

## Question 7: Sample response two

Like the previous response, this answer establishes the dominant ideas and views of Conrad's context very effectively through reference to popular academic discussions of the period and historical events. This candidate produces a strong discussion but at times the answer lacks detailed evidence of the claims being made. It is interesting to note the way this candidate engages with the changes to readers' contexts since the time this text was produced, and how our ideological positions might not be more in keeping with ideas that would have been controversial at the time of Conrad's writing.

Like many literary texts, Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness* acts as a cultural medium for its time depicting colonial Europe's dominant Eurocentric ideologies as well as engaging with imperial themes and practices to give insight into relevant issues surrounding the international "Scramble for Africa". In the years surrounding 1899, European powers were competing to "civilise" Africa in order to gain political and economic power. As a result, eye-witness reports on colonial brutality and controversy were surfacing in Europe. In his novella, Conrad incorporates the writing style of those accounts, as well as his own experience in the Congo, to share his criticisms of colonisation with the middle class male audience of the Blackwood magazine.

Whilst the narrator Marlow is constructed to provide insight into the process of colonisation, the character of the framed narrator along with the anonymous men on the boat 'The Nellie' actually provide the dominant Eurocentric perspective of the time as representatives of Conrad's target audience. The men's Eurocentric roots are reflected in the framed narrator's colonial discourse when he remarks; 'bearing the sword and often the torch, messengers of the might... the sacred fire. What greatness!' In this passage Conrad characterises the narrator as championing the altruistic mission of Europeans who 'bear the sword', a sign of their European nationhood and nobility as well as 'the torch', a symbol of Lady Justice, image and representation of Europe's elevated virtue. As the perceived "superior race" it was

This sets up the contextual factors of Conrad's work very clearly. But it could address the elements of the question more effectively to control the discussion better.

A complicated sentence that could be better expressed to explain these multiple perspectives and how they are presented by the text.

These are all important aspects of the contextual framework that the novel constructs.

believed Europe's responsibility to spread its influence through the 'messengers of the might' who "civilised" and evangelised "inferior" races. Conrad constructs the framed narrator as having great pride in Europe when he claims 'What greatness!' and in doing so demonstrates the dominant idealisation of Europe's goodness and the idea that colonisation is an altruistic 'mission'. Conrad uses Marlow's narration, however, to offer a different perspective and insight as he questions the framed narrator's Eurocentric assumptions through the lens of Kurtz and his downfall. A symbolic idol of civilisation, 'all of Europe went into the making of Kurtz'. However, behind this reputation hides an outright lust for power that undermines the idea of Europe "higher" morals.

Conrad uses Marlow's recollective position to give the narration a moral 'haze' which both challenges imperial perspectives and encourages readers to draw their own interpretations from the text. As he travels deeper into the Congo jungle, Marlow's psyche appears to become more and more 'misted' and disoriented from the truth. Conrad reflects this through the use of multiple discourses, fragmented thought and contrasting descriptions of Kurtz and the African natives, praising them in one line and calling them savages in the next. The ambiguity of conviction frees readers to draw their own understandings and conclusions from the text, just as Conrad intended when he writes; 'the meaning of an episode [is] not inside like a kernel, but outside, enveloping the talk that [brings] it at.' In other words, the truth is determined by how readers interpret the story within their own context and in this sense, although the novella is rooted in colonial Europe, the dynamics between readers and the text allows into the perspectives and ways of thinking unique to the reader's context as well.

For Conrad's intended audience, however, the truth seems to be brought out by the two narrator's contrasting discourses as many of Marlow's descriptive

It would be reasonable to use the discourse of colonialism here to create a more succinct explanation of the various perspectives.

This haze needs an example but the paradoxical nature of this description is certainly effective in the text – using the metalanguage to identify this element of construction would help create a concise and controlled discussion.

Examples are necessary here. How is discourse used?

A clearer explanation of the various narratorial voices would deliver a stronger knowledge of the text.

insights appear to challenge the framed narrator's Eurocentric perspective. For instance, instead of being 'messengers of the right' Marlow describes the colonisers as 'faithless pilgrims'. Instead of colonisation as an altruistic 'great mission', its reality is described as 'hints from a nightmare', and instead of championing Europe's morals like a 'bright jewel', Marlow perceives them to be a 'rapacious, weak-eyed devil.' In many ways, the framed narrator's response to the alternative insight Marlow's narration offers is representative of Conrad's intended response from his target audiences. The framed narrator focuses on the 'darkness' and moral ambiguity of European men which he perceived as overhanging London like a 'storm cloud'. Upon this discovery the framed narrator begins to question his perception of Europe as, unlike Africa, being untouched by cultural brutality. This idea could have been intended by Conrad to provoke Eurocentric readers to consider Europe's potential for 'darkness' and Africa as merely a 'black backdrop', thus challenging the dominant Eurocentric perception.

As creative, contemporary readers we can draw our own 'kernel of truth' from the novella by using the dominant perspectives and habitual ways of thinking of our own time, to analyses and mine the themes of the text. As history has progressed, we have seen a shift away from Conrad's colonial context into a post-colonial era. Because of this, ideological perspectives that were a naturalised aspect of Conrad's context are no longer maintained today. Since 1899, more voice has been given to colonised figures and moral subjects such as equality and racism have been incorporated into our habitual way of thinking and is commonly used in the analysis of literary texts in order to identify themes of discrimination. Because this change in thinking and perspective diverge from that of Conrad's, we notice that whole new meanings are highlighted in the text. For instance, from a post-colonial perspective many of Conrad's remarks that may have challenged a colonial audience in the way that they humanise Africans, are

Here the candidate is working to more directly address the question. You can see the argument taking a stronger form.

Clear, perspectival positions are being defined in this topic sentence.

This reading position is a useful inclusion as it explained that the insights about the 'time and place' of Conrad's context are reformed by various reading contexts. This doesn't alter the perspective offered by the text, but can be seen to cause a different response from readers.

no longer seen as revolutionary and instead readers are more likely to criticise his cultural assumptions.

It would be safe to say, that *Heart of Darkness* is at times an ambiguous text but in many ways that is one of the reasons why it has remained a staple in English Literature as it allows readers to make their own reading and insight into the representation of imperial and colonial Europe. Personally I felt challenged by many of the representations in the text, such as the racial marginalising of Africans and the way the framed narrator is constructed as ignorantly devoted to Europe. However, it was these things that challenged me that also allowed me to gain new insight into the cultural divisions of time and the way Eurocentrism overwhelmed as the dominant ideological perspective.

This conclusion comes around to focus on the concepts of the question, and does make a clear statement about the impact that the text's opposing perspectives does have on them as a reader. This could have a great impact if it were to synthesise the ideas around the question concepts.

#### Hint: Personal voice

Many students feel uncertain about using personal voice in academic writing. Most markers, however, are delighted when they read an essay that sounds like it was authored by a living, breathing human being! The above conclusion comes across as honest when the candidate mentions being challenged. However, they don't really give context as to why they felt this way. Don't be afraid of putting yourself into your work and being honest about your thoughts and feelings. Engage with your marker – you might be surprised by the results.

## Question 8: Sample response two

This response is a sophisticated response to the question for a variety of reasons. The candidate acknowledges that the concept being assessed here, national and cultural identities, are complex constructions that shift and change depending on political and social pressures. The selection of this particular novel, along with the line of argument taken, show how collective identities are often superficial and meaningless, and therefore susceptible to misinterpretation, corruption or being found to be invalid as an authentic rendering of people. This response explores multiple aspects of the novel and the Australian identity, and demonstrates a strong understanding of the dominant assumptions embedded in this national expression, clearly showing how the novel challenges the validity of this concept.

What it means to be an Australian is a complicated notion, confused by often antagonist and conflicting efforts to involve colonial, post-colonial, indigenous and immigrant experience into a sense of nationhood and identity. *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (Hereafter Clapping) written by Richard Flanagan is a prominent Australian text which explores this Australian cultural uncertainty through the perspective a Slovenian immigrant, Boja, his daughter Sonja and their integration into Australian culture. Flanagan writes in the wake of a federal election that confirmed many xenophobic attitudes among Australians, and by engaging with these base assumptions, challenges the conventional view of nationhood and identity. From this, Flanagan proposes a unique concept of Australian identity, which dismisses the importance of 'cultural tokens', and emphasises the importance of shared commitments and physical place. While challenging assumptions grounded in racial relations, Flanagan also challenges the ultra-masculine and sexist attitudes which have integrated themselves into the Australia idea of mateship. In *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, Richard Flanagan asserts and positions his readers to accept a unique visage of Australian identity that challenges the racial, social, and gendered assumptions of the past.

The assumptions that the Australian identity relied on 'tokens' and expressions of cultural value and that

A good opening that acknowledges the complexity of national, and inclusive, identities.

Useful contextual information about Flanagan's context and the identity politics of the period.

This response is now developing a position about what this text is explaining regarding identity – it is challenging Australian assumptions about race, social interactions and gender. A strong introduction.

cultural homogeneity was the bond of nationhood, and were among the contextually accepted notions when *Clapping* was published. Published in 1997, *Clapping* was released in the wake of the 1996 federal election which saw a conservative resurgence in the election of a Coalition government, as well as the election of Pauline Hanson (MP for Oxley) to the House of Representatives, signifying the culmination of an anti-multicultural movement. Flanagan opposed this trend towards away from multiculturalism, and through the representation of an immigrant's experience in Australia, he categorically dismisses a culturally homogenous view of identity. Boja, on coming to Australia says he lives in 'wog flats... that means they are not for the Australian people.' By doing so, Flanagan demonstrates the exclusive nature of Australian identity, leading to the unfair and xenophobic treatment of migrants, opposing Pauline Hanson's statement that certain minority groups were 'swamping Australia.' In order to then integrate, Boja then saves to purchase a 'FJ Holden' 'as proof to both those in Slovenia and Australia that he had become what he had set out to be: Australian.' This however, does not assist his integration and only further isolates him from the cultural body he wishes to join. Flanagan asserts that symbolic icons used to assert homogeneity do not define the Australian identity, and uses the experience of Boja to then demonstrate the true nature of an Australian identity.

Instead of racial, social, or ethnic lines, Flanagan proposes that Australian identity ought to be foregrounded by a shared commitment to Australia's future, and by the notion of place, or physical landscape. Australia's landscape is harsh and unique, and repeats as a motif of identity, throughout *Clapping*. When Sonja, for instance, 'walks into the harsh desolate noises of the Tasmanian rainforest, towards the squawk of cockatoos and the cries of currawongs', she is shown to truly belong to the landscape. This may be intertextually validated by Judith

A better expression – At the time that *Clapping* was published expressions of Australian identity were often expressed through tokens, or hollow definitions about unity and nationhood.

A definition of the homogenous identity that is falsely idealised would help the argument.

There is a lot of material here that is significant to the argument but not picked up on. The FJ Holden is a token or emblem of Australian identity but Boja's experience exposes this token as powerless to perform the desired transformation of inclusion.

This is a useful point showing how the narrative construction confers belonging through *genius loci* or the power of place.

Wright, who asserts Australia's landscape is her 'bloods country', or by the Jindyworobak movement which sought to define Australianism by a connection to land, such as it is in Indigenous culture. In Sonja's case, despite the fact she is singing a 'Slovenian lullaby' to her baby, the readers are acknowledge her acceptance within this locale. Flanagan, beginning his novel with 'all this you will come to understand but never know' positions his audience to listen and include the experiences of immigrants within ideas of Australian identity, and to celebrate them as opposed to silencing them. After all, Boja seeks to only improve Australia, and has dedicated to his family to it by having a grandson. Richard Flanagan rejects that Australian identity must rely on icons, or tokens, which he challenges as superficial, instead positting that it is place and a shared future which creates Australian nationhood.

Useful intertextual connections.

A powerful expression of the reading regarding identity.

While exploring the intricate nature of Australian identity as a nation, which immigrants also participate in, Flanagan challenges the vile extremes of masculinity which have come to dominate Australian identity through corrupted assumptions around "mateship". This is clearest in the industrial masculine domain of physical labourers which Boja joins: full of cursing, hatred and misogynistic attitudes. Sonja says that she 'hates that' Boja finds 'cruel camaraderie in the comfort of [such] men.' The alliteration of the cacophonic "c" sound makes this quote jarring, memorable and invasive. The sexist attitudes which have corrupted the unique sense of Australian 'larrikin-ism' are seen throughout Clapping, represented by perversions which the Australian identity does not appropriately sanction. The assumptions about gender roles in Australian lifestyles are expressed when Sonja is told, 'come, you get us food' by her father, relegating her at a young age to domestic subservience. While getting food for her father, 'one of the men [seeks] to paw her,' demonstrating the sexist attitudes and behaviours that

result from the Australian identity's sense of mateship, when this sense of mateship relies on a power imbalance that systematically disenfranchises women. Flanagan challenges the sexist attitudes in the Australian culture of mateship, and positions his audience to reject the cultural assumptions which perpetuate the power imbalance between the gender roles.

Richard Flanagan's *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* explores the nuance of what it is to be Australian. The text challenges the gendered assumptions that hide in notions of mateship, which are exploited to objectify and oppress the agency and autonomy of women. Additionally, Flanagan resists the contextual assumptions of 1997 that determine Australian identity by xenophobic considerations of race, ethnicity, and culture, instead dismissing a definition relying on tokens and superficial icons for one grounded in a shared future, inclusive values and belonging to place. Australian identity is complicated and dynamic, but Flanagan's reinterpretation assures the integrity of justice, encouraging readers to oppose sexist and xenophobic assumptions in lifestyle and culture.

This is a very good point of discussion. It is necessary to show how we are positioned to challenge this though. While the behaviour is instantly despicable, it would be helpful to explain how text signifies that it should be challenged.

A wonderful conclusion that not only synthesises the text's position on identity, but also demonstrates a sensitivity and nuanced understanding of the concept.

## Question 6: Sample response one

This response – while still a competent response – reflects a problem that crops up frequently. This question has two parts: the initial statement and the question that follows. This form of question requires a careful negotiation between the two parts. The question component needs to be considered in light of the statement. This candidate offers a sound exploration of how their appreciation of the text was deepened by careful consideration of literary elements, but fails to really offer an argument as to the powerful nature of their chosen text, *Heart of Darkness*.

'Art is seldom limited to one exclusive meaning, and does not necessarily reach a definitive conclusion.' These words, written by Polish-British novelist Joseph Conrad, are particularly true of his novella; *Heart of Darkness*. Within *Heart of Darkness*, literary elements have been effectively used to create a physical environment that reflects the moral horror that both the readers, and the protagonist (Marlow) go through as the novella progresses. This environment has been constructed using: allusion to relate the environment to Hell, the point of view of Marlow, and irony. These specific literary elements have increased my appreciation for the text in its criticism of European colonialism during the "scramble of Africa", but has also deepened my appreciation as a postcolonial reader of the idea that these conventions also aid in justifying colonialism to a certain degree, making the text not entirely effective as a criticism of colonialism and opening it to no definitive conclusion.

The candidate makes valid points here but it is all one sentence. It would be better to separate them to aid clarity.

In *Heart of Darkness*, allusion plays a major part in criticising colonialism, and the use of this is effective in furthering the appreciation of this criticism by readers. A major source that *Heart of Darkness* alludes to is Dante's *Inferno* the first of a three-part series of poetry called *The Divine Comedy*. Scattered throughout *Heart of Darkness* are allusions and connections between the two texts, particularly notable in connecting the environment of Africa to Hell. Early in his travels, Marlow states that he feels he has stumbled upon 'some inferno' when he sees several

The candidate is offering an intertextual analysis here. This is valid but they need to focus on role of allusion in the construction of their studied text in order to ensure they fully address the question.

slaves who are starved and overworked. The use of the word 'inferno' directly connects the two texts. Furthermore, flies are associated with death in both texts; souls in Canto 20 being stung and bitten by flies and the body of the helmsman surrounded by 'buzzing flies' in *Heart of Darkness*. There is also a strong connection between the tortured souls of the *Inferno* and the people of the Congo. One such connection is their dehumanisation through making them part of the landscape. In *Inferno*, one circle of Hell punished the souls by making them trees in woods. Meanwhile in *Heart of Darkness*, African people are often connected to the landscape, such as when they were described as 'coming out of the gloom, half caught in the Earth.' The cruelty of the treatment of the Africans is emphasised in the contortion of their bodies into 'clumps of acute angles' and likewise in *Inferno*, the tortured souls' 'faces were heavily distorted'. This allusion to Dante's *Inferno* is important in deepening the reader's appreciation for the text, as it strengthens criticisms of colonisation within the text. As many post-colonial readers would be critical of colonialism Conrad's use of allusion to create a physical landscape to reflect the psychological horrors of colonialism is significant in increasing reader appreciation of the text as they travel 'to the centre of the Earth', another connection to Hell.

In *Heart of Darkness*, the reader is presented with two narrators; the frame narrator and Marlow. The frame narrator appears at the beginning and end of the text and establish the scene of Marlow telling his tale on the Nellie on the Thames. Marlow's point of view is critical when both examining criticisms of colonialism, and the naturalisation of colonised beliefs. Marlow states 'this too has been one of the dark places of the Earth' in regard to the Thames. Here he relates how he sees Africa at the time to what Britain was before the Romans came along and "civilised" the Anglo-Saxons. This is one of the instances that point

It is in this sentence that the candidate talks about the allusion as an element of construction. More of the discussion here should have been focused on this effect rather than just highlighting the similarities between the two texts.

This reference to the frame narrative is a clear element of construction and may have been a stronger point to lead with. However, the topic sentence does not clearly identify a point of argument

of view has helped me appreciate the texts' treatment of Africa is problematic. In Marlow establishing that he believes that Africa to be what England once was, he implies that Africa is a land caught in the past, rather than merely holding a different culture to Europeans. Furthermore, as Marlow considered it noble and glorious for the Romans to come along a "civilise" the Anglo-Saxons, (making England, in his eyes, no longer one of the dark places of the Earth), there is an implication that Marlow believes that colonialism is a glorious and noble quest if it is for the sake of "civilising" the people of Africa. In fact, readers may note the way Marlow describes African people to be unintelligent. He describes them using slurs, gives no names to them, prescribes no individual personalities and described 'expressions of dumb pain' when they are injured. Marlow's point of view in this instance helped me, as a post-colonial reader, appreciate that this novella has flaws and in some places can be described as "racist". However, the point of view also clearly rejects the cruelty of the Europeans to the African people. In his narration he describes colonisation as 'robbery... and murder on a grand scale'. Here he directly connects the actions of the Europeans to crimes committed against other people-stating it is wrong. Marlow often includes in his narration that he feels "kinship" with the people of Africa, who 'were not criminals, were not inhumane'. So the narrative point of view of Marlow helps me, as a post-colonial reader, both appreciate that the text criticises a common belief in Conrad's time that Africans were inhuman, but also that there are issues in the text; particularly how Marlow describes Africans as essentially primitive forms of mankind that should be "civilised".

A literary element that contributed to the deepening of my appreciation of *Heart of Darkness* was irony. One deep irony is how Kurtz has a painting that is symbolic of justice; a blindfolded woman holding a torch, the light of which covers her face from view. The

The candidate makes good points here about Marlow's point of view, but the frame narrative that they alluded to in their opening sentence is largely ignored. This creates some confusion as to the actual point the candidate is making in terms of both the literary element they are discussing and the deepening of their appreciation as a result.

This alternate reading certainly qualifies as a 'deepening' of the candidate's appreciation. It's also a reference to one of the text's great ambiguities, and indicates how this candidate may have shaped their discussion for Question 5 instead.

The candidate leads with irony here, when really the literary element they highlight is the symbol of the painting. The effect is an appreciation of the irony of such a symbol.

irony is that the Europeans of the text believe strongly in justice, and yet in actuality, are blind to the injustices they commit or allow to continue. The torch is symbolic of the Europeans supposedly bringing knowledge and true "civility" to Africa. Meanwhile, they are blind to the damages they do. The Europeans still in Europe, like the Aunt, believe they are bringing knowledge and light to Africa (the 'heart of darkness'). What they are blind to is that the Africans are actually being beaten, enslaved, starved, and treated with barbarity by the Europeans. This is another irony; the Europeans go to Africa "civilise" the Africans, but end up (like Kurtz) 'taking a seat among the devils of the land.' This demonstrates the idea that evil is in the hearts of all of mankind, and such a thing is not defined by race. Kurtz was seen to be an 'emissary of pity' by the Europeans, but once he is actually introduced, he treats the African's cruelly, as demonstrated by the heads on spikes. Marlow says it himself; 'all of Europe contributed to making Kurtz'. He is symbolic of what Europeans strove for, but turns out to also be symbolic of the cruelty that can be found in the Europeans. Irony has been used in this text to further my appreciation for how the text is critical of the practice of colonialism. It illustrates how, while Europeans believed they were doing the right and just thing, the actual practice of colonisation was barbaric, cruel, and ineffective. Once more, however, this text seems to naturalise the idea that the theory behind colonialism is noble, even if the practice failed.

Specific literary elements of allusion, point of view, and irony have been used by Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*. These have served to strengthen my appreciation of this text, not only as an anti-colonial text, but also as a text that has issues in how it seems to present Africans as "primitive" and "savage", and somewhat endorses the idea of civilising the Africans.

The candidate displays an impressive collection of quotes here and they are incorporated seamlessly.

The candidate needs to link their discussion back to the question here.

Some final reflection on what makes this text 'powerful' is needed. Better focus on elements of construction is also needed. This response tends to simplify matters to a discussion of literary elements and how they make meaning.