

ADT in English
Program Assessment Report (Initial)
Spring 2014

Background

The Associate Degree for Transfer in English at Norco College was developed in 2011-12 and approved in 2013. It is one of 13 ADTs presently offered by the college. So far, Norco College students have chosen to graduate for the most part in one of the seven interdisciplinary areas of emphasis (AOE) degrees rather than any of the more discipline-specific ADTs: over 1000 students received AOE degrees in 2013; fewer than 25 in one of the ADTs (and none so far in English). That may change in the coming years as more of the Cal States (and perhaps UCs) give priority transfers to holders of ADTs.

The English ADT (*see appendix A*) requires students to complete 19 units distributed among three lists of courses. English 1B is the only required course. Students must take at least two of the literature survey courses (English 6-7, British; English 14-15, American; English 40-41, World), which makes any one of them a good proxy for assessing student achievement in the program overall. (Norco College typically offers English 6-7 and 14-15 in alternate years, and usually offers two other literature courses each semester.) A curriculum map for the program has been completed and can be accessed at: <http://norcocollege.edu/employees/faculty/Pages/Curriculum-Maps.aspx>. The present study focuses on student performance in English 7 during spring 2014, with some attention to performance by probable English majors in the other literature course taught in spring 2014 (only two were taught), English 30 (Children's Literature). English 30 is somewhat less useful for ADT assessment purposes because fewer likely majors enroll in it.

Very few students in any given year at the college plan to transfer as English majors, let alone complete an ADT in English. Prospective English majors with sophomore status at the college would presumably enroll in one of the survey courses, but only three prospective English majors took both English 6 and 7 in 2014-15. Only one student took both of these courses as well as English 15 in spring 2014. This is not an argument for discontinuing the program, but it does suggest we need to be careful about deploying resources to support it that might best be used elsewhere.

The program level learning outcomes for the English ADT indicate that at the end of the program, students will be able to

1. Read a variety of literary texts (fiction, poetry, drama, literary non-fiction) with understanding and insight.
2. Demonstrate critical thinking skills about literary texts, including the ability to construct and test interpretive hypotheses, analyze rival hypotheses, and recognize interpretive problems to which literary texts give rise.
3. Write analytical or argumentative essays on literary texts that demonstrate effective stylistic, organizational, and rhetorical control, support claims with sound textual evidence, and employ correct MLA citation methods.
4. Demonstrate an awareness of the relationship between literature and culture, including a recognition of literature as a product of as well as a contribution to human history.

Methodology

Program-level assessment at the community college level is complicated by the fact that many (perhaps most) non-CTE students do not declare a major (or even necessarily think of themselves as majoring in anything) until shortly before graduation. In assessing our AOE, we have tried to solve that problem by examining course-taking patterns among students enrolled in courses where majors are likely to enroll, something that also permits us to determine whether the number of units a student takes within a particular degree pattern is correlated with performance. With the ADTs, the English discipline was able to focus on a smaller group of students in a quasi-capstone course (in the case of English 7) and simply survey students as to their probable majors. Students who indicated they plan to go on to major in English, composition, comparative literature, or creative writing were deemed to be “in” the Norco College English ADT program, whether or not they actually planned to obtain an English ADT degree. Of the 20 students who were enrolled in English 7 at the end of the semester, eight said they considered themselves English majors, another four were Humanities majors (chiefly history), and eight were taking the course to satisfy a general education requirement.

Two sets of data were collected. First, English majors in the English 7 were surveyed anonymously (see *Appendix B*) about their experiences taking English courses at Norco College and their thoughts about how the program might be improved. Second, late-term essays were collected in both English 7 and English 30 from English majors and evaluated against a rubric. Two students took both classes and are therefore represented twice. The instructors of the two courses (Arend Flick for English 7; Rebecca Marsh for English 30) conferred during the semester about the project. The specific assignments students addressed in their essays may be found in *Appendix C and D*; sample student essays may be found in *Appendix E*. The present study also draws on survey information collected from students at the beginning of English 7.

Results

Surveys

Of the eight English majors who stayed in English 7 to the end, five completed the survey. (In retrospect, it would have been better to administer it in class before the end of the semester.) A summary of their responses is as follows:

- Three of the five are recent enrollees (2012 or 2013) at the college. Two have been taking courses much longer, in one case since 2006 and another since 2009.
- Four of the five have taken all or virtually all of their courses at Norco. The fifth student has taken most of his or her classes at another RCCD campus.
- All five have completed English 1A. Four of the five have completed 1B, while the fifth student was enrolled in 1B during spring 2014.
- Four of the five students had taken other literature courses besides English 7 and 1B. Two completed ENG-15; two completed ENG-6. Additional courses completed by an individual student include ENG-23, 30, 11, and 44.
- Three of the five indicated that they thought high school prepared them for college-level work in English. Two said it didn't.
- Most students indicated that they are majoring (or planning to major) in English because they enjoy literature and enjoy learning about themselves through the study of literature. Four of the five students intend to become teachers; the fifth aspires to be a novelist or poet.

- All plan to get A.A. degrees, but not necessarily in English. One expects to receive a Humanities degree, one a Social and Behavioral Sciences degree.
- Most plan to transfer to a U.C. One is going to Cal Poly Pomona.
- All five students agreed that their coursework in English at Norco had helped them become better readers, writers, and critical thinkers.
- Some students expressed a desire for more class offerings (one asked for evening classes). Two made suggestions for improved pedagogies (e.g., less lecture, more discussion). One bemoaned the lack of collegiality among English majors at the college.

In addition to the anonymous surveys at the end of the semester, the English 7 instructor asked students to complete a questionnaire at the beginning of the semester, which allows for some evaluation relevant to assessment. The following are brief summaries of each of the nine prospective English majors based on their response to that survey and their later performance in class:

- Student 1 (male). Creative writing major who has completed both 1A and 1B. Wants to write “the next Great American novel.” Accepted in to CS Long Beach creative writing program. Also takes classes at RCC. Received a “B” in the class but could have done better if he had revised the second essay and done more of the short homework assignments. Very active in class discussion. Provided sufficient evidence in his work all semester that he has achieved the learning outcomes of the program.
- Student 2 (female). Began at the English 60A level at Norco and did very strong work in English 7. Has completed 1A and 1B. Plans to be a teacher or journalist and attend either UCLA or UC Berkeley. Very active in class discussion. First essay C+; second essay A-; received a “B” in the class but came very close to an “A.” Provided sufficient evidence in her work all semester that she has achieved the learning outcomes of the program.
- Student 3 (male). One of the strongest writers in the class (also took English 6), but had difficulty submitting work on time because of issues in his personal life. Has completed 1A and 1B. Intends to transfer to CSU Long Beach. Is considering becoming a copywriter. Received a low “B” in the class in part because very few homework assignments were submitted. Provided sufficient evidence in his work all semester that he has achieved the learning outcomes of the program.
- Student 4 (male). Has completed 1A and 1B. Wants to be an English teacher. Also a student of the piano. Did consistently “B+” work on his essays, which were consistently fluent but slightly deficient in focus and critical thinking. Very active in class discussion. Provided sufficient evidence in his work all semester that he has achieved the learning outcomes of the program.
- Student 5 (male). Has completed 1A and 1B. Aspires to become an English professor. A strong writer, less accomplished as a critical thinker. Overall, a solid student who was active in class discussion and almost never missed class. Final grade “B.” Provided sufficient evidence in his work all semester that he has achieved the learning outcomes of the program.

- Student 6 (female). Has completed 1A and 1B; also took English 6. One of the two strongest writers in the class; mature for her age, deeply reflective, thoughtful. Considering becoming a teacher or a journalist. Received a “B” in the course; would have had an “A” with more homework assignments and a stronger final essay, which seemed hurried. Provided sufficient evidence in her work all semester that she has achieved the learning outcomes of the program.
- Student 7 (female). Overall, the strongest of the eight prospective English majors. Completed 1AH and 1BH as well as English 6. Very self-confident; aspires to be an English professor. A bit stronger as a critical thinker than as a writer (can be a bit verbose and imprecise, though still very fluent). Final grade “A.” Provided sufficient evidence in her work all semester that she has achieved the learning outcomes of the program.
- Student 8 (female). Probably the single strongest writer in the class, and also a very good analyst of literature. Aspires to be a middle school English teacher. Had to miss a lot of class; did not participate much in class discussion. Very close to an “A” but ended up with a “B.” Provided sufficient evidence in her work all semester that she has achieved the learning outcomes of the program.

Seven of the eight English majors, then, received “B’s” in English 7; one received an “A.” Four of the seven students who got a “B” would have had an “A” if their circumstances had permitted them to do a little more of the ungraded homework for the course. These students were all very good to excellent writers, but some had more difficulty than others with the program level outcomes related to reading literary texts with understanding and insight as well as demonstrating critical thinking skills about literary texts. Suggestions for addressing these problems are provided in the final section of this report.

Skills as demonstrated in essays

English 7

As indicated earlier, the English ADT has four program learning outcomes (PLOs), all specifically tied to the study and understanding of literature. The first involves critical reading, the second critical thinking, the third academic written expression, the fourth cultural awareness. The English 7 assignment chosen for the assessment project enables students to demonstrate sufficiently their mastery of each of these outcomes. It was given at the end of a four-week unit in which students studied British colonial and postcolonial literature from the mid-nineteenth to the early-twentieth centuries. Texts assigned included two novels (*Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte; *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad), both written during Britain’s colonial period and both containing evidence of the writer’s attitudes toward British colonial practices in places like Africa, Jamaica, and India; as well as more recent short stories and poems by more recent “English” writers with cultural ties to colonized places, e.g., Salmon Rushdie (India), Zadie Smith (Jamaica), and Derek Walcott (Saint Lucia). Students were expected to understand that British literature of the colonial period is characterized by a central contradiction in that it often seems to condemn some forms of cultural oppression (e.g., Belgian imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*) while tacitly and apparently unwittingly endorsing other forms (e.g., Conrad’s own Eurocentrism in expressing racist views of the natives of Africans). They also should have been able to trace issues related to power and identity in postcolonial literature, much of which explicitly expresses authorial conflict as to whether and to

what extent the author, as a person of color with cultural ties to colonized places, is or is not “British.”

As the assignment (due in draft in early May and then in final form in mid May) makes clear, students had a choice about whether to write on a topic related to colonial British literature or post-colonial British literature. Two of the eight students chosen to write on topic one (which proved to be the harder of the two), six on topic two. PLO one is assessed as a function of PLO two: if students demonstrate critical thinking skills about literature in their essays, they are deemed to have read the text(s) under consideration with “understanding and insight.” All passing papers on this assignment, of necessity, demonstrate “an awareness of the relationship between literature and culture.”

The following table summarizes the performance of each of the eight English majors in the class in terms of how well their essays demonstrated PLO achievement (scores expressed on a four-point scale with 4 = clear evidence of achievement, 3 = adequate evidence of achievement, 2 = insufficient evidence of achievement, 1 = little or not evidence of achievement).

Student number	Paper topic	Final grade	PLO 1 and 2	PLO 3	Additional remarks
1	1 (on <i>Jane Eyre</i>)	B (did not revise)	Adequate achievement (3)	Strong achievement (4)	Had some difficulty making the argument that the book could be seen as Eurocentric—began refuting it prematurely
2	2 (on power and authority in Rushdie and Smith)	A-	Strong achievement (4)	Strong achievement (4)	Did a particularly good job defining not only similarities but also differences in how the writers represent power
3	2 (on the tension between tradition and modernity in Rushdie and Smith)	B- (submitted too late to revise)	Adequate achievement (3)	Strong achievement (4)	A very strong paper on the similarities between the two stories without sufficient attention to the differences
4	1 (on <i>Heart of Darkness</i>)	B+	Adequate achievement (3)	Strong achievement (4)	A slightly under-developed paper in which the writer had some difficulty making the case that Conrad's book is Eurocentric
5	2 (on hybridity in Rushdie and Smith)	B	Adequate achievement (3)	Adequate achievement (3)	Somewhat under-developed, with some relatively minor stylistic issues.
6	2 (assimilation in Rushdie and Smith)	B+ (not revised)	Adequate achievement (3)	Strong achievement (4)	Thesis a bit murky, in part due to the subtlety and complexity of the argument.
7	2 (on modernity and tradition in Rushdie and Smith)	A	Strong achievement (4)	Strong achievement (4)	A rich and thoughtful paper, well written and original
8	2 (on hybridity in Rushdie and Smith)	A	Strong achievement (4)	Strong achievement (4)	This essay was shared with the rest of the class in draft form as a model of stylistic grace and strong critical thinking.
Average score			3.375	3.875	

English 30

The Children's Literature course in spring 2014 had only two prospective English majors in it, each of whom (anecdotally) were also among the eight English majors in English 7. The assignment provided for this study enabled students to choose from among three topics, one of which involved writing a modern fable in the manner of Aesop. One of the two students chose this topic. A case could be made that students might be able to demonstrate how well they read Aesop as well as

their critical thinking skills about Aesop through the writing of a fable based on his work, but because this is a fairly tenuous proposition (and since it would not be possible to demonstrate achievement of PLO 3 with such a topic), this student has been discarded from the study. (The work she or he produced, however, was creative and thoughtful.) None of the three assignments permitted students to demonstrate their achievement of PLO 4, an “awareness of the relationship between literature and culture.” The second essay, however, in response to the topic 2, was a well-written (clear achievement of PLO 3) paper that was somewhat deficient in reading and critical thinking skills (PLOs 1 and 2). The writer was to have analyzed two books by Jan Brett in terms of how the illustrations “use color, line, and symbolism to create or enhance the mood or message of the book.” She or he described the illustrations effectively but did little to analyze how they contributed to the books’ “mood or message,” which was never clearly specified. It may be that the deficiency here rests more with the assignment than with the student.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The general approach we employed to assessing a very small ADT program for the first time at Norco College was an effective one, easily adaptable to other programs in which quasi-capstone courses can be identified and students in those courses surveyed to determine whose work should be sampled to assess the program. It would be much easier to assess such programs, however, if they had true capstones, and this is something that English in particular might want to consider—though as noted, such a course would probably have trouble enrolling sufficient students. A good substitute might be to ask students in the English ADT to compile a portfolio of their best work in English, perhaps stored electronically, which could help not only in assessment work but also in facilitating transfer and job placement.

Other conclusions and recommendations:

- All students at Norco College actively enrolled in the English program in spring 2014 demonstrated at least adequate competency in the PLOs assessed. Academic writing skills tended to be significantly stronger than critical thinking skills, however. Students were well prepared by their prior English courses to compose fluent and coherent essays largely free from error. But they were somewhat less successful in writing thoughtfully about complex issues arising from the study of challenging literature. Part of the problem is simply that the survey course CORs require students to read a great deal of literature, fairly quickly, which prevents (or least hinders) them from learning the skills of close textual analysis another sort of class might be able to provide. A case can be made that prospective English majors at the sophomore level would be better served by being asked to take first a kind of “introduction to the academic study of literature” course prior to enrolling in survey courses—assuming survey courses are even desirable.¹ In any event, we recommend that instructors of these courses strongly consider teaching less literature more intensively, to the extent permitted by the COR. And since critical thinking has been shown to be a problem for Norco College students generally, in part because so many instructors seem to be so uncertain about what it means to teach it, we advocate greater attention paid to critical thinking in professional development workshops at the college.

¹ Survey courses in English and American literature are common throughout the CCC and CSU systems, but far less common at colleges and universities elsewhere in the country. The great problem with them is that they nearly guarantee that instructors sacrifice depth for breadth in the teaching of literature, at least to a considerable degree.

- The current 19-unit program is difficult to complete in two years at Norco College (assuming that option is desirable), and will become more difficult after English 1A has been formally been made a prerequisite for the literature courses. Assuming a prospective major completes English 1A in her or his first semester and 1B in the second (along with a single literature course), the student must take at least two literature courses in each of the next two semesters. But in semesters when the college only offers two literature classes, that can present obvious problems. On the other hand, offering three literature courses each semester to service a program with fewer than 10 students, particularly when full-time English faculty at the college need and want to prioritize the teaching of composition, may be equally problematic. The program also contains some anomalies that need to be addressed. For example, English 20 (African-American Literature) is an option under List C, but English 25 (Latino Literature) is not an option under either List B or C. With a Hispanic student population of around 50%, there is no logical reason why this course is not offered regularly and made an elective as part of the program.
- To address the issue of student collegiality, program identification, etc., it might be worth considering appointing a “program leader”—a faculty member in the English discipline who would help to publicize the program, hold occasional informational meetings and workshops, and generally help to ensure the program’s viability and the success of the students.

Appendix A: Certificate/Program Title: Associate in Arts in English for Transfer Degree (Norco College)

PROGRAM PREREQUISITE: none

SHORT DESCRIPTION of PROGRAM

The Associate in Arts in English for Transfer degree is a curricular pattern designed specifically to transfer students as English majors with junior status to the CSU system. Though the Associate in Arts in English for Transfer also provides broad general preparation for English majors entering any four-year university, students must consult the specific requirements of any non-CSU campus to which they are applying. Students earning the Associate in Arts in English for Transfer will analyze, interpret, and synthesize diverse texts in order to construct well-supported academic arguments and literary analyses, and they will encounter interpretive questions to which there are multiple plausible answers. Students earning this degree will also have exposure to a variety of literary genres and periods and will be able to illustrate a basic understanding of the ways that literature can embody cultural, intellectual, and artistic trends.

PROGRAM LEARNING OUTCOMES Upon successful completion of this program, students should be able to:

5. Read a variety of literary texts (fiction, poetry, drama, literary non-fiction) with understanding and insight.
6. Demonstrate critical thinking skills about literary texts, including the ability to construct and test interpretive hypotheses, analyze rival hypotheses, and recognize interpretive problems to which literary texts give rise.
7. Write analytical or argumentative essays on literary texts that demonstrate effective stylistic, organizational, and rhetorical control, support claims with sound textual evidence, and employ correct MLA citation methods.
8. Demonstrate an awareness of the relationship between literature and culture, including a recognition of literature as a product of as well as a contribution to human history.

Required Courses (19 units) Units

ENG-1B* or 1BH* Critical Thinking and Writing 4

List A Choose from the list below 6

List B Choose from the list below 6

List C Choose from the list below 3

List A Choose two courses from the following (6 units):

ENG-6* British Literature I: Anglo-Saxon through Eighteenth Century 3

ENG-7* British Literature II: Romanticism through Modernism/Post-Modernism 3

ENG-14* American Literature I: Pre-Contact through Civil War 3

ENG-15* American Literature II: 1860 to the Present 3

ENG-40* World Literature I: From Ancient Literatures to the Seventeenth Century 3

ENG-41* World Literature II: Seventeenth Century Through the Present 3

List B Choose two courses from the following (6 units)

Any course from List A not already used

ENG/HUM-8* Introduction to Mythology 3

ENG-11* Creative Writing 3

ENG-44* Poetry from the Twentieth Century to the Present 3

List C Choose one course from the following (3 units)

Any course from List A and List B not already used

ENG-9* Introduction to Shakespeare 3

ENG-10 Special Studies in Literature 3

ENG-20* Survey of African American Literature 3

ENG/HUM-23* The Bible as Literature 3

ENG-30* Children's Literature 3

ENG-35* Images of Women in Literature 3

ENG-45* Modern Drama 3

ENG-48* Short Story and Novel from the Twentieth Century to the Present 3

COMM 7 Oral Interpretation of Literature 3

THE 3* Introduction to Theater 3

*courses may be double-counted

Total units: 19

Associate in Arts for Transfer Degree

The Associate in Arts in English for Transfer degree will be awarded upon completion of 60 California State University (CSU) transferable units including the above major requirements, 2-17 units of electives and the Intersegmental General Education Transfer Curriculum (IGETC) or California State University General Education (CSUGE) requirements with a minimum grade point average of 2.0. All courses in the major must be completed with a grade of "C" or better. (Students completing this degree are not required to fulfill the RCCD graduation requirements found in section VII. Additional degree requirements: Health Education and Self Development)

Appendix B: Survey of prospective English majors

Some background: Norco College established an Associate Degree for Transfer program in English effective fall 2013. One of the advantages of creating a number of discipline-specific programs is that it will make transfer to the CSUs, and eventually the UCs, nearly automatic. The program consists of 19 units, to be chosen from three different areas (see details on separate handout). Our accrediting body requires that we evaluate student learning in all of our programs, and this survey will be part of an effort to do that. You do not need to be planning to get an A.A. in English from Norco College in order to complete the survey—students who are simply thinking of transferring to a university as an English, Creative Writing, or Rhetoric/Composition major should also complete it. Your comments will, ideally, help us improve the existing program.

1. What semester did you first begin taking classes at Norco College?
2. Roughly what percentage of your college classes have you taken at Norco?
3. Have you taken English 1A? English 1B? Where and when?
4. What other college-level English classes have you taken?
5. Do you think your high school classes adequately prepared you for success in college-level English classes? Why or why not?
6. Why are you planning to major (or giving some thought to majoring) in English or a related field? What do you expect to “do” with it after you graduate?
7. Are you planning to get an A.A. degree before you transfer? Why or why not? In what major do you anticipate graduating?
8. What is your probable transfer destination? (If you are considering multiple possibilities, please list them.) What is your main reason for this choice?

9. To what extent have your Norco College English courses made you a better reader of literature? A better academic writer? More familiar with literary studies as practiced in higher education? More appreciative of a range of literature?

10. Are there any classes you'd like to have taken at Norco in English that the college hasn't offered during your time here?

11. How could Norco College improve its program in English, including its course offerings?

12. What additional thoughts do you have about the value of the English courses you have taken at Norco? Where, if anywhere, have you been disappointed?

Appendix C: English 7 essay assignment

English 7
Second Midterm

General Directions: Write an essay of around four pages (1200 words) in response to one of the questions below. Follow all of the directions from the first midterm in terms of audience, format, support for major claims, etc. Essays are due by the beginning of class on Thursday, May 1. However, if you attend class on April 29 and May 1 and come prepared, you may take until Saturday, May 3 to submit your essay without penalty. Essays should be once again submitted electronically as Word attachments, though I can also read ODT or Works documents if necessary.

Please note: While I usually allow (indeed, encourage) students to revise essays before I assign final grades to them, I don't always. Don't submit a sub-standard essay on May 1 on the assumption that you'll get a chance to revise—do all you can to ensure that the draft you submit initially is ready for a grade.

1. In recent years, *Jane Eyre* and *Heart of Darkness* have been criticized for expressing (perhaps unconsciously) Eurocentric attitudes in their representation of non-European people and cultures. Focus on one of these two works (both written during the height of the British colonial period) and consider the extent to which this is a just charge. Show as well as you can what the basis for such an accusation might be, then consider the justness of that accusation. In your conclusion, consider whether you think the value of the book as literature could survive even if such a charge were proved.
2. Compare and contrast “The Prophet’s Hair” and “The Waiter’s Wife” as postcolonialist texts, focusing on one or more significant point of similarity and/or difference. Among points you might consider: the representation of power and authority; identity (social, cultural, etc.) and hybridity; tradition vs. resistance to or challenge of tradition—or whatever most interests you (in the context of postcolonialism).

Appendix D: English 30 essay assignment

English 30

Response Paper #2

(50 points)

Directions: Write a thoughtful, well-reasoned response (1-2 pages) to ONE of the topics or issues below. Please follow the general directions on the back of this sheet, or read the sheet called “How to Write a Response Paper” online under the “Instructions for Assignments” link. **NOTE:** Papers shorter than one page, or with margins that are too wide, or papers using larger than 12-point type will earn a 10% penalty. (-2.5 points)

NOTE: For #2 and 3, your paper will be stronger if you make two or three brief (maximum two lines each) citations from the tales, picture books, or descriptions of the illustrations, to support your analysis and/or point of view. After each citation, use correct abbreviated parenthetical documentation. How to do it? Simply cite the textbook author by last name and the page number in parentheses—e.g., (Zelinsky 4) . Also attach a Works Cited reference to your paper. See the back of this page for full directions.

1. Beginning with a moral chosen from Aesop’s fables, write a modern fable. Use presentday animals or objects. People may be part of the story but should not be the major characters. Illustrate it if you wish.

2. Find a Caldecott Medal-winning picture book from around 40-50 years ago, another from about 20-25 years ago, and the last one from the past 1-5 years. Then compare and contrast them. How have the illustrations changed? What changes did you notice in the stories? Were there changes in the didactic and/or entertainment emphases?

[See <http://www.carr.org/read/caldecott.htm>

3. Select one or two children’s picture books by **one** of the following authors, and analyze the way the text and drawings are integrally related to each other. How does the illustrator use color, line, and symbolism to create or enhance the mood or message of the book?

- o Jan Brett
- o Eric Carle
- o Beatrix Potter
- o Jean de Brunhoff
- o Tomie di Paola
- o Paul O. Zelinsky
- o Jon Szieszka (illustrator Lane Smith)

Appendix D: Sample essays, English 7

Student 4 (topic 1)

Joseph Conrad: A Heart of Eurocentricism?

The nineteenth-century novella, *Heart of Darkness*, is not the work of a Eurocentric mind. The celebrated author, Joseph Conrad, is arguably Poland's greatest present to England's literary canon. His work lives today as a testament to what happened in Africa during the peak of the Victorian Era. His riveting tale about a man, forced to witness the iniquities of European mercantilism, excites and touches readers today. The novella's descriptions of imperialism are partially nourished by Conrad's own travels to Africa before settling in England as an author. Some critics, most notably the late Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, have argued that Conrad's novella contains some Eurocentric elements. Due to the interpretive nature of literature, particularly in the 1890s, it is easy to see where these assumptions rose to the surface. After examining the fictional character of Marlow, and Conrad's rhetorical strategies throughout *Heart of Darkness*, it is clear that these accusations are invalid.

The first charge brought against Conrad involves his comparisons between objects in Africa and Europe. After reading *Heart of Darkness*, it appears that every object (individuals, locations, and natural formations) associated with Africa is discussed in a negative light; conversely, the same objects in Europe are described in a decorative and celebratory light. The clearest example of this phenomenon lies in Conrad's descriptions of rivers. The Thames River is described as peaceful and serene, while the air is "brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth" (2407). The bulk of the story takes place along the Congo River in Africa. "Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world." Critics like Chinua Achebe maintain that Africa is frequently described as "the other" place. Europe and Africa are different, but as Marlow describes them, it often appears like Africa is on the underhand.

Accusation based on comparison, here, oversteps its boundaries. Critics who make these claims miss the fact that humans are naturally proud of their culture. When they are exposed to new cultures, they are not inclined to view it in the same light as their own; that does not mean they are positing superiority. Imagine a Bostonian taking his family to New York for the weekend. Part of their trip involves visiting Yankee Stadium. Of course, the hotdogs do not taste anything like the dogs at Fenway. It would be foolish to assume, by this comparison, that Yankee fans are lower castes than Red Sox fans. The Bostonians simply give homage to their place of origin much like Conrad takes homage to Europe.

Accusations that suggest *Heart of Darkness* is a Eurocentric work of fiction come in two forms: intentional and habitual. In circumstances such as the river comparisons, it seems more likely that Conrad expressed his own attitudes involuntarily. However, there does seem to be sequences that make Africa out to be primitive and downright muddy. Among these sequences, the clearest one occurs when Marlow is describing an encounter with Africans:

Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind waggled to and fro like tails [...] all their meagre breasts panted together, the violently dilated nostrils quivered, the eyes stared stonily uphill. They passed me within six inches, without a glance, with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages [...] He was speedily reassured, and with a large, white, rascally grin, and a glance at his charge, seemed to take me into partnership in his exalted trust. (2417)

Conrad's Marlow is deliberately dehumanizing people with darker skin. These words, unlike the adjectives used describing the rivers, were *intended* to degrade the African race. "It was a habit" is not a sufficient excuse to defend Conrad's reputation.

It is vital to separate Conrad and Marlow. It is even more important to highlight the fact that *Heart of Darkness* is a work of literature, not Conrad's travel diary. At face value, yes, the novella depicts the African world harshly. But it is done only to strengthen another point: the repercussions of European Imperialism. In the end of the novella, Conrad describes England's waters with dismal imagery: "The

offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness” (2465). It seems out of place to mention the title here, since the majority of the story is set in the Congo. The darkness of the story also happens in Africa. Conrad suggests that the *source* of calamities in *Heart of Darkness* is actually Europe. In essence, nobody ends up looking like a victor.

To pull his European audience on board with his ideas, James Conrad tries to expose a world most readers are unfamiliar with. His intention was not to convince readers that Africans were primitive castes, but to teach them that Europe and Africa cannot mix. The rough descriptions were an attempt to emphasize the fact that the continents were two different places; the fatal combination of the two lead to catastrophic results: a storm, a shipwreck, an attack, and the death of a successful and talented Kurtz.

In his essay “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*,” Chinua Achebe asserts that Conrad makes Africa out to be the inferior world. He supports this assertion by discussing Conrad’s comparisons between the two societies and confirms that Africa is frequently the “antithesis.” The problem with Achebe’s argument is nobody in the novella is a victor. The heart of darkness is not solely the murky weirdness of the Congo; the heart of darkness is the detrimental act of combining European colonialism with a culture that is unwilling to accept change. The heart, much like the human heart, will continue to pump life into the horrors of colonialism until it is stopped. Joseph Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness* not to belittle Africans, but to expose the complications of European intervention in Africa.

Student 7 (topic 2)

The Search for Balance: Postcolonialism in British Literature

“While postimperial anxieties and exhaustion seemed to beset many postwar English writers, postcolonial novelists were energetically claiming for literature in English untold histories, hybrid identities, and vibrantly creolized vocabularies” (Norton1842). The postcolonial period began in British literature following World War II and the dissolution of the British colonies. The resulting literature was primarily about, and created by, people that had lived on colonized land or in the countries that had colonies, as they struggled to find their identities, in both culture and society. This literature blends both European ideals with Western tradition, while questioning the Eurocentric beliefs previously popular in British literature, and creating a belief system that includes both native and alien qualities, resulting in a unique genre of literature that hadn't existed previously. “The Prophet’s Hair” by Salman Rushdie and “The Waiter’s Wife” by Zadie Smith are short stories that demonstrate this postcolonial movement in two very different ways. While “The Prophet’s Hair” is centered around a family that seems to revert back to traditional values, “The Waiter’s Wife” is just the opposite, depicting a couple blending into the new society.

“The Prophet’s Hair” and “The Waiter’s Wife” both have a very different representation of power and authority. “The Prophet’s Hair” originally has a very European take on family; a father that is the sole breadwinner, an affectionate mother that runs the household, a firstborn son that is following his father’s footsteps and going to take over the family business in the future, and a daughter who is both smart and independent. There is a balance in this presentation of the modern nuclear family. However, with the installation of a vial of hair from Muhammad into the storyline, Hashim and his wife and children begin to revert back to a family dynamic that was more traditionally Western. The family must answer to the strong male force of Hashim, who in turn feels that he answers to God. This unbalances the family dynamic, as Hashim abuses this power. “These breaches of the family’s unwritten laws of decorum alarmed Atta and Huma... ‘From now on,’ Hashim bellowed, ‘there’s going to be some discipline around here!’” (Norton2859). The family

lives in fear, and this puts a strain on their family relationship. In one situation, Hashim aggressively tries to get his daughter, Huma, to revert back to traditional Muslim beliefs,

Huma now lost her composure, challenged her father openly, and announced (with that same independence of which he had encouraged in her) that she would wear no cloth over her face; apart from anything else, it was bad for her eyes. On hearing this, her father disowned her on the spot and gave her one week in which to pack her bags and go (Norton2859).

Throughout the the story, he tears his family apart by forcing his beliefs, hitting his wife and children, cutting his wife's portion of his will down to follow Islamic standards, and ultimately murdering his children and destroying his wife's livelihood. While some of the things Hashim does are unacceptable to some audiences, many things were considered less alarming the Western world than the more modern European world. The family moved back from being separate people working together, to a group of people living under a dictator, as if they went from being an independent group to a colonized being.

"The Waiter's Wife", however, has a much different presentation of the balance of power. In Samad and Alsana's traditional beliefs, Samad should hold the power in the relationship, however, that is not the case. "In his naivety Samad had simply assumed a woman so young would be... easy. But Alsana was not... no, she was not easy. It was, he supposed, the way with young women these days" (Norton1549). Samad's statement that women as a whole are changing is a key point in determining that Samad and Alsana are becoming less traditionally minded, and begin to acclimate into their European surroundings, where there is a different way of thinking. The way that Alsana bosses her husband around and the fact that Samad struggles to make ends meet even with schooling from Delhi University also vary greatly from their tradition. The scales become more evenly balanced as their relationship develops, which is a different experience for a couple who lived in a largely patriarchal society.

In addition to balance of power, the search for identity and the character's hybridity are also questioned in the works by Rushdie and Smith. Both stories demonstrate traditional ideals, as well as the incorporation of new beliefs. In "The Prophet's Hair", Hashim and his family are upper middle class, not an unusual position for a businessman, and more commonly depicted in British literature. They also aren't overly religious, originally. In fact, it is even stated that "Hashim was fond of pointing out that while he was not a godly man he set great store by 'living honourably in the world'" (Norton2856). It's clear that they are aware of the Muslim religion and have a Qur'an in their household, but don't seem to be practicing Muslims. Rushdie explains "In their children, Atta and Huma, the moneylender and his wife had successfully sought to inculcate the virtues of thrift, plain dealing and a healthy independence of spirit" (Norton2856), values not typically found in Western culture, and especially not to women. They are only identified by occupation, the moneylender and his family, and if the reader was only told of them before the hair of Muhammad was brought into their lives, it wouldn't be clear what nationality the family was. However, once the vial of Muhammad's hair finds its way into the family, everything changes almost immediately.

"...Huma saw the servants, under her father's direction, constructing a great heap of books in the garden and setting fire to it. The only volume left untouched was the Qur'an..." (Norton 2858). By burning all his books but the Qur'an, Hashim effectively destroys knowledge of anything else, and any other way of life. He also gets very physical with his customers, something a respectable businessman would not do. By trying to force Huma to wear a face scarf, Hashim essentially wants her to give up her independence. They pray and read the Qur'an, and are no longer allowed to go to the movies like they used to. It is clear that they give up their more European ideals in favor of traditional Indian beliefs, and this takes a major toll on the family. They lose their European ideals due to the involvement of the hair, as "Within a few hours, however, the glassy contentment of that household, of that life of porcelain delicacy and alabaster sensibilities, was to be shattered beyond all hope of repair" (Norton2856). Hashim and his family go from a progressive way of thinking as

independent people to a violent and strictly religious patriarchy, where the family as a whole effectively loses their identity in the process.

The "Waiter's Wife" expresses the opposite, as Samad and Alsana gradually lose some of their traditional beliefs in favor of more European ideals. They clearly identify themselves as Indian throughout the story, and are clearly out of their element when they arrive in New York. Alsana is thrown off by Clara's 'hot pants', and states "So some black people *are* friendly... It was her habit to single one shining exception out of every minority she disliked..." (Norton1542). She seems to identify everyone else around her as a minority, showing clearly where she feels her identity lies. However, the longer they live in England, the more they adopt European qualities. For example, Alsana, who was originally surprised by 'hot pants', starts "sewing together pieces of black plastic for a shop called Domination in Soho (many were the nights Alsana would hold up a piece of clothing she had just made [...] and wonder what on earth it was." (Norton1543), showing her slowly accepting what was originally unacceptable in her traditional lifestyle. Alsana is prone to outbursts of rage at her husband, something very unusual for traditional Indian women. Ultimately, of the both of them, Samad struggles the most with finding his identity, shown when he wishes to wear a sign that reads "I am not a waiter. That is, I am a waiter, but not just a waiter. I have been a student, a scientist, a soldier. My wife is called Alsana. We live in East London but we would like to move North. I am a Muslim but Allah has forsaken me or I have forsaken Allah. I am not sure. I have an English friend – Archie – and others..." (Norton1544). This statement from Samad is a clear example of his shifting identity. He mentions living in London, and his past jobs, but not his past home in India. He mentions being Muslim, but only to mention that he has been forsaken by his God. He mentions his English friends, but not any Indian friends or family. In addition, there is also evidence that their arranged marriage, common in Indian culture, begins to cause them more grief than in the beginning, possibly due to the fact that this arrangement is not common in European societies. For example, Alsana states when explaining her arranged marriage "Yes, I didn't know him from Adam. But I liked him well enough... Now every time I learn something more about him *I like him less*" (Norton1546). She still has emotional ties to her native culture, shown in the names she picks for her children, however, she begins to act less traditionally the longer she interacts in her new environment. For example, she questions the Jewish groundskeeper of the park, Sol Jozefowicz, about the murder of innocent people, in a time following the Holocaust. "It strikes all three women – the way history will: embarrassingly, without any warning, like a blush" (Norton1551). This statement by Alsana not only makes the women realize how different life is in their present than in their past, it also clues the reader in to how much Alsana has changed. Originally a quiet Indian bride, she becomes a girl that associates herself with a African American girl and the 'niece-of-shame', and outright challenges men. It seems as if Samad and Alsana's life looks a lot like Ardashir's Indian restaurant, "He had taken the simple idea of an Indian restaurant (small room, pink tablecloth, loud music, atrocious wallpaper, meals) and just made it bigger. He hadn't improved anything; it was the same old crap in a bigger building in the biggest tourist trap in London" (Norton1545). They were still the same people, but their beliefs and their identities were different. They evolve into different people from the beginning of the story, in favor of the modern ideals they were thrown into.

Postcolonialism is expressed in "The Prophet's Hair" by Salman Rushdie and "The Waiter's Wife" by Zadie Smith, by character's have different views on identity and tradition. "The Prophet's Hair" proves that people and their beliefs can move forward, but can't go backwards. The family was already progressive, and by moving backwards into a more restricted system, bad things happened to them. "The Waiter's Wife" demonstrated a couple that lost some of their cultural identities, beliefs, and love for each other when they were transplanted into a new culture. Ultimately, it's important to note that no major character in either story ends up happy. Postcolonialism doesn't lead the reader to believe that one culture is better than any other, it just depicts authors and their character's searching for an equilibrium and balance between the two.