

Response to a Critical Essay

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 that we're slated to read and discuss in weeks 9 through 12: either Smith's or Brantlinger's essay in our edition of *Heart of Darkness* or Andrew Roberts's "Epistemology, Modernity and Masculinity: *Heart of Darkness*." (This piece is actually cited in the critical history of *Heart of Darkness* included our text, and I've included it in the online course reader.)

Start by reading all the the essays carefully for 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, put in your own two cents, and take more notes. As you do all this, you should also be thinking about what you would say to the essays' 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 paper that you hand in will consist of two parts: 1) a schematic, paragraph-by-paragraph summary of your chosen essay, followed by 2) your own reasoned response. Details:

1. Number each paragraph of your chosen essay. Following the guidelines for reading in the handout "Making the Most of Your Reading," go back and critically evaluate what you've highlighted or underlined in your essay: do you think what you've chosen still makes sense? Now condense each paragraph of the essay into a sentence or two. Occasionally you may find a sentence within a given paragraph that truly captures its essence, but those occasions will be rare. 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. (Better in any event to force yourself to paraphrase in this way, since it can be tempting to quote what you don't truly understand.)

All summaries inevitably adopt an evaluative point of view on whatever it is they're summarizing, especially if their ultimate purpose is critique. But at this point, you're trying to listen to the author and represent him or her as neutrally and accurately as possible. Save the evaluation for later. **A good of summary of a twenty-paragraph can easily take 2 to 3 double-spaced pages, but have mercy on your instructor and try not to go more than 4.**

Your paragraph-by-paragraph summary should be laid out as a list—*not* in essay form. Like so:

Par. 1: Let's put Conrad in historical context. To do that, we need to historicize history.

Par. 2-4: A brief history of *historiography*: it moved from typological to evolutionary time—from history conceived of as a moral lesson or a revelation of timeless truths (essentially a medieval frame of mind) to history conceived of as a descriptive, objective recreation of what happened (though perhaps still providing insight into universals like "Human Nature").

Par. 5: Today we recognize the futility of this latter project—i.e., this notion that there is an objective history built from pure facts and "universal" truths. And in fact, Conrad anticipated this view himself when he said that fiction is more truthful than history.

(The above is a summary of the first paragraphs of Brook Thomas's New Historicist essay [which we aren't reading] in our edition of *Heart of Darkness*. Note that if it's appropriate, a few paragraphs may be bundled into a single summary.)

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

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

Thesis: According to Brook Thomas in "Preserving and Keeping Order by Killing Time in *Heart of Darkness*," Conrad's novella anticipates the insights of New Historicism; namely, the constructedness of historical narratives and the inaccessibility of truth—inaccessible 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 own response. You should first articulate for yourself, in your own mind, what that response is: 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? *Totally* unpersuasive?

You'll also need both to *account* for your response and clarify the *nature* of your response. What exactly are you reacting? Do you take issue with the critical approach the author has taken (e.g., you're not persuaded by one or more basic premises of feminist criticism in general)? Do you find the approach generally enlightening, but nevertheless come up with a different understanding of *Heart of Darkness* when you view the text through that critical lens (i.e., 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 certain details of the novel that would undercut or 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 shouting match on Fox News.)

I'm giving everyone the opening paragraph of their response in the form of a fill-in-the-blanks template:

In [Title of Essay], [Author's Full Name] [argues/claims/asserts/etc.] that _____.
More specifically, _____. As [Author's Last Name, hereinafter referred to as "X"]
[himself/herself] puts it, "_____." While some might [object that/wonder whether, etc.]
_____, X contends nevertheless that _____. I myself X's [argument/position/etc.]
_____, because _____.

(You may recognize this template from Graff and Birkenstein's *They Say, I Say*, excerpts of which appear in the online Course Reader. If necessary, you may adapt or alter its specifics slightly, for elegance of phrasing or to better suit your purposes.)

The remainder of your response will justify your critique of the essay as explained above. 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 when you do a close reading of a literary text, so too do you need 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 difficult or long-winded or stylistically obscure or personally objectionable. Such gut responses may, however, help you to identify your *intellectual* objections, as long as you're willing to dig a bit deeper and get past how the essay made you "feel."

Due: Thursday, November 13 at the start of class.