'.