

## Response to a Critical Essay

**Please refer to the syllabus for due date!**

**Goals:** We've all had the experience of being unconvinced by someone else's "take" on a text that we've studied carefully and feel strongly about. The purpose of a paper like this is fairly straightforward, then: to join a critical conversation and to lay out some of your *own* ideas about a text (in this case, *Heart of Darkness*) in reference to someone *else's*. As Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein argue in *They Say, I Say*, "the underlying structure of effective academic writing...resides not just in stating our own ideas but in listening closely to others around us, summarizing their views in a way that they will recognize, and responding with our own ideas in kind...[T]he best academic writing...is deeply engaged in some way with other people's views."

When someone else's ideas are contained in a piece of dense academic prose, of course, it can be difficult to make them out, let alone to articulate a response. Rather than ask you to frame your response in the form of an essay, then, I'm asking you to complete a more formulaic exercise, one with a clear template and some "blanks" to fill in. It's not college-level Mad Libs, exactly; the "blanks" will sometimes need to be filled with sentences or even paragraphs rather than words or phrases. But I hope that this will lower the degree of difficulty somewhat and make grappling with dense prose and difficult ideas more manageable.

**How to proceed:** for this assignment you'll choose *one* of the assigned critical essays in our edition of *Heart of Darkness*, which we're slated to read and discuss in the coming weeks (Smith or Brantlinger) *or* Andrew Roberts' "Epistemology, Modernity and Masculinity: *Heart of Darkness*." (This title was actually cited in the critical history of *Heart of Darkness* in our text; it's available online through the course reserves page.) You'll start by reading each of the essays carefully for our class discussions: highlight and annotate each one, piece out the main lines of its argument(s), paraphrase key points, identify and assess your own difficulties with the text, etc. Come to class, pay attention to what's said, ask questions, put in your own two cents, and take more notes.

As you read the essays for class, then, you should also be thinking about what you would say to the authors if you had them in the room with you. To whom would you have the most to say? You'll want to choose an essay that genuinely interests, intrigues and/or infuriates you.

The actual assignment that you hand in will consist of two parts: a schematic, paragraph-by-paragraph summary of the essay, followed by your response to the essay in several paragraphs.

1. Begin with the paragraph-by-paragraph summary of the essay. Following the guidelines for reading in the handout "Making Your Reading Count," read through the selected essay, numbering each paragraph. Focus on your highlighted/underlined material (do you think what you chose to underline still makes sense?). Condense each paragraph into a sentence or two. Paraphrase your highlighted passages, rather than quote; it's easy to quote what you don't really understand. However, if you do find yourself quoting directly from the essay be sure to follow up with a brief paraphrase of what you take the quotation to mean. (This is just good form in quoting any material.)

More often you will have to weed out what's peripheral from what's essential and put the core thought of the paragraph into your *own* words. All summaries/paraphrases inevitably adopt an evaluative point of view on whatever it is they're summarizing, especially if their ultimate purpose is critique. Just the same, try to be as neutral and accurate as possible at this stage, and save any interpretive angle for later. At this point, you're listening to the author and trying to let the author speak his or her piece. **A good summary of a twenty-page essay is likely to take at least 3 double-spaced pages; try not to take more than four, to be merciful to your instructor.**

**Summarizing always means selection:** picking and choosing from among the many ideas the most relevant ones to the author's overall argument.

The paragraph-by-paragraph summary should be laid out as a list—*not* in essay form. That is, you'll number the paragraphs in the text, and then provide a summary of no more than two or three sentences for each, thusly:

Para. 1: Let's put Conrad in historical context, kids. And to do that, we need to historicize history.

Para. 2-4: A brief history of *historiography*: it moved from typological to evolutionary time, from history as moral lessons, revelations of timeless truths (essentially a medieval frame of mind) to history as descriptive, objective recreation of what happened (modern history), but still providing insight into universal truths (like Human Nature, for instance).

Para. 5: We recognize today futility of just this project, this notion of an objective history of pure facts and "universal" truths; Conrad in fact anticipated it himself when he said that fiction is more truthful than history.

This is a summary of the first paragraphs of Brook Thomas's New Historicist essay (which we aren't reading). Note that a few paragraphs may be bundled into a single summary *if* appropriate.

At the end of your paragraph-by-paragraph summary, write out the essay's **thesis** in a paraphrase:

Thesis : According to Brook Thomas in "Preserving and Keeping Order by Killing Time in *Heart of Darkness*," Conrad's novel anticipates the insights of New Historicism—that is, the constructedness of historical narratives and the inaccessibility of truth, except, possibly, through the imaginative leap of the work of art, which itself tends to defer, even as it promises, revelation.

2. Once you feel you have a solid idea of what's going on in the essay, you can turn to your response. You should first articulate for yourself, in your own mind, what that response is, of course: do you agree wholeheartedly with the author? Would you, in fact, *extend* the author's argument in some ways? Do you agree, but only to an extent and with some reservations? Would you reframe the author's argument in some way? Do you find the author's argument somewhat unpersuasive? Do you find it *totally* unpersuasive?

You'll also need to *account* for your response. What makes you respond this way—how do you justify your response? Do you take issue with the actual critical approach the author has taken (you're not persuaded by feminism in general)? Do you find the approach enlightening, but come up with a rather different understanding of *Heart of Darkness* when you view it through that lens (you're a card-carrying feminist, but your feminist/gender reading of the novel is rather different from Smith's)? Do you find logical inconsistencies in the author's argument? Does the writer ignore details of the novel that would refute his contentions? Or does the critic's reading of the novel dramatically increase your own understanding of the text—so much so that the author's insights illuminate other aspects of the novel that she didn't discuss in the essay? Do you agree with 90% of the author's assertions but find one point in the essay troubling or unconvincing?

*Nuanced* responses are good. You're not out to establish that Andrew Michael Roberts is a total idiot, or that Patrick Brantlinger actually knows nothing about postcolonial criticism. You're inserting yourself into a critical discussion here—not engaging in a debate on Fox News.

I'm giving everyone the opening paragraph of their response in the form of a template with blanks to be filled in:

In [Title of essay], [name of essay's author, hereafter "X"] [argues/claims/asserts, etc.] that \_\_\_\_\_. More specifically, \_\_\_\_\_. As X him/herself puts it, "\_\_\_\_\_." While some might [object that/wonder whether, etc.] \_\_\_\_\_, X contends nevertheless that \_\_\_\_\_. I myself find X's argument \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

In other words, your first paragraph should lay out what you understand to be the author's main point, the understanding of the text to which he or she is responding (implicitly or explicitly) and your own perspective on the essay and its argument. (You *can* play around with the language in the template, but try to keep to this overall structure.)

The remainder of your response will justify your critique of the essay. This should take **at least two full pages**.

Some important things to keep in mind:

- *Begin by making sure you have a solid grasp of the essay's argument and purpose.* Just as you need to attend to the specific words on the page of a literary text through close reading, you need also to attend to the specifics of a critical text. Obviously, if you misinterpret or misrepresent what its author says, your response will be much less effective. **THIS I FIND TO BE THE SINGLE GREATEST CHALLENGE FOR STUDENTS.**
- *Read through your paragraph summaries:* can you in fact track an argument? And is it an argument that seems to support what you identified as the thesis? If the answer is no, then check your work: perhaps you've misconstrued the thesis and/or the point of one or more paragraphs.
- *Consider carefully the nature of your response to the essay.* Were you bored by it? Frustrated by its reliance on "jargon"? Offended by its characterization of the great Joseph Conrad as (gasp!) a disseminator of a suspect ideology? Well, get over it. Your focus here is on the quality of the writer's argument, not your visceral reaction to a text you find obscure/long-winded/challenging/personally objectionable. Those responses may, however, help you to identify your *intellectual* objections, if you're willing to dig a bit deeper and get past how the essay made you "feel."