

## Sample Section A response: *Heart of Darkness*

**Author:** Joseph Conrad

**Genre:** modernist novel (or novella)

**Perspective used:** psychoanalytic

**Other approaches:** postcolonial, New Critical / formalist, New Historicist

**Topic:** Consider the proposition that Conrad's novella is primarily concerned with an examination of the human condition.

A consideration of what lies within the hearts of men is central to Joseph Conrad's classic novella *Heart of Darkness*. **1** Marlow's journey into the colonised heart of Africa serves as a vehicle for Conrad to explore the ramifications for humanity when the superficial mask of civilisation is stripped away. **2** Plunged into a world without the restrictions of Western civilisation, Marlow is left dependent upon his own capacity for self-restraint to resist the call of the 'drums' which echo through the narrative. **3** Thus, as argued by critic Albert Guerard in 'The Journey Within', his psychoanalytic reading of the novella, *Heart of Darkness* is a 'journey into the self' in which Marlow must look into his own heart and find out whether he is, at his core, savage or civilised. **4**

From the outset of Marlow's narrative, it is clear that his experiences have been confronting. Although Guerard refers to this beginning as Marlow's 'introspective plunge', there is a hesitance and vagueness to Marlow's account which suggests that Marlow himself is not fully capable of true introspection. **5** Marlow describes his time in the Congo as the 'culminating point of my experience' which threw 'a kind of light' upon his own existence. The adverbial phrase 'kind of' implies that Marlow does not acquire full knowledge, but prepares the reader for some revelations about the importance of what he encounters. **6** When Marlow goes to the 'whited sepulchre' that is Brussels, enigmatic images of death and stagnation are employed to foreshadow that, in Marlow's journey to the Congo, the choices he will make may render him as soulless as the city. That Marlow's experiences will affect his very being is most clearly intimated by the fact that he is greeted by two women who resemble the Fates of ancient Greek mythology, for they appear to be 'guarding the door of Darkness'. The nature of that darkness is hinted at by the doctor Marlow sees, whose seemingly innocuous inquiry 'Ever any madness in your family?' reveals that it is not just Marlow's body that is about to

- 1** Begins by showing some understanding of what the 'human condition' is. A response scoring in the highest mark range would show a greater degree of finesse here.
- 2** Shows understanding of complexity of the story rather than just recounting the plot.
- 3** Narrows the discussion so that it becomes clear that a psychoanalytic perspective is being employed.
- 4** Clear connection made to a specific piece of literary criticism. The discussion shows an understanding of Guerard's contention, reflecting wide reading in preparation for the task.
- 5** Discussion of Guerard reveals a capacity to engage with and critique the ideas put forward by this critic.
- 6** Analysis of the importance of 'kind of' reveals a complex and insightful understanding of how language creates meaning.



- 7 Use of 'inscrutable' suggests a close reading and understanding of the language employed throughout the novella.
- 8 Acknowledges and places pressure on the views and values that are conveyed in the text.
- 9 Criticism of Guerard shows understanding of the breadth of this critic's discussion. Note the connection to the subsequent paragraph.



be challenged, but also his mind. Conrad thus foreshadows that Marlow's physical and psychological reserves will be necessary to survive the confrontation with his own nature that will come from engaging in the colonialist enterprise underway in the Congo.

The challenges faced by Marlow become clearer upon his journey from the Outer Station towards the Inner Station and Kurtz; but they remain, as Conrad repeatedly reminds us, 'inscrutable'. 7 Already confronted with the 'touch of insanity' which marks the Company's actions on his journey to Africa, Marlow observes a 'scene of inhabited devastation', with decaying pieces of machinery strewn about and 'objectless blasting' underway at a cliff which is 'not in the way of anything'. This imagery suggests a lack of purpose, and a senseless undertaking to do 'work' of any kind in order to maintain a facade of colonial enterprise. This facade is maintained with particular care by the Company's chief accountant, whom Marlow admires for being able to maintain an appearance of civilisation. Marlow himself quickly throws himself into the 'work' of repairing his boat when he arrives at the Central Station, in spite of the fact that 'I don't like work'. It seems that Marlow is seeking to protect himself from something, perhaps from the 'tremor of far-off drums' that he hears on his journey to the Central Station and finds 'weird, appealing, suggestive, and wild'. The sound of the drums is an essential tool employed by Conrad to reveal the stripping away of civilisation and also Marlow's ever-nearing encounter with his own true nature, a motif that in turn reflects how closely Conrad aligns the African natives with the ancient origins of the European colonisers – a distinctly racist equation which is difficult to overlook. 8 Marlow tells his listeners that the only reason he was able to resist the call of the Darkness to 'go ashore for a howl and a dance' was that he was busy at work keeping the boat on course so that he could get to Kurtz. Guerard argues that work, in the absence of the superficial restrictions of 'the butcher and the policeman', is Marlow's only armour against the internal pull of his own nature to the dark call of the Congo. This, however, ignores the fact that when Marlow finally does confront his darker 'savage' self, he is no longer protected by work but only has his own inner reserves to call upon. 9

With his arrival at the Inner Station, the temptation to reject the principles and values of civilised society is strongest as Marlow meets Kurtz. Kurtz presents to Marlow what Guerard refers to as 'a potential and fallen self', a man who has already had to face

'utter solitude without a policeman' and been unable to meet the challenge. **10** Kurtz is revealed to have 'taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land' and abandoned the principles that he had sought to uphold as an 'emissary of light'. It is made clear that Kurtz's failure resides in single fault – he lacks restraint. Kurtz's fate occurs not only because he is removed from his social context, but also because he lacks the inner capacity to resist the evil urges that are able to take hold when a person is the sole arbiter of their own actions. With no authority to call upon but himself, behaving like a demigod, Kurtz is revealed to be incapable of exercising the restraint that the cannibals on Marlow's steamboat, despite a great shortage of food, show themselves to be capable of. Marlow is equally confronted with the need to exercise restraint. The symbolic drums, **11** which he has heard faintly echoing through the darkness on his journey to the Inner Station, reach their crescendo as Marlow, no longer occupied with the 'work' of keeping the steamer afloat, confronts Kurtz in the grass near the hut. This confrontation symbolises Marlow's confrontation with his own savage self, with his own capacity to seize power over those whom he sees as lesser beings than himself. As Guerard argues, Kurtz, described as a 'shade' and an 'initiated wraith from the back of Nowhere', represents Marlow's Jungian shadow, a personification of the inferior and hidden aspects of his personality that have been protected by European civilisation and 'work'. But Marlow makes a choice to return to the boat, and to civilisation, seeking to avoid a dark encounter with his own truth like Kurtz experienced as the 'veil' was rent and he pronounced upon his own existence 'The horror! The horror!' **12**

Thus it becomes clear that *Heart of Darkness* is not simply an examination of the impact of colonisation upon the Congo, but an examination of the impact upon the souls of European men when they are removed from the civilising forces with which they have surrounded themselves. It appears that, according to Conrad, at the heart of the human condition lies a capacity for great evil, but also a capacity for choice, and that ultimately it is not fate that determines our pathways through life, but our responses to the impulses and desires lying at the very core of our humanity. **13**

- 10** Returns to the specific piece of literary criticism being drawn on, reinforcing the perspective being used as the 'lens' for the interpretation as a whole.
- 11** Consistent reference to drums throughout piece reveals a perceptive and close reading of the text.
- 12** Further elaboration of this point, and the significance of this important piece of textual evidence, would improve the essay.
- 13** Conclusion clearly draws together the key ideas of the essay and highlights how the essay has responded to the topic.

## Guiding comments

The philosophical notion of ‘the human condition’ is a complex one, for it encompasses the various experiences of human existence from birth to death, and the ways in which those experiences are shaped by our unique capacity to be self-aware and to reflect on our past. The physical aspects of these moments are not what is being considered; rather, it is our responses to them, for in these encounters we experience emotions such as anguish and despair, and we look for the truth and meaning in our existence.

Of particular relevance to discussion of Conrad and the human condition are questions around our nature and the nature of the society we live in. Are we inherently good or evil? Are we truly civilised, or is civilisation simply a veneer that masks our true selves? These are questions that Conrad appears to ask through Marlow’s narration.

This response is informed by psychoanalytic criticism, and in particular by the article ‘The Journey Within’ by Albert J Guerard. Psychoanalysts consider how individuals’ actions in everyday life may be shaped by unconscious motives that they are unaware of. The theory was developed by Sigmund Freud in the 1890s and has since been extended and adapted by various theorists. When applied to literature, psychoanalysis sees the text as a record of the author’s unconscious concerns, and the reading of the text becomes an interpretive process, with the reader looking for clues that point to a deeper, more significant meaning.

A Freudian reading of *Heart of Darkness* would focus on Freud’s model of the mind as having three functional aspects. Those aspects are the id (which incorporates libidinal and other desires), the superego (the internalisation of standards of morality and propriety), and the ego (the part of the mind that mediates between the id and the superego). From this perspective, Kurtz is representative of the id, while the fogginess of the journey suggests a parallel journey through the ego into the unconscious.

Jungian criticism attempts to explore the connection between literature and what Carl Jung (a student of Freud) called the ‘collective unconscious’ of the human race. In literary analysis, a Jungian critic would look for archetypes such as the ‘shadow’ – which is mentioned in the above essay.

## Other approaches

There are many ways that you could approach this topic, though you must focus on the idea of the human condition. Here are three suggestions.

- A **postcolonial** perspective would enable a discussion of how the ideology of racism pervades Marlow’s narrative. It could be argued that Conrad’s novella is not concerned with an examination of the human condition, but rather the condition of the white man, and that the novella is tainted by a dependence on defining humanity against the African ‘other’.

- You could examine this question using a **New Critical** or **formalist** approach, focusing on the formal features of *Heart of Darkness* without regard to the context in which it was written. Such a response would focus upon the artistic form employed, particularly Conrad's impressionism which contributes to the sense of 'inscrutability' which pervades the novella.
- A **New Historicist** perspective would engage in a detailed discussion of the text's historical context in order to reconnect *Heart of Darkness* with the time period in which it was produced. Thus, a New Historicist approach to this essay would consider the anxieties experienced by those living in the late-Victorian era, particularly around the impact of colonisation on their understanding of their own nature.

### References

Conrad, J 2007, *Heart of Darkness*, Penguin Classics, London. First published in 1899.

Guerard, AJ 1958, 'The Journey Within', reprinted in the Norton Critical Edition of *Heart of Darkness*, 3rd edn, pp.268–80.