



Write-to-Learn Assignments

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Introduction

If we're to be in the business of education rather than that of schooling, one of our long-range goals must be to help students become lifelong learners. Developing their ability to use writing-to-learn and their confidence and enjoyment in the process and its results should then be one of the highest educational priorities. Learning is the quintessential human activity. Language is the most powerful learning tool we have. All students have a right to discover--or, perhaps, rediscover--the joys of learning and we should all recognize that writing-to-learn is one of the best means of helping them to do so.

John Mayher, et. al.

It's more difficult to convince teachers that writing is a learning process than it is to convince them that talk is, because so often teachers use writing as a way of testing. They use it to find out what students already know, rather than as a way of encouraging them to find out. The process of making the material their own--the process of writing--is demonstrably a process of learning.

James Britton

The writing activities described in this section are designed to allow--perhaps even force--students to make language choices. It is precisely this process of language selection that makes the activities such valuable learning tools.

You will notice that these activities do not include copying or filling in the blanks--activities which research suggests consumes much writing time in our schools and is of limited learning value. The challenge of expressing ideas in writing places students at the center of their own learning, enabling them to master content and to improve their skill at expressing ideas. In addition, writing activities help students discover connections, discern processes, raise questions and discover solutions. The means through which this learning is achieved is invaluable, its effects, far-reaching.

If you haven't used writing-to-learn activities before, I encourage you to experiment with some suggested here. The list is not exhaustive, by any means, and some of the ideas presented here will trigger others for you. Of course, you will want to vary the activities you have your students do. But whichever ones you select, you will want to spend a few minutes of class time incorporating the writing activity into the lesson, allowing students to see directly or indirectly how the writing seeks to enhance the learning objectives.

After students have written, call on several of them to read, not tell you in other words, what they have written. Doing so forces them to pay attention to how they have stated their ideas and encourages them to look at their written words. Calling on several students allows for a variety of responses, and you can use this activity to make your own connections between and among their responses.

One word of warning is in order, however: do not make judgmental comments, either good or bad, after students have read. Remember that you are encouraging them to commit ideas to paper. You do not want to make them anxious or resent the activity because the person who read first received a "Great!" response from you and the next person did not. A simple "Thank you for sharing" works well as you proceed to call on the next person or to tie what has been said in with the day's lesson.

Experiment with these writing activities. Some of them will work better for your particular discipline than others. But you have a range of options available. And you will think of others along the way. A combination of writing to learn activities used efficiently and effectively is guaranteed to spark additional interest in your courses.

Freewriting

First introduced in Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* (Oxford University Press, 1975), freewriting simply means putting pen to paper and writing whatever comes into your head. It is a useful tool for generating ideas and discovering attitudes. The key here is to keep writing, even when you are having difficulty thinking of something to say. Some texts even instruct that the pen is not to leave the paper. Teachers might devote as few as five minutes of class time to freewriting, though ten to fifteen minutes are the most often used times allotted for this activity. Out-of-class freewriting, especially for students attempting to generate ideas for papers, can, of course, be much longer.

Elbow suggests that at the conclusion of a freewriting session the writer should compose a single sentence that summarizes the main point--"the center of gravity," he calls it. This sentence can then be a springboard for further exploration of ideas the next writing session.

Using freewriting at the beginning of a class has the advantage of immediately engaging students in the class. Students must, by necessity, close out some of the non-course related concerns that they bring into the classroom.

Focused Freewriting

While some writing texts do not discern between freewriting and focused freewriting, the distinction is worth noting: focused freewriting is writing about a particular subject or question which has been posed. Professors worried that freewriting is too unstructured will find comfort in the ways that focused freewriting can generate discussion about the day's topic(s). The nice thing about this activity is that all students have written something and one does not have to rely upon the handful of students who always volunteer their thoughts.

Sample questions:

1. What did you understand least about today's reading assignment?
2. What points in the article you read for today are the most (or least) convincing?
3. Of what value is this knowledge? How does what you are studying apply to the world around you?
4. Had you been a peasant during the French Revolution, what do you feel your greatest fear would have been?
5. What assumptions do you make about the author of the piece you have just read?

Entry Slips / Exit Slips

Entry slips and exit slips are written responses from students to questions you pose either at the beginning (entry) or the end (exit) of class. They usually take no more than five minutes and you can tell very quickly from these responses whether students are with you and are understanding the material. If understanding the relationship of X to Y is crucial to the next step you are discussing, you may want to check students' understanding by having them formulate the relationship in their own words. These slips take only a few minutes to read and keep you in touch with your students.

Sample questions:

1. What is the cause/effect relationship between A and B?
2. What confuses you about the material you read for (entry) / we covered (exit) today?
3. What are the three most important things you learned this class period?

Reader - Response Writing

Sometimes students need to be reminded that they bring attitudes to the subjects they study that affect their receptivity to the ideas under consideration. One interesting activity to emphasize this point is the following: have students divide a sheet of paper with a vertical line down the center. On one side of the paper than can write as a heading **(The Author's) Prejudices**; on the other side, **My Prejudices**. Listing the biases of the author forces them to think critically about what they have read. Noting their own prejudices should help them to discover their own angle of vision which informed their response to the material.

(The Author's) Prejudices	My Prejudices

The Sentence / Passage Springboard

Not all sentences strike us with equal force. We do find sentences, however, that catch our attention, perhaps because of their shock value, beauty of expression, or truthfulness. Ask students to note a particular sentence or short passage from their class reading that has captured their attention and to write that sentence/passage across the top of the page. They then spend whatever time you allot to exploring in writing their thoughts about the sentence/passage. This can be an out of-class as well as an in-class activity.

Writing Definitions to Empower the Student

Students often claim to lack knowledge of or attitudes towards the topics they study. One way to illustrate that they bring knowledge and attitudes to their studies is to ask them to write on a concept before it is discussed in class. For example, if you are reading a feminist article by a female author who is lamenting that her work, because of its feminine subject matter, is discounted by the long established patriarchal publishing world, you might ask students to write about the word authenticity. What is authentic? After asking several students to read their definitions, you then bring the discussion around to the search for a writer's authentic voice (the unique angle of vision that informs a work) and the societal standards that have confined and perhaps even silenced those voices. If the discussion is on love, you might ask them to write about vulnerability. The point is to get them to see connections (that is why you do not want them to write directly on the topic), to circle around, always broadening their perspectives based on what they already know and/or think.

I once heard someone refer to this process as the "velcro strip" technique--giving students something to which they can attach the new information.

Student Formulated Questions

We all strive to become skillful questioners in the classroom. By and large, we generally ask more questions than the students do. By seeking their questions first, we can help them explore considerations they might not otherwise have. Once again the point is to ask them to write their questions so that all students are involved, not just the quick thinkers who give us the questions we wanted, allowing us to hasten to the points we had in mind all along.

If you asked students to write on authenticity or vulnerability, as suggested in the previous exercise, they might pose the following questions: How do I recognize the authentic from the unauthentic? Am I authentic? Is vulnerability desirable? When does vulnerability become injurious? Do I understand my own vulnerabilities? Other subjects would have different questions: What is missing from this author's argument? What do I want to know that was not provided in this information? What are the consequences of X? Formulating questions (learning what to ask and how to ask) helps students better understand the material and assess the relevance of what they are studying to themselves and their world.

Students can bring their questions to class as a homework assignment, or the questions can be generated in class.

The Short Summary

Most of us agree that students need help--or perhaps just practice--with their abilities to summarize material. The following exercise gives them practice while it also aids their comprehension: ask students to summarize in no more than 50 words the main points of their reading assignment. They might do this on regular notebook paper or index cards. The activity encourages them to read the assignment and helps them to remember what they have read. And its brief format is not threatening to them.

You might also combine this activity with small group work, asking each group to work collaboratively on the best version. They could also shorten their summary to 25 words and/or to one sentence.

Group Writing Activities

*from Center for Instruction Development and Research
University of Washington at Seattle*

- A. Ask students to work together revising a document that has already been written. This is a useful activity for work on focus, organization, support, and use of jargon. You might have them rewrite something for a different purpose or audience. You have the option of having them sit down together cold or work individually on the document beforehand and then pool their suggested changes.
- B. Assign a group writing project. For example, instructors in sociology, speech communication and political science might divide their classes into 5 or 6 groups in order to investigate local problems or issues. Some students do the background research while other conduct interviews or surveys. Each student prepares a draft of his or her results for the group. Then the group as a whole must synthesize the information, organize, and prepare a report for presentation to the entire class. This assignment provides the instructor with only five or six papers to grade.
- C. Use peer response groups to work on all stages of major assignments:
 - 1. Brainstorm about possible topics or approaches to the assigned topic.
 - 2. Bring in plans or notes for feedback from group members.
 - 3. Read drafts to check that criteria for the assignment are being met. Provide feedback forms that address the criteria (i.e., questions about content, focus, organization, style, etc.).
 - 4. Read completed drafts for work on editing and/or revision.
 - 5. Written Critiques: Ask students to write an overall response to another student's essay. Provide guidelines for criticism which address the assignment criteria.

Dialectical / Double Entry Notebooks

The most useful way to raise consciousness of texts as intermediary forms and to develop a method of critical reading is, simply put, to have students write continuously in a double entry notebook.... The reason for the double-entry format is that it provides a way for the student to conduct that 'continuing audit of meaning' that is at the heart of learning to read and write critically.

Ann Berthoff, *The Making of Meaning*

Unlike the customary journal or notebook, dialectical/double entry notebooks are named for the vertical line drawn down the page, dividing the functions. Actually, these notebooks have a variety of uses and involve attitudinal writing, questioning, summarizing, and process writing.

Such a notebook is frequently used to help students understand the course content, particularly when the material is difficult. I first came across this writing activity while attending a writing conference in New Jersey. The speaker, a biology teacher, had participated in a pilot Writing Across the Curriculum faculty training workshop at her community college. Somewhat skeptically, she admitted, she began the semester asking students to take notes from the text in the left-hand column of their notebooks. In the right-hand column, they wrote questions about the material. The instructor then used the question column as the basis for class discussion, clarifying what they did not understand rather than covering material that they did grasp. Unlike other semesters, she gave no quizzes that term. She collected the journals at intervals and quickly responded to the questions in the right-hand margin if students had not already done so from class discussions. The results? Test scores that semester averaged 8 points higher than previous semesters. And, she noted with emphasis, for the first time ever she did not fall behind on her syllabus!

Example #1

Text Summary	Questions
<p>Simple columnar epithelium--rectangular with nuclei located near the bases of cells. Line the digestive tract from the cardia of the stomach to the anus the gallbladder and excretory ducts of many glands.</p>	<p>What is the cardia of the stomach? [Opening from esophagus to stomach].</p>

Still another use is as an in-class activity. Have students write a concept or a sentence/short passage from the text across the top of a sheet of paper. Student #1 responds to the passage in the left-hand column; students then exchange papers with the second student responding to Student # 1’s comments with her own in the left-hand column. They may want to exchange papers several times until they have exhausted their ideas on the subject. (I have had some of my liveliest class discussions after using this activity the first 15 minutes of class.)

Example #2: Passage from text: student to student

Student #1	Student #2
<p>Mary had just previously made the realization that Jay might already be dead, whereas she was kind of talking herself out of the idea. This accounts for her thought of Mary’s beginning to come of age. Hannah thought she had already done this and it was almost as if she were looking down on Mary, as if she had become much older. And with this she was content with herself.</p>	<p>I agree that Mary’s realization that Jay may be dead is what Hannah was referring to when she says that Mary is beginning to come of age, but I don’t think Hannah is looking down on Mary at all when she says she felt older. I think that she probably feels older because Mary has been like her own child to her, and when she realizes that Mary is mature enough to handle this situation, Hannah realizes that she herself is old.</p>

“Her soul is beginning to come of age, she thought; and within those moments she herself became much older, much nearer to her own death, and was content to be.”
 One could also use this activity to have students summarize outside readings. The summaries would appear in the left-hand column; their questions, observations, and/or insights in the right-hand column. I have included an assignment and a student response as an illustration. (See the next sample, Example #3.)

Example #3: Sample Student Handout/Assignment--Double Entry Notebook

What is it?

- a notebook in which you record information and ideas taken from readings, discussions (both inside and outside of class) lectures, films, television, and radio.

What is its purpose?

- to provide an impetus to read, listen, and view thoughtfully and critically
- to encourage verbal response to materials being studied
- to provide a record of information and reactions that may be useful later for writing papers, for discussion participation, and for studying for exams.

How do you do it?

Use blank notebook paper. Make an entry once a week for material you have read or viewed related to our course of study. Each entry will have two parts: Record and React. Divide your page in half with Record in the left-hand column and React in the right-hand column.

The entry format for the Record column is:

Date:

Name of author/lecturer/program:

Pages read, length of program, source of program:

Main subject of what you have read, viewed, heard (this should be about a one-sentence position statement made by your source).

Summary of the main points and of the information and arguments given supporting the source's position statement.

The entry format for the React column is:

Write your position statement on the subject.

Compare your position statement with the one in your source.

Explain your focus on this reading, lecture, program--why is it important, disturbing, controversial to you?

Relate the material to our course.

How will it be evaluated?

- the instructor will evaluate two of your entries this term, and/or
- other students will help you select the two best entries to be evaluated.

Example #3: Sample student response--double entry notebook (*continued*)

Date: 4/17/86

Name: Joseph Giovanni, New York Times Magazine

A Sense of Place. "The Material Art."

Subject: Architects across the country are using common, indigenous materials to convey a sense of place in the houses, public buildings, and furniture they are involved with.

Summary: Architects are now using materials that are strongly associated with a region or city to capture the spirit of the place. Use of indigenous materials gives buildings both feeling and meaning as well as identifies their whereabouts. Architecture is considered to be a material art and creatively used materials can convey a sense of place.

Traditionally, the materials used for construction were of local origin. They were easily found at hand and didn't require freighting in. Typically, these were natural elements as opposed to those that were manufactured. Originally they were also the cheapest materials available. But they also reflected a care and craftsmanship that is missing from most contemporary materials.

Though cost is largely irrelevant today, many local or vernacular materials are purposely being used rather than international products in an effort to regain a sense of the basics. It is a move away from high-tech design and from the idea that machines will automatically produce a better product.

Vernacular materials are being used in furnishings, homes, and public buildings to create a feeling of regional uniqueness. An L.A. house with a kitchen floor of asphalt is an extreme but illustrative example.

Building materials are also seen as having a sense of social place and position. Buildings and architects can manipulate social imagery through their choice of materials. Plywood and marble combined in a table "would confound any passing Marxist."

The use of traditional materials to connect a building to its region gives it a social context. This makes a place "that helps people know where they are and by extension, who they are."

Position: I found this analysis to be very interesting. It provided me a new way of looking at the architecture around me. Though I have noticed differences in style and construction of the homes and buildings in areas I have visited, I seldom gave it much thought. Viewing materials as a means to create an environmental sense of place can, I believe, enhance our understanding of the built world that surrounds us.

Compare: The use of common or vernacular materials can heighten our sense of place in a city, a region, or a country. Awareness of this can enhance our feelings of belonging to a place, of having roots.

Explain: In a rapidly developing technological world where mobility and rootlessness are endemic, this

movement back to basics in Architecture is reminiscent of the current trend of "country" furnishings and knickknacks. It is as though people, uneasy with a world and technology they are hard pressed to understand, are seeking the old, safe, comfortable stability of a known past. The obsession with hand crafts as opposed to computers further indicates this is a popular need.

Interestingly, the most contemporary architectural examples of new buildings in the Northwest, other than houses, do not seem to reflect this material art philosophy. Columbus Center resembles a black glass, 2001 monolith and the Portland City Office Building is more reminiscent of the Nile than the Willamette River Valley.

Nevertheless, on a smaller scale, in homes and furniture, vernacular materials are used quite successfully to convey a sense of regional uniqueness. In the face of miles of motorhome communities, acres of cinderblock, suburban ramblers, and endless lines of white, plastic Italian chairs, any effort that resists creeping homogeneity is a positive move.

Relate: The operational and perceptual environments in which we operate encompass a fantastic number of elements, many of which we are not fully aware. Buildings and furniture often just fill space and we are conscious of little else save their presence. Understanding the motives and materials used in design and architecture can provide us with yet another dimension of understanding the physical world.

Microthemes

Generating faculty enthusiasm for a writing-across-the-curriculum effort is not an easy task. As long as content area instructors think of writing instruction as doctoring up the grammar of term papers, there can be little hope of progress. A successful writing-across-the-curriculum program therefore demands some conceptual blockbusting. One of the best blockbusters we have discovered is the microtheme--an essay so short that it can be typed on a single five-by-eight inch note card (Work, 1979).

John C. Bean, et. al. "Microtheme Strategies for Developing Cognitive Skills"

One of the best examples that the microtheme, despite its brevity, can relay a significant amount of information is a microtheme on the writing of microthemes, written by Dr. John Molenda one of our own faculty.

A MICROTHEME ON MICROTHEMES

The MICROTHEME, a brief essay limited to one side of a 5" x 8" index card, is an ideal instrument for painlessly increasing the written content of a course. Brief and thus easily graded it is educationally sound, for a great deal of thinking must precede the writing. There are four main formats, each of which challenges and cultivates writing and cognitive skills in a different way.

The Summary-Writing Microtheme: The student must read a body of material, discuss its structure (main idea, supportive points, connections among its parts), condense it while retaining its hierarchy, and eliminate frill in order to write a summary. This exercise strengthens reading comprehension and writing ability. It also targets "egocentrism," that is the tendency of the "maturing" student thinker to impose personal opinion on data, veer from the topic, and distort an author's perspective.

The Thesis-Support Microtheme: The student must take a stand and defend it. A topic citing Spock's childhood permissiveness as the cause for the sixties revolution becomes the thesis "The student revolutionary movement in the sixties was not causally related to...." This exercise strengthens the ability to discover, state, and defend an issue, using clear evidence and logical reasoning.

The Data-Provided Microtheme: Data is provided in the form of tables or factual statements. The student must comment on its significance. Selecting, arranging, connecting, and generalizing about data develops inductive reasoning. Students thus progress from merely listing facts to making assertions.

The Quandary-Posing Microtheme: A practical occurrence or puzzling situation is presented. The student must explain the underlying scientific principles in clear terms and pose a solution. This exercise moves students from rote learning to application, thereby strengthening concept comprehension and abstract reasoning.

HIST 101: WORLD CIVILIZATIONS**MICROTHEME****DR. T. MILLER****PURPOSE**

To prepare for class discussion and to practice writing skills

FORMAT

The microtheme essay is to be typed, single-spaced, on an index card 5x8 in size (the largest standard size index card). Make your answer five to eight sentences in length.

KNOWLEDGE

You will need to read Plutarch's *Life of Pericles* in order to complete this assignment.

For the first microtheme answer one of the following questions; however, you should answer all of the questions in your notes so that you will be prepared for the class discussion. Be sure to note page references from your Penguin Classics edition of Plutarch in answering these questions.

1. What was Plutarch's purpose in writing this life of Pericles? (Find specific passages and note the page numbers.)
2. Find an example of Plutarch's upperclass attitude (an attitude which was the curse of the later Greek intellectuals).
3. Which had the most influence in shaping Pericles' ideas? How did Pericles strengthen the democracy at Athens (make the government more democratic in practice)?
4. Compare the political-economic programs of Cimon and Pericles. (Can you make any comparisons to American politics in 1984?)
5. What was the Delian League? [To answer this question consult the text (Strayer) or go to the library and consult the Oxford Classical Dictionary.]
6. What was Pericles' most dazzling achievement? Why was it controversial?
7. In the account of Pericles' siege of Samos (pp 192-195), find evidence that Plutarch's primary sources were in disagreement.
8. Tell us something about Aspasia.
9. According to Plutarch, what were the causes of the Peloponnesian Wars?

EVALUATION

The Microtheme assignment is part of the University's Writing Across the Curriculum program. Therefore, proper grammar, coherent sentence structure, and organization will count just as much as content in determining your theme grade.

Answer the Question!

Ivan Palmblad, Biology Dept.

The simple exercise below is designed to improve the written responses to exam questions. Perhaps because of the widespread use of multiple choice exams, many students lack the simple skill of answering the question that is asked.

Procedure: The students will be given the sheet that follows and be asked to evaluate the answers. (Their sheet would not include my comments as below.) After 10 minutes the sheets could be collected and rated or an overhead could be used to criticize as a group each of the 6 answers.

QUESTION: How did the skull and pelvis of fossil “Lucy” revolutionize our thinking about human evolution?

EVALUATE THE FOLLOWING ANSWERS:

1. The pelvis can show if the organism is four legged or two legged. The skull showed the size of the brain.
(Comments are true but fail to address the question.)
2. The skull was smaller and the pelvis was tipped so that upright walking was possible.
(This answer is also true and provides more information but still does not address the question of how “Lucy” reversed our thinking.)
3. It showed that Lucy walked erect millions of years before we thought it was possible.
(What does “it” refer to? I assume the pelvis. Therefore, the skull portion of the question is ignored.)
4. Because they were so close to what the human skull looked like from that period of time.
(In addition to not answering the question, this statement is incredibly inaccurate! The answer suggests that Homo sapiens and “Lucy” Australopithecus afarensis co-existed.)
5. Lucy walked upright and yet she had a small brain which contradicted the thinking that the large brain came before walking man.
(very satisfactory)
6. Before Lucy it was common belief that a large brain led to tool use and then upright bipedalism. “Lucy” showed that in fact bipedalism occurred before brain expansion.
(very satisfactory)

Clarification / Review Letters

English 417: The Victorian Period
Art Young, Fall, 1992
Clemson University, Clemson SC 29634-1503

Writing Assignment #6. Due In Two Parts, November 18 and November 25.

You will have a final exam question on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Assignment #6 is designed to enhance your understanding of this novel in collaboration with a classmate. The assignment follows:

1. Reflect on your reading of *Heart of Darkness* and then write a 200-300 word note (legible handwriting is okay) to a classmate in which you describe some aspect of the novel that you are having trouble understanding--a specific area you are having difficulty interpreting or fully comprehending. You should make distinctions where you can--that is, describe what you do understand and what you don't understand. You should refer to one or more particular passages in the novel where you are experiencing difficulty. Don't just say "I don't understand the passage beginning on line ten of page 227." Provide a context for what you don't understand--so your reader can see your difficulties and thereby give you some assistance. I hope this exercise will help you clarify your thinking about Conrad's novel as well as describe a particular problem(s) to a classmate that you really want to know more about. This brief writing is due Wednesday, November 18 in two copies—one for your classmate and one for me.
2. Take the note a classmate has given you and consider it carefully, review *Heart of Darkness* and our class discussions about it, and then respond to your classmate with a thoughtful note of explanation and exploration. Explain where you can, and where you are not sure of particular aspects yourself, explore reasonable possibilities. Again, my hope from this assignment is that you will not only help your classmate understand and gain a better critical appreciation of *Heart of Darkness*, but that in constructing your response you will learn more about the novel as well. This note should be 400-500 words long and typed. Due November 25 in two copies--one for your classmate and one for me.

If you are absent November 16, you are responsible for exchanging notes with your partner at the earliest possible time thereafter-but not later than November 20.

Heart of Darkness
Letters exchanged by students: Set #1

Alyson,

On page 149, Marlow makes a general statement about women after having a conversation with his aunt, saying, "It's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up, it would go to pieces before the first sunset." After reading the novel, I could see how Marlow would think that Kurtz's Intended fit into this stereotype. She did really seem to be totally out of touch with reality, and she didn't seem to have a clue about the man she loved. The question I want to ask is whether the African woman described near the end of the novel on page 226 fits into this stereotype. Actually, I would like to know where and how she fits into the novel at all, beyond the insinuations of being Kurtz's mistress. I think this woman must be symbolic of something, although I am not exactly sure of what. Is she a living, breathing human embodiment of the 'heart of darkness,' the wilderness of the African Congo, as seems to be indicated on page 226?

Yours, Emily

Emily,

In class, we discussed the possibility that *Heart of Darkness* is a masculine novel. This idea seems supported by the narrator's reliance on patriarchal assumptions and Marlow's unsympathetic view of women and perhaps, by the subject matter which focuses on plotting, murder, intrigue and male adventure. Based on these assumptions, the savage woman's role can be explained as a symbolic representation of the things to which this man feels alternately attracted and repulsed—woman and Africa.

Before the trip, Marlow has, as you mentioned, stated his demeaning and subordinating attitude towards women (that they're out of touch with truth). But that description fits his Aunt and the Intended specifically, while this savage woman seems a striking deviation from this stereotype. When considering the savage woman in the context of Marlow's stereotype, I came up with several possibilities.

Some possibilities for the purpose of this woman were suggested briefly by Achebe. He believes that she serves as a direct contrast or opposite to the Intended. If so, I wonder why Conrad would deliberately draw this contrast with his own view of woman who is embodied in the Intended? When you consider the dichotomies presented (Thames/Congo, Africa/England, civilized/savage, good/evil), this contrast of the powerful, wild savage with the civilized, naive Intended is a fitting echo of the division being made by Marlow. But does Marlow's image of women represent what he wants them to be? I think he does because he willfully hides the truth from the Intended by lying about Kurtz's last words.

Yes, I think it's important that, to Marlow, truth is available to men only. It is a masculine concern. So if the woman represents Africa, which he suggests is the case by such comments as "...the whole sorrowful land. . . seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul" (76), then she has a strong connection with truth. As I see it, the primitive and savage is the vehicle for truth in *Heart Of Darkness*: therefore, this woman conveys, or threatens to convey, truth.

She is a threatening image, although we never hear what Marlow's feelings are about her. But his description of her includes words of awe, mystery and dread. He is uneasy and

disquieted by her “ominous” progress, and the “tragic” and “fierce” expressions on her face. Although Achebe believes that Marlow “approves” of her because she is in her place, I sense that he fears her while being simultaneously attracted to her. He acknowledges that she is “gorgeous” and “superb” as well as “barbarous” and “savage”. So could her purpose in the novel be to reinforce and symbolize his feelings about Africa and the truth that is found there? I think that’s a strong possibility because there is a sense in which all women in Marlow’s tale are symbols—perhaps symbols of his fears and inadequacies. Because he obviously holds chauvinistic attitudes, it makes sense that (using our modern perspective of Freudian analysis) he fears them. Therefore, his masculine tale to his group of male friends reduces women to symbol. For example the women knitting wool, who are said to be associated with the Fates, represent his fear of his fate on this journey. However, I’m not sure how his Aunt or the laundress would fit into this interpretation. In any case, he sees the savage woman as the jungle. Like Africa, this woman is dark, mysterious, wild and powerful. As such, she is everything he believes a woman is not or should not be.

However, another purpose this woman serves is to help explain Kurtz. The implication that she was his mistress makes Marlow and the reader consider her as a real woman, one who is capable of having a relationship with a white man. It’s interesting to consider whether Conrad created her to represent how savage Kurtz had become or to show us that our kinship with Africa is real. I think an important question is whether she represents a positive alternative to the deluded, meek Intended or whether she represents the darkness which lured Kurtz into madness. That question asks, I think, a major decision to be made about the novel.

Hope this helps, Alyson

Dear Scott,

I’ve always thought it interesting that the narrator of *Heart of Darkness* is not the one who has the main story—rather, Marlow does. Why not have the whole story written from Marlow’s point of view, instead of having the narrator repeat all that Marlow said? The conclusion that I came to was that Conrad, in letting us view Marlow from the outside through the narrator, is giving us the opportunity to judge Marlow, just as Marlow has judged Kurtz. My question is, How should we judge Marlow? I’d specifically like to figure out what Marlow’s motive was in traveling into the heart of darkness—were his intentions noble?—and whether in remaining loyal to Kurtz he somehow corrupted himself.

In Marlow’s prelude to the tale, he says that what redeems the conquest of the earth is the idea only, an unselfish belief in the idea. This passage especially interests me now that I have a background of the Victorian sense of duty, the white man’s burden, etc. Was this why Marlow was going? I can’t really tell, because before he even departed, he realized that something was not quite right about it all. When he says that it appeared to others that he would be an emissary of light, a lower sort of apostle, he sounds sarcastic, but could that just be hindsight at work? Once on his journey, he encounters people who consider the natives to be enemies who “hate the savages,” but what does Marlow think? I think it may be telling that towards the end of the story, when Marlow describes Kurtz’s madness, Marlow says that because of his own sins, he had to go through the ordeal of looking into Kurtz’s mad soul himself.

So. Are we by to judge Marlow? If not, why not, and if so how should we judge him?

Rosemary

Heart of Darkness
Letters exchanged by students: Set #2

Dear Rosemary,

I think that Marlow was a kind of Buddha figure, a sage and wise man, but he represented the wisdom of the worldly Victorian, which is one of his major distinctions: for the most part, the Victorian characters with whom we have been made familiar have, for the most part been wholly ignorant of and often willfully disdainful of culture, knowledge, and wisdom originating outside of the European circle of enlightenment. It is, was, a creeping form of Eurocentrism that can be narrowed further to a kind of Victorian-centrism. They were not unjustified—as far as Marlow and the rest of the Victorians had any ken, theirs was the best and brightest civilization on the Earth: industry, standards of living, education, democracy, happiness (how unique) and prosperity for all could be a concern. Ah, there it is, that wonderful pan of the idealistic pie; they believed that because they were happy with their civilization/culture, that every other human being would be just as happy given the same circumstances. So I guess, in their own narrow way, they could “jolly well feel good about civilizing those bloody savages” because, from their own perceived position at the top, it would be beneficial to the abyres to be civilized by/for the “Motherly auspices of the Crown.”

You know, Conrad himself was not a Victorian. . . He was a thoroughly displaced Pole, forced to speak Russian, then German, French, and finally English. He spent eight years wandering the ocean with the British merchant navy. He was not born Victorian or raised/acculturated Victorian. He was the ultimate outsider to the culture. Though bitter about his own culture (the destruction thereof), his viewpoint could afford him an overview of British culture that none of its inhabitants could achieve.

Perhaps this is why Conrad felt that he could so easily remove himself from Marlow, in narration and spirit, because to Conrad, Marlow was a Victorian. In a way, Conrad is generous to Marlow by not attributing malice to Marlow’s own prejudices, few though they seem. Marlow is, in more ways, Conrad himself; a voyager adrift in the real world, absorbing everything in order to make sense of himself and his own world, carrying with him his unconscious values and prejudices *without forcing them onto the people or word around him*. There is the judgment of Marlow: he carries the value/idea “Victorian” around with him, but he does not force the world to conform to his ideas. Kurtz is/was the embodiment of those ideas that Marlow holds, his own hero. Witnessing the actual implementations of those ideas and finally watching Kurtz’s decline and facing his Intended is what brought Marlow to fully question those ideas, to face their actual lack of enlightenment; to return to England and face the actual heart of the darkness.

Yours truly, Scott

Dear Kelly,

My first question comes from the end of the story where Conrad writes that the Thames “seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.” What do you think he’s talking about exactly? “Heart of darkness” usually refers to Africa, I know, the Dark Continent as well as the dark forces dormant in men’s souls. To me, the story seems to be about discovering those forces as we are taken out of civilization, so isn’t it ironic that he uses this reference now when the story is back in civilization? I ask this because at the beginning of the story he uses as

much dark imagery describing London as he does for Africa. It doesn't seem to be that they are leaving the lighted safe city for the dark jungle so much as they are going from a place where "darkness" is underneath to where it comes to the surface.

This brings me to my second question--do you think they go to Africa and learn to be corrupt or that they are corrupt and use Africa as the excuse? (Their passions run wild because they expect them to.) At one point, Marlow runs down the city as corrupt when he is talking about first going to sign up for the job, but then he goes to find the same forces at work where he thought he would escape them. Is the darkness there out of civilization, or do they bring it with them?

Cookie

Dear Cookie:

In his introduction to *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*, Cedric Watts writes the "darkness of the book's title refers to many kinds of darkness: moral corruption, primitive savagery, night, death/ignorance, and that encompassing obscurity of the pre-rational which words seek to colonize and illuminate" (xvii). The last line of *Heart of Darkness*, "seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness," corresponds to Marlow's comments only a few pages into the novel when he says of England—"and this also has been one of the darkest places of the earth." Marlow seems to use dark imagery to describe land in its primitive state, as it is used to describe the Belgium Congo. Yet I believe that the more important implication of the imagery of darkness is the corruption and evil in every man. This evil is found in all men, but lies dormant, controlled by civilization. That Marlow begins by saying that England was once dark and concludes by saying that it is still dark reveals that he believes that it is not simply the land which is dark, or that civilization ends darkness, but that the darkness remains a part of each man on every continent. Marlow describes "the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men" as if the wilderness is removed by civilization (140). But the actions of the English men belie his belief that efficiency has saved them and removed the darkness. Efficiency, Marlow's word to describe the importance of civilization, merely hides the darkness. The moral corruption that seems to exist in Africa also exists in England; it is merely kept underground, only whispered about

Several examples of corruption in England are present in the novel. It is in England that the Ivory Company makes its plans to send Englishmen into the Congo to take ivory. It is in England where Marlow, who believes lying to be abominable, is forced to lie to the Intended. He rips the words "Exterminate all the Brutes!" from Kurtz's report thus aiding continuation of sending Englishmen to Africa to "enlighten" the Africans with Christianity.

In England, one steps "delicately between the butcher and the policemen, in the holy tenored scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums" (206). Although men are corrupt with evil urges and desires, society prevents them from being acted on most of the time by threatening with hangings or confinement. "When they we gone you must fall back upon you own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness (206).

In Africa, the English men are not more corrupt than they were in England. Instead, the power or strength they hold over the Africans and the lack of societal constraints enables their corruption to shine more brightly. The men are internally corrupt and being in Africa simply allows their corruptness to manifest itself externally as well. The men no longer have to whisper. Because they were more powerful than the Africans, due to weapons and explosives, they are able to prey on them without fear of reprisal.

Your friend, Kelly

English 326 Final Mini-essay University of Richmond

You'll be working in study groups of 3 or 4 when drafting your major essay for this course. Assignment #6 is designed to enhance your reading of Robert Frost in collaboration with a classmate. This collaboration may help you prepare for fuller group work.

1. Reflect on your reading of Robert Frost and then write a 200-300 word note (legible handwriting is okay) to your classmate in which you describe some feature of Frost's poetry or an individual poem that you are having trouble understanding--a specific area you are having difficulty interpreting or fully appreciating. You should make distinctions where you can--that is, describe what you do understand and what you don't understand. You should refer to particular moments in the text where you are experiencing difficulty. Don't just say "I don't understand the passage beginning in line 10" Provide a context for what you don't understand so that your reader can see your difficulties and thereby give you some assistance. I hope this exercise will help you clarify your thinking about a poem or a feature of Frost's art as well as describe a particular problem to a classmate that you really want to know more about. This brief writing is due Wednesday, Feb. 24 in two copies--one for your classmate and one for me.
2. Take the note a classmate has given you and consider it carefully, review the poem(s) and our class discussions, and then respond to your classmate with a thoughtful note of explanation and exploration. Explain where you can, and where you are not sure of particular aspects yourself, explore reasonable possibilities. Again, my hope from this assignment is that you will not only help your classmate understand and gain a better critical appreciation of Robert Frost, but that in constructing your response you will learn more about his poetry as well. This note should be 400-500 words long and typed. Due March 1 in two copies--one for your classmate and one for me.