

## Essay Tips and Tricks III

### Definition of "theme":

The statement(s), express or implied, that a text seems to be making about its subject. The theme of a work on suffering might be that suffering is in God's plan and should therefore be accepted. The term "theme" is generally applied to the main idea or message in a text but is sometimes applied more broadly to include secondary ideas or messages, hence, the characterization of themes as "major" and "minor."

– Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms

### Effective ways to discuss "theme":

**Central (major) theme.** State the central theme in sentence form. This is the author's message or thesis. It is what the entire text seems to ultimately be saying. (This could also be a question.)

DON'T SAY "THEMES OF" WHEN DISCUSSING THE CENTRAL THEME

**Additional (minor) themes.** You may bring up minor themes as phrases or single words, as long as those single words are abstract notions to be pondered, such as patriotism, sacrifice, death or darkness. Minor themes may be more vaguely stated than the central theme, which must not be.

IT IS OK TO SAY "THEMES OF" WHEN DISCUSSING MINOR THEMES

TO DISCUSS A BATTLE BETWEEN TWO NOTIONS, SUCH AS GOOD VERSUS EVIL, DON'T SAY "THEMES OF GOOD VERSUS EVIL." INSTEAD SAY, THE AUTHOR EXPLORES THE BATTLE/FIGHT/PULL/TUG/RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL."

**Recurring motifs** (thematic elements), are images, symbols, and character types that recur and help to unify the piece and illuminate the central theme. You may describe motifs as "snake motif" or "water motif" if you then discuss how the snake or water motif leads to another motif and/or to the central theme. "Perhaps as snakes and water both move in insidious ways, so, too, does darkness, including and especially the darkness of a conqueror."

Possible outline for an explication of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*:

- I. Introduction ending with your thesis, which is (or is nearly) the text's central theme. "The author comments on imperialism and its prevailing legacy via a frame-story with two alternating narrators, each of questionable reliability, and a symbolic delving into the darkness that resides within each one of us. The journey of the protagonist is not only a journey into Africa, but also into the dark core of man."
- II. The single, most salient literary technique in *Heart of Darkness*, which would be frame-story.
- III. The second most salient literary technique in *Heart of Darkness*, which would likely be symbolism. There is ubiquitous mention of darkness, which represents both the literal darkness of places unknown and the figurative darkness that resides deep within each man. Also, of course, the Congo, snakes, decapitated heads, ivory and other objects represent a multitude of abstractions that all point to the author's interest in exploring the paradoxical darkness that exists inside self-righteousness.
- IV. The third most salient literary technique in *Heart of Darkness* which might be paradox, irony, foreshadowing, shift in tone, or another.
- V. Another technique, if you have the time and inclination.
- VI. Closure, which is NOT a full-paragraph-restatement of what you have already said but is instead the point you want to make about how these techniques all work in concert to say something crucial about our world then and now. This could be its own paragraph, or it could simply be a concluding sentence at the end of your last body paragraph.

## Joseph Conrad and His Times

Joseph Conrad was born to aristocratic Polish parents at a time when Poland was a part of the Russian empire. To avoid being drafted into the Russian army, he fled first to France and then to England. He did not learn English until he was twenty years old. He entered the Merchant Marine to continue a career at sea that he had already begun in France. He earned his certificate as a ship's officer and in a few years attained the rank of captain. His career at sea took him literally around the world, although most of his time was spent in Asia and the South Pacific. Eventually, he was forced to retire due to health problems. Friends encouraged him to become a writer. At first his novels and stories were not well received, and he was viewed as a writer of adventurous sea stories for young boys. Some important writers of his time, however, including H. G. Wells and John Galsworthy, appreciated the quality of his writing, and—with their support—he eventually found a wider and more appreciative audience.

Clearly Conrad's experience as a seafarer had a major influence on his works, but he did not write only about the sea. His major focus was the capacity of human beings to endure—under extreme conditions—the constant threat of the dissolution of human integrity and a surrender to the darkness that he saw as the essential heart of the entire universe. His works always focus on human beings under stress, and he never comes to clear conclusions about why people behave as they do. This ambiguity is one of the traits that mark him as a transitional figure between mainstream nineteenth-century novelists and the modern writers of the twentieth century who were influenced by him.

### Colonialism

Joseph Conrad's career as a sailor, from approximately 1870 to 1900, coincided with the peak of the British Empire. British colonies circled the globe and it was said, correctly, that the sun never set on British soil. The powerful British navy protected the sea lanes, but it was the British merchant marine that moved people and cargo throughout the empire. Imperial governments were primarily concerned with exploiting the natural resources of their colonies while using the colonies as markets for their manufactured goods. This situation was frequently a matter of oppressing native populations and taking advantage of their relative lack of sophistication. For the British, however, there was also the feeling that it was their duty to bring the fruits of civilization to the non-white populations they governed. The contradictions between the goals of greed and bringing culture, education, and scientific enlightenment to native peoples were concepts Conrad was very aware of from his experience, but it was a problem with which many educated Europeans could not identify. Conrad's works were, at least in part, an effort to make the people back home more aware of the problems and contradictions that the colonial enterprise entailed.

### The Novel's Themes

Conrad's view of the world is that there are dark, chaotic forces that continually threaten to destroy individuals and whole civilizations. The only protection from this is the resolute steadfastness of men and their stubborn reliance on each other no matter how hopeless the situation or how powerful the forces of darkness may appear. In physics this would be like the principle of entropy, which states that the tendency of all organized systems is toward dissolution and decay. People die, bodies decay, civilizations fall; and only constant effort and attention to preservation can halt these forces—and then only temporarily. In philosophy, Conrad can be seen as a precursor of the Existentialists, who likewise believed that the inevitable fate of each individual was darkness and oblivion, but that humans must not surrender to these destructive impulses.

There are some, like Kurtz's Intended, who could not face the true nature of the darkness at the center of the world; and, not only do they not comprehend it, but would be destroyed by it if they were forced to confront it. Conrad believed that to truly understand the world, people have to confront the true destructive heart of the universe, but they do so at great risk. Kurtz is destroyed by it, but Marlow sees it, partially understands it, and is able to resist the dark power of destruction. Conrad sets his story in what was still, in his time, one of the last great stretches of unknown territory in the world. His voyage is away from the bright, artificial world of civilization, into a place that is still a large unexplored area where civilization completely disappears. As his voyage progresses, we see him traveling through almost endless scenes of disintegration and decay until he at last arrives in the "heart of darkness."

### Narrative Layers

Conrad learned from American novelist Henry James a new technique called the "ambiguous narrator," which permitted the novelist to better represent how uncertain we must always be about the words, actions and motivations of others. Earlier novelists had used an "omniscient narrator" who knows what each character is thinking and feeling and why they act the way they do. In *Heart of Darkness* Conrad increases the distance between the main character in the story (Kurtz) and the reader by adding several layers of narrative isolation. The first layer of isolation occurs with Conrad's use of his experiences as the fresh-water commander of a steamboat expedition up the Congo River, which is the probable basis of the character Marlow. The second layer is told from a narrator who is listening to Marlow's story. Finally, Marlow is a third layer of isolation in that he tells a story the meaning of which he himself admittedly does not fully understand. His stories are, after all, "inconclusive experiences." The reader must work his or her way through three distinct narrative layers to reach the truth about Kurtz.

## Heart of Darkness Essay

Written during the age of imperialism, Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness explores the unanswered question of who are the true savages are between the white imperialists and the African men. Throughout the intricate plot, Conrad effectively applies the literary techniques of allegory through darkness and symbolism through the Accountant and tries to communicate to his readers that compared to these African "savages," European men may be the primitive individuals after all.

Conrad begins his novel with the ~~allegory~~ allegorical title, Heart of Darkness. The author stretches the metaphor of darkness to ~~perhaps~~ represent the unknown, imperialism, and savagery. As ~~perhaps~~ <sup>Marlow</sup> begins his journey into the Congo River in Africa, he mentions that he is traveling into the heart of darkness because of Africa's unexplored state at the time. Therefore on a world map, Africa stood as one huge blob of darkness, and Marlow's thirst for exploration and mystery was ready for this journey. As Marlow and his crew enter the African borders with their narrow, European mindset, they believe that they stand as superior individuals over the "primitive," African men, who apparently carry hearts of darkness themselves. However, as Marlow travels further into the jungle to see how his company is exploiting African territory and men for their ivory and thus profit, Marlow enters a state of confusion as he simultaneously finally begins to step out of his ignorant mindset to give a thought to the fact that perhaps, the European men are the true savages to these African men. Conrad <sup>also</sup> ironically labels women as holding hearts of darkness, as women are only attracted to the aesthetics and surface of materialistic goods; therefore, women are one of the most ignorant creatures of all and hold the darkest of hearts. When Marlow must tell Kurtz's fiancée Kurtz's last words before he died in Africa, Marlow tells her that his last words were "Your name" because he cannot bear to tell such a frail creature

## Heart of Darkness Essay.

Kurtz's final words, "The horror! The horror!" Lastly, Conrad again applied the allegory of darkness in an ironic light through the cannibals who only eat hippos around the seamen. ~~conrad~~ Although cannibals are thought to be the darkest creatures of all, as they consume humans, Conrad illustrates that even the "primitive" cannibals may stand more civilized next to the profit-hungry European businessmen. Through the allegory of darkness with hints of irony, Conrad, in a way, provided a sense of comic relief to his audience.

From the ~~character~~ seemingly-minor character of the Accountant to the flies that surrounded Kurtz, symbolism stands dominant throughout the plot as well. The Accountant of the ivory company symbolizes the company as it wants to be seen by others. He dresses elegantly in a full suit, despite the scorching heat and poverty of the African communities that surround him to emphasize the company's seeming professionalism. The Accountant's exaggerated emergence in books and diligence represents the company's devotion to perfection and excellence. The appearance of the Accountant ties into the surface of the "civilized" European men, in that they seem to act superior, but in reality, they are the most uncivilized and darkest creatures of all. Also, during the scene of Kurtz's death, flies surround Kurtz's sick body. Kurtz was once the most honorable ivory businessman of the company and apparently one of the most European men Europe has ever had; however, Kurtz lies in his deathbed in the interior of Africa because of his harsh exposure to reality that white men are the true savages. Kurtz, himself, returns to his primitive being as he mentally and physically deteriorates. The flies serve to represent Kurtz's death and corruption built through imperialism. Through Conrad's excellent appliance of symbolism and allegory for darkness, his touch of comic relief through his use of irony may have been necessary ~~because~~ for his audience because the novel itself may have been too dark... too dark altogether.

# Heart of Darkness Essay

4/29/13

Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness explores many dark themes that raise questions about the nature of mankind. The same questions are raised in Lord of the Flies. Both stories reveal a terrifying descent into savagery, ~~but~~ but there are subtle yet significant differences between the two.

Heart of Darkness follows a man named Marlow in his journey to Africa. At many points, Africa is described as a place that makes one feel isolated from civilization like an island. Lord of the Flies is ~~is~~ about a large group of children stranded on an island ~~with~~ after a plane crash. In both novels, ~~there~~ there is no government or institutional authority to guide the people and provide stability. The rules ~~of~~ of survival are more Darwin-esque. In Heart of Darkness, the native Africans are controlled by a man named Kurtz. Kurtz is ~~very~~ legendarily clever and influential. ~~In~~ In Lord of the Flies, a boy named Ralph becomes leader ~~is~~ because he is the oldest and ~~is~~ because others naturally look up to him. ~~This~~ In both tales, ~~the~~ this leadership ~~can only go so far before men~~ only went so far before the inevitable descent into "darkness" took place. In Heart, the native Africans turned to cannibalism and would go to any means necessary to find ivory for their "masters." In Lord, the children turned away from Ralph and followed a violent boy named Jack who wanted to lead a pack of hunters. In both stories, man ~~is~~ is characterized as brutal and savage ~~when~~ when left to

his own devices.

While the end result ~~of~~ of man's descent is portrayed the same way, the circumstances surrounding ~~Heart's~~ Heart's plot and ~~Lord's~~ Lord's plot reveal different themes. Heart of Darkness shows ~~power~~ power divided by race. The white man from Europe is able to come into Africa and ~~control the natives~~ manipulate the natives to do as he pleases. In Lord of the Flies, the two leaders, Ralph and Jack, come to power because they are the oldest and most naturally fit to lead. Heart of Darkness ~~illustrates~~ illustrates the evil associated with imperialism while Lord of the Flies demonstrates how Darwinism can be abused. When Marlow first arrives in Africa, he is under the impression that the Africans are savage beasts to begin with. They ~~are~~ are not cultured and civilized like Europeans and must be tamed for the benefit of white men. Marlow soon ~~learns~~ finds himself sympathizing with the natives rather than <sup>his</sup> fellow white men. He comes to a greater understanding that the real darkness lies within the people in Europe partitioning up Africa for their petty and materialistic desires. The protagonist ~~finds~~ of ~~the~~ Heart realizing fault in his actions differs sharply from the blameless Ralph in Lord. Ralph <sup>is</sup> ~~is~~ a victim of circumstances beyond his control. He tried to be democratic, but democracy does not work when the people elect Hitler. Heart raises complex social questions while Lord raises equally complex governmental

questions.

Both stories do feature a character represented as a martyr. ~~However~~ However, the reasons for each character's martyrdom are different. In Heart, Kurtz, despite his erratic ways, is beloved by the native Africans. When he falls ill and dies, the natives become distraught. Kurtz was their leader against the evil exploitation of the company. ~~His death was caused by tropical disease which is ironic. His~~ ~~insatiable~~ Kurtz's death was caused by tropical disease which is ironic. His ~~insatiable~~ insatiable desire to become rich and powerful through ivory led to his death and the death of a heart of darkness. In Lord, the martyr is a chubby boy with glasses named Piggy. Piggy is a pacifist that can be seen as the voice of reason. He is Ralph's right-hand man and someone who wishes to see civilization again. Piggy is tragically killed by Jack and his pack of hunters who mistake him for a wild beast. His death symbolizes the death of civilized behavior and the completion of the descent into savagery.

Heart and Lord explore many difficult and disheartening themes. ~~Imperial~~ Imperialism, Darwinism, democracy, racism, and martyrdom can all ~~also~~ illuminate dark truths about mankind.